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Han Yong'un (1879–1944) and Buddhist Reform in Colonial Korea

The practice of Buddhism in colonial Korea holds the key to understanding how Buddhist reformists tried to counter the challenges of modern transformation. Steeped in the traditions of Sŏn orthodoxy and lay salvationism, Korean Buddhism faced a new age with the arrival of the Japanese, who tried to restructure Korean Buddhist institutions according to Japan's colonialist governing system. Looking at the example of Han Yong'un, who spearheaded Buddhist reform efforts during the colonial period, this article examines what was at stake in attempting to reform Korean Buddhism so as to create a religion that could meet the needs of Korean society. Han wrestled with the task of bridging the gap between institutional Buddhism and lay Buddhism, which had resulted in the deterioration of the Buddhist ideal. In an attempt to find a middle ground that could connect these two extremes, Han's strategy was to focus on both the Buddhist notion of expediency and the caring spirit of bodhisattva. He was not particularly successful.

KEYWORDS: Sŏn (meditational) Buddhism—Kibok (fortune-seeking) Buddhism—middle ground—expediency—bodhisattva—Temple Law

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WHEN Japan was close to completing its colonization of Korea after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, leaders of Korean Buddhism were growing wary. Frustrated with the deteriorating political situation, fifty-two representatives of Korean temples convened in 1908 at Wõnhũngsa 元興寺 in Kyõngsõng and formed an organization called the Wõnjong 圓宗, or Wõn Order, in order to revive their dwindling strength.¹ They hoped to unite all members of Korean Buddhism under the banner of this newly-minted Buddhist order against the Pulgyo yõnguhoe 佛教研究會 (Association of Buddhist Studies)—a pro-Japanese Buddhist organization established in 1906 under the maneuverings of Japanese Jõdoshũ 淨土宗. However, the monk Yi Hoegwang 李晦光 (1862–1933), who was well-connected to pro-Japanese collaborators such as Yi Yonggu 李容九 (1868–1912) and served as principal of Myõngjin School, a Western-style school established by the Pulgyo yõnguhoe, managed to get elected as the leader of this organization. It was a bizarre twist from the beginning.

Soon after Korea's colonization, Yi Hoegwang conspired with Takeda Hanshi 武田範之 (1863–1911), who was directing the Korean propagation bureau of the Japanese Sõtõshũ, to merge the Wõnjong into the Sõtõshũ without any consultation with his colleagues. When the subversive terms of the proposed merger were revealed to the Korean press, Korean Buddhist leaders cried out against the “selling off” of Korean Buddhism to a Japanese sect. Anti-Japanese leaders such as Pak Hanyõng 朴漢永 (1870–1948) and Han Yong'un 韓龍雲 (1879–1944) immediately countered the merger attempt with a nationwide campaign to restore a spirit of independence to Korean Buddhism. In 1911, during this ongoing scuffle, the Governor-General of Colonial Korea issued Sach'allyõng 寺利令 (Temple Law) and brought Korean Buddhist temples and monks under its control.² The colonial government divided the country into thirty parishes and assigned the same number of head temples to those parishes for control and administration.

Facing an ever-deepening crisis, Han Yong'un came to realize that the best way to revamp Korean Buddhism, which had been demoralized for so long, was to refashion it through extensive reform. In his view, Korean Buddhism was dying not only through imperial colonialism, but also in the hands of Korean monks themselves. In 1913, Han Yong'un declared in his *Chosõn Pulgyo yusinnon*

1. For details on why this particular name was picked up, see KIM Yõng'ae 2000, 351–52.

2. HUR 1999, 119. In 1924, Hwaõmsa 華嚴寺 was elevated to the ranks of head temple, thereby refashioning Korean Buddhism into the system of thirty-one head temples.

朝鮮佛教維新論 (A thesis on reforming Korean Buddhism) that Korean Buddhism should be destroyed in order to survive. He declared:

What is restoration (*yusin* 維新)? It is the offspring of destruction. What is destruction? It is the mother of restoration.... Those who destroy a little are to achieve a little restoration, and those who destroy a lot are to achieve much restoration. Restoration parallels destruction. The first task to be done in launching restoration is destruction.³

What should have been destroyed in Korean Buddhism? As targets of destruction, Han Yong'un pointed to the mood in Korean Buddhism of detached emptiness from the daily lives of the populace, as well as to its indiscriminate association with the vulgar desires of the populace. It seems contradictory, but Han Yong'un believed that Korean Buddhism had gone in two opposite directions: Buddhist spiritual pursuits were separated from the daily lives of the populace and, at the same time, Buddhist ritual practice was indiscriminately carried out. Han said that Buddhism should be a religion for salvation with solemn purposes for all people and society. But, unfortunately, in his view, Korean Buddhism was far removed from this purpose.

The problem, as Han saw it, was in the haughty dominance of the Sōn 禪 (meditation) tradition which had widened the gap between the pretense of a Buddhist ideal and the reality of life away from the guidance of Buddhist compassion. Han implied that the Sōn tradition had risen into a hollow sky and that lay Buddhism had plunged into the muddy pond of vulgar desires. The gulf between the ideal of Buddhist elites and the reality of lay people into which Japanese Buddhism was intruding for control seemed so unbridgeable and so destructive that Han decided to negate Korean Buddhism itself in order to revive it. This was the guiding spirit of his proposals suggested in the *Chosōn Pulgyo yusinnon*.

The spiritual hiatus of transcendentalism and vulgarity that Han Yong'un rebuked almost a century ago still remains a challenge to Korean Buddhism today; Sōn meditators and "fortune-seeking" prayers follow parallel tracks. Although the new direction of Korean Buddhism is no longer sought in "restoration," reform-minded Buddhists agree that Korean Buddhism is suffering from the separation between the elitist, clergy-centered institutional tradition of Sōn Buddhism and the diffused, "shamanistic" religious practices of lay Buddhists. The former does not so much engage in, or even disregard, the concerns of the latter; the latter, which is exploited by petty monks, is indifferent to the spiritual quest of the former. Along this segregative line, supporters of lay Buddhist movements criticize the institutional Buddhism of Korea as apathetic to the sufferings and religious

3. HAN 1978, 15–16. For an account of the overall reform ideas of Han Yong'un, see Yi 1987, 307–33.

well-being of lay people. In contrast, conservative Buddhists charge that lay Buddhists are preoccupied with egoistic interests and desires such as power, money, social success, or health, thereby posing the danger of transforming the splendid tradition of Korean Buddhism into a religious tool for seeking mundane virtues and benefits. Lay Buddhism that refers to lay salvationism is often dubbed *kibok pulgyo* 祈福佛教 or “Buddhism for seeking fortune.”

