

Formation of Modern Buddhist Scholarship: in the Cases of Bak Jonghong and Gim Donghwa

Cho Sungtaek

Cho Sungtaek (Jo, Seong-taek) is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Korea University. He obtained his Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. His articles and books include “Buddhism and Society: On Buddhist Engagement with Society” (Korea Journal, 2002) and “Nine Mountain Seon Schools” (2003). E-mail: stcho@korea.ac.kr.

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Abstract

Contemporary Buddhist scholarship in Korea has been strongly affected by its origins in the Victorian era, when Western religious scholars sought to rationalize and historicize the study of religion. Modern Korean scholars, trained with in the Western scholarly paradigm, share this prejudice in favor of the rational. The result is a skewed understanding of Buddhism, emphasizing its philosophical and theoretical aspects at the expense of seemingly ‘irrational’ religious elements based on the direct experience of meditation practice.

This paper seeks to the historical context in which modern Korean Buddhist scholarship had been shaped during the colonial period of Japan. Two case studies will be particularly examined in the light of post-colonial perspectives of Buddhist studies: one is in the case of Bak Jonghong (1903-1976), and the other Gim Donghwa (1902-1980), two pioneering scholars in the field of Buddhist studies. They share similarities as well as differences. Both were born and active at almost same period, during which Korean peninsular had experienced the modernization forced by the Japanese colonialism. And thus the experience of colonialism and modernization brought them into conflict between tradition and modernity. Their responses, however, were different. Bak, originally trained in Western philosophy, especially German philosophy, wanted to study Korean Buddhism in the context of the so-called Korean Thought per se. He was motivated to seek the national and cultural identity of Korea, and thus his scholarship on Korean Buddhism was naturally led to seek an originality of Korean Buddhism compared to Buddhism in India, China and Japan. On the other hand, Gim, who became a monk in his youth, and later he went to Japan for college, where he was exposed to modern Buddhist scholarship. He was the one who first introduced modern Buddhist scholarship to Korea, and since then the contemporary Korean Buddhist scholarship has been owed much to him.

Despite their contributions to contemporary Korean Buddhist scholarship, if we look at their contributions in the light of post-colonial perspective, their contributions need to be reevaluated.

Keywords:

Introduction

The anti-Buddhist policy of the Joseon dynasty(1392-1910), in which Confucianism was adopted as an overarching social thought, changed with its collapse. Modern Korean Buddhism is generally regarded to have begun in 1895, the year marking the lifting of the measure prohibiting Buddhist monks from entering the capital, through the help of Sano Jenryo, a [Nichiren](#) monk from Japan. With this, the monks were legally allowed to enter freely the capital city, making the end of the long, dark years characterized by Mountain Buddhism. Although Buddhism was at last delivered from a repression that lasted for about 500 years, **the fact that this change came about not through its own efforts but as the result of external power dynamics, affected in many ways the direction and content of the modernization of Korean Buddhism to come in the following years.** From the standpoint of the Korean Buddhist community, Japanese Buddhism was both a model for its own modernization as well as an object of rejection to be avoided. Pressured to be differentiated from Joseon Buddhism that had been suppressed for long years on the one hand, and the need to overcome colonial Buddhism or so-called “Japanized Buddhism” on the other, the Korean Buddhist society put many reform programs into action that sometimes conflicted with each other or produced contradictory outcomes within the community. For instance, some argued to permit monks to marry as a practical measure to modernize Buddhism, while others saw it as an element of “Japanized Buddhism” and urged a stricter adherence to the rule of celibacy. In contrast to its dualistic attitude toward Japanese Buddhism, the Korean Buddhist community’s response to “modernity” was consistently positive and proactive. It created many modern reform programs intended to place Buddhism into harmony with modern civilization, while at the same time reacted to the growing influence of Christianity, which had been exercising great influence on the modernization of Korean society at that time. Emphasis on active missionary work in the central city, the translation of Buddhist scriptures from classical Chinese into *han’guel*, and efforts to popularize Buddhism in general can all be viewed as the Buddhist community’s attempts to adapt to a new religious environment that had come to be defined as the “modern.”

Most of research on modern Korean Buddhism conducted both at home and abroad mainly has dealt with the Korean Buddhist community’s response to the challenges posed by modernity and Japanese colonial Buddhism. One thing that has been overlooked in this is the influence of the modern Buddhist scholarship. Though there had also been some scholarly work on Buddhist doctrines in traditional Buddhism, it was not scholarship in the modern sense, but rather a ‘study of one’s own sect,’ with strong sectarian tendency. Early modern Buddhist scholarship originating in Europe was based on the rigorous philological study of Buddhist texts and empirical historical research. East Asian Buddhism in early modern period, which had followed the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism and Seon (Zen) Buddhism, revealed completely different aspects in the understanding of its own tradition since modern European Buddhist scholarship was introduced in the early 20th century. A most important difference was the emergence of highly-educated lay believers, or so-called Buddhist “scholars.” These Buddhist scholars were different from the scholar-monks of the traditional sense. In understanding their own tradition, the Buddhist scholars tried to move away from the platform of traditional Buddhism and adopted an objective historical perspective, and

their new understanding imparted a lasting, extensive influence - though indirect - on the reform programs of modern Buddhism in East Asia.

