

Trends in the Study of Korean Buddhism in Europe 1968-2006

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Abstract

This essay traces the development of interest in the study of Korean Buddhism in Europe over the past four decades. Unlike Japan and the United States, where academic interest in Korean Buddhism had been rapidly developing since the end of World War II, Europe lagged far behind and it was not until well into the 1970s that the situation began to slowly change. In this period Korean Buddhist studies was in its infancy in Europe, and it was mainly dominated by general topics, articles, and comparative issues. During the 1980s, a growing number of scholars in Europe turned their attention to Korean Buddhism, and in the 1990s, the terrain changed dramatically. Especially interest in the Seon tradition began to captivate the minds of scholars. Towards the end of the decade a new generation of scholars had appeared on the scene, and at present, Europe can boast a relatively large and growing contingent of scholars whose work reflects various approaches to the study of the religion, which includes the study of epigraphical texts and the relationship between Buddhist church and state. It is probably no exaggeration to say that Europe has by now overtaken the United States as the leading academic force in the study of Korean Buddhism.

Keywords: Korean Buddhism, European scholarship, *Samguk yusa*, Seon, Goryeo, Buddhist art, Japanese colonial period, Buddhist rituals, Hwaeom, Beopsang, *hoguk bulgyo*, geomancy

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Introduction

The present essay has been made on demand, and while I have accepted the commission as a challenge as well as a duty and honor, I must also confess that I have found it a somewhat awkward and mildly embarrassing task. It is always difficult to describe the work of one's colleagues and peers in an open and unbiased manner, allowing for both deserved praise as well as fair criticism. Moreover, the format of this essay—as well as the historical events it attempts to describe—have also made it necessary to include a sort of autobiographical presentation of my own academic persona and work, something which I would most gladly have left to others. Hence, what is presented here is a subjective and personal account reflecting my own level of understanding, shortcomings included, and not some universal or objective "truth." I have, however, endeavored to give as truthful and terse an account as humanely possible under the given conditions, and otherwise allowed the available, empirical data to guide my writing. Here it must also be said that not all the scholars included in the present essay are Buddhologists or even historians of religion, and several of those mentioned hail from other academic disciplines such as history, literature, art history, etc.

Before proceeding with the topic of this survey which I have chosen to write in the form of an essay, I wish to extend my sincere apologies to those whose work I may have treated superficially or inadvertently left out of this account. It has not been done intentionally, but mainly because of insufficient information. Most of the scholars mentioned here were contacted well before I started writing, and I am happy to say that the majority of them responded positively to the project and supplied me with data and information necessary for the task.

The Beginnings

Unlike Japan and the United States where academic interest in Korean Buddhism has been rapidly developing since the end of the Second World War, Europe has lagged far behind and it was not until well into the 1970s that the situation began to change in earnest. One of the first European scholars to take notice of Korean Buddhism was Fritz Vos, a leading Japanologist at Leiden University who also took an interest in Korean religion and culture. In 1968, Vos wrote *Die Religionen Koreas*, which was meant to introduce the history of religious practice on the Korean peninsula (Vos 1968). Despite its title, his book is notable for having left Buddhism more or less out of the discussion of Korea's religions. Nevertheless, Vos did manage to mention it in passing as a significant element in the many new cults and new religions (*sin-gyo/sin sin-gyo*) that rose during the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. One might see his lack of interest in Korean Buddhism as a result of the dominance of studies on Chinese and Japanese Buddhism in the academic world in Europe (and the United States) at that time. However, it would appear that Vos eventually came to appreciate the importance of Korean Buddhism later in his career when he undertook to translate the *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms)—containing some of the earliest source material relating to Korean Buddhist history—into English. Unfortunately, this noble project was never to see the light of day as Vos passed away before having completed his work. According to information given by himself to this author, a rough draft of the full translation was completed at the beginning of 1985, but not the copious annotations meant to accompany it. Perhaps we shall one day see this translation in print?

Pak Youngsook, now retired from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, also belongs to the pioneers in the field. An art historian, she studied with the German specialist in East Asia, Dietrich Seckel, and although Dr. Pak's research has dealt with many aspects of both Korean and Chinese art, her work on Korean Buddhist art has always been at the forefront of her academic output.