In an effort to bridge this gap, some reformists have promoted the idea of Buddhism’s social salvation or social service—one that is not so different from what Han Yong’un advocated with the proposition of “salvific compassion of Mahāyāna Buddhism.” But reformist efforts have fallen short of overcoming the binary orientations of Korean Buddhism bifurcated into Sōn Buddhism and lay Buddhism (Kibok Buddhism). Korean Buddhist culture is characterized by the distance between the spiritual without the practical and the practical without the spiritual. The ideal of enlightenment in Sōn Buddhism, which is nestled in deep mountains, contrasts with the pursuit of daily interests in Kibok Buddhism, which is steeped in the commercialism of prayer. Sōn Buddhism, embraced as orthodoxy by the dominant Chogyejong 曹溪宗 or Chogye Order, has claimed sole authority and prestige in institutional Buddhism. Kibok Buddhism, nourished by shamanic monks and lay Buddhists inside and outside the Chogyejong, has been a mainstay of booming Buddhist enterprise despite ongoing criticism or denial.

Although his efforts launched from the early part of the second decade of the twentieth century to reform Korean Buddhism failed to bear much fruit, Han Yong’un was a pioneer in raising fundamentally crucial questions about in which direction Korean Buddhism should proceed. To be sure, hostile anti-Buddhist environments, particularly during the Chosōn period, under which Buddhism had struggled to survive, could be blamed. Similarly, one can insist that colonial rule from 1910 until 1945 was never helpful for reforming Korean Buddhism. Worse yet, Korean Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s failed to discard its colonial legacies as it plunged into internal turmoil. This was another factor that prevented Korean Buddhism from moving forward.

But it should also be noted that, at a deeper level, the “structural impediments” built into Korean Buddhism played a role by impeding what Han Yong’un envisioned—a vision launched in search of Buddhism’s engagement in the religious well-being of people and society. As we will see, Han’s suggestions, if insightful and almost revolutionary in direction, proved unreceptive to the deep-rooted spiritual orientation of Sōn Buddhism, as well as to the vulgarity of lay salvationism. The traditions of Korean Sōn Buddhism were too indoctrinated to be easily compromised, while the lay salvationism of Kibok Buddhism strayed far from the institutional guidance of Sōn Buddhism.

In this sense, Han Yong’un’s reform ideas provide a useful lens that allows us to examine the structural fabric of Korean Buddhism with which Buddhist

reformists wrestled in Colonial Korea. Korean Buddhism in the colonial period encountered challenges from both within and without. The reform-minded Buddhists who had to struggle between the two extremes of Sŏn Buddhism and lay Buddhism directed their energy to the task of creating and expanding a middle ground. They hoped that it would enrich the religious life of people while advancing Korean Buddhism. But their visions could not be fulfilled. How did the tradition of Korean Buddhism work against itself?

The Institutional Context of Korean Buddhism

The institutional history of Korean Buddhism in the Koryŏ period (918–1392) is often described in terms of factional contentions between two major Buddhist schools—the doctrine-school (Kyojong 教宗) and the meditation-school (Sŏnjong 禪宗). Their competition was based on the issue of “orthodoxy” or “correctness” regarding the way in which one should pursue the Buddhist truth. Buddhist thinkers followed the lead of Ŭichŏn 義天 (1055–?), who took the position of the doctrinal Buddhism-centered formula, or they followed Chi’nul 知訥 (1159–1210), who espoused the Sŏn Buddhism-centered prescription.

While elite groups of the Buddhist sangha were busy debating the issue of the methodology of enlightenment, ordinary ritual monks and temple administrators were dragged into the race for accumulating wealth and social and political influence, often under the banner of “Buddhism that protects the nation” (*hoguk pulgyo* 護國佛教), or with the service of offering a religious panacea to the wants of the populace. For this latter group, neither the issue of doctrine nor that of meditation mattered much. Institutionally, however, this group of ritual monks and temple administrators was treated like second-class citizenry in the Buddhist community, seen as beneath the self-esteemed class of pathfinders of enlightenment, whether they concentrated on doctrinal studies or meditational pursuits. The long-term result was the classificatory hierarchy of two distinctive groups of Buddhist monks in Korean Buddhism: *ip’ansŭng* 理判僧 (monks administering principle—ones in the pursuit of enlightenment) of higher status, and *sap’ansŭng* 事判僧 (monks managing daily temple affairs—ones in the service of managing the Buddhist sangha and conducting prayer rituals for the populace) of lower status (TAKAHASHI 1929, 902–4).

With the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), Korean Buddhism encountered a hostile environment. Political leaders of the new regime began to purge Buddhists from power and social influence. Extraterritorial privileges and state support, which Koryŏ Buddhists and their institutions had enjoyed, were gradually stripped away by the accusation that they had been a source of corruption and political meddling. In particular, Confucian-minded leaders attributed the ills of Buddhism to the chronic factional infighting that

had been waged by five sub-schools in the doctrinal Buddhist division and two sub-schools in the Sŏn Buddhist division. In an attempt to clean up the mess, King Sejong (r. 1418–1450) regrouped these sectarian schools into Kyojong and Sŏnjong. The institutional structure of these two Buddhist Orders, which was carved into law in the Kyŏngguk Constitution, was preserved intact up to the end of the nineteenth century even though the Kyojong was pushed aside and lost its prestige from the mid-sixteenth century.

At the same time, Chosŏn leaders and Confucian scholars made efforts to amend the “disorderly” state of lay Buddhism at not only the institutional, but also the cultural level. As far as Confucianists were concerned, the culture of lay Buddhism was no less than the superstition of ignorant people who were deluded by peddling monks and nuns or Buddha swindlers. The sufferings and hardships of ordinary folk, argued Confucianists, were not something that Buddhist teachings or skills of ritual performance could surmount. To them, for example, the Buddhist message of karmic transmigration seemed too mechanical and even adverse to the rational human mind; the soteriology of Buddhist merits (accumulable through rituals and prayers), which was taught as a cure-all solution for human problems, was too superstitious and deceptive (see U and KIM 1968, and KIM Kwangsik 1996, 134–38). In order to foster Confucian virtues grounded in the cultivation of the “rational” mind, Chosŏn leaders and Confucian intellectuals not only suppressed lay Buddhists but also tried to cut them off from institutional Buddhism.

