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Chŏng Suok's Tour of Imperial Japan and its Impact on the Development of the Nuns' Order in Korea

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Abstract: The eminent scholar-nun Chŏng Suok (1902–1966) traveled from colonial Korea to Imperial Japan from 1937 to 1939 and wrote a travelogue that provides an important first-hand account from a woman's perspective on the state of Japanese and Korean Buddhism during the early 20th century. Bemoaning the destitute state of Korean Buddhist nuns who had no schools, lecture halls, or even meditation rooms, she notes the stark contrast with the Japanese nuns who had access to proper education and enjoyed respect from society. After returning from Japan, she became not only a dharma instructor and abbess but something much more. As a prominent leader of the Buddhist purification movement in the 1960s she became one of the most influential nuns in Korea, promoting education, practice, social engagement, and feminist consciousness until her death in 1966. Her long struggle exemplifies a transnational crossing that helped to deepen the Buddhist tradition in both Korea and Japan.

Keywords: Chŏng Suok (1902–1966); Korean Buddhism during the Japanese colonial period; Buddhist nuns in Korea; Japanese nuns; feminist consciousness

1. Introduction

The past decade has brought various theories on the characteristics and nature of the modern Korean Buddhist community. Though scholarly interest in the Japanese colonial era in Korea has surged, the dynamics of Korean society from the late Chosŏn era (1392–1910) to the mid 1900s resist many of the reductionist interpretations that often describe this complex age. Views that spin the era into a single thread or divide it into binary relationships of oppressor (i.e., Japanese colonizer) and oppressed (i.e., colonized Korean) cannot preserve the complex and multifaceted realities of the time (Cho 2003, pp. 88–89).

One striking limitation lies in the unbalanced and unjustifiable treatment of the various personalities who played a role in that complicated period. Most studies on Korean Buddhism have revolved almost entirely around men, *bhiksus* (ordained monk) in particular. By contrast, little attention has been paid to women, either lay or monastic, despite the important part they played in the era. There were important nuns who had emerged as notable meditation practitioners and leaders of the nuns' community and even lay women who remained in the periphery but contributed material support in a modest way that nevertheless helped shape the fabric that made Buddhism what it was at the time.

This paper seeks to begin the rectification of this unequal scholastic bias by evaluating the life and teachings of the heretofore ignored scholar nun Chŏng Suok (鄭守玉 1902–1966) and elevating her to the historical level as an important scholar-monastic that she rightfully deserves. She went to study in Japan as a young nun, from 1937–1939 during the Japanese colonial period, and became an important educator and scholar when she returned. Upon her return, she became a dharma instructor at a seminary for nuns at Namjang-sa Monastery and ultimately, after the Korean War, became one of the main leaders of the Buddhist purification movement. In recognition of her services, she was

granted the abbotship of Naewŏn-sa in 1955, a temple which had been razed to the ground during the war. There she established a seminary on top of its ashes and devoted her entire life to educating nuns.

The foundation for her lifetime of service can be seen in her unique literary contribution to modern Korean Buddhist culture. While in Japan, Suok published a travelogue in a Buddhist magazine in Korea. This work stands with us today as a valuable cross-cultural testimony of a colonial subject and religious aspirant traversing the material and cultural boundaries of the empire and the colony.¹ With a particular emphasis on the state of nuns, her travelogue is a unique record of a Korean Buddhist nun using her observant eyes to develop a sharp analysis towards her own tradition in transition. With insightful understanding of the cross-cultural comparisons of Buddhism in the two nations, Suok reveals her advanced views on many issues of Buddhist society, including the necessity of education for Buddhist nuns and the comparatively unequal status of Korean nuns in particular.

Her modern feminist consciousness and progressive perspectives exemplify the transnational crossing of the East Asian Buddhist cultural boundaries at this time, and this work shows how her newly emerging women's awareness had a lasting impact on the Korean *bhiksuni* sangha that continues to this day.

2. Suok's Early Life

Suok was born in 1902 in Chinhae, South Kyŏngsang Province. According to her epitaph, "she was precocious, and held no stock in secular life starting at an early age." She regarded the secular life with contempt and pined for a life of calm ascetic practice amidst white clouds in the verdant mountains. One late autumn day in 1917, when she was 15 years old, she slipped out of the house unbeknownst to her parents and traveled to Haein-sa Monastery. When she spoke of her desire to join the sangha (Buddhist monastic community), she was rejected on the grounds that the monastery was only reserved for monks. As a result, she went to Kyŏnsŏng-am Hermitage at Sudŏk-sa Monastery, well-known as a practicing community for nuns, and became the pupil of Myori Pŏphŭi (1887–1975), a nun regarded to have revived the *bhiksunis'* meditation lineage (fully ordained female monastics, nuns) in modern Korea. In Pŏphŭi, Suok could not have found a better vocational master.