Her early work focused on Korean Buddhist painting, especially that of the Goryeo (Koryŏ) period (Pak 1977). Since then, a number of articles have appeared on various topics relating to Korean Buddhist art, including a very significant piece on illuminated Buddhist manuscripts (Pak 1987/1988). Together with Roderick Whitfield, she has completed a book on Buddhist sculpture, the first to offer a comprehensive presentation and discussion of Korean Buddhist sculptural art in a Western language (Pak and Whitfield 2003).

James Grayson, now a professor at the University of Sheffield, is a former missionary in Korea. As a Christian theologian and religious historian with an interest in comparative aspects, his study of Buddhist assimilation in Korea during the Three Kingdoms period was chiefly meant as a model with which the introduction, spread, and accommodation of Christianity in Korea during the late nineteenth century might be better understood (Grayson 1980). Even the Christian influence on Korean Buddhism after the 19th century has been the subject of one of his papers (Grayson 1991). In addition, his research has touched upon such topics as Buddhist "missionaries" (Grayson 1984) and folk cults inspired by Buddhist and Shamanistic ideas (Grayson 1992a). In recent years his study has taken him to folk tales and myths involving Buddhist beliefs and lore, including an attempt at using data from the *Samguk yusa* as historical evidence (Grayson 2004a, 2004b). Despite an extensive range of publications, Grayson's work on Korean Buddhism, which is mostly seen from the perspective of Korean religiosity and spirituality in general, has tended towards overviews and general observations.

Maturation

Henrik H. Sørensen (formerly at the University of Copenhagen, now of the Seminar for Buddhist Studies) may be the first scholar in Europe to have focused on the study of Korean Buddhism. Meetings with Robert E. Buswell in the setting of monastic Buddhism in Korea during the late 1970s were seminal in the subsequent development of

his academic interest in Korean Buddhism. Readings in Sino-Korean with Dr. Eric Grinstead in Copenhagen, a multi-talented scholar and specialist in several Oriental languages greatly facilitated his ability to access the primary material. Later he had the good fortune to meet Prof. Han Kidu of Wonkwang University, whose wide knowledge and kind personality greatly stimulated the young scholar in his study of Seon (S`n) Buddhism. Sørensen's early study of Korean Buddhism was mainly limited to the history of the early Seon Buddhist tradition, popularly known as the Gusan Seonmun or the Nine Mountain Schools (Sørensen 1988b, 2003a), as well as Korean Buddhist painting in general (Sørensen 1988c, 1989). A growing interest in the relationship between Buddhist beliefs, practice, and material culture has led to several articles and essays on ritualism, philosophy, dogma, and art (Sørensen 1991, 1992, 1993b, 1994, 1995). Sørensen has also taken a special interest in the demythologizing of Korean Buddhist studies, in particular those that have characterized and to some extent still characterize the field in Korea itself. Hence, a number of his studies have sharply criticized the irrational and ahistorical approach to Buddhist studies one often encounters in Korean academia (Sørensen 1990, 1991, 2000d, 2004, etc.). Korean Buddhism during Japanese colonial rule is another favored topic that he took up in the early 1990s (Sørensen 1990, 1993c, 1999). Much of the Korean scholarship on this important period has been tendentious and nationalistic in tone, something that has often led to a distortion of the facts. Ongoing collaboration with Vladimir Tikhonov on this aspect of Korean Buddhism is meant to redress this state of affairs. Sørensen's work has also touched upon contemporary Korean Buddhism, leading to a series of articles on its religious, social, and political aspects (Sørensen 1996, 2004a) as well as Buddhist nuns (Sørensen 2004b). In the last decade, the Esoteric Buddhist tradition (*milgyo*) in Korea—in particular that which flourished under the Goryeo (918-1392)—has been at the forefront of Sørensen's ongoing research (Sørensen 1994, 1996, 2005, 2007a, 2007c). Due to an insatiable passion for Buddhist thought, practice and related material culture, Sørensen's scope of interest covers virtually all aspects of Kore-

an Buddhism with the possible exception of the earliest period, i.e. the Three Kingdoms (c. 300-668). Nevertheless, he has not been able to write on all the topics that have captured his interest.