Even under this hostile environment, however, Buddhist monks were involved in factional squabbling. The issue of their infighting was again a methodological one—which path should be considered superior or correct in pursuing Buddhist enlightenment (see KIM Yŏngt’ae 2000, 276–87). Their internal disputes, in which each side asserted its own “correct and authentic” way of Buddhism, were eventually tilted in favor of the Sŏn Order when Hyujŏng 休靜 (1520–1604), a highly respected monk, delivered an authoritative commentary in his *Sŏnga kwigam* 禪家龜鑑 (Ideal mirror of Sŏn Buddhists).⁴ Hyujŏng, while recognizing the due place of Kyo, decisively put Sŏn Buddhism in a higher place through his influential exegesis. Since then, the Sŏn Order has been regarded as the legitimate, authentic carrier of Korean Buddhism.

Korean Buddhism today preserves the legacy of Hyujŏng, as we can see in its dictum: *sagyŏ ipsŏn* 捨教入禪 (discard Kyo and enter Sŏn) is the way that sincere Buddhist practitioners should take. In the institutional hierarchy of Korean Buddhism, devotees of doctrinal study occupy secondary positions below the Sŏn practitioners, while *sap’ansŭng* are further pushed to the sidelines where they espouse Kibok Buddhism and cater to the wants of lay followers without

4. For an excellent discussion of the *Sŏnga kwigam*, see KEEL 1993, 16–19.

being much involved in disciplinary training or education. Not surprisingly, the current Chogye Order, which champions Sŏn tradition, claims that it has inherited the “orthodox lineage” of Korean Buddhism going back to Chi’nul and Hyujŏng.

Interestingly, however, this does not mean that the hierarchical order of authority gauged by the yardstick of methodological distillation has ended with the coronation of the Sŏn Order. The tradition of Sŏn Buddhism has not escaped unscathed from its internal squabbling and sub-factionalism. Again, the cause of contention has basically been same—the issue of methodology in meditation. The debate over which method should be considered superior or authentic when measured in terms of purity and effectiveness has been the cause of dissension among Sŏn adherents who would often seek references in Chi’nul or in Hyujŏng for their own interpretation. The problem was that the views of these two founding fathers of the Sŏn Order with regard to the “correct” method in meditation were not identical: Chi’nul tried to make a balance between gradual cultivation (*chŏmsu* 漸修) and sudden enlightenment (*tonŏ* 頓悟), whereas Hyujŏng espoused the supremacy of sudden enlightenment for the reason of its purity and straightforwardness. In particular, Hyujŏng argued that in order to achieve wordless enlightenment, one should pursue meditation in a direct and sudden manner, and that it could be made possible only when the method of *kong’an* 公案 (questioning meditation known as *kanhwasŏn* 看話禪) in the Linchi 臨濟 (Kr. Imje; Jp. Rinzai) tradition was applied. Since the seventeenth century, the ideal of “questioning meditation,” which Hyujŏng had advocated, has been taken as orthodoxy in the Korean Sŏn Buddhist dharma-lineage.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Yi Hoegwang plotted to annex Korean Buddhism into the Japanese Sŏtōshū in 1910, the outcry of Korean monks was directed not only toward the attempt of annexation itself, but also toward the intrusion of the Sŏtōshū as the umbrella institution of Korean Buddhism. For many Korean monks, the Sŏtōshū, which embraces enlightenment through gradual cultivation, was an outrageous insult that might contaminate the purified tradition of sudden enlightenment in Korean Sŏn Buddhism (see KIM Kwangsik 1996, 71–91). Right after Yi Hoegwang’s scheme had been uncovered, in January of 1911, monks in Kyŏngsang and Chŏlla provinces held an emergency meeting at Songgwangsa 松廣寺 and declared the establishment of the Imje Order in the name of “preserving the orthodoxy of Korean Buddhism” (KIM Yŏng’ae 2000, 354–55). The current Chogye Order inherits the tradition of sudden enlightenment tracing back to this Imje Order.

The ideal of sudden enlightenment was the final destination of Korea’s institutional Buddhism that had gone through the spiraling process of gradational methodological purification pushed in search of Buddhist orthodoxy. In other words, the orthodoxy of sudden enlightenment was, in the historical context of

Korean Buddhism, established as the most privileged mode of Sōn Buddhism. It was far removed not only from the religious orientation of lay Buddhism but was also demarcated from the legacy of doctrinal Buddhism. Situated at the bottom end of the ladder of institutional hierarchy, lay Buddhists (who were associated with ritual monks), petty Buddhist entrepreneurs, and temple managers were kept at bay even though they were the very patrons who contributed to the subsistence of the sangha of Sōn Buddhism.

The wide gap between lay Buddhism and Sōn Buddhism denotes that Korean Buddhist culture lacks a middle ground between the clergy-centrism of institutional Buddhism and the worldly salvationism of lay followers. Han Yong'un endeavored to create and enrich a middle ground by nurturing two critical ingredients of Mahāyāna Buddhism: the utility of expedience (*pangp'yōn* 方便 or *upāya*, which signifies skill in means or skillful means in Buddhist practice), and the spirit of bodhisattva.

Expedience in Buddhism refers to differential manners of teaching or forms of practice that can be applied to promote and enhance the Buddhist well-being of people and society. In theory, *upāya*, as a means to propagate or deliver Buddha's teachings and wisdom, is a sort of didactical strategy that needs to be flexible and resourceful in order to reach the diverse needs of all sentient beings. But in Korean Buddhism, it has been translated into a polemic exploited to sublimate the meditational path of (sudden) enlightenment while discrediting other paths.

On the other hand, the spirit of bodhisattva, which is closely linked with the concept of *upāya*, refers to the outreaching compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Through their long aeons of spiritual practice, these figures had accumulated vast funds of religious merit—enough for their own salvation—but they had decided to remain in this world as savior figures in order to help others. It is an essential feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Great Vehicle), which places much emphasis on caring for the spiritual well-being of lay people and, by extension, society in general. In comparison, Hīnayāna Buddhism (Small Vehicle) or Theravāda Buddhism (Buddhism of the Elders) cherishes monastic life as represented by the ideal of an arhat, who would devote his or her individuality to pursuing vigorous disciplinary practice for total extinction at the end of his or her life. Korea's institutional Buddhism, which has treasured the purism of Sōn meditation, has not seriously devoted enough of its energy to the spirit of bodhisattva even though it capitalized on this for material gains through the practice of Kibok Buddhism.

