

# Buddhist Nuns in Confucian Joseon Society

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The purpose of this study is to search for traces of women who led alternative lives outside the boundaries prescribed by the Confucian patriarchal ideology. This paper pays particular attention to the tensions between the dominant Confucian doctrine, which often subordinated women to men, and the creative engagement by women in religious life, through which they conformed to, rejected, or appropriated the existing gender system. As a way to bring about a picture of the lively experience women had in the realm of religion, I tried to excavate stories about nuns from official Joseon records, and then reinterpreted the records in order to better understand various strategies and actions taken by women who submitted themselves to the dominant gender ideology and yet found ingenious and subversive ways to exercise their power and resist the status quo. Through Buddhism, some women were able to create an alternative space outside Confucian social norms and live a life separated from the main norms of the Joseon dynasty.

Keywords: Joseon, Buddhist nuns, Confucianism, Buddhist temples, play, women's culture

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines women who went beyond the boundaries of the dominant Confucian doctrine through an alternative reading of the male Confucian elite's discourse on Buddhist nuns during the Joseon period.<sup>1</sup> Buddhist temples provided upper class (*yangban*) women an alternative cultural space in which they

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1. There are studies on female Buddhist monks during the Joseon period that examine the establishment of Buddhist temples for female monks by the royal household (Jeong and Park 1998;

could emanate their “female vitality” that the new Confucian norm tried to restrict. Buddhism in Joseon society formed an important part of popular culture, which Confucian ideology was not able to completely subsume. Its vitality was maintained especially by women. For the most part, scholars have discussed the status of women in relation to the establishment of Neo-Confucianism as the governing ideology of the Joseon dynasty. They see the transformation of the status of women as occurring in tandem with the spread of Confucian ideology. In particular, they have discussed the ways in which confucianization affected such institutions as inheritance (Wagner 1983), marriage (Jang 1997), adoption (Peterson 1996), and ancestor worship (Deuchler 1992).

We can read how Confucianism defined the proper role of women in the Virtue of Three Followings; here, women were defined as daughter, wife, or mother. Becoming someone’s wife was an essential condition of leading a normal life in Joseon dynasty. But did all women living under this Confucian ideology succumb to these requirements of society and live as wives and mothers of sons in contentment? Were there not any alternative lifestyles?

It is true that numerous restrictions on the activities of women outside the home were legislated during the Joseon dynasty. Yet I wonder if we should view these many legal restrictions not as proof that women led primarily domestic lives, but as evidence that so few women in fact submitted willingly to a life restricted to the domestic sphere (Jeong 2005).

There is a need for scholarship to go beyond the broad descriptions of Joseon women and to focus specifically on the detailed context, process, and contents of confucianization. It is especially necessary to view how Confucianism, even while steadily progressing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, continued to arouse opposition and encounter resistance. We should be careful, moreover, not to view this resistance simplistically. Perhaps rather than simply defining the Joseon dynasty as the Age of Confucianism, we should view it as a period during which, even while Confucian morality was changing society, numerous counter-movements were also coming into being and forming a new

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Lee 2003; Hwang 2008) and the ways in which female monks are portrayed in novels and stories during the period (Kyeong 2004; Kim 2004). Min Sun-ui (2004) offers a feminist analysis of Buddhism by focusing on the Buddhist faith of the royal household, such as queens Sohye and Mungjeong. She explains that feminism means laying stress on women’s experiences, understanding and looking after others on the basis of maternal thinking, women’s solidarity and sisterhood, and gender politics. She analyzes the Joseon women’s Buddhist activities as an embodiment of sisterhood.

balance with these new Confucian customs. The persistence of non-Confucian elements in Joseon society is one of the main issues that has to be discussed further.<sup>2</sup>

If we look at documents from the Joseon dynasty, we find numerous references to women who do not fit in with this Confucian ideology, from the wives of bureaucrats who came home at night dead drunk after carousing in a banned religious ceremony, to Buddhist nuns traveling in groups and staking out positions in the countryside (Jeong 2005). One can approach the issue of women's responses to the confucianized domestic sphere by investigating the Buddhist beliefs of *yangban* women, with special focus on their activities within Buddhist temples (Lee 1996; Lee 1997). Perhaps then we should try to understand the thoughts and lives of women within Joseon's Confucian society. We should especially focus on how women's interests—material, intellectual, and emotional—caused them to make space for themselves outside of the domestic sphere.