In the case of Korean Buddhist society, modern Buddhist scholarship was introduced from Japan during the colonial period. The Buddhist scholars of the time, who were educated in the more western civilization of Japan and its modern universities, identified the modernization of Buddhism with a new understanding of Buddhism based on modern scholarship. A good example is Gim Dong-hwa, who I am going to discuss in this paper. Here, I try to understand the responses of the Korean Buddhist community to modernity as being separate from the modern reform programs of Korean Buddhism by investigating how the modern Buddhist scholarship of Europe introduced to Korea from Japan in the colonial period was understood by Korean Buddhist scholars. Towards this end, I focus on the cases of Bak Jong-hong and Gim Dong-hwa and examine how they understood the problem of 'modernity' and how it influenced their understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist scholarship.

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Bak Jong-hong (1903-1976) and Kim Dong-hwa (1902-1980) were pioneers in Buddhist scholarship in Korea after the liberation and their scholarly achievements have wielded great influence on the Buddhist community until today. I begin my attempt to open a new chapter in the study of Buddhist scholarship by taking issue with the scholarship of the two scholars mentioned above. This is not meant to belittle the import of their scholarly achievements, but to use it as a starting point **from which to reflect on the current status of Korean Buddhist scholarship, given that there has been few scholarly achievement excelling theirs and that their scholarly influence continues even today.**

As these two scholars are not the only ones who have large footprints in the field of Korean Buddhist scholarship since the liberation, it is worth explaining the reasons I take issue with them. To begin with, both Gim and Bak have some similarities and differences that make them appropriate subjects as case studies. They were born at nearly the same time, in 1902 and in 1903, respectively--when the political and economic invasion and exploitation of Korea by the West and nearby powers was underway in full force--and as colonial intellectuals, they similarly experienced the conflicts of tradition and modernity, with that experience coming to greatly influence the formation of their scholarship on Korean Buddhism, and Buddhist thought in general.

In a strict sense, Bak Jong-hong is a philosopher of the West and Korea, rather than a Buddhist scholar. The backbone of his scholarly world is the modern German philosophy represented by Hegel and Heidegger. Yet, as he said, the primary motive for his "doing philosophy" lies in "the realistic existence of myself, this time, this society and this soil,"¹ and he was motivated to seek for the national and cultural identity of Korea. Thus, while he studied Korean Buddhism in the context of the so-called Korean Thought per se, his study of Korean Buddhism was to seek for an originality of Korean Buddhist thought distinct from those of India, China and Japan.

¹ Quoted from Yi N. (1996, 23).

Gim Dong-hwa is different from Bak Jong-hong in many aspects. Bak studied the traditional, Confucian Chinese classics during childhood. In contrast, Gim became a Buddhist monk as a child, was awakened to Buddhism, and then later went to Japan for college where he was exposed to modern Buddhist scholarship. While Bak studied specifically Korean Buddhism as a part of Korean thought, Gim studied Buddhism in general and his interest in Korean Buddhism was to place it within the context of pan-Buddhist area, including India.

What, then, would be the reference framework of the criticism of Bak and Kim, or the Buddhist scholarship represented by the two? The reference framework of the criticism is, indeed, to overcome the Buddhist studies from the perspective of colonialism and to open a new horizon for Buddhism studies in the postcolonial period. There is no need to dwell on the fact that the modern scholarship and perspective on Korean traditional thought, which was taken up by Bak and Kim as part of their mission of overcoming tradition and modernizing their mother country, began in the West. It is true that modern European Buddhist scholarship brought a new perspective to the traditional understanding of this religion, and it broadened and enriched the realm of Buddhist studies in its relationship with various branches of the humanities developed in the West, such as philology, philosophy, theology, linguistics, archaeology, and religious studies. However, both the critical consciousness and perspective implicated in modern Buddhist scholarship are fundamentally founded on the Western colonial perspective towards the East. As Edward Said points out, the Western view of the East starts with the conception of the East as the Other, the unknown and the mystic and thereby, an object of interest and conquest. This conception of the East is imbued in its approach to Buddhism as well.²

It may not be fair to reevaluate the scholarship of the two scholars, who survived colonial period with a strong sense of national pride and responsibility for their mother country, from the relatively recent perspective of post-colonialism. However, this is not just to criticize the shortcomings of their scholarship, but to suggest the starting point for a new chapter in Korean Buddhist scholarship.