It is an irony that Korean Sōn Buddhism, although boasting that it belongs to the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is rather impoverished in its most critical nutrients: the tool of expedience and the spirit of bodhisattva. Lay salvationism, which is couched in omnivorous “fortune-seeking” (Kibok) Buddhism, rarely

captures the hearts of elite orthodox Sŏn monks, who are focused on the institutional legacy of the Sŏn orthodoxy. As a result, lay Buddhism was left uncared for and unguarded; it became vulnerable to ritual monks and petty religious opportunists who traded fortune-seeking religious skills. These are the structural impediments which Han Yong'un lamented as ingrained in Korean Buddhism. Han Yong'un envisioned the utility of expedience and the spirit of bodhisattva flowering in Korean Buddhism through destruction and reform.

Expedience in Korean Buddhism

Han Yong'un was critical of the popular understanding of Buddhist deities (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and guardian celestial deities) as they were commonly depicted at that time. In particular, the pictorial images of these figures in disordered displays and commercialized at temple halls were too arbitrary and artificial to convey the true meanings of Buddhist teachings. Worse yet, lay Buddhists and petty monks were indiscreetly dragged into these misleading visual representations as they sought supernatural aid in their boundless wishes of wealth, health, and power. Should all these Buddhist images be thrown away?

We cannot remove all of them from the temple buildings. Instead, we should give some thought to why these paintings attract the attention of lay followers. These paintings appeal to their minds in a direct and tangible manner, so that when they look up, they are easily moved and choose good against evil in their life. That is why ancient sage kings erected gates and monuments in honor of those who had excelled in filial piety and taught people the virtue of filial piety with examples.

(HAN Yong'un 1978, 44)

In the display of Buddhist images, if not the most veracious in the doctrinal sense, Han Yong'un found some potential for expedience on the condition that these images should be simplified. He argued that human beings have different capacities in understanding the true meaning of Buddhist truth; it would be necessary and even unavoidable to adopt a different method or means in order to produce a desirable result for each individual.

Han Yong'un's admonition on the tool of imagery expedience was, in fact, a standing reprimand to both the institutional tradition of Sŏn Buddhism and the disorderly state of lay Buddhism. Even though his criticism of boisterous ritualism was more harsh toward the lay followers of Kibok Buddhism than toward the pursuers of Sŏn Buddhism, his real intention was to debunk the hypocritical and laissez-faire attitudes of traditional Sŏn Buddhists. The Sŏn Buddhists had practically abandoned, and as a result distorted, the idea of expedience since the time of Hyujŏng, who had made an authoritative comment on the method one should take in order to grasp the wordless Buddhist truth. Hyujŏng's prescription was simple: since Sŏn meditation starts from wordlessness and reaches wordlessness through

wordlessness, one should adopt the method of no method. Hyujōng implied that even if one adopted a method, whatever it might be, in the hope of grasping the wordless truth, it would be useless and wasteful anyway, for “you have to be there already from the beginning, or you won’t reach there at all” (KEEL 1993, 16–17).

In this context, Sōn Buddhism adherents were skeptical and pejorative toward the Kibok Buddhism of lay people as well as toward the stance of doctrinal Buddhism, which regarded the Buddhist truth as an object of textual understanding. Sōn practitioners, who believed in the dictum that “you have to be Buddha already from the beginning, or you are never Buddha at all,” tended to look down upon all other forms of Buddhism. For them, the Buddhist truth was not an object that could be cultivated or understood, but something that should be experienced directly through sudden enlightenment—the experience of existential change in the person that would lead to becoming the truth itself.

In other words, from the standpoint of sudden enlightenment, one is never able to grasp the wordless Buddhist truth if he or she tries to depend on external means, including rituals, pictorial images, and deities. The pure and wordless Buddhist truth allowed no methods at all. With that being the case, how could ordinary people expect to approach the pure Buddha-truth or Buddhist compassion? How could Sōn Buddhist priests expect lay followers to realize existential transformation? Instead of embracing lay Buddhism, Korean Sōn monks, often secluded in their Sangha retreat, tried to shield their high purposes from pious folk. To them, the religious practices of lay Buddhists, who were preoccupied with fortune-seeking, posed a serious threat to the ideal of Korean Sōn Buddhism and to their safety deep in the mountains. Government suppression was real, but the suppression provided them with a ready excuse for securing a cocoon of escapism.

In contrast, lay Buddhists who were served by ritual monks and temple operators tried to incorporate a wide range of heterogenous beliefs and ritual practices into their Buddhism beyond the institutional confines of the sangha. The religious pursuits of lay Buddhists, which was directed to issues related to the life cycle, deceased family members, ancestors, misfortunes, health, and more, were boundless. Understandably, Sōn adherents maintained a distance from the Kibok Buddhism of lay followers and were satiated in their safety zone of tradition. Detached from the everyday life of the populace, Korea’s atomized Sōn practitioners remained behind in providing and developing religious services and social ethics, thereby leaving the way open for religious entrepreneurs to capitalize on the multifarious religious demands of lay Buddhists. Chaotic expedience was unavoidable.

The passivity of Korean Sōn Buddhism in promoting and developing expedience for the religious welfare of lay followers and society, however, did not mean that it had shut down. In dealing with its own affairs, it was never inactive in

economic interests or institutional affairs, particularly regarding issues related to hegemony, power, and prestige. The long battle of the so-called “movement of Buddhist purification” (*Pulgyo chōnghwa undong* 佛教淨化運動) that swept through Korean Buddhism from 1954 to 1970 is a case in point. Under the banner of eradicating evil (Japanese) elements and of cleansing disorderly expedience from the tradition of Korean Buddhism, a persistent fight was fought inside as well as outside the sangha community. The battle was waged in the rhetoric of Buddhist purism which aimed at expelling married monks and preserving the tradition of Sōn Buddhism, but it was really a fight over the issues of property and institutional control. The initial outcome of the struggle was the refashioning of the current Chogye Order in 1962.⁵ During this process, the religious welfare of lay Buddhists and society was rarely discussed in any depth.

It is interesting that the elite leadership of Korean Buddhism, which has survived hard times thanks to the unyielding support of the laity, particularly women, has not been fully engaged in the religious concerns of its lay supporters. The ideal of Korean Sōn monks was set high, and their institutional standards were kept high as well. But what could be expected from their monadic, “high-minded” religious quest? This was what Han Yong’un questioned in the early years of colonial Korea.

The essence of Sōn meditation is in the quieting and awakening of the mind. However, I find the practitioners of Sōn meditation strange indeed. The meditators of the past tried to keep their minds tranquil, but the meditators of today keep their dwelling places hushed. The meditators of the past kept their minds calm, but the meditators of today keep their bodies static. If one keeps one’s dwelling place hermetic, one cannot but become misanthropic, and if one keeps one’s body static, one cannot but become self-righteous.

(HAN Yong’un 1978, 26).

At one extreme end, Han Yong’un indeed saw some sort of religious hypocrisy lurking in the insulated mode of Korean Sōn Buddhism.