In this paper, I search for traces of nuns<sup>3</sup> who led alternative paths outside the boundaries prescribed by the Confucian patriarchal ideology. Not many records tell of these women: they did not leave historical records themselves, and the few records written about them by others are distorted with male-dominant views. Most of the relevant discourses were produced during the building of the Joseon state as a Confucian society, with the objective being the containment of Buddhism and Buddhist nuns. But with these sources, we can trace their existence. Reading these discourses that worry about women becoming Buddhist monks or argue for regulating and punishing their activities from a feminist perspective, this paper examines the women who did not conform to Confucian norms.

## 2. Stories of Those Who Became Nuns

The song from the Joseon dynasty called *Sijipsariyo* (Suffering under the In-laws) is about a woman, Ggokdugaksi, who was harassed by her in-laws for not working hard enough in the field. When her husband Bak Chumji takes a concu-

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2. Confucian reformers attempted a thorough transformation to a very different social order, so contemporary Koreans have an arduous transition out of the Confucian embrace (Deuchler 1977:45).

3. Nuns were called *seungni* (僧尼) or *niseung* (尼僧) during the Joseon dynasty.

bine and refuses to give her any property, Ggokdugaksi tells him, “I want to go to Geumgang Mountain to become a nun. Give me some travel expenses.” She leaves; she ends up becoming a nun against her husband’s wishes, and becomes a wanderer.<sup>4</sup> How are we to understand the life of this woman who decided to leave the unjust in-laws behind and become a nun? Can we not read the subjectivity of Joseon dynasty women from this song, those who actively refused the unjust and oppressive familial structure? The following record relates some information about nuns in Joseon dynasty.

These days, unmarried women and widows continuously shave their heads and become nuns. Saying that they are either encouraging good virtue or picnicking in the mountains, they gather in groups and mingle with nuns; these kinds of wanton acts disrupt the good custom of proper families. They provide no benefits to the state and only harm to the people. We [the officials] are curious as to why your majesty does not shut down the temples, although everyone in the court including your advisors is telling your majesty to do so. (Seongjong *sillok* 9/30/11)<sup>5</sup>

This claim, which clearly intends to describe nuns in a bad light, does not provide us with a true ‘reality’ of the matter. But from the expressions “continuously shave their heads” and “gather in groups,” we can surmise that nuns were not so rare in Joseon society. We can also surmise that becoming a nun was not so much a forced outcome born out of necessity but a deliberate choice. In order to further our understanding of who these women were, let’s examine a record from the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of Seongjong’s reign.

These days, not only those from the middle class but also those from the literati class shave their heads and become nuns. They become nuns when their husbands have only just passed away. Even unmarried women compete with each other to go to the temples to become nuns. This is not appropriate. It is only natural that men have wives, and

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4. Lim 1984. Previous studies state that the decision to become a nun was considered a passive response to marital conflict (Jang 1984:16). But when considering that by becoming a nun a woman abandoned entirely the oppressive familial structure, the decision could be considered a more aggressive one.

5. For the reader’s ease, *sillok* are referenced using reign year/day/month.

women have husbands. For women to become nuns when they are still young and never having married harms the harmonious energy. I beg your majesty to order them back to the secular world. (Seongjong sillok 22/22/5)

We can see from this record, that there were many women, either unmarried or widowed, of various classes, who became nuns. And these nuns were criticized for “disturbing the harmonious energy” for not being in a marital relationship. *Seongjong sillok* records many cases of literati women becoming nuns. Thus there was much debate whether to ban the practice (Seongjong sillok 9/10/3).

