

## **Korean Buddhism in East Asian Context**

***ROBERT E. BUSWELL, JR.***

***UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES***

The story of Buddhism that tradition tells us is of seemingly unremitting waves of missionaries breaking over the ever-expanding shores of the Asian continent, in what with little exaggeration we may call the world's first example of globalization. Soon after the inception of the religion in the sixth or fifth century B.C.E., the *Mahāvagga* tell us, the Buddha ordered his monks to “wander forth for the welfare and weal of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare, and weal of gods and men.” This command initiated one of the greatest missionary movements in world religious history, a movement that over the next millennium would disseminate Buddhism from the shores of the Caspian Sea in the west, to the Inner Asian steppes in the north, the Japanese isles in the east, and the Indonesian archipelago in the south. Buddhist missionaries, typically

following long-established trade routes between the geographical and cultural regions of Asia, arrived in China by at least the beginning of the first millennium C.E., and reached the rest of East Asia within another few hundred years. In the modern era, Buddhism has even begun to build a significant presence in the Americas and Europe.

But this account of a monolithic missionary movement spreading steadily eastward is just one part of the story. The case of East Asian Buddhism suggests there is also a different tale to tell, a tale in which this dominant current of diffusion creates important eddies, or countercurrents, of influence that redound back toward the center. Because of the leading role played by the cultural and political center of China in most developments within East Asia, we inevitably assume that regional developments within Buddhism would have begun first on the mainland of China and from there spread throughout the rest of the region where Buddhism also came to flourish and where literary Chinese was the medium of learned communication. Through sheer size alone, of course, the monolith that was China would tend to dominate the creative work of East Asian Buddhism. But this dominance need not imply that innovations did not take place on the periphery of East Asia, innovations that could have a profound effect throughout the region, including the Chinese heartland itself. These

countercurrents of influence can have significant, even profound, impact on neighboring traditions, affecting them in manifold ways.

I am increasingly convinced, in fact, that we should not neglect the place of these "peripheral regions" of East Asia—Japan, Vietnam, Tibet, perhaps, but most certainly Korea—in any comprehensive description of the evolution of the broader "Sinitic" tradition of Buddhism. Korea was subject to many of the same forces that prompted the growth of Buddhism on the Chinese mainland, and Korean commentarial and scriptural writings (all composed in literary Chinese) were often able to exert as pervasive an influence throughout East Asia as were texts written in China proper. Given the organic nature I propose for the East Asian traditions of Buddhism, such "peripheral" creations could find their ways to the Chinese center and been accepted by the Chinese as readily as their own indigenous compositions. We have definitive evidence that such influence occurred with the writings of Korean Buddhist exegetes. In considering filiations of influence between the traditions of East Asian Buddhism, we therefore must look not only from the center to the periphery, as is usually done, but also from the periphery toward the center, using the Korean case to demonstrate the different kinds of impact a specific regional strand of Buddhism can have on the broader East Asia tradition as a whole. Indeed, the approach I suggest here for

studying Korean Buddhism will be a particularly apt example of how “Korean Studies Interfaces with the World,” the topic of this 4<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Korean Studies.

Looking at the patterns of influence that Korean Buddhism exerts in East Asia will also allow us to move beyond a traditional metaphor used in scholarship on Korea, in which the peninsula is viewed merely as a “bridge” for the transmission of Buddhist and Sinitic culture from the Chinese mainland to the islands of Japan. As enduring as this metaphor has been in the scholarship, it long ago became anachronistic, a Japan-centric view of Korea that should finally be discarded for good. In fact, most of the early transmission of Buddhism into Japan occurred along a current that led not from China, but straight from Korea. Much less well understood than even this Korean influence on early Japanese Buddhism is the impact of Buddhists from the Korean peninsula on several schools of Buddhism in China itself. Finally, Korean Buddhism was also able to exert substantial influence in regions far removed from the peninsula, even in areas as distant from Korea as Szechwan and Tibet. Korea was not a “bridge”; it was instead a bastion of Buddhist culture in East Asia, which could play a critical role in the evolution of the broader Sinitic Buddhist tradition.

### **Korea's Role in the Eastward Dissemination of Buddhism**

Notwithstanding the regrettable "hermit kingdom" appellation that early Western visitors gave to Korea, we should note that throughout most of history Korea was in no way isolated from its neighbors throughout the region. Korea was woven inextricably into the web of Sinitic civilization since at least the inception of the Common Era. The infiltration of Chinese culture into the Korean peninsula was accelerated through the missionary activities of the Buddhists, who brought not only their religious teachings and rituals to Korea but also the breadth and depth of Chinese cultural knowledge as a whole. To a substantial extent it was Buddhism, with its large body of written scriptures, that fostered among the Koreans literacy in written Chinese, and ultimately familiarity with the full range of Chinese religious and secular writing, including Confucian philosophy, belles lettres, calendrics, and divination.

