



## **Review of “Representing Korean Buddhism: Toward a Transnational Understanding of the Field of Korean Buddhist Studies”**

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This is an important article that critically diagnoses problems in Korean Buddhist studies and the field’s prospects in the broad context of transnational Buddhism. Although the number of Western scholars specializing in Korean Buddhism has increased since the mid-20th century, the globalization of Korean Buddhism, which has long been recognized as an important task in Korea, seems to be still far away. In his article, Prof. Sem Vermeersch, a Western Buddhist scholar who has been working in Korea for nearly twenty years, analyzes Korean Buddhist scholarship both inside and outside Korea from an insightful perspective.

The author explores the problem of the globalization of Korean Buddhism from four different angles. In the first section, he discusses how the study of Korean Buddhism in the West began and developed, and, second, critically examines the current state of Buddhist studies in Korea in comparison to global Buddhist studies. In relation to this, he examines in the third section problems and difficulties in the translation of Korean Buddhist source materials into English. Finally, he presents prospects for Korean Buddhist studies in association with the broader methodological change in the humanities.

In the first section, the author discusses how Korean Buddhist studies have developed in the West. Addressing the difficulties the study

of Korean Buddhism faced in its initial stage—defining its position vis-à-vis neighboring countries—the author notes the efforts made by Western scholars of Korean Buddhism in their specific situation of often interacting with scholars of other Asian Buddhisms and from other East Asian studies programs. It is in such circumstances, the author says, that Robert Buswell, a pioneering Western scholar of Korean Buddhism, proposed “*hoguk bulgyo*” (state-protection Buddhism) and “syncretism,” as two characteristic features of Korean Buddhism (Buswell 1987), by relying on previous Korean Buddhist scholarship. After that, however, Buswell offered a critical reflection on the concept of *Koreanness* in his influential article on the Korean Buddhist *imaginaire* (Buswell 1998) by indicating the inadequacy of applying the notion of nation-state to premodern times. His edited volume, *Currents and Countercurrents* (Buswell 2005), is a landmark study that moves beyond the limiting discourse of *uniqueness* vs. *derivativeness* and demonstrates East Asian Buddhism to be a process with many “flows and counterflows.”

Another point Vermeersch notes in regards to Korean Buddhist studies in the West is the fact that Joseon Buddhism has been reevaluated on its own terms. Unlike those who had typically viewed Joseon Buddhism as a derivative or “pale reflection” of Buddhism, some Western Buddhist scholars, such as Lewis Lancaster, began to pay attention to the significance of Joseon Buddhism. Vermeersch also points out that, whether as a result of Lancaster’s efforts or otherwise, scholarly interest in Joseon Buddhism in general has gradually increased as well. Overall, in the author’s evaluation, despite some limitations in the early days of its development, Korean Buddhist studies in the West has gradually made meaningful progress on the basis of communication with Korean academia.

In the second section, Vermeersch notes the fact that, in contrast to Western scholars’ steady references to the studies of Korean scholars, Korean scholars rarely reference Western research on Korean Buddhism. Besides the language barrier, what the author identifies as a main reason for this asymmetric referencing is that Korean scholars often consider the studies of Western scholars not as research, but as “attempts at introducing Korean Buddhism to an English audience” (Vermeersch 2021, 163). In other words,

Western studies on Korean Buddhism have drawn Koreans' attention not in terms of "what they have contributed to the study of Korean Buddhism," but in terms of "how they appraise it" (Vermeersch 2021, 163). This implies that Korean Buddhist academia does not accept Western Buddhist scholars as academic peers, but rather as objects of edification. Whether this attitude derives from its pride or inferiority complex, it reveals that Korean Buddhism is not really participating in the field of Buddhist studies, but remains as the *Korean Buddhism* they have long *imagined*.

Vermeersch also discusses the different responses by Western and Korean academia toward critical theories from the West. In Western Buddhist scholarship the critical theories of, say, Foucault, Said, Baudrillard, or Anderson, are widely referenced as a methodological frameworks, as they are in other fields in the humanities. However, Korean Buddhist scholars rarely address them. In making this contrasting approach, the author clearly notes that he may be himself generalizing, by mentioning that the field in Korea is now more and more diversified (Vermeersch 2021, 164). However, given the attitude of the Korean Buddhist community, which regards Western scholars as an "audience" rather than "peers," it seems inevitable that Korean scholars do not pay much heed to Western methodological problems. "The lingering influence of traditional Buddhist approaches to texts" (Vermeersch 2021, 166) in Korea, which the author addresses at the end of this section, may also be related, at least partially, to this attitude centered on Korean Buddhism.

In the third section, Vermeersch observes translation projects of Korean Buddhist texts, which have been emphasized in Korea as a key task for globalizing Korean Buddhism. Korean Buddhist materials have been translated into English in expectations that a quantitative increase in English translations will promote Korean Buddhist studies in the West. However, the author points out that random translations without considering a "target community" did not facilitate "communication" (*sotong*) (Vermeersch 2021, 167). Of course, practical factors, such as the intent of economic sponsorship or the administrative limitations of government projects, should also be considered in translations. However, as the author writes, the most important elements for translation—"What kinds of text would interest the

US academic reader? How should they best be presented? Through which publisher or what platform?” (Vermeersch 2021, 169)—have been largely neglected. This seems to answer why the results of translations led by the Korean Buddhist communities have thus far fallen well below expectations. Again, it seems that this failure in fully considering Western target audience in the translation projects may be related with the underlying tendency in the Korean Buddhist community of regarding the West merely as an object of edification.

