

Trial and Error in Modernist Reforms

Korean Buddhism under Colonial Rule



Pori Park

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Back cover: Bust of Han Yongun (Manhae) in front of the Manhae Museum located in Manhae Village (Manhae Maül) near Paektam Monastery at Inje, Kangwōn Province, which was built to commemorate Han's life as a poet, monk, and patriot. Photograph courtesy of the Manhae Museum.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
1. Rebound: From Oppression to Emulation of New Models	14
2. Caught In-Between: Korean Reactions to Japanese Buddhism and Colonial Policies on Buddhism	34
3. Modernizing Buddhism: Buddhist Reforms before the March First Movement	48
4. Confusion, Compromise, and Resistance: Buddhist Reforms after the March First Movement	69
5. A Vision for Social Salvation: Han Yongun's Integration of <i>Sŏn</i> and <i>Kyo</i>	94
Epilogue	118
Appendix 1: Major Events in Modern Korean Buddhism and Chronology of Han Yongun's Life	126
Appendix 2: Table of Contents of the <i>Treatise on the Reformation of Korean Buddhism (Chosŏn Pulgyo yusillon)</i>	130
Appendix 3A: Table of Contents of the <i>Great Texts of Buddhism (Pulgyo taejŏn)</i>	131
Appendix 3B: Table of Contents of the <i>Holy Texts of Buddhism (Bukkyō seiten)</i>	134
Bibliography	136
Glossary-Index	148

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Introduction

Buddhism enjoyed royal protection for more than a millennium after its introduction to the Korean peninsula in the latter half of the fourth century C.E. The high status of Buddhism, however, was overturned with the establishment of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty (1392–1910). The Chosŏn court instituted Confucian ideology in lieu of the Buddhism that had been deeply ingrained in the politics of the preceding Koryŏ 高麗 dynasty (918–1392). The Koryŏ court lavished its financial resources on magnificent monasteries and sumptuous Buddhist rituals, and, in turn, Buddhist monasteries became major landholders and enjoyed numerous social and economic privileges. In the process of upsetting the power structure of the Koryŏ dynasty, the Chosŏn court targeted Buddhism, inflicting great damage on the *sangha* 僧家 (the Buddhist order), both financially and socially. The Chosŏn court maintained anti-Buddhist policies throughout most of the dynasty, and, as a result, Buddhist clerics fell to one of the lowest social strata.

Amid the social and political chaos at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Korean Buddhism found a new chance to rebound from its fallen status. After the 1876 Korean-Japanese Treaty of Kanghwa, when Japan forced Korea to open Pusan and two other ports and to grant extraterritorial rights to Japanese settlers in the opened ports, the Korean peninsula was caught in the cross fire of rival foreign colonial powers, including China, Japan, and Russia. After the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan increased its dominance over the Korean peninsula. Korea was forced to sign the 1905 Protectorate Treaty and subsequently lost its sovereignty to Japan in 1910. As a result, the Korean Buddhist order was, on the one hand, released from the restraints of Chosŏn persecution and, on the other, forced to accommodate its traditional practices to the type of Western modernity brought about by Japanese colonial rule.

The subsequent reform movement in Korean Buddhism was a concerted effort both to redress the negative effects of five hundred years of persecution under the staunchly Confucian Chosŏn dynasty and to respond to the new social and political contexts that evolved under Japanese rule (1910–1945). This book examines the reform movement, from roughly the early 1900s to 1945, which established the foundation of the modern era of Korean Buddhism. Present-day Korean Buddhism continues to deal with issues of modernity that were raised during that time.

Buddhist “Modernist” Reforms

The concept of reform movements, as I use it in this book, refers to Buddhist revival efforts during the first half of the twentieth century. Around this time, Western colonial powers were attempting not only to subjugate the military and the economy in Asian countries, but also to influence the realms of culture and religion. The rapid influx of Western civilization brought chaotic disturbances to the traditional equilibrium; Asian Buddhists could no longer enjoy their privileged status in the traditional order. Directly and indirectly, Asian countries reevaluated and rationalized their heritages in the light of new perspectives imposed by the West. They began to believe that their religions, including Buddhism, were obstacles to modernization, and Buddhists were accused of having superstitious practices and backward beliefs. Surrounded by rapidly secularizing societies, Buddhist institutions throughout Asia soon became targets of attack and disestablishment. Thus, Buddhists had to find ways to adjust their religion not only to Western modernity, but also to the new political structure of nation-states that emerged as a result of interaction with the West. In particular, the rapid dissemination of Christianity awakened Buddhists to the imminent nature of the challenges they were facing. Whether or not Buddhism could demonstrate its viability in a new context became the pivotal question for the survival of the religion.