Korean Sōn Buddhism still insists—in spiritual orientation—on the ideal of meditational purism in juxtaposition to the folk piety of lay Buddhism or to any other. It also adheres, in lineage-conscious tradition, to the idea of orthodoxy it sets for itself. This is a mind-set engraved in Korean Buddhism over the periods of the Chosōn dynasty and Japanese colonial rule. The very tenets of Sōn purism have been prone to ignore expedience for the laity. By the same token, lay Buddhism, which could not secure the support of the Sōn orthodoxy, has been cut loose from institutional Buddhism. In a situation where the middle ground

5. For a convenient collection of information on this “struggle for purification,” see HAN’GUK PULGYO KŪNHYŌNDAESA YŌN’GUHOE 1995, 185–353. For a brief account of the struggle, see BUSWELL 1992, 30–34.

between sudden enlightenment and folk piety was impoverished, Korean Buddhism still needed, as Han Yong'un warned, to find ways to develop means and tools for bringing Buddhist ideas and practices closer to the daily lives of the populace and for the well-being of society in general.

The Spirit of Bodhisattva in Korean Buddhism

In the Chosŏn period, Korean Buddhism had nurtured eremitism; its practitioners retreated into the mountains and isolated themselves away from social activism. To be sure, state suppression of Buddhism could not be underestimated, but even after monks were allowed to "enter the capital city" in 1896, most of them continued to stay deep within the mountains. Han Yong'un lamented:

Temples stay still in the mountain.... There won't arise any appetite for adventure and challenge in the isolated mountain. There won't arise any passion for salvation. All the great religious leaders tried to save the world and hated to live in solitude. Those living in the mountain are pessimists who ignore the sufferings and pleasures of the world. In the mountain temples we cannot find the spirit of competition, nor can we expect any warm hearts that might arise toward the people. (HAN Yong'un 1978, 36-37).

Han Yong'un maintained that Buddhism should stay in touch with the ideal of lay salvationism and be grounded in society. He declared that monks who were not concerned with the well-being of their neighbors would simply be freeloaders on society.

In this context, Han Yong'un concluded that much of the stagnation and backwardness of Korean Buddhism was attributable to its lack of a salvational spirit toward the people, in spite of its assertion of the Mahāyāna ideal. As far as he was concerned, the compassion of bodhisattva in Korean Buddhism was lost in the self-centered Sŏn tradition. Worse yet, the practice of Mahāyāna compassion was degraded as the business of ritual monks or petty Buddhists who were treated like second-class citizens in institutional Buddhism.

Why was Korean Buddhism neither serious nor systematic in delivering the spirit of bodhisattva to society? Han Yong'un agreed that it would be attributable to the prolonged hostile sociopolitical environments that pushed individual Buddhist practitioners to the social margins where they had to struggle to eke out an existence through vulgar religious services. But more seriously, the trouble was that all this was justified or unchallenged under the aura of Sŏn purism, which was hardened with doctrinal tenets antagonistic to the spirit of bodhisattva. In spiritual orientation, Korean Sŏn Buddhism was not in full rapport with the theory that Buddhist deities somehow could save those who invoked them, for it denied the dualistic distinction between compassion-givers and grace-seekers; this distinction was vigorously negated or rarely appreciated.

In contrast, lay Buddhists were enthusiastic in seeking the compassionate power of supernatural Buddhist deities, believing that they were the omnipresent object of prayer and worship. Prayer rituals invariably took the format of communication, in whatever forms, between those who provided salvation and those who asked for it. Structurally, the distinction or separation between an object and a subject was a necessary precondition that enabled one to invoke the descending compassion of Buddhist deities. Compared to this, enlightenment in Sōn Buddhism was considered a possibility only when the dualism of object and subject was categorically denied; the state of enlightenment was described as *kkaech'im* 깨침, which literally means “brokenness.” What must be “broken” is the process of cognition or understanding which juxtaposes an object against a subject (PARK 1983, 123–25). For this reason, religious activities, which were deemed detrimental to the “breaking,” could hardly buy strong institutional support in the Korean sangha.

The tradition of sudden enlightenment in Korean Sōn Buddhism even resisted embracing the approach of gradual cultivation toward the goal of enlightenment, for it was premised on the separation between sentient beings and Buddhas (the enlightened). Gradual practice presupposes a distance between one who cultivates oneself and the final destination of one’s cultivation (Buddha), a gap that must be bridged through the process of gradual cultivation. But one can never bridge the gap once it is objectified and dualism sets in, taught Hyujōng (see PARK 1983, 66–77). In a similar vein, Pure Land Buddhism, which enjoyed popularity in Korea’s neighboring countries, was not fully accepted in Chosōn Buddhism simply because it was based on a dual structure between grace-seekers (sentient beings) and compassion-givers, represented by Amitābha Buddha, who made forty-eight primal vows to save all sentient beings. There were debates on the issue of how to invoke the compassion of Amitābha Buddha, either through self-power (*charyōk* 自力) or through other-power (*t’aryōk* 他力). In the final analysis, supernatural saviors transcending the worshippers and the human world, which the tradition of sudden enlightenment in Korean Sōn Buddhism negated from the beginning, could not form a mainstay of the Korean Buddhist institution.

It seems like tautological play, but in Sōn Buddhism, breaking the dualistic mode of cognition is realizable only when one gets completely out of the dualistic mode of cognition from the beginning. It is analogous to a struggle between the component parts of the self that try to form a fusion among parts of the self. Since Sōn practitioners are engaged in a struggle with relations within the self, they inevitably become withdrawn from public roles and social engagement, like the life of a mystic who withdraws from public realms and creates his or her own inner space in a quest of contemplative introspection. In theoretical terms, what matters most in Korean Sōn Buddhism is an inner self retired from social ser-

vice. Korean Buddhism at the turn of the nineteenth century was rarely found to venture into social service.

Han Yong'un was, nevertheless, cautious in transferring all blame to the reclusive spiritual orientation of Sŏn Buddhism and its practitioners. He conceded that the ways in which lay people believed and acted in pursuit of Buddhist compassion were equally disturbing. To his eyes, people's beliefs were nothing less than superstitions entrapped in the disorderly webs of countless deities, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist. There were simply too many haphazard activities conducted in the name of prayer and worship, Han Yong'un noted. He said that they would only exacerbate the already messy folk salvationism that was running counter to the law of Buddhist retribution.