Korea played an integral role in the eastward transmission of Buddhism and Sinitic culture through the East Asian region. Buddhist monks, artisans, and craftsmen from the Korean peninsula made major contributions toward the development of Japanese civilization, including its Buddhist culture. The role of the early Korean kingdom of Paekche in transmitting Buddhist culture to the Japan islands was one of the two most

critical influences in the entire history of Japan, rivaled only by the nineteenth-century encounter with Western culture. Indeed, for at least a century, from the middle of the sixth to the end of the seventh centuries, Paekche influences dominated cultural production in Japan and constituted the main current of Buddhism's transmission to Japan. Korean scholars brought the Confucian classics, Buddhist scriptures, and medical knowledge to Japan. Artisans introduced Sinitic monastic architecture, construction techniques, and even tailoring. The early-seventh-century Korean monk Kwallük, who is known to the Buddhist tradition as a specialist in the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna philosophy, also brought along documents on calendrics, astronomy, geometry, divination, and numerology. Korean monks were instrumental in establishing the Buddhist ecclesiastical hierarchy in Japan and served in its first supervisory positions. Finally, the growth of an order of nuns in Japan occurred through Korean influence, thanks to Japanese nuns who traveled to Paekche to study, including three nuns who studied Vinaya in Paekche for three years during the late-sixth century.

But even after cultural transmission directly from the Chinese mainland to Japan began to dominate toward the end of the seventh century, an influential Korean countercurrent reappeared during the Kamakura era

(1185-1333), which affected the Pure Land movement of Hōnen (1133-1212) and especially Shinran (1173-1262). Shinran cites Kyōnghūng (d.u.), a seventh-century Korean Buddhist scholiast, more than any other Buddhist thinker except the two early Chinese exegetes T'an-luan (476-542) and Shan-tao (613-681). Indeed, a broader survey of Japanese Pure Land writings before Shinran shows, too, a wide familiarity with works by other early Unified Silla thinkers, including Wōnhyo (617-686), Pōbwi (d.u.), Hyōnil (d.u.), and Ŭijōk (d.u.). The influence of these Korean scholiasts led to several of the distinctive features that eventually came to characterize Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, including the crucial role that sole-recitation of the Buddha's name, or *nenbutsu*, plays in Pure Land soteriology, the emphasis on the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra* (*Sūtra on the Array of Wondrous Qualities Adorning the Land of Bliss*) over the apocryphal *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching* (*Contemplation Sūtra on the Buddha Amitābha*); the emphasis on the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the forty-eight vows of Amitābha listed in the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*, which essentially ensure rebirth in the Pure Land to anyone who wants it; and the precise definition of the ten moments of thought on the Buddha Amitābha that are said in the eighteenth vow to be sufficient to ensure rebirth in the Pure Land. Hence, at

least through the thirteenth century, Korea continued to exert important influence over the evolution of Japanese Buddhism.

### **Korean Influences in Chinese Buddhism and Beyond**

Despite their apparent geographical isolation from the major scholastic and practice centers of Buddhism in China, Korean adherents of the religion also maintained close and continuous contacts with their brethren on the mainland throughout much of the premodern period. Korea's proximity to northern China via the overland route through Manchuria assured the establishment of close diplomatic and cultural ties between the peninsula and the mainland. In addition, during its Three Kingdoms (4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries) and Unified Silla (668-935) periods, Korea was the virtual Phoenicia of East Asia, and its nautical prowess and well-developed sea-lanes made the peninsula's seaports the hubs of regional commerce. It was thus relatively easy for Korean monks to accompany trading parties to China, where they could train and study together with Chinese adepts. Ennin (793-864), a Japanese pilgrim in China during the middle of the ninth century, remarks on the large Korean contingent among the foreign monks in the T'ang Chinese capital of Ch'ang-an. He also reports that all along China's eastern littoral were permanent communities of Koreans, which were granted extraterritorial privileges and had their own autonomous political

administrations. Monasteries were established in those communities, which served as ethnic centers for the many Korean monks and traders operating in China. Koreans even ventured beyond China to travel to the Buddhist homeland of India itself. Of the several Korea monks known to have gone on pilgrimage to India, the best known is Hyech'o (fl. 720-773), who journeyed to India via sea in the early eighth century and traveled all over the subcontinent before returning overland to China in 727.