George Bond, in his study of the Sinhala Buddhist revival movements, demonstrates how two major concerns of Buddhist reformers were “identity” and “responsiveness.” In other words, Buddhism had to adapt successfully to the changes of a new social context and, at the same time, preserve its traditional cultural appeal. Bond explains: “Since modernization has changed the context radically, religions have an urgent need to respond by reinterpreting, re-presenting the essence of their tradition, their central truth, in a way that provides meaning both within and for the new context.”¹ That is, Buddhist reforms had to be carried out in a

¹ Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, 13.

Rebound: From Oppression to Emulation of New Models

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Korean Buddhism had to overcome the effects—social, doctrinal, and institutional—of the anti-Buddhist policies of the Chosŏn dynasty before finding a new form that would be compatible with the recently opened society. Amid the social and political chaos, the religion rebounded, stimulated by the arrival of Japanese Buddhist and Christian missionaries following the 1876 Treaty of Kanghwa. The rapid growth and active propagation of these religions challenged Korean Buddhist clerics, who regarded the situation as conducive to change (*yusin* 維新) and progress (*chinbo* 進步). Old Buddhist customs had to yield to “enlightened times” (*kaemyŏng sidae* 開明時代) and “civilized times” (*munmyŏng sidae* 文明時代).¹ Japanese Buddhism and Christianity were viewed as advanced forms of religion that offered a frame of reference for the Koreans’ idea of modernity.

As groundwork for investigating the major issues involved in Korean Buddhist reform (chapters 3 and 4), this chapter discusses the internal and external circumstances of Korean Buddhism at this crucial juncture in its history. The Chosŏn anti-Buddhist policies are analyzed in terms of the damage they inflicted upon Buddhism and the extent to which the resulting consequences extended to modern Korean Buddhists. Next, the arrivals of Japanese Buddhism and Christianity on the peninsula are analyzed in terms of their effect on Korean Buddhists’ attempts at modernist reforms.

The Ramifications of the Chosŏn Anti-Buddhist Policies

The political oppression of Buddhism was initiated by early-Chosŏn monarchs and reinforced by later monarchs throughout the dynasty. The Chosŏn court first focused on the dispossession of Buddhist financial resources. The anti-Buddhist act appeared at the end of the Koryŏ dynasty

¹ One example of this trend in Buddhist reform is O Chaeyŏng, “Pulgyo pogŭp e taehan ŭigyŏn,” 50–59.

Caught In-Between: Korean Reactions to Japanese Buddhism and Colonial Policies on Buddhism

The rapid growth and ambitious missionary activities of Japanese religions and Christianity offered a chance for Korean Buddhist clerics, who had been reduced to a marginal status by the Confucian Chosŏn court, finally to redress the cumulative effects of the anti-Buddhist culture and find ways to start anew. They regarded the social activities of Christian and Japanese Buddhist missionaries as civilized, “modern” methods that could be adopted to revive their own religion. Japanese missionaries approached Korean clerics as brethren who understood the painful history of Chosŏn Buddhism. Thus, Korean clerics first viewed Japanese clerics as benefactors, but as it turned out, they were also Japanese nationals serving their own national causes. Caught in conflict between their religious interests and their patriotic sentiments, Korean Buddhists both imitated and resisted Japanese Buddhism. This chapter examines the Japanese attempt to absorb Korean Buddhism into the Japanese Buddhist establishment and how the Korean Buddhist order managed to avoid such subjugation. The chapter goes on to discuss how colonial policies toward Korean Buddhism imposed limits on Buddhist reforms.