Then under what circumstances did these women become nuns? According to *Seongjong sillok*, “Some of them became nuns for losing their virtue. Others became nuns after they were widowed, claiming that they pray for their deceased husbands. But the real reason behind it was to wander around numerous temples and engage in wanton acts” (Seongjong sillok 4/4/8). From these materials, we can see that the male Confucian intellectuals believed that there were three types of women who became a nun. The first type was unmarried women. They were said to have become nuns due to adulterous acts,<sup>6</sup> the persuasion of others,<sup>7</sup> illness (Seongjong sillok 6/26/5), out of sadness for a parent’s death (Sejong sillok 7/23/6), or for being ousted from their home. We have to consider that all these reasons were given by men and did not necessarily represent reality.

The state banned unmarried women from becoming nuns, yet they considered those who did as objects of relief. Nuns were portrayed as destitute women, deprived of married lives that they yearned for (Sejong sillok 25/16/5). Some were considered as having chosen the path, but most were considered to have become nuns because of the coercion of others. Government officials said, “Literati women are not allowed to become nuns, but of late, due to lax inspection, many are forced to shave their heads and not marry” (Seongjong sillok 6/26/5).

6. *Joseon wangjo sillok* calls these cases *silhaeng* (inappropriate acts), which usually refers to pre-marital sex (Seongjong sillok 4/4/8).

7. A record from the Seongjong reign states, “Hong Gyeongson’s sister became an unmarried nun, and his niece also became an unmarried nun...” It seems likely that Hong Gyeongson’s sister became a nun first and then influenced her niece to do so as well (Seongjong sillok 2/22/11).

During Seongjong's reign, an unmarried woman, Miss Kwon, became a nun, and there was a debate between the king and Kyeong Jun about whether the woman became a nun through her own will or through coercion by a woman named Hong Sadang. King Seongjong thought that she became a nun through her own will because she had an illness. Kyeong Jun argued that since she became a nun through Hong Sadang's coaxing and her parents' lack of interest, it was not due to her free will (Seongjong sillok 8/29/2). If she did not become a nun through her own free will, the person who coerced her into shaving her head was to be punished. There were also incessant discussions to force those who had already become nuns to return to the secular world and marry. In *Taejong sillok*, we can find a petition: "Please order the young nuns, except those who had entered the temple as widows, to keep their chastity, to return to their homes, and to marry" (Taejong sillok 2/18/2). The male officials thought that "although the nuns regret their decision [to become a nun] and want to return, they cannot say it aloud, and thus their hearts are always troubled" (Sejong sillok 8/23/6). As such, those who became nuns never having married were considered to be objects of relief.

The second type to become a nun was widows. Many widows became nuns soon after they were widowed, claiming that it was necessary for keeping their chastity. This seems unlikely since if keeping their chastity was the real purpose, they would have first completed the period of mourning for their deceased husband. There were some women who became nuns even before the funeral. Mrs. Yun, the wife of Yu Jahwan, who became the abbess of Jeongeopwon, was such a case.<sup>8</sup> She ran away and became a nun on the day her husband was buried.

The wife, Mrs. Yun, daughter of minister Yun Hyung, was easily led to jealousy and lechery. Even when her husband Yu Jahwan was alive, she would secretly socialize with nuns, and she had no expressions of sadness when her husband passed away. When the relatives prepared to go to [the husband's] hometown [to bury him], she pretended as if she was going to go with them. But on the evening before the burial she ran away and became a nun. Afterwards, she wandered the mountains and met many monks, received scriptures from them, and stayed with them. She would say that she was "praying for her deceased husband," but actually she was only looking to please her mind. (Sejo sillok 13/25/2)

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8. See Hwang (2008) for more information about female chief priests at Buddhist temples.

We do not know exactly why Mrs. Yun ran away to become a nun without even attending her husband's burial. Could she not endure life as someone's wife under the Confucian family order? Although male officials criticized her by saying that she was pursuing pleasure, she was likely just active in her religious activities as evidenced from the fact that she received scriptures from the monks she met. Moreover, she was capable enough at networking in her religious community to later become the chief priest of Jeongeopwon. For such a woman, living within the strict Confucian norms as someone's wife must have been so unbearable that she could not even wait until the burial rite was performed before retiring from the world. Or, perhaps, she had already crossed the norms that obligated her to attend her husband's funeral.