Practicing under Man'gong (1871–1946), a renowned Sŏn master (Ch. Chan, Jp. Zen) of the colonial period and famous as one of the only monks willing to receive nuns as students and provide them with Sŏn training, Pŏphŭi was the first nun to do so and received from him a dharma transmission poem, the formal recognition of awakening in the Sŏn tradition, in 1916. It was at this time that Suok entered the sangha, only a year after Pŏphŭi had been recognized as a Sŏn master and started teaching nuns at Kyŏnsŏng-am Hermitage. Pŏphŭi would become a trailblazer who all but singlehandedly restored the tradition of the *bhiksuni* practice after it had fallen into disarray by that time.

After some years of practicing Sŏn meditation and serving her master, Pŏphŭi, Suok set her mind on studying Buddhist scriptures and left Kyŏnsŏng-am Hermitage for a seminary at Haein-sa. As a nineteen-year-old, she completed her freshman (*samigwa*) and sophomore (*sajipgwa*) levels in two years under the tutelage of Kogyŏng, a nun. She then finished her junior (*sagyogwa*) and senior (*taegyogwa*) studies in Seoul at Unsŏng-am Hermitage, under a scholar monk, Taeŭn Kim T'aehŭp (1899–1989) who would play an important role for her future direction study.²

She was twenty-eight years old by the time she finished her studies in March 1929. In April she received full *bhiksuni* precepts from Yongsŏng (1864–1940) as a precept master at Haein-sa, a monk renowned for his reformation work for Chosŏn Buddhism during the Japanese colonial period. For the next two years, she studied Vinaya under Yongsŏng and then returned to Kyŏnsŏng-am Hermitage to

¹ For a delicate relationship of Late Chosŏn Buddhist figures with Imperial Japan, during the colonial period, see (Kim 2012b).

² For general information on Kim T'aehŭp's life, please refer to (Kim 2011).

complete five summer retreats.³ Having thus mastered Sōn (meditation), *Kyo* (Doctrinal study), and Vinaya study, she was a rare and extraordinary practitioner for the time and aroused the envy of many.

3. Leaving for Japan for Higher Study

Not content to rest on her laurels, Suok went abroad to study in Japan. Although there are some discrepancies in the sources about her time in Japan, her own travelogue states that she left for Japan in 1937 and returned in 1939. While in Japan in 1939, she published a travelogue titled “Observations from a Tour of Japanese Buddhism” (Naeji Pulgyo Kyōnhakki) in the July and August 1939 issues of *Pulgyo Sibō* (Buddhist Times)⁴ which will serve as our main source material.

The first essay begins by capturing her motivation to study abroad, “In Chosōn (i.e., Korea), I’d always heard that Japan was a Buddha land. So I thought sincerely about how I would like to study Japanese Buddhism.”⁵ By the time she left her homeland for Japan, it would have been more than 20 years since she became a nun, and years since she had begun training in the sangha and studying Buddhist doctrine under notable *bhikṣu* monks. Now 36 years old, she was most likely already a notable figure in the community of Korean nuns. As an elite nun with the highest degree of education, talent, and devotion, she stood well above her contemporaries.

Though it is understandable that a talented 36-year-old nun such as Suok would have the passionate desire to go to Japan, there are no sources that relate how she was able to get there. Although it was not unusual for Korean monks to study abroad during the Japanese colonial period, I have found no indication that any nuns other than Suok studied in Japan.

It could be legitimate for us to assume that her teacher, Kim T’aehŭp, who was a monk when he taught Suok in the final two courses of her seminary training, might be behind this. Kim was a leading intellectual monk during the Japanese colonial period who had studied in Japan himself. In 1920, he supported himself through college at Toyo University while studying Indian Philosophy at Nihon University where he studied Religious Studies. In 1928, after spending nine years in Japan, he returned to Korea and became more active promoting Buddhism as a lay Dharma teacher, publishing many articles in *Pulgyo*, the leading Korean magazine for Buddhists at the time, giving speeches on the street, or broadcasting radio programs. Besides sermons, he organized Buddhist choirs and theater troupes, composed hymns and wrote and directed plays. For seven years from 1928–1935, his achievements shone brightly. When *Pulgyo* (Buddhism), a popular magazine on Buddhist culture went out of circulation in July 1933, he started a new monthly periodical called *Pulgyo Sibō* (Buddhist Times) in August 1935.

Given that Suok studied under Kim T’aehŭp right after he returned from his studies in Japan, it is easy to imagine that this may have stoked her desire to study a new kind of Buddhism for the new era. From this, it hardly seems coincidental that Suok’s travelogues were published in two parts in Kim T’aehŭp’s *Pulgyo Sibō*.