Japanese Attempts to Absorb Korean Buddhism

Japanese missionaries made a series of attempts to absorb the Korean Buddhist order into their denominations. The first attempt was by the Nichiren monk Sano Zenrei. He filed a petition with the Korean government in 1895 to lift the ban against Korean monks’ entry into the capital, which had been in effect since 1449. Japanese Buddhists and Christian missionaries were allowed to proselytize in the capital, the Seoul of today, which Korean monks were still forbidden to enter. The pro-Japanese cabinet, which was proceeding with the Reforms of 1894 (*Kabo kyŏngjang* 甲午更張), accepted this request.¹ Many Korean clerics were eager to

¹ Chŏng Kwangho, “Ilche ūi chonggyo chŏngch’aek kwa singminji Pulgyo,” 77. The progressive cabinet instituted a series of reforms, such as abolishing the traditional

THREE

Modernizing Buddhism: Buddhist Reforms before the March First Movement

Political and social changes simultaneously brought turbulence to the Korean peninsula and provided the Korean Buddhist order with opportunities to restore the social status of Buddhism that was damaged during the Chosŏn dynasty. The arrival of Christianity and Japanese Buddhism, in particular, offered Korean Buddhists both challenges and a frame of reference for the idea of modernity. Japanese Buddhist establishments were almost successful in taking over the Korean sangha before the colonial regime intervened with the Temple Ordinance. The Japanese government then encouraged Buddhist reforms so that Korean Buddhism would become strong enough to support Japanese policies on the peninsula. The Japanese regime's support of Buddhism was also prompted by the rapid growth of Christianity: Buddhism served as a way to curb Christian expansion.¹ The regime urged Korean Buddhists to cooperate in the same way that Japanese Buddhists had been encouraged to become faithful followers of government policies since the Meiji.²

As discussed in the introduction, previous studies on Korean Buddhist reform stressed its anti-Japanese nature, contrasting the nationalist young clerics with the allegedly pro-Japanese Buddhists who were associated with the abbots of the thirty main state-supported monastery districts. I argue, however, that the reformers and the so-called collaborators worked together throughout the period and that the collaborators even had their own versions of reformation that were mainly modeled upon Japanese Buddhism.

The common goal of modernizing Korean Buddhism linked various groups, the urgent issue for all of them being "responsiveness," the need to present a form of Buddhism that was socially viable. Accordingly, by participating in the general march toward modernization and nation building, the Korean sangha embarked on reforms, centered on

¹ Sŏ Kyŏng-su, "Ilche ūi Pulgyo chŏngch'aek," 119.

² Chŏng Kwangho, "Ilche ūi chonggyo chŏngch'aek kwa singminji Pulgyo," 84–85.

FOUR

Confusion, Compromise, and Resistance: Buddhist Reforms after the March First Movement

Among Korean Buddhists there was consensus that the best strategy for the revival of Buddhism was to modernize clerical education and propagation methods. Under the oppressive regime of Governor-General Terauchi, these reform efforts were strictly confined to the religious realm; the Japanese regime actually promoted purely religious activities. However, the sangha's apolitical stance and hastily conceived reform projects produced internal grievances and conflict. After 1919, when the Japanese acceded to the outcry of the Korean people and changed their coercive policy into a so-called cultural one, young clerics began to question the docility of the Buddhist order and to defy the religious policies of the colonial regime.¹ This was the first attempt of Korean Buddhists to express their position vis-à-vis the state, opposing the sangha's overt and covert collaboration with the Japanese government. This chapter deals with the second phase of Buddhist reforms, to which the youth added a political dimension. It explores changes in the Buddhists' ideas of modernity, issues relating to modernist reforms, the development of a nationalist stance within the Buddhist youth movement, *minjung Pulgyo* (Buddhism for the masses), and the establishment of a sectarian identity.

Previous studies tend to bifurcate the Korean sangha during the colonial period, contrasting the youth with the reputedly pro-Japanese Buddhists, most of whom were abbots of the thirty main-monastery districts. As I have argued, however, this pro- and anti-Japanese approach is not an accurate depiction of reality; its limitation is that it views nationalism only in light of the Buddhist relationship with the Japanese state. Buddhist nationalism of this period was more complicated than is suggested

¹ The Buddhist youth movement began, according to Han Yongun, with the creation of the Imje-jong. However, the Imje-jong movement was a spontaneous reaction to cope with the conspiracy between Yi Hoegwang and the Japanese Sōtō sect. Only after the March First Movement did the youth movement actually appear (Han Yongun, "Pulgyo ch'ōngnyōn yōnmaeng e taehayō," 338–340).

