

Book Review

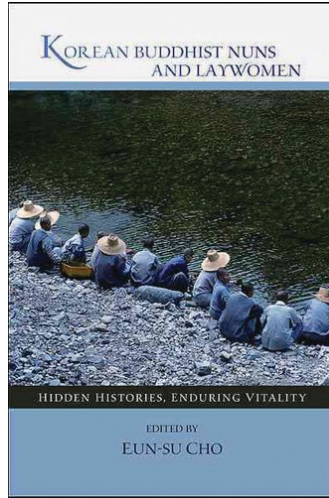
Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen: Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality
Edited by Cho Eun-su
State University of New York Press, 2011
Review by Seon Joon Young

When *Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen: Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality*, edited by Cho Eun-su, was published in 2011, I was excited to see an academic book in English focused exclusively on the under-examined role of women in Korean Buddhism.

Finding English-language material on Korean Buddhism can be difficult enough; what research has been done has focused on two main areas: (1) major (male) figures of Korean Buddhism and their personal contribution to Korean Buddhist thought, and (2) overviews of Korean Buddhism in historical contexts, such as the series on Korean Buddhism in Korea edited by Lewis Lancaster and C.S. Yu. If we were to only read about Korean Buddhism and never actually visit or engage its complex and multifaceted world, our picture of Korean Buddhism would be at best misleading, and at worst an ignorant erasure of half its contributing members. This book proposes to begin the long process of reshaping our understanding of Korean Buddhist history by highlighting research on the lives of Korean Buddhist women.

This is not an easy task, however. As Eun-su Cho herself notes in the introduction to *Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen*, one large reason why nuns—individually or as a community—are not an object of study in the same way as their male counterparts is because nuns are underrepresented in historical records. These include the two major indigenous historical Korean works, the 12th-century *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk Sagi*) and the 13th-century *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk Yusa*), dynastic annals and epigraphic records, and firsthand narratives such as personal diaries. As a result, when looking at Korea's past as represented in the remaining material, nuns seem to have literally disappeared.

Cho is quick to point out, however, that if the sangha of nuns were as absent in actuality as they are textually, it is unlikely that the strong and vibrant community of contemporary Korean nuns would exist as it does today. The



historical foundation for the current nuns' community has always been there, simply hidden beneath selective histories and obscured by what Cho calls the "most formidable obstacle to our research of the near past . . . Buddhist women and monastics' own writings about their lives and religious practices are almost nonexistent." Cho locates this lack of firsthand accounts in Korean women's own reticence and seclusion:

This absence [of material] is largely due to a widespread reaction of Korean nuns in their personal attitudes in which they developed common outlooks on practice that had a significant impact on their presence in the historical record. Specifically, one of their key

coping mechanisms was to seclude themselves entirely from the outside world. . . . Because Korean nuns in the past five hundred years experienced both the oppression of Buddhism and the ideology of male primacy, later nuns seem to have accepted the fact that seclusion was their traditional, normative lifestyle. Determined to preserve such a tradition and to avoid revealing their personal abilities, nuns have virtually quarantined themselves in their meditation rooms and lecture halls in the mountains of Korea, even up to the present day. Hence, it is an urgent task for researchers to document nuns' achievements in modern Korean Buddhist history and record oral interviews with elderly nuns before they die.

In large part, then, this book is a call to arms for those who study Buddhism: knowing that the lack of historical materials has skewed the present understanding of Korean Buddhism, it is necessary to work toward two goals. Researchers need not only to rectify our view of the past through more careful examination of what materials we have, but also record the materials that now and in the future will give an accurate account of the role of women

in contemporary Korean Buddhism.

Despite Cho's urgent request for thorough ethnographic work focused on the lives and contributions of women within the contemporary Buddhist community, the two chapters focusing on the contemporary nuns' sangha are little more than overviews, rather than examples of the kind of ethnographic work Cho insists is critical to research. The first-person accounts that would have made the material come to life are lacking, and in some instances the data is slightly out of date.

Cho's chapter, "Female Buddhist Practice in Korea," is an excellent introduction to the contemporary situation. She simply touches on some subjects, especially the Choseon era (1392–1897) and the establishment of specific communities or temples, in part because other chapters in the book cover much of the same material with more depth. Cho's brief biographies of some of the major female figures during the Japanese colonial and postcolonial periods of the 20th century is particularly welcome (as is Pori Park's in her own chapter), because it brings historical movements to a focus and grounds general social or religious trends in the people who lived them.