4. Suok in Japan and Her Cross-Cultural Observations

At any rate, Suok finally stepped foot on Japanese soil in 1937. Again, in the words of Suok herself:

Two years ago, during the 12th year of Showa [1937], I crossed the Korea Strait and landed in Japan. First, I went on a pilgrimage to Buddhist temples in Osaka, Kyoto, Nara and Kobe. Beginning in 1938, I studied at a Nichiren temple for more than one year; I moved to Nishugakurin in Mino Prefecture in the spring of that year, 1939. Nishugakurin is a

³ Her biography is based on the two sources: “Yangsan Naewōnsa Biguni Hwansandang Suok hwasang Pimun” (Epitaph of *Bhikṣuni* Hwansandang Suok *hwasang* of Yangsan Naewōnsa), in (Yi 2000, pp. 1197–98; Ha 2001, pp. 207–20).

⁴ (Chōng 1939a, 1939b) Part 1 & Part 2.

⁵ Chōng Suok, *ibid.*, Part 1 in (Chōng 1939a).

Buddhist religious school run by Myoshin-ji in Kyoto, the head temple of one branch of the Rinzai school. The word Nishugakurin means a training school for Buddhist nuns.⁶

As a 36-year-old mature scholar-nun, Suok was ready to explore Japanese Buddhism in a depth that her knowledge, experience, and insight would have afforded. Her attention was rightly directed toward the stark contrast she witnessed between the Buddhism of Japan compared to that of Korea. For example, she cites the sectarian nature of Japanese Buddhism as the clearest difference between the Buddhism of the two nations. In her words:

But I feel an introduction is needed to the situation of Buddhism here [in Japan]. Although it is said that Chosŏn also had many schools of Buddhism in the past, now everything has become dominated by the Sŏn meditation school; we study the *sutras* and chant *dharanis* within the tenets of the school. But Japanese Buddhism is different. It is divided into 13 schools and 56 branches, and no matter which school a temple belongs to, the patriarch of the school and the branch's founders are revered even above the Buddha himself.

In Korea, the Chosŏn dynasty government had integrated Buddhism into the doctrinal (*Kyo*) and meditation (Sŏn) schools. During the Japanese colonial period these two schools were merged into Sŏn only, and Wŏnjong—the predecessor of today's Chogye Order of Buddhism—had already been established.

In Japan, if you visit a large temple, they revere the hall of the patriarch more than the Buddha Hall, and indeed you can see them all praying in the Patriarch Hall instead. If you visit the sacred temples on Mt. Koya you will see that they respect the figure of Kukai more than Mahāvairocana Buddha. In the Pure Land Sect, they revere the founder Shinran above Amitabha Buddha; and the Nichiren sect, Nichiren In small temples, the statues of the Buddha are behind, so the statue of the patriarch holds a prominent place and it is hard to see the Buddha. I think that this is a distinguishing feature of Japanese Buddhism. But in our temples at home, it is the complete opposite. A portrait of the patriarch or the founding master can only be found hung in the corner of a small shrine and only once a year is it ever paid prominent attention, such as in the form of a tea ceremony; never is there a great ceremony on the memorial anniversary and one never sees devotees praying to it. It truly seems that the patriarch and the founders of Korean Buddhism chose the wrong disciples. Of the almost 1300 temples in Korea, how many worship the founding masters? All the old temples claim that they were built by Ado, or Wŏnhyo, or Ŭisang, but where are the temples that clearly venerate those masters?⁷

Suok suggests, “Therefore, that in order to advance Buddhism in Korea there must be a faith that reveres the founders and seeks to reify the patriarchs.” Considering the situation at the time when Korea was a colony of Japan, she gives the scathing critique that Korean Buddhism not only lacks awareness of its own traditions, but neglects its own tradition, founders, and ancestors. It is as if she is exclaiming, ‘Look at the difference between a tradition that properly preserves its past history, and one that does not. Look at how it has turned out today!’

Still, Suok does not uncritically praise this sectarian nature of Japanese Buddhism, but criticizes weaknesses: “Although there are fine advantages, they focus too narrowly on their foundational *sutras* and doctrines, and disparage other schools. For example, in the Pure Land Sect they only look at Pure Land texts and neither teach nor read any other *sutras*. Nichiren treats anything other than the *Lotus Sutra* as if it were heretical teachings.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Korea has a long tradition of Mahayana Buddhist practice beginning with its inception on Korean soil in 4th century. It has been noted that an ecumenical attitude developed early on in Korea soon after the introduction of Buddhism. Leaving aside any discussion about the philosophical or religious efficacy of this comprehensive and syncretic approach (or, questioning whether Korean Buddhism really put this syncretism into practice), there has long been a tradition within Korean Buddhism that views this harmonizing attitude as the superior one. The defense of this ecumenical ideology from her would have been especially acute. From the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty, the structure and training of Chosŏn Buddhism had been organized into two tracks of *Sŏn* (meditation) and *Kyo* (doctrinal study). By the end of Chosŏn, *Sŏn* practice became more prevalent than doctrinal study.

