A Handbook of Korean Zen Practice is the third installment in the new Korean Classics Library: Philosophy and Religion Series published by the University of Hawai’i Press. At its core, the book is an annotated translation of the oldest extant edition of Sŏn’ga kwigam (Models for Sŏn Practitioners), which was first written in the Korean vernacular script as a handbook for Sŏn monks by Sŏsan Hyujŏng (1520–1604) and published in 1569. John Jorgensen, however, has provided much more than merely a scholarly translation and annotation of this influential work, which, in a variety of forms and recensions, is still widely read by monks and lay practitioners in contemporary South Korea. The basic structure and contents of the book are as follows: A scholarly introduction to Hyujŏng, his life, his doctrinal positions, and the composition of the Sŏn’ga kwigam placed within the historical context of the vicissitudes of royal patronage under the Confucian-oriented Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) and his role is organizing monastic militias in devastating war that engulfed the greater East Asian region in the late sixteenth century due to the Japanese invasion of Korea (1592–1598); the translation of the Sŏn’ga kwigam; an appendix of published editions of the Sŏn’ga kwigam, notes; a bibliography and an index.

Jorgensen’s translation of the Sŏn’ga kwigam is accessible to both scholarly and general audiences. It is the first Anglophone translation of the Korean vernacular (ŏnhae) edition of Hyujŏng’s work, which was initially written as an introductory guide for students and lay believers interested in Sŏn Buddhism. This version of the Sŏn’ga kwigam comprises 153 sections dealing with numerous topics seminal to the growth and development of Sŏn practitioners, and it is nearly twice as long as the literary Chinese edition of the text that has only 81 sections.[1] Although the guidebook is, at heart, a derivative work that abstracts passages from more than fifty Buddhist sūtras and Chinese Chan and Korean Sŏn texts (see pp. 22–30), because Hyujŏng either quotes or alludes to many of the most famous stories and anecdotes of the Zen tradition and typically provides lucid commentary for the sake of his reader, it is an outstanding source for understanding the weltanschauung of the mature Korean Sŏn tradition in the mid-Chosŏn period. General readers and students will appreciate the copious explanatory notes on the terms, concepts, slogans, and anecdotes supplied by Jorgensen to help readers unfamiliar with the specialized jargon of the Zen tradition understand this text. Academics will appreciate the layered, comprehensive, and minutely documented nature of Jorgensen’s presentation of commentarial material supplied.
by Hyujŏng in both literary Chinese and Korean. In other words, Jorgensen allows readers to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between the commentary found in the Chinese version and the commentary composed in the Korean vernacular script. Furthermore, Jorgensen explains the close relationship between the Sŏn’ga kwigam in the Korean vernacular and the Samga kwigam (Models for Practitioners of the Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), another important work of Hyujŏng.

The structure and content of the Sŏn’ga kwigam plainly illustrate the ambivalent acknowledgement and inconsistent perception of doctrinal Buddhism averred by proponents of Sŏn Buddhism in Korea. As Jorgensen explains succinctly in his comprehensive introduction, the Korean Sŏn tradition of Hyujŏng’s day inherited two somewhat conflicting approaches to Buddhist practice due to the mediation of Pojo Chinul (1158–1210): (1) a healthy dose of Song-dynasty Linji Chan with its emphasis on the approach of “investigating the topic of inquiry” (kanhwa; hwadu) and its rhetoric that the words of sûtras do not lead to true enlightenment, and (2) recognition of the usefulness of sûtras, such as the Diamond Sûtra and the Avatamsaka Sûtra, as catalysts or expediency (upâya) in helping aspirants achieve breakthroughs in their practice. Despite the rhetoric inherent to the Zen tradition regarding the inferiority of doctrinal Buddhism, Jorgensen points out that the structure of the Sŏn’ga kwigam is modeled after the composition of the apocryphal text The Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith, which presents for practice a theory of mind and its ineffability in its true state. Although Hyujŏng’s text denigrates those who are attached to words, he provides brief Sŏn insights on the use of mantras and appropriate worship of Amitâbha. Nine Buddhist sûtras and one treatise (the Dazhidu lun) are mentioned by name in the body of the Sŏn’ga kwigam, along with a requisite Zen texts such as the Jingde chuan-deng lu, the Xuanzhongming, and a Rite of Confession. Several of the nine sûtras mentioned by name continue to be relevant in the living Sŏn tradition in contemporary Korea: Nirvâna Sûtra, Lengyan jing, Fanwang jing, Prajñā (Wisdom) Sûtra, and Yuanjue jing. Furthermore the Laozi and Zhuangzi are quoted by name just as often as the Zen texts. As expected, material from such seminal Zen works as the Platform Sûtra of the Sixth Patriarch and the Recorded Sayings of Zhaozhou are paraphrased and alluded to throughout, but they are not mentioned by name by Hyujŏng.

Although Jorgensen’s A Handbook of Korean Zen Practice can certainly be seen as a stand-alone work, it can also be viewed as a companion to his previously published annotated translation of the literary Chinese recension of the Sŏn’ga kwigam executed for the Collected Works of Korean Buddhism series.[2] In evaluating the book as a model of translation, if there is a shortcoming or, perhaps more positively stated, an inconvenience in Jorgensen’s methodology for clarifying the text, it would be that he somewhat sporadically provides the original language and/or Sinographs of specialized terms and phrases that require annotation, so the interested reader or researcher will need to consult the original text. For example, the term “percepts” (the mental result or product of perceiving; an object or perception) appears several times in the book (pp. 47, 90, 101, 103, 111, 119, 121, 142, 146–147, 152) but the technical or non-technical Korean or Chinese term Jorgensen translates as “percepts” is never provided. In one place, the Korean commentary says that the Sanskrit name for Siddhârtha in Sino-Korean is Ton’gil, but the note does not provide the logographs (pp. 89, 191n114). In another place, Hyujŏng uses the Huayan technical term “nature-occurrence,” but does not provide the Sinographs in the explanatory note (pp. 104, 210–211n228). Admittedly, this is a minor inconvenience, and may have been due to constraints on the length of the book. Nevertheless, because scholars of East Asian Buddhism writing in English must always mediate the meaning of the text by translating, Jorgensen’s translation choices are important to a select group of readers. This is a minor shortcoming when compared to the wealth of information provided in the notes.

Notes


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