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Female Practitioners' Religious Lives: The First Generation of Female Wŏn Buddhist Clerics

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Abstract: For Korean women, the Japanese colonial period was a transitional period in which Confucian patriarchal culture still prevailed, but some options for a social identity outside the home as “new women” were beginning to emerge. In this era, Soŭ’aesan, the founder of Wŏn Buddhism, put forward the teaching of “equal rights for men and women” as one of the core doctrines of Wŏn Buddhism and opened the way for many women to find their true selves through Buddhist teachings and practices. This path was that of becoming a *kyomu* (Wŏn Buddhist ordained clerics). By analyzing the biographies of the first 146 female *kyomus*, this paper sheds light on how these devotees were transformed from women with no identities outside the home into Buddhist masters or mothers of the world.

Keywords: female Wŏn Buddhist Clerics (*kyomu*); Soŭ’aesan; Wŏn Buddhism; equal rights for men and women

1. Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to re-evaluate women’s lived experiences under Wŏn Buddhism during Korea’s colonial period (1910–1945) and after its liberation by examining the biographies of 146 female *kyomus* 教務 (Wŏn Buddhist clerics), also known as *chŏnmu ch’ulsinja* 專務出身者 (one who devotes oneself fully to the order). Pak Chungbin 朴重彬 (1891–1943), better known by his sobriquet Soŭ’aesan 少太山, founded the Pulpŏp Yŏn’guhoe (The Society for the Study of the Buddhadharma 佛法研究會, hereafter PYH) with his disciples as a Buddhist reform movement in 1924. This society was later renamed Wŏnbulgyo (Wŏn Buddhism 圓佛教). The notion of *kyomu*, which refers to both male and female ordained devotees, emerged in the Wŏn Buddhist community in the 1920s. The *kyomu* position comprised a particularly novel religious model for women, enabling them to free themselves from the cultural norm of marriage and to become instead Buddhist masters who instructed the general public.

The PYH has kept a detailed record of their personal history and spiritual transformation from the beginning of their religious activity and practice so that we can learn about the lives of these women and their spiritual growth. In particular, this paper will examine the biographies of the 146 female members who served as ordained *kyomus* during the first thirty-six years of Wŏn Buddhism (1916–1952) contained in *Wŏnbulgyo che 1 tae ch’angnip yugong’in yŏksa* (The History of Persons Significant to the Founding of Wŏn Buddhism during the Order’s First Period of Thirty-Six Years: The History of Ordained Members (vol. 1)).¹ By illuminating the lives of this first generation of female clerics, this paper will examine how ordinary women overcame the challenges inherent to practicing Buddhism within Korea’s entrenched patriarchal culture. When they eventually gained the unprecedented opportunity to become such masters, these *kyomus* laid the groundwork for the contemporary paradigm of the Wŏn Buddhist female minister.



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2. Historical Background of Korean Women's Social Status in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The Confucian patriarchal social system, which was gradually established during the five hundred years of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1391–1897), limited women's social position and abilities in numerous ways. During the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392), particularly in the early Chosŏn Dynasty, women held a relatively high status in society. Throughout both the Koryŏ and early and medieval Chosŏn Dynasties, it was customary to grant women an equal division of inheritance according to the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* (經國大典), a law code of the Chosŏn Dynasty, and this law was practiced until the seventeenth century (Yun 2013, pp. 278–81). However, after the Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592, and with the reinforcement of the Confucian *chongpŏp* (clan law) system aimed at ensuring the continuity of the patriarchal family line, society shifted towards conservatism, leading to significant changes in women's social status (Yi 2011, p. 30). Not only were women not welcomed at birth, but they were subjected to male authority throughout their lives. The so-called “way of *samjong* (三從)” for women stated in several Confucian scriptures, such as *Liji* 禮記 (*The Classics of Rites*), teaches that one must follow the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the children after the husband dies (*Liji*, Jiao Te Sheng: 35). The late Chosŏn period was characterized by strict gender roles and limited opportunities for women, and there were no official educational institutions for girls (Bishop 1898, p. 342). Even though a few women from the upper class in Korea (*yangban*) were educated in reading Korean, Classical Chinese, and Confucianism, the idea of allowing a girl to be educated was not widely accepted. Women were generally uneducated, and women's social activities were extremely limited. They were taught that they were lascivious, reckless, emotional, jealous, quarreling, and of little spiritual depth, so they should be pious and submissive to men. This was a widespread Korean view of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Western ideas entered Korea, the social position of Korean women began to change. The newspapers of the time, such as *Tongnip sinmun* (Independence News, 1896), *Cheguk sinmun* (Empire News, 1898), *Hwangsong sinmun* (Capital Gazette, 1898), and *Taehean maeil sinbo* (Korean Daily News, 1904), publicized that women could be regarded as members of the society who could participate in public, social activities just as men through writing about the New Woman (*sinyŏsŏng*). These modern newspapers played an important role in creating a new type of political subject by treating women as an integral part of the modern nation-state. New Women, which appeared in newspapers and magazines of the era, was considered identical to ‘educated women’ or ‘girl students’ as a term referring to Korean elite women who studied in Japan (Sin 2003, p. 136; Kim and Kim 2015, p. 205; Yum 2018, p. 108). Recent cultural studies of New Women from the colonial period in Korea, however, have defined this class not as individuals with static identities but as “discursive subjects” that have been used to mean many things in modern discourse (Kim and Kim 2015, p. 205). On the one hand, these studies portray the New Women as advocates of women's liberation and companions who collaborated with men to modernize their country and as modern mothers. On the other hand, New Women have also been perceived as detrimental to society, being considered modern-day decadents who were only focused on vanity and sexual indulgence (Suh 2013, p. 20; Kim 2005, pp. 273–308). Particularly, the emergence of New Women produced “a dualistic categorization of women: a newly emerging figure of the New Woman and its backward, negative counterpart, the Old-Fashioned Woman” (Suh 2013, p. 13; Yi and Yi 2016, pp. 203–6). Furthermore, the ideal woman of this era was still defined by the Confucian notion of the “good wife and wise mother” (良妻賢母 *yangch'ŏ hyŏnmo*) (Yi and Yi 2016, p. 208), and so New Women were often criticized for being so-called Mottŏen girls (bad girls) (Yi and Yi 2016, p. 212; Kim 2005, p. 282). As Michel Foucault points out, the gradual inclusion of women who were once confined to their homes in the public domain enabled them to transcend the patriarchal norms that restricted them; however, the newfound visibility of New Women in public places also made

them the objects of male scrutiny and social surveillance (Yi 2004, pp. 295–313). As many scholars have pointed out, the mass media paid attention to women’s every move as they explored society openly for the first time and produced patriarchal discourse on women through gossip, rumors, and hearsay (Kim and Kim 2015, p. 205). Despite the fact that some women began to experience a wave of great change during the late Chosŏn Dynasty and the Japanese colonial era (1910–1945), it would not be an exaggeration to say that there were still few things most women could do in Korean society at that time. We must not forget that only a small number of people of that time enjoyed the privileges of being a New Woman. It becomes clear that the emergence of this supposedly more liberated kind of woman did not achieve complete gender equality. Most women still had to live within the limitations of widespread discrimination.

