

H-Net Reviews

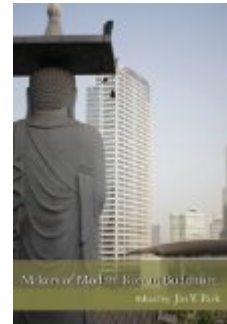
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jin Y. Park, ed. *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. ix + 382 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-2921-2; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-2922-9.

Reviewed by Richard McBride (BYU-Hawaii)

Published on H-Buddhism (July, 2011)

Commissioned by A. Charles Muller



Modern Korean Buddhism

Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism brings together thirteen wide-ranging essays on individuals and topics associated with the development and experience of Buddhism in modern Korea. Jin Y. Park organizes this collection of essays in a roughly chronological manner after separating the articles under the three general sub-headings of (1) “Modernity, Colonialism, and Buddhist Reform,” (2) “Revival of Zen Buddhism in Modern Korea,” and (3) “Religion, History, and Politics.” Although six of the essays were published previously, all have been revised by the authors. Taken together, the essays provide multiple windows through which to view Korean Buddhism’s complex and multifaceted encounter with modernity, as well as demonstrating the changing norms of intellectual discourse.

Scholars of Korean Buddhism trained in Korea assess the history of Korean Buddhism from the opening of Korea to foreign influences in the late Chosŏn (ca. 1876–1910) through the Japanese colonial period (1910–45) with a different set of assumptions and intellectual agendas than scholars of Korean Buddhism trained in the West. Thus, the wide variety of scholarly approaches found in the book should be both challenging and stimulating to readers interested in questions of the emergence of modernity and the evolution of Buddhist doctrine and practice, as well as issues of Korean nationalism. Jin Y. Park’s introduction does an admirable job in contextualizing the main themes covered in the book: Buddhist reform movements, the revival of Sŏn/Zen Buddhism, the

Buddhist encounter with modern intellectual ideas and views, and the reconsideration of Buddhism and modernity in Korea.

This collection of essays should cause students of Korean Buddhism trained in the West to rethink the received academic understanding of the significance and history of Korean Buddhism during the late Chosŏn and Japanese colonial periods. Hitherto, scholarship on this period of Korean history has centered on the seminal issues of the reform and development of Korean Buddhism, and nationalism. In other words, the people who have been studied primarily are those Buddhist monks who published essays describing how the Buddhist church in Korea should reform and modernize, regardless of their actual influence. Also, the issue of nationalism has been paramount. Buddhists, both monks and lay people, who played significant roles in policymaking, scholarship, or practice, have been labeled either as collaborators with the Japanese or as nationalistic patriots, neither of which labels comprise a fruitful approach to truly understanding who the most influential Buddhists were during this troubled time period.

Some essays illustrate this point by assessing their subjects using criteria which the latter cannot possibly fulfill. In other words, because the conventional scholarly classifications for Korean Buddhists, monks and laity alike, have been only reformers, nationalists, or collaborators with the Japanese, almost by definition individuals

who did not resist Japanese occupation and colonization can only be seen as collaborators. In this sense, the study of Korean Buddhism in the modern period shares much with the study of Buddhism in modern China, Taiwan, Burma, Sri Lanka, and other Asian countries.

For instance, Jongmyung Kim's essay, "Yi Nūnghwa, Buddhism, and the Modernization of Korea: A Critical Review," examines the role of the scholar Yi Nūnghwa in the modernization of Korea. Throughout the essay Kim struggles with his perception of Yi Nūnghwa because all of the exterior evidence suggests that, of the above three possible choices, he must have been a collaborator: he never served time in prison for resisting Japanese rule, he was a participant and contributor to the *Chōsen shi* (History of Korea) project executed by the colonial government, and so forth. Kim's thesis is that Yi Nūnghwa was interested in the modernization of Korea, and that he attempted to popularize and modernize Buddhism through his writings. He attempts to rescue Yi's importance from the criticism of his being a collaborator by focusing on his scholarship, because Yi's influence on modern South Korean historiography concerning Korean Buddhism, especially since the 1980s, has been immense. The problem is that Yi does not fit well into the category of nationalist either. Because he wrote exclusively in literary Chinese, he seems to be more of a traditionalist propounding Sinitic universalism (not toadyism toward the Chinese). However, this is precisely what is unpalatable to Kim, who felt that Yi was sending mixed messages to his target audience—who can only be Korean Buddhists by this reasoning—by not writing in a language they could easily understand or appreciate (p. 98). Kim's essay is important because it suggests that scholars reconsider their criteria for evaluating individuals. The conventional schema for the evaluation of Korean Buddhism since 1876 should be reevaluated because the tripartite classification of reformers, nationalists, and collaborators limits rather than facilitates our understanding.

Jin Y. Park's essay, "Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Iryōp and Buddhism," pushes the boundaries of conventional scholarly approaches to Buddhism and provides a refreshing and important counterbalance to the dominant narratives on the link between modernity and Christianity in Korea. Raised in a Christian family, the writer Kim Iryōp was one of the central figures

in the emergence of what was called the "New Woman" in the 1920s and 1930s. Park describes how failures in "modern love" led Kim to turn away from her Christian background and embrace Zen Buddhism, and how she wrote books to proselytize Buddhism. Because scholars usually emphasize the widespread growth and influence of Christianity in discourses on modernity in Korea, the case of Kim Iryōp demonstrates that more traditional modes of expression were just as viable and compelling during the colonial period. This essay on Kim is a refreshing addition to the field emphasizing the role of women in modern Korean Buddhism, and that they too can be regarded as Zen masters. Patrick R. Uhlmann's essay on "Sōn Master Pang Hanam" emphasizes the role of ritual in the development of modern Korean Buddhism and shows how Master Hanam (1876-1951) crafted a viable system of monastic training and practice that struck a balance between meditation (Sōn/Zen) and doctrinal learning. Uhlmann shows how Hanam's *Five Regulations of the Sangha* helped create the inclusive framework of religious practice followed by most Buddhists today: (1) Sōn; (2) recitation of the Buddha's name (*yōmbul*); (3) scripture reading (*kan'gyōng*); (4) rituals (*ūisik*), and (5) protecting or safeguarding the monastery (*suho karam*). Hanam's role, though well known in Korea, has been mostly overlooked and he has been overshadowed by more famous Zen masters such as Kusan (1908-83) and Sōngch'ōl (1912-33). Uhlmann's essay helps create greater nuance regarding the position of a Zen master in a religious community and shows how reaching out to the laity through ritual was an important component in Korean Buddhism during the colonial period.

Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism will certainly be useful for courses on the history of Korean Buddhism as well as courses on Buddhism in modern Asia. There are also enough essays on modern Zen masters for good coverage of Korea in courses on Zen Buddhism: Huh Woosung's article on Paek Yongsōng (1864-1940), Pori Park's essay on Han Yongun (1879-1944), Henrik Sørensen's essay on Kyōngho (1849-1912), Mu Seong's article on Man'gong (1872-1946), Uhlmann's article on Hanam, Yun Woncheol's essay on Sōngch'ōl, and Chong Go's essay on Daehaeng (b. 1927). Park's book is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on Korea's experience with modernity and the role of Buddhism in this transformative process.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Richard McBride. Review of Park, Jin Y., ed., *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31327>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.