

BYENGENSEN PARK



Interviewed by
Chung Soonwoo

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In this interview, we introduce Byengsen Park, a scholar residing France who was the first to present the notion that *Essentials of a Buddhist Sermon* (直指心經 or 直指心體要節) is the first printed edition using metal type during the Goryeo kingdom. She resided temporarily at the Academy of Korean Studies in order to do further research on the illustrated records of national events and royal ceremonies during the Joseon dynasty. The interview was conducted by Professor Chung Soonwoo, Professor of the Academy of Korean Studies.

The Editorial Board of the *Review of Korean Studies* would like to express our deepest gratitude to Byengsen Park for sharing life story, experiences, and academic achievements with us. Further thanks go to Professor Chung Soonwoo, Professor Park Jeong Hye, and Dr. Jeong Mi-Ryang for their kind cooperation and contribution. -Editor

Interview with Byengsen Park

Chung Soonwoo
The Academy of Korean Studies

To France

Q: What made you go to France alone in 1955 and why did you focus on bibliography in your academic career?

A: Frankly, I am not interested in bibliography; instead, I have always been interested in books because books have been a part of my life. Reading is my favorite daily activity and pleasure. Before I graduated from Seoul National University, some professors in my department proposed that I stay in school as a research assistant because I received the top score on my university thesis. Though students did not learn about Western philosophy in class, I educated myself with books translated into Japanese, which contained knowledge about Western philosophy. I wrote my thesis on the history of Western philosophy during medieval times. From the experience I became very confident in learning and dared to go to France. But as soon as I arrived in France, I knew I had made a mistake; there were too many things to learn. Trying to motivate myself to go further, I started learning French first.

I wanted to learn how to manage preschools and elementary schools so that I could successfully build and run my own schools after graduation. That is why I choose the College of Education at Seoul National University. Even my parents did not like my going to college, but I insisted and succeeded. The Japanese had a social program called *Chukkyu* (塾) which helped students from poor families continue their education; students selected from each prefecture had their school

fees paid for and were provided necessary support when they went abroad to continue their studies on condition that afterwards they would return and help the community.

I was impressed when I learned about this Japanese system and as far as I knew at the time, there were lots of good private schools in France which were run by the Catholic Church. And that is why I decided to go to France. But when I learned and became good enough to communicate in French, I found that there were no such university courses about the management of a school. Therefore I went to a church school run by nuns and asked for some help to learn how to run a preschool and elementary school, meet the needs of the children, use texts, and about pedagogical methods as well as many other things. Fortunately, some of the nuns provided me with relevant texts and materials and gave me a chance to practice with the children what I had learned from the books. It lasted one year, until I found that I was not fit to be a teacher. It was very hard for me to be absorbed into the children's world.



Q: Was this because the social conditions in France were far more advanced than Korea?

A: Well, rather because of my personality, I think. I could not get along with the children, even elementary school students. After two or three years I stopped thinking about building and running my own school. Then my focus shifted to running a nursing home.

Q: Was there nursing homes in Korea at the time?

A: No, there weren't. When I visited Seoul in 1972, I talked to people I met that I'd like to run a nursing home, and some people said that they would support me. There was a man who offered his personal land to build a house for free. There were three more people who offered part of their property for free. But there were some problems: despite their goodwill and favors, the land they

would have provided was not suitable for a nursing home and it was impossible to use the land in a more effective way. And another problem also occurred. No considerations were taken into account about the legal issues relevant to a contribution made by the aged people when they entered the nursing home. Even if they agreed and signed over their property to the nursing home, their siblings would become eager to get their parents' money back when they died. There would be no choice but to meet their demand; that was their legal right at the time. The judicial system was not completely developed at the time.

When I stayed in Seoul in the early 1970s, I was sometimes invited by First Lady Yuk, who advised me to meet and talk with the president of Youngnam University when she heard about my idea. I knew when I met and talked with him that he was also thinking about the same matter as I was. It was concluded that it was impossible to launch such a project. I felt sorry that my dream of senior citizens spending their life in peace, gardening, growing vegetables and sharing their knowledge with the community would not happen. But it was just a dream.

Q: You studied at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. Was it in the religion department?

A: After I failed to continue in education I entered as a junior the Department of Eastern Language and Culture at the Catholic University of Louvain in 1957. Louvain was founded by the Catholic Church but its curriculum had nothing to do with religion. But it was not difficult to find theological students at the university. Some of them knew about my difficulties in coping with the classes; there was even a student who took notes during class on carbon paper and gave them to me. I studied under the eminent Indologist Father Étienne Paul Marie Lamotte (1903—1983), whose personality was very stubborn and who got mad at students who were late, even by one or two minutes, for his class. But in his class on Buddhism we learned about Buddhism by using texts written in Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan and Chinese, which proved to be very helpful to understanding the essence of Buddhism and its transformation according to geographical regions. In this intensive class I became good at many foreign languages, enough to translate a Buddhist text written in one of the four languages into another one.

