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Publication Date

2019

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Redacting Buddha:

Sacred Scripture and Religious Identity

in the Korean New Religious Movement of Wŏn Buddhism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in Asian Languages and Cultures

by

Frederick M. Ranallo-Higgins

2019

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2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Sacred Scripture and Religious Identity

in the Korean New Religious Movement of Wŏn Buddhism

by

Frederick M. Ranallo-Higgins

Doctor of Philosophy in Asian Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Robert E. Buswell, Chair

This study seeks to move academic discourse on Wŏn Buddhism beyond didactic introductions and official narratives. Delving into tensions between a complex constellation of text, redaction, narrative, belief, praxis, and personal experience, I explore the quick transformation of Pak Chungbin's small Buddhadharma Research Society into the contemporary and international Wŏn Buddhist order. On an immediate level, this study reveals a disparity between text and praxis that emerges after the death of the charismatic founder. On a broader level, it reveals the concrete ways adherents in

a nascent religious order immediately alter text and praxis to fit their desires and needs, despite the trajectory on which the charismatic founder set his order. The Introduction provides a thorough review of existing English literature on Wŏn Buddhism, discusses historiographic and methodologic concerns, deliberates on the source material, and reveals the need for more sustained and focused investigations of Wŏn Buddhism. Chapter One surveys official narratives around Pak and the founding of the order. It also investigates the divine status of Pak as the Maitreya Buddha, which followers claimed after his death. Chapter Two provides an accounting of the early texts of the order, examines the redaction of Pak's *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, and locates Pak's teaching firmly within broader East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist worldviews and schemata. Chapter Three provides a much-needed outline and accounting of the community: types of membership, governance, education of ordinands, and the daily life of the ordained in a variety of settings. This chapter also provides a complete accounting of temple structure, rituals, and the performance of dharma meetings. Chapter Three closes with three important critical issues facing the community: self-autonomy of ordained members, gendered discrimination, and the invisibility of LGBT members. Throughout this study, I include an extensive personal ethnography, weaving in my own subjective experience with the Wŏn Buddhist community.

The dissertation of Frederick M. Ranallo-Higgins is approved.

John Duncan

Timothy R. Tangherlini

Burglind Jungmann

Robert E. Buswell, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

Dedicated to devoted LGBT religious practitioners
hiding in the shadows of all the world's religions.

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Frederick Michael Ranallo-Higgins
Vita

- Education
- Columbia University in the City of New York
 - Master of Arts, East Asian Studies
 - Advisor: Jahyun Kim Haboush
 - Won Institute of Graduate Studies
 - Won Buddhist Studies and Training
 - University of Colorado at Denver
 - Bachelor of Arts, Art History and Religious Studies
 - summa cum laude*
 - Metropolitan State University of Denver
 - General Studies, Honors Program
 - Sogang University (South Korea)
 - Korean Language Education & Research Institute
 - Graduate, Korean Language Studies
- Professional Experience
- Won Institute of Graduate Studies
 - Assistant to the President and Senior Management
 - 2017 – present
 - University of California Los Angeles
 - Teaching Fellow 2011 – 2016
 - Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University in the City of New York
 - Administrative Assistant 2008 – 2010
 - Metropolitan State University of Denver
 - Immigrant Student Tutor 2000 – 2003
- Seminars & Conferences
- University of California Los Angeles Inaugural Graduate Conference on Religion
 - Conference Coordinator 2014
 - Korean History & Culture Seminar for American Educators
 - Korean Culture Center Los Angeles
 - Lecturer 2014, 2015

University of Colorado at Denver Art History Symposium
Assistant Coordinator 2005
Presented: "Nancy Grossman: Embracing the
Shadow"

Publications Yu Kilchun. *Sōyu kyōnmun (Observations on a Journey to the West)*. Translated by Min Suh Son, Hanmee Na Kim, Sinwoo Lee, and Frederick Ranallo-Higgins, edited by John B. Duncan, forthcoming from the University of Hawai'i Press.

Awards Eugene V. Cota-Robles Fellow, UCLA, 2010-2014
Dean's List, University of Colorado, 2005
National Deans List, 2000-2004
Honors Program Scholarship, MSUD, 2003
Rocky Mountain Accordion Society, multiple awards
Accordion Federation of North America, multiple awards
American Accordionist Association, multiple awards

Professional Development ATIXA Title IX Coordinator Certification, 2018

Introduction

April 16, 2016, marked the 100th anniversary of the awakening experience of Pak Chungbin 朴重彬 (1891-1943) and the founding of Wŏn Buddhism (*Wŏnbulgyo* 圓佛敎).¹ Although I could not attend the festivities in Iksan, South Korea, I received numerous emails with links to pictures and news articles. Several messages referenced an interview with historian Donald Baker.² Full of images of smiling Wŏn Buddhist followers (many that I recognized), and images of Baker meditating with a Wŏn Buddhist member in an empty meditation hall, Baker heaps praise on Wŏn Buddhism, painting a picture of a thriving Buddhist order with international appeal. Toward the end of the video, he declares:

I'm a historian, not a prophet. But, I mean, I think Wŏn Buddhism is becoming known in the Western world. And Wŏn Buddhism is the most suitable form of Buddhism for the modern world. So, I think when Westerners realize that, they will be drawn to Wŏn Buddhism.

Outside of the Korean Wŏn Buddhist community, I had never heard an academic praise Wŏn Buddhism as the “most suitable form of Buddhism for the modern world.”

¹ Pak's officially recorded name is Pak Hŭisŏp 朴喜燮; childhood names are Pak Ch'ŏhwa 朴處化 and Pak Chinsŏp 朴鎭燮; dharma name Pak Chungbin 朴重彬; honorific dharma title Sot'aesan 少太山; and Wŏn Buddhist posthumous title Taejongsa 大宗師. Many Wŏn Buddhist followers do not know all these names. Even senior members are often unaware that his officially recorded name is Pak Hŭisŏp. I utilize his dharma name in this study, as it is the most common and appears in all English secondary and translated material.

² Baker posted the broadcasted interview to his Facebook page. Don Baker's Facebook page, accessed May 27, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/ubcdbaker/videos/10209713484980847>.

Contrary to the picture he paints in the interview of a thriving religious order, the Wŏn Buddhist order has been struggling for years with little success to retain its younger generation and attract new members. Baker's characterization seems out of touch with the reality of the Wŏn Buddhist experience.

Several other emails referenced an interview in the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* with the retired fourth Head Dharma Master Yi Kwangjŏng 李廣淨 (b. 1936).³ At several points, the interviewer raised the topic of gender discrimination. Yi provides the standard Wŏn Buddhist response and states, "Our founding master, boldly for that time, abolished that discrimination."⁴ When the interviewer challenged Yi by asking if there has ever been a woman Head Dharma Master, he responds, "So far all of the heads have been male. But our second-ranked person, the executive director of the ministry, is a woman."⁵ Although doctrinally women are equal, currently women are not equal in the Wŏn Buddhist order. The problem is publicly discussed and known, albeit not by Yi's interviewer or by an unformed *Tricycle* reader. A missed opportunity, Yi opted for standard Wŏn Buddhist rhetoric instead of addressing the issue head on and acknowledging the harsh reality: with their lives and bodies strictly controlled, women do not enjoy equal status in the order. In fact, the gender discrimination is often

³ Emma Varvaloucas, "The Grace in This World: An interview with Venerable Chwasan, former head dharma master of the Won Buddhist Order," *Tricycle* (Summer 2016): 42-47, 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 92

the first thing noticed by non-Korean lay people who are interested in Wŏn Buddhism, and it is often the reason they leave and never come back. It was one of the reasons I left and stopped pursuing ordination.

The little academic attention paid to Wŏn Buddhism reflects, for the most part, the same public face. One recent journal article by a non-Wŏn Buddhist academic varies little from officially sanctioned narratives.⁶ Similar to Baker's interview, Adams depicts a dynamic, growing religious institution with a large international footprint. He places great significance on Wŏn Buddhism's "successful" American missions and on the opening of the Won Institute of Graduate Studies in Philadelphia.⁷ I lived and worked within the community at the Won Institute and have studied or lived with the Wŏn Buddhists on and off for over twenty years, in both the United States and South Korea - I have yet to hear anyone discuss the American missions as a 'success.' In fact, most discussions revolve around how to solve the serious problems facing Wŏn Buddhism in the United States: gender inequality that inhibits Americans from joining; the inability to attract dedicated and financially supportive non-Korean adherents; increasing financial difficulties and the need for ongoing financial support from the Headquarters and Korean donors; low involvement of second or third-generation Wŏn Buddhist

⁶ Daniel J. Adams, "Won Buddhism in Korea: A New Religious Movement Comes of Age," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society – Korea Branch* 84 (2009): 1-35.

⁷ I will discuss the Won Institute more fully later.

Korean-Americans; a lack-luster American Wŏn Buddhist Studies program that struggles to stay afloat; a palpable nationalist and exceptionalism view of the order that leaves non-Koreans feeling as the outsider; and anti-LGBT sentiments that go against-the-grain for most American Buddhists. Except for a short, superficial mention of gender disparity, Adams' outsider study never moves beyond textual and official positions, delivering a piece of propaganda that would make the Wŏn Buddhist order proud.

This nexus of discordant narratives is only one example that lays bare the tension between what the text says and what Wŏn Buddhists believe and practice, between the founders vision and the desires of his followers, between the lived reality and the identity they project into public spaces, and between what Westerners interested in Wŏn Buddhist teachings want and what Wŏn Buddhist are willing to give. Through exploring the tensions between the text and the teachings and the desires and needs of the community, we see how the Wŏn Buddhist community has transformed Pak's text and its teachings, in a relatively brief time, back into the religious and cultural patterns the founder criticized. This is significant on multiple levels. On an immediate level, it reveals a chasm of disparity between text and praxis that quickly emerged after the death of the charismatic power that initiated the order. This disparity highlights the key issue Wŏn Buddhism faces in its efforts to stay relevant in a changing world. On a broader level, it reveals the concrete ways adherents in a nascent religious order alter

text and praxis quickly to fit their own desires, despite the trajectory on which a charismatic founder initially directs followers.

I organized this study around the Buddhist Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Here, respectively, that would be Pak, his text and teachings, and the community of ordained and lay members. Through this framework, I will address a complex constellation of issues. First, I will reveal the complexity of Wŏn Buddhist beliefs surrounding official narratives. Living within the Wŏn Buddhist community reveals a variety of views, often disparate, on everything from basic practices to the supposed divine status of the founder as the new Buddha. Second, I will explore the teaching and how the redaction of the original text interacts with and influences many critical issues informing Wŏn Buddhist identity. Third, we have no accounting of the actual daily life and practice of Wŏn Buddhists: previous works have focused on introducing the teaching or delivering official historical narratives. Through my extensive experience with a variety of Wŏn Buddhist communities, in both South Korea and the United States, and from small, empty temples to the bustling Headquarters of Wŏn Buddhism, I will provide a thorough accounting of life in these various communities. Fourth, English speakers repeatedly ask the same questions regarding Wŏn Buddhist history, beliefs, and praxis. Bringing in these concerns, I will attempt to provide the cultural and historical context to answer such questions and offer a more nuanced understanding of Wŏn Buddhism.

This Introduction will review previous scholarship, address concerns about historiographic method, review primary source material, and outline my experience with Buddhism and various Wŏn Buddhist communities. Chapter One will focus on Pak Chungbin. Instead of providing a full accounting of the already well-explored official biography, I will summarize main events as stated in the doctrine and focus on the variety of conflicting views on each topic. Pak's deification as the 'New Buddha' or Maitreya will be critically assessed. Chapter Two will focus on the teaching and the redaction of Pak's original text, *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* (佛敎正典). The reorganization of the text will come into focus, and I will argue that the redaction reflects a shift from Pak's supposed 'reformation' of Korean Buddhism toward long-established cultural patterns he rejected. I will also argue that, based on his teachings, Pak was more of a social reformer concerned with social ills that contribute to human suffering rather than with 'reforming' or changing Buddhist doctrine or practice. Chapter Three will close with an in-depth look at the community and the challenges it currently faces in defining itself as a 'modern' form of Buddhism. I will focus on critical issues usually only discussed within the Wŏn Buddhist fold, and will argue that most of these issues result from the order's subsequent move away from Pak's instruction and back toward cultural patterns that Pak critiqued.

Review of Previous Scholarship

English-language scholarship on Wŏn Buddhism, which includes writings by

prominent Korean Won Buddhists, remains limited and generally only provides introductions to the teachings of Pak and introductions to the official history of Wŏn Buddhism. Except for Bongkil Chung's short footnotes and appendix in *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism*, no other works address (or even display awareness of) the issue of redaction.⁸ The most common question that continues to concern academics is how to categorize Wŏn Buddhism within the religious traditions of Korea. Attempts to locate it reveal not only conflicting opinions on the nature of Wŏn Buddhism but also on the nature of Korean Buddhism, indigenous religious thought and practices, nationalism, and Korean exceptionalism. Generally, scholars offer three perspectives: Wŏn Buddhism as a new sect of well-established Buddhist patterns, as a new indigenous religion, or as something in between.

One of the earliest to address the issue, Earhart categorizes Wŏn Buddhism as a new form of Korean Buddhism.⁹ He notes that Wŏn Buddhism formed outside the established orders and that the founder received his awakening independent of any Buddhist practice or inspiration. After his awakening, Pak studied various teachings and found his awakening experience and new understanding related closely to the teachings of the Buddha; however, Pak remained critical of the monk-centered system

⁸ Bongkil Chung, *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism: A Translation of the Wŏnbulgyo Kyojŏn with Introduction* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

⁹ H. Byron Earhart, "The New Religions of Korea: A Preliminary Interpretation," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society - Korea Branch* 49 (1974): 19-20.

unrelated to the daily lives of lay followers. Because of this criticism, Pak formed his own Buddhist group outside the established order. Since Pak grounded his teaching in understandings of a universal buddha-nature, Earhart argues that the order exists as a new and separate Korean Buddhist organization, particularly in its institutional structure and worship patterns. Only a few paragraphs long, Earhart's notable point is that Wŏn Buddhism represents a new form of Korean Buddhism.

The most prolific and one of the earliest writers in English on Wŏn Buddhism, Bongkil Chung continuously argues in his publications that Wŏn Buddhism represents a reformation of Korean Buddhism. In "What is Wŏn Buddhism?," he characterizes Wŏn Buddhism as an eclectic synthesis of tenets from the three dominant religious traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) grounded in a Buddhist vision of the nature of reality.¹⁰ Although he describes Wŏn Buddhism as a synthesis of the three, he identifies only two minor differences between established Korean Buddhism and Wŏn Buddhism: Wŏn Buddhism is not only for the ordained but for everyone; and Wŏn Buddhists do not pay homage to Buddha statues but rather to all beings as living buddhas. These are hardly significant differences.

In later publications, Chung repeats his assertion that Wŏn Buddhism is firmly Buddhist. In *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism*, he frequently draws attention to the

¹⁰ Bongkil Chung, "What is Won Buddhism," *Korea Journal* (May 1984): 18-31.

relationship between the basic Wŏn Buddhist belief structure and Buddhism, and often presents quotes from the founder exclaiming that he teaches and practices the Buddhadharma.¹¹ In his latest publication on Pak's successor, he shows that the teachings of Song Hong'uk 宋鴻昱 (1900-1962, dharma name Song Kyu 宋奎, dharma title Chŏngsan 鼎山) also remains grounded in a Buddhist soteriology; however, Song emphasized Wŏn Buddhism as an independent Buddhist institution completely separate from Korean Buddhism.¹² While locating Wŏn Buddhist teachings within Buddhism, Chung emphasizes that it also represents the formation of a new, independent indigenous Buddhism.

As a dedicated follower of the teaching, Chung appears to struggle with Wŏn Buddhist identity: he wants to make clear that the teaching represents Buddhist beliefs while also asserting its independent and nationalist nature. This perspective appears most evident in his chapter in *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*.¹³ The simple inclusion of Chung in the book implies he views Wŏn Buddhism as firmly Buddhist, and he

¹¹ Chung, *Scriptures*.

¹² Bongkil Chung, *The Dharma Master Chŏngsan of Won Buddhism: Analects and Writings* (Albany: State University of New York, 2012), 1-47. Unfortunately, Chung chose to completely reorganize this canonical work, so his text is difficult to use as a reference. His translation does not follow the order of the canonical text, which makes cross-referencing with the original text unnecessarily cumbersome. For this reason, I do not utilize or cite from his text.

¹³ Bongkil Chung, "Sot'aesan's Creation of Won Buddhism through the Reformation of Korean Buddhism," in *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, edited by Jin Y. Park (Albany: State University of New York, 2010), 61-90.

presents Wŏn Buddhism as reformed Korean Buddhism; however, he states Wŏn Buddhism represents a new form separate from the old.

Mark Cozin classifies Wŏn Buddhism as a new Korean religion.¹⁴ He argues that Wŏn Buddhism fused Buddhist beliefs and techniques, Confucian social ideas, and Christian institutional and temple organization. He focuses on the fact that Wŏn Buddhists remain conscious of themselves as a separate religious body; however, he fails to recognize the complexity of such a view, as represented by Chung, in which Wŏn Buddhists often represent themselves as a new Buddhism – a mixture of old and new. Cozin emphasizes the institutional quality and activities of Wŏn Buddhism to classify it as a new Korean religion without analyzing the doctrine or history of the order. Thus, for Cozin, Wŏn Buddhism is new simply because it is institutionally new.

Kwangsoo Park also presents Wŏn Buddhism as a new indigenous religion.¹⁵ Focusing on the symbolism of Pak's teaching of *irwŏn* (一圓, often literally translated as "one circle") as representative of *dharmakaya buddha*, the doctrinal basis of faith and practice in Wŏn Buddhism, he argues that Pak articulated *irwŏn* to synthesize Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist teachings to reflect 'traditional religious thought' in

¹⁴ Mark Cozin, "Wŏn Buddhism: The Origin and Growth of a New Korean Religion," in *Religion and Ritual in Korean Society*, edited by Laurel Kendall and Griffin Dix (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), 171-184.

¹⁵ Kwangsoo Park, *The Won Buddhism (Wŏnbulgyo) of So'aesan: A Twentieth-Century Religious Movement from Korea*. San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1997.

Korea. For Park, even with its Buddhist foundation, Pak created a new religion based on the concerns of the common people by combining the three teachings into one.

Jin Park complicates the matter by locating Wŏn Buddhism not specifically within Korean Buddhism or religion but rather within the broader Mahāyāna teachings.¹⁶ According to Park, in its social aspect, Wŏn Buddhism's reform agenda focuses on expanding Buddhism beyond the monastery by simplifying the teaching and practices. In its philosophical aspect, its reform efforts remain solidly anchored in Mahāyāna teachings on buddha-nature (*pulsŏng* 佛性, a Chinese translation of *buddhadhātu*). Similar to Chung, the only difference with established Buddhism remains Wŏn Buddhism's efforts to simplify the teaching in order to appeal to the public rather than focus on monastics. Thus, for Park, Wŏn Buddhism represents typical Mahāyāna teachings of East Asia repackaged for the masses.

James Huntley Grayson classifies Wŏn Buddhism as a new indigenous Korean religious movement but states it does not fit neatly into this category.¹⁷ He argues that Korean new religious movements (*sinhŭng chongyo* 新興宗教) share several common features: syncretism; strong shamanic influence; strong elements of nationalism; and millenarian utopianism. Since Wŏn Buddhism does not draw from shamanic practices,

¹⁶ Jin Y. Park, "The Wŏn Buddhist Practice of the Buddha-Nature," in *Religions of Korea in Practice*, edited by Robert E Buswell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 476-486.

¹⁷ James Huntley Grayson, *Korea – A Religious History* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 203-215.

he finds it problematic to classify it as new indigenous religion; however, to compensate for this, he emphasizes a Christian influence by arguing that the appeal of *dharmakaya* to Pak must have been a reaction to the unitary God of Christianity. Even though he considers Wŏn Buddhism to represent orthodox Buddhist teachings, because of the Confucian and Christian influence and its separate institutional existence, Grayson groups Wŏn Buddhism with new indigenous Korean religions.