With this background of ecumenical approach of Korean Buddhism, Suok did not seem too impressed by the sectarian and devotional nature of the Nichiren Pure Land Sect. She was, after all, an elite nun steeped in the deepest Buddhist doctrinal philosophy as well as an experienced meditation practitioner. She tells us frankly that “because of boredom,” she moved from a Nichiren temple to a Rinzai Zen temple.

I am now at a temple of the Rinzai Zen school, the same [school] as the Korean Sŏn school. From what I can see, whether it is in doctrine, its institutions, or practice, Rinzai Zen is the exemplar of Japanese Buddhism . . . ⁸

By stating that Rinzai Zen is the model of Japanese Buddhism, she implies that the Sŏn school of Buddhism is superior, implying at the same time that the current mainstream of Korean Buddhism was, and rightfully should be, the Sŏn school. She reflects the attitude of contemporary Koreans at the time who, beneath their fear of Japan as a powerful nation, nonetheless looked down on the Japanese and Japanese culture as narrow-minded, provincial, and petty. Suok’s reaction can also be understood as falling into this vein. Although Japanese Buddhism might appear to be strong and thriving, she expresses pride that the Sŏn school is dominant in Korea and has a higher level of teaching from an ideological standpoint.

5. The Status of Japanese Buddhist Nuns in Comparison to Korea

Conscious of her own country’s long and deep cultural tradition, Suok was unlikely to give single-minded praise to Japanese Buddhism in her cross-cultural observations. She is mature in her critical approach, and while she praises the merits of Japanese Buddhism, she also points out their regrettable narrow-mindedness. However, as a Korean nun, when she observed the enormous gap between the high status of Japanese Buddhist women and the women at home she had nothing to offer Korean Buddhism but scathing criticism. One by one, she goes over the qualifications and the social realities of Japanese nuns:

In Japanese Buddhism, monks (男僧), i.e., *bhiksus*, cannot earn the trust of their devotees until they are considerably educated. Starting when they are young, they go through elementary school, middle school, vocational school and university and then they enter the monastery where they go on to practice Zen meditation for 2–3 years, and become abbots and dharma missionaries. But the same is true for women clerics, called women priests (女僧) or nuns (尼僧) depending on the sect. The Nun’s Training School, where I am now, was founded a long time ago by Myoshin-ji, a major branch headquarters of Rinzai Buddhism in Kyoto. It is a place for the cultivation of nuns that gives substantial scholarships of several thousand yen every year to provide for the nuns’ education. The nuns from Myoshin-ji and its branch hermitages always come here for five year of middle school, then they enter a separate meditation hall to practice Zen sitting for a few years. After that, they go on to be

⁸ Ibid.

abbesses, missionaries, or even the Sōn masters of meditation halls. Because the nuns here have acquired so much education along with clearly marked levels of practice, they receive honorific titles such as Great Venerable (大和) or Great Zen Master (大禪師), or Venerable Elder (老師) while being treated with the highest respect.⁹

Looking at the high qualifications and status of the Japanese nuns at the time, where even nuns were given honorific titles, it would have been hard for Suok not to compare them to the wretched status of nuns in Korea, where nuns could not even read and far from being able to engage in religious practice, they were busy struggling simply to feed themselves like the ordinary laity.

But what are the circumstances like in Chosŏn? Of course, there are temples where only nuns live where a nun can aspire to become an abbess, but how many nuns in Chosŏn even have an education? Are they not all illiterate, barely able to read a single letter of even the Korean alphabet [Hangŭl]? If so, what is there for them to do but live hand-to-mouth, struggling with domestic cares just the same as if they were still in their secular families? And since this is the case, of course monks look down on the nuns with disdain. For lay followers, nuns are regarded as mere friends to chat with when they come to the temple to pray. Although I am just a woman, a nun myself, after seeing the climate for nuns here in Japan I cannot help but sigh at the pathetic state of Chosŏn nuns back home.¹⁰

While Suok's condemnation is most severe, was that the reality of education—indeed, the reality of nuns in Korea, at the time? It is hard to tell exactly what the state of affairs was for nuns in the late Chosŏn dynasty. After receiving state support for more than a millennia until the end of the Koryŏ dynasty, the fate of Buddhism waxed and waned through Chosŏn, a dynasty that held anti-Buddhist policy. While the effects of this policy were highly dependent on particular kings and a shifting social milieu, and impacted men and women, rich and poor, center to margin, with different intensity and effect, overall we can say in general that by 18th century, the Buddhist society has declined and lost its vigor. Only a handful of sources give hints. The description of a pitiable woman found in an 1803 poem by Tasan Chŏng Yagyong shows that while temples functioned as a shelter for women who left home,¹¹ conditions must have been sufficiently poor that there were no systematic training courses or programs for meditative practice. Though one can guess by the time of her travel in late 1930s, the material level of life for nuns would have been better, it still was in a rather deplorable state.

