

# KOREAN BUDDHIST NUNS AND LAYWOMEN



HIDDEN HISTORIES, ENDURING VITALITY

EDITED BY  
EUN-SU CHO

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*Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality*

Edited by  
EUN-SU CHO

**SUNY**  
P R E S S



**Korea Foundation**

한국국제교류재단

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The cover photograph was taken in 1996 by JOO Myungduck at Unmun-sa Monastery in Cheongdo, South Korea. The novice nuns (who are studying at the Unmun-sa seminary) are washing vegetables at the stream. The image is used with the permission of the photographer.

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*To my late mother, who lived in a world  
where few of these wonderful opportunities  
were available to women.*

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## Foreword

Despite having a 1,600-year history within the Korean Buddhist tradition, ordained and lay women have been neglected in both traditional and contemporary accounts of the religion. Korean Buddhist monastic records offer little information on the religious activities of women. There are some brief references to nuns during the Paekche and Unified Silla periods, a bit more material about women during the Koryŏ-dynasty golden age of Buddhism, but next to nothing during the Chosŏn period, when women suffered under an oppressive social system and Buddhists endured a centuries-long persecution at the hands of Confucian ideologues. This paucity of records has long discouraged scholars from attempting any kind of comprehensive narrative of the place of women in Korean Buddhism. Although scholars have acknowledged the presence of nuns within the order since virtually the inception of the religion, the specific contributions that ordained and lay women have made to Korean Buddhism have yet to be examined systematically.

Anyone who encounters Korean Buddhism in its modern setting, however, soon recognizes that nuns and laywomen demonstrate a tenacity of purpose and religious commitment that is incommensurate with the modest recognition, respect, and support they have traditionally received. Thankfully, conditions for women are changing, and changing rapidly. Perhaps most fundamentally, the difficulties nuns have been compelled to overcome in the modern age have clearly made them particularly dedicated practitioners. Even though there are about as many ordained nuns as monks within the tradition, nuns have far fewer monastic institutions available to them. For those crowded institutions to function, ordained women have had to be especially cognizant of the role that precepts play in the Buddhist way of life and the importance of nonattachment. Perhaps precisely because of the hardships nuns have learned to endure every day, many of these women display remarkable self-reliance, tolerance, and

humility in their religious practice, exhibiting a palpable sense of the joy of renunciation.

As the status of women in Korean society has more broadly improved over the last few decades, so too has the status of ordained Buddhist women. It is now common to find nuns studying and teaching in Buddhist seminaries and universities, training in meditation halls, and holding important ecclesiastical office. Nuns are at the vanguard in eleemosynary activities, religious propagation, social engagement, and environmental activism. Indeed, there are now nuns who are as eminent and as widely known as monks in virtually all aspects of the contemporary Buddhist tradition: as meditators and Sōn masters, scholars and academics administrators, painters and calligraphers, even vegetarian chefs and tea masters.

This engagement with society at large has led in turn to nuns having increasing influence with communities of laywomen. As Korean society has undergone a dramatic shift from intimate village life to a crowded, but often isolated, urban environment, nuns have become sounding boards for laywomen who no longer can draw on the extended family as their support system. Nuns have thus become especially adept at negotiating the divide that has typically separated the lives of monastic and laypersons in Buddhism.

For all these reasons, the influence of nuns in the Korean Buddhist tradition has arguably never been greater than it is at the present moment. Thanks to the efforts of editor Eun-su Cho and her collaborators, this volume takes important strides in documenting the crucial contributions that women have made to Korean Buddhism and restoring Korean Buddhist nuns to their rightful place in any comprehensive accounting of that tradition. Their coverage will help to transform the women who have all too often been silent partners into eloquent exponents of the best that Korean Buddhism has had to offer throughout history.

Robert E. Buswell, Jr.  
Los Angeles, California

## Preface

This volume was conceived with the intention of breaking new ground in a neglected area of Korean history and culture—the tradition of female Buddhist practice—for those in the broader academic community already focused on the topic of women and religion. It addresses the roles and accomplishments of women in Korean Buddhist history, including the role and status of nuns in the Three Kingdoms, Koryŏ, Chosŏn, and modern periods, and also examines the systemic and organizational aspects of nuns' lives. The contributors to the volume detail the sorts of education and training the nuns received in their lecture halls and meditation rooms, as well as the relations between that system and the modern order of nuns.