If the opinions on unmarried nuns were quite simple, opinions about widowed nuns were more complex. Since remarriage was practically banned in Joseon dynasty (Lee 1948), the idea that widows became nuns to keep their chastity was warmly accepted. During Sejong's reign, there was a discussion to ban one's sons and unmarried women from entering the temple as monks and nuns, but they made an exception for widows (Sejong sillok 2/7/11). But there were incessant suspicions about the behavior of these widowed nuns. Criticism of widowed nuns who engaged in lecherous acts with monks was constantly raised. These widows practiced the norms of chaste widows by becoming nuns, but by doing so, they were able to transgress the boundary between the chaste and the unchaste.

The last group was those who had "betrayed their husbands" (Sukjong sillok 30/28/10). These women were those who were married but left their homes to become nuns. These women may have resorted to becoming nuns because of oppressive in-laws or unfaithful husbands.<sup>9</sup> But in the eyes of the abandoned husbands, these women were regarded as 'betraying wives.' There were also those like Sabangji (Sejo sillok 8/2/5), whose sexual identity was unclear, and court ladies (Yeonsan-gun ilgi 10/23/12) who became nuns.

### 3. Temple and Play: Staying Overnight, Talking, and Mingling

Joseon Korea was a state built on Confucianism as its ruling ideology. From the beginning of the dynasty, the Joseon court, through numerous policies, attempt-

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9. The previously mentioned Ggokdugaksi in *Sijipsariyo* falls under this group.

ed to remake itself into a Confucian society. Numerous laws restricting the daily lives of women were put into effect from the early Joseon dynasty, including *naeoe beop* (内外法, laws defining which male relatives could meet freely with what women), *bunyeo sangsa gumji beop* (婦女上寺禁止法, laws restricting women's entrance into temples), and *pyeonggyoja geumji* (regulations outlawing the use of open sedan chairs by women), as well as *jaeganyeo jason geomgo beop* (再嫁女子孫禁錮法, laws preventing the descendants of twice-married women from taking civil service exams) (Pak 1976).

During the Joseon period, the state policies based on Confucianism stressed the regulation of women's bodies as a focus for moral cultivation. In this sense, leaving the inner room and play can be seen as a kind of resistance to the social and ideological norms of the time. Temples provided women with a liberated area from these regulations.<sup>10</sup>

Since the fourth year of Taejong's reign, women were ordered not to enter Buddhist temples (Taejong sillok 4/8/12). But this ban was never successfully carried out. Occasionally, there were Buddhist functions sponsored by the royal court itself, and many literati men and women attended them. Prince Hyoryeong (孝寧大君) Yi Bo (李補) opened a Suryuk festival (水陸齋)<sup>11</sup> for seven days near the Han River. Men and women gathered and the literati women offered food at the altar (Sejong sillok 14/14/2). Nuns were criticized for not being hidden in the mountains but mingling with women and sponsoring temple events.

Those who strongly argued that women who frequented temples should be punished pointed out the fact that these women were mingling with monks. During Sejong's reign, the late Guanbusa Yi Hua-yong's widow, Mrs. Dong, convinced not only her mother and daughter, but also other female relatives, to stay at a small temple with monks. She also had her jewelry melted down to write the *Sutra of the Lotus* and made honey cookies to offer to the monks

10. About temple and play as a general theme, we can refer to Hur's research about Asakusa Sensoji in late Tokugawa Japan. He selected the topics of "prayer" (*kito*) to identify the religious dedications at Sensoji and "play" (*asobi*) to illustrate how socioeconomic and cultural matters eventually assumed greater significance in the temple's affairs. By the end of the seventeenth century, the government's neo-Confucian advisors were anti-Buddhist, and the shogunate essentially terminated official financial support. Seeking new sources of income, Sensoji administrators used the temple's adjacent land for a variety of profitable enterprises (Hur 2000).