Pye takes a nuanced approach to the classification of Wŏn Buddhism by analyzing whether or not it represents a 'new religious movement.'¹⁸ He points out that classification as 'reformed' Buddhism does not apply, as Pak never attempted to reform the established order or teaching; however, classifying it as 'new' belies Wŏn Buddhism's essential reliance on well-established, orthodox Mahāyāna teachings. He states that this tension between innovation and appropriation often characterizes new religious movements. He concludes that, although it may appear paradoxical, Wŏn Buddhist self-identity (such as represented by Chung), exemplifies the best classification: both old and new Buddhism.

The need to assert an identity as either 'Korean Buddhism' or 'new Korean indigenous religion' characterizes all these studies; however, this represents a variety of problems associated with such classifications, as Pye notes. Religions and religious identities represent a complex hybridity of identities that only arise when confronted

¹⁸ Michael Pye, "Won Buddhism as a Korean New Religion," *Numen* 49, no 2 (2002): 113-141.

with an opposing identity. By seeking to classify Wŏn Buddhism as ‘Korean Buddhism’ or ‘Korean new religion,’ scholars remain entrenched in nation-based identity politics and in outdated religious concerns of orthodoxy versus heterodoxy.

My ideas on this continue to evolve; but, currently, I look at the *axis mundi* within Wŏn Buddhist teachings. What central beliefs inform Wŏn Buddhist thought?

Considering it starts from a fundamental belief in karma and rebirth, it promotes the ineffable qualities of the absolute or nirvāṇa, strives for a Bodhisattva ideal, frames its soteriology firmly within Mahāyāna cosmology and rhetoric, and, most importantly, the founder claimed the Buddha’s teachings (through Mahāyāna texts) as the most effective way to explain reality, I consider Wŏn Buddhism, as Jin Park points out, firmly Mahāyāna Buddhism. Whether or not it is ‘new,’ ‘old,’ ‘reformed,’ ‘Korean,’ or ‘indigenous,’ remains irrelevant. Wŏn Buddhism is what it is – the Buddhist teachings of Pak Chungbin that continues to be re-interpreted by a dynamic community of people representing a plethora of various perspectives for which identity politics will never fully account.

Although existing English scholarship adequately introduces the teachings of Pak and the official history, most of these studies deliver an idealized view of the order and fail to recognize the differences between Pak’s original Buddhadharma Research Society (*Pulbŏp yŏn’guhoe* 佛法研究會) and its current manifestation as Wŏn Buddhism. For the most part, they locate Wŏn Buddhism outside mainstream Korean Buddhism

and fail to engage the Wŏn Buddhist worldview, which will be demonstrated as clearly mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism. Emic scholarship from Korean practitioners (both in English and Korean) tends to skirt or completely ignore key issues that arise after the founder's death, delivering hagiographic and idealized views based more on scripture than on lived reality.¹⁹ Etic scholarship from non-Korean academics appears completely unaware of the lived reality, delivering the same hagiographic and official narratives promulgated by the Headquarters of Wŏn Buddhism. It is quite surprising that after a long national and international presence in the Korean and world religious community, scholarship on Wŏn Buddhism has remained so limited, uniformed, didactic, and hagiographic.

Historiography and Methodology

This dissertation is not a theoretical exploration, by any means. I am more interested in revealing what Wŏn Buddhist's do and believe and less concerned with interpreting those beliefs and practices through overarching theoretical models and metanarratives. I have no desire to challenge the current Hegelian, French critical theory, and post-colonial-inspired models dominating the academe. Still, for the sake of

¹⁹ A large body of Korean-language Wŏn Buddhist secondary scholarship exists, and the order has digitalized it and made it available over the internet. Unfortunately, it provides little additional information outside of the primary source material, repeatedly presents the same information, and, since Wŏn Buddhism publishes the material through its own publishing house, it presents the same official hagiographic narrative. This body of work may be valuable in locating official views on belief and practice; but these views can be gleaned with even a casual encounter with the order or its text.

historical context, clarity, and transparency, I must briefly address several historiographical, theoretical, and methodological concerns that inform this study.

On Modernity

One of my main concerns in historically contextualizing Wŏn Buddhism lies with the perniciously present concern of *modernity*. Having been addressed in academic studies *ad nauseam*, it seems trite to address this issue, and yet the present model of Western capitalist industrial modernity continues to shape and inform history. Not only does Wŏn Buddhism present itself as something new and separate from a degenerate past, much of the history of Korea from 1880s to the present is ruptured from any continuity with Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910) and Neo-Confucianism, which are often relegated to a corrupt past of lost beliefs shed in the name of development and progress.

The impact of modernity distorts, and its presence must be navigated. Outside of its specific historical engagement in which all things ‘modern’ were promulgated by colonizers, the colonized, and those struggling to maintain their independence in the face of spreading industrial imperialism, the current academic model of modernity has run its course. In the current model, modernity is an acultural process that involves specific industrial and sociopolitical developments stemming from the West and Japan that Korea experienced as if it was ruptured from the past and forced into the modern.

Korean history revolves around a development model, and even critical theories of modernity remain locked into the same dynamic. Continually stuck on the traditional

versus modern dichotomy, too few academics of contemporary Korea explore continuities with the past that 'modern' Korean cultures carry or their agency in navigating modernity. By looking toward Chosŏn, its Neo-Confucian worldview, and its continuity with the present, I view Wŏn Buddhism as an illustrative example for what Charles Taylor calls *cultural modernity*.

In "Two Theories of Modernity," Taylor outlines the failings of the dominant acultural modernity model, while suggesting alternative foci for a cultural model.²⁰ Taylor evokes 'culture' in its widest application, as a "picture of plurality of human cultures, each of which has a language and a set of practices that define specific understandings of personhood, social relations, the good, virtues and vices, and the like."²¹ A cultural model of modernity is one that takes these understandings as its basis for analysis between present and past, interpreting modernity as the rise of a new set of definitions, the rise of a new culture. Industrial, capitalist, or political changes are not enough to constitute cultural modernity. Cultural modernity must consider the background of beliefs and definitions as listed above to define the modern. These beliefs and values are often embedded in religious, ritual, philosophical, and metaphysical views, some of which may predate industrialization and yet remain markers of the

²⁰ Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," *The Hastings Center Report* 25, no 2 (March-April 1995): 24-33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

modern. In other words, we must look to the amalgamation of beliefs and practices that provide a foundation for the industrial, capitalist, and political structure.

Of course, this is not the focus of most contemporary Marxian-inspired historiography, which focuses on what are considered culturally neutral universals like socio-economic and political developments, intellectual changes and the growth of 'reason' (Enlightenment), rupture, secularization, industrialization, nationalism, and the like. These processes erode or end 'traditional' modes of living and give rise to the 'modern.' This transformation could be common to any non-specific culture with the same outcome, and every culture is expected to eventually, if they have not already, be required to experience it. Taylor states:

These changes are not defined by their end point in a specific constellation of understandings of, say, person, society, good; they are rather described as a type of transformation to which any culture could in principle serve as "input." For instance, any culture could suffer the impact of growing scientific consciousness; any religion could undergo secularization; any set of ultimate ends could be challenged by a growth of instrumental thinking; any metaphysic could be dislocated by the split between fact and value. ... So modernity in this kind of theory is understood as issuing from a rational or social operation that is culture-neutral. This is not to say that the theory cannot acknowledge good historical reasons why this transformation first arose in one civilization rather than another, or why some may undergo it more easily than others. The point rather is that the operation is defined not in terms of its specific point of arrival, but as a general function that can take any specific culture as its input.²²

Thus, changes in values and understanding are the product of culture-neutral social and rational developments. Ignoring the main input of beliefs and values of person,

²² Ibid., 25.

society, and God that stimulated Western modernity, the products of our shifting consciousness, rather than the consciousness itself, have enslaved and enthralled our perception of the past.²³ This remains the dominant paradigm of interpretation in the humanities.

The lure of this model is apparent. By focusing on seemingly neutral, universal, and 'objective' applications, we seek out materialistic explanations that appear rational and scientific, rather than engaging the ethereal and more complex underpinnings of moral and value judgments. Taylor observes that instead of investigating the moral motives behind what gave rise to Western industrial modernity, we put forth explanations such as the desire for wealth, power, and control, without any connection to the moral. Taylor argues that:

And even where individual freedom and the enlargement of instrumental reason are seen as ideas whose intrinsic attractions can help explain their rise, this attraction is frequently understood in non-moral terms. That is, the power of these ideas is often understood not in terms of their moral force, but just because of the advantages they seem to bestow on people regardless of their moral outlook, or even whether they have a moral outlook. Freedom allows you to do what you want; and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever that is. ...It is obvious that wherever this kind of explanation becomes culturally dominant, the motivation to explore the original spiritual vision of modernity is very weak; indeed, the capacity even to recognize some such thing nears zero. And this effectively takes cultural theories off the agenda.²⁴

²³ 'God' and 'good' will be used interchangeable depending on the reference point.

²⁴ Taylor, "Two Theories," 27.

The lure of this mode of modernity not only offers a false sense of scientific analysis but also placates the social ego, placing Western socio-political and scientific developments at the forefront of globalization, relegating the continuity of values in other cultural spheres to traditionalism.

The negative influences an acultural model elicits are real and pervasive. The relationship between transformed Western cultural background understanding and scientific and socio-political developments is overlooked. This causes us, as Taylor states, “to fail altogether to examine certain facets of the modern constellation, closely interwoven with our understandings of science and religion, that do not strike us as being part of the transformation to modernity.”²⁵ Differing views from various positions in time and space are forced into an already skewed Western experience that distorts the other and inhibits understanding identity. Taylor succinctly sums up the problem by stating that “exclusive reliance on an acultural theory...locks us into an ethnocentric prison, condemned to project our own forms onto everyone else and blissfully unaware of what we are doing.”²⁶

How can Wŏn Buddhism help to illustrate a model for cultural modernity? Despite its claims of being a modern and reformed Korean Buddhism, the relationship between Chosŏn, Chosŏn Buddhism, and contemporary Wŏn Buddhist culture is

²⁵ Ibid., 27.

²⁶ Ibid., 28.

striking. The most superficial exploration of the Chosŏn Neo-Confucian and Buddhist worldviews provides profound insights into the present constellation of Wŏn Buddhist views of person, society, and the good. This does not negate the variety of ways in which Wŏn Buddhism has transformed from its founding in 1916; but, understanding contemporary Wŏn Buddhism (or even contemporary Korea) without understanding the underlying value structure developed during and continuing from Chosŏn is no different than trying to apprehend European or American modernity without understanding the importance of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French and American Revolutions, and the rise of classical liberalism.²⁷ If we are to move beyond the dominant acultural model, the source of worldviews of person, society, and the good of a modern culture must be considered.

Taylor utilizes Bourdieu's concept of habitus to describe what he calls "background understanding." Our views of person, society, and the good operate in the background of our explicit belief systems. Some of the background comes in the form of deliberate and indoctrinated social construction, but much is delivered unconsciously and uncritically through socialization or habitus. The subtle difference between explicit, factual doctrinal beliefs and background understanding is that when the background

²⁷ When historians and social scientists analyze Western modernity, they are often more inclusive of influencing cultural elements. The dominant mode of interpreting is still acultural, but, nonetheless, when academics explore our own culture, they often provide the influence of these shifts in cultural perspectives on person, society, and God. Yet, when they look toward other modern cultures, the starting point is inevitably a rupture from the past, from the 'traditional,' and the continuity of values and norms is overlooked in favor of the 'universal' modes of Euro-American developments.

shifts, new and different modes of being are introduced.²⁸ The Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment produced such shifts in background understanding, which contributed to a shift in explicit and factual beliefs such as science, industrialization, and capitalism. Underlying the superficial manifestation of our explicit belief system is an unexplored undergirding of background understandings. When we utilize the acultural model of modernity as a rubric for analysis, we obfuscate and esotericize implicit value and moral judgments.

For contemporary Korea and Wŏn Buddhism, the background understanding of person, society, and the good were shaped by and continues to interact with the Chosŏn worldview. The founding of Chosŏn, the rise of Neo-Confucianism, and the solidification of its worldview in the post-Imjin War period is a key shift in background understanding that could be used as a model for Korean cultural modernity. As Haboush states, “the emotional and psychological impact this reconstruction had on people must have been considerable.”²⁹ This does not negate any continuity with previous ages or changes in explicit contemporary beliefs, but in post-Imjin War Chosŏn much of the contemporary ethos of ‘modern’ Korean and Wŏn Buddhist worldview was debated, formed, and solidified. A few years of industrialization and

²⁸ Taylor, “Two Theories,” 28-30.

²⁹ JaHyun Kim Haboush, “Filial Emotions and Filial Values: Changing Patterns in the Discourse of Filiality in Late Chosŏn Korea,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55, no 1 (June 1995), 131.

the awakening experience of Pak hardly dented the five-hundred-year-old cultural foundation of the Chosŏn worldview. Acultural theories often depict a newly modernized Korea as shucking off an old and antiquated, rigid, sexist, ineffective, irrational, and oppressive system of Neo-Confucianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; but, did it excavate the foundation of background understandings of person, society, and the good or simply renovate the Neo-Confucian shrine into a temple of capitalism? What we know of Chosŏn is primarily that of the elite class; however, the elite did not exist in a vacuum. They lived and interacted with everyday people, and much of the underlying morals and values of the Chosŏn are engendered by the average Korean.³⁰ Wŏn Buddhism emerged from this same agrarian milieu, and its worldview is firmly rooted in a similar worldview as the Chosŏn.

One explicit change in a sense of self and society was the development of patrilineal descent and the expression of filiality. Martina Deuchler elucidates this gradual process in *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*.³¹ Patrilineal descent had a profound effect on Chosŏn and modern Korea. In Confucianism, a person is defined in terms of relationships and how well they remain virtuous to those relationships. To totalize and over-simplify this into a communalism versus individualism dichotomy is

³⁰ This is not a totalizing overgeneralization. Just as most Americans from Euro-American backgrounds unavoidably share in their background understanding of person, society, and God, most people in any culture share these understandings by default.

³¹ Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

erroneous; rather, this belief is a reminder that relationships are unavoidable and part of human existence, and that our sense of self and position in the world is cultivated out of those relationships.

How those relationships are played out and further defined is also part of the explicit belief system and mutable. Gender is one example. With changes in marriage ritual and lineage descent, women received the short end of the deal. We must be careful not to characterize Chosŏn women as powerless victims of uncaring men, but, nonetheless, their situation did change. Yet, did this alter their position as a person defined by relationships, or did it simply reorganize and reprioritize the relationships? In contemporary Korea, how much of this explicit belief system has changed? Women are free to choose who and if they marry, free to work, can inherit property, and they enjoy most of the legal rights and privileges of men; but is their responsibility to relationships different? They are still daughter, sister, wife, mother, grandmother, ancestor, and citizen and are expected to remain virtuous to those relationships. Even though perspectives on gender continue to evolve and young women are increasingly rejecting parenthood and marriage, parents and grandparents still expect their daughters to raise a family. The underlying sense of a person defined by these relationships continues. A switch in background understanding would be more profound than granting social equality, and the relationship to the greater cosmos would have to be radically altered.

This all falls in the realm of explicit belief structures. This is how the background understanding played out in life at a moment in time and space, but this is not the background understanding. The background understanding positions the *axis mundi*, it tends the gardens of the sacred mountain; but, as Taylor points out, when the focus of attention is the acultural, these aspects are relegated to a distant space in the historical landscape. *Sources of Korean Tradition* is an example of an emphasis on the acultural.³² *Sources* is an invaluable text for English-speaking readers and its contribution to Korean studies cannot be overstated. Delivering a wide range of historical information, it summarizes an ancient history into two succinct volumes full of translated primary material. Periodized into distinct eras, however, it mostly focuses on classical Marxian themes. We can glean the background understanding from the philosophical and religious selections presented, but they are isolated from socio-political developments as if they had no effect, their relationship simply implied but not explored. Continuities or subtle shifts in background understanding or cosmology are not specifically engaged for each period. This is particularly noticeable when it reaches the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, in which the selections are entirely dominated by war, factionalism, strife, colonialism, nationalism, economics, and politics. Korean religions, where

³² Peter H. Lee and Wm. Theodore de Bary, eds, *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Yôngho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm Theodore de Bary, eds, *Sources of Korean Tradition*, vol 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Mostly a translation of a Korean text, the criticism still holds, as the parts the editors chose to translate still fall into the same general pattern.

continuities and changes in background understanding would be more clearly revealed, received a whole four pages.

The Korean background understanding is predicated on a cosmological understanding of embodied souls in a physical and metaphysical world of nature, spirits, and ancestors completely interconnected through a combination of principles and alternating vital life forces. Both the individual and their relationships exist, both given equal space. This background understanding is infused into the present moment. Often labeled as 'superstitious' by uncritical eyes restricted by the blinders of a capitalist industrial modernity, this background understanding is a degree less superstitious than, say, Christian belief in an omnipotent and omniscient god. Laying the superstition card, a popular strategy in the game of industrial modernity, is a poor and unobservant move. Contemporary Wŏn Buddhists are also quite complicit in this erroneous view. This background understanding, which shapes views of person, society, and the good, ought to be considered when interpreting historical events, and shifts, cracks, and changes in its foundation should be looked at with more interest.

In the first few pages on the modern period in *Sources* is this statement:

“Regarding the Westerners as barbaric and licentious, Korea’s Confucian traditionalist feared that any contact with the West would contaminate their social order with inimical ideas and would eventually bring ruin to what they believed to be the true

civilization.”³³ From the perspective of the public sphere, which was the main concern for Neo-Confucian literati, arguing a threat to their social order is a given; however, the concern is more than the obvious anxiety with the fall of social order to materialism, which they correctly predicted. Even though more similarities exist than differences, the Christianized West had and still has a distinct set of cultural background understandings, and it was legitimately threatening.

Late eighteenth-century Yi Ik (1681-1763) alludes to this threat in his astute critiques of Catholicism. One of his points of contention was reincarnation, which is a vital aspect of the background understanding of Korean and Wŏn Buddhist culture.³⁴ Whether envisioned as rebirth into a blissful realm, a Buddhist hell, or back into this world as a spirit or person, a belief in reincarnation or transmigration of a soul is assumed by many as part of an endless cycle of life. This is so distant and familiarly in the background that you rarely come across it in academic discussion except in esoteric Buddhist studies’ debates, and even in that context it can be fodder for discord. While daftly pointing out that both claims for or against reincarnation are baseless, by singling out reincarnation Yi reveals a perceived threat to his sense of person, society, and the good that would be inherent in Christian claims against reincarnation.

In their opposition to Christianity, Yi and his fellow Neo-Confucian intellectuals

³³ Ch’oe, *Sources*, 208.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

legitimized and strengthened these background beliefs by remaining steadfastly ambivalent toward such metaphysics, coming to no firm conclusions. Debating back and forth over the existence of spirits and how they formed and functioned, they seemed unconvinced of their existence or non-existence. Flowing forth from the ancient wellspring of shamanism and fed by Buddhism and Taoism, these background understandings were solidified, codified, and sanctioned by the equivocations of Chosŏn scholars. The source of the background understanding reaches into antiquity, but the interpretation, delineation, and imagination of these contemporary understandings took form in late Chosŏn.

The process through which Confucianism was Koreanized took some time, as Deuchler points out, and much of the ideology solidified in the general Korean population after the Imjin War (1592-1598). Haboush often suggests the impact the post-Imjin War period had on the formation of individual, social, and national identity.³⁵ Utilizing Taylor's model, the origins of modern Korean culture lie in the formation of Chosŏn, and it solidified in the post-Imjin War period. Thus, the Imjin War can be interpreted as the start of 'modern' Korean culture. Just as in the West, the tendency is to view the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation as the formative years of

³⁵ See JaHyun Kim Haboush, "Dead Bodies in the Postwar Discourse of Identity in the Seventeenth-Century Korea: Subversion and Literary Production in the Private Sector," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no 2 (May, 2003): 415-442; and JaHyun Kim Haboush, "Constructing the Center: The Ritual Controversy and the Search for a New Identity," in *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, edited by Haboush and Deuchler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 46-90.