All the chapters except chapters 4 and 6 originated as papers presented at the May 2004 international conference entitled “More Than Women: Korean Nuns within the Context of East Asian Buddhist Traditions,” held at and sponsored by the HanMaum Seonweon (One Mind Zen Center) in Anyang, Korea. As the first international conference on Buddhist nuns and female practice in Korea and East Asia, this gathering drew attention from both academic and religious communities inside Korea, which consequently led to a surge of interest on this topic of the lives and practice of Buddhist nuns. Considerably more papers were delivered at the conference, yet not all were included in this current volume. Our focus in narrowing the selection targeted only those papers devoted to Korean tradition. Thus, papers on Chinese and Japanese Buddhism that had been presented with the intention of providing comparative and contextual material were not included. A few papers pertaining to cultural studies, art history, and literature in the Korean tradition were not included as well, as we decided to limit our focus to historical overviews specifically addressing the development of female Buddhist practice in Korea.

Some chapters have been previously published elsewhere. An earlier version of chapter 2 was originally published in the *Seoul Journal*

of *Korean Studies* 22, no. 1 (June 2009), as “Reinventing Female Identity: A Brief History of Korean Buddhist Nuns.” An earlier version of chapter 3 was originally published in Korean in the journal *Ihwa sahak yŏn’gu* (Study of History at Ehwa Womans’ University) 30 (2003), as “Koryŏ Chin’gak kuksa Hyesim ŭi yŏsŏng sŏngbullon” (Koryŏ Master Chin’gak Hyesim’s Theory of Women’s Attaining Enlightenment). An earlier version of chapter 5 was originally published in Korean in the journal *Chŏngsin munhwa yŏn’gu* (Study of Intellectual Culture) 27, no. 4 (2004 Winter), as “Chosŏn ŭi Chŏngyu wa Koryŏ ŭi Chinhye.” An earlier version of chapter 7 was originally published in *The Review of Korean Studies*, 11, no. 4 (December 2008). I thank these publishers for their generous permission to use them.

As the first collection of its kind in the English-language press, this volume was compiled through a group effort to identify and appreciate the unique tradition of women in the Buddhist monastic communities of Korea. The contributors sincerely hope that this book will shine light on heretofore undiscovered aspects of the lives and practices of Korean Buddhist women. We also hope that it will illuminate Korean culture, religion, and thought through the experiences of Buddhist nuns and laywomen, both modern and premodern. Women remain seriously underrepresented in Korean culture and history, especially in books on Korean religion and thought, even while interest in Korea has been growing steadily in the West, so we hope this volume will contribute to filling in the gap.

Several people led me to this new area of interest, which contrasts with my earlier research on Buddhist doctrinal thought. Through his own writings on the topic and personal encouragement, Samu Sŭnim, a Korean monk who moved to America a few decades ago, inspired me to study the remarkable tradition of female practice in Korea. He is indeed a pioneer in this area of research, and, to the best of my knowledge, his articles on three Korean Buddhist nuns in the 1986 issues of *Spring Wind*, a Buddhist magazine that he headed, should be recognized as the first English-language publications highlighting Korean nuns’ lives. I was also influenced by the nun Sukdham Sŭnim who helped me more directly understand Buddhist nuns’ practice and ways of life. She showed me her own personal essays about leaving home to become a nun when she was young and this impressed upon me the importance of the determination of these brave female practitioners. Another friend, Shi Zhiru, also a Buddhist nun and an academic in Buddhist studies, has given me advice at various stages in the publishing of this volume.

Many people and friends have contributed to this venture: Matty Wegehaupt, my former student at the University of Michigan, extended his unlimited helping hands without considering his own busy schedule, from the initial stage of organizing the conference to correcting transliterations and grammar mistakes of nonnative writers. Victoria Scott, a freelancer copy editor, also improved the manuscript considerably by copy editing most of the chapters. I would also like to thank Nancy Ellegate of State University of New York Press, to whom I am deeply indebted for her encouragement throughout this long process and especially for her crucial advice in sharpening the focus of the volume at the time of its initial submission. I must also thank my students Sangyop Lee, Ahrim Won, and Inga Kim Diederich for their assistance in providing proofreading to the text as well as their help in the laborious process of indexing this multi-faceted project. Many thanks are due to Joo Myungduck for sharing his fine photograph, which captures the spirit of the community of Buddhist nuns in Korea, for the cover of the volume.

Last but not least, without the sponsorship and support of HanMaum Seonweon, led by Reverend Daehaeng, my aspiration to reveal the significance of this religious tradition of practice would never have materialized. Many other people—including the Venerable Hyewon Sūnim of Dongguk University and another Hyewon Sūnim, the abbot of HanMaum Seonweon—also provided the initial connections that enabled me to organize the 2004 conference. The present volume is dedicated to the Reverend Daehaeng and her community.