11. A Buddhist ceremony performed for the lonely and hungry ghosts wandering on water and land.



(Sejong sillok 7/8/11). In the sixteenth year of Sejong's reign, Hoe-am temple (檜巖寺) in Yangju hosted a Buddhist event and many women and nuns attended. When three monks began to dance a dance called *mu-aehi*, the women began to take off their clothes for donation (Sejong sillok 16/10/4). Another source described the scene: "musicians were hired, gold and silver decorated the Buddha, and men and women were mixed" (Sejong sillok 25/11/4; 25/28/4).

Advisory officials demanded that the king punish the husbands of the violators. "Although it is well known that women are not allowed to enter the temples, of late, those like Mrs. Yun, Mrs. Yi, and Mrs. Hwang have traveled to numerous temples and stayed for two nights. Their manners were not in accordance with the *Book of Rituals*, and surprised those around them" (Seongjong sillok 4/18/7). In response to these memorials, the king avoided punishing them by saying, "these women were merely unaware of the law." In the end only one literati woman and one nun were flogged eighty times while others were just fined (Sejong sillok 16/7/7).

Buddhist events by nuns and women continued; it was impossible to stop them from frequenting the temples with these bans. Another reason why these incidents were difficult to punish was because these events were sponsored by the royal court and the women participating were from the families of high officials. A *Sahonbu* (司憲府) record laments, "These women do not fear the ban and act as they wish!" (Sejong sillok 29/27/4).

*Joseon wangjo sillok* recorded that women from the literati class would go up to the temples and pray, stayed overnight, and chatted with each other. What did the nuns and the women chat about all night? These dialogues never appeared in the pages of history but were recorded as "lecherous mixings" through the eyes and mouths of male recorders of history.

But kings knew very well that they could not break these women's wills. "If they consider it [going to the temples] a virtuous act and admire it with all their heart, then this means that these women have given up [Confucian cultivation], and we cannot do anything about it" (Munjong sillok 1/13/4). From this we can see that the women who frequented Buddhist temples were considered by the state as having given up the proper life of Confucian cultivation, and have chosen to live according to their own will.

In a society where civilized life was defined in Confucian terms, women continued to believe in Buddhism, pray at Buddhist temples, and participate in temple events. State control and punishment could not change this cultural trend. In the temple, nuns were able to build their own world. Mrs. Yun, who became a

nun even before carrying out her husband's funeral, became an abbess at Jeongeopwon. The niece of Hong Kyeong-son, who became an unmarried nun, is recorded to have gone to Gyeongsangnam Province to picnic in the mountains (Seongjong *sillok* 6/26/5). The significance of a nun picnicking in the mountains becomes clear once we remind ourselves that women during the Joseon dynasty were kept indoors by the Confucian rules of conduct. While other women were restricted from going outside, nuns were free to roam outdoors and picnic in the mountains.

The male intellectuals' descriptions of the activities of the nuns and women at Buddhist temples as lecherous and debauched were intended to disparage both the women and Buddhism. Thus it is hard to say that the narratives are factual. It is more likely that they were recording the fact that Buddhist prayers were being held overnight with such descriptions as "men and women mingled." However, it is also possible that the women at the Buddhist temples expressed their sexual, pleasure seeking, and chitchatting desires—those things seen in the eyes of Confucian male intellectuals as "lecherous"—to their heart's content. What does it say about the male ruling class when they could not prevent women from frequenting the temples? Doesn't it show that by permitting the women's activities at the Buddhist temples the male ruling class's discipline of women according to Confucian norms seemed unimpeded on the surface?

#### **4. Nuns and the Discourse about Buddhism Endangering the State**

The nuns and women at the temple did not just party by singing and dancing. According to *Jungjongillok*, "The evil acts of nuns are worse than that of monks; some frequent the homes of ministers, some frequent the court, and they do disrespectful acts. I beg your majesty to ban them from entering the capital" (*Jungjongillok* 1/29/10). These nuns seem to have frequented the houses of ministers and meddled with 'outside matters.' We can surmise that behind the discourse that criticized these nuns for being "lecherous" there may have been vigilance against their political power. Perhaps for this reason, the discourse on nuns during the Joseon dynasty was mostly negative: they were lecherous, willful, dirty, and harmful to the people. They were also "not afraid of the laws and conceited" (*Sejongillok* 16/4/5). As soon as women became nuns they began to exist outside the Confucian norms of conduct. It is not surprising that these women who had desire, passion, and collective power were considered lecher-

ous and dirty from the perspective of those living within the prescribed boundaries.