Ch’oe Cheu 崔濟愚 (1824–1864), also known as Suun, and Kang Ilsun 姜一淳 (1871–1909), also known as Chŭngsan 甌山, through their respective teachings of Tonghak (Eastern Learning) and Chŭngsando (The Way of Chŭngsan), championed gender equality and challenged the patriarchal norms of Korean society (Yang 2012, pp. 157–91; Kim 2021, pp. 99–136). It was these indigenous thinkers who awakened the consciousnesses of women, opening up a world of new possibilities to them. Suun’s groundbreaking Tonghak teaching that all people are endowed with God-nature within their hearts (*sich’ŏnju* 侍天主) began to dismantle the class beliefs of Chosŏn society, a value system that had become stronger than cement over the course of five hundred years. Suun’s thought contains humanistic elements as well as an emphasis on social equality. His ideas were reflected in the Kabo Reforms (1894), which banned slavery, underage marriage, and discrimination based on the class system and granted widows the right to remarry. Although the Tonghak Revolution (1894–1895) ended in failure, Suun’s notion of human equality powerfully contributed to transforming Chosŏn’s traditional feudal system into a modern state, greatly awakening Korean women’s consciousness as well. After Tonghak was renamed as a new religion under the name of “Chŏndogyo” (a religion of the Heavenly Way) by Son Pyŏng-hi (1861–1922) in 1905, various efforts were made to promote women’s rights to establish a new image of women, including the launch of women’s magazines such as *Puin* (Wife) in June 1922 and *Sinyŏsŏng* (New Women) in 1923. Chŭngsan was even more revolutionary for women. He foretold a new world for women, raising the banner of gender equality and declaring that the era of women and the era for resolving women’s resentment had arrived (Yi 2019, 3:120; 6:134).

3. Soŭ’aesan’s Teachings Regarding Equal Rights for Men and Women

Against the socio-cultural background at that time, Soŭ’aesan addressed the issue of gender discrimination against women in a serious manner, beginning with the first drafting of his teachings at the Pongnae hermitage in 1920. In the *Sayŏp pogosŏ*, published in the fourteenth year of the Wŏn Buddhist Era (1929), Soŭ’aesan highlighted gender equality as one of the main teachings of the PYH:

In the past, the world was exclusively male-oriented. The newly awakened New Women eagerly exclaim that the old social systems were only for men. Indeed, that is right. Who else, besides women, is without basic rights and freedoms in this way? Women did not have the property rights they deserved as human beings. Women were not given the rights of social intercourse that even animals deserve. Women were not able to enact filial piety, no matter how much they respected their parents. They were discriminated against even by the children close to their hearts. Where else could there be such people without rights and freedoms? Accordingly, women also did not have the obligations they should have as human beings. As a rule, obligations are given when rights are given. Likewise, rights are given when obligations are given. Therefore, there can be no rights without obligations, and there can be no obligations without rights. Therefore, it is natural that women who do not have rights will become irresponsible. When all women—a gender that makes up half of the population—become

irresponsible and rely solely on men for everything, how great will be the loss to family, country, and society? This is equivalent to having work that should be done by the power of two be done only with the power of one person. The stone that could be lifted by ten people is lifted only with the power of five. How merciless it is. Therefore, we will thoroughly give the same rights to husband and wife, recognize the rights of all women, and also share all duties equally so that no one has to rely on others for basic requests. In this regard, a man will not be unable to do his work because of a woman, and a woman will not be unable to do her work because of a man. In this way, we are trying to make equal rights between husband and wife our main tenet and to realize it gradually. (*Wŏnbulgyo kyogo ch'onggan 5: Kich'o saryo p'yŏn*, "Sich'ang 14 nyŏn Sayŏp pogosŏ," pp. 85–86; Yun 2021, p. 256)

Preaching the necessity of gender equality, Soŭ'aesan listed equal rights for men and women as one of the "Four Essentials" of social reformation.² According to Soŭ'aesan, women of his era were deprived of their inherent human rights (such as property rights, social rights, and inheritance rights), freedom, and duties. Soŭ'aesan argued that this patriarchal system was an irrational social custom that created unfavorable conditions for both men and women. For these reasons, Soŭ'aesan established gender equality as a key tenet in his project of making society and the world more equitable.

The Principle of Equal Rights for Men and Women

Both men and women should fulfill together the personal duties and responsibilities incumbent on human beings. With this notion, our aim is to prevent mutual resentment from growing between the genders due to men thinking they cannot accomplish their ideals and aspirations due to women and women thinking they cannot accomplish their ideals and aspirations due to men. (*Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng*, p. 76; Yun 2021, p. 219)

This teaching particularly reflects the social environment during the late Chosŏn dynasty and early colonial period, which was characterized by limited opportunities for women in Korea due to the strong impact of Confucian beliefs that lasted for centuries. Soŭ'aesan specifically stated that in the past, female dependency had manifested in these ways:

- (1) Women were not able to fulfill their duties as their parents' children;
- (2) They even received discriminatory treatment from their children;
- (3) They were not able to receive the education necessary for all human beings;
- (4) They were not able to enjoy the basic rights of social intercourse, though all human beings deserve such rights;
- (5) They did not have the right to inherit property;
- (6) They inevitably faced constraints in whatever they did or did not do with their own bodies and minds. (*Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng*, pp. 75–76, Yun 2021, pp. 219–20; cf. *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, pp. 39–41; cf. *The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism*, pp. 39–40; c.f. Chung 2003, pp. 131–32)

Soŭ'aesan noted that a widespread feeling of animosity existed between genders for these several reasons. Women resented men for depriving them of their rights, as mentioned earlier, and men were resentful towards women because they were solely responsible for providing for their families. Since women were denied the rights and duties that all human beings should have, they would inevitably come to harbor resentment towards society or men and could not pursue happiness. Conversely, Soŭ'aesan continued, the heavy responsibilities and burdens born only by men make them unhappy, too, leaving them dissatisfied with women and with society. Soŭ'aesan also pointed out that a Confucian patriarchal society arranged in this way creates an enormous social loss because this system excludes half of the members of society from contributing to collective projects. Soŭ'aesan aimed to alleviate the deeply ingrained resentment in Chosŏn society by advocating for "equal rights for men and women."