3

Before entering into a detailed discussion, I would like to summarize several problems that have been raised until recent years over the identity of Eastern thought in the community of Korean scholars. For the last ten years or so, there has been active discussion over the conceptual definition and research methodology of Korean thought as well as East Asian thought. I think that this arises from reflection on the **Eurocentric** world history and the universal mainstream of the Western culture that has been continuous since the early modern period, and from a new awareness and interest in our own tradition that is occurring in Korean society. Particularly, the recent trend of globalization appears to foster a sense of crisis related to the cultural identity of Korea and urges reinterpretation and a new understanding of Korean tradition. It is against this backdrop that the community of Korean thought has found the scholarship on Confucianism and Buddhism particularly problematic, which constitutes the traditional

² See Said (1978) on this. See Almond (1988) for a more recent work on Buddhist scholarship. See also Sim (1986, 319-342) on the Western view of Oriental philosophy.

thought of the East and together forms the main components of Korean thought.³

Is Eastern Thought a Philosophy or Not?

In my view, this is an issue that entirely reflects the East-West confrontations and the history of Western imperialism and colonialism in modern times. It is not an issue of how to conceptually define Eastern thought, but that of defining historical [consciousness](#) itself. The discussions over this issue among Korean scholars can be roughly summarized in the following ways:

Some (particularly, those who specialize in Western philosophy) think that Eastern thought is similar to religious thought (in the case of Buddhism), is closer to social ideology in the sense that it deals with mostly the [political system](#) and social structure (in the case of Confucianism), and cannot be defined as a philosophy because it pursues individual cultivation and enlightenment (in both Buddhism and Confucianism). This view is problematic, as they regard philosophy as a phenomenon of the Western world only, and adopt too narrow a view of philosophy.

Another group of people think that Eastern thought possesses many elements that can be philosophical and thus can be philosophically explored, which is a rational and valid argument. But the conceptual definition of “philosophy” held by advocates of this view is also problematic. Many of them still think of philosophy as that which is based on the Western conceptual definition of philosophy and study Eastern thought from only a Western perspective. This is the group of people I criticize in the present article, with Bak Jong-hong and Gim Dong-hwa standing out as its most obvious representatives.

Another view often found among conservative scholars of Eastern thought is one holding that Eastern thought cannot be measured by Western criteria and that “East is East and West is West.” According to Professor Sim Jae-ryong’s classification, the so-called traditional Confucian teachers of the old days are part of this category.⁴ This view is unworthy of any discussion, just like that of scholars on the Western philosophy noted above.

The various views on modern scholarship of Eastern thought can be classified into the above three types. In the paper, the extreme views of the first and the third will not be discussed. I personally subscribe to the second view concerning the philosophical study of Eastern thought and regard Korean Buddhism as a [part](#) of Korean thought, and intend to analyze the second view from a critical perspective.

What Is Korean Thought?

The most comprehensive and general definition of the concept of Korean thought is “thought by Koreans living in Korea.” There is little disagreement to this definition, as it is comprehensive. But there are various discussions and debates on the issues of the specific scope of Korean thought. Also, there are gaps between the “reality” and “theory” behind the debates.

[Professor Yi Myeong-heon wants to include “the fruits of Western philosophy,](#)

³ See Sim (1986) for various discussions on the research methodology of East Asian thought and philosophy.

⁴ Sim (1986), 228.

whose seeds were sewn from 1920 and on” within the scope of Korean thought or philosophy.⁵ It sounds agreeable. As far as it is true that Buddhism and Confucianism were imported from outside and became ‘Koreanized’ through a process of acceptance and assimilation for a certain period, it may not be impossible that Western philosophy has become ‘Koreanized’ and a part of Korean thought. However, if we look at how the term “Korean thought” is used in ordinary sense, only Confucianism and Buddhism, among various kinds of imported thought, are included within the definition of Korean thought. Many people use the term this way, and the academic curriculum in Korean universities is organized this way. The specialty areas of Korean thought majors are usually Buddhism, Confucianism, Donghak thought, as well as modern thinkers such as Sin Chaeho--and nothing more. People who specialize in Western philosophy agree to define Korean thought as “thought by Koreans living in Korea,” but few seem to think that they are studying Korean thought, though **they** are Koreans and are based in Korea.

I do not have a rigid, unwavering view on the conceptual definition of Korean thought and its scope. But I would like to explain my position, though tentative and preliminary, on those issues and raise some questions regarding them in the hope of engendering discussion in the future.

*My Position on the **definition** and scope of Korean Thought*

First of all, I think that Buddhism and Confucianism are Korean traditional thought and not just because they have a long history in Korea. Likewise, I cannot agree to the claim that Western philosophy can be a part of Korean thought just because a great amount of time has passed since its import. The question of Korean acceptance of imported thought is not simply a matter of the length of time. Let us take a look at a specific example. In the descriptions of the history of Buddhist thought in Korea, Monk Seungnang of the Goguryo kingdom is often mentioned at the beginning. Seungnang’s theory on the Middle Path of the Two Truths was a Korean interpretation of the Madhyamika philosophy, which was exported back to China, exerting critical influence on the formation of New Sanlun School, also known as the Three-Treatise School. This occurred only 100 years after Buddhism was imported to the Korean Peninsula. Now, calculating from the 1930s, when the first-generation Western philosophers, including Bak Jong-hong, were produced in Korea, let me ask if a Korean interpretation of Kant can be envisioned in 2030? I doubt it, even if we were to wait 30 more years. If it is doubtful, which would be my expectation, is it because of the content of Kant’s philosophy, or because there has been no genius the likes of Seungnang among all Korean scholars of Western philosophy? Should we sit in wait of that genius to come?