The ready interchange that occurred throughout the East Asian region in all areas of culture allowed indigenous Korean contributions to Buddhist thought (again, all composed in literary Chinese) to become known in China, and eventually even beyond into Central Asia and Tibet. Writings produced in China and Korea especially were transmitted elsewhere with relative dispatch, so that scholars throughout East Asia were kept well apprised of advances made by their colleagues. Thus, doctrinal treatises and scriptural commentaries written in Silla Korea by such monks as Ŭisang (625-702), Wŏnhyo (617-686), and Kyŏnghŭng (ca. 7<sup>th</sup> century) were much admired in China and Japan and their insights influenced, for example, the thought of Fa-tsang (643-712), the systematizer of the Chinese Hua-yen school. In one of my earlier books, *The Formation of Ch'an Ideology in China and Korea*, I sought to show that one of the oldest works of the nascent Ch'an (Zen)

tradition was a scripture named the *Vajrasamādhi-sūtra* (Kor. *Kūmgang sammae kyōng*; Ch. *Chin-kang san-mei ching*), an apocryphal text that I believe was written in Korea by an early Korean Sōn adept. The *Vajrasamādhi* is the first text to suggest the linearity of the Ch'an transmission—that is, the so-called “mind-to-mind transmission” from Bodhidharma to the Chinese patriarchs—a crucial development in the evolution of an independent self-identity for the Ch'an school. Within some fifty years of its composition in Korea the text is transmitted to China, where, its origins totally obscured, it came to be accepted as an authentic translation of a Serindian original and was entered into the canon, whence it was introduced subsequently into Japan and even Tibet. This ready interchange between China, Korea, Japan, and other neighboring traditions has led me to refer to an "East Asian" tradition of Buddhism, which is something more than the sum of its constituent national parts.

Korean Buddhist pilgrims were also frequent visitors to the mainland of China, where they were active participants in the Chinese tradition itself. Although many of these pilgrims eventually returned to the peninsula, we have substantial evidence of several who remained behind in China for varying lengths of time and became prominent leaders of Chinese Buddhist schools. A few examples may suffice to show the range and breadth of this

Korean influence in China, and beyond. The first putatively “Korean” monk presumed to have directly influenced Chinese Buddhism is the Koguryō monk Sūngnang (Ch. Seng-lang; fl. ca. 490), whom the tradition assumes was an important vaunt courier in the San-lun school, the Chinese counterpart of the Madhyamaka branch of Indian philosophical exegesis; issues remain, however, regarding his ethnicity and his contribution to Chinese Buddhism. (Sūngnang may in fact have hailed from a family of Chinese ancestry from the Liaodong region.) Less controversial is the contribution of the Silla monk Wōnch’ūk (Ch. Yüan-tse, Tibetan Wentsheg; 613-696) to the development of the Chinese Fa-hsiang (Yogācāra) school. Wōnch’ūk was one of the two main disciples of the preeminent Chinese pilgrim-translator Hsüan-tsang (d. 664) and his relics are enshrined along those of Hsüan-tsang himself in reliquaries in Hsi-an. Still today, Wōnch’ūk remains perhaps better known in Tibet than in his natal or adopted homelands through his renowned commentary to the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* (*Sūtra that Reveals Profound Mysteries*), which the Tibetans knew as the “Great Chinese Commentary.” Wōnch’ūk’s exegesis was extremely popular in the Chinese outpost of Tun-huang, where Chōsgrub (Ch. Fa-ch’eng; ca. 755-849) translated it into Tibetan at the command of King Ralpachen (r. 815-841). Five centuries later, the renowned Tibetan scholar

Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) drew heavily on Wönch'ük's work in articulating his crucial reforms of the Tibetan doctrinal tradition. Wönch'ük's views were decisive in Tibetan formulations of such issues as the hermeneutical strategem of the three turnings of the wheel of the law, the nine types of consciousness, and the quality and nature of the ninth "immaculate" consciousness (*amalavijñāna*). Exegetical techniques subsequently used in all the major sects of Tibetan Buddhism, with their use of elaborate sections and subsections, may even derive from Wönch'ük's commentarial style.