I am Catholic, but the reason I started to learn about Buddhism was that whenever asked what the spirit of Korea was, what the original thought of Korea was, I was not able to give a clear answer. I at least knew that to mention the founder of Gojoseon, Dangun, would have sounded ridiculous. Anyway, motivated to learn the root of Korean culture and thought, I started to study Buddhism. And it is necessary for any student who wants to understand Buddhism to learn about Buddhist sutras and the origins of Buddhism first. When an idea is transmitted to another place or culture, then it develops its own way of thought. For example, when Indian Buddhism was introduced to China, the Chinese people changed the religious ritual and interpreted the original ideas using a Chinese perspective of their civilization with their own language; Korea also interpreted Buddhist ideas using a different point of view.

Illustrated Records of the Joseon Dynasty

Q: Why did you work at a French library and devote yourself to bibliography?

A: As I mentioned earlier, I thought that I should first learn more about Korea, so I studied Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. I was for some time so fascinated with Taoism that I would have become Taoist if I weren't Catholic. Taoism, I thought, was quite humane and even romantic. And Kaltenmark, one of the leading Taoist scholars, stayed in Paris and taught students *Tao Ching*. After one year of learning Taoism and Catholicism as well as Catholic doctrine and its history, I was able to tell the common features and differences between Catholicism and Buddhism, and Catholicism and Taoism.

Q: Do you feel your job was your destiny?

A: Well, it's about circumstances, I think. When I made the decision to go to France, one of the professors at Seoul National University, Yi Byeongdo, advised me to look into whether the old books and documents of Korea, which were stolen when the French navy attacked the west coast of Korea in 1866, were kept in France. So in the early period of my life in France I tried to find any record, but I could not find any clue for a long time. Later when I started to work at one of the national libraries I found a record about the archive of Korea but there was no corresponding material in the library. One day I found out by chance that the

archive was being stored in a library in Versailles. It was there without any record. The archive contained illustrated books about national events during the Joseon dynasty. But I had no idea what kind of books they were because the written language looked similar to Classical Chinese but not the same, nor was it Japanese. Later I learned with the help of some professors that the language was Idu (an archaic language which represents the Korean language using hanja) used in Korea since the Three Kingdoms period. It was very difficult for me to figure out what kind of archive there was and what the contents were. As you may know, the terms used in the illustrated records are very technical and it is not easy to understand their meaning and context. I dared to research by myself, which was possible because I didn't know how difficult it would be. I could have asked for some help from professional researchers in Korea, but I did not have any grant or personal finances to cover the costs.



Q: Copies of fifty-seven volumes from the archive are in Korea, aren't they?

A: Yes, the Academy of Korean Studies, the National Library of Korea, and the National Assembly Library have copies.

Q: I remember that you once said that it isn't a problem if Korean archives stolen by foreign powers are housed under the best conditions abroad.

A: Yes, I think that if the conditions for preservation are ensured, then you don't have to be agitated that Korea's precious treasures are in the hands of foreigners. The fact that the materials are the product of Korean culture and are Korean property does not change. I think it is possible that some people who maintain a private archive do not know the value and what kind of documents they have.

Q: After the publication of your bibliography of the illustrated books, many researchers started to pay attention to the archive and produced many articles. It

led to two dissertations; one at Seoul National University and the other at the Academy of Korean Studies. The area encouraged many researchers and the Korean government has offered lots of grants. I am sure that you have deep emotions about this phenomenon when you compare it to when you started.

A: Yes I do. When I first began, many people were very cold to what I was doing. Some people said that it was useless to spend time and energy on it, and other people showed me scorn. And when the staff at the Embassy of Korea in France told me not to bother them any further asking for documents and information, I was deeply frustrated. Furthermore, some library staff that I worked for were alarmed that some fault in the management of the library had happened because they doubted that I revealed very important information of the library to the public. The library had collected the Korean archive but there was no corresponding record except a memo stating that 340 volumes had been donated to the library in 1867. When I couldn't find any of the materials, I thought the books had disappeared during the world wars. At the moment when I almost gave up finding the materials, I chanced upon the archive in a library in Versailles.

Q: Among your achievements, many people value that you confirmed that *Essentials of a Buddhist Sermon* (直指心體要節) found in the archive was the first edition printed by metal type in the world.

A: All I did was study the historical evidence and then announce that the print was the first edition by metal type. In some respect I think I was lucky to have had the chance to announce this fact in public. I presented at the Congress International Oriental in Paris, which meant that scholars from many countries were given the information.

Q: It was printed by Heungkuk Temple (興國寺), wasn't it?

A: Yes it was. At the end of the edition you can see the record that it was printed by metal type, a year after an edition by wooden type was made. There was a Korean scholar who insisted that he contributed to the finding of this fact. But I was the first person who studied the historical evidence, confirmed it, and presented my findings at the Congress of Asian Studies. They had never seen the real edition before I showed them photos of it. Then how could he insist that

he confirmed the historical evidence? When I heard the news a year after the Congress from a staff member of the National Library of Korea, I was angry at the scholar and the irresponsible atmosphere of Korean academia. Scholars need to be sincere about what they achieve, not steal from other people.