What I think is that we have to consider not just the length of time, but also the culture area for the external representations of Korean thought. Though Buddhism was originated in the Indian culture area, to which Korea does not belong, it was transmitted to Korea through China and Korea as a part of the Chinese culture area. Besides, Central Asia played a bridging role linking Chinese culture and Indian culture geographically and culturally, and Central Asian immigrants to China played a role as well. Central Asian monks such as **Kumārajīva** and the descendants of Central Asian

⁵ Yi M. (1986, 23).

immigrants played an important role in transmitting Buddhism to China by bridging the two different cultures. Witnessing these historical cases, I come to think that the definition of Korean thought as “thought by Koreans living in Korea” should be revisited. When it is defined as such, ‘Koreans’ and ‘Korea’ are not simple concepts. We must examine more cases in history. For example, how can it be justified to include in the history of Chinese Buddhist thought Central Asian monks who were active in China, like Kumarajiva, and the descendants of Central Asian immigrants? Besides, the regional concept of “Korea” must be reconsidered. Specifically, how should we then treat philosophical research by people of Korean blood living in the United States or Yanbian, China? The history of the Balhae(Pohai) kingdom is a part of Korean history. Therefore, should the philosophical activities of Koreans living abroad and their descendants constitute a part of Korean thought or not?

The questions raised above imply that more discussion needs to be made over the scope and the conceptual definition of Korean thought. Now I would like to begin a critical discussion of the Buddhist scholarship of Bak Jong-hong and Gim Dong-hwa.

The Case of Bak Jong-hong

As a member of the first generation of Korean modern philosophers, **Bak made pioneering efforts to systematize Korean traditional thoughts such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Donghak thought in the context of Korean intellectual history as well as in the philosophical perspective.** Despite those achievements, however, the research methodology on Korean thought that he tried to establish and his attitude to it are quite problematic from today’s perspective, and those problems are exactly the very origin of the many problems surrounding scholarship on Korean thought today.

In his article, “Preliminary Thoughts on the Study of Korean Thought” published in 1958, he notes that he deals with the issue of “the attitude and the scope of the study of Korean thought.”⁶ He adopts a very comprehensive approach to the conceptual definition and scope of Korean thought, arguing that the thought of Koreans have to be Korean thought and that Korean thought is produced because Koreans live as Koreans and it is taken up as a study problem for that very reason.⁷ According to this conceptual definition of Korean thought, this is nothing else than the thought of “Koreans living in Korea.” However, despite the very comprehensive definition of Korean thought, he confines the research scope of Korean thought to traditional thought such as Confucianism and Buddhism, and more recent Silhak (Practical Learning) and Donghak thought. His position contrasts with that of some other Korean scholars who try to include “the fruits of Western philosophy, whose seeds were sewn from 1920 and on” within **the boundary of Korean philosophical thought.**

Now let us examine what Bak proposes as the attitude of studying Korean thought in his paper. As he says his thoughts are preliminary, he does not offer any specific research methodology or stance. But we can get a glimpse of his ideas about the research methodology of Korean thought **through his remarks scattered throughout the paper.**

⁶ Bak (1982, 9-19). Bak does not distinguish between thought and philosophy throughout the paper and uses them interchangeably.

⁷ Bak (1982, 9).

First of all, Bak thinks of Korean thought as “thought that has Korean character.” He asks himself, “If art and music truly have reached a level praised by foreigners, then, would there not be something remarkable in the thought of Koreans who have produced and lived with such art and music?”⁸ and notes that it is the agenda of Korean thought to find ‘thought’ that is unique to Korea. On Korean Buddhist thought, he says that “it is expected that we can clarify in what aspects Korean Buddhist thought reveals its own unique characteristics by studying and understanding Jinul’s thought.”⁹ In sum, he believes that it is the mission of Korean Buddhist scholarship and moreover, of Korean thought to identify distinct characteristics from the Buddhist thought of other regions. For him, studying Korean thought means finding Korean characteristics. For the theoretical basis of his research methodology to find Korean characteristics, he refers to regional variances in language. He notes that “The way Koreans think is limited by the structure of the Korean language. . . . It is language that mediates and links one’s thought with one’s life or one’s foundation.”¹⁰ He views that different languages lead to different thought.

Yet the following problems can be pointed out for his methodological premise of divining the specific character of Korean Buddhist thought through its characteristics.