Eun-su Cho  
Seoul, Korea

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## Introduction

*Eun-su Cho*

While the modern study of Buddhism has witnessed impressive development over the years, the shape of this progress has not always been balanced. Perhaps most notable in this skewed progress has been the lack of focus on women and their role in the religion. With Korean Buddhism, this has certainly been the case, but the time has come for this situation to change. The life and culture of Korean Buddhist nuns and laywomen deserve serious attention from scholars not only in the Western world, but in Korea as well. This is not merely a pursuit for a superficial balance, but a remedy to correct a flawed vision of the complex history of Buddhism. Through an examination of historical records and biographical excerpts from Buddhist nuns, we can see, albeit fragmentarily, that Korean nuns have maintained a tradition of religious practice and commitment to the Buddhist teaching from the very inception of Buddhism in Korea, despite the common perception that such a history is merely the history of monks. To the contrary, the research supports the notion that when the monks' order was formed upon the transmission of Buddhism to Korea, a nuns' order was established at almost the same time. This leaves Korean nuns with a long history of some 1,600 years, a rare and remarkable feat that stands out in the history of world religion. This achievement runs contrary to the dominant narrative of a long moribund female Buddhist tradition, and calls for a much-needed focus to be brought on the unique place Korean Buddhism holds in Buddhist culture.

Evidence of the existence of female monastics is found in Buddhist scriptures from the beginning of the history of Buddhism. The Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* was formed during the time of its founder. The Buddha pronounced that the Buddhist community should consist of male monks, female monks, laymen, and laywomen. Though the reality of

At this point, the most striking question one might pose is why the fates of these two *bhikṣuṇī* communities were so disparate; why did the Theravada *bhikṣuṇī* literally die out and the East Asian tradition survive? This area is in desperate need of further explanation. As we hope that further historical and textual study will bring answers, I would like to add my own candid opinion by comparing their means of sustaining themselves, that is, their economic basis. Theravada Buddhists are known for their strict adherence to the Vinaya precepts, even now following the early teaching of the Buddha not to engage in any kind of economic activity to support themselves other than getting food by alms rounds. There is a famous story that when a Brahman criticized the Buddha, “How come you don’t work or grow anything but depend on others giving,” the Buddha answered that he and his followers do work, but work on the field of their mind. A phrase found in the Pāli scriptures states that donations to *bhikṣus*—not *bhikṣuṇīs*—bestows upon the donor great merit, conspicuously omitting mention of *bhikṣuṇīs*; this might be the reason why when societal resources during war and famine grew thin, female monastics were neglected, lacking enough external support to sustain themselves.

On the other hand, early in the sixth century the Chinese Buddhist community began to establish new sets of precepts called “pure precepts,” which were also introduced to Korea in which labor and work for self-support and sustenance were encouraged. There is a famous saying in the monasteries that if you don’t work one day, there is no food for one meal. For example, in Koryŏ, women received equal estate inheritance from their parents as well as from deceased spouses; some widowed women entering the monastic life would bring their resources with them. This might provide the monasteries with land and attached labor in the form of serfs so that they would not have to solely depend on almsgiving for their daily food. This kind of materialistic foundation may be the reason why Korean Buddhist nuns were able to survive even when society passed over them. This unique and characteristic Mahayana interpretation of the Vinaya precepts, which can be viewed as leniency, may have been a factor in East Asian *bhikṣuṇī* economic equality and independence.

In Korea, the health of the *bhikṣuṇī* saṅgha followed that of the religion in general. Buddhism flourished during the first millennium of its history in Korea, through the ancient period of the Three Kingdoms of Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla, and Unified Silla (opening date ?–935). The subsequent Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) saw Buddhism enjoy prosperity and respect as the national religion. Such benefit led to a backlash as it struggled to survive during the Chosŏn dynasty

a persistent power discrepancy between male and female monastics must never be ignored, it should be emphasized that Buddhism is one of the few major religions in which female clergy exist alongside their male counterparts with independent organizational structures and religious functions, and have done so from the beginning of the religion. That said, egalitarian ideas could not surpass the social prejudices and historical turmoil of the societies in which Buddhism developed, and the closest descendents of the earliest bhikṣuṇī saṅgha of South and Southeast Asia died out around the eleventh century. From then on, the tradition has remained defunct for many centuries, due to the bitterly ironic situation that there were no bhikṣuṇī to perform bhikṣuṇī ordination, as required by the scriptures. Only at the end of the twentieth century did brave women from these countries without bhikṣuṇī forge a path to China, Taiwan, or Korea to receive bhikṣuṇī ordination from sister communities that had persisted. This daring effort to reinstate bhikṣuṇī orders in Sri Lanka and Thailand, while met with some skeptical resistance in their home countries, has received strong support from the international Buddhist community. In a recent meeting of the International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Saṅgha, organized for monastics and scholars in Hamburg, July 2007, a resolution was passed stating that the establishment of the bhikṣuṇī saṅgha where it does not currently exist is a significant event and should be applauded. Yet even as we recognize that this tradition founded in great turmoil continues to struggle to maintain its birthright, it is imperative that such conflict does not paint an overly bleak picture of the tradition as a whole. Whatever difficulties may have accompanied the long history of the bhikṣuṇī saṅgha, its accomplishments are what should more properly define it.