Sot'aesan proposed two separate agendas, one for each gender, as a solution to the deeply entrenched resentment between them. In the “Agenda for the Encouragement of Men for the Realization of the Equality of Men and Women,” Sot'aesan suggested two recommendations: Firstly, after marriage, both partners should maintain financial independence. Secondly, if women are better equipped to lead the way toward gender equality, then men should be guided by them. Sot'aesan also listed a separate agenda for women, outlining the role they should play in promoting gender equality:

- (1) Women, just the same as men, should receive an education that will allow them to take an active part in human society;
- (2) Women should all work diligently at their occupations to gain financial freedom in their lives;
- (3) They should also discharge their filial duties both during their parents' lifetimes and after their deaths, as did the eldest son in the past;
- (4) They should not request special love and reliability from men based on their gender;
- (5) If they lack the ability to pursue all of the suggestions listed here, and men are doing a better job at it, then they should accept guidance from men. (*Pogyōng yuktae yoryōng*, p. 76; my translation)

To summarize, the central idea of these teachings is that men and women should equally bear the responsibilities and duties of being members of society rather than being constrained by social norms.

Sot'aesan's teaching of gender equality can be understood in the historical contexts of both the emergence of the New Woman and Chŭngsan's doctrine of gender equality. Chŭngsan insisted on resolving resentments on a large scale, such as the resentments between countries; between men and women; between classes, in particular, the yangban and common people; and between heaven and earth. Chŭngsan's solution to the problem of such inequalities was to perform a heavenly *kut* (*ch'ōnji kut*), a unique religious ritual to resolve mass resentments between these social groups. As the above-quoted text demonstrates, Sot'aesan was, similar to Chŭngsan, aware of the necessity of curing the resentments that had become deeply ingrained in Chosŏn society. Sot'aesan also notes that unreasonable Chosŏn systems of discrimination include “discrimination between gentry and commoners; between legitimate and illegitimate children; between old and young; between males and females.” By raising this awareness, Sot'aesan attempted to create a new way for women to more actively reveal their highest value as human beings within an otherwise patriarchal society.

One of the practical steps that Sot'aesan took in this direction was to carve a path by which women could work as spiritual teachers without being bound by the social norm of marriage. The notion of *kyomu* thus emerged in the PYH community in the 1920s, offering a new religious model available equally to men and women, both of whom could be exempted from marriage as they sought to become Buddhist masters who instruct the general public. In addition, the opportunity to become a *kyomu* was extended to any of his followers, without obstacle and regardless of marital status, so long as they took a vow to work towards the salvation of the universe's countless sentient beings and towards the attainment of Buddhahood. Establishing this system—in which women could realize their potential for enlightenment and unfold their utmost abilities as spiritual masters by devoting their capabilities to the public beyond their households—is one of Wŏn Buddhism's most historically significant innovations.

4. Examination of the Biographies of 146 Female *kyomu*

4.1. From Unnamed to Named

During this time of transition, 146 women were ordained and served as active Dharma teachers in the PYH, despite the majority of Korean women still living within the traditional, male-dominated society. These female ordained members had a chance to form a new identity as Buddhist women outside the domestic realm, providing them more opportunities.

First, the given names that the female members took provide us an insight into the status of women at the time. Twelve of the 146 women did not have given names but were instead known by only their last names, such as Kim *ssi* or Ch'oe *ssi*. There are four women who were referred to only by the generic name Söngnyö 姓女, meaning “gender female.” Another example includes Malnyö 末女, and Malrye 末禮, meaning “the last female child” and “the last courtesy,” respectively, implying that the woman’s parents wanted thenceforth to have only sons. The remaining names emphasize the duties of virtuous women who submit to the men in their lives, including their fathers, husbands, or sons: e.g., Sunnam 順男, Pongnam 福男, Chöngsuk 貞淑, Sunim 順任, Oksun 玉順, Sundük 順得, P’alsun 八順, Yimhyo 任孝, Poksun 福順, Chaesun 在順, Sunnye 順禮, Kwisun 貴順, Sorye 小禮, Kwirye 貴禮, Namsun 南順, Kumsun 今順, Okrye 玉禮, Sonpok, Ilsun 一順, Yusun 柔順, Yang’im 良任, Myöngae 明愛, Chongsuk 宗淑, Kyöngsun 敬順, Chahüng 子興, etc. Most of these names contain the Sinograph *sun* 順, which means “being obedient to.” These names suggest that women were expected to bear sons after marriage and be subservient to men. Looking at these given names provides us with an understanding of what it was like to be a female born during this period. In short, a female child was seen as less desirable than a male child by their families. However, it is clear that upper-class families gave their daughters a distinct name, similar to how they would a son.

Sot’aesan conferred special Buddhist Dharma names to his female disciples; I will now explore some of them. One example of this is Cho Oksun 曹玉順 (1909–1976); her Dharma name, provided by Sot’aesan, was Chön’gwön 專權. Upon hearing her wish stating, “Even though I am a woman, and am therefore destined to sacrifice myself for family, I wish to become a great person who can do something great for the world,” Sot’aesan conferred a name, Chön’gwön, which means “seizing all of the powers/rights.” Sot’aesan further explained,

“Please reveal your utmost value and assume all of the power in the world by becoming a mother to all sentient beings. In order to become a mother to all sentient beings, you need to be enlightened to the truth of all things in the universe. Only after being enlightened will you be able to understand the relationship between you and me and produce infinite compassion. After that, you can serve the whole world through the highest order of compassion, which comes from having ‘no self.’” (Pak 2003b, p. 86; Pak 2022, pp. 287–88; Yun 2021, pp. 267–68)

Another example is Sö Kümrye 徐金禮 (1914–2004), who was given the Dharma name Taein 大仁 by Sot’aesan. Sot’aesan also commented on her name:

“Your Dharma name is so great. I don’t know whether you will be able to live up to your name. Tae 大 means a ‘great justice’ 大義. In 仁 means ‘benevolence.’ Both ‘justice’ and ‘benevolence’ are fundamental foundations for a great person of the Way. You decided to dedicate yourself to this work despite your father’s stubborn objection. You should live up to your name, benefiting all human beings as well as all sentient beings, whatever you do. Only then will your decision to become an ordained celibate *kyomu* be fruitful.” (Wönbulgyo Sinbosa 1988, pp. 325–26; Wönbulgyo Che 1986, pp. 123–24; Yun 2021, pp. 268–69)

When Taein came to the PYH at the age of sixteen, she was illiterate because her father, a sincere holder of Confucian patriarchal values, did not educate his seven female children. She became the third celibate *kyomu* in the PYH, dedicating her whole life to the benefit of all sentient beings. Eventually, after her passing, she became the first female *kyomu* to reach the highest Dharma rank, comparable to Sot’aesan’s, which is reserved for the most enlightened *tathāgatas*.³ Compared to the names that the majority of female clerics originally received from their families, these two examples demonstrate how much great potential Sot’aesan believed that his female disciples had.