Boudewijn Walraven of Leiden University, a leading scholar of Korean shamanism and premodern literature, has occasionally delved into the arcana of Korean Buddhism (Walraven 1996, 1997, 2006). He is currently working with Dr. Lee Younghee (Wellington University, New Zealand) on a joint project dealing with the use of *gasa* (traditional songs) in Buddhist rituals during the late Joseon (Chos`n) period. Part of this research will be presented at the biannual meeting of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe in Paris, 2007.

During the 1980s, Allard M. Olof, a librarian and student of Fritz Vos and Boudewijn Walraven at Leiden University, wrote a number of inspired articles on the printed editions of Buddhist tales for public edification from the first half of the Joseon period. Especially, Olof's study of the *Worin seokbo* (Buddhist Chronicles Imprinted by the Moon), a collection of pious Buddhist tales written in Hangul, is noteworthy for our understanding of the sponsorship of the publication of Buddhist moral tales by the Joseon court (Olof 1983, 1989, 1990). Olof's work has shown how the use of Hangul stimulated the spread of Buddhist ideas among the common people during the first half of the Joseon Dynasty.

Antonino Forte (d. 2006, Italian School of East Asian Studies), an estimated Sinologist and specialist in Tang Buddhism, came to Korean Buddhism relatively late in his career as a researcher. His long interest in the history of the Huayan School in China led him to an investigation of the fascinating exchange between Fazang (643-712), traditionally considered the third patriarch, and the celebrated Korean monk Uisang (625-702), who later is credited with founding the Hwaeom School in Silla (Forte 2000). Forte's interesting study of the letter from Fazang to Uisang illuminates several interesting and significant points in the transmission and development of Avatamsaka studies between China and Korea in the late seventh century.

Anja K. Haftmann (formerly of Ruhr-Universität Bochum), a former student of Werner Sasse, also contributed to the study of Korean

Buddhism through her research into Middle-Korean and the early use of Hangul in Buddhist writings. Her work culminated in an annotated translation of the earliest official document using Hangul, actually a decree in the form of two letters, the *Odaesan sangwonsa jungchang gwonseonmun* (Text Encouraging the Repair of Sangwonsa Temple on Mt. Odaesan) written by King Sejo (1455-1468) for the Buddhist community on that mountain (Haftmann 1998). Besides her deciphering and analysis of Middle Korean in this document, Haftmann's study reveals the close relationship that existed between the Joseon court and Buddhism during the second half of the fifth century.

The "New Wave"

The 1990s saw the rise of a new generation of young European scholars interested in Korean Buddhism. Among these is Vladimir Tikhonov (University of Oslo). Originally a student of ancient Korean history, especially the Gaya state, Tikhonov has developed a growing interest in the history of Buddhism, first during the Goryeo (Tikhonov 1998b) and later shifting his attention to the premodern period. In the process of his work on Goryeo Buddhism he came to realize that contemporary South Korean scholarship has tended to characterize Buddhism as "state-protecting," and to claim that related functions, including the participation in the interstate warfare by Buddhist monks, took place on the basis of doctrinal convictions. An attempt to problematize this view and to show the complexity of Korean Buddhist attitudes towards war and violence, has resulted in a number of papers (Tikhonov 2000b). Gradually shifting his focus to the late Joseon period, and the Japanese colonial period (1911-1945) in particular, Tikhonov has written on a wide range of topics including the Buddhist response to modernity (Tikhonov 2002a, 2004) as well as the controversial issue of Korean Buddhist monks collaborating with the Japanese during the occupation (Tikhonov 2003). As a student of the important and influential historian Choi Byung-Heon of Seoul National University, himself an expert on Korean Buddhist

history both ancient and modern, Tikhonov has naturally absorbed certain aspects of his teacher's research. However, he is approaching the study of early modern Buddhism in Korea from the perspective of the modernity discourse including issues such as intellectualism, Darwinism and contemporary literature (Tikhonov and Miller 2007). Moreover, by adopting a critical approach to modern Korean history, he has often provoked angry responses from the heavily politicized academia of modern Korea. As part of his research, he has written a number of unusual and illuminating articles on eminent Buddhist figures of the early Japanese colonial period including Yi Dongin (fl. late 19th cent.) and Han Yongun (1878-1944) (Tikhonov 2001, 2002a). In addition to being an astute scholar of early modern Buddhism in Korea, Tikhonov is also an established writer in Korea of critical social and political essays under the name Pak Noja.