At this point, Suok asks a pointed question: "Whose fault is this?" She adamantly claims that the blame lies not with the ignorance of women, but rather the men who bear the onus of mistreating, belittling, and mistreating nuns.

Of course, some may say the fundamental cause is the ignorance of nuns. In my view, however, the blame lies mostly with the men, the *bhiksus* in the Chosŏn temples, and their crime is great. If only the monks, who bear the responsibility of guiding the nuns of Chosŏn, had worked to improve the status of nuns from the beginning, created seminaries for nuns and built meditation halls so that nuns could perfect both learning and practice! Even with Buddhism so ostracized from the secular world during the Yi dynasty [Chosŏn], nuns were able to interact and mingle freely with any household (i.e., common households)—would nuns then not have been able to edify and sway them so that they (the common people) could become a huge source of strength allowing Chosŏn Buddhism to prosper? It is my hope that the men, the monks of Chosŏn, at least begin now to abandon their attitude of oppression, neglect, and disdain, and start improving the status and dignity of nuns.¹²

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

¹¹ (Cho 2019, p. 81).

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

Her criticism toward Korean monks is harsh. That “monks bear the responsibility of guiding nuns” refers to the stipulations in the Eight Rules in the Vinaya (a corpus of monastic regulation), the rules specifically regarding nuns and that nuns accept along with other rules on their full pledged ordination to become a *bhiksuni*. These eight rules serve to subordinate the nuns to the monks in perpetuity, stipulating not only that all monks are superior to all nuns, and requiring them to prostrate accordingly and other requirements, but that nuns must be in the care of and educated by the monks. This responsibility to support and control nuns is also stipulated in the Vinaya. Therefore, whose fault is the current state of nuns? Was it not the responsibility of the monks, whose duty it is to supervise the nuns and whose privilege it is to receive their forced respect, to reciprocate that respect instead of treating them with “oppression, neglect, and disdain”?

She continues:

Even though there are around 1000 nuns in Chosŏn, is it not a humiliating disgrace that there is not a single seminary or educational institution for nuns, or even a meditation hall of any respectable size? It is my hope that that temples in Chosŏn start working to educate nuns as soon as possible. It is my hope that the talents of Chosŏn nuns be cultivated so that great Doctrinal masters and great Sŏn masters might arise from their ranks and be treated the same as the Buddha himself.¹³

It is unknown what the readers’ responses were when this article was published in *Pulgyo Sibō* in July 1939. Her next contribution, published the next month in the next issue, in August 1, 1939 contains only a record on the practices of Japanese Rinzai Zen temples and their intense, strict, but also simple way of life. In particular, the record below of the procedure when one enters a meditation hall excellently captures the Japanese mood.

With alms bowl in hand and clothed in *kasa* and robes, you enter the temple grounds and prostrate in front of the garden: with a long, thin voice you plead, “otonomi itashimasu” (I plead your indulgence). Then, an officer within the temple replies in a long voice, “tourei” (greetings). But after this, you do not enter the hall immediately—you lay there prostrate for the entire day, and they bring lunch out to you as they would a beggar ...

Once you enter the monastery, you are seated not in order of age, but rather seniority in terms of when you were admitted to the monastery; the eldest sits at the head of the table. The nuns alternate through all of the chores without leaving them for someone else to do: whether it is cooking the rice, making other dishes, or chopping wood and setting the fire. Periodically, they go into town and beg for alms ... it does not matter whether the students’ master is rich or poor ...

And the monastic life here is truly simple; in the morning and evening you eat rice porridge, lunch is never more than a bowl of barley rice together with miso soup. Since you have to eat the barley rice without a single side dish, it is as if you are eating bitter medicine—you cannot eat more than half, maybe one bowl—and it is like living with constant hunger ...¹⁴

Education was one of her greatest interests. She marveled at the pedagogical curriculum in the Japanese seminary and its systematic organization, not only in terms of meditation and doctrinal study but also in character development and the cultivation of humility, endurance, and frugality. Despite it being a seminary, Zen meditation was also part of the curriculum. The intense and strict meditation regimen and the disciplined and modest way of life earned her praise. She exclaims that the nuns there were truly the models for others, and that the lay followers treat and respect the nuns as if they were their own mothers. She ends her travelogue thus:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Chŏng Suok, *ibid.*, Part 2. (Chŏng 1939b, p. 6).