The establishment of Confucianism was only enabled through the suppression of Buddhism (Jorgensen 1998). “A king’s reign is shortened when Buddhism is popular” (Sejong sillok 2/7/11). This statement represents the typical discourse which was espoused during the Joseon dynasty in order to suppress Buddhism. The Neo-Confucian elite argued for stronger suppression of Buddhism by strengthening the *dochop* system (度牒制).<sup>12</sup> The state encouraged nuns to return to the secular world, and there were discussions to punish the head of a family when an unmarried daughter became a nun (Seongjong sillok 2/22/11). Monks and nuns were ostracized in Confucian society, and nuns were particularly considered dangerous beings. Unmarried women disrupted the family-centered order of the state, and for being outside of the bounds of marriage, nuns were considered dangerous to the state.

Nuns were considered as a congregation of women who had disrupted the Confucian order. They did not benefit the state and only harmed the people. Especially when unmarried women became nuns, the basis of the state structure, which was the harmonious relation of yin and yang, wife and husband was being disrupted. “If they had married and engaged in productive industry they would have become good people, but since they idle and consume clothes and food, they only disrupt the order of the state” (Seongjong sillok 9/30/11). As such, monks and nuns were considered disruptive to the state. This is why the Joseon dynasty had a policy that made unmarried nuns return to society and marry (Jeong 2004). Through marriage, the Joseon dynasty tried to bind men and women together into a ‘normal’ family unit. This policy was in a sense a relief policy for those women who could not marry, but also an encouragement for the women to be reborn into a ‘normal’ woman that society demanded.

In *Sejong sillok*, debates over never married nuns continued; it was argued that never married nuns should be ‘rescued’ because they harm the harmonious energy. One year there was a drought, and a memorial was submitted saying, “[it is natural that] the sky responds to the changes in the human world; the harmo-

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12. Sejong sillok 11/16/4. It was a system that required Buddhist monks to carry a *dochop*, an identification tag for monks. Anyone who wished to be a monk had to receive a *dochop* after fulfilling certain duties for the country. When a monk died or returned to secular life, the *dochop* had to be returned. Anyone who wished to be a monk had to pass a national exam and pay with cloth in order to receive a *dochop*.

nious energy was harmed because there are women in their thirties and forties that have never married” (Sejong sillok 25/16/5). The censorial official Saganwon continued:

The scripture said make sure that there are no women in resentment. This is because the scriptures regarded the importance of the yin-yang harmony between husband and wife. Here, young nuns accumulate impure desires in their hearts but disguise them with a chaste appearance; although they want to get married, they cannot say it out loud, and they go on living sighing. These surely are the hidden resentments! Would your majesty not order the officials around the state to have nuns under thirty years of age grow out their hair and marry? (Sejong sillok 25/16/5)

As such, women who became nuns never having married were considered as objects of relief. By saying that the young nuns resented their ill fate, the voluntary decision of these women was erased. But for those nuns who had no prospect of being relieved, they were subjected to measures that restricted them from entering the cities and prevented them from socializing with ‘normal’ women. The following passage from *Sukjong sillok*, which relates to Saganwon’s argument to destroy Buddhist nunneries, aptly demonstrates how nuns were perceived at the time.