Tonino Puggioni (formerly of Seoul National University), an Italian diplomat and scholar of Buddhist medieval history in Korea, is like Tikhonov a student of Professor Choi Byung-Heon. With his interest in Goryeo Buddhism, in particular the religious aspects of the relationship between the Korean and Yuan Mongol courts, Puggioni is the one among Prof. Choi's disciples who has most faithfully followed in his mentor's footsteps. In his impressive doctoral thesis written in Korean, he discussed the importance of the Beopsang/Ja-eu School during the Goryeo period (Puggioni 1996). Recently studies on Korean Buddhist women at the Mongol court at Dadu and the role of eunuchs have shed new light on the role of Buddhist institutions at the Goryeo court during the late medieval period (Puggioni 2004a, 2004b). Puggioni's interest in the history of Buddhism under the Goryeo court has also made him look at the making of illuminated manuscripts by the court as an expression of Buddhist faith (Puggioni 2000). At present he is working on travelogues and miscellaneous literati writings concerned with and reflecting Buddhist topoi.

Pankaj Mohan (formerly of the University of Copenhagen), now a professor at the University of Sidney in Australia, has spent enough time in Europe to merit attention in the context of the present article. Like Tikhonov and Puggioni, he is also a disciple of Choi Byung-

Heon in the more formal sense of the word, but in contrast to both of these scholars he has chosen to follow quite a different line of research than his mentor. Pankaj's dissertation "Buddhism and State in Early Silla" (Mohan 1999) reveals a great interest in the relationship between the royalty and Buddhism under the Silla Dynasty with special reference to the *Renwangjing* (Scripture of Benevolent Kings). This has resulted in a number of papers dealing with the notion of Buddhism as protector of the kingdom (*hoguk bulgyo*) (Mohan 2005a, 2005b). One of the central areas of Mohan's research concerns the introduction of Buddhism to Korea during the Three Kingdoms' period. According to his work, Buddhism was able to penetrate into the courts of the early Korean states because of the inability of the indigenous shamanic faith to meet the political needs at that time. Buddhism succeeded in expanding its appeal and influence because it could more effectively perform many of the functions that shamans were hitherto called upon to fulfill. Korean Buddhism, in the light of intercultural relations and development, has also captured Pankaj's interest and resulted in a number of articles tracing Indian influence on Korean Buddhism including related myths. Based on the available literary and archaeological data, he seeks to establish whether the archaic Gaya kingdom was established as a state in the first century AD, and whether it was materially advanced enough to embrace a foreign religion. To this end Mohan makes use of Malinowski's thesis of myth as a way of explaining the meaning of a given legend's significance for the political process (Mohan 2007).

Although not belonging to the Koreanological circuit in Europe as such, Bernard Sénécal (Sogang University), a Jesuit priest from Paris, must also be mentioned for his contribution to the development of Korean Buddhist studies in Europe. Especially his dissertation "La vie et l'œuvre du Maître S`n T'oeong Seongcheol (1912-1993)" which dealt with contemporary Korean Seon Buddhist practice and doctrine from the perspective of the comparative study of religion. In this work, Sénécal places his emphasis on contemplative practice as taught by the late Patriarch Seongcheol, an influential leader of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (Sénécal 1998). While

it can hardly be denied that Sénécal's study of Korean Seon Buddhism has both a sectarian and apologetic, as well as polemic slant—in particular, as he is dealing with Seongcheol, who caused much controversy within the Jogye Order during his time in office as "Supreme Patriarch"—his keen and deep personal interest in the contemplative traditions of contemporary Catholicism and Korean Buddhism has yielded important insights. In a more recent review, Sénécal has criticized Robert E. Buswell's *The Zen Monastic Experience*, a study of contemporary Korean Seon monasticism, on the grounds that the book is tendentious and romantic in its outlook (Sénécal 1998).