“Then, when are these seminaries and schools and meditation halls for nuns ever going to appear in our Chosŏn? Whenever I think about this, I shed silent tears; I get upset without even realizing it whenever I see the marvelous facilities here in Japan.”¹⁵

6. Becoming the First Modern Dharma Instructor at a Seminary for Nuns

Suok returned to Korea that year, in 1939, after three years of stay in Japan, which included her study at Nishugakurim. One can imagine what thoughts were going through her mind on her journey home. As luck would have it, a position for dharma instructor had opened up at Kwanŭm Seminary at Namjang-sa Monastery, located in the city of Sangju, North Kyŏngsang Province. Thus, her career as an educator began. Her experiences and keen observations in Japan paid off immensely in her work in Korea after returning. For an account of the status quo that Suok was trying to overturn, we turn to an interview conducted around 2007 with Kwangwu (1925–), Suok’s first disciple.¹⁶ Here, Kwangwu offers the first account of the first time she met her teacher Suok.

At that time [in 1940], the first *bhiksuni* seminary was established at Namjang-sa Monastery. Although Namjang-sa was originally a place for *bhiksus* to practice, Master Hye bong opened a seminary for nuns there when he was abbot. It was solely through the support of Master Hye bong that the seminary became a reality. When I was at a meditation hall at Pudo-am Hermitage in Tonghwa-sa Temple, Suok was also there after coming back from her studies in Japan. Whenever she had free time, she taught me the *Lotus Sutra*, and I proudly wrote this in a letter to the Master (her father, Hye bong). When I went to Namjang-sa to see him after my retreat ended, he handed me a letter, saying I should deliver it to Suok *sunim* (*sunim* is an honorific title in Korean, for monks and nun). Well, as it turned out, the letter said he was willing to give away the Kwanŭm Meditation Hall if she accepted the invitation to establish a seminary and serve as a dharma instructor. Suok *sunim*’s face brightened up immediately when she read the letter! Of course, she packed up her things right there and went to be a dharma instructor at Namjang-sa.¹⁷

Suok thus became the dharma instructor of the Buddhist vocational seminary at Namjang-sa, where she trained disciples for three years. The seminary did not just rely on word of mouth to recruit nuns, it posted advertisements in newspapers, bringing in students from all over the country. Having a *bhiksuni* in charge as the dharma instructor certainly must have brought attention. Although there were more applicants, due to the limitations of space, only 20 *bhiksuni* students were accepted to study at the Kwanŭm Seminary. The curriculum was the same as the traditional male seminaries of Korea.

Kwangwu noted that it was not only the first time a meditation hall had become a seminary, but also the first time in Korean Buddhist history that a seminary for nuns was officially established. She reminisced, “Suok *sunim* was so considerate when she taught her students, but she could be very strict when she needed to be. It was my great fortune that I was able to spend my youth studying under someone like her.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Following her father Hye bong’s (1874–1956) entrance into the sangha, she followed suit and joined the sangha at Chikjisa in 1939, together with her mother; she was 15 years old. Kwangu later became a leader of the Korean Buddhist nuns’ society. She served two terms as the president of the National *Bhiksuni* Association in 1995 and 2004. Her memory on her teacher is recorded in (Ch’oe 2008, p. 48). Kwangu characterizes the nuns society at the time thus: “When I first joined the sangha [in 1939], there were no separate seminaries for nuns the way it is now. Nuns had to study while moving between tiny hermitages to large monasteries. Putting it in modern terms, they just had to pick it up from other people instead of enrolling at an official school. Naturally, there were very few nuns who would really study the *sutras*. This became a vicious cycle so that there were few nuns who were well-versed in the *sutras* and nuns always had to rely on monks at large monasteries to teach them. That is also how I started.” (Ch’oe 2008, pp. 48–49).

¹⁷ (Ch’oe 2008, p. 49).

¹⁸ (Ch’oe 2008, p. 49).

While there is currently little evidence to attest to the attitude of contemporary monks to nuns' being educated, one thing for sure was there were, even though rarely, male instructors who regarded *bhiksunis* as being worthy of education. Unhō (1892–1980), for example, though a later figure in this history, who was a leading scholar and known for his modernist thinking, was keen on educating nuns. He had recognized the problem that the tradition of providing academic Buddhist education to nuns had long been forgotten and made a pioneering vow to help educate nuns. However, teaching nuns the Buddhist scriptures, written the Chinese language containing highly polemical and advanced learning, was an unusual matter and a sensitive issue among the *bhiksus*. He himself therefore had to receive approval from various influential monks at the time including Ch'ōngdam, Sōngch'ōl, and Hyanggok, to provide formal education on the scriptures to nuns.

Unfortunately, the Namjang-sa Seminary did not last long. After the first graduating class in 1943 of five nuns, including Kwangwu,¹⁹ the seminary closed down in 1944. Founded as it was during the final days of the Japanese Empire, the last stage of the Pacific War created a particularly horrible threat to single young women in Korea who were targets for brokers seeking so-called “comfort women” for the Japanese Imperial Army. With the realities of the secular world crashing down in this particularly tragic fashion, the flow of new students stopped. Suok returned to Kyōnsōng-am Hermitage in 1943 and devoted herself to her own practice.