First, a characteristic of something is what makes it distinguished from others and at the same time, it should continue for a certain duration of time. An instant projection of a phenomenon devoid of a historical context cannot be a characteristic. Bak seems to believe that it is possible to infer the characteristics of Korean Buddhism inductively, and furthermore, closely examine Korean thought by studying the thoughts of those renowned scholar-monks in Korean Buddhist history, such as Seungnang, Woncheuk, Wonhyo, and Uicheon. But I wonder whether the historical characteristics of Korean Buddhism running through Seungnang, Woncheuk, Wonhyo and others really exist, as Bak expects or proposes.

Second, Bak maintains “it is Uicheon who widely spread the spirit of *hwajaeng* (reconciliation of doctrinal controversy), a tradition in Korean Buddhism, by promoting the importance of cultivating doctrine and contemplation.”¹¹ But I wonder whether the spirit of *hwajaeng* can really be called a tradition that had continued from Wonhyo to Jinul to the Joseon dynasty. Where did Jinul make mention of Wonhyo? [Was there in the history of Korean Buddhism any dharma disciple or a successor who inherited Wonhyo’s thought?](#)

Third, in asserting that “Koreans’ talent and capacity of philosophical contemplation are displayed in the doctrinal development of Buddhist thought,”¹² Bak tries to prove their excellent ability for philosophical contemplation by demonstrating the extraordinariness and creative interpretations made by a few distinguished figures such as Seungnang, Woncheuk, and Wonhyo (through comparison with their contemporaries of China). But the fact that only four or five people exercised influence on Chinese Buddhist society over the millennium from the import of Buddhism to

⁸ Bak (1982, 10).

⁹ Bak (1982, 14).

¹⁰ Bak (1982, 16-17).

¹¹ Bak (1982, 154).

¹² Bak (1982, 206).

Jinul's time only shows the dearth of Korean Buddhist thought. Ironically, contrary to his intention, it only stresses the paucity of Korean Buddhist thinking.

Fourth, though Bak says he wants to closely examine the characteristics of Korean Buddhism, he does not conduct a comparative analysis alongside Chinese and Indian Buddhism. He examines Wonhyo's thought in his commentary on *The Awakening of Faith in Mahayana*, but in many parts does not distinguish between the main ideas of *The Awakening of Faith in Mahayana* and Wonhyo's own thought. Even though *The Haedongso* (The Commentary of the East), Wonhyo's commentary on *The Awakening of Faith in Mahayana*, is a representative work of his, it is essential to compare it with those of other commentaries for a better understanding of Wonhyo.

Fifth, **by discussing the close relationship between language and philosophical characteristics, Bak argues that Korea had its own unique thought.** But because East Asia had the common, intellectually mediating language of Chinese characters at the time, language differences seemed to have functioned as a medium linking East Asia as a community of intellectual discourse rather than guarantee the development of the unique characteristics Korean Buddhist thought.

Sixth, an element consistent in Bak's attitude in studying Korean traditional thought is that of a strong sense of nationalism. Although not negative in itself, nationalism, if excessively expressed, can do harm to one's academic perspective. He often mentions in his papers that "We have something as good as the West." This may be an expression of his national pride and self-respect, but it also reveals his sense of Eastern inferiority to the West and obsession with modernization. This tendency is not observed solely in Bak; it is often present in the writings of Korean intellectuals produced from the liberation to the 1970s.

To Bak, the main purpose of studying Korean thought is to identify its characteristics. This attitude is shared by many contemporary scholars studying Eastern thought in the East and the West and I think it is the wrong attitude and approach. The concept of regional characteristics based on the unit of nation such as Korea, China or Japan was created since modern times. Nation and region as a political unit are old concepts coinciding with the history of war, whereas the concept of nation as a cultural unit is pretty recent. Bak tries to study Korean Buddhism through Wonhyo under the notion that he is a representative figure of Korean Buddhist thought. But in my view, it is historically more compelling that Wonhyo's interest was not solely on Korean Buddhism but lay in joining the intellectual discourse in the pan-Buddhist area of his time, which included India and East Asia. Therefore, it might not be possible to identify regional characteristics of Korean Buddhism by studying Wonhyo and Jinul; even if it is possible, such an undertaking would have little meaning to us. **The term "one hundred thoughts" in 'the controversy of one hundred thoughts,' Wonhyo's main object of *hwajaeng*, refers to the community of discourse on Buddhist thought encompassing East Asia at large, including China.**

I am not saying that regional characteristics are not important in the study of Buddhism, or that regional characteristics are nonexistent. **Actually, focus on regional characteristics in Buddhist scholarship initially began with Western scholars, who first studied Buddhism as a part of regional studies at the beginning. To me, the fact that Korean scholars of East Asian studies take regional characteristics as a main research topic shows that they are adopting the Western perspective of East Asian studies without criticism.**

The Case of Gim Dong-hwa

Gim Donghwa is another model case suiting the topic of this paper. While Bak was not a Buddhist scholar in a rigorous sense and studies Korean Buddhism as a [part of Korean thought](#), Gim is a Buddhist scholar and studies Buddhism in general, without limiting it to Korean Buddhism. In this sense, criticism of Gim will be a criticism of Buddhist scholarship in Korea at large rather than it is directly on Korean Buddhism.