A Vision for Social Salvation: Han Yongun's Integration of *Sŏn* and *Kyo*

The development of a socially viable Buddhism was of primary concern for the Korean sangha. The mere imitation of social involvement by Buddhist clerics, however, caused confusion and posed major challenges. Genuine reformation required that Buddhists find ways of social engagement that were congruent with Buddhist systems of thought. Without reflecting on fundamental soteriological differences, Buddhists superficially copied the social programs of Christianity, which were never fully incorporated into Buddhism. The absence of real passion for social involvement produced adverse results, including helping to sustain the status quo and fostering collaboration with the colonial regime.

Han Yongun was a unique figure in Korea in that he attempted to overcome this impasse by directly embracing the aim of social salvation. Han treated social involvement not as a temporary cure, but as something fully ingrained in the main Buddhist systems of thought. He joined social involvement and the pursuit of Buddhist awakening with his non-dual approach of *kyo* (doctrine) and *sŏn* (meditation). In this way, the social dimension was no longer seen as separate from Buddhist practice, and clerics were no longer drawn away by secular interests.

Han devoted his life to Buddhist reform. His *Treatise on the Reformation of Korean Buddhism* generated the motivation for sangha reforms by providing both a rationale and a blueprint. Han was almost unanimously regarded as the leader of the Korean sangha during his time.¹ In 1932, when the magazine *Buddhism* asked clerics to vote for the most outstanding colleague in representing the sangha, Han received 422 votes while 18 votes went to Sŏn Master Pang Hanam and 13 votes to Kyo Master Pak Hanyŏng. This chapter examines how Han doctrinally supported his vision of socially engaged Buddhism and resolved the impasse in dealing with social salvation. It begins with a discussion of his active life and then focuses on his doctrinal presentation.

¹ Ko Ŭn, *Han Yongun p'yŏngjŏn*, 352.

Epilogue

This study has examined Korean Buddhist reforms not only in terms of ideas, as previous scholarship has largely done, but also as religious and social movements. Reform was the top priority of the Korean sangha throughout the colonial period. The sangha strove to render Buddhism socially viable amid political and social change while struggling to recover from the deterioration suffered during the Chosŏn dynasty. The Buddhist reform movement progressed as a concerted effort among clerics, addressing various issues and problems through the different phases of its development. As in other Asian countries, the viability of Buddhism in Korea depended considerably on Buddhists' participation in a nationwide effort to co-opt Western modernity.

In the first phase, before the March First Movement, reforms centered on clerical education and proselytization. The sangha attempted to increase its social breadth by exposing Buddhist clerics to modern education and by developing propagation methods. During the second phase, in the 1920s and early 1930s, clerics raised awareness of Buddhist social responsibility and tried to establish the sangha's independence from state intervention. In this process, Korean Buddhists reconstructed their tradition to make it more relevant to the changing conditions of modern times. With modernist reforms, Korean Buddhists aimed to counteract negative images of Buddhism from the Chosŏn period—such as “mountain Buddhism,” “Buddhism for women,” and “Buddhism for securing worldly desires”—by establishing a socially conscious Buddhism, *minjung Pulgyo*. At the same time, they identified Buddhism as a major Korean tradition by emphasizing Buddhist contributions to the country and composing histories of Korean Buddhism to instill national pride. Under these circumstances, a need arose to unify Korean Buddhism doctrinally and institutionally. Buddhist clerics established sectarian names, which had become blurred during the Chosŏn dynasty, by tracing their lineages back through history. They also created new sectarian names, such as