Western modernity and the Enlightenment and French Revolution as the harbingers of the modern; so the formation of Chosŏn and the Imjin War can be interpreted in the same fashion.³⁶ From this perspective, it would be prudent to date Korean cultural modernity to the Imjin War and to firmly connect the Wŏn Buddhist worldview to late-Chosŏn Korea.

This discussion has only explored one facet of background understanding in this limit space, but Taylor's model can extricate a cultural model for modern Korea which binds it to Chosŏn. By exploring economic, political, and social developments through a lens of culturally relevant background understanding, a more humane, informative, and colorful landscape of modern Korean culture may emerge. Because of the relatively quick and late industrialization of Korea and the well documented developments of Chosŏn, Korea is in a favorable space to challenge the dominant acultural paradigm of modern historiography.

Have we looked at modernity enough? Is it still important to challenge the acultural with a cultural understanding of modernity rather than just work within an endemic system? I think so. Not only does an acultural model lock us into an ethnocentric prison doomed to project our own understandings and concerns onto other

³⁶ In discussion of Korean modernity, such as in Michael Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), an introductory chapter explaining developments in national and individual identity and background understandings since the Imjin War would have added the cultural context the text needed.

cultures, as Taylor points out, it restricts us from profound insights learned through the experiences of all modern cultures. Insights into our own identity, our humanity, remain superficially focused on money, power, and sex. These are interesting and valuable issues to look at, but when their interpretation is fixed through an acultural lens, how does it contribute to tearing down the imaginary walls constructed through nationalist rhetoric in an increasingly interconnected modern world? Background understandings are a means to connect our internal dialogues, because at that level much of the differences and misunderstandings between cultures begin to melt away.

When looking at the constellation of the present moment influencing modern Korean culture, the background understanding appears as a bright full moon illuminating the night with other points in time and space, but glimpsing its fullness through the towering city landscape of modernity is difficult, and the flood lights of industrial modernity drown out its unassuming glow. Re-centering our gaze to a cultural perspective focused on background understandings enhances interpretations of history, interpretations of our selves, and facilitates cross-cultural understanding. Eroding continuity with the past and with other cultures, the acultural model vilifies the traditional, damages a sense of community, and negates the importance of values and morals in a global community.

With all this in mind, I am more concerned with illustrating the background understandings in contemporary Wŏn Buddhism. I will not be locating Wŏn Buddhism

within a French critical theory or post-colonial discourse centered on economic and socio-political concerns. While those may appear occasionally in brief comments, my main concern will be connecting the Wŏn Buddhist worldview with its continuities to Chosŏn cultural patterns. In this process, it will be shown that, although Pak critiqued the established background understanding, claimed a rupture with the past, and positioned his teaching as a modern and reformed Buddhism, contemporary Wŏn Buddhist belief and praxis actually represent a reaffirmation and return to the well-established background understandings and, if anything, represent a neo-conservative strengthening of 'traditional' values. Thus, we can historically contextualize Wŏn Buddhism, and Korea itself, as a contemporary constellation of modern Chosŏn cultural patterns.

On New Religious Movements

In response to increased contact between world cultures and the spread of industrialization during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, numerous new religious movements emerged to meet the needs of shifting cultural landscapes. Whether as self-proclaimed novel newcomers or as reformists and revivalists of established religious teachings, new religious movements since the mid-eighteenth century number in the thousands worldwide. Most of these movements remained small and insignificant, eventually fading under the shifting sands of time. For the few that survived, some grew into well-established religious orders; and among those a select

few developed internationally and are now on the cusp, or have already moved over the threshold, of becoming world religions.

Even though new religious movements provide an opportunity to see how religions form, evolve, hybridize, and change quickly in real time, academia has been slow to recognize the value of exploring new religious movements. Scholars of the major world religions largely ignore these religions and remain fixated on the ancient texts of dominant religious cultures, on long-lost traditions and artifacts, and on trying to uncover historical details and identities that remain elusive and distorted by the projections of our own historical imagination. Viewed as cults, folksy syncretism, non-literary, 'popular religion,' and outside of mainstream teachings, new religious movements are left for socio-political theorist to explore within Hegelian-Marxist and acultural frameworks of ideological conflict and class struggle: hyper-politicized within academic discourse, their teachings, doctrines, and practices remain largely unexplored.

Wŏn Buddhism provides one example among many. Even though Wŏn Buddhism has grown into the largest Buddhist order established outside the historical Korean lineages and although it is now the fifth largest religion in Korea, scholarship on Korean Buddhism or religions normally does not include references to this important early nineteenth-century new religious movement. Shockingly, it is almost completely absent from Korean studies discourse. Dismissed by the orthodox dominant Chogye order as unorthodox, overall scholars have followed this perspective and normally do

not include Wŏn Buddhism within discussions of Korean Buddhism. In a recent English language publications on Korean Buddhist reform efforts during Japanese colonization, Pori Park chose to not include Wŏn Buddhism in her narrative on modernist reform efforts;³⁷ and in a recent Korean language publication, Ch'oe Pyŏng-hŏn's two-volume bibliographical introduction to scholarship on Korean Buddhist history did not include any mention of Wŏn Buddhism even though numerous Korean publications exist.³⁸ The neglect of Wŏn Buddhism within the larger Korean Buddhist narrative represents an all too common situation regarding new religious movements – Wŏn Buddhism is regrettably not unique.

This situation is quite unfortunate. New religious movements offer numerous possibilities for scholars of mainstream religions. By looking closely at how new religious traditions emerge and evolve, we can infer and make well-informed estimations on the formation of many of the largest world religions. For instance, the process of creating Christian and Buddhist sacred texts is mostly lost to time. Although literacy and means of communication and documentation have changed greatly since the so-called Axial Age of religious and philosophical thought, we can still glimpse through the production of texts in new religious movements how devoted followers

³⁷ Pori Park, *Trials and Errors in Modernist Reforms: Korean Buddhism under Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009).

³⁸ Pyŏng-hŏn Ch'oe, *Han'guk pulgyosa yŏn'gu immun*, vol 1 & 2 (Seoul: Chisik San'ŏpsa, 2013).

utilize, change, and shape their worldviews and praxis. Wŏn Buddhism offers a particularly interesting model, as the founder left a written doctrine, and all subsequent redactions are intact; thus, we can see how text, belief, and praxis have changed rapidly over a brief period of time. The implications of this on the history of textual production in the major world religions cannot be understated. This is only one situation in which looking closely at new religious movements may provide a more nuanced understanding of the early formation of world religions.

What exactly is a 'new religious movement?' Since H.W. Turner utilized this term in his typology of religious innovation in Africa over the many years of colonization, new religious movements have been defined by a constellation of meanings centered on established dominant religious traditions, colonialism, and modernity. Primarily utilized as a replacement for the pejorative term *cult*, recent debates around defining new religious movements center on whether they are 'new' or simply extensions of existing traditions, or, more precisely, concerns over whether the term *new* is simply another pejorative assigned by the dominant traditions. This discussion is well represented by the conversation between Eileen Barker and J. Gordon Melton, two leading figures in the field of new religious movements.

Melton argues that the starting point of defining new religious movements lies with the pejorative term *cult*, a status assigned by the dominant religious culture, which also shapes secular voices within the government, media, and academics; however,

scholars have failed to locate any shared characteristics or identify a consistent definition of new religious movements.³⁹ Since new religious movements differ significantly and are often difficult to separate from the dominant religious culture, the only shared characteristic is the negative view held by the dominant culture, which pushes these religious movements into a marginalized contested space – the newness of the religion is irrelevant. In Melton’s framework defined by social conflict, religious movements clash with the dominant religious beliefs and engage in practices deemed unacceptable to religious (and thus secular) authorities, such as violence, illegal behavior, high-pressure proselytism, alternative medicine, or unconventional sexual practices. Melton suggests that to define a group as a new religious movement, it must be located relative to the mainstream tradition and viewed as outside the dominant religious culture. Just because a religious movement is new does not mean it is a new religious movement: conflict defines whether it is new. The positionality and contested space that the movement occupies should be the subject of scholarly concern.

Barker takes issue with Melton’s narrow definition of new religious movements based on conflict.⁴⁰ While not dismissing that new religious movements often find themselves in contested or oppositional spaces in their close relationship to the

³⁹ J. Gordon Melton, “Perspective: Toward a Definition of ‘New Religion,’” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no 1 (July 2004): 73-87.

⁴⁰ Eileen Barker, “Perspective: What Are We Studying?” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, no 1 (July 2004): 88-102.

dominant religious culture, she does not view conflict as the defining and sole shared characteristic of new religious movements. Regardless of their similarity or dissimilarity with the dominant religious culture, new religious movements share many characteristics with each other simply because they are new – their newness itself is the defining characteristic. Barker argues that even though it can be claimed, in a sense, that nothing is new and thus new religious movements are simply derivative cultic forms at odds with the dominant power structure, it can be equally claimed that everything is new, that reality is constantly mediated through individuals bringing new perspectives to religious understandings. All established religious traditions constantly re-invent and re-create themselves. New religious movements are thus a new re-creation built on something old, but this does not cancel out their newness.

Barker identifies several consistent characteristics that define a new religious movement, all based on the newness of the movement. Although new religious movements are often seen as syncretic and based in existing understandings, the combination of pre-existing beliefs itself is new. Barker notes that it would be a fallacy to assume that combining old things does not make something new. The movement usually establishes new religious locations and structures, and the institutional organization itself is often new. More importantly, Barker states that membership in a new social group is key. When converts decide to be part of something new, they draw boundaries and create new identities that are grounded in the newness of the

subculture. Temporal concerns also emerge from the simple newness of the movement, where sharp distinctions are created between now and then, old and new, tradition and modern, past and future. This temporal concern can manifest as a 'new life,' being 'born again,' or lead to millennial expectations of dramatic change in a 'new age.' For Barker, a new religious movement is simply that – new – and rather than being a defining characteristic, any conflict that emerges is simply a possible, not predetermined, consequence of their newness.

Wŏn Buddhism, undoubtedly a new religious movement, has something to offer this conversation. Even though scholars have neglected Wŏn Buddhism and the two main Buddhist traditions have labeled it unorthodox, characterizing Wŏn Buddhism as existing in a contested space of social conflict would be an exaggeration. In fact, for the most part, Wŏn Buddhism in its various incarnations has existed quite harmoniously within Korean society. Even during Japanese colonization, when many new religious movements were disbanded, Pak's small new community of Buddhist practitioners could exist and prosper. Well-grounded in pre-existing religious beliefs and social values, what makes Wŏn Buddhism special, by its own account, is its newness: Wŏn Buddhists see themselves as a new Buddhist movement, as followers of a new Buddha for a new age. If we follow Melton's strict definition based on conflict and marginalization, it would be difficult to define Wŏn Buddhism as a new religious movement, even though most of Korean society and Wŏn Buddhists themselves view it

as such. Viewed through a Wōn Buddhist lens, Barker's call for new religious movements to be defined based on their newness rather than on social conflict grounded in cult-like status seems more appropriate.

Although Barker and Melton disagree on the defining characteristics, they both view the topic through a sociological lens: what new religious movements do in society is more important than what they believe. This fits with the current trend in religious studies that views the centuries-old traditions of doctrinal and textual concerns as less important than sociological and anthropological concerns. Considering the newness of the field, locating studies on texts produced by new religious movements is almost impossible. Most studies follows Melton's perspective and tends to focus on the socio-political drama or contested space a new religious movement occupies, often within a Marxist post-colonial or anti-hegemonic framework. If they do not focus on conflict and focus on doctrine, texts, or history, it is often shaped by a hagiographic or didactic framework in which a dedicated follower seeks to display why their new religion is worthy of exploration. Serious studies of the doctrine, texts, or praxis by notable religious studies scholars are virtually nonexistent. In other words, any shifts or continuities in the background understanding are overlooked to explore the newness within dominant acultural frameworks.

Lydia Willsky's recent study on new textual production in nineteenth-century America represents a move toward serious inquiry into the texts of new religious

movements.⁴¹ Willsky explores the Mormon scriptural canon of Joseph Smith and the Christian Science sacred texts of Mary Baker Eddy. Willsky observes that scholars tend to view nineteenth-century American new religious movements as a result of the disestablishment of Christianity rather than as products of the dominant religious culture. In seeing them as outsiders and unorthodox, they have failed to notice their intimate continuities with the dominant religious culture.

Willsky brings to light the Christian cultural context surrounding textual production in new religious movements. She locates Smith and Eddy within the dominant textual paradigm of the plain-Bible culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which the Bible's meaning was clear to the reader, no matter the readers understanding of biblical language. Since the Bible was viewed as objectively clear and authoritative, this gave rise to a plethora of contesting interpretations and denominations. In the cacophony of competing claims to objective authority, Smith and Eddy created a space for mystery and innovation by reinterpreting scripture and by creating their own bibles. Never rejecting the Bible, they attempted to contest the clarity of plain-Bible claims and re-establish authority through their own alternative views. By looking at the context of the textual production of new religious movements, Willsky illustrates the complicated nature of American Christianity and shows that, although

⁴¹ Lydia Willsky, "The (Un)Plain Bible," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 17, no 4 (May 2014): 13-36.

such groups are often marginalized and overlooked by academic textual studies, they are intimately related to what is viewed as the dominant religious culture. Even though Willisky does not comparatively consider the beliefs and doctrines contained in these sacred scriptures and opts for the standard sociological analysis, she represents an important move toward serious inquiry into the texts of new religious movements.

One of the few studies to examine closely the texts and doctrines of a Buddhist new religious movement is Jammie Hubbard's research on the Japanese Shinnyo-en, founded in 1936 by Itō Shinjō and his wife Itō Tomoji.⁴² Remarking on the absence of attention to the doctrine, Hubbard states that scholars concerned with texts and doctrinal studies have remained uninterested in new religious movements. He identifies two disciplinary boundaries inhibiting such studies: first, the tendency to view the beliefs of new religious movements as representing folk religion and popular beliefs immersed in superstition and cultic activities; and second, the contemporary sociological view that doctrinal studies are simply an extension of elite interests and not representative of the experiences of the masses.

Hubbard argues that by looking closely at the doctrines of new religious movements, we can identify the most creative activity and immediate concerns of authority that provide insight into the formation of the texts and doctrines of the

⁴² Jamie Hubbard, "Embarrassing Superstition, Doctrine, and the Study of New Religious Movements," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no 1 (Spring 1998): 59-92.

dominant religious culture. Through his comparative study that explores established Buddhist texts and how the Shinnyo-en interprets them, Hubbard demonstrates that the common view of a new religious movement as being outside the mainstream and embedded in superstition is misguided and that most of their teachings are firmly rooted in doctrinal norms. Hubbard provides an interesting middle way between Melton and Barker: the Shinnyo-en, as Melton would say, is nothing new and is integrally intertwined with existing established norms; and yet, as Barker argues, it represents something new in its traditions, institutions, and practices. More importantly, Hubbard concludes that if Shinnyo-en doctrine and practices are firmly grounded in the dominant cultural tradition, then this questions contemporary romantic projections that the dominant religious culture is not embedded in the same folk traditions. Through his study, Hubbard exposes that the ignoring of new religious movements reveals the ancient dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, which continues to shape contemporary scholarship.

These four scholars offer an interesting framework from which we can explore and contextualize Wŏn Buddhist texts, beliefs, and praxis. Melton provides an important caution in the term *new*, emphasizing that, while they may be new, if they are not at odds with the status quo, we should be cautious in viewing them as outside the dominant religious culture. Barker's insight provides a counterbalance by instructing us to not focus on their contested space and to pay attention to the new forms, innovations,

institutions, geographies, communities, and identities that are inevitably formed.

Hubbard shows us the importance of looking closely at the doctrine produced by a new religious movement, reminding us that the dominant cultural tradition most likely shares many of the same concerns within its own texts, albeit in a different historical context. Willsky expands on this point by illustrating the need to remain contextually grounded, not only in the socio-political situation but also in the contexts of textual production itself. This study will position Wŏn Buddhism as a new religious movement while navigating these four concerns of contextualization and attempt to deliver more nuanced understandings of Wŏn Buddhism within a broader context of cultural traditions and background understanding.

On Methodology

Since much of this study is ethnographic, and sometimes grounded in experiential evidence, I sense a need to address methodology, much to my chagrin. Before I do, I must make clear my distaste for formal methodologies, my distaste for any shaping and packaging of knowledge for 'academic' consumption. Every writer in the humanities would be well-served by familiarizing themselves with Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method*. Regarding historical production and methodologies,

Feyerabend states:

'History generally, and the history of revolution in particular, is always richer in content, more varied, more many-sided, more lively and subtle than even' the best historian and the best methodologist can imagine. History is full of

‘accidents and conjunctures and curious juxtapositions of events’ and it demonstrates to us the ‘complexity of human change and the unpredictable character of the ultimate consequences of any given act or decision of men.’ Are we really to believe that the naïve and simple-minded rules which methodologists take as their guide are capable of accounting for such a ‘maze of interactions’? And is it not clear that successful *participation* [sic] in a process of this kind is possible only for a ruthless opportunist who is not tied to any particular philosophy and who adopts whatever procedure seems to fit the occasion?⁴³

In essence – anything goes.

My methodology is simple and inspired by several sources. My main inspiration was Robert Buswell’s *The Zen Monastic Experience*, which provides an accounting of historical, doctrinal, and everyday practices within a Korean monastic community.⁴⁴

Observing that most previous academic studies remained entrenched in and enthralled by textual studies while neglecting the living traditions surrounding them, Buswell challenges the dissonance between the two and delivers a realistic and important corrective of Buddhism in Korea as it is lived by monastics. In explaining his motivation, I think it worthwhile to quote in its entirety his paragraph on the importance of examining the practices of Buddhists:

In the preceding discussion, I have made much of the difficulties of comprehending Zen beliefs through interpretations of written documents divorced from their historical and cultural context. What I am also suggesting by such comments is that data drawn from direct observation of the living tradition of Buddhism can offer students and scholars of Buddhism new and innovative ways of understanding the religion. The text-based approach to Buddhist Studies, to use historian Hayden White’s term, “prefigures” scholarly discourse

⁴³ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 3rd ed. (London: Verso, 1993): 9-10.

⁴⁴ Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

on the tradition and discourages scholars of the religion from pursuing other approaches. Even though many of us Buddhist specialists spend much time overseas studying Buddhist texts with our Asian counterparts in universities and research centers, rarely has any of our work reflected the Buddhism that then surrounds us. As Michel Strickmann remarks, in a harsh, but not altogether undeserved, criticism of contemporary Buddhist Studies: “Although many North American ‘Buddhologists’ (as they barbarically term themselves) enjoy long periods of publically subsidized residence in Japan, most seem to prefer the atmosphere of libraries and language schools to that of the society in which they temporarily dwell. Nor do American university programs in Buddhist Studies appear to encourage research and fieldwork in the living Buddhist tradition: their neo-scholasticism excludes the phenomenal world.” By ignoring Buddhism’s living tradition, scholars of the religion risk succumbing to the Orientalist dogma described by Edward Said, in which “abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a ‘classical’ Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities.”⁴⁵

This passage inspired me. Before going to Korea and while living as a Wŏn Buddhist postulant and novice, I had no exposure to English Korean Studies materials; and while I was there, I immediately noticed that what little I had read about Buddhism seemed far removed from what I was experiencing in Korea. Once I returned to the United States and entered a Korean Studies program at Columbia, I was exposed to Buswell and other scholars and realized the same problems Buswell noted: academic materials on Buddhism were just that – academic. When Buswell and other faculty at UCLA encouraged me to write about my first-hand experience, I knew that I wanted to approach Wŏn Buddhism in the same fashion as Buswell’s study. Thus, utilizing my

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

extensive experience and journal entries on the lived reality of the Wŏn Buddhist community, I hope to contribute something worthwhile to Wŏn Buddhist Studies, Buddhist Studies, and Religious Studies in general.