In his *Bulgyohak gaeron* (Introduction to Buddhist Studies) published in 1954, Gim discusses the conceptual definition and research methodology of Buddhist studies in great detail. The work is the first modern introductory book and research [manual](#) of Buddhist studies in Korea, and even today is widely read as an introduction to Buddhist studies. The book contains a great deal of Japanese Buddhist scholarship and scholarly achievements of his time, which is not a surprise, considering the author's educational background.

Japan adopted the advanced culture and [civilizations](#) of Europe in the modernization process after the Meiji Reformation, with scholarship having been no exception in terms of this development. The skepticism and even rejection of the intellectuals on their own tradition, which were very common in the modernization process of the East Asia, were of no exception in the case of Japan. With the import of Western philosophical thought, there even occurred a movement in Japan to reject its own intellectual tradition on account of its being superstitious and unscientific. One of these traditions was Buddhism, which was regarded as irrational and superstitious in comparison to the rational scientific thought of the West.¹³

Self-forsaken interest in Buddhism was rekindled in Japan as Buddhist scholarship was imported back from Europe. England and France showed a strong interest in Buddhism.¹⁴ With the European reinterpretation on the basis of its advanced classical linguistics, philology, religious studies and philosophy, Buddhism began to draw the attention of Japanese intellectuals as a scholarly discipline, i.e., modern Buddhist scholarship. Yet modern Buddhist scholarship was analogous to Buddhism from the Western standpoint. The following statement by Sueki Takehiro shows very well how Eastern intellectuals view their tradition in early modern times and how they have come to accept their tradition reinterpreted from the Western standpoint:

Extremely [intellectual and intelligent](#) elements are found in Indian thought. A good example is the Early Buddhism. Looking at the [Early Buddhism of Shakyamuni](#) in his lifetime, it is very different from the Buddhism we see and hear in Japan. Talking about Japanese Buddhism . . . it focuses mostly on emotion and intuition, lacking rationality.

¹³ As a matter of fact, many temples were forced to close down and some had to close voluntarily with the banning of offerings. With the annexation of Korea to Japan in 1910, Japanese Buddhism entered Korea and D. T. Suzuki introduced Japanese Zen Buddhism to the Western world. These can be seen as self-rescue measures of Japanese Buddhism to cope with a difficult time at home. See Sharf (1995, 107-160).

¹⁴ Early Buddhism, in particular, the Pali [Paali] Canon, formed the main current in England, while France was interested in Chinese Buddhism reflecting its interest in China as a colonial market and Italy in Tibetan Buddhism. See Almond (1988).

That is why many people tend to think that Buddhism is anti-rational thought. When I say that Buddhism is a rational thought system, most people are surprised.¹⁵

“Rationality of Early Buddhism” that Sueki Takehiro discusses is nothing but the Victorian perspective of English Buddhist scholarship, which is merely Buddhism reconstructed based on then-popular historicism and rationalism.¹⁶ Under the influence of European Buddhist scholarship, [Buddhism and Buddhist scholarship in modern Japan are distinguished based on reason and the rationalist perspective](#), and attainment of objective truth by reason is proposed as a primary proposition of modern Buddhist scholarship.

The starting point of Gim’s Buddhist scholarship is the attitude of the Japanese Buddhist scholars toward Buddhism in the early modern period. This can be seen in his assertion on the possibility of philosophical study of Buddhism. In his *Bulgyohak gaeron*, he divides the areas of Buddhist studies into three, religious, philosophical, and ethical study, [while excluding Buddhist soteriology such as nirvana or enlightenment from the philosophical study of Buddhism](#).¹⁷

The doctrines of Buddhahood and nirvana are both religious and subjective and relate to the doctrine of Buddhist cultivation. . . . When we say the Buddhist truth as the [Jewel of Dharma](#), it means objective philosophical truth mainly It is subjectivity, but it is not a simple subjectivity, but subjectivity as an object of philosophy, i.e., objective subjectivity. If Buddhism is viewed simply as a religion, the truth in the [Jewel of Dharma](#) is actually unnecessary. Despite this, however, in reality the truth forms a large part of Buddhist doctrine, which is different from other religions.¹⁸

Here the so-called “objective philosophical truth,” which Gim offers as the presupposition of philosophical study, is problematic. He claims that because objective truth is the sole object of philosophical truth, “internal experience from enlightenment through nirvana” be excluded from the philosophical truth of Buddhism. Indeed, this attitude is found in many Buddhist scholars today. For example, Sin O-hyeon remarks in his paper titled “Philosophy of Wonhyo under the Modern Perspective” the following:

Of course, because our discussion intends to be thoroughly philosophical, we cannot discuss the doctrine of [dependent origination](#) and therefore, we cannot

¹⁵ Sueki (1970, 24).