7. Participation in the Purification Movement

In 1945, Korea was finally liberated from Japanese rule. In March 1947, when she was 46, Suok began teaching students at Pomun-sa in Seoul until the start of the Korean War. In 1951, she became abbess of Podōk-sa in Tōksan, South Ch'ungchōng Province. But, through the social upheavals of liberation from Japan and the Korean War, there were great shifts in the status of women and nuns. After the war, orphaned girls were adopted by *bhiksuni* temples and the number of nuns quickly grew in this period. The nuns also had to rebuild the temples that had been razed to the ground by the bombings during the war. Interestingly and ironically, these hardships and ordeals in the early 1950s opened up new opportunities for these nuns.

Another monumental shift in the fabric of Korean Buddhism was the so-called “purification movement” that pitted celibate *bhiksus* and *bhiksunis* against married monks and nuns. The 1954 rally saw 30 nuns and 116 monks gathered at Seoul's Sōnhak-won and though the individuals names are not recorded, her name appears in other various records. A few days later, ten *bhiksuni* representatives, including Suok, were named as members of the Assembly of the Chogye Order on November 3, 1954,²⁰ marking the first time ever that *bhiksunis* held any high positions in the Chogye Order. In December, a series of violent demonstrations continued after a bloody physical confrontation between the married monks and the Chogye Order *bhiksus*, whose ranks included even 17 and 18-year-old nuns. A newspaper records thus:

“A crowd of bald headed grey robed monks and nuns marched in downtown Seoul on this snowy day. They were *bhiksus* and *bhiksunis* with a firm belief that Korean Buddhist society can only be purified when married monks with wives are removed from temple grounds. It was the third day of their national meeting which started two days ago. At 2 o'clock on December 13th, about 500 monks and nuns, gathered from all over the country and displaying their spirit and will for the Purification, departed from T'aego-sa Temple and marched to the Blue House to meet with the President. A few hundred nuns also participated in this march, with senior nuns like Kang Chaho and Chōng Suok leading the head.”²¹

¹⁹ *Pulgyo Sibō*, a column from July, 1943.

²⁰ Accounts by Tōksu and Chōnghwa, from (*Sōnwudoryang Han'guk Pulgyo Kūnhyōndaesa yōn'guhoe* 2002, pp. 180–88).

²¹ *Kyōnghyang Daily*, December 15, 1954, quoted in (*Hwang* 2008, p. 283).

The role of the nuns in the purification movement was formidable indeed. However, several years later, when the purification movement achieved victory and the redistribution of seized monasteries began, nuns were denied even the request that at least one of the 25 Head Temples (*ponsa*) of Korean Buddhism run by monks be designated as a headquarters for nuns. Instead, in recognition of the nuns' efforts, the Jogye Order transferred a few lesser monasteries to nuns, such as Naewön-sa, Taewön-sa, and Unmun-sa. Given that the number of nuns had at that point already equaled the number of monks, spaces for nuns to match their numbers were desperately needed.²²

Ultimately, the reason nuns were not able to receive their just reward, even though they outnumbered the monks and had fought on the streets like soldiers on the battlefield, was due to the fundamental weakness of *bhiksuni* leadership and the lack of an effective leader. The great nuns of the time had dedicated their whole lives to practicing asceticism, proud that they had never once set foot out of their mountain retreats. Although Suok was a negotiator who could talk face to face in a conference with other monks, this was not a war that could be won by one person.²³ From here on the realization set in among Korean nuns that they need to politicize themselves and build their influence.

In March 1955, Suok was appointed as the abbess of Naewön-sa, nestled in Chönsöng-san Mountain in South Kyöngsang Province. Like other deep mountain temples, this one had been burnt to the ground during the Korean War. Three elder nuns were now handed the task of rebuilding the temples, many of which only had their foundations remaining. These three were close dharma friends and resolved to set about building a space for themselves where nuns could practice in peace. Suok was 54 at the time.

From this point forward, she worked to expand the horizons of both herself as an individual and as a member of the *bhiksuni* tradition. Preserving and expanding her own lineage, she worked to reinforce the institutions and organizations of nuns within the realities of a modernizing society. In her disciple's words, she "spent every last drop of devotion and effort into rebuilding and organizing this space."²⁴ Through all manner of personal sacrifice and hardship, they were able to claim a space for themselves to live and practice. By actively carving out this space, nuns developed a communal awareness that reinforced their identities as practitioners.

On a personal level, the foundation of these spaces confirmed and built pride in their identities as nuns and provided the opportunities for nuns to find their own voice and become recognized by society at large. For example, for her work in rebuilding her temple, Suok received an award of merit from the governor of her province in 1959 and a similar award from the president of the Chogye Order. These commendations have brought great self-esteem not only to Suok, but to all nuns in Korea.