However, it does not mean that Han Yong'un was persuaded toward the other end of the spectrum: "We cannot turn Buddhism into a philosophy. Embracing the salvational quest of the lay people, we can still reorganize the pantheon of Buddhist deities, simplify the formats of rituals, and emphasize the importance of the mind in Buddhism" (HAN Yong'un 1978, 50–51). He did not want lay salvationism to be taken over by Sŏn purism. Han Yong'un's push for reforms for Buddhism's social service and Buddhism for the people had more hopes in the right form of lay Buddhism.

The Dearth of a Middle Ground in Korean Buddhism

The gulf separating institutional Buddhism and lay Buddhism was so deep and wide that Han Yong'un decided to offer a radical remedy—one that he learned from Japanese examples to some extent (YI Chaehŏn 2007, 66–88). Hoping that it could revitalize Korean Buddhism, he suggested that monks should be allowed to marry—a suggestion that would indeed “destroy” the institutional backbone of the sangha tradition of Korean Buddhism. The stubborn refusal to allow Buddhist monks to marry, he argued, had done serious harm to the development of Korean Buddhism in four respects: 1. it was ethically wrong because celibate monks disrupted the natural flow of generational reproduction; 2. it had a negative impact upon national strength because it decreased the population; 3. it inhibited the propagation of Buddhism because many monks gave up celibacy in favor of “normal” life and so withdrew from their Buddhist careers; and 4. the blind suppression of one of the most basic human instincts could lead to scandals and crimes (HAN Yong'un 1978, 58–63; and HUR 1999, 128–29). Most Korean monks initially countered with an argument that Han's proposal, imported from degenerate Japanese Buddhist practices, would be an outright violation of the Buddhist commandments prohibiting lewd and unchaste conduct.

Whether it was acceptable or not, the underlying message of Han Yong'un's proposal was that Korean Buddhism should take the draconian measure to fix

itself and thereby to bring itself closer to the general populace, society, and the nation. Before long, many monks were attracted to the idea of clerical marriage as the Japanese colonial government stood by Han's insistent proposal (KIM Kwangsik 2000, 21). Korean monks adopted clerical marriage with startling speed. By the early 1930s, about half of all Korean monks were found to be married and by 1945, clerical marriage had become a normal practice that nobody seemed to question. According to one estimate, of about six thousand five hundred monks in total, those who remained celibate did not exceed three hundred (KIM Kwangsik 2000, 384). It was a dramatic change—one that indeed amounted to the destruction of the sangha tradition of Korean Buddhism. Buddhism that had been an enemy of family values was now turned into a religion of family life; it was taken more and more as a means of subsistence for the married monks. Once burdened with family responsibilities, married monks tended to take the issues of temple management and property very seriously.

Han Yong'un urged Buddhist revitalization not just for professional pursuers of the Buddhist truth, but more for the active engagement of Buddhism in the spiritual well-being of people and society. In that context, Han Yong'un's proposal for clerical marriage was supposed to help expand an intermediary realm designed to bridge the gap between institutional Buddhism and the secular world of the people. The lack of such a middle ground in Korean Buddhism, as was found in doctrine, organization, ritual and the spirituality of religious quest, unequivocally pointed to the state of impoverishment in the spirit of bodhisattva and expedience. Over time, however, clerical marriages seemed only to exacerbate that impoverished state, as the married monks pursued their own interests and plunged into corruption.

So how could a sound middle ground be created and expanded? Here, Han Yong'un's other proposals catch our attention. In the name of religious egalitarianism and salvationism, he offered a list of proposals that included the training of Buddhist missionaries for broad social proselytization, the relocation of mountain temples to towns and urban centers where they could serve the populace, the simplification of complex and costly rituals and ceremonies for easy access, the popular election of head monks at temples, and the ban on vagabond-monks who could not serve the laity in a stable manner. At the same time, however, some of his reform proposals criticized lay Buddhist traditions. One of them was his call for demolition of *yōmbuldang* 念佛堂 (halls for the recitation of Buddha's name) and removal of all divine images but that of the Buddha (YI Chaehōn 1999, 75–76). He intended through these measures to recover what he regarded as the essence of Buddhism by redressing the disorderly state of lay Buddhism.

In 1931, Han Yong'un was frustrated by the disharmony, rampant corruption, and political opportunism of the Korean Buddhist leadership; he proposed another set of reform measures. As a way of preserving the independence of

the Korean Buddhist institution from the interference of the colonial government and expanding the popular support of Buddhism, Han called for the establishment of a united governing organ of Buddhist temples, the consolidation of minor temples, the development of programs designed to help improve the living standards of Buddhists, the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Korean, and the launching of broad missionary activities. In particular, Han Yong'un made it clear that without achieving independence and autonomy free of external control, Korean Buddhism could not be reformed. As if countering the strong opposition of some conservative elements against clerical marriage, Han remarried in 1933 and strongly advocated the catch phrase “from mountains to streets, from monks to people” (KIM Kwangsik 2000, 34–36). Except for the push of clerical marriage, however, Han Yong'un's reform efforts, which were ambitious and radical yet abstract and nestled in clergy-centered thinking (to some extent modeled after Japanese examples), failed to produce any measurable fresh impact upon the course of Korean Buddhism.

Korean Buddhism experienced a stream of reform efforts pushed forward by other Buddhist leaders as well, who can be categorized into three groups: 1. Song Kyōnghō 宋鏡虛 (1848–1912), Song Man'gong 宋滿空 (1871–1946), and Pang Han'am 方漢岩 (1876–1951), who tried to preserve the long-held tradition of Korean Sōn Buddhism; 2. Paek Yongsōng 白龍城 (1864–1940) and Pak Hanyōng (1870–1948), who focused on lay Buddhism and Buddhism's social awakening—the line of reform compatible with Han Yong'un's reforms; and 3. Yi Nūnghwa 李能和 (1869–1943) and Kwōn Sangno 權相老 (1879–1965), who paid keen attention to modernizing Buddhist studies and education (SONG Hyōnju 2000, 163, and KIM Kwisōng 2003, 326–28).

In particular, Paek Yongsōng, who was imprisoned during the time of the March First Movement in 1919 and continued to work on reforming Korean Buddhism until his death in 1940, focused on what was known as the “movement of the teachings of Great Enlightenment” (*Taegakkyo undong* 大覺教運動). *Taegakkyo* was an alternative term he coined to replace that of Pulgyo (Buddhism)—a term that represented the old state of Buddhism which, in his view, was utterly corrupt and therefore should be reborn (KIM Chōnghŭi 2003, 30). Emphasizing the practice of both meditation and precepts (including the ban on clerical marriage and meat eating), Paek tried to establish a new model of monks as bodhisattvas as well as to separate Buddhism from secular power. His vision of a new Buddhism featured the balance between the “obtainment of enlightenment upward” (*sanggu pori* 上求菩提) and the “salvation of sentient beings downward” (*hahwa chungsaeng* 下化衆生) (see KIM Chōnghŭi 2003, 31–33). Toward this goal, he emphasized the importance of Buddhist precepts and Sōn meditation in daily life. He also devoted himself to such projects as translating Buddhist scriptures into Korean language, composing Buddhist hymns, and carrying out social programs.