In a patriarchal society, the most significant values of Confucianism, such as “seizing all powers/rights” and “great justice and benevolence,” could only be attained and nurtured by men. Nonetheless, Sot’aesan boldly gave names that embodied these ideals to his

initial female disciples. These new Dharma names also show the importance of Buddhist enlightenment to Wŏn Buddhism because only through the realization of selflessness can one generate boundless compassion for all sentient beings. Soŭ'aesan opened up the possibility of enlightenment to female disciples at a time when various forms of discrimination against women were still prevalent in society. The Dharma name given to Chŏn'gwŏn holds a significant symbolic meaning since she was the first unmarried female *kyomu* to devote herself to serving all living beings. Soŭ'aesan allowed his female disciples to choose whether or not to marry, and Chŏn's decision to become an ordained *kyomu* while remaining unmarried was a bold move in her society at that time. Upon receiving her Dharma name, she was granted "all of the powers," which included the ability to serve as a mother to all living beings and as a spiritual leader for the betterment of the world.

4.2. Motives for Joining the Clergy

Of the 146 female ordained devotees, the most frequently cited motive for joining the clergy was to obtain an education that would enable them to live a more meaningful life, both for themselves and for the betterment of the world.⁴ A brief glance at the motives of these female ordained devotees provides insight into the enthusiasm with which young girls pursued their education during this time period and the genuine desire they had to make a positive impact on the world, despite being told that their gender made it impossible. For instance, as previously noted, Sŏ Taein did not receive any education until she turned sixteen, which left her with a profound sense of sorrow. Thanks to the assistance of her cousin, who had joined the PYH before her, she was able to travel to Iksan and join the PYH (*Wŏnbulgyo Che* 1986, p. 124). Despite her father's persistent attempts to arrange a marriage for her, Sŏ Taein's vow to walk the path of the ministry remained resolute. After completing four retreats, she eventually became the third celibate *kyomu* at the PYH. Similar to Sŏ Taein, many of Soŭ'aesan's female disciples, such as Yang Tosin 梁道信 (given name: Sosuk 小淑, 1918–2005), Yi T'aeyŏn 李泰然 (given name: Pogim 福任 1914–1963), Chŏng Yunjae 鄭潤才 (given name: Pongnye 福禮 1922–2007), Ko Hyŏnjong 高賢種 (given name: Chŏngnye 正禮 1925–present), Song Chamyŏng 宋慈明 (given name: Tonim 敦任, 1926–2015), Kim Chihyŏn 金智玄 (given name: Chisun 智順, 1926–2003), Sŏ Sein 徐世仁 (given name: Ŭllyŏn 乙年, 1925–2023), Yi Sunsŏk 李順錫 (given name: Ŭnju 銀珠, 1922–2015), and Yu Changsun 柳壯順 (given name: Sunja 順子, 1923–2016) experienced significant anguish over their inability to contribute to society because the patriarchal Confucian social norms or the economic hardships faced by their families prevented them from getting proper education as women. Soŭ'aesan's teachings on the possibility of enlightenment for women and his spiritual, educational program attracted them to the PYH above all else.

There are also numerous instances where young girls were inspired by the students of the Yŏngsan Center, the branch educational center of the PYH in Yŏnggwang, and decided to become ordained ministers. Such students include Yi Yongjin 李用眞 (given name: Ongnye 玉禮, 1925–2020), Chang Kyŏngan 張景晏 (given name: Sunae 順愛, 1925–2016), Chŏn Yich'ang 全二昌 (given name: Chaerye 在禮, 1925–present), Yi Chŏngman 李正滿 (given name: Ogim 玉任, 1914–1987), Chŏng Kyojin 鄭教眞 (given name: Sunyŏng 順英, 1909–1950), Chŏng Pokch'ŏn 鄭福天 (given name: Poksun 福順, 1929–2002), and Chŏng Kyŏnggho 丁慶浩 (given name: Kirho 吉浩 1925–2006).

There were many cases where mothers or grandmothers became members of the PYH and then encouraged their daughters or granddaughters to become *chŏnmu ch'ulsin*. Song Yŏngbong 宋靈鳳 (1927–present) (*Wŏnbulgyo Che* 1986, p. 438), Song Sunbong 宋順鳳 (1933–2013), Pak Yujŏng 朴維正 (given name: Myŏng'ae 明愛 1928–1964) (Ibid., p. 556), Kim Taesim 金大心 (given name: Taedŏk 大德 (1927–2011) (Ibid., p. 484), Chŏng Yangjin 丁良珍 (given name: Pongsŏn 鳳善, 1924–?) (Ibid., p. 374), and Kim Pŏpchin 金法眞 (given name: Yŏnsu 季洙, 1934–present) (Ibid., p. 585) became members of the PYH and vowed to become *kyomus* under the guidance of their respective mothers. In these instances, grandmothers and mothers actively encouraged their daughters and granddaughters to pursue

the path of becoming spiritual teachers for the betterment of the world. Their motivation stems from their desire to spare their female children from the pain and limitations they themselves experienced due to gender-based obstacles in society. When these female clerics returned to their hometown temples and engaged in teaching activities as *kyomu*, these women became sources of inspiration for the younger generation, paving the way for them to follow in their footsteps and become *kyomus* themselves. Not only did female students look up to them, but male students were also inspired by their teachings and aspired to become *chŏnmu ch'ulsins*. It is noteworthy that Song Hyesŏng, a male student at Wŏnp'yŏng temple, discovered his life's calling after being mentored by a female *kyomu*.

In certain instances, fathers or grandfathers, who were themselves, disciples of Soŭ'aesan, played a critical role in guiding their daughters or granddaughters toward the path of becoming *chŏnmu ch'ulsin*. Yi Chŏng'ŭn 李正恩 (given name: Chŏngbok 正福, 1923–2010) (Ibid., pp. 267–68), Yim Sŏnyang 林善揚 (given name: Sŏngnye 成禮, 1923–2013) (Ibid., p. 282), Chi Sŏng'in 池性仁 (given name: Sukhŭi 淑姬, 1932–1982) (Ibid., p. 579), Kim Posin 金普信 (given name: Pokch'ŏn 福田, 1934–present) (Ibid., p. 583), and Yi Chaun 李慈雲 (1934–?) (Ibid., p. 589) took vows to become *chŏnmu ch'ulsins* in part because their fathers encouraged them to do so. Kim Taegwan 金大觀 (1933–present) (Ibid., p. 548), Yi Chŏngmu 李正務 (1932–present) (Ibid., p. 526), and Pak Sŏnggyŏng 朴性敬 (given name: Kyŏngsun 敬順, 1928–present) (Ibid., p. 478) took vows to become *kyomus* with the support of their grandfathers. Given the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture of the time, it would have been challenging for mothers and grandmothers to urge their daughters and granddaughters to break away from traditional gender norms. It is particularly noteworthy that, despite the prevailing culture, these female disciples received support from their fathers and grandfathers in pursuing a path of spiritual teaching and public service for the betterment of society, even if it meant not getting married. Soŭ'aesan's teachings had a profound impact not only on these girls' mothers and grandmothers but also on their fathers and grandfathers. They were able to relinquish the Confucian socio-cultural ideology that they had upheld for generations and instead embrace the belief that their daughters should have the freedom to pursue a different path in life, one that led them to become spiritual leaders.