Yannick Bruneton (INALCO), a young scholar from France, is among the leading researchers on Korean Buddhist history during the middle ages. Bruneton's mentor and primary teacher is Heo Heung-Sik, a passionate and highly productive scholar in the fields of medieval Korean Buddhism and the Goryeo Dynasty in particular. It is hardly an exaggeration to see Bruneton as among the most qualified students of Heo's. Bruneton's research has focused on classical, historical sources from the Goryeo Dynasty including official histories, stele inscriptions, memoranda of Buddhist construction works, etc. (Bruneton 2003, 2004). The role and function of geomancy (*pungsu*) in Buddhism has been the red thread running through much of his work (Bruneton 1997, 2000, 2005). He has shown that although contemporary sources generally offer a positive view of Buddhism and geomancy, documents of the fifteenth century onwards tend to always refer to them in a negative way. Despite a certain modicum of reason behind this critique, one must also see it as attempts to vilify the Goryeo regime, to disparage Buddhism, and to legitimate the drastic reduction of monastery estates and the relocation of the capital to Hanyang during the Joseon Dynasty (Bruneton 1997). It remains a fact that geomancy as practiced by members of the Buddhist *sangha* was an important feature of the social, political and religious life in Korea during the Goryeo period. Some monks practiced geomancy in order to make a living outside of institutional boundaries. Others partook in public administration, participated in

dogam (special committees), and were occasionally called on to organize a famous monk's funeral, construct Buddhist temples or participate in royal excursions. As geomancy and fortunetelling were also carried out by other government agencies, Buddhist geomancers often acted as middlemen between the Goryeo period state and Buddhist establishments (Bruneton 2000). To some extent Bruneton's work helps us to understand the present efforts among Korean scholars to revive the myth of the great Buddhist geomancer Doseon (827-898), who has been seen by some as the bearer of Korean identity and harmonizer between Confucianism and Buddhism, the latter of which was supposed to have been prevalent in the early and middle periods of the Goryeo Dynasty (Bruneton 2006). In recent years, the development of practical methods with which to analyze Buddhist epigraphical writings has been at the forefront of Bruneton's research.

Being among the last in a now established tradition of European scholarship in the field of Korean Buddhist studies, Jörg Plassen (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) is a new star on the academic firmament in Europe. Whereas Bruneton remains a traditional historian and philologist at heart, Plassen's interests are broader and more diverse as reflected in his broad range of writings. A specialist in Sino-Korean Buddhist philosophy—especially the Samnon/Sanlun tradition—and the Buddhist commentarial traditions of both cultures, he has found it fairly easy to shift back and forth between the two Buddhist traditions (Plassen 1997, 2005). Furthermore, Plassen has identified the commentarial literature as one of the common denominators of both traditions, and has provided important insights into the various commentarial strategies encountered in this type of religious literature (Plassen 2004). Wonhyo (625-685), the celebrated Buddhist exegete and commentator, has also captivated Plassen's interest, which resulted in articles on various aspects of the former's *oeuvre* including the *Geumgang sammaegyeong non* (Plassen 2001, 2003). In his various writings, he has proven eminently suited to bridge the two Buddhist traditions of China and Korea and their copious literature. In recent years, Plassen has collaborated with the Korean scholar Choi

Yeonsik in the discovery and identification of a hitherto overlooked Buddhist commentary from the Baekje (Paekche) area. Everybody in the field is eagerly awaiting the fruits of this exciting collaboration to appear in print.

The latest arrival to the field of Korean Buddhist studies in Europe is the young Dutch scholar Sem Vermeersch, who passed his doctorate in 2001. A student of Martina Deuchler (formerly of SOAS), the important historian of Joseon Korea, Vermeersch undertook to study the relationship between the Korean Seon Buddhist tradition and the government during the late medieval period in his dissertation "The Power of Buddha: The Ideological and Institutional Role of Buddhism in the Goryeo Dynasty" (Vermeersch 2001). While Vermeersch's dissertation was overly ambitious and somewhat misconceived in scope, this talented young scholar has subsequently produced a number of interesting articles and papers on the role of Buddhism in the formation of state building in medieval Korea (Vermeersch 2004).