Henrik Sorensen also provided some inspiration for my simple method through his review of Wedemeyer's important text on Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism, which he both praises and sharply criticizes.⁴⁶ Sorensen praises Wedemeyer for challenging and undoing current academic theories of Tantric Buddhism's intents and meanings. He considers Wedemeyer's addition to the discussion one of the most important contributions to the field; however, he also heavily criticizes Wedemeyer's methodology. He brings attention to the highly theoretical nature of the book, which he considers a major distraction from the topic. He notes that Wedemeyer's "tedious lecturing" and "politically tinged" discourse occupies most of the text and requires a high degree of contextualization itself, which Wedemeyer does not supply. While praising Wedemeyer for his contribution, Sorensen closes with a statement pregnant with implications: "And finally, this is not a book for the classroom, but one that only the most dedicated scholar-nerd of Tantric Buddhism can truly appreciate and enjoy." This statement engenders my perspective on most current studies produced by the humanities – out-of-touch, elitist, and accessible to only the nerdish specialist.

⁴⁶ Henrik Sorensen, review of Christian Wedemeyer's *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*, H-Asia, H-Net Reviews (March, 2015): www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42349.

I am not a theorist. While completely recognizing the tremendous contribution of models grounded in acultural Hegelian-Marxist-French critical theory, its current deceptive make-over as cultural studies consumes and dictates discourse in the humanities. Its 'critical' aspect is now the new, unforgiving hegemon; and its focus on the 'social' through economics and politics reveals its own elite, conformist, and capitalist concerns with power and wealth. When the theoretical model becomes the center of the narrative, we inevitably fall into a self-referential discourse in which only the elite of elites can participate. As Carol Gluck stated in a lecture on writing East Asian history: if your neighbor or any stranger to your topic cannot read your writing, understand it, or connect it to something easily grasped as meaningful, you have failed as an academic writer.⁴⁷ I am not concerned with locating Pak or his teaching within competing and politicized metanarratives. In this study, all theoretical concerns and academic name-dropping will be limited to footnotes and not part of the general discussion. I will attempt, as much as possible, to keep my narrative accessible, clear, simple, concise, free of jargon, and focused on Pak, his teaching, possible implications of the redaction, the current state of the order, and the complex constellation of Wŏn Buddhist beliefs and practices.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Carol Gluck, course lecture, *Workshop in East Asian History* from Columbia University, New York City, April 15, 2009.

⁴⁸ On the issue of accessibility, clarity, and simplicity, I firmly agree with Orwell's promotion of plain English. Although he focused primarily on political writing, writings on history and religion hold similar influence, and thus require the same attention to plain language. See, George Orwell, "Politics and the

In the continuing attempt to present the humanities as science, academics have eschewed the use of a Montaigne-like personal voice for something that appears more 'objective;' however, as Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob clearly demonstrate in their analysis of writing history, this objectivity is not only illusory but also deceptive.⁴⁹ I prefer the approach of Chün-fang Yü's *Kuan Yin* or Sarah Thal's *Rearranging the Landscape of the Gods*, in which the writers incorporate their own personal involvement with their topic into their narrative.⁵⁰ This offers a balanced approach to the stiff, formal, misleading, and often inaccessible 'objectivity' of most academic work, and, to be frank, delivers a much more interesting and relatable read. This project will thus pull from my own personal experiences living and practicing within the Wŏn Buddhist communities both in South Korea and in the United States, as well as reveal my own intellectual and personal positionality with my subject.

My methodology will draw on Daniel Overmyer's promotion of utilizing text, history, and fieldwork in the study of religion.⁵¹ Topics will include personal experience

English Language," *Horizon* 13 (1946): 252-265.

⁴⁹ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994).

⁵⁰ Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia University, 2001); Sarah Thal, *Rearranging the Landscape of the Gods: The Politics of a Pilgrimage Site in Japan, 1573-1912*.

⁵¹ Daniel Overmyer, "History, Texts and Fieldwork: A Combined Approach to the Study of Chinese Religions." Paper delivered at the Workshop for the Study of Chinese Religions, Sun Moon Lake, Taiwan, July 1998.

and observations regarding the contemporary situation, drawing on my extensive notes and journals kept during my times in the order. For example, in the discussion of forced celibacy for female ordained members, which Pak specifically denies in his doctrine, I will start with my own positionality with the subject, move to my experiences and observations with the contemporary Wŏn Buddhist situation, and finally contextualize Pak and his understanding of celibacy.

I must comment on the use of anecdotal or experiential evidence. Unfortunately, there are few academic studies or published opinion on the critical issues addressed herein. The Wŏn Buddhist community is quite cautious in the publishing of information that may be critical of the order or that question official narratives, and any gathered data is strictly guarded and unavailable for public consumption. Public calls for reform in the *Wŏnbulgyo Sinmun* (Wŏn Buddhist newspaper) often appear as benign generalization for ‘globalization’ or ‘modernization’ of the order, with very little specific detail on problems. Most in-depth discussion happens in closed door sessions or within online private chat rooms, temples, schools, dormitories, and Headquarters. Much of this study draws on decades of unrecorded personal conversations and experiences within those environments, which will often appear here as experiential evidence, but my positions are informed through patterns identified over numerous years of emic exposure. Hopefully, some of my conclusion and statements, whether received as correct or misinformed, will stimulate others to respond through studies, opinion

pieces, and in-depth research that provide a more sustained focus on a topic.

Academics are too quick to dismiss the importance and value of experiential evidence, but such evidence can be the most valuable. Our objective data only provides an illusion of objectivity, and our involvement with our subject can taint the data and its utilization. As I will illustrate later, as soon as my positionality as an academic researcher was revealed to certain members of the community, it forever changed my relationship with them and completely altered my ability to participate in meaningful dialogue. It is the casual and personal nature of my involvement that allows me to hear very personal and emotionally charged opinions on some of the most sensitive topics discussed within the Wŏn Buddhist fold. Revealing even a small amount of my knowledge in this study will most likely alter that involvement. I will not be making any grand theoretical claims grounded on anecdotal premises, but experiential evidence can be quite useful in areas of research where there is little published data, and it can stimulate the formation of hypotheses that may lead to future research.

Being part of a religious community is an intensely personal and emotional experience. I want to reveal some of that emotional dimension in this work. Parts of this study may thus appear as personal emotional journaling, but as Feyerabend warns us above, to reject experiential evidence in favor of strict methodological rules may have us miss the maze of interactions that make knowledge come alive. We should not limit the presentation of knowledge to formal academic frameworks and models, but rather

we should remain questioningly receptive to knowledge in any form. The emotional and experiential dimension of this work helps make the information more palatable, while also laying bare my own personal bias: my relationship with this subject *is* naturally personal. To hide behind an illusion of objectivity would be disingenuous. I cannot offer citations for every statement or conclusion I offer, and I accept all errors as mine and mine alone.

For quoted or cited text, I will utilize the most recent official translation of the Wŏn Buddhist texts in *The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism (Wonbulkyo Kyosŏ)* when possible.⁵² In some situations, I may replace critical terms with my own bracketed translation, which I will explain in footnotes. For well-established Buddhist terms, I will utilize English translations from *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* and *The Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. I utilize McCune-Reischauer for Korean romanization; in cases where cited English translations of Korean originals use variations, those variations will be used instead.

Source Materials

Within the main doctrinal and sacred scripture of Wŏn Buddhism, I have identified two general textual characteristics. The first characteristic is *hybridity*. In form and content, Wŏn Buddhist sacred texts display a mixing of various doctrinal and

⁵² *The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism (Wonbulgyo Kyosŏ)*, trans. Committee for the Authorized Translations of Won-Buddhist Scriptures (Iksan: Wonkwang Publishing, 2016).

textual genres. For instance, the teachings and activities of Pak recalled by his followers in the *Taejonggyōng* (大宗經 Scripture of the Great Founder) in content appear similar to many apocryphal scriptures that utilize indigenous understandings of Taoism, Confucianism, and shamanism to interpret Buddhist teachings; and in their form, they appear a familiar mix of sutra, *abhidharma*, commentary, and discourse records. Not only do they mix various genres, Wŏn Buddhist texts represent a hybridity of orthodox and unorthodox forms of religious discourse, mixing contemporary concerns, vocabulary, and expressions with old, and almost clichéd, orthodox standards. By retaining enough familiarity with pre-existing textual forms and content, Wŏn Buddhist texts appeal to traditional ideas of authority and legitimization. By incorporating new vocabulary, using vernacular language, and positioning their teaching as an authoritative and concise distillation of traditions several thousand years old, Wŏn Buddhism presents a modern scripture appealing to members who desire a new religious teaching that addresses their concerns in a changing world.

The second characteristic of Wŏn Buddhist sacred text is *manageability*. Its small and manageable size immediately distinguishes it from the vast Buddhist canon, which contains hundreds of texts in multiple classical languages. Mastery of the entire Buddhist canon is extremely difficult if not impossible. Pak observed the overwhelming scope of Buddhist scripture; and, distilling it into a manageable teaching written in common vernacular language was one of his motivations for the creation of his small

text *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* (佛敎正典). This small book was expanded by his followers into the current and much larger *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* (圓佛敎全書). Any lay follower can master the Wŏn Buddhist canon.

The entire Wŏn Buddhist canon is contained in the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, a small, portable book bound in black with gold-gilded edges, similar in appearance to a Christian bible. In its most current version, *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* contains six sections, in this order:

1. *Wŏngbulgyo kyojŏn* 圓佛敎教典 (Scripture of Wŏn Buddhism)
 - a. *Chŏngjŏn* 正典 (Principal Book)
 - b. *Taejonggyŏng* 大宗經 (Scripture of the Great Founder)
2. *Pulcho yogyŏng* 佛祖要經 (Essential Sutras of the Buddha and Patriarchs)
3. *Yejŏn* 禮典 (Book of Ritual Propriety)
4. *Chŏngsan chongsa pŏbŏ* 鼎山宗師法語 (Dharma Discourses of Head Master Chŏngsan)
5. *Wŏnbulgyo kyosa* 圓佛敎教史 (History of Wŏn Buddhism)
6. *Wŏnbulgyo sŏngga* 圓佛敎聖歌 (Hymns of Wŏn Buddhism)

The *Wŏngbulgyo kyojŏn* (Scripture of Won Buddhism) includes: Pak's redacted *Chŏngjŏn* (Principal Book), a brief monograph on his doctrine and practice; and the *Taejonggyŏng* (Scripture of the Great Founder), which contains the sayings and activities of Pak as recalled by his followers. The *Pulcho yogyŏng* (Essential Sutras of Buddha and the

Patriarchs) is a small collection of popular Buddhist texts that Pak deemed essential to understand Buddhism and his teaching. The *Yejŏn* (Book of Ritual Propriety) contains various institutional rules, regulations, procedures, ritual prayers, and incantations. The *Chŏngsan chongsa pŏbŏ* (Dharma Words of Master Chŏngsan) are the teachings of the second head of Wŏn Buddhism, Song Hong'uk. The *Wŏnbulgyo kyosa* (History of Wŏn Buddhism) is the official narrative of Pak's life and the early years of the Wŏn Buddhist order, mostly written by Song. The *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* ends with the solemn *Wŏnbulgyo sŏngga* (Hymns of Wŏn Buddhism), a collection of hymns used at most Korean Wŏn Buddhist services but largely absent from English language services in the United States.

The manageability and accessibility of a small canon helps legitimize Pak's teaching in the eyes of believers, as the East Asian Buddhist canon is seen as inaccessible to the general reader in both its literary obtuseness of Classical Chinese and its overwhelming quantity. This manageability and textual simplicity are often used to legitimize both the enlightenment of Pak and the relevancy of the teaching. I have heard many Wŏn Buddhists in both South Korea and the United States mentioned this as a mark of Pak's awakening. Wŏn Buddhists rely on this simple canon for all scriptural and institutional authority.

The *Chŏngjŏn* is the basic doctrine of the Wŏn Buddhist order, the first to appear in the canon, and the most authoritative text to which Wŏn Buddhist refer. A

compilation of previously published smaller texts, the *Chŏngjŏn* was initially published in 1943 as part of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* (佛敎正典). *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, published just after Pak's death and representing the culmination of his teachings, originally only included the *Chŏngjŏn*, his doctrine and practice, and the *Pulcho yogyŏng* (Essential Sutras of Buddha and the Patriarchs). This foundational text was redacted in 1972 into its present form in the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*. This change over time can roughly be represented as:

individual manuscripts > ***Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*** < *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*
 (earliest years) (Chŏngjŏn & Pulcho yogyŏng) (currently used)

The most obvious difference from traditional Buddhist sutras is that the *Chŏngjŏn* is not the remembered words of the Buddha but rather the directly authored teachings of someone believed to be Maitreya Buddha. Unlike the mind-boggling number of incongruent ancient sutras that rest their authority on the superhuman memory of Buddha's disciple Ānanda and on the Sangha's stamp of authenticity, the authority of the *Chŏngjŏn* rests with Pak. Written in a form reminiscent of the *abhidharma* literary structure of matrices and closer in content to apocryphal scriptures that mix Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, and other local traditions, this concise extirpation of doctrine does not fit well within the main Buddhist sutra, Vinaya, apocryphal, commentarial, or discourse genre forms.

Appealing to multiple authoritative and legitimizing points of reference, this text is a hybridity of various teachings flavoring the Chosŏn Korean religious soup of the

time and delivers them in a concise textual form shaped by but outside of the traditional forms. This new religious movement's foundational text represents a dynamic utilization of authority and legitimacy similarly dealt with in the oldest of sutras. In the future, comparison of original publications and subsequent edited versions may provide insight into how disciples and institutionalization affect doctrine, as well as provide insight to Buddhism's influence on the lives of a group of average, rural commoners in Chosŏn Korea at the turn of the century, as colonialism and industrialization swept over their lands.

The *Taejonggyŏng* appears second in the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*. Written, compiled, and published in 1962 by followers of Pak, it is a collection of the remembered words and deeds of the founder. Although this text appears second in the canon, it is utilized much more frequently in the edification and ritual life of members. Not part of Pak's original *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* and later inserted between his *Chŏngjŏn* and the *Pulcho yogyŏng*, the small collection of Buddhist sutras Pak had identified for essential study, the *Taejonggyŏng* has become the most often quoted and utilized material in ritual life. Many problems and interesting questions emerge with the introduction of this text into the canon, which are beyond this discussion, but considering its close connection to existing textual forms, the *Taejonggyŏng* illustrates the importance of traditional forms and authority.

Unlike sutras, which are specifically presented as the remembered words of the

Buddha through such statements as “thus have I heard,” Wŏn Buddhists present the words and deeds of Pak as first-hand records and direct quotations, appealing to modern sensibilities of technologically recorded and verifiable statements. They utilize direct quotes, opening most of their individual chapter sections with “the Founding Master said [at so and so time and place]....” While Buddhist sutras appeal in their authority to the sangha’s agreement and stamp of authenticity on what are the correct words of the Buddha as remembered by Ānanda, Wŏn Buddhists attempt to locate authority within the enlightened figure of Pak himself. Thus, while appealing to traditional understandings of authority resting in the written word of sutras, they shift the locus of authority to Pak through presenting the material as directly recorded – which many are not. By utilizing traditional and contemporary legitimizing strategies, we can see that while the form may be new, this new religious movement remains embedded in firmly established means of establishing authority. If we stick to pre-established textual genres, this Buddhist new religious movement will always be marginalized from the mainstream, even though in content it fits squarely within mainstream East Asian Buddhism.

Personal Experience with Buddhism

At the age of eight, I experienced a demystifying experience regarding my family’s Catholic god. As early as I can remember, I prayed to God and Jesus for help with abusive individuals in my life. Help never came. One evening when my parents

went out and left me and my younger siblings alone, a severe mid-Western thunderstorm rolled through town. The thunder was deafening, shaking the house and windows. The rain poured down for hours, and the lights kept flickering on and off. Alone in the house at night without parents, we got scared. We did what we were taught in Catholic school - pray. We prayed for God and Jesus to bring our parents home and keep us safe. My siblings finally fell asleep in tears, all of us curled up on my bed. Looking back, the storm was typical, we lived in a safe, small Missouri town, there was no danger, and my parents were not far away; but to children alone, this was a nightmare of tears and fear.

After my siblings fell asleep, the sound of the thunder moved to the background and my mind settled into a void of nothingness. Floating alone in a dark void punctuated by the flash of lightening, I realized that even if God and Jesus existed, praying to them did nothing. It did not stop abuse. It did not bring home parents. It did not save children. Only I could help myself. Only I was there to comfort my brother and sister. This moment of realization seared itself into my hippocampus. There was no turning back from this understanding, and there were no more tears. I started asking questions in my Catholic school religion classes, which was not appreciated and quickly shot down. By twelve years old, I was looking up what little I could find about religion in my school library or reading about religion and philosophy in my family's set of printed encyclopedias. Buddhism particularly attracted me, but there was little in the

school or local library about it. The internet did not exist. No Google to search.

When I was sixteen, a friend's mother cast my Yijing. I was fascinated. She encouraged me to read about Taoism and Buddhism. She gave me a copy of W.Y. Evans-Wentz's translation of the biography of Milarepa.⁵³ That was it. From that moment on, I consumed Buddhist materials as fast as I could find them. I continually had thoughts of becoming a Buddhist monk, but I had never met a Buddhist or gone to a temple. Finding Buddhist communities in a pre-internet era was not easy for an uninformed young mind. I continued to study on my own, devouring as much as I could find on Buddhism and Taoism. I continued to have thoughts of finding a teacher and sought out a few groups, but the need to survive and work in a capitalist world consumed my attention. On top of this, I did not experience a calling.

I appreciated the Buddhist teachings, but no order or group I read about or met with grabbed my attention. They all seemed old fashioned, trapped in empty traditions. While reading *Tricycle*, I saw an ad in the back section. It had a simple circle in a box with a bit of text that said to write to Wŏn Buddhism for more information and a free copy of their teachings. I did; but I wrote to groups for texts a lot and quickly forgot I had. Several months later, a package arrived from South Korea. It was a small black book with gold-edged paper that looked eerily like a Christian bible. I thought, "Oh no,

⁵³ W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa: A Biography from the Tibetan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

what is this?" I was beyond skeptical and put it aside.

A few months later, I picked it up after being frustrated trying to get through Nyanaponika Thera's *Abhidhamma Studies* and feeling like I would never 'get' Buddhism. I read the Wŏn Buddhist doctrine in one sitting and read the discourses over the next few days. A lot of the pieces fell into place, and many of my previous questions were answered. I experienced the calling – intensely. If people were living this simple-to-understand and progressive Buddhism, I wanted to learn. I contacted a Wŏn Buddhist temple in Los Angeles; we talked several times by phone, and within six months I was on my way. I sold or gave away most of my possessions, quit my excellent job in advertising, and, with no understanding of South Korea or Korean language, I departed for Korea. I arrived on my twenty-fifth birthday.

I spent my first year with Wŏn Buddhism enrolled in a Korean Language program at Wŏn Buddhism's Wonkwang University, located next to their headquarters. I lived at the headquarters and worked as a postulant (*kansa* 幹事) in the Department of International Affairs.⁵⁴ Unlike the other Korean postulants that lived communally in a large room, I was afforded the luxury of a small room by myself. The director of the Department of International Affairs, a senior celibate female *kyomu* (教務, lit. instructor

⁵⁴ The term *kansa* simply means 'administering affairs,' or 'administrative management,' and is often part of various administrative titles in Korea. In Wŏn Buddhism, it is best translated as 'postulant.' *Kansa* is a two-year postulant period prior to becoming a novice. The first record of the term being used appears in Wŏn Buddhist administrative records in 1967, and the postulant system and title were officially adopted in 1971. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

in the teaching, the Wŏn Buddhist title for ordained members) with a PhD from an American university, and the director of the Department of Education, a senior and well-known married male *kyomu*, both decided I should live alone since I had just arrived in Korea and was unfamiliar with Korean culture. The male director gave me his room in one of the traditional buildings in the historic quarter of Headquarters, which meant he had to go back and forth to his home and wife every day, which was not far but a little inconvenient for such a busy person. I felt honored, and the female director made sure I understood the honor he granted me. I was the only person in the small building and had my own bathroom, which impressed the other postulants and novices. Living at Headquarters brought me immediately into an unexpected center of attention.