APPENDIX 1

Major Events in Modern Korean Buddhism and Chronology of Han Yongun's Life

- 1876 • The ports of the peninsula are opened after the Korean-Japanese Treaty of Kanghwa.
- 1878 • The first branch temple of the Higashi Honganji sect of the Jōdo Shin school is established at Pusan.
- 1879 • Han Yongun, later known as Manhae, is born at present-day Hongsŏng in South Ch'ungch'ŏng Province.
- 1880 • The Korean Catholic Church starts to grow in membership. (Catholicism was introduced to Korea in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.)
 - Protestant missionaries arrive on the peninsula in the mid-1880s.
- 1881 • A branch temple of the Nichiren sect is opened at Pusan.
- 1892 • Manhae marries.
- 1894 • Tonghak Rebellion begins.
- 1894–1895 • The Sino-Japanese War.
- 1895 • The ban against Korean monks' entry into the capital is lifted.
- 1897 • King Kojong proclaims the establishment of the independent Great Han Empire.
 - Manhae becomes a novice monk at Ose-am near Paektam Monastery.
- 1899 • Manhae's plan for a world trip stops at Vladivostok.
- 1902 • The Office of Temple and Shrines is established.
- 1904 • Manhae's son from his first wife is born.
- 1904–1905 • The Russo-Japanese War.
- 1905 • Korea becomes a protectorate of Japan.

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Abbreviations

- HYC *Han Yongun chŏnjip* (Collected works of Han Yongun), by Han Yongun. 6 vols. Seoul: Sin'gu Munhwasa, 1973.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, edited by Takakusu Junjirō, Watanabe Kaikyoku, et al. 85 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Isssaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934.

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- _____. “Ch'unmong” (Dreams of spring). *HYC*, 1:239–240.
- _____. *Han Yongun chŏnjip*. 6 vols. Seoul: Sin'gu Munhwasa, 1973.

Glossary-Index

Persons

- Ānanda (Indian patriarch), 82*n*
 Bacon, Francis, 52
 Bodhidharma (Indian patriarch), 82*n*
 Chin Chinŭng (monk), 38, 98
 Chinul 知訥 (1158–1210; monk), 82, 113
 Cho Hagyu (Buddhist cleric), 60, 65, 66, 71, 77
 Ch'oe Namsŏn (1880–1957; historian), 85, 119
 Ch'oe Pŏmsul (Buddhist cleric), 77
 Chŏng Inbo (1892–1950; intellectual), 102
 Chŏng Kwangjin (Buddhist cleric), 60, 65, 71
 Chŏnghŭi (1418–1483; queen dowager), 21
 Chungjong (king, r. 1506–1544), 16, 17
 Descartes, René, 52
 Fayan Wenyi (885–958; patriarch), 111
 Han Ch'angsu (official), 9
 Han Yongun 韓龍雲 (Manhae 卍海; 1879–1944; reformer), 11, 38, 50, 51–56, 65, 73, 93, 94, 95*ff*, 123–125
 Hisamatsu Sin'ichi (1889–1980; philosopher), 24, 114
 Hŏ Yŏnggho (youth leader), 77, 80, 119
 Hong Yingming (monk), 98*n*
 Huineng (patriarch), 82*n*
 Hwaŏm 華嚴 (C. Huayan) school, 85
 Hyepy'ŏn (monk), 85
 Hyŏngjong (king, r. 1659–1674), 17
 Hyujŏng (1520–1604; sectarian founder), 38, 82, 82*n*, 84, 113–114
 Ichikawa Hakugen (1902–1986), 114
 Im Sŏkchin, 71
 Kagŏm (patriarch), 82
 Kang Taeryŏn (abbot), 72
 Kant, Immanuel, 52
 Katō Kiyomasa (J. commander), 27
 Kim Chŏnghae (monk), 60, 65, 67, 85
 Kim Hyŏnam (general director), 37
 Kim Kyŏngju (youth leader), 73, 80
 Kim Kyosik, 95
 Kim Kyuhyŏn, 71
 Kim P'ogwang (youth leader), 73, 82, 86
 Kim Pŏmnin, 60, 73, 77, 99
 Kim Pyŏgong (cleric), 89
 Kim Sangho (youth leader), 77, 80
 Kim Sanghŏn, 99
 Kim Sisŭp (1435–1493), 111
 Kim T'aehŭp (youth leader), 65, 73, 80, 89, 119
 Kim T'aehwan, 71
 Kim Yŏngju, 60
 Kim Yŏn'gok (monk), 96, 96*n*, 97
 Ko Ŭn (poet), 95
 Kojong (king, r. 1864–1907), 43
 Kropotkin, Pyotr Alexeyevich, 77
 Kwigok (patriarch), 82
 Kwŏn Chunghyŏn (official), 9
 Kwŏn Sangno 權相老 (1879–1965; intellectual), 50, 51, 61, 82, 84, 85, 119
 Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929; intellectual), 49, 52, 97