Later, during the Sung dynasty, Ch'egwan (Ch. Ti-kuan; d. ca. 971) revived a moribund Chinese T'ien-t'ai school and wrote the definitive treatise on its doctrinal taxonomy, the *T'ien-t'ai ssu-chiao i* (*An Outline of the Fourfold Teachings according to the T'ien-t'ai School*), a text widely regarded as one of the classics of "Chinese" Buddhism. Several other Korean monks were intimately involved with the T'ien-t'ai school up through the Sung dynasty, including Ŭich'ön (1055-1101), the Koryŏ prince, Buddhist monk, and bibliophile.

Such contacts between Chinese and Korean Buddhism are especially pronounced in the case of the Ch'an or Sŏn tradition of Sinitic Buddhism. Two of the earliest schools of Ch'an in China were the Ching-chung and Pao-t'ang, both centered in what was then the wild frontier of Szechwan in

the southwest. Both factions claimed as their patriarch a Ch'an master of Korean heritage named Musang (Ch. Wu-hsiang; 684-762), who is better known to the tradition as Reverend Kim (Kim *hwasang*), using his native Korean surname. Musang reduced all of Ch'an teachings to the three phrases of "not remembering," which he equated with morality, "not thinking," with *samādhi*, and "not forgetting," with wisdom. Even after his demise, Musang's teachings continued to be closely studied by such influential scholiasts in the Ch'an tradition as Tsung-mi (780-841).

Korean influence over Chinese Buddhism was won not only through religious practice, doctrinal expertise, scholarly erudition, or spiritual charisma, but also through hard cash. Indeed, the financial support of the Koryŏ dynasty for the activities of Hui-yin Monastery in the Southern Sung capital of Hang-chou was so substantial and continuous that the monastery came to be better known by its nickname of Korea Monastery (Kao-li ssu). The Koryŏ royal family provided Ŭich'ŏn's Chinese teacher Ching-yüan (1011-1088) with funds to publish and distribute his Hua-yen writings. Koryŏ tribute to the Sung court for many years also included funds specifically earmarked for Hui-yin ssu's support. Other funds were designated for construction of a pavilion for storing Hua-yen scriptures, to cast images of Vairocana, Samantabhadra, and Mañjuśrī, and to purchase

offerings for the pavilion. After Ŭich'ŏn's death, the monastery hung his portrait in a shrine at the temple, turning the shrine into the virtual equivalent of a merit cloister for the Koryŏ royal family and thus effectively requiring that the Koryŏ government maintain it. Koryŏ's financial power was so dominant that the Koryŏ king even retained the authority at certain points in the monastery's history to appoint its abbot.

### **The Self-Identity of Korean Buddhists**

The pervasive use of literary Chinese in the names of these Korean expatriate monks sometimes masks for us today the fact that the men behind these names were often not Chinese at all, but monks from the periphery of the empire. Many of the expatriate Koreans who were influential in China became thoroughly Sinicized, but rarely without retaining some sense of identification with their native tradition (e.g., through continued correspondence with colleagues on the Korean peninsula). In the case of Ŭisang, for example, despite assuming control of the Chinese Hua-yen school after his master Chih-yen's death, the *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) tells us that Ŭisang still decided to return to Korea in 670 to warn the Korean king of an impending Chinese invasion of the peninsula. The invasion forestalled, Ŭisang was rewarded with munificent

royal support and his Hwaŏm school dominated Korean Buddhist scholasticism from that point onward. Fa-tsang (643-712), Ŭisang's successor in the Hua-yen school, continued to write to Ŭisang for guidance long after his return to Korea and his correspondence is still extant today.

Even where these Korean monks were assimilated by the Chinese, their Korean ethnicity often continued to be an essential part of their social and religious identity. I mentioned above that Musang was best known to his contemporaries as Reverend Kim, clear evidence that he retained some sense of his Korean ethnic identity even in the remote hinterlands of the Chinese empire, far from his homeland. The vehement opposition Wŏnch'ŭk is said to have endured in cementing his position as successor to Hsüan-tsang—through a defamation campaign launched by followers of his main rival, the Chinese monk K'uei-chi (632-682)—may betray an incipient racial bias against this Korean scholiast and again suggests that his identity as a Korean remained an issue for the Chinese. Therefore, even among Sinicized Koreans, the active Korean presence within the Chinese Buddhist church constituted a self-consciously Korean influence.