As word spread that their first Western (specifically white, or *paegin* 白人) postulant was studying Korean language and living as a *kansa* at the headquarters, I was introduced to an endless flow of *kyomu* and lay followers, from all levels of age, rank, and reputation. I received several one-on-one meetings with the Head Dharma Master, another honor, and he personally meditated on and gave me my dharma name – Wŏn Isŏng 圓理性.⁵⁵ Everyone used my dharma name and I preferred it, since they butchered the pronunciation of my English name (“F” is particularly challenging for

⁵⁵ At that time, foreigners were distinguished in their dharma name by adding the character *wŏn* 圓, from the name of Wŏn Buddhism, as their family name. Currently, most American members do not receive that designation, and simply receive a two-character dharma name.

Koreans), and I would have to repeat it so many times that it was annoying. Many Wŏn Buddhists in Korea only know me by my dharma name. I lived, worked, and practiced with the community at Headquarters for one year.

After finishing the Korean language program at their university, it was clear that the newly created international language program for foreigners was grossly underprepared to educate me to a level of proficiency needed to study Wŏn Buddhist and Buddhist doctrine and scripture. The director of education decided to send me to Seoul to study at the Jesuit Sogang University, which had a well-established Korean Language program for international learners. I was sent to live at one of the most famous Wŏn Buddhist temples, with one of the most prominent celibate female *kyomu* in the order, in one of the wealthiest areas of Seoul. I commuted to Sogang University five days a week as a full-time student. Living at this temple as a *kansa* also provided a unique experience.

The temple was renowned for the social status of its members, their great wealth, and their international missionary work in India and Nepal. The head of the temple, a female *kyomu*, was famous both in Korea and abroad, and she was a skilled orator. All the *kyomu* living in the temple had marginal English language skills, so I learned Korean language quickly in a full-emersion environment. This was also the home temple for one of the first non-Korean novices, a young man from Nepal, who was a disciple of the head *kyomu* of the temple. The dharma meetings were full, and the temple was active.

Again, being part of this temple brought me into another unique and unexpected center of attention, and I met prominent lay members and international religious figures. I lived, worked, and practiced at this temple for one year; however, this was a busy temple, and they could not afford giving up the room for a *kansa* that spent most of his time outside of the temple at school. The temple needed another worker, so I was transferred to a small, almost empty temple closer to Sogang University, which was better, as it significantly cut time off my long subway commute. This small, struggling temple provided a distinct perspective on Wŏn Buddhist temple life.

The celibate female head *kyomu* running this temple was not known for her oratory skills, the temple was mostly attended by elderly people, and sometimes the dharma services were almost empty. I rarely saw any young people around, and the temple seemed stagnant and uninspired. The second *kyomu* in charge was unhappy with the head *kyomu*, and overall it was somewhat of a depressing experience. I stayed at this temple for one year until I graduated from the two-year program at Sogang University. By this time my Korean was quite good. I could hold conversations easily and fluently, and since I had spent three years around many prominent Wŏn Buddhists, I was well-versed in their doctrine and scriptures. I had a basic understanding of Classical Chinese, enough to get by with scriptural studies, and could hold conversations on religion and philosophy. The directors of the Department of Education and the Department of International Affairs decided it was time for me to enroll as a

novice in one of their education programs.

Headquarters transferred me to Youngsan College, a small private school located at the sacred birthplace of the founder. Wŏn Buddhists revere this sacred ground, and the community of postulants, novices, and *kyomu* is small and intimate compared to the much larger Wonkwang University next to Headquarters. More a seminary than a proper college, Youngsan College is closed to the public and only novices of the order attend classes. Tucked away in a valley, deep in the mountains, the bucolic environment was what I had expected when I first moved to Korea to become an ordinand. I studied there for a year and a half, practiced, and worked in the greenhouses and farm fields. I found the teaching sub-par and desired a more rigorous education. At the same time, I had grown tired of the age, gender, and sexual discrimination in the order, and I did not like having to live in the closet as an adult gay man. I had come to learn that the order was struggling to attract new followers and was not following its own teachings. When I raised these issues openly with others or in the classroom, older *kyomu* resisted discussion or completely shut it down. Often, they told me to grin and bear it, as it must be my karma to experience it. Knowing my leaving would not be appreciated, I left late one night during the summer break and did not go back. I informed the few people in the order that needed to know. I stayed in Korea for six more months with friends, and then I returned to the United States, enrolled at a university, and majored in Art History and Religious Studies.

The town I moved back to had a small Wŏn Buddhist temple with a few devoted *kyomu* and lay members, so I stayed connected with the order. Although I had no desire to be part of the order, I could not shake the calling. Thoughts of returning to the order plagued my mind, but I did not feel Korea was the place for me. When I graduated from my undergraduate program, I was informed that a Wŏn Buddhist school for novice training had opened in Philadelphia. The first of its kind, *kyomu* assured me that novice life was different at this school. The order was running this school 'American style.' I contacted the appropriate people, got all the signatures and stamped forms, and was sent to a temple in Manhattan to stay for several months until my attendance was approved.

Staying at this Wŏn Buddhist temple was also a unique experience. Located in one of the wealthiest sections of Manhattan in an old four-story townhome sandwiched between two apartment buildings, the head female *kyomu* was heavily involved at the United Nations and in international inter-religious dialogue. This was the first time I experienced a temple with financially supportive and giving non-Korean American members. The temple still received support from the headquarters, and overall temple membership and attendance was small. The head female *kyomu* was well educated and spoke English, but even she expressed much concern over the state of Wŏn Buddhism in both Korea and the United States. Most of the American temples struggle to attract and maintain non-Korean members. She referred to it as the revolving door of Wŏn

Buddhism: they come in and go right back out. I started to feel concerned over my choice to attend the Won Institute, but she assured me they would be doing things differently than in Korea. Once I received final approval from the headquarters, I was sent to Philadelphia.

I moved into the Won Institute communal dormitory for *kyomu* and novices, a beautiful and large Victorian home in Glenside, Pennsylvania. Coincidentally (or not, if you are a Buddhist), the original *kyomu* that I spoke to over the phone in California who had organized my initial trip to Korea ten years prior was now residing in this community. I immediately noticed that even though this was the United States, it was run Korean style. The same ageism, sexism, and gender discrimination was in play. The traditional Korean conservative hierarchical structure was a bit stronger than in Korea, a common experience among diaspora communities. Several American members attended the Wŏn Institute program, but none of them ended up ordained and either left the program or left Wŏn Buddhism all together. One Korean Canadian novice did graduate and became an ordained *kyomu*, but for the most part, this was a conservative Korean community in the US, not doing things any differently, as I was assured.

The senior male *kyomu*, who was the chaplain at the school and well-known in Korea, vehemently opposed me becoming a *kyomu* due to my extensive tattooing, especially the tattooing on my head. He called me in for tea, looked me in the eye, and said in Korean that he would never let me ordain unless I removed my tattoos. He said

that my appearance would misrepresent Buddhism and Wŏn Buddhism to the world, and he politely and calmly reiterated several times that he would go to the headquarters and personally oppose my ordination. I left tea somewhat shocked but continued with my studies.

Another problem emerged when I took a part-time job in a local cafe. Wŏn Buddhist doctrine clearly states that *kyomu* can and should have jobs and should be independent and financially support themselves, however this is not the case, which will be discussed later. *Kyomu*, novices, and postulants do not usually work outside of Wŏn Buddhism and receive significant financial support from their families, home temples, and some support from Headquarters. I was receiving none of this financial support. I received a little spending money from a devoted follower, but she could not provide the same support other novices received from family and temples. I was American and had student loans and other small financial obligations to finish paying off. When I started working a part-time job outside Wŏn Buddhism, several male *kyomu* did not accept me working. They did not like that I went outside the order and did not like that I would not bow down to their authority and quit working when they demanded it. In a heated debate with a senior female *kyomu* arguing for me to stay, the two male *kyomu* in charge of the male dormitory voted for me to leave the communal house. In a weird twist of irony, one of them was the same male *kyomu* from the California temple that first sent me to Korea. I left, moved in with a friend in

Philadelphia, and continued to study. The senior female *kyomu* thought it best for me to live outside the community; she encouraged me to continue my studies and said she would do her best to get me ordained.

The final straw was when I told her I refused to live as a closeted *kyomu* in the United States. She understood that the LGBT community was a cornerstone of Buddhism in the United States. The Wŏn Buddhist community in Philadelphia had several LGBT members; however, when it came to ordination, she knew it would not happen. The headquarters would never ordain an openly gay man. When she said there would be no hope for me to become ordained, I stopped attending the ordination program. After finishing a master's degree in Korean Studies at Columbia University, and then six year of PhD studies at UCLA, I returned to Philadelphia. Again, the Won Institute invited me to join their ranks, but this time as assistant to the president and senior management team.

This personal narrative spans almost twenty-five years. I have been part of the Wŏn Buddhist community in a wide variety of positions and locations, and currently work closely with the senior management and Board of Trustees at their flagship American school. I have intimate knowledge and experience with a wide variety of Wŏn Buddhist communities and individuals. Continually drawn back, I have kept records of my experience, which offer a trove of information to draw from to construct a more nuanced narrative of Wŏn Buddhism that few non-Korean's have experienced.

Chapter One: The New Buddha

For many Wŏn Buddhists, the life story of Pak Chungbin inspires their faith in the order. From 1937 to 1938, Song Hong'uk, the second leader of the Wŏn Buddhist order, serially published in newsletters the history of the earliest years of the small Buddhadharma Research Society (*Pulbŏp Yon'guhoe* 佛法研究會), the original name of Pak's religious movement. After Pak and Song's deaths, members compiled, edited, expanded, and eventually published Song's history in the current canonical work *History of Wŏn Buddhism* (*Wŏnbulgyo kyosa* 圓佛教教史, 1974). Parts of this canonical history appear throughout the chapters of *Taejonggyŏng* (Scriptures of the Great Founder), the main source of narratives for the history and teachings of Pak.

Taejonggyŏng shapes how most, if not all, Won Buddhists imagine Pak's life and the early years of the Wŏn Buddhist order; but how followers interpret the narratives vary.

History of Wŏn Buddhism was not available in translation when I first received the English translation of *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism*, which contains a translation of *Taejonggyŏng*.¹ I was struck by the text's depiction of Pak's character: he made no claims to sainthood, no claims of buddhahood, and spoke in a relatable vernacular. Without an understanding of Korean culture or language, some of the content initially made no sense, but overall, Pak's story appeared believable, inspiring, and humble. A poor,

¹ See Pal Khn Chon, trans., *The Scripture of Wŏn Buddhism*, revised edition (Iri: Wonkwang Publishing, 1988).

failed farmer from the rural countryside, his questioning and seeking eventually lead to an awakening experience, which, as describe in the text, parallels the stories and teachings of other historic religious leaders, mystics, and mystery traditions of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries. With my interest in the Theosophical Society and Rosicrucianism, Pak fit right in with nineteenth and twentieth-century Spiritualism. Even though he was from a rural area of East Asia, he appeared directly plugged into an important religious current of the time.

Emphasizing the oneness and interconnectedness of everything in the universe, his cosmic vision grounds itself in an easy practice, which Pak intentionally presents in a simple vernacular and methodical format.² Critical of established Buddhist institutions, critical of his own cultural traditions, emphasizing equality of the sexes, promoting iconoclastic views, and tearing down distinctions between ordained and lay members, his desire to bring Buddhism down from the mountains and into the lives of everyday people attracted me. At that time in my life, I observed a chasm between what I read in religious texts and what I saw religious people doing. If people were practicing Pak's teaching, I had to experience it. The narrative is powerful, simple, and inspiring. However, from the moment I first arrived in Korea and got into the van that shuttled me into the night from the airport to the Headquarters of Wŏn Buddhism, I noticed a

² Scholars have thoroughly discussed Pak's teachings in numerous publications, and except as necessary for specific topics, I will not discuss the minute details of Pak's teaching. Refer to the bibliography for English publications on Pak's teachings.

difference between text and practice – Pak had become god-like.

I had no knowledge of Korean language when I arrived, and the man that picked me up in the dead of night at the airport could not speak English. The circle of Wŏn Buddhism (*irwŏn-sang* 一圓相) on the side of the van told me that I was at least going with someone associated with Wŏn Buddhism. After I settled in the back of the van and we headed off, I immediately noticed a picture on the dashboard. A portly, balding man wearing round glasses in a small, black and white portrait stared at me, absent of facial expression and looking forward in the same fashion as most early twentieth-century portraits. Part of a sticky-type mini calendar, it was attached to the dashboard above the center console with many other decorative plastic doodads that moved back and forth with the car's movements. I had never seen an image of Pak but surmised this was he. I looked around the van and noticed several prayer beads hanging from the rearview mirror, all with what looked like a similar small image of Pak in the center bead. I saw another in a pocket behind the driver's seat and pulled it out. The driver must have seen me reach for it, because I looked up and saw him in the rear-view mirror staring at me with a smile on his face. Sure enough, the man in the prayer bead was the same as on the dashboard, but this image looked like a color painted portrait of Pak without glasses. Having already read *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism* several times, I thought how curious that they would create an icon of a teacher who was clearly iconoclastic. With a flood of foreign sights, sounds, and smells overwhelming me during the night

drive, this first impression of Wŏn Buddhism will never dim from my memory. Neither will the driver's eyes intently watching me in the rearview mirror. After a long drive, he dropped me off at the dormitory, unloaded my stuff, directed me to a woman who spoke broken English and was going to show me to my room, and then handed me the prayer bead I had pulled out of the seat pocket. He spoke to the woman, and she told me he saw me looking at it and wanted me to have it. I thanked him, and he drove away into the night.

When I walked into the dormitory, again I saw the same painted portrait of Pak, this time framed and hanging in the dormitory lobby. I asked the woman who it was, and she confirmed it was the founder of Wŏn Buddhism. I spent the next few days on Wonkwang University campus getting familiar with my new surroundings, hanging out with the young Korean university student assigned to live with me as a language-exchange partner, meeting other international students that arrive for a Korean language program, and meeting with school officials. I saw pictures of Pak everywhere. After several days, university faculty and staff realized that I was not there to only study Korean in their new language program and that I had come expecting to become an ordinand. They took me off campus to the Department of International Affairs at the Headquarters of Wŏn Buddhism, located next to the university.

When I walked into the office, I noticed a picture of Pak hanging on the wall, a sight that was already familiar. The people in this office spoke English, said they had

been expecting me, and said I should be living with them at the headquarters with all the other Wŏn Buddhist postulants, novices, and *kyomu*. As the female *kyomu* in charge of the department began to call around and make plans to move me, a male *kyomu* in the office took me for a tour of the headquarters. He first introduced me to all the *kyomu* in the same office building and then took me to the next building over, a large, rather plain concrete building. Inside was a large auditorium-like temple that could seat well over a thousand people, with a huge altar, an enormous back-lit circular gold *irwŏn*, and hanging to the right of the stage-like altar was an enormous portrait of Pak.³ It looked at least ten feet tall. I was shocked. It reminded me of the larger-than-life images of Mao plastered all over China that appear in popular media. I looked at the young man giving me the tour and commented on its size. He replied with a slight chuckle and acknowledged Pak's importance to Wŏn Buddhism. I became nervous that I had joined something different from what I read.

He then took me to a nearby museum. This was a modern building with a large dome on the top, surrounded by well-manicured trees and bushes, and with two large sweeping half-circle stairways up to the second floor. It was constructed with a Western Palladian sense of balance but on a much smaller scale. On the main floor was a small museum that contained personal possessions of Pak and some founding documents of the order on display. We went outside and up the sweeping staircase to the second

³ Kaegyŏ Panbaengnyŏn Kinyŏmgwan 開教半百年記念館 (50-year Anniversary Building), built in 1971.

floor, a single open room with an enormous white stone statue of Pak sitting in meditation under the large dome. He looked just like a seated buddha. Considering Pak criticized the use of buddha statues, which will be discussed later, this enormous statue grabbed my attention. Around the room are large murals with the life story of Pak painted rather crudely. Pak is depicted with a halo and standing in a powerful, authoritative upright stance, usually pointing or directing people in some way. An old woman stood motionless in front of the statue, with her eyes closed, hands together in prayer.

During my time living with Won Buddhists, both in Korea and the United States, I have seen images of Pak in every imaginable location: temples, altars, homes, cars, offices, restaurants, auditoriums, school classrooms, dormitories, storage rooms, bathrooms – everywhere. I have seen his image carried by people, in women’s purses, on stickers, key chains, jewelry, websites, computer screen wallpaper, as small icons, in videos, and on TV. Although Pak never makes claims to divine status or lays claim to being a new buddha, Pak’s followers have granted him that divine status. Mundane actions and events in the narrative of his life take on new, profound meaning, often interpreted through supernatural agency. I have observed people pray to his image, pray to his stupa, pray for him to help them, pray to assist their kids with testing, and often pray to him to return to the order, all in both informal and formal ritual settings. Challenging Pak’s divine status as a buddha can incite scofflaws, stimulate anger, and

even bring forth tears.

In this chapter, I will explore three key topics: pressures to control the narrative; variations in interpretation of key parts of the narrative; and Pak's supposed divine status as the new Buddha. A complex intersection of personal, institutional, and social pressures controls the narrative and seek to enforce consistency. These dynamics of control are so intense, that over the last fifteen years since becoming an academic, both *kyomu* and lay members have requested that I seek approval from Headquarters to write, in any fashion, about Wŏn Buddhism. On one recent visit to Korea, when a lay member learned I was writing about Wŏn Buddhism at UCLA, she became concerned and stated firmly that I should not be writing about Pak without asking Headquarters. When she learned about some of the critical issues I would address, she became quite distressed and demanded I go speak to the head of the order to get approval. When I refused, the situation became quite tense. In such moments of tension, my liminal status as both a foreign other to guard against and as a familiar member needing control becomes clear, and a palpable fear that I will give up the ghost, break rank, and spill the beans arises to challenge me.

Controlling the Narrative

In contextualizing the rejections and acceptances I received when I approached Wŏn Buddhists to participate in a fieldwork project focused on sharing narratives about the founder, a complex dynamic of social, institutional, and personal controls

manifested, highlighting a tension between etic and emic involvement. When I approached Wŏn Buddhists as a formal researcher, it forever changed my relationship with some members.⁴ Most *kyomu* and lay members declined to participate. Since I had been involved with the order for almost twenty years when I decided on this project, positive expectations fueled my invitations. I have many close friends at all levels of the order. While I expected a willing acceptance, what followed was rejection. Although I had spent many years in temples, monasteries, and Headquarters as a postulant and novice, an overwhelming understanding of myself as a foreigner (*woegugin* 外國人) came hissing to the fore. When I attempted to turn my religious engagement into a scholarly engagement, my prospective participants collectively waived an imperial-yellow Gadsden flag to proclaim, “don’t tread on me.” In an official role of academic researcher, I transformed from a fellow practitioner and member into a threatening other. More interesting than the brief narratives told by the few participants, the patterns in acceptance and rejection were revealing. With Bruce Jackson’s call to hear about failed fieldwork projects and about the emotions of the fieldworker, I reveal this experience and its emotional contextualization, which complicated a frustrating fieldwork project.⁵

⁴ I have altered the names of all participants and, unfortunately, must leave out important and relevant identifying background information to protect identities. This includes information about location, time, date, etc., otherwise I expose Wŏn Buddhist friends and participants to criticism and rebuke within the order.

⁵ Bruce Jackson, *Fieldwork* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1987), 14-15.