Nevertheless, a significant number of young women faced resistance from their parents and other relatives when they expressed their desire to become a *chŏnmu ch'ulsin* at a young age. Despite these obstacles, these girls clandestinely traveled to either Yŏngsan Sŏnwŏn or the Iksan headquarters to pursue their aspirations.

Sin Chegŭn 辛濟根 (given name: Sunim 順任, 1923–2013) became a member of the PYH after graduating from Yŏnggwang Elementary School at the age of seventeen. She wanted to continue her studies, so she traveled to Iksan. Nine days later, however, her father and uncle came to Iksan and took her back home. On 4 November 1940, she covertly traveled to the Yŏngsan center again to pursue her dream (Ibid., p. 208).

Many women also sought consolation during times of family crisis, such as divorce, difficult marriages, or the loss of a spouse or parent, by paying homage to PYH's teachings and finding inspiration to become a *chŏnmu ch'ulsin*. Amidst such trying circumstances, some soon-to-be female disciples were introduced to the teachings of PYH and chose to become *kyomus*, hoping to begin a new life by relying on the Buddhistharma.

Kim Yŏngsin 金永信 (given name: Sundŭk 順得, 1908–1984), who, along with Cho Chŏngwŏn became the first celibate female *kyomu* of Wŏn Buddhism, was Yi Kongju's niece. She had the good fortune to study at the Kyŏngsŏng Women's High School. However, an accident that occurred during a school running race left an indelible scar on her face. She asked Soŭ'aesan how she could help heartbroken people such as herself (Pak 2003a, p. 115). At that time, Soŭ'aesan answered that if she learned about Buddhist teachings and practiced them, she could help many others with their grief and pain (Pak 2003a, p. 115). In this

first meeting, Kim Yöngsin received a Dharma name, Yöngsin, meaning “eternal belief,” and made a vow to become a *kyomu* (Wönbulgyo Che 1986, p. 155)

Yi Chöngman 李正滿 (given name: Ogim 玉任, 1914–1987) lost her mother when she was eight years old, after which she was eager to leave home. Her father, Yi Tong’an, was a disciple of So’t’aesan, and after hearing him talk about the life of chönmu ch’ulsin, Yi Chöngman excitedly decided to become a *kyomu*. At the age of fourteen, she went to the Yöngsan Sönwön and studied there for four years. In order to be able to pay her tuition fee for retreats, she worked in a rubber factory in Chönju while she began her training as a *kyomu* (Ibid., p. 155).

In the case of Kim Yöngsin, she belonged to a group of promising new women from an elite family to the point of graduating from Kyöngsöng Women’s High School. However, the deep scars on her face caused by her accident paved the way for her to turn to her buddhadharma and live a new life. All the women listed here—Chöng Sewöl 鄭世月 (given name: Inhüŋ 仁興, 1896–1977) (Ibid., p. 157), Kim Sammaehwa 金三昧華 (given name: Poin 寶仁, 1890–1944) (Ibid., p. 166), Yi Sönggak 李性覺 (given name: Sunnam 順男, 1886–1983) (Ibid., p. 168), Han Kwijihwa 韓貴智華 (given name: Han-ssi 韓氏, 1890–1955) (Ibid., p. 178), Yi Tosinhwa 李道信華 (given name: Ch’unsan 春山, 1891–1985) (Ibid., p. 180), Hwang Chunam 黃周南 (given name: Kapnam 甲男, 1916–1982) (Ibid., p. 186), An Hye-samhwa 安慧三華 (given name: An-ssi 安氏, 1895–1978) (Ibid., p. 190), Pak Tökchehwa 朴德濟華 (given name: Sunhüi 順姬 (1893–1975) (Ibid., p. 196), Kwön Uyön 權偶然 (given name: P’ilgyöng 畢慶, 1918–2010) (Ibid., pp. 265–66), Yi Chi’il 李智一 (given name: Söksun 錫順, 1915–2003) (Ibid., p. 280), Yu Kwanjin 柳寬眞 (given name: Okküm 玉今, 1916–1997) (Ibid., p. 284), On Pöpchunghaeng 溫法中行 (given name: On-ssi 溫氏, 1873–?) (Ibid., 366), Kim Inhyön 金仁現 (given name: Sukhyön 淑鉉, 1881–1957) (Ibid., p. 382), O Ch’ölsu 吳哲秀 (given name: Sunnye 順禮, 1878–1966) (Ibid., p. 294), An Chisuk 安智淑 (given name: Oksun 玉順, 1916–1991) (Ibid., p. 416)—got married at a young age and formed a family. However, when various unfavorable circumstances made it impossible to continue in their married lives, they turned to PYH’s teachings and found solace in them by devoting their lives to the PYH. Out of 146 ordained devotees, 61 had been married before taking their vows. This indicates that women could become *chönmu ch’ulsin* during the early period of the PYH, regardless of their marital status. By regularly attending Dharma services, these women followers deepened their devotion and faith in the Buddhist teachings, eventually making a commitment to live their lives for the betterment of society as *kyomu*. Women ministers included Yi Ch’unghwa 季忠和 (given name: Chongsuk 宗淑 1925–?) (Ibid., p. 486), Kim Hyönhö 金賢虛 (given name: Ilsun 一順, 1927–1967) (Ibid., p. 500), Kim Pongsöng 金奉性 (given name: Ponggüm 奉錦, 1890–?) (Ibid., p. 516), Chöng Chöngyöl 鄭貞烈 (given name: Yusun 有順, 1929–?) (Ibid., p. 536), Ch’oe Yongsun 崔容順 (given name: Chöngnam 正男, 1927–?) (Ibid., p. 550), Yang Pöpkwan 梁法寬 (given name: Aewön, 1926–2003) (Ibid., p. 552), Chön Kyöngghwa 全敬和 (given name: Kyöngjae 京在, 1926–1999) (Ibid., p. 567), Chang Söngö 張善舉 (given name: Mallye 末禮, 1917–2013) (Ibid., p. 568), Kang Haksön 姜學善 (given name: Myöngghak 明學, 1904–?), among others (Ibid., p. 570).

Thus far, we have explored the motivations behind the decision of 146 female ordained devotees to join the PYH as ordained devotees. While each woman has a unique story, a common thread unites them all: a strong desire to make a meaningful contribution to society in a culture that did not often allow women to assume such roles. They devoted their lives to serving the public in whatever capacity they could. In addition to giving regular Dharma talks at Dharma meetings, their duties included building and managing a temple, cooking in the kitchen, cleaning, working in the fields, sewing, etc.

4.3. Working in Factories

Despite taking their vows to become ordained devotees, these women were not able to immediately participate in the summer and winter retreats. The order was experiencing economic hardships, so only those who worked in factories for over four years and

raised enough funds were able to study and practice at the PYH. The majority of teenage students had to work and earn money to pay for their studies, with the exception of a few disciples from elite families or those who became ordained devotees later in life. Devotees from wealthy families often paid for the education costs of other students, in accordance with one of Sot'aesan's "Four Essentials" of social reform, which is to "Educate Others' Children."