¹⁶ See Cho (2002) for the criticism of the rationalist approach to Buddhist scholarship and the problems of the understanding of early Buddhism by English scholars during the Victorian period.

¹⁷ In *Bulgyohak gaeron*, he divides the areas of Buddhist scholarship as follows:

a) Teachings by the Buddha > The Jewel of the Buddha > Study of the Founder > Religious > Leaving suffering and achieving happiness > Beauty > Emotion > Buddhist sutras > Study on meditation > Faith
b) Teachings on the Buddha, the Enlightened One > The jewel of Dharma > Truth > Philosophical > Transforming ignorance and unfolding enlightenment > Truth > Intellect > Buddhist commentaries > Study on wisdom > Understanding
c) Teachings on (achieving) buddhahood > Jewels of the Buddhist community > Ethics > Ethical > Preventing unwholesome parts and cultivating wholesome parts > Goodness > Will > Buddhist book on discipline > Punishment > Practice (p. 7)

¹⁸ Kim D. (1954, 90).

attempt a close examination of the loss of freedom and its recovery in causal relations. It is a matter of fact and [cultivation](#), which is beyond the scope of philosophical analysis and explanation.¹⁹

Many people who try a philosophical approach to Buddhism commit this fallacy of excluding internal experience such as “cultivation” and “enlightenment.” On the basis of this attitude lies, whether consciously or unconsciously, the supposition that philosophy is entitled to be called philosophy only in the Western sense of the term. In Western philosophy, objective truth is conceived by reason and the focus is on the object of conception through abstraction from the conceiving subject. In Buddhism, the capacity of human consciousness in understanding truth is not limited to reason. Human consciousness has many levels and stages. Reason from the standpoint of Western philosophy is similar to the mental functions of the [sixth and the seventh consciousness](#) in Buddhism while the *a priori* universality of consciousness overlaps with some mental functions of the eighth consciousness ([Storehouse consciousness](#)).

The diverse stages of mind in Buddhism that are based on meditative experience has a [hierarchical](#) structure. In Buddhism, cultivation means transformation of the level of consciousness in understanding reality. Depending on the level or stage of consciousness, a corresponding reality unfolds. The two kinds of truth, ultimate truth and conventional truth, should be understood in such a way that an infinite range of experiences of diverse realities can be thought to lie between the two kinds, like the spectrum of a rainbow, rather than define two concrete stages of reality. The multi-layered hierarchy of reality and the understanding of different levels of reality depending on one’s level of cultivation are presupposed in the philosophy and religion of Indian origin. Upanishad philosophy demonstrates the progression to the ultimate truth or the hierarchy of diverse realities. The ultimate reality called *ātman* is not understood through daily experiences, but experienced through a very high level of cultivation.

After all, it can be said that Buddhism’s philosophical thought system concerns the reality and consciousness unfolding diversely according to the level of cultivation.

¹⁹ See Sin (1994, 174). Sin claims that “In the case of Wonhyo, the terms he uses are thoroughly philosophical as they are so much metaphysical and thus, Wonhyo’s Buddhist thought can be properly understood only through a philosophical approach.” I think this is a misunderstanding of Wonhyo’s thought and of Buddhism at the same time. His position is based on the assumption that cultivation cannot be an object of philosophical investigation. He is not the only person who holds the view.

Sin also notes in his paper that “The origin of philosophical knowledge is subjective experience. . . . However, because subjective experience has *a priori* universality beyond relative subjectivity, it must be distinguished from (Buddhist) wisdom mentioned earlier” (Sin 1994, 73). I think that Sin has a wrong conception of “Buddhist wisdom.” Furthermore, if subjective experience has (relative) objectivity, it is meant to emphasize the object of conception through abstraction of the object from the conceiving [conscious] subject. What is a priori universality Shin talks about? Is it not an ideology of Western philosophy as he criticizes it himself? I think it is the unity of the subject and the object that needs to be pursued. It does not matter whether it is called wisdom, pure experience or a priori universality. Philosophical terms are as ideological as the long history of philosophy and a conceptual definition of something is, in nature, self-constraining or closed up by itself. For instance, if I call the state of unity between the subject and the object “pure experience,” it can be used as a philosophical term distinctively from the term “pure experience” used in phenomenology. Anyway, the semantics of a term does not provide its conceptual definition.

On the importance of “cultivation/practice” in doctrinal or philosophical study of Buddhism, see my paper (Cho 2003, 163-189).

For instance, the expression that “every sentient being has the Buddha nature” is not an expression of religious belief or a metaphysical thesis; it is an experienced reality reached through “enlightenment.”