After his awakening in 1916, Pak founded a Buddhist order outside the established lineages and criticized Buddhist institutions for what he saw as a disengaged tradition reclining in temples deep in the mountains and away from the people. He attempted to bring Buddhism down from its lofty mountaintop by empowering lay practitioners, especially women, and demanding more social involvement from his devoted members. Since people often find the plethora of Buddhist texts intimidating and hard to understand, Pak summarized the teachings he deemed important into the short instructional *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*. It contains Pak's short doctrine and a small collection of Mahāyāna Buddhist texts Pak considered essential for studying Buddhism. Pak continually encouraged his followers to turn to the Buddha's teachings, but after his death, the order purged some of the Buddhist flavor from *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* to create its own identity in a crowded religious landscape.

Purging the focus on Buddhist scriptures, the leaders redacted *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* and inserted the *Taejonggyŏng* (Scriptures of the Great Founder), the teachings of Pak as recalled by his followers. They inserted this text between his doctrine and the Buddhist sutras and declared Pak the new Buddha for a new age. By placing *Taejonggyŏng* in front of the traditional Buddhist sutras that Pak encouraged his followers to study, the order established an implicit hierarchical relationship between Pak and the Buddha. They deemphasized the traditional teachings in favor of their own. Scriptural study in Wŏn Buddhism now consists primarily of studying Pak's short doctrine, the *Chŏngjŏn*,

and *Taejonggyōng*. Declaring Pak a new buddha, the move away from established Buddhist scriptures toward newly invented and subsequently inserted scriptures, and the re-introduction of practices Pak criticized all position Wŏn Buddhism for tensions with a variety of interlocutors, from followers of established forms of Buddhism to Wŏn Buddhist members wondering why the order does not follow the original teachings. From my own subjective experiences with a wide network of friends and colleagues outside the order, many of my Korean friends view Wŏn Buddhism as a cult and hearing derogatory comments about Wŏn Buddhism was unfortunately common while I lived in Korea.

This negative social image influences how members view themselves and how they interact with outsiders. The rise of evangelical Christianity in Korea and the common Protestant position that negatively views Buddhism as a heathen practice heighten the social approbation focused on Wŏn Buddhism.⁶ One Wŏn Buddhist member stated that in order to avoid uncomfortable situations, she does not reveal to strangers her position as *kyomu* and will often not wear her religious clothing away from the temple. Such negative perceptions of Wŏn Buddhism act as a social control that can influence religious expression and practice. Two invitees who rejected

⁶ A well-known Korean guest speaker at UCLA referenced Buddhism and Shamanism as heathen influences on Korean Christianity that have contributed to the decreased influence of Protestantism in Korea. Hak Joon Lee, "Authority and Public Spirituality: Inculturation and the Crisis of Korean Protestant Christianity" (Lecture, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, February 14, 2012).

participation noted concerns about information being used negatively against the order or themselves in the future. While studying in Korea, non-Won Buddhists I met often questioned why I was studying Wŏn Buddhism instead of “real” Buddhism; and I learned quickly to say I was studying Korean languages and not mention Wŏn Buddhism. Even within the American academy, I have experienced dismissive glances from native Korean scholars when I mention an interest in Wŏn Buddhism. Few scholars pay attention to Wŏn Buddhism.⁷ Although an insider such as me can have intimate knowledge and experience about a community of religious practitioners, when social stigmas exist, we must wonder if the information offered by participants has been refracted through this lens of social influences.

I sent invitations to a wide variety of *kyomu* and lay members. Most invitations went to conservative individuals who serve in well-known temple communities and Headquarters; a few invitations went to progressive individuals considered on the fringe in terms of their views. Only two conservative members agreed to participate, the rest who agreed were progressive members known to share opinions on controversial matters.

Since Korean social etiquette often discourages direct answers of “no,” most

⁷ As previously mentioned, in her important book on Korean Buddhism during the Japanese Occupation, Pori Pak disappointingly fails to mention Pak Chungbin. The fact that his organization survived scrutiny, himself taken in for interrogation, and emerged from colonial rule intact deserves exploration. See: Pori Pak, *Trial and Error in Modernist Reforms: Korean Buddhism under Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009).

rejections came in the form of no reply, of being too busy with duties, or of polite rejections based on concerns that they should not speak for the order in such an official way. Two of those who rejected participation stated that they would have to check with the head *kyomu* of their temple, after which they never again replied. I realized that I had inadvertently “broken rank” in the hierarchy: the initial invitations should have gone to the heads of the temples or at least addressed them in some way. Even though Pak criticized the entrenched Confucian practice of hierarchical structures that demand respect and placation based on age or rank and in his order attempted to base respect on demonstrated wisdom and knowledge, his idealism never manifested.⁸ Pak promoted self-autonomy, a popular nationalist theme at the time, and wanted members to think and speak for themselves, yet here I was running into the wall of hierarchy and an unwillingness to speak for oneself. Pak’s idealized vision of equality proved hard to maintain once his charismatic example passed, and the order quickly moved back into socially acceptable patterns of hierarchy based on age and rank in a hierarchical power structure of educated *kyomu*.

Ordinands must graduate with a master’s degree in Wŏn Buddhist Studies from one of three educational institutions run by the order: Wonkwang University, Youngsan

⁸ *Doctrinal Books*, 39-44; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 39-44.

University, or Won Institute of Graduate Studies.⁹ The bulk of this education consists of memorizing Pak's short doctrine and the more lengthy *Taejonggyŏng* – the study of Buddhist sutras is on the periphery. Most professors of Wŏn Buddhism I am familiar with are conservative *kyomu* appointed and approved by the order's Department of Education. From my experience in these classrooms, I can report that critical discussion is not promoted, and the *kyomu* provide set parameters of narrative interpretations that support the hierarchical structure. Deviations from official narrative interpretation are corrected.

I met Ms. Chŏng, one of the conservative respondents, while she studied at the newly opened Wŏn Institute of Graduate Studies in Glenside, Pennsylvania. Headquarters decides which Korean students are sent to this Wŏn Buddhist educational institution outside of Korea, an example of control in who represents the order to the outside world. Chŏng was an ideal candidate for representation abroad: conservative, gentle, kind, loving, demure, quiet, obedient, and possessing an intense desire to missionize and save the world, all idealized characteristics for a female *kyomu*. However, Chŏng did not want to be there. She expressed feelings of isolation from the Korean community, and she was uncomfortable when, inevitably, critical discussions of

⁹ This is quite far from the model Pak instituted and is considered by many *kyomu* and members as being one of the contributing reasons to the continued decrease in members wanting to become fully ordained. The American branch of Wŏn Buddhism has been discussing reassessing this process toward ordination, but change has yet to manifest. This will be discussed later.

Wŏn Buddhist doctrine and practices arose in classrooms with American novice and lay participants.¹⁰ When American Wŏn Buddhist members, Korean *kyomu*, and young novices discussed the removal of clothing and hair expectations that apply to female novices and *kyomu*, Chŏng stated she liked the image of the traditional female uniform, a perspective that frustrated progressive members striving for equality.¹¹

When she shared a narrative about the founder for this project, Chŏng offered a textbook narrative, memorized word-for-word from the canon. She knew exactly what to say and never veered from the official narrative:

Chŏng: Ok, I love this story from Master Soŭ'aesan's time. When Master Soŭ'aesan was alive and residing at Pongnae cloister. You remember at that time, he was in a deep mountain to establish religious teaching of Wŏn Buddhism. A monk came from Diamond Mountain to see the Great Master. The Great Master asked, "What can I do for you who have come such a long way?" The monk answered, "I wish to know the Way. Please tell me where the Way is." The Great Master said, "The Way is in your question."

I always love this story. Regarding monk's question, "Where is the Way?" Why did the Great Master say, "The way is in your question"?

Me: What do you think?

Chŏng: What do I think? In this sense, learning Buddhism or Wŏn Buddhism is learning my self, only learning my mind. This means, I guess, that the way

¹⁰ At this American institute, Wŏn Buddhist Studies courses usually consist of three to five Wŏn Buddhist novices and one or two Americans from the community. In one instance, Chŏng was brought to tears over her frustration with the doctrine being critically analyzed by American participants.

¹¹ Men have no clothing restrictions but are encouraged to wear certain clothes. Consequences for stepping outside those bound are essentially non-existent for men. Women are expected to wear the traditional *hanbok* and other restrictive clothing, and their hair must be kept in a particular way. This is often enforced by senior nuns, and deviation is rebuked and characterized as disrespectful and selfish. Such rules did not exist during Pak's time, and equality between the sexes was one of his bedrock teachings. Wŏn Buddhism is currently struggling with this issue in the face of public criticism, particularly in countries outside Korea. This will be discussed later.

is not outside but very close to us, in our mind. Awakening to the Way is exactly related to awakening to our fundamental mind. That is why we have to watch our mind constantly and diligently, and over and over and over again.

Chǒng presents Pak as the sagacious Buddhist master, in a mode directly from classic Zen discourse literature. Through her presentation of a narrative wrapped in a classic Zen narrative discourse format, she brings forward issues of legitimacy: Pak knew exactly how to respond to this traditional Buddhist monk's question, and Chǒng had Pak's response memorized and well-rehearsed, lending legitimacy to herself. By choosing a story that has Pak interacting with a Buddhist monk, she highlights the tension between Wǒn Buddhism and established Buddhist orders, placing Pak in the position of true master. This, by extension, legitimizes the order itself as possessing awareness that established Buddhism lacks. When I asked her why she chose the narrative, she stated it shows the relationship between Wǒn Buddhism and "regular Buddhism."

Even though she was speaking to someone quite familiar, Chǒng chose to use Pak's much more formal posthumous title of Great Master (*Taejongsa* 大宗師, translated as both Great Master and Great Founding Master). This title is often utilized in texts and ritual settings. In my experiences talking among Wǒn Buddhist friends, we usually use Pak's common Dharma title *Sot'aesan*. Some Wǒn Buddhists may argue that this is simply a naming convention and a display of respect; however, I found that the use of various titles often changed according to the individual and context. Thus, in this

formal interview situation, instead of addressing Pak casually, Chǒng chose to address Pak in his most formal title and display not only his authority but also display her humbleness.

When asked if she knew any stories about Pak outside of official discourse, she responded, “No, I don't think so. I think all stories are in the scripture.” I was surprised. Many oral non-canonical stories exist, and canonical stories that have various oral embellishments are passed down through the order. Even as a foreigner, I had heard many. This illustrates the power of the canonical *Taejonggyǒng* and *History* over memory: the texts successfully codify official narratives and provide an effective institutional means to control narratives and representation. Combined with the social influence of strict hierarchical structures that seeped back in after the death of Pak, the order maintains control over how and what is represented to the outside community, and Chǒng participated in that control by sticking to the text.

Chǒng's response was not unusual by any means. In fact, most novices and *kyomu*, including the only other conservative participant, offer similar and highly congruent narrative interpretations. Chǒng's response is the norm. In my experience, only progressive members pushing for reform expressed narrative variations, and their responses reveal tensions with how the order idealizes Pak. All the other respondents in this project exist somewhat on the fringe in terms of views and praxis, but this in no way means they are any less devout. All respondents I invited, conservative and

progressive, are devout and highly respected members. Like contemporary American political rhetoric, conservatives Wŏn Buddhist members will often view progressives as misinformed or disrespectful toward elders, while progressive members view conservatives as locked into old-fashioned beliefs and customs.

Ms. Chang is a *kyomu* of notoriety. Chang fit the same desirable profile of a model *kyomu* in all ways but one – she is a progressive and critical thinker. She openly challenges the order on the required clothing and hairstyle for female novices and *kyomu* and refuses to take the expected, but not officially mandated, oath of celibacy for female *kyomu*.¹² She did more than talk publicly about problems - she acted on them. Such activism is difficult in Wŏn Buddhism, as members often consider pushing for reform as disrespectful to the older generations. Obedience to established protocols is expected. Chang continues to struggle with balancing the expectations of her conservative religious community and embodying Pak's written doctrine that often contradicts current practices.

Chang chose a story of Pak that reflects a fundamentally different approach, one that views him as a teacher, mentor, and fallible man:

Chang: I'll start by sharing an odd story that I heard many years ago from a *kyomu*. So't'aesan was on his way to Yujŏm Temple, somewhere on Gŭmgang Mountain, and he stopped to take a rest. A squirrel appeared in front of him and started making playful gestures. So't'aesan, enraptured by the squirrel's movements, thoughtlessly threw a stone at the squirrel. But the rock hit the squirrel, killing it instantly. So't'aesan felt really sorry

¹² Celibacy will be discussed later.

and said to the squirrel, "You were waiting for me to come here. I will devote all the spiritual energy I gain from this short trip to your deliverance."

Me: What did you think about it?

Chang: I just remember thinking to myself, "Weird!" If the squirrel was so darn cute, why the hell throw a stone at it? But I was more confused by Sot'aesan's reaction in the story. "Waiting for me?" What does that mean? What connection did he have with this squirrel? And why at that moment? Is it even true? I mean, there's no such thing as coincidence in Buddhism, right? I guess that's why the story sticks with me today.

Chang offers a narrative of a man, addressed by his less formal dharma title, who makes a mistake, regrets it, and strives to make restitution. She displays her marginal positionality through her readiness to choose a non-canonical narrative that represents the founder as faulty. More importantly, Chang challenges the story's authenticity by questioning if it is even true. Questioning the validity of the narratives is uncommon among members, and challenging narratives as false often elicits anger and sharp rebuke. My own liminal status may have encouraged Chang to express her challenge openly.

After I first arrived at the Headquarters in 1995, the gender disparity in Wŏn Buddhism was immediately visible. It troubled me, since Pak had strongly condemned gender discrimination in his doctrine. While strolling toward the Headquarters one day, a young female novice walking her bike out of the compound grabbed my attention. She had pigtails and wore fitted rolled up jeans and a feminine fitted shirt. She looked different from other female novices and *kyomu*, who all wear clothing that de-sexualizes their bodies. Ms. Ko was from a prominent Wŏn Buddhist family and had recently

decided to pursue ordination after a professional career. Leveraging her family's status, Ko is a constant voice for change in Wŏn Buddhism. She is particularly vocal on reinstating marriage for ordained women. She was eventually assigned to a small foreign temple with few members.¹³

Ko chose to share a narrative that encapsulates the need for a human rather than a divine teacher and that engenders Pak's iconoclastic charisma. Ko's characterization of Pak's youth is one of a bad kid doing rotten things:

My favorite story is about young Chŏhwa. I do not remember exactly in detail but generally it is correct, I think. Chŏhwa took the Chinese classic class in his village school when he was young. However, he was not interested in studying Chinese classic, in other words Confucianism. It is because around ten years old he already started having questions about all things concerning his life. His head was full of questions at that time. It seems natural he neglected his study. And he asked some weird questions to his teacher, and the old man couldn't give an answer. His teacher did not like Chŏhwa, a ten-year-old little devil who would keep asking some stupid questions and make him overwhelmed.

One day Chŏhwa and his teacher played a bet on whether Chŏhwa could surprise him or not before the sunset. I forgot why they started placing a bet, but the old man assured that he would never be dumbfounded ever. During the daytime, Chŏhwa played with his friend happily and by the sunset, he went to his teacher's house. Chŏhwa set fire to the teacher's barn. Needless to say, the old man came out from his room in underwear, dumbfounded. <laughs> It was anecdote from when he was ten years old. I like that story because he was not a nice kid at all when he was young. He was a somewhat weird and bad kid in a sense, and I like it.

Abandoning formal titles normally used by all members when speaking of Pak, Ko

¹³ This is reminiscent of the classic theme of East Asian banishment. Send the offending or too vocal official to a remote location far from the center of influence and power.

strips Pak of any divine or dharmic status and addresses him by a childhood name, Chöhwa. Despite my documenting her response, she addressed Pak in an unorthodox way, illustrating her tendency to push the envelope. After many years involved in the order, this was the first time I experienced a devout Wön Buddhist refer to Pak without using honorifics and using a childhood name. Ko chose a story that also highlights Pak's rejection of Confucian values, his rejection of studying the Confucian classics, and his performance of an unfilial act.

Another progressive member on the margins, Ms. Su is from a prominent Wön Buddhist family of an original disciple of Pak. Her father was a *kyomu*, and her mother is an exemplar of piety with strong connections within the order and to the Korean government. Su studied abroad at a prestigious university, travels extensively, and works for an international Korean corporation. Su is also a closeted lesbian. Although Korea and particularly Seoul has a vibrant and large underground LGBT community, due to Su's prominent and conservative family status, she remains closeted to family and most of her Korean friends. She has a partner of many years in a foreign city and spends most of her time outside of Korea.

Her chosen narrative reflects long years of existing on the margins of her familiar and religious worlds:

I know you know my story. We talked about it before when we met many years ago. I can't believe so much time passes! Ok, ok, you know, I never remember if it was at a temple or somewhere else, but I think it was a temple. Well, at temple, some prostitutes were always showing up, and it made the

members really mad. They were all so worried about their reputations and what everyone would think about it. So they complained to Sot'aesan, "Hey, we should stop these prostitutes from coming. What will people think about us? We should kick them out."

I remember that Sot'aesan got so very angry. He yelled at them very loudly, "How dare you! You cannot judge anyone. Are you perfect? No! You should hold open the door very wide for them. I don't want to hear such nonsense again. Look at your own problems and stop judging." Well, it was something like that. <laughs> Sorry, I haven't read scripture or anything about this for a long time. You know, prostitutes could never come to temple now. No way! They would be kicked out. The door would never be open to them.

Su expressed that if Pak were alive today, he would not recognize his order. Informed by her experiences within the tighter confines of elite Wŏn Buddhist circles, she stated that she believes many *kyomu* are obsessed with power, prestige, converting others, and being glorified saviors and less concerned with being humble practitioners. She expressed that if she were to come out as lesbian, *kyomu* and lay members in the order would ostracize her, despite her high social status. Her choice of narrative reveals a desire to reveal her LGBT life and a desire for the order's approval.

Only one male Wŏn Buddhist member agreed to participate. He stated clearly and emphatically that he has no interest in Wŏn Buddhist narratives or scriptures about Pak and distrusts their content:

As a student of Sot'aesan, Lao Tzu, and Zen Buddhist teachers, I am more influenced by poets in the school of "if you see the Buddha on the road, shoot him." That's what Sot'aesan taught, right? Don't worship the buddhas. So, this means avoiding the personality cults and personal anecdotes of disciples relating stories of their teachers. And this holds true for the discourses of Master Sot'aesan. But also, the anecdotes in the Scriptures are so desiccated of any personality as to render them as teachings and not insights into Sot'aesan the person. I'm only interested in his final, short doctrine, and that's all.

Mr. Kang expressed frustration that the order remains out of touch and dismissive of the perspectives of many members. Mr. Kang's criticism of narrative brings light to an important contemporary issue in Wŏn Buddhism: lay members often do not hold the same concern for the image and prestige of the order, and through increasingly strong distinctions between lay and ordained, some members feel isolated from any meaningful influence in the order. He expressed concern that Wŏn Buddhism would not survive into the future if it did not return to Pak's teaching and stop worshiping him.

As the sole male participant to accept an invitation, Mr. Kang's involvement highlights gendered peripheral and marginal views. Although undoubtedly the order could not continue to exist without its population of ordained women, which far exceeds the number of ordained men, the male members, on the whole, are far less willing to challenge the order or engage from the periphery, as they do not experience any significant discrimination as long as they remain in-step with the community. Conflicting opinions remain secret or only privately expressed. Gay male *kyomu* remain closeted, as lay member Ms. Su, and often marry and have children as expected, while maintaining secret relationships with other closeted *kyomu*, lay followers, or individuals outside the community. They tend to not rock the boat.

We can thus estimate that marginality influences the outcome of this fieldwork project. Since marginalized members desire acceptance from the group, some are

willing to share their views and challenge their marginal position. Those close to the center remain guarded and protective. Conservative members on the inside rejected participation, unwilling to share stories with someone not completely in the fold. Conservative members that did participate responded with narratives that promoted the order and displayed authority or legitimacy.