After earning enough money for their study expenses, the devotees traveled to either the Iksan headquarters or the Yöngsan Sönwön to participate in the retreats. For instance, Cho Ilgwan 曹一貫 (given name: Posun 寶順, 1912–1981), whose father was the second chairman of the PYH, had to work in factories during the day in Chönju and Iksan, and study at night (Ibid., p. 176). Chöng Yangsön 丁良善 (given name: Yönhong 連弘, 1914–1986), Yi Taeyön, O Chongt'ae, Yi Chöngman, Yi Chöngghwa, Cho Ilgwan, and Kim Taesin worked in factories for more than four years. Most other female devotees, such as Yang Tosin, Chöng Yunjae, Song Chamyöng, Ko Hyöjong, and Kwön Chöngüm, worked in the kitchens of the PYH or of regional branch temples for three years and then were able to begin their practice. In 1939, Yi Söngsin 李聖信 (given name: Ongnye 玉禮, 1922–2012) became the first recipient of a PYH scholarship and was, therefore, able to begin studying immediately after taking a vow to become a *kyomu* rather than working in factories or at temples first. The PYH drew this scholarship funding from money it had received from the Founding Groups of Education and Industry run by the PYH (Ibid., p. 230).⁵

The requirement by PYH for students to earn tuition to cover their training and education during this time had a wider objective that went beyond simply generating income for the organization. In Korea's Buddhist monastic systems, in order to become an ordained monk, "each monk [first] is required to begin his career with six months as a postulant (*haengja*), learning the basics of monastic discipline and adapting himself to the rigorous daily schedule followed in the monastery" (Buswell 1992, p. 69).

Throughout this postulancy period, they engage in extensive physical labor, including tasks such as cooking meals in the kitchen, working in the fields, and cleaning the latrines (Buswell 1992, p. 69). Likewise, for these young girls, the period of work was an opportunity for them to cultivate humility by occupying the lowest social positions while also gaining the fundamental knowledge and strength required to study and practice Buddhism. During this phase of strenuous work, the female devotees encountered various obstacles, but they also had the chance to ready themselves for financial self-sufficiency and to discover novel methods of living independently without depending on men. The toughness and inner fortitude they acquired during this demanding period proved vital in equipping them to manage temples and guide congregations eventually.

4.4. Personalized Teaching by Sot'aesan

The majority of the initial female followers were profoundly impacted by Sot'aesan and directly received his teachings when they pledged to become *kyomus*. Additionally, Sot'aesan bestowed upon each woman a Dharma name that he deemed fit for each disciple. Here is an illustration:

Kim Chönggak 金正覺 (given name: Kim-ssi, 1874–1952) married and had one daughter, but her husband passed away early. Kim, who was unable to find peace of mind, began practicing the Poch'öngyo faith with her acquaintances, who included Song Chökyöok and Kim Namch'ön. One day, Kim met with Sot'aesan in Chönju. She told him that she was suffering from three kinds of *han*:⁶ (1) not having good parents; (2) not having a good husband; (3) not having a son. After hearing her story, Sot'aesan gave her the name Samhan, which means "a person with three griefs." After receiving her Dharma name, Kim began to work at the Yöngsan Sönwön, and she gradually underwent a religious change of heart. She eventually told Sot'aesan this: "I previously thought that I had three enormous griefs, blaming others and feeling pessimistic about myself. But, now I realize that all of my great grief is actually just my karma." Upon

listening to her words, Sot'aesan said, "Now you truly understand my teaching. From now on, you are no longer a person with three great griefs but a person who has realized the right path. So, let me give you a new name, Chŏnggak, which means 'correct enlightenment'" (*Wŏnbulgyo Che* 1986, p. 296; Yun 2021, p. 284).

Similar to Kim Chŏnggak, all of the *kyomu* in the early stage of PYH had substantial individual interactions with their mentor, Sot'aesan. These exchanges were not restricted to their initial encounters but also involved significant discussions with him as they pursued their respective vocations. The individual connections with their teacher provided these women with a sense of direction and significance that enabled them to fulfill their mission with greater devotion. Despite some of Sot'aesan's followers being significantly older than him, their life stories frequently depict their initial encounters with him as unique and unforgettable experiences:

"There is no way to express my happiness and joy [at meeting Sot'aesan]; it was as if parents and children who had parted ways without a promise of reunion met again suddenly" (*Wŏnbulgyo Che* 1986, p. 24).

"I couldn't express my joy. It was as if I had experienced the Second Coming of Christ, and I didn't want to go back home again because I felt the PYH was similar to the place where the divine gods lived" (Ibid., p. 80).

"I was as delighted as I would have been if I had encountered my parents after missing them for a long time; my joy was difficult to measure, and I immediately became a disciple" (Ibid., p. 149).

"After completing the three-month retreat, joy sprang up in me as if I had found the right path for my life, and all of the pain I had suffered disappeared at once" (Ibid., p. 276).

"Joy soared in me as if were a little girl meeting her mother" (Ibid., p. 147).

The experiences of these women, who embarked on their spiritual journeys after having such remarkable encounters with Sot'aesan, were crucial to the development of Wŏn Buddhism.

4.5. The Accomplishments of Female Ordained Devotees

One of the most significant accomplishments of PYH's early female devotees was their meticulous record-keeping of both the Dharma discourses of Sot'aesan and the history of the order. Yi Kyŏnja 李慶子 (Dharma name: Kongju 共珠 1896–1991) served as a private teacher to Empress Sunjŏnghyo (純貞孝, 1894–1991) from 1909 to 1913. Yi was among the few well-educated female disciples of her time, having graduated from Kyŏngsŏng Women's High School (Kyŏngsŏng Yŏja Po'ong Hakkyo). Sot'aesan called Yi by the nickname "Pŏmnang" (法囊), meaning "Dharma Basket," because she had recorded many of Sot'aesan's Dharma words as well as important PYH events (Pak 2022, p. 297; *Wŏnbulgyo Che* 1986, pp. 21–28; Yun 2021, p. 269). She also edited PYH's early monthly newsletters and later provided many materials for the compilation of the *Discourses of Master Sot'aesan*. In particular, Yi played a key role in collecting, organizing, writing, and publishing the historical and biographical records of 1756 persons of merit involved in Wŏn Buddhism during its first thirty-six years of existence (1916–1952). Her efforts resulted in a seven-volume publication. In 1932, Yi, who had lost her husband ten years prior, decided to devote her life to the PYH as an ordained devotee, along with her only son. At that time, she donated all of the issues of *The Tong-a Ilbo* (*Tong-a Daily*) that she had collected, from its first issue in 1920 through 1932, to the library at Posŏng College (now Korea University). This initial act demonstrated her commitment to preserving historical records (*Wŏnbulgyo Che* 1986, p. 26).