Nuns such as Myori Pophui (1887–1974) and Mansong (1897–1975) should be as well known as their male contemporaries, and Cho's chapter is a first step toward accomplishing this. In addition to being a student and recognized dharma heir of the renowned monk and Zen Master Man Gong, Myori Pophui was responsible for making Zen practice as central to nuns' spiritual training as it was to monks' training. Mansong was another of Man Gong's students, and helped to build an important Zen centers for nuns, Taesong Am Hermitage in Pusan.

The one weakness in Cho's chapter is one that recurs in Pori Park's chapter: when discussing the current situation for women in Korean Buddhism, the research and analyses already feel dated. Although Cho correctly highlights the remarkable and laudatory growth of the nuns' sangha over the past 60 years and attempts a general explanation of the factors that gave rise to that success, she does not mention the challenges some of those very same factors now pose to the nuns' sangha. In particular, the change in women's status in general Korean society, which at one point was the foundation on which nuns gained status and support, has now become a reason why women are unwilling to leave society for monastic life.

Like Cho, I can only speak from a subjective and anecdotal perspective and say that monastic life is difficult even under ideal circumstances, and social pressures and environments exert influence on the growth and decline of the monastic world. In the past six years we seem to have reached a tipping point in which women sometimes perceive monastic life as a step backward, in terms of personal autonomy, status and economics. Compared to the current life women can lead within Korean society, monastic life is no longer a space of freedom in the same way

it was decades ago. Although thoroughly investigating this aspect of Korean monastic life and women is beyond the scope of the book as a whole or any single chapter, still, given that it was published in 2011, I would have liked to see some gesture toward the complex and shifting landscape of Korean Buddhism for contemporary Korean women that was already evident by that time.

Pori Park's chapter, "The Establishment of Buddhist Nunneries in Contemporary Korea," gives a strong account of the historical background on which Buddhist nunneries, including meditation temples (sonbang) and doctrinal schools (kangwon) were founded. The Purification Movement of the 1950s in Korea was one of the most critical events of contemporary Korean Buddhist history. Lasting from 1954 to 1970, the Purification Movement was started by the celibate monastics of the Chogye Order. They fought to remove noncelibate monks from the order and were ultimately successful, resulting in the current division between the Chogye Order (which requires celibacy of its monks) and the Taego Order (which does not require celibacy). Park does a good job of introducing the movement and broadly outlining its role in shaping the contemporary sangha. My reservations about her research come from knowing perhaps too much about her subject, and being able to see where mere data or a chronology of dates and important figures fails a complex and involved subject. I was a student-nun at Unmun Monastic College from 2008 to 2012, and noticed that although Park correctly notes the increase in the student-nun population at Unmun Sa Temple between its establishment as a nuns' doctrinal school and 2008, she did not note the dramatic and alarming decrease in the student population from 2008 onward. Beginning with my class at Unmun Sa, and the same incoming classes at the other nuns' schools, the student-nun population decreased by half or more. The picture that Park's chapter and the book as a whole paints of the contemporary nuns' sangha is one of past strength and projected growth, when the actuality is far more complex and not entirely positive.

Park also mentioned the standardization of the monastic curriculum by the Chogye Order in 1984. She does not mention the Chogye Order's most recent major overhaul of the curriculum, beginning in 2009 and fully implemented around 2011, which was controversial within the monastic sangha and inspired furious debates over the purpose and substance of monastic education and the role of monastics in society. Again, knowing these things from the inside, I felt that some recognition of the rapidly shifting reality of the sangha was needed to round out the current history she presents, even while I appreciated having the major aspects of nuns' life over the past century put into historical context and brought to a wider audience.