Institutional and social controls are not the only forces affecting participation. Buddhist praxis itself must be considered a form of control. Most Buddhist practitioners believe in karma, and a main goal of practice is to lesson or eradicate one's production of negative karma through behavioral controls. In the Buddhist monastic codes of conduct, a significant percentage of rules deal with speech. Speech is a major contributor to karma and controlling or being aware of one's speech is a key component of practice. Identifying all the ways one's speech may produce positive or negative karma is nearly impossible, which magnifies the importance. Since the Buddhist monastic rules or precepts are quite numerous and often culturally specific to India, Pak summarized his rules into thirty precepts, with no distinction between lay and ordained or male and female. Nine of Pak's precepts, or almost one-third, deal directly with speech.¹⁴ Thus, conclusions may be drawn in terms of social and institutional control, but many of the rejections, no-replies, and perceived conservativeness in engaging with

¹⁴*Doctrinal Books*, 89-90; and *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 81-82.

an outsider could have been influenced by the possibility and un-predictableness of creating negative karma. Such rules can be viewed as an extension of institutional control, but that would highlight a tension between etic and emic perspectives on practice.

Personal involvement and emotions of the interviewer may also have a profound influence on research and conclusions. My history with the order may have influenced participation and responses. My initial decision to leave the order was a reaction to the gender disparity and the strict hierarchical structure, which conflicts with the spirit of the doctrine. After the opening of the Wŏn Institute of Graduate Studies several years later, members assured me things would be different at the American school – they were not. The gender disparity remained, the strong distinction between lay and ordained that Pak attempted to remove remained, and I was eventually told ordination would be impossible since I was now openly gay. Some of this may have contributed to my less-than-desirable status and caused members to reject invitations to participate.¹⁵

¹⁵ Although training for ordination is offered by the Won Institute of Graduate Studies, ordination is strictly controlled by the Headquarters. In one case, the Headquarters denied ordination to an American woman after she completed years of training, investing her time and money. She would have been one of the first non-Korean *kyomu* in the order, which would have endowed her with significant authority and status. The official reason for rejection was that she was too old (which they should have said beforehand); however, *kyomu* I know mentioned a variety of other contributing factors, such as having been married, divorced, having had children, and several mentioned her African American heritage, all which did not fit the order's contemporary image of the pure, young, virginal female *kyomu*. Most of the founding women and men in the order were married with children, some quite older, but the majority of contemporary female *kyomu* join right out of high school, remain chaste, and are sometimes pressured by their families to join. This has contributed to a sharp decline in ordinations. This will be further discussed in chapter three.

As the first American to officially join the order and study in Korea, many members know my story. I was assigned to the best temples, given the best accommodation, and had frequent audiences with high-ranking members. Rumors circulated of reincarnation, and I had several senior *kyomu* claim that they knew my previous life, and of course, it was Wŏn Buddhist. When I left Korea, I heard from several novices and *kyomu* what they were told about me leaving. The official narrative of my leaving was that cultural differences made ordination in Korea difficult for foreigners, but I would continue to contribute to the order in other ways. Although many members from various levels of the order consider me an insider, others isolate me to the margins for my foreignness and perspectives. I am neither fully in nor completely out. No matter how much time I spend with the community, practice in temples, participate in temple activities, study Pak's doctrine, develop friendships with members, or share meals and intimate moments, my status as foreigner - as other - is never mitigated.

Contested Narratives

The second leader of the order, Song Hong'uk, wrote Pak's initial short biography based on stories he heard from Pak, his family, neighbors, and other members, which the order later edited and expanded into *History of Wŏn Buddhism* and included in *Taejonggyŏng*. After Pak's death, Song summarized Pak's life into the "Ten

Episodes of the Great Founder.”¹⁶ He compared this to the eight episodes of the Buddha’s life, a popular trope in East Asian Buddhist narrative and visual arts. These ten episodes of Pak’s life are often depicted in popular print media and art. A low-relief sculptural representation surrounds Pak’s stupa at Headquarters, a mural of the episodes decorates the walls near the large statue of Pak previously mentioned, and temples often hang framed versions around the dharma hall or temple.

Wŏn Buddhists are familiar with these episodes. After twenty years of hearing people retell these stories in a variety of situations, I rarely note inconsistencies, and any inconsistencies are minor and insignificant.¹⁷ In creating these episodes, Song made it easy for Wŏn Buddhism to teach and control Pak’s narrative; and the incorporation of the episodes into the canonical *History of Wŏn Buddhism* and *Taejonggyŏng* lends them a sacred authority on par with Pak’s original text. The episodes are presented in the texts as contemporarily recorded facts; however, most of them, especially the early episodes, were not.¹⁸ More important than the minutia of detail, these episodes represent

¹⁶ *Taejongsa sipsang* 大宗師十相. See, *Doctrinal Books*, 540; and, *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 766.

¹⁷ In the online version of *Lion’s Roar* magazine, a *kyomu* recently published an article about Pak’s life. The article opens stating that the writer “delves into the life of Wŏn Buddhism’s founding master,” but really the writer has copied the official narrative from *History of Wŏn Buddhism*, directly plagiarizing without citation and even using some of the same headings from the ten episodes. None of the article is original composition from the author. For someone unfamiliar with Wŏn Buddhism, it may appear like the writer is explaining Pak’s life in their own words; but anyone familiar with the text easily recognizes this is not the authors work but pulled directly from the official history. See, Doyeon Park, “The Life of Sot’aesan, Founder of Won Buddhism,” *Lion’s Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time*, January 30, 2019, accessed May 27, 2019, <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-life-of-sotaesan-founder-of-won-buddhism/>.

important aspects of Pak's doctrine or practice and provide ideals for practitioners to model. They are essentially didactic and created for edification. Some of them represent foundational worldviews that if questioned can invoke sharp rebuke. Held dear by many, the episodes continue to inspire members to leave the mundane world and enter on the path of ordination.

Even though Wŏn Buddhists hold these ten episodes of Pak's life in high regard, variations in interpretation exist. These variations can be minor and insignificant, but sometimes they can shake the foundation of Wŏn Buddhist faith. In those instances, one must tread carefully, and members often limit such discussions to included other members with established like-mindedness. Openly challenging some episodes can make tears flow and anger flare. I have had senior *kyomu* shush me when bringing up such topics, cautiously looking around to see if anyone overheard. Variations in interpretations of the ten episodes will be the focus of this section.

Before moving on to the first of the ten episodes, we should note that the first episode of Pak's life does not start with his birth but starts at the age of seven. Unlike the traditional Buddhist episodes that provide a cosmic legitimizing birth narrative for the Buddha, Song's ten episodes leaves this out; however, Pak's birth and earliest years

¹⁸ Eamon Adams notes the same observations about the source material supplying the history of Pak's life, especially regarding the early years. He questions most of the narrative's historical validity. Being forced to utilize Wŏn Buddhist-produced accounts, he cautions all readers to be aware of their clear hagiographic nature. See, Eamon F. Adams, "Toward the Reform of Korean Buddhism During the Japanese Colonial Period, 1910-1935" (Dissertation, University of London, 2010), 259.

are briefly mentioned in the opening section of *History*, and here some charismatic and legendary mythmaking does take place. This introductory passage is also included on Pak's large memorial stele installed at Headquarters next to his stupa, lending it more monumental weight in meaning and authority.¹⁹ Since the official translation of *History* was published in limited quantity and not available in libraries, it is worthwhile to quote the entire introduction and explore its creative flourishes:

The surname of Sot'aesan (K. Taejongsa, 大宗師) is "Park" (朴) [Pak], his first name is "Chungbin" (lit. "Relight," 重彬), his religious epithet is "Sot'aesan" (lit. "Young Great Mountain," 少太山).²⁰ He was born on March 27, 1891 of the lunar calendar, some 25 years before the birth of *Won*-Buddhism.

Sot'aesan grew up in the village of Yongch'on, Killryong-li of Paeksu-myun, Yongkwang-kun (全羅南道 靈光郡 白岫面 吉龍里), which is located on the Southwestern coast of the South Ch'olla Province. His father's name was Park, Hoe-kyong (dharma name; epithet: Songsam, 法名 晦傾字成三) and his mother's was Yu, Ch'ong-ch'ön (dharma name, Yu family of Kangn'ung 江陵劉民 法名 正天). Park, Hoe-kyong is the descendent of Park, Hyo-go-se, the first king of Shilla Kingdom (新羅始祖王朴赫居世), his 'Pon'gwan' (K. original hometown, 本貫) being Miryang (密陽). His distinctive family lineage also included Milsong, son of Kyongmyong, the Silla king (景明王長子密成大君).

After living in the area of Yangju-kun (楊州郡) for several centuries, Sot'aesan's grandfather – from the 7th generation of Sot'aesan's family – moved to the Yongkwang area. After staying in the village of Maup-li of Kunso-myun for a short time, the family moved in 1884 to the village of Killryong-li, 7 years before Sot'aesan's birth.

Sot'aesan's father was poor and therefore did not get the opportunity to receive an education; nevertheless his innate wisdom received much praise from those around him. Sot'aesan's mother's nature was generous, and was similarly praised by the people of the village. Sot'aesan was the third son.

¹⁹ *Taejongsa s'ongbi* 大宗師聖碑, erected April 26, 1953.

²⁰ The incorrect addition of "(K. Taejongsa, 大宗師)" into the first sentence is unnecessary and not in the original. I have not been able to discover why it was placed in the official translation. See *History*, 14, and *W'önbulgyo ch'önsö*, 1032.

In his youth, Sot'aesan was conscientious and magnanimous. He carefully watched over all things and accounted for them without any carelessness of sight, hearing, speech, or action. Favoring to follow his elders, he was curious and loved to ask about their activities and their explanations of their activities. He always kept his word, and acted on his promises to other people regardless of difficult situations. When he was very young, he sent away a big serpent in front of a stream without being frightened. When he was only four years old, he surprised his father by intentionally giving false information about the coming of the Tonhak revolutionary armies. When he was 10 years old, in keeping a promise he had made, young Chungbin upset his teacher by allowing the teacher's grandson to start a fire at his home. These episodes show one of the aspects of Sot'aesan. He was either criticized as being the cause of big problems, or was highly appraised by his neighbors as a great leader.²¹

The passage immediately opens with hagiographic flourishes. As previously noted, Chungbin is Pak's dharma name – that he took on himself after his enlightenment. He was not born with the name Chungbin; but a name with the meaning 'relight,' 'important light,' or 'intense brightness' seems more fitting for an 'enlightened' master. Many members do not know Pak's birth name.

Next we have the claim to royal descendancy from the legendary founder and king of Silla (57 BC – 935 CE), Pak Hyökköse Kösögan (朴赫居世居西干, 69 BC – 4 CE, r. 57 BC – 4 CE), the supposed progenitor of all Pak clans in Korea.²² When I asked a *kyomu* during my training on Wŏn Buddhist history to prove this claim, one Korean

²¹ *History*, 14; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1032-1033. This awkward translation has many errors in content, romanization, grammar, and consistency. I leave all the mistakes intact in all citations from the official translation of *History*. Only egregious translations and romanization errors that prohibit clarity will be corrected and noted.

²² The primary source for the legend is the twelfth century *Samguk Sagi*, the oldest extant Korean history that included some legendary information about the founders of each of the three kingdoms of ancient Korea.

novice in my class snorted and snarked that all Koreans want to be descended from royalty, especially commoners, but direct descendants are rare and have genealogical records to prove it. There are no genealogical records to support either claim to royal descendancy. When I ask members why spurious and unverifiable claims would be included in an official history, most dismiss it as nothing and claim that many families have such legends. One senior elderly *kyomu* laughed at my question and refused to answer it.

In the context of a religious leader founding a new religious movement, such a claim takes on special meaning and displays a need to legitimize Pak through a distinctive family lineage. This claim in *History* reveals insecurity in following a poor, illiterate farmer in a society that values social status and learning as the ultimate signifiers of culture and legitimacy. As an outlier not legitimized by Buddhist lineages, it belies doubt on the legitimacy of Pak's religious claim to Buddhist awakening and downplays Pak's poor commoner status. Ironically, Pak's status of poor, illiterate commoner is precisely part of his charisma, and this attempt to legitimize falls flat, even among devoted members. Most Wŏn Buddhists I have questioned over the years do not give much credit to this statement.

The questionable status of this statement plays out in the enormous *Wŏnbulgyo*

taesajŏn, an encyclopedic and authoritative compendium of all things Wŏn Buddhist.²³ Its predecessor and much smaller version *Wŏnbulgyo sajŏn* reproduces this royal claim from *History* in its entry for Pak; but in the greatly expanded *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, these details are missing from the entry about Pak.²⁴ *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn* even lists Pak's official name and childhood names, which *History* does not. But this claim to royal lineage – gone.²⁵ The lengthy entry for the Ten Episodes does not list this claim.²⁶ Even the listing for Pak's father, Pak Hoegyŏng, the probable source of the legend, does not include this questionable claim.²⁷ The only reference to this claim in *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn* is now buried under a new entry for the legendary founder of Silla, Pak Hyŏkkŏse, who emerged from an egg as an adult-like boy and radiated light that made the birds and beasts dance. That entry explains the legend from the *Samguk Sagi* first and then, in the last sentence, simply states that Pak is a descendent of Pak Hyŏkkŏse.²⁸ For such an

²³ *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, compiled by Wŏn'gwang Taehakkyo Wŏnbulgyo Sasang Yŏnguwŏn (Iksan: Wŏnbulgyo ch'ulp'ansa, 2013). This is by far the best Korean language academic source for Wŏn Buddhism. Most of the academic material produced by Wŏn Buddhist adherents delivers the same official positions in this encyclopedic compendium.

²⁴ *Wŏnbulgyo sajŏn*, compiled by Wŏn'gwang Taehakkyo Chonggyo Munje Yŏn'guso (Iksan: Wŏnbulgyo kyomubu, 1974): 165.

²⁵ *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 329-334.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 335.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 335. The claim is also reproduced in the text for the memorial stele produced for Pak, see *Ibid.*, 233.

important claim embedded in the official history and immortalized in stone on Pak's memorial stele, finding any explanation in the official and authoritative sources is challenging, and as of yet, no proof to this claim has been provided.

The eventual burying of this questionable claim to royal descendancy in *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, the most authoritative reference material within Wŏn Buddhism, has interesting implications. Foremost, it displays an awareness of this problematic narrative flourish in the official narrative, which brings to question the validity of the entire hagiographic narrative. It reveals that even in the first generation – from direct disciples of Pak – the desire to include questionable flourishes outweighed any concern for factual inquiry. It also documents how narratives can quickly change over time: the narrative in the *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, the main academic reference material, now differs from the canonical history. Does this portend the future editing out of this flourish from the history?

The rest of the introductory passage about Pak's childhood in *History* contains standard patriarchal flourishes of the perfect child doing childish things. *History* depicts Pak as a child with mastery over his senses, filial, and smart: in other words, a perfected Buddhist and Confucian child. Although this reveals how the order officially wishes others to imagine Pak's childhood, members often have a different view. As previously mentioned, Ms. Ko interprets the story of Pak participating in setting fire to a teacher's home as evidence that he was a devious little brat and troublemaker. Many members I

speak to view his lying to his father about the coming of rebels as just that – lies to provoke trouble – and hardly filial acts of a good kid. The introduction to Pak’s story closes by stating Pak was either praised or criticized as a child, which does not support claims of a perfect child with mastery over his faculties. *History* attempts to deliver a narrative of legendary perfection about a religious founder, but believers often do not believe the hagiographic details. Instead, they sometimes believe in a more realistic and normal, if not troubled, childhood for Pak.

Numerous members with whom I have discussed this introductory narrative report believing in a complicated and troubled childhood for Pak, one full of doubts, rebellion, and dissatisfaction with the status quo. This view of a dissatisfied and frustrated child is more fitting with the reality of Pak’s life and his pointed critiques of social traditions and Buddhist institution. This view challenges how the order and many members imagine Pak’s childhood, and my conversations with members holding such views are always away from any formal classroom or temple setting.

Episode One: Seeing the Sky and Doubts Arising²⁹

The first of the ten episodes Song identifies focuses on Pak from seven to ten years of age and states:

One day, when Sot’aesan was seven years old, he looked up at the beautiful clear sky that did not have a single cloud. He also observed the mountains that were filled with pure energy in the four directions. Suddenly, he

²⁹ *Kwan-ch’ŏn kiŭi-sang* 觀天起疑相, see *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 236.

raised a question, “That sky is high and vast, how did it get so clean?” Then another question arose, “How does the wind and clouds arise unexpectedly from such a clean sky?” These initial questions were the catalyst for more inquiry. From the age of nine, he started to reflect on himself so that his own existence became the subject of questioning. As he thought of his parents, brothers, and sisters, the relationship of his parents, brothers, and sisters became subjects of questions. While thinking about these many things, much became the object of question. When thinking of day and night, the changes of the day and night became an object of questioning, and all these questions make Sot’aesan restless.

Following the order of his parents, he attended a private Confucian school, at the age of ten, to learn the Confucian classics, but his heart was so preoccupied with questions, that he did not focus on his studies nor did he have the desire to play with other children his own age.³⁰

This episode is visually depicted in art as a youthful Pak standing in a clearing near the top of a small pine-covered hill. Dressed in regular commoner clothing of the time and with his hair parted and pulled back in a braid, Pak is usually gesturing at clouds or an open sky with one hand and has a nimbus around his head. The presence of the nimbus in visual depictions of the first episode reveals a narrative indicator that one should not view Pak as an ordinary child.³¹

Episode One represents a core aspect of Wŏn Buddhist practice: an inquiring mind bent on understanding human affairs and universal principles.³² I have noted two

³⁰ *History*, 16-17; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1034-1035.

³¹ The narrative images discussed in this study can easily be found by searching the internet. For a popular version of the images, see “Sotaesan, the Founding Master,” *Won Dharma Center*, accessed May 27, 2019, <http://www.wondharmacenter.org/won-buddhism/sotaesan>.

³² Inquiring into human affairs and universal principles (*sari yŏn’gu* 事理研究) is part of Pak’s three-fold practice, equivalent to the Buddhist threefold training. Inquiring into human affairs and universal principles is identical in substance to the Buddhist cultivation of wisdom or *prajna* through right view and right intention. The arising of doubt is also a specific discussion in Buddhism and one of the

views among members on how to interpret this passage. First, as a super-human ability at an early age to contemplate philosophical questions of reality and existence; and second, as a questioning that is full of doubt and sometimes debilitating. The first interpretation generates faith in super-normal abilities and grounds faith in a heroic and cosmic narrative for religious devotion. Although Song's title for Episode One includes the arising of doubts and the narrative reveals the problems these created for Pak, this important aspect of the narrative is downplayed for an emphasis on philosophic and cosmic inquiry. When *History* was compiled and edited, Song's original name for this episode was changed from "Seeing the Sky and Doubt Arising" to a more prosaic "The Great Master's Resolve," removing any reference to doubt or questioning.³³ Doubt can be dangerous. In English, the order often translates it as "spiritual" questions or meditations, even though Pak's doubts obviously led to some social dysfunction.³⁴

hindrances of Buddhist teachings, including Pak's. Specifics of Wŏn Buddhist doctrine and practice have been well-discussed in many publications and will not be the focus of this discussion. See *Doctrinal Books*, 48-50, 166-170, 179-181, 207-208, 284-285.

³³ *Taejongsā-ŭi palsim* 大宗師의 發心. This is a play on the word *palsim*. In its everyday sense, *palsim* means 'resolution' or 'intention,' which is how I hear it used and how the order officially translated it. From a Buddhist sense, *palsim* has a connotation of awakening and entering on the path, or generating an aspiration for enlightenment (*bodhicittotpāda*), even though at this point, so the story goes, Pak has had no exposure to Buddhist teachings. He has not met any of the criteria of understanding outlined in Mahāyāna texts for generating an aspiration for enlightenment, and he is depicted in the narrative as only generally seeking a nondescript understanding. The order applies a more profound and specific Buddhist meaning to Pak's seeking in its redaction rather than utilize Song's original generation of doubt and questioning for the title.