Why would monks from Korea have been able to exert such wide-ranging influence, both geographically and temporally, across the East Asian Buddhist tradition? I believe it is because Buddhist monks saw themselves

not so much as “Korean,” “Japanese,” or “Chinese” Buddhists, but instead as joint collaborators in a religious tradition that transcended contemporary notions of nation and time. These monks’ conceptions of themselves were much broader than the “shrunkened imaginings of recent history,” to paraphrase Benedict Anderson’s well-known statement about nationalism. Korean Buddhists of the pre-modern age would probably have been more apt to consider themselves members of an ordination line and monastic lineage, a school of thought, or a tradition of practice, than as “Korean” Buddhists. If they were to refer to themselves at all, it would be not as “Korean Buddhists” but as “disciples,” “teachers,” “proselytists,” “doctrinal specialists,” and “meditators”—all terms suggested in the categorizations of monks found in the various *Kao-seng chuan* (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*), which date from as early as the sixth century. These categorizations transcended national and cultural boundaries (there are, for instance, no sections for “Korean monks,” “Japanese monks,” etc.), and the Chinese compilations of such *Biographies of Eminent Monks* will subsume under their main listings biographies of Koreans, Indians, Inner Asians, and Japanese. Hence, although the *Biographies* might mention that Buddhists as being “a monk of Silla” or “a sage of Haedong”—both designations that are attested in the *Biographies*—they are principally categorized as

“proselytists,” “doctrinal specialists,” and so forth, who may simultaneously also be “disciples of X,” “teachers of Y,” or “meditators with Z.”

But unlike many of the other peoples who lived on the periphery of the Sinitic cultural sphere, Koreans also worked throughout the premodern period to maintain a cultural, social, and political identity that was distinct from China. As Michael Rogers so aptly described it, Koreans throughout their history remained active participants in Sinitic civilization while also seeking always to maintain their “cultural self-sufficiency.” There are several anecdotal examples that illustrate this sense of simultaneous participation in the Sinitic world while maintaining an independent identity for Korea. During the Koryŏ period, for example, in the fourth of Wang Kŏn’s “Ten Injunctions” to his descendants on how to assure the continued success of his new dynasty, he reminds his subjects that Korea is distinct from China and that it must continue to maintain its own independent cultural and social traditions: “In the past we have always had a deep attachment for the ways of China and all of our institutions have been modeled upon those of T’ang. But our country occupies a different geographical location and our people’s character is different from that of the Chinese. Hence, there is no reason to strain ourselves unreasonably to copy the Chinese way.” In his entreaty to support Buddhism, Wang Kŏn also

hints that there are uniquely Korean versions of important rituals that should be maintained. This nascent sense of a distinctive Korean practice of Buddhism is discussed in the sixth injunction, where Wang Kŏn notes: “I deem the two festivals of Yŏndŭng [Lamplighting] and P’algwan [Eight Prohibitions] of great spiritual value and importance. The first is to worship Buddha. The second is to worship the spirit of heaven, the spirits of the five sacred and other major mountains and rivers, and the dragon god. At some future time, villainous courtiers may propose the abandonment or modification of these festivals. No change should be allowed.” The P’algwan ritual is, in fact, known in India and China, where it was a Buddhist fortnightly ritual in which laypersons would take the eight precepts. But the Korean interpretation of this ritual as a naturalist ritual seems to be otherwise unknown in Asia, and may be a uniquely Korean innovation. Paralleling this concern with maintaining Korea’s separate identity, Kim Pusik (1075-1151) in the preface to his *Samguk sagi* (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms; ca. 1122-1146) laments the ongoing neglect of Korea’s own indigenous history and cites this neglect as one of the principal reasons for compiling his new history.

Simultaneous with their recognition of their clan and local identity, their allegiance to a particular state and monarch, their connection to

Buddhist monastic and ordination lineages, and so forth, Buddhist monks of the pre-modern age also viewed themselves as participating in the universal transmission of the dharma going back both spatially and temporally to India and the Buddha himself. With such a vision, East Asian Buddhists could continue to be active participants in a religious tradition whose origins were distant both geographically and temporally. East Asians of the premodern age viewed Buddhism as a universal religion pristine and pure in its thought, its practice, and its realization; hence the need of hermeneutical taxonomies to explain how the plethora of competing Buddhist texts and practices—each claiming to be pristinely Buddhist but seemingly at times to be almost diametrically opposed to one another—were all actually part of a coherent heuristic plan within the religion, as if Buddhism’s many variations were in fact cut from whole cloth. This vision of their tradition also accounts for the persistent attempt of all of the indigenous schools of East Asian Buddhism to trace their origins back through an unbroken lineage of “ancestors” or “patriarchs” to the person of the Buddha himself. Once we begin tracing the countercurrents of influence in East Asian Buddhism, however, we discover that the lineages of these “patriarchs” often lead us back not to China or Japan, but instead to Korea.