The reason why monks and nuns were banned from entering the city walls was to protect the people against lechery and cunningness, so as to correct the ways of the people. This is why the previous king destroyed all the nunneries. Yet, these days Buddhism has once again become popular, and nuns in groups of tens or hundreds live together within the ten li from the eastern suburbs and build big houses; these houses sparkle in gold, and six out of ten are built so close to each other that one could look into another house from one house. These houses have become the gathering places of wives who betrayed their husbands, maids who betrayed their masters, and unchaste widows. I cannot numerate the evil and lecherous deeds of these women. I ask your majesty to order these houses to be destroyed and the women to be sent to their proper places; please correct this wrong, and transform these women into proper people. (Sukjong sillok 30/28/10)

From this record we learn that from the Confucian state's point of view, the nuns were adulterous and cunning beings and even late Joseon dynasty women did not stop favoring Buddhism. Even though the majority of records about women frequenting temples came during the Taejong and Jeongjong reigns, this is only because the Taejong and Jeongjong reigns were when the Joseon state made regulations regarding the matter; it was not because women became less interested in Buddhism after the seventeenth century.

We also learn that nuns were not rare: according to the above passage, they were as numerous as to build houses in groups of tens and hundreds. Fearing that the nuns would cause disorder in the ways of the people, the state ended up banning nuns from entering the city walls. In the first year of Yeongjo's reign, the ban was expanded to include monks.

Seungji Yi Jeongju pleaded, "Because there are so many Buddhist temples close to the cities, many good daughters from proper families are lured into shaving their heads and becoming nuns. Your majesty must ban this practice." The king said, "Currently, the Confucian way is prosperous in the state; how could a petty number of heretics harm the Confucian way? Only ban the nuns from entering the city walls." (Yeongjo sillok 1/3/5)

Nuns were considered dangerous women who could taint proper women if left to their means. Although there were different kinds of nuns (unmarried, widowed, those who had committed adultery), the commonality between them was that they were not contained by the Confucian family order.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the *Joseon wangjo sillok* records put the nuns in such a negative light, we can also read from the record how Buddhism was prosperous at the time. Also, we learn that despite Saganwon's continual requests to have the nunneries destroyed the king never allowed it. The king knew that Buddhism, as a woman's religion and culture, could not be destroyed merely by destroying a number of temples.

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13. Catholic women were considered in the same light as Buddhist nuns by the Joseon state. During Sinyu-bakhae, among the evil deeds of those women executed for "being baptized and luring others into evil ways" was "not marrying."

## 5. Conclusion

The Joseon dynasty tried to cut off the influence of Buddhism in everyday life and tried to rebuild the society on the basis of Confucianism. The builders of the new state espoused Confucianism as an antidote to Buddhism, which was the state ideology of the previous Goryeo dynasty. The major obstacle in achieving this goal was women who were not willing to give up their Buddhist practices. Following the long cultural tradition, women believed in Buddhism, prayed at the temples, and socialized with monks and nuns.

Those women who became nuns did so not just because of their religious convictions but also to protest against the Confucian patriarchal order. ‘The temple in the Geumgang Mountain’ was an alternative space to the marital home that could be chosen or imagined. Thus, women living during the Joseon dynasty were able to create an alternative space outside of Confucian social norms through Buddhism.

In Joseon dynasty records (which were produced by men), nuns were described as lecherous and cunning beings. The nuns were thought to be luring proper daughters to stay with them at the temples all night long and engage in lecherous activities with monks. In short, they were regarded as harmful to the Confucian state ideology.

The state tried to prevent the nuns from influencing other women. At the time, Confucian intellectuals and the royal court did not exercise extreme control over these activities although they certainly limited them. This shows the complex ways in which intellectual and religious communities negotiated and adjusted their ideologies and practices. This negotiation opened a niche in which women could maintain their Buddhist cultural life, handed down since Goryeo, while at the same time seemingly conforming to Confucian norms. This niche was rendered possible by the constant resistance by some women, like Buddhist nuns, who were not completely subsumed under Confucian regulations.

How can we find the erased voices and the diverse lifestyles of those women who transgressed the socially prescribed boundaries? How can we tell the stories of women who did not adjust easily to the new Confucian patriarchy or of those women who wanted to lead alternative lives? Joseon dynasty women made space for themselves by utilizing all the means allowed to them. Can we not read in the lives of Buddhist nuns and the space of Buddhist temples the traces of women who transgressed the Confucian boundaries in the Joseon dynasty?

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