8. Honoring the *Bhiksuni* Scholarship Lineage

This reconstruction effort also served as an opportunity for Suok to develop and perfect her leadership skills. The influence of her leadership did not stop at organizing and building the physical environment of Naewön-sa,²⁵ but also influenced Korean nuns as they gradually assumed independent control of their respective temples. The nuns also started codifying a comprehensive standard of education and seminary education, an effort that is now considered by many to be the greatest driving force raising the status and identity of nuns to prominence in contemporary Korean Buddhism.

Suok's life also became something more than her personal achievements, as it lives on vibrantly through a clearly defined pedigree and dharma-lineage. Such is attested to in a case involving the

²² On the Purification Movement of Korean Buddhist society, please see (Park 2009, pp. 8–9, 125–26).

²³ Account by Töksu, *Ibid.*

²⁴ (Ha 2001, p. 215).

²⁵ The Naewön-sa meditation hall soon grew in renown even after her passing 1966 and became one of the centers of Sön meditation practice. This was also the place where Martine Batchelor, a French woman who has written extensively about Korean Buddhist nuns, stayed and written much about. Please see (Batchelor 2006, p. 101).

great scholar Myöngsöng (1930–).²⁶ Though she had already received dharma transmission from her own master, Myöngsöng performed a formal dharma transmission ceremony, pledging herself as a disciple to the late Suok in front of her ancestral tablet in 1983. This posthumous dedication ceremony was rare and showed the strong desire of Myöngsöng to declare herself within the lineage of Suok and to continue the dharma tradition from woman to woman.

Myöngsöng composed this dedication prose during the ceremony:

Before the spirit of my master—

I reflect on how I am living my own life right now while savoring these words you left. I had endless respect for you while you were alive, but I was not even able to express it properly. Now it is the 18th anniversary of your passing and my feelings of emptiness and regret are measureless as I pledge myself your disciple in front of your spirit. I am deeply ashamed and sorry that I, more insignificant than a firefly, dare to carry on the dharma of one such as you, as lofty as Mt. Chönsöngsan. Nevertheless, you had given me your clear permission. I intend to understand and carry out your will and devote my body and soul to the distribution of the Buddha's sea of teachings. As a small gesture of my heart I have republished a collection of your valuable words and will share it with others who miss you, praying with both palms together so that you will sooner be reborn as an eternal light for all sentient beings.

July 27, 1983, dedicated by Myöngsöng²⁷

That women recognize other women as a source of authority and seek to inherit the dharma lineage through them is a hallmark of a modern consciousness and showcases for their feminist awareness.

9. Closing Words

Suok's life can be defined by the following three points: (1) she solidified her own national awareness even while overwhelmed by the advanced Japanese civilization; (2) she became more confident of her ecumenical views based on the traditional Korean Buddhist training system comprising doctrinal learning and meditation practice; and, most importantly, (3) she developed a strong feminist identity, providing a strong motivating force for the leadership role she would take in Korean nuns' society until her death in 1966.

She worked to earn proper respect from the public and equal treatment from monks. The detailed account of monastic life in Japan that came through her travelogue provided the sharp contrast with the social conditions of Korean nuns that spurred her work. In the end, what is clearly revealed is her firm resolution to better the state of Korean nuns' society rooted in a strong self-awareness as a Korean *bhiksuni*. Upon her return to Korea, it was a top priority for Suok to establish a firm community for the nuns of Korea—so that nuns could live and practice like 'real' nuns. On the other hand, her harsh critique of the lack of support from the *bhiksus* reflected the Buddhist milieu at that time, where monks often despised nuns and ignored their educational needs. Therefore, it was time for *bhiksunis* themselves to revive their traditions of education and practice, learning and training, and it was only through the establishment of institutions dedicated solely for this purpose—seminaries and meditation halls—that this could be accomplished.

Her critique of *bhiksus*—who she claimed bore the responsibility for the inferior status and respect accorded to nuns—is part of an intractable problem that has yet to be fully resolved even now, 50 years after her passing. But the continued effort she made throughout her entire life toward religious self-realization, in spite of all manners of hardship and adversity, has been taken up by other nuns.

²⁶ Myöngsöng is now regarded as among the most influential Korean *bhiksuni* and has served as abbess and dean of Unmun-sa *bhiksuni* seminary, the largest educational institution for Buddhist nuns in Korea, from 1977 to 2011. In the traditional Korean separation of Buddhist practice into scholarship and meditation, she represents the former tradition.

²⁷ (Kim 2012a, pp. 47–48).

Through her long struggle, she not only managed to cross the boundaries of two nations, but the boundaries between monks and nuns, both past and present, as well.

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