The author also discusses the problem of terminology, a very important factor in translation, but often overlooked by many Korean scholars. Admitting that there is no simple solution to this, the author suggests a “contextualized approach,” by “crafting translations that somehow resonate with people in the here and now” “even if it risks being a mistaken or one-sided interpretation” (Vermeersch 2021, 170).

In the final section, Vermeersch deals with the prospects for Korean Buddhist studies, both in Korea and the West, in relation to the fundamental changes occurring in West-centered humanities. As the author writes, although Korean Buddhist scholars do not seem to have shown open hostility to the formerly predominant West-centered scholarship, the fundamental transition in the methodologies of the humanities has been reflected in the fact that “the field [of Korean Buddhism] has diversified, both in terms of scholars and topics covered” (Vermeersch 2021, 172). In addition to the diversification of research topics and scholars in the field, the author also addresses the research evaluation method as a likely factor in the process of bringing the fields together. He points out that the *quantitative* measurement method based on STEM disciplines, which is now widely accepted in all academia, has limitations in measurement of the *qualitative* aspects of humanities research.

The problems in Korean Buddhist studies the author indicates in this article are very important issues that should be carefully considered by Korean Buddhist community insofar as the globalization of Korean Buddhism remains a task at hand in Korea. I would like to highlight and further clarify the significance of these issues by adding a few comments.

The author remarks in the first section how Korean Buddhism since

the Japanese colonial period has had to justify its distinct position relative to other East Asian countries. He goes on to say: "However, for most Korean scholars this is not so much an issue since the academic peers they interact with are mostly fellow countrymen, therefore this framework does not need to be explicitly tackled" (Vermeersch 2021, 159). The situation of Western scholars, who often feel compelled to clarify the characteristics of Korean Buddhism when communicating with scholars of other Asian Buddhisms, is truly different from that of Korean scholars, who are mostly interacting with domestic peers. However, can it be said that most Korean scholars do not take as an issue the problem of determining the characteristics of Korean Buddhism just because they have little opportunity to explain them in front of other scholars?

Following the decolonization process, the uniqueness of Korean Buddhism is no longer the substantial subject of research it was presumed to be in the colonial period. However, even if the decolonization process were complete, would Korean Buddhist scholars cease exploring the characteristics of Korean Buddhism vis-à-vis the Buddhism of other countries? As Vermeersch writes, "the abandoning of descriptive markers of uniqueness ... does not mean that the impact of Korean Buddhism as a force in its own right has been abandoned" (Vermeersch 2021, 162). In the colonial period, the uniqueness of Korean Buddhism was argued in order to distinguish it from others; currently, Korean scholars still remain concerned about the particularities of Korean Buddhism, but now taking into consideration the commonalities of East Asian Buddhism as well. It appears that identifying the characteristic features of Korean Buddhism has always been a given task for Korean Buddhist scholars, although the underlying perspective of that scholarship has shifted from positing exclusive distinction between Korean Buddhism and those of other countries to open comparison with them.

Furthermore, the postcolonial discourse seems to be still underway. In the paper's second section, after mentioning that Western critical theories are rarely referred to by Korean Buddhist scholars, the author presents an exception to this case—a research article that critically discusses the elements of Orientalism inherent in the early modern Korean Buddhist studies. However, the employment of the critical theory of Orientalism in

this article seems to have originated from a postcolonial perspective on Korean Buddhism. In other words, the introduction of the critical theory of Orientalism in this article may be seen as an effort to perform the internal task of decolonization, rather than as an expression of participation in the fundamental reflection on West-centered humanities.

The rise of scholarly interest in Joseon Buddhism may also be seen from this perspective. Vermeersch points out the growing interest in Joseon Buddhism in both the Western and Korean academia in the context of globalization. In Korea at least, the attention given to Joseon Buddhism may be related again to the longstanding task of the country's decolonization; scholarly reinterpretation may provide a legitimate significance to Joseon Buddhism, which was devalued during the Japanese colonial period. Of course, this does not mean that Joseon Buddhism is being reinterpreted only to escape the colonial point of view, even though it lacks academic grounding. However, it seems the reevaluation of Joseon Buddhism cannot be discussed separate from the decolonizing process of Korean Buddhism. Notwithstanding, it is also true that Korean Buddhist studies, as the author says, is gradually heading toward a transnational Buddhism.

Critical reflection on a West-centered framework in Buddhist studies by itself cannot constitute a "true transnational Buddhism." Sincere efforts by Korean and international Buddhist scholars to understand and communicate with each other should be indispensable for a true transnational Buddhism. The importance of this article, which provides an insightful diagnosis of the current position and problems of Korean Buddhist studies, cannot be overestimated in this regard.

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