Despite a wide range of suggestions, arguments, and actions, most of the reform efforts led by many leaders did not guide Korean Buddhism in a new direction. On the contrary, the structural problems inherent in Korean Buddhism were exacerbated by colonial rule. The uphill battles of reform movements continuing into the mid-1930s could not overcome the trend of intensifying colonial bureaucratization into which Buddhist institutions were dragged. The implementation of the Temple Law (*sachallyöng* 寺刹令) in 1911 had paved an administrative framework of colonial control; Korean Buddhism was, in fact, gradually transformed into a vanguard religious agent of Imperial Japan.⁶

It should be noted, however, that the integration of the Korean Buddhist institution into the colonial governing system was not something for which Japanese colonial rule should solely be blamed. As a matter of fact, many Korean monks who had suffered for long during the Chosŏn period welcomed, sometimes with enthusiasm, the new waves of “modern” change Japan brought to Korean Buddhism. In particular, they were attracted to and even excited about the fact that monks in Japan enjoyed high social status and economic affluence. Japanese Buddhism that seemed “advanced and modernized” was the envy of most of the Korean Buddhists, including Han Yong’un and many other reform leaders (KIM Kwangsik 2000, 19). When the colonial government began to implement the Temple Law of 1911, the public opinion of Korean Buddhists was by and large quite positive. Many monks were supportive of the colonial government which moved to protect the property rights of Buddhist institutions, encouraged Buddhists to establish modern schools and educational organizations, and enhanced the social status of Buddhist monks. Many Korean monks, who grabbed opportunities to travel to or study in Japan, were eager to emulate Japanese models of Buddhism, and many temples opened programs of Japanese language education (HAN Tongmin 2006, 121–28).

The core of the Temple Law was in organizing all temples, which numbered more than 1,370 in the early part of the second decade of the twentieth century, into the hierarchical nationwide head-branch system centered on each of thirty parishes. According to this law, matters involving mergence, moving, abolition, and property dealings of all temples were all subject to the discretionary power of the Governor General (KANG Yŏnghwan 1997, 175). Obviously, the head-branch system, which was based on the Japanese model, fit very well into the governing scheme of the colonial government that adopted the top-down approach in controlling the populace. Once integrated into the control system of the colonial government, the head temple of each parish and its head monk could exercise

6. For detailed discussion of the Temple Law in terms of its historical background and promulgation, see HAN Tongmin 2006, 97–121.

unprecedented power and property rights under the protection of law and public authorities. In return for the benefits guaranteed by the colonial power, many monks in the leadership position made themselves apolitical and offered their support and loyalty to colonial rule. In 1912, Haeinsa (one of the most prestigious head temples) put into practice its own temple law—a set of self-regulatory rules—that would be followed by many other temples. In its article 80, Haeinsa made clear that “one who discusses political matters or joins a political organization and, as a result, loses his own duty as a monk shall be deprived of his monk status” (KIM Kwangsik 2000, 23). Seven years later, in 1919, when the March First Movement swept the country, Kim Yonggok 金龍谷, who served as chair of the association of thirty head temples, warned the Buddhist youth “neither to be involved in political matters nor to offer their support to the rash uprising and foolish behavior [of the independence movement].” He stressed that the Buddhist youth should “uphold the policies of public authorities sincerely and wholeheartedly” (KIM Kwangsik 2000, 23).

Over time, many Buddhist monks who tasted the sweetness of power and privilege transformed themselves into collaborators of the colonial government. In this trend, the head monks of thirty-one parishes (one more parish was created in 1924 with Haömsa as its head temple) were expected to conduct a series of annual ceremonies devoted to the promotion and celebration of the glory of Imperial Japan. On a daily basis, they offered a prayer ritual toward the sacred tablet, which was inscribed with the words “Hail the Longevity of the Imperial Majesty” and installed in front of the main Buddhist deity on the central altar of the main hall in their head temples.⁷

Some Buddhist leaders were very critical regarding the increasing trend in which Korean Buddhist institutions offered their services to Imperial Japan in return for power and economic benefits. In 1921, tens of young Buddhist leaders formed an organization called Chosön Pulgyo yusinhoe 朝鮮佛教維新會 (Association for the restoration of Korean Buddhism) and pushed for the separation of politics and religion in order to achieve the autonomy of Korean Buddhism from bondage to the Temple Law and the colonial government. But over the issue of who should take the initiative of establishing the united organ of Korean Buddhist institutions, the young cleric leaders were divided into two groups and soon the infighting began, derailing their efforts not long afterward. Amid the turmoil of the restoration movement, the majority of Korean monks in power were further integrated into the bureaucracy of the colonial government and enjoyed prestige and financial stability (Yi Chaehön 1999, 83).

From another side, some Buddhist monks established the Academy of Sön Studies (Sönhakwön 禪學院) in 1921, with the aim of preserving the traditions

7. For further details see KANG 1997, 175, and KIM Kwisöng 2003, 322.

and principles of Korean Sŏn Buddhism. They were able to register about three hundred and sixty members for the movement but their activities did not last long. After silence for some years, a large number of Buddhist leaders held a meeting in 1929 at Kakhwangsa 覺皇寺 in Seoul and resolved to organize a unified organ (later named Chung'ang kyomuwŏn 中央教務院) of Korean Buddhism and its constitution, or *chonghoe* 宗會 (KIM Sunsŏk 2006, 64–70). But this movement of self-strengthening and independence, which placed much emphasis on the preservation of Sŏn orthodoxy or traditional Buddhist tradition, soon dissipated as the terms of the *chonghoe* expired in 1934. The inner momentum for overcoming the system of the “Temple Law,” which regulated all administrative matters involving the appointment of monks to positions of power and the management of temple properties, did not last long. Again, a number of Sŏn monks, who fashioned themselves as “gatekeepers of orthodox Chosŏn Buddhism,” tried to harness their strength to “defend the tradition and revive the institution” in 1934 but again had little success (KIM Sunsŏk 2006, 71–80). Their monastic-centered efforts had little to do with the vision of lay Buddhism and failed to garner public support. The distance between clergy-centered Buddhist institutionalism and lay Buddhism was still deep and wide.