Yi Kongju's financial support also made it possible for the PYH to publish its first text, *Suyang yŏn'gu yoron*. Her commitment to collecting issues of *Wŏmal t'ongsin*, PYH's monthly newsletter, was instrumental in eventually getting these published in a compi-

lation entitled *Kyogo ch'onggan* (Wŏn Buddhist Literary Collections), as she possessed the only complete collection of these newsletters. Only five copies of each of the early issues of *Wŏmal t'ongsin* were printed, two of which were distributed to the order's Headquarters in Iri, and one of which was sent to each of the temples in Yŏngsan, Sinhŭng, and Kyŏngsŏng. Yi also kept a diary throughout her life. An eight-volume facsimile containing all her diaries (1909–1973) and collections of PYH's documents has since been published. Yi's spirit of record-keeping and historical preservation was crucial in creating a comprehensive historical record of Wŏn Buddhism. Yi's contributions to Wŏn Buddhism were invaluable—simultaneously spiritual, physical, and material. She is therefore regarded today as one of the order's foremost founders of merit. She also served as one of the main leaders of the female members of the religion's Supreme Council.

The second key aspect of the female devotees' contribution to the faith is that these women demonstrated their profound devotion and compassion as being seen as bodhisattvas without expressing any entitlement with regard to their relatively high status within the order. They devoted their lives to serving the public in whatever capacity they could. They performed various forms of manual labor, including cooking, housekeeping, peddling, and factory work, to save money for their retreat expenses and to support the maintenance of their respective temples. Despite these taxing daily duties, they also cultivated their lives as Buddhist practitioners by engaging in the Threefold Practice (cultivating the mind, inquiry into human affairs and universal principles, and mindful choices in action)⁷ each day. They maintained their commitment to practicing Buddhism in their everyday lives without compromising their identities as women. The self-sacrificing ethos of these female *kyomus* laid the foundation for Wŏn Buddhism, as they generously gave of themselves to build and maintain temples and devoted their personal assets and hearts to teaching the temple's devotees and members. Enumerating the achievements of all the order's female *kyomus* here would not be practical. However, I would like to introduce a brief description of the accomplishments of several more representative women below.

Yi Tongjinhwa (1894–1968) sold her own house and founded the Kyŏngsŏng temple. She took care of the building's monthly maintenance while dedicating herself to the practice and teaching of Dharma. During the bombing of the temple's restaurant during the Korean War (1950–1953), she bravely remained onsite and successfully defended the building (Ibid., pp. 59–60). Cho Chŏngwŏn played an active part in the operations of the Pusan Nambumin and Ch'oryang temples (Ibid., pp. 80–81). Kim Yŏngsin laid the foundation for establishing temples in the Hadan, Pumin, and Ch'oryang neighborhoods. Yi Wŏnhwa (1884–1964) was the first female disciple of Sot'aesan. While traveling to regions such as Chinan, Chŏnju, Wŏnpy'ŏng, Iri, and Yŏngsan, Yi served as a staff member and helped with tasks such as housekeeping and cooking while also sharing the teachings of the PYH with many temple devotees. She is now recognized as a great bodhisattva of compassion who had the power to bring happiness to people no matter how much they may be suffering (Ibid., pp. 105–6).

Yi Ch'ŏngch'un (1886–1955) was driven by her family's financial struggles to become a *kisaeng*. However, at the age of thirty-eight, she had a life-changing realization. While observing a piglet playing in her yard, she suddenly thought, "If our lives revolve solely around indulging our five senses, what distinguishes us from that pig?" She felt ashamed by the prospect of continuing down that path and resolved to find her true calling in life and live as a *kyomu*. Yi sold her house, used the proceeds to build a temple in her hometown of Chŏnju province, and dedicated herself to her responsibilities of sharing the teachings of the PYH with the temple's members. Despite having lived as a courtesan in her youth, she reformed her secular ways and became an inspiration to future generations through her sincere aspiration and determination to break free from worldly ties. She maintained her resolve to uphold the precepts of Buddhism and stayed true to her original vows, despite facing many forms of adversity. Through her frugal lifestyle, Yi saved a significant sum of money, which she donated to the temple to lay the foundation for its establishment. In this and other ways, she dedicated herself to serving her community. Her selfless actions

and unwavering commitment to her beliefs continue to serve as a model for us all (Ibid., pp. 116–17).

Yi Kyöngsun (1915–1978) began her journey with Wŏn Buddhism by serving at the Seoul temple, after which she was appointed a *kyomu* at the Kaesŏng temple. Her warm demeanor and teachings had a profound impact on many people. During the Korean War, she was appointed the head of the Ch’oryang temple, where she tirelessly cared for numerous evacuees and played a significant role in establishing temples in Sŏmyŏn and Pusanjin. Her selfless actions and dedication to the cause have left an indelible mark on the history of Wŏn Buddhism (Ibid., p. 122).

Sŏ Taein (1914–2004) faced numerous challenges while growing up in an impoverished household, where she had to work hard and save money constantly. Despite these hardships, she remained committed to her faith and actively taught and inspired others in temples located in Ch’oryang, Seoul, and Ch’unch’ŏn. Her benevolent and selfless nature touched the lives of many, and her compassionate teachings left a lasting impact on those who heard them. In 1950, Sŏ was promoted to the rank of Samrye *kyomu* and continued to develop her temple with dedication and kindness. Her unwavering commitment to the teachings of Wŏn Buddhism has made her an exemplary figure in the history of the religion (Ibid., p. 126).

All of these women used their lives to cultivate their minds, deepen their compassion, and gain wisdom amidst personal suffering and great historical upheaval. Despite facing poverty and many other difficulties, they practiced and helped to found the early religious teachings of Wŏn Buddhism. The broader societal pain they endured included that of the Japanese colonial era, the oppression of women during the late Chosŏn Dynasty, the poverty and hardships of the Korean War after liberation, and an often depressed and unstable economy. However, these challenging circumstances only served to highlight the remarkable spirits of the bodhisattvas, who gave their all to the cause. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that every church in Wŏn Buddhism’s hundred-year history was built upon the wholehearted dedication of these women. Their selflessness formed the basis for Wŏn Buddhism as we know it, and their legacy of perseverance has continued to inspire each subsequent generation after them.

5. Conclusions

In the 1920s, the emergence of *kyomus* in the PYH community introduced a new model of Korean Buddhism that offered equal opportunities to both men and women. In the pursuit of this egalitarian ideal, the community organized three-month summer and winter retreats to help women discover their true potential and identities within an otherwise patriarchal Korean culture. This article has analyzed the biographies of 146 female clerics who were part of the first generation of female *kyomu* in Wŏn Buddhism. This examination has revealed several key facts.

My analysis of the given names of these female clerics confirms that being born female was generally unwelcome in both the individual household and in society at large in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Korea. During the colonial period, higher education was a rare opportunity for women in rural Korea. Marriage was also compulsory during this time, leaving women with limited life paths. However, the Yöngsan Center in Yönggwang and the Ch’ongbu Sŏnwŏn in Iksan provided women with the opportunity to pursue higher education and escape the societal norm of marriage. The female clerics’ stated motivations for joining the order also suggest that the PYH served not only as a religious pillar but also as an important educational organization. It allowed women to overcome the prejudices of a society that viewed them as inferior and to forge their own identities through education.