Postscript: The Future of Korean Buddhist Studies in Europe

Through this introduction, I hope I have shown both the breadth and depth of European scholarly endeavors in the field of Korean Buddhism. As can be seen, a multitude of important topics have already been dealt with. Moreover, there are now several ongoing projects in the field which all promise to yield new discoveries and alter hitherto established but now out-moded views on the development of the religion in Korea. Despite the extent and scope of research into Korean Buddhism, concerned scholarship in Europe is still in its infancy, and there is a vast amount of material that we still need to access in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena in all its diversity. Aspects that still need to be worked on include the interrelationship between Buddhism and Confucianism, the status of women in Korean Buddhism, the history of the Cheontae School, poetic and literary writings by Korean monks, Buddhist music, tem-

ple economics, etc. Ritual practices during the Goryeo and Joseon periods are still very little understood and is another field that needs to be more thoroughly researched. Moreover, the study of Buddhist material art has so far only been superficially undertaken, and much more in-depth research needs to be done on virtually all aspects related to Korean Buddhist art. For some reason, the history and culture of Buddhism during the second half of the Joseon period are largely “unknown territory,” and even though this phase in Korean Buddhist history is very well documented in both religious and secular sources, very little has been done in this interesting period. Hence, there are enough topics to study for the next several decades to come.

It is ironic and somewhat disheartening that now, when the study of Korean Buddhism has finally grown into a strong and important academic tradition within European Koreanology in general, we are witnessing a steady decline in support for non-European and classical studies within the Humanities in Europe. During the 1980s and the early 1990s, it was much easier to be a student of Korean Buddhism at a European University with a Korean program than nowadays, even though we were often alone—or at least very isolated—with our, admittedly, rather specialized interest(s). At that time, grants were readily available both from Korea and locally, and we had lots of time to indulge our interest in the rich arcana of Korean Buddhism. Today research on the East Asian religions is often viewed as an unnecessary luxury, and little if any funding can now be found, even for outstanding scholars or students. In light of this development where universities all over Europe are in the process of actively dismantling the classical and more exotic studies including Koreanology and Buddhology, it remains an open question whether or not the study of Korean Buddhism will survive in the European academic world of the future unless strong countermeasures are adopted. The present state of affairs is untenable, and it is a great shame if Korean studies and with it the study of Korean Buddhism should now decline or even disappear, especially now when so many new and highly qualified scholars have appeared in the field. Here, it

is also interesting to note that at present the number of European researchers working on Korean Buddhism greatly outnumber those found in the United States. This is highly significant, since American scholars in the field of East Asian Buddhism normally are much more numerous than those from Europe.

One hope is that the new generation of European scholars in the field—many of who are now in permanent positions at various universities—will be able to stimulate sufficient interest among their respective students to bolster the study of Korean Buddhism. The task is not an easy one, but given the diligence and high academic level of this new generation of European scholars, it may not be too optimistic to hope that the study of Korean Buddhism will still be active here after the passing of another thirty years.

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GLOSSARY

Beopsang	法相(宗)	<i>milgyo</i>	密教
Cheontae	天台	<i>pungsu</i>	風水
dogam	都監	Renwangjing (Ch.)	仁王經
Fazang (Ch.)	法藏	<i>Sanguk yusa</i>	三國遺事
<i>gasa</i>	歌詞	Sangwonsa	上院寺
<i>Geumgang</i>	金剛	Seon	禪宗
<i>sammaegyeong non</i>	三昧經論	Seongcheol	性徹
<i>hoguk bulgyo</i>	護國佛教	<i>sin sin-gyo</i>	新新教
Huayan (Ch.)	華嚴	<i>sin-gyo</i>	新教
Hwaeom	華嚴	<i>Worin seokbo</i>	月印釋譜
Ja-eun	慈恩(宗)		

(Ch.: Chinese)