Q: What was the most difficult element for you in your research of the archive?

A: It was most difficult to identify the names of the regions mentioned.

Q: What is your opinion about the French archival system and archival management? As far as I know, there are graduate courses in archival studies. Is that true?

A: The French system of preservation and its archival studies are very superior to many other countries. They are systematic and well organized. If you visit the French archives you will understand. And there are independent educational institutes, not colleges, which train students in all aspects of archival work. But one difference between Korean and French archival materials is the French ones were written on parchment, not the paper used in Korea.

Collecting the Archive of Korean Independence Movement Activists

Q: You have collected several boxes containing materials about the Korean independence movement and published part of them in Korea. Can you give more details?

A: Just one volume has been published. The collection is composed of official documents of the 1900 Expo, reports by French officials from the Embassy of France in Korea and Hong Jongoo (洪鍾宇, 1854~1913), the first Korean who went to France to study. I was so eager to collect relevant documents that one day a staff member of the Embassy complained saying that I was bothering them. Recently, a Korean university proposed that I publish and study the materials in partnership with them. I haven't signed a contract yet, but it is probable that I will cooperate with some Korean professors to study the archive. A bibliography of the archive will soon be published in Korea. All of the materials are

about the independence movement. From the research of the archive you can see multiple viewpoints of the movement and the activists who led the movement in Shanghai, Beijing, and Chungching.

Q: When Western Learning (西學) was introduced by France during the Joseon dynasty, Catholic missionaries played an important role. Do you have any materials on this?

A: Those kinds of materials have already been introduced by the Research Foundation of Korean Church History.



Korean Studies Outside of Korea

Q: But the Research Foundation is not willingly to share its materials.

A: Most academic institutions in Korea are the same. They don't want to open to the public until the materials are arranged properly. That is one of the reasons that the same project has been done by different institutions at the same time, wasting time and money. They don't share what they have and don't care what other institutions or individuals have. Let me take as an example the March First Independence Movement. There are many different perspectives about the movement, e.g., the Korean people who suffered under the oppression of the Japanese government and the French diplomatic officials in Beijing who produced about 300 reports analyzing the cause and effect of the movement. There are also documents which the Embassy of France in China sent to Japan. If it was possible to collect documents in various cities including Shanghai and Chungching, then we could have a large collection about the independence movement as well as an overview that included both a domestic and international view. We would have a more generalized and objective viewpoint about the movement. But now we have only part of the picture and even worse, we don't share them with each other.

Q: I definitely agree with you. There is such a narrow focus among us.

A: I have two thousand boxes of materials about the independence movement. It would be quite effective and economical to have a partnership, but I doubt it will happen because it is quite difficult to do in Korea.

Q: What's your opinion of Korean studies in Europe?

A: Korean studies in Paris is only focused on the translation of old books (Korean classics), which as a result lessens the attractiveness of Korean culture and any academic performance. Compared with the popular Japanese and Chinese studies departments in universities, there are few students in the Korean studies departments at Lyons, Bordeaux, and Bretagne. The Korean language book is not good and the language class is one hour a week, which is not enough to advance Korean studies. There needs to be a more advanced and well designed curriculum.

Q: Then should the Korean government invite and provide grants to French students who want to study Korean culture?

A: I doubt that that will be effective because French scholars believe their method of study is the best. They would not listen to other people.

Q: What kind of advice would you give to young researchers?

A: My advice would be not to focus only on the researchers, rather on all people. I'd like to say that if you try to do your best at any moment then you can accomplish what you really want. When each individual does his job and performs diligently, then life and society will change and become more beautiful. This rule applies not only to some but to all people.

Face of Korea and Personal Plans

Q: You have lived in France for fifty-four years. What are the characteristics of Korea in comparison with France? What do you think the face of Korea is?

A: It is not easy to say in a word. To say it simply, I have a feeling that young Koreans especially are getting quick tempered and aggressive in situations. Everyone looks quite busy and is losing patience. Whenever I visit Korea I can feel it even though the situation is slowly getting better.

Q: What do you think is the difference between the advanced French society and Korea? France seems to have very advanced civil ethics.

A: Well, it is, I think, because of a different social development. Civil ethics reflects where the society is located. In this respect I feel sorry that Korean society still has a long way to go.

Q: Did you experience any racial discrimination in France?

A: The situation is much better now. Of course there was a certain social and psychological discrimination against people who had different ethnic backgrounds but now it is very hard to say the purity of French ethnicity.

Q: Do you feel the desire to leave France for Korea and do the projects you first had in mind?

A: Sometimes, yes. But I think it is too late to leave France, come back to Korea permanently, and continue the social welfare project. I believe that I was fortunate to do my job with divine grace.

Q: Thank you for sharing your time and experiences. I believe that when the archive of the Korean independence movement is completed then it will encourage many Korean researchers and contribute to the collection of archival materials about the movement elsewhere as well.