Throughout our examination of Wŏn Buddhism, we have primarily focused on the faith’s doctrine and the history of its founder. It is also important to acknowledge that the history of Wŏn Buddhism has predominantly been written from the perspective of men. While the founder’s role is essential, it is equally important to recognize the contributions

of female members who helped to develop the faith alongside him. The 146 ordained female devotees I have highlighted here were inspired by Sot'aesan and his teachings, and he highly valued their encounters with him in turn. They established new temples, maintained their operations, and disseminated the teachings and skills they acquired at the PYH to the inhabitants of nearby communities through regional temples. Above all, these impoverished and humble girls, despite their limited education, became spiritual mentors capable of guiding others in the ways of Buddhist practice, committing their lives to the greater welfare. By thus rejecting a self-centered life, these women eventually earned the public's respect and finally became considered buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The female disciples of PYH devoted their lives to practicing its teachings and sharing their knowledge with others, which greatly contributed to the religion's growth. They embraced their roles as clerics while also embracing their womanhood, setting an example of female ministry by maintaining feminine ideals such as compassion and nurturing care. Liberated from dependence upon male familial authority, they became similar to mothers of the world. Sot'aesan encouraged young female disciples to break free from the constraints of the single-family and instead become parents to all sentient beings, expressing love and care as if these other creatures were their own children. These women's teachings and sermons have helped many individuals across the world escape pain and suffering and find true happiness.

Finally, I hold the belief that new models for female clerics in Wŏn Buddhism must be continuously explored and developed now and in the future. In the early twentieth century, when women's human rights were restricted in many ways, it was truly innovative that the PYH allowed women not only to leave the family enclosure but to become Buddhist masters. While the early twentieth century saw significant progress for women's rights, the contemporary context demands a re-examination of the Wŏn Buddhist female model. With education and women's rights more advanced than ever, how can Wŏn Buddhism continue to empower women in the twenty-first century innovatively?

To address this inquiry, we must investigate and gain insight into the history of Wŏn Buddhism. Looking back, we can draw lessons from how these early female teachers rose from namelessness to become esteemed figures. Certainly, there may be diverse interpretations of why they were able to accomplish this. In my view, however, our initial focus should be on the intensity of the suffering these women endured and their ability to transform that suffering into compassion and the advancement of Buddhist practice. The 146 women whose stories are presented here had anything but an easy life. They were born into a period when women were socially and culturally marginalized and enjoyed few educational opportunities. They also lived through the colonial era and experienced life as colonial subjects in a nation stripped of its sovereignty. These particular female disciples also felt the pain of poverty, constantly worrying about whether they would have enough to eat and struggling to make ends meet.

Nevertheless, it is clear that these women turned their afflictions into a means of attaining enlightenment and cultivating their spiritual practices. What set them apart was their unwavering acceptance of adversity and their ability to transmute these challenges into a virtuous state of mind. It was through this process of refinement that they achieved sacredness. We must bear in mind that the writings, sermons, and teachings penned by these women were not born of rote doctrinal study. Rather, it was the manifold adversities they endured throughout their lives that instilled within them a profound sense of humility and enabled them to cultivate an unshakeable mind and compassion. Whether toiling in factories, kitchens, or fields, they strove to overcome the poverty that plagued them.

These early female disciples' greatness lay not in their status within the order but in their humble diligence—their determination to do their best despite their materially lowly stations. Moreover, even in the face of daunting obstacles, they remained steadfast in their duties as *kyomus*, striving to advance along the path of true enlightenment by participating in biannual three-month retreats. It was through this rigorous training that they found the inspiration to preach. In light of these remarkable attributes, what qualities might we

expect to find in the next generation of female Wŏn Buddhist teachers? This is a question that merits our collective contemplation.

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Notes

- ¹ “As a special production for the commemorative ceremony of PYH’s first term [1916–1952], the order compiled a history of those individuals who had been significant in the foundation of Wŏn Buddhism and who had advanced into special dharma ranks through their practice and religious contributions (physically, materially, and mentally). The order published this history as *Wŏnbulgyo che 1 tae ch’angnip yugong’in yŏksa* (*The History of Persons Significant to the Founding of Wŏn Buddhism during the Order’s First Period of Thirty-Six Years*), a work divided into seven volumes” (Yun 2021, p. 254).
- ² “The Four Essentials” include “developing self-power” [it developed from “equal rights for men and women” in *Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng*, and later changed to “developing self-power” in *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* 1943 (See *Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng* 1932, pp. 27–29; *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* 1943 in *Wŏnbulgyo kyogo ch’onggan* 4, pp. 160–63)], the primacy of the wise, educating others’ children, and venerating the public-spirited.” See (*The Doctrinal Books of Wŏn Buddhism*, pp. 25–52; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, pp. 39–46; Yun 2021, p. 217).
- ³ According to *The Principal Book of Won-Buddhism*, So’taesan provides a definition for the rank of the greatly enlightened tathāgata as follows: “The rank of the greatly enlightened tathagata is the status of people who, having practiced each and every item for advancement to the status of beyond the household and advancing to the preparatory status of the greatly enlightened tathagata, embody myriad of abilities in delivering all living creatures with great loving-kindness and great compassion; edify by flexibly responding with myriad expedients, but without ever straying from the main principle and without revealing those expedients to the people who are being edified; and are free of attachment to discrimination even when active, and for whom discrimination is properly regulated even at rest.” (*The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism*, pp. 100–1; cf. *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, p. 91; Chung 2003, p. 164).
- ⁴ According to the 1930 census taken by the Japanese Government General of Korea, 23% of the general population was literate in either Korean or Japanese. (See Hong and Paek 2017, pp. 938–64). However, the female literacy rate in North Cholla province was only 8.64% (See No 1994, p. 109).
- ⁵ In 1924, So’taesan established the PYH Cooperative Association to take over the affairs of the existing association and implemented a system for saving money for various needs. These various funds included the districts’ fund, which comprised the unified savings of the assets of the General Headquarters and various districts; the dues fund, which was intended for the payment of dues needed for the upkeep of membership; the study fund, which went towards training fees for meditative retreats; the contributory fund, which covered commemorative memorial services for the Order’s forefathers; the work fund, which could be used for members to carry out miscellaneous projects; the scholarship fund, which was intended to be used to educate the members’ children; the living expenses fund, which meant to help provide good living conditions for the membership; and so forth. See *The History of Wŏn Buddhism*, p. 47.
- ⁶ The Korean term *han* means a deep sense of grief and sorrow in the face of overwhelming difficulties.
- ⁷ See (*The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism*, pp. 46–52; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, pp. 46–50; Chung 2003, pp. 135–37).

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