I think that it is improper to argue that the Buddhist doctrine of truth is the objective, philosophical truth that Kim does, or that objective truth is the sole object of the study of Buddhist philosophy, as Sin implies in his paper. **In the Buddhist doctrine of mind and reality as revealed in the changing levels of consciousness depending on one’s cultivation, and the hierarchy of reality developing in correspondence to it, the premise of Western philosophy that objective truth is reached by reason loses its validity and legitimacy. The Buddhist believes that the experience of meditation, or *samādhi*, provides a more reliable foundation for epistemology than reason in daily life. The term objectivity in Western philosophy already presupposes ‘daily’ and ‘rational’ experience as opposed to the experience of ‘meditation.’ In this regard, Buddhist truth is not objective truth in the sense of Western Philosophy because it is obtained from the experience of meditation, and ultimately enlightenment.**

However, this does not mean that meditation or enlightenment experience is necessary to study Buddhism. This is only to point out that we need to understand that Buddhist texts are a verbalized record of the enlightenment experience, which is different from daily experience based on reason. In this regard, I proposed “methodological agnosticism” as a method of studying Buddhism in another article.²⁰ Methodological agnosticism is a means to overcome the dilemma that, while Buddhist texts are records of enlightenment, scholars of Buddhism are not necessarily practitioners, nor can they proceed without being firmly grounded in reason. This approach presupposes a distinction between “rationality” and a “rationalistic approach.” This requires that, while using rationality as the primary tool for scholarly study, we accept a certain realm, like enlightenment experience, as it is; in doing so, we deny our rationality access to it. In this way we may prevent the proper meaning of the Buddhist doctrine from being distorted. In this regard, Buddhist traditional scholarship has some implications for us. In the tradition of Buddhist scholarship, *che* (Ch. *ti*, essence) and *yong* (Ch. *yung*, function) are employed to interpret Buddhism. Each concerns a different realm: *yong* refers to the realm that can be understood by reason and language, while *che* signifies the realm beyond the reach of reason. This might serve as a solution to relieve the tension between Buddhism built on the world of enlightenment and scholarly effort based on the instrument of reason. That *che* and *yong* are in a non-dualistic relationship means that it is possible to understand the world of *che* through **rational understanding of *yong*. In the terminology of *the Awakening of Faith in Mahayana*, the realm of enlightenment, i.e., ineffable suchness, is incomprehensible rationally, but it is comprehensible through the domain of effable suchness, which is in a nondual relationship with it.** Therefore, methodological agnosticism can be seen as a cautious approach to take in order to reach the understanding of *che* via *yong*.

Conclusion

²⁰ Cho (2003).

In the Western intellectual history, it was reason that divided theology and philosophy. Since then, any attempt to define philosophy in the West had to be constantly conscious of theology, which traversed the realm of philosophy with ease. But philosophy restricted its domain and narrowed its boundary of concern with a passive attitude that certain things were “not an object of philosophy” instead of taking a more open and fluid opposing attitude that still shapes the character of modern philosophy--in particular, modern British and U.S. philosophy--even today. It is beyond the scope of my abilities to discuss whether that is right or wrong, nor is it the concern of the present paper. Suffice it to say is that in the philosophical study of Buddhism, the conceptual definition of philosophy should not be as narrow a one as in modern British and U.S. philosophy. It nearly goes without saying that when people in Korea say that traditional thought such as Buddhism and Confucianism are not philosophies, they are referring to Western philosophy in a very narrow sense. In my view, this problem reflects in entirety the East-West confrontation and Western imperialism and colonialism in early modern history. It is a problem of historical viewpoint, not just that of conceptually defining of Eastern thought.

I am not asserting that Buddhism has a solution to the problems Western philosophy has not solved, or that Buddhism has some special areas that Western philosophy does not, or that it has a unique philosophical methodology. As I mentioned earlier, as long as we are engaged in Buddhist studies, we must employ reason as our primary tool of scholarly exertion, just like in any other discipline, and participate in the community of philosophical discourse through language. In addition, there is no disagreement with the notion that religious truth and philosophical truth can be different. However, in differentiating religious truth from philosophical truth, the Western criteria used to divide theology and philosophy should not be regarded as absolute. Western philosophy must broaden the definition and scope of philosophy by accepting the terms of other systems of thought and philosophy, without disregarding them on the basis of them being outside the realm of philosophy, or misunderstand or distort them only because they do not fit it's a narrow Western definition of philosophy.

Korea had Buddhism but did not have Buddhist scholarship until modern times; there was a Buddhist scholarly tradition, but not scholarly discipline in the modern sense. Buddhist scholarship originated in Europe in the early nineteenth century and was introduced to Korea through Japan and developed into its current form. Thus, it entirely reflects a Western-oriented worldview and a Western **perception**. From the liberation to the present, Koreans have followed that Buddhist scholarship without reflection. Now is the time to consider a new approach to traditional thought, including Buddhism. It must be wary of nationalistic tendencies, as displayed in the present case studies involving those scholars, and the related modernist need for it, and instead proceed with a critical perspective.

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