Thus, an outside force could easily penetrate into the vacuum created by the gap between the institutional tradition of Sŏn Buddhism and lay Buddhism. The colonial government, which knew exactly what to do, continued to strengthen the head-branch system by empowering head monks to control all temple matters in their parishes. Once Korea's Buddhist institutions were brought under control, the colonial government proceeded to subjugate lay Buddhism as a tool of supporting Imperial Japan's political cause while further marginalizing the resistant adherents of Sŏn tradition and reform-minded Buddhists. Han Yong'un and his like-minded colleagues and supporters gradually lost the impetus of their reform energy as colonial rule tightened its grip. After 1937, the voices of reform or restoration were rarely heard.

Similarly, academic reform advocates who pitched their hope in modernizing Buddhist studies also dissipated into what the political climate of their times dictated. The dramatic transformation of Kwŏn Sangno is a case in point. When he raised the banner of Buddhist reform in the early part of the second decade of the twentieth century, he was full of enthusiasm in pursuit of the vision that Korean Buddhism, endowed with some six thousand monks and about nine hundred temples, had great potential to lead the Korean people and society in the new direction of the modern world. In 1912–1913, when he was in charge of a monthly Buddhist magazine called *Chosŏn Pulgyo Wŏlbo* 朝鮮佛教月報, Kwŏn was a champion of modern Buddhist education, religious egalitarianism, and the movement of popular proselytization (see Yi Chaehŏn 1999, 74; KIM Kyŏngjip 1998, 280–99; and KIM Kwisŏng 1003, 329–30).

By the mid-1930s, however, Kwŏn Sangno was a totally different person who was, conversely, eager to offer his expertise to the Japanese colonial government and Imperial Japan. It is said that he did so in the conviction that Korean Buddhism could realize its potential only when it was willing to die for the glory of Imperial Japan. Along with Yi Hoegwang, Yi Chong'uk 李鐘郁 (1884–1969), and Kim T'aehŭp 金泰洽 (1899–1989), Kwŏn Sangno formed a core group of pro-Japanese fanatics. He urged young Korean men and monks to volunteer to fight for the Japanese emperor, saying that for young monks in particular, fighting for Imperial Japan not only constituted the “fundamental duty of Buddhism” but was also a way of fulfilling the “unique tradition of Korean Buddhism” because “the principle of the Great Empire of Japan is in perfect harmony with the Mahāyānic teachings of Buddhism” (IM 1993, vol. 2, 514–15). In 1943, Kwŏn proclaimed in his book, *Imjŏn ūi Chosŏn Pulgyo* 臨戰의 朝鮮佛敎 (Korean Buddhism that goes to battle), that “the realization of Buddhahood is in the winning of the Sacred War, and (Buddhist) precepts are the guiding spirits of battle [for it]” (IM 1993, vol. 2, 522). Kwŏn Sangno, who had once spearheaded the movement of promoting modern Buddhist studies, refashioned himself as an admired imperial model for all Korean Buddhists and thrilled the Japanese warmongers. Under the terror of total war that froze any attempt of disagreement, the structural porosity of middle ground in Korean Buddhism that had been a breeding ground of colonial control was kept intact, at least until 1945.

Conclusion

During the colonial period, the task of amending the dual structure of Korean Buddhism through the proliferation of expedience and the spirit of bodhisattva remained unfulfilled. In his *Chosŏn Pulgyo yusinnon*, Han Yong'un saw hope for the flowering of a new phase of Korean Buddhism on middle ground through the remedy of “destruction,” but after 1945 that hope was slated to go through another fierce round of infighting. The Sŏn traditionalists had endured the dark period of colonial harassment and emerged with a vengeance when President Yi Sŭngman (commonly known as Syngman Rhee) proclaimed in 1954 that all married monks should leave their temples. President Yi's announcement immediately invited a rash of the internal purge of the “movement of Buddhist purification.” The issue of clerical marriage was the towering symbol of colonial Buddhism that had been played at the hands of temple administrators and pro-Japanese collaborators. Against this historical backdrop, the leaders of the “movement of Buddhist purification” singularly targeted their vengeance at the married monks who were “polluted” by Japanese Buddhism. Without the removal of these colonial legacies, argued its leaders and supporters, the tradition of Korean Sŏn Buddhism could not be rectified.

During the course of the “purification movement” that lasted for seventeen years, Korean Buddhism fell into turmoil and violence as all interested parties, including the government, scrambled for control, hegemony, stability, or survival. Until the chaos finally subdued in 1970 when the married monks decided to leave the Chogye Order and established a new sectarian order called the T’aego Order (T’aegojong), Korean Buddhism had once again exposed its long-running structural problems—the chasm between lay Buddhism that was left on its own and institutional Buddhism that was imprisoned to its clergy-centered interests. The Buddhist leadership was so preoccupied with its own business of power struggle and property control that when the infighting was calmed by the prescription of internal splitting, Korean Buddhism seemed to have returned to the bare bones of clergy-centrism. The Chogye Order, which secured the orthodox status of Korean Buddhism, further hardened its stance for the orthodoxy of the “sudden enlightenment” of Sŏn Buddhism.

Interestingly, amid the lingering confusion, pro-Japanese monk-collaborators and power wielders who had dominated the Korean Buddhism scene in the colonial period quickly transformed themselves into the preservers of Korea’s Sŏn Buddhist tradition. It was an amazing and shrewd conversion, but what was more surprising was that many of them not only exercised their unusual skills of survival and escaped retribution but also even reclaimed their previous influence and occupied high positions in the Chogye Order. This was the legacy of colonial Buddhism preserved in the vacuum of middle ground that had been incubated between institutional Buddhism and lay Buddhism. There was no middle ground that might have been able to check and mend the ills of the lop-sided religious orientations of both traditions.

As if resonating with what Han Yong’un had voiced a century ago, Buddhist reform leaders today assert that Korean Buddhism should more actively embrace and nurture the spirit of bodhisattva through diverse tools of expedience, and provide hope to its neighbors and communities. Their proposals under the banner of “people’s Buddhism” (*minjung Pulgyo* 民衆佛教) or “lay Buddhist movement” (*chaega Pulgyo undong* 在家佛教運動), which include the establishment of regional centers for propagation, education, meditation, healing, social activism, volunteer activities and the promotion of Buddhism’s social well-being, are still much heard (CHÖNG 1992, 149–54). Korean Buddhism, which has survived through the colonial experience and the storm of the “purification movement,” is being pressured by self-reform that calls for the bridging of the lofty clergy-centrism of the Sŏn tradition and the vulgar salvationism of lay Buddhism.

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