While the bhikṣuṇī saṅgha faced major difficulties in South and Southeast Asia, its fortunes were much brighter in the East Asian countries, where the Mahayana tradition had been established some centuries after the founding of Buddhism in India. The scriptures and the way of practice reflecting the Mahayana Buddhist development of Northwest India, the so-called northern tradition of Buddhism, were transmitted to Central Asia first, and then to the countries of East Asia—China, Korea, and Japan. As a part of this process, the Vinaya texts were also introduced to China on a few separate occasions and one prominent set among them became the basis for bhikṣuṇī ordination. In ancient Korea, the historical evidence indicates that Buddhist nuns were ordained by these precepts and it is these same precepts that remain today as the foundation of the contemporary bhikṣuṇī order.

(1392–1910), which had adopted a neo-Confucian ideology to organize society and enforce an explicitly anti-Buddhist policy. Buddhism was suppressed and Buddhist monks and nuns were disrespected in public, suffering self-doubt and treated as outcasts. Buddhist nuns suffered double oppression as both Buddhists and as women. The neo-Confucian Chosŏn society treated women as the property of their fathers, husbands, and sons. Given these adverse circumstances, Buddhist nuns were encouraged to hide themselves and lead quiet, uneventful lives away from the outside world. Most of them lived and died anonymously without leaving much information about their lives.

However, the environment for female clergy in Korea has changed rapidly in the past thirty years. The remarkably increasing presence of Buddhist nuns in the public religious sphere of modern Korea has forced us to question the invisibility of Buddhist women in modern research, not only in the Western world but also in Korea. Scholarly research in English on Buddhist nuns and laywomen, gender in religious history, and female spirituality in general are available in the West as there has been a considerable amount of new research on the subject in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Serious studies of the history of Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese Buddhist nuns have already been undertaken. The biographies of eminent Buddhist women past and present have been researched and disseminated to the world outside of these individuals' respective traditions.<sup>2</sup> International organizations like Sakyadhita have held international conferences on Buddhist women over the past two decades, publishing edited volumes of their research and serving as an important venue to distribute information on Buddhist women around the world.<sup>3</sup> Such works should provide comparative context through which the Korean tradition can be understood as well as insight into the diversity of Buddhist women's practice. More thorough treatment of the significance of the similarities among the East Asian Buddhist traditions, which would bring a shared sense of the implications of social prejudices and historical circumstances that shape perceptions on religious women in East Asia, is needed in the future. However, specialist research on Korean nuns has been alien not only to the non-Korean academic world but to the Korean academic world as well. The number of writings on Korean nuns can be counted on one hand, and it is no exaggeration to say that the fruits of this academic research had been almost nonexistent until a few years ago.<sup>4</sup>

Although there are a number of reasons for this, the most important is the scarcity of textual materials and historical evidence. The activities of women in general had been neglected and left out of official histories. The accounts that do exist are found mostly through

indirect mentions of spouses and daughters of remarkable men. As renunciants without close ties, Buddhist nuns left no records about themselves, nor were their life stories recorded by their relatives. Instead, we must look to tangential descriptions that appear in more general works. The major historiographies telling about women of the Three Kingdoms period are *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, but the former only comments on the transmission of Buddhism and lacks records of individual activities. The latter introduces many stories relating to pious women and Buddhist teaching, but since they are mostly tales of the miracles and magical events of bhikṣuṇīs and laywomen, it is hard to use such literature as an historical record, even though it may give us solid proof for the general notion that women did indeed play an important role in the religious landscape of Buddhist practice at that time. As for the Chosŏn period, given its massive volume and quantity of records, the Chosŏn dynasty annals (*sillok*) stand as the most important account of Buddhist females, but these are almost entirely of a fiercely negative tone. In fact, on almost every occasion when Buddhist nuns were featured in the Chosŏn *sillok*, it was for criminal cases or appeals to the throne when the women were prosecuted due to supposed sexual misconduct or prohibited religious activities. Sadly, this lack of historical materials is notable not only in classical texts, but persists into our recent history. What few records that do exist of the deeds of important nuns of the recent past have been scattered and even now are not being properly preserved.