The chapters focusing on historical figures or periods and using literary material, court annals and epigraphic material have a solid foundation in terms of the

methods used to examine the source materials and the source materials themselves. I was glad to see that Gregory Schopen's pioneering treatment of Indian epigraphic material has made its way to analogous situations, like that of Korea. Like Schopen, researchers in Korea are closely examining inscriptions on stelae in order to tease out histories that not have made it into official histories or other recorded materials. Young Mi Kim, in her chapter "Male Son Masters' Views on Female Disciples in Later Koryo," puts this method to good use. She closely examines stelae inscriptions as well as letters and other records from the Koryo period (918–1392) to challenge the historically prevalent belief that women cannot attain awakening in a female body, but must be reborn in a male body first. (This view is still common among nuns and women in South Korea today, and the aspiration to be reborn as a man forms part of the repentance ceremony that aspiring novice nuns do each night during ordination training.)

She makes a careful analysis of a major master from the late Koryo, National Preceptor Chin'gak Hyesim, to show how his support of his own female students' efforts toward awakening was a result of his belief in the full spiritual capacity of women. Chin'gak (1178–1234) was the student of the great 12th century master Chinul, whose synthesis of sutra and meditation into a unified path of practice and awakening became the standard approach to training in Korean Buddhism. As Chinul's student, Chin'gak inherited Chinul's teachings and his role as a leader of the sangha. The attitudes of Zen masters from 900 years ago are deeply relevant today, given that there are still men and women who hold that enlightenment is impossible in a female body. To combat a belief with roots sunk as deep in tradition as this, we must bring history and tradition to bear upon it, and Kim's chapter is one step in this process.

Heung-sik Heo's comparative look at two teachers in "Two Female Masters of Two Eras" is also an important step in shifting the inertia of a male-centered history of Korean Buddhism. Heo's examination of two female masters, Chinhye (1255–1324) and Chongyu (1717–1782), is crucial not only because it brings to light relatively unknown biographies, but also because in the telling of those biographies we get a sense of different social situations for women in different eras and some of the tensions at play in the lives of women, especially those from eminent families (in the case of Master Chinhye). Both Chinhye and Chongyu were nuns, but Chinhye was from a prominent noble family of the Koryo, whereas Chongyu was from a common family during the Choseon. The differences in both time and status allow Heo to examine multiple aspects related to women, nuns and Buddhism at the same time. Heo also avoids the easy narrative and includes the problems inherent to the particular materials he used, namely memorial stelae and tomb inscriptions, in his analysis of these two figures. His analysis is the more nuanced and responsible as a result.

The chapters by John Jorgensen and Jiyoung Jung are interesting for their exploration of Buddhism and women in Choseon-era Korea. Thoroughly grounded in Neo-Confucianism, the last dynasty of Korea established a religious and moral culture which continues to exert influence on Korea to this day, and in looking back at its particularities we can better understand its legacy. In "Marginalized and Silenced: Buddhist Nuns of the Choseon Period," Jorgensen's analysis of individual histories through court records and popular gazettes illustrates the ways in which Buddhist nuns were, in his words, "marginalized and silenced" by Choseon policies and enforced cultural norms. Jung's chapter provides a nice balance to Jorgensen's by examining the "alternate spaces" Buddhist nuns found outside of the oppressive Confucian rule of the Choseon. Her challenge to established understandings of women in Choseon society is refreshing:

We may ask whether all women living under this Confucian ideology [of proscribed subordinate relationships] actually succumbed to these requirements and lived as wives and mothers of sons in contentment. . . . It is true that numerous restrictions on the activities of women outside the home were legislated during the Choseon period. . . . Yet I wonder if we should view these many 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. There is a need for scholarship to go beyond generalized descriptions of Choseon women and to focus specifically on the detailed context, process, and contents of Confucianization.

Her chapter, "Buddhist Nuns and Alternative Spaces," does go beyond generalized descriptions. If Jorgensen's chapter uses the records and materials remaining to us to describe the severely limited sphere in which Buddhist nuns operated, Jung manages to use the same materials to point to the impossibility of absolute control, giving some hint as to how Buddhist nuns and women managed to maintain themselves with the "enduring vitality" of the book's title.

Ultimately, this book is a welcome first step toward more mature research into the lives and continuing role of Buddhist women in Korea. In particular, it is my hope that scholars heed Cho Eun-su's call for rigorous efforts to record the living history that still exists in the memories and lives of the oldest members of the Korean nuns' sangha and the lay community. *Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen* is an important book for anyone interested in gaining a more complete understanding of Korean Buddhism, past, present and future.



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