The most formidable obstacle to our research of the near past is that Buddhist women and monastics' own writings about their lives and religious practice are almost nonexistent. This marks a sharp difference compared to records from China or Japan. This absence 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. Many Korean nuns lived and died anonymously, leaving little if any information about their lives. 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. These women are the last generation of witnesses to the Buddhist practice of the colonial period. They alone might offer us insight into whatever changes and challenges were brought to the way female monastics had lived and practiced toward the end of the Chosŏn dynasty. In terms of understanding nuns' roles in Korean Buddhism, the urgency of this task, and the loss that will be incurred should it fail, cannot be overstated.

The passive, eremitic atmosphere of their community contributes to other difficulties in research beyond simply the dearth of primary text source material. Reliance on personal testimony brings its own methodological conundrums. The prevailing views of informants can restrict our information about the past, present, and future and, within such limits, there is a propensity to create new forms of misunderstanding. That is, within the limits of the testimony of surviving people, one is often forced to reproduce the achievements of the past according to the stipulations of the current ideology and the contemporary lineage environment. Therefore, one may unwillingly duplicate the biases of one's living informants. Moreover, while many nuns complain about the external prejudices toward them, they themselves harbor varied prejudices as well. In particular, the lineage adherence that exists among them can be fatal to reliable research. As secondary and tertiary prejudices come into play, later research about nuns will likely be forced to grope among the differing biases, potentially giving rise to even more distortions and unnecessary disputes.

Our research faces the additional difficulty that it cannot be carried out without considering the relations of nuns with the order of monks in general and also with monk teachers individually. For example, it would be contradictory to posit the ideological and practical independence of nuns whose lives were voluntarily dependent on the position and influence of the monk teachers under whom they studied and practiced. The viewpoints of nuns' male patriarchal teachers must also be given our attention and their impact analyzed accordingly. Recent research on the status of female clergy inside religious orders seems to show that women's religious orders that operate independently of men in terms of their education, faith, and proselytization make more progress than those whose operations are dependent on male institutions. A full accounting of such relationships must be brought to bear on any appraisal of the achievements, or lack thereof, of the *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*.

The case of Myori Pŏphŭi, whom I deal with at length in chapter 2, is instructive here. She was one of the greatest female masters of

modern Korea and was a remarkable guide to the first generation that established the modern order of nuns. Yet when giving her membership in the lineage of the dharma, her teacher, the monk Man'gong, said to her, "Go before the congregation, since you have been venerated of late, but do not preach."<sup>5</sup> Pöphüi followed her teacher's words to the letter. Although she had a renowned career as a Sön master, received many contemporary male masters for dharma exchanges, and nurtured many disciples, she never once ascended the dharma podium to preach. Her case thus shows the ambivalent position a female disciple could fall into with her male guide in the religious order: these relationships were often of simultaneous guidance and restraint that men offered women in the Buddhist monastic orders.

Another area of concern when considering the obstacles our research must contend with is that most research on nuns has been hampered by the overarching concern that "nuns are women." There are cases premised on the vague expectation that "nuns must essentially be feminists," or must have aims or starting points similar to those of feminists. However, some care needs to be taken in this approach. Many contemporary Korean Buddhist nuns certainly expressed, through their writings or personal meetings with me, that their desire to become nuns was to overcome their present "bondage" as women. Yet they also mentioned that the way to do this was through spiritual practice and its final goal of attaining enlightenment, and that this spiritual quest was the ultimate reason they wished to become nuns. That is, people who choose ordination do so in anticipation of the highest religious ideal; questions of gender differences or their oppressive environment are secondary.

The practice journey of Reverend Daehaeng is an instructive case. She was the founder of the HanMaum Seonweon (One Mind Zen Center), and her rise as a woman in the Korean saṅgha was a stormy one. However, Reverend Daehaeng's explicit desire was always to open up the possibility of a "new humanity," regardless of gender. While she challenged the existing male-centric system of practice, her achievements were always aimed toward an enlightenment that totally transcended such issues, receiving recognition of the universal position existing beyond lay or cleric, male or female. Her practice and teaching have discarded the particular form of "a nun," since for her and her disciples, the idea of femaleness or maleness is itself a useless delusion. Her disciples see Reverend Daehaeng as a universal human and as a teacher.<sup>6</sup>

Given all the social and intellectual obstacles against researching Buddhist nuns and women, the seven papers collected in this volume