³⁴ "Founding Master," last modified April 4, 2011, accessed November 2, 2018, <http://www.wonbuddhism.org/#/founding-master>.

The arising of doubt is the salient and sensitive part of this short passage, and *History* depicts Pak as becoming restless at an early age, unable to focus on studies, and without any desire to play with other children. This contradicts the introductory statement that Pak was in full control of his faculties at an early age. I have had many discussions with Won Buddhists about the possibility that Pak suffered from depression and anxiety in his youth, and they often utilize Episode One through Episode Four as evidence. Life was not easy for poor commoners in the countryside, and the geo-political situation was tense and quickly changing. Japan would soon annex the Korean peninsula into its growing empire and push the countryside deeper into poverty. Confucian values strictly enforced a hierarchical social structure, with parents and elders expecting life-long obedience from children, and children married early through arranged marriages. The passage does not offer any possible social context for Pak's discontent and instead opts for a more mythic narrative with a cosmic focus.

Many members I have known and studied with suffer from depression and anxiety, particularly LGBT members, and they often relate to this period of Pak's life. However, characterizing this period of Pak's life as depressive and anxiety-ridden challenges the super-human narrative of Pak absorbed in spiritual contemplation and meditation as a child. Contemporarily, many older members interpret depression as an imperfection, weakness, or mental deficiency, unfortunately common throughout the

world, and this would counter a heroic narrative for a religious founder. When I suggested such an interpretation during my initial novice training, an interpretation that seemed rather obvious at the time, I was sharply rebuked by a male *kyomu* and was instructed that Pak was glimpsing the “Truth” – at the age of seven – without understanding it, which led to his confusion. One *kyomu* asked me why Pak would be depressed, since he had a perfect childhood and family, glossing over colonialism, war, and significant poverty. Later, others expressed to me that they too believe depression and anxiety as a more realistic interpretation of Pak’s early years, and they suggested I not raise such issues in formal settings.

Episode Two and Three: Praying at Sambat Pass and Struggling to Find a Teacher³⁵

The second and third episodes are quite complex and multi-layered in their narrative, import, and interpretations. Identified as two different episodes by Song, they were edited into one passage in *History* and titled “Great Master’s Search for the Way.”³⁶ It states:

Day and night, Sot’aesan continued to toil over his questions and

³⁵ *Samnyŏng kiwŏn-sang* 蔘嶺祈願相 and *Kusagohaeng-sang* 求師苦行相

³⁶ *Taejongsa-ŭi kudo* 大宗師의 求道. The use of the word *kudo* in the redacted title is problematic. *Kudo* means seeking ‘Truth,’ or religious awakening, and in a Buddhist context, it means seeking the correct Buddhist path. Here, as the narrative states, Pak is not specifically seeking either, but rather he is seeking contact with a mountain spirit and later seeking a teacher. I have never heard anyone in Wŏn Buddhism describe this episode as Pak seeking religious truth or seeking after the Buddhist path. I have not been able to learn exactly why these episodes were edited into one passage under a framework of *kudo*. The change suggests that the order prefers a more focused seeking after a ‘religious path’ rather than the more general seeking after spirits and teachers, even though Pak was not seeking any ‘religious truth’ at this point in the narrative.

earnestly sought to find the answers to them. At age eleven, he attended his ancestral rituals at the mountain village of Maup. After watching an ancestral ritual that followed a ritual ceremony for the Mountain Spirit, he raised a question with his close relative. After hearing about the great mysterious power of the Mountain Spirit, and decided to visit the Mountain Spirit.

After that day, he went to Sambat Peak every day. Sambat Peak is a small mountain behind his village, which is part of the Kusu Mountains. Sot'aesan offered fruits from the mountain and mindfully placed food in the open space of the Court Rock. He bowed in the four directions all day long, returning home only after sunset. Sometimes he would stay at the Court Rock overnight. He prayed for five years without missing a single day regardless of precarious or harsh weather. At first, Sot'aesan prayed at Sambat Peak without informing his parents. However, his mother eventually discovered the truth about his daily journey to the mountains and was moved by his sincerity and dedication. She greatly supported his passion to find the answers to his questions about life.

At age fifteen, Sot'aesan married Yang Ha-un, who lived in the Hong-kok village.³⁷ The following year, he visited his parents-in-law for a New Year's greeting. He overheard stories about certain sages of Taoism who assisted the hero in solving problems. These stories were from the two novels the Pakt'aebō-jŏn (Story of Pakt'aebo) and the Choung-jŏn (Story of Choung). This discussion intrigued Sot'aesan, and led to a great change in his mind. Although he practiced diligently in the mountains for five years, Sot'aesan never saw the Mountain Spirit. Therefore, he decided that meeting the sages would be the next step. He thought to himself, "I have not seen the Mountain Spirit in these five years; therefore, it cannot be certain whether the Mountain Spirit exists. So, if I give a great effort to go and see a sage, like the main figure of the novel, I will be able to see whether there is a sage or not."

With this in mind, whenever he met a stranger or a beggar, he tested him to see whether they were a sage or not. Also, when he was told about a stranger or a hidden sage, he never failed to go and see him. He sometimes invited them to stay at his home, and Sot'aesan would test them. Sot'aesan sincerely searched with great effort to find his master for six years (1906-1911).³⁸

Combined into one longer passage, these two episodes represent several aspects of the

³⁷ Yang Misang (1890-1973, dharma name Yang Haun 梁夏雲)

³⁸ *History*, 17-19; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1035-1036.

Wŏn Buddhist worldview.

The most important aspect is Pak's unwavering zeal to find answers to his questions, even in the face of failure. Building on the previous episode's lesson of cultivating an inquiring mind, developing zeal or energy is a fundamental part of Buddhist practice. It counters the pull toward sloth, torpor, and laziness, which in a Buddhist worldview leads to unwholesome activities with less-than-helpful karmic outcomes. The Buddhist path is not easy and requires great exertion. Wŏn Buddhist sermons often quote this and related stories to illustrate Pak's determination and to inspire members to not give up applying effort in Pak's prescribed day-to-day practices of mental cultivation. This narrative, which I read after having studied Buddhism on my own for many years, personally inspired me. It encouraged me to continue my attempts to understand Buddhist teachings, even though I felt I would never 'get it.' Such personal stories of inspiration through Pak's dogged determinism are common, and the importance of cultivating this zeal is chanted daily in Wŏn Buddhist temples and homes.³⁹

Episode Two, the part about prayer to the mountain spirit at Sambat Pass, is often visually depicted as a young Pak on a chilly winter day, kneeling in the woods on a mountaintop clearing, with a small offering of persimmons for the mountain god on

³⁹ *Doctrinal Books*, 52-57; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 54. "The Essential Dharmas of Daily Practice" is chanted daily by serious practitioners. The chant specifically mentions the cultivation of zeal, and the encouragement of zeal suffuses the chant by reminding members daily to never stop practicing.

the ground in front of him. Pak usually looks disheveled, face flushed from the cold, and he prays intently with a halo surrounding him. This passage requires some context to appreciate.

The Chosŏn worldview was infused with shamanism. Even though Buddhism rose to prominence on the Korean peninsula a thousand years before Pak, and even though Confucian teachings and its social system had dominated for several hundred years, shamanism remained as a central core of cultural practices and beliefs. Most Buddhist temple grounds contain a shrine to the local mountain god, elite Chosŏn woman patronized shamans, and most villages had one or more shamans whom locals turned to for a variety of otherworldly concerns. Shamanism influenced both Buddhism and Confucianism, and shamans wielded considerable social power, which is well documented throughout Korean history. Shamanism continues into the present and remains a dynamic and adaptive cultural force.

Although the general population and many of the elites employed shamans for their thaumaturgic abilities, from the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty in the 1300s, Confucian scholar-officials condemned them as tricksters and troublemakers in their attempts to take control of the royal court. When the Buddhist kingdom of Koryŏ fell and King T'aejo came to power, the Office of the Inspector-General memorialized the throne and admonished the new king to avoid evil practices through a ten-point list of things to immediately do, the tenth being:

...the regulation of access to the palace. The establishment of the palace is meant to enhance the sovereign's power and to define clearly the boundary between the inner and outer courts. We beseech Your Majesty to order the gate guards to prohibit the unauthorized entry of anyone without official position, and especially to spurn shamans who practice women's magic and those who cunningly flatter.⁴⁰

Shamans were a constant target of officials and often scapegoated for a variety of social issues. As world empires and colonizing forces encroached on Chosŏn in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they brought industrialization and that killer of all things deemed 'superstitious' – science. Domestic and colonial forces targeted shamanistic beliefs and practices as backward vestiges of old traditions. Many nationalists and intellectuals blamed Buddhism, Confucianism, and shamanism for contributing to Chosŏn's inability to maintain its sovereignty in a quickly changing world.

Pak lived during this period of increasing colonialism and industrialization. He grew up consuming a Buddho-Shamanic neo-Confucian soup of beliefs and practices, and he came to view such superstitious beliefs as a hindrance to social development. Considering the time and social critiques leveled at shamanism, it is not surprising that the order would include an anti-superstitious jab at shamanism in his narrative.

The local mountain spirit is one of a great pantheon of spirits, deities, and ancestors that exist in an otherworldly reality overlaying and penetrating the human world. Shamans can interact with these ethereal beings through physical possession and

⁴⁰ Lee and de Bary, *Sources*, 276.

various rituals, acting as an intermediary between the otherworld and this world. These deities and spirits can be helpful or harmful and are often troublemakers. People petition them for various immediate real and otherworldly concerns, and here we see Pak making offerings to the mountain spirit on a rock outcropping above his small rural village, asking for its assistance to alleviate his concerns and answer his vexing questions. After a little over five years of going up and down the small mountain, he abandons his fruitless efforts and decides to look for a Taoist sage instead. The shamanic jab comes in Pak's statement on the outcome of this endeavor: he doubts their existence. His teaching and discourses are peppered with anti-shamanic and anti-superstitious calls to modernism. If we consider the pervasiveness of shamanic beliefs, the encroachment of industrialization and colonialism, and the contemporary social critiques targeting all things superstitious, we can squarely locate Pak within a social movement toward the 'modern.' In a way, Pak acted as an indirect broker of industrialization, colonialism, and modernity, even if only on a small, rural scale.

The narrative of Pak's life and his own critiques of superstitious practices encouraged a notably anti-shamanism worldview. I have heard numerous members express negative views of shamans as charlatans and quack pots. I have seen no serious discussions on the real influences of shamanism on Wŏn Buddhist belief and praxis, and members often go out of their way to criticize anything related to shamanism. When I stated an observation that Wŏn Buddhists still follow many shamanic beliefs

and practices, and suggested that the prominence and dominance of women in Wŏn Buddhism may correlate with the long-established role of women as shamans, several female *kyomu* become so irate it brought them to tears and shut down any possibility of discussion. I have attempted many times to have this discussion, but it inevitably results in disaster.

Episode Three is the last half of the narrative, where Pak hears about sages and decides to abandon his shamanic experiment and attempts to search for a sage.⁴¹ This is visually depicted by a more mature Pak, surrounded by a halo, dressed in traditional clothes and hat of local aristocrats (which Pak would not have worn), out on a mountain road passing by a shabby old man. Although institutional Daoism never attained a notable footprint on the Korean peninsula, the teachings, literature, myths, and legends of Daoism influenced its cultures and kingdoms, particularly legends of the wandering Daoist sage in disguise. Again, *History* positions Pak against an established cultural force full of legends of mysterious masters, sages, a pantheon of immortals, and supernatural abilities. Pak searches with earnest effort for six years, testing those rumored to be sages or any odd character he thought might be a sage in disguise. While this story does not contain a direct criticism challenging the existence of Daoist sages,

⁴¹ *Tosa* 道士 (Ch. *daoshi*), probably better rendered as ‘master of the Dao’ or ‘teacher of the Way.’ This reference can be interpreted as both a general religious teacher and something akin to the classic Daoist wandering sage. I often hear it within Wŏn Buddhism in the later context, with a specific Daoist connotation.

his failure to find one obliquely challenges their legendary existence. These two episodes lay out a fundamental and powerful critique against superstitious beliefs and practices – believing in and searching for them is a waste of time.

Episode Four: Entering Contemplation by the Riverside⁴²

This episode covers roughly the five years before Pak's awakening experience. He was in his early twenties and had already been married for five years by the age of twenty. It contains an important chapter of Pak's life, also interpreted in several ways, and states:

Starting from a young age, Sot'aesan sought the Way, without showing any concern for studies or earning a living. Although his father did not understand his intentions in the beginning, after watching his son's sincere effort, he slowly became a great supporter of Sot'aesan. Sot'aesan was unsuccessful in meeting a spiritual master, so his father built a small house nearby the Court Rock for his son to practice mind concentration. During Sot'aesan's search for the truth, his father helped him enormously. His father passed away in October, 1910, six years before the Wŏn Buddhism era. Sot'aesan was twenty years old.

Sot'aesan lost his father, the great supporter of his life and of his struggle to achieve the Way. Sot'aesan's eldest brother and his younger brother were adopted by his relatives. His elder brother died at a young age; therefore Sot'aesan took on the responsibility to serve his mother and his family members. The suffering this caused to Sot'aesan is ineffable.

In addition, although he met a large number of people in those six years, Sot'aesan could not meet a proper spiritual master to guide him in achieving the Way. He gradually gave up the idea of finding spiritual masters beginning at the age of twenty-two, and deeply thought to himself, "What should I do in the future?" Though he occasionally thought of his livelihood and felt suffering from time to time, he concentrated with a single mind from morning to evening and from evening to morning. He sometimes chanted incantations (*mantra*) that appeared in his mind.

⁴² *Kangbyŏn ipchŏng-sang* 江邊入定相

In order to devote himself to ascetic practice, he went to Yŏnhwabong (lit. "Peak of Lotus Flower"), a mountain in Koch'ang County of the Chŏlla-pukto Province (全北高敞郡心元面蓮花峰). He concentrated on his meditation for several months during the winter. Around the age of twenty-five, after he returned from his practice at Yŏnhwabong, Sot'aesan abandoned the question of "What should I do with this question of Seeking the Truth in the future?" He then entered into a state of non-consciousness, in which he was not conscious of his own actions. During his ascetic practice, he moved his house twice and experienced the deterioration [sic] of his house twice. His predicament was so difficult that he lost all desire even to eat breakfast or dinner. Unfortunately, this ascetic practice led to the development of a stomach tumour as well as strange blotches all over his body. He soon became regarded as a living corpse which stirred much ostracism and criticism among his neighbors. Sometimes Sot'aesan fell into a kind of unawareness that gave a calmness of no distinction [sic]. He also fell into a state of mind that darkened his memory. His bizarre behavior alarmed his family and led his wife to start a prayer for his recovery.⁴³

Pak abandons his efforts to find a Daoist master and experiences some of the hardships that have come to define his young-adult years. Visually, this episode is depicted as Pak near a river in traditional autumn clothing, surrounded by mountains, standing serenely with a numinous halo behind his head – a stark contrast to the image *History* paints of a sick and ill Pak consumed by mental anguish.

The first sentence states Pak, without attending school or working, has been searching for the Way (*to* 道, Ch. *dao/tao*) since he was young. By utilizing the term *Way*, we can interpret this as Pak: specifically seeking after *religious* truth or awakening; seeking after a more *philosophic* truth, justice, and reason; or seeking after a religious doctrine or *path*. The term is used in a variety of general and specific ways in Daoism,

⁴³ *History*, 19-20; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1036-1038.

Confucianism, and Buddhism. The use of the term invokes a purpose-driven Pak seeking after truth or awakening. A member once succinctly summarized the problem with this passage by asking me a question: Was Pak seeking the Way, or was he lost? It is an important distinction that challenged the heroic narrative of a young man driven by specific goals with a narrative of a lost man wandering without real purpose. Pak is obviously on a quest for understanding, but the nature of the understanding he seeks at this point is debatable. The narratives do not offer any specifics as to what he was seeking after other than generalized answers to cliché existential questions about the universe and existence. Is he seeking after Truth? Is he seeking after the Daoist or Buddhist Way? Is he even seeking any generic 'Way'? Does he even know what he is seeking? Or is he trying to figure out his place in his world being invaded by colonizers? It is hard to know for sure, and the source material glosses over it. The rest of the passage suggests someone who is lost and desperate.

Not working or going to school, Pak relied heavily on his father, Pak Hoegyǒng 朴晦傾 (1852-1910) to support him and his family. Knowing exactly what his father thought about his son's efforts is difficult. Pak Hoegyǒng left no records, and all we have are stories told within the context of a hyper-patriarchal Confucian family culture that glorifies male heads of the home. Speaking ill in any way of Pak Hoegyǒng would be highly un-filial and being the father of the 'new Buddha' almost guarantees he will be revered posthumously. Pak Hoegyǒng is one of the few truly enigmatic figures in

Wŏn Buddhist history who we can only know through his family's patriarchal reminiscing and through the creative imagination of worshipful members. I have asked many members about Pak's father, and most respond with the same limited and filial narrative delivered in *History*. However, several have commented that, although *History* depicts his father as supportive, if we consider their family's poor commoner status and that Pak already had a wife and children he was failing to support, Pak Hoegyŏng must have died extremely worried and possibly disappointed in his son. When I mentioned this interpretation that I heard to a senior *kyomu*, she responded quickly and seriously that I should never speak such nonsense and that whoever told me it was completely wrong – Pak was a perfect and supportive father.

At twenty years of age, married with two children, with nothing to show for his life, and relying on his father for support, Pak lost his father in the autumn of 1910.⁴⁴ This profoundly changed Pak's life. Pak could no longer lean on his father, and the full weight of a householder came down on his shoulders. Not to be overlooked, the geopolitical situation took a drastic turn just a few months before the death of Pak's father – the Empire of Japan annexed the brief Korean Empire (the remnants of the Chosŏn dynasty), and started a prolonged period of colonization, exploitation, increased

⁴⁴ It is quite interesting that the only part of Song's narrative to provide the reader a sense of Pak's family life is centered on the death of Pak's father. Even Pak's marriage to his wife in 1905 is only mentioned to set up the story of Pak hearing about Daoist sages. If we are to believe Song, none of these common pressures of life affected Pak. This complete omission of Pak's wife and children from the narrative reveals Song's stereotypical neo-Confucian patriarchal worldview.

poverty, and war. The incredible trauma of this period continues to play out in contemporary Korean culture. The next few years, for many members I speak to, reveal the truly precarious situation that Pak faced. I have identified two dominate interpretive themes for this episode: Pak consumed by religious asceticism; and Pak spiraling into a deeper state of psychological loss, confusion, and desperation.

History glosses over the socio-political situation of the time, opting instead for a narrative that centers Pak's entire life concerns on ambiguous existential questions and religious asceticism. The narrative never considers that the intense geo-political situation contributed to Pak's malaise, dissatisfaction, and confusion. One member told me that if *History* mentioned such things, it would fundamentally weaken the mythic quality and narrative of Pak and would pull him too far into worldly concerns. Members need a mythic Buddhist master for inspiration, and such realities would go against an image of the perfected master on a hero's journey. Thus, all such family and real-life concerns are only "occasionally thought of" by Pak, and the hero continues to press on through a single-minded focus on asceticism.

The narrative of focused and purposeful asceticism is repeatedly challenged by the mentioned of a world crumbling around Pak and by his increasingly troubled responses to the circumstance. Pak is forced to move his house several times after he lets them deteriorate into disrepair. The stresses of his immediate family responsibilities and national crisis most likely contributed to his poor health and loss of appetite.

Neighbors began regarding him as a pariah and criticized him heavily for his actions and inability to care for his family. Song even states that Pak “fell into a state of mind that darkened his memory.” A male member commented that Pak was basically out of it and hitting rock bottom. He was an abject failure. He was not supporting his family and had abandoned all responsibilities of home and children to his wife. His home was literally in ruins. His body was failing. His country was occupied, and his people were suffering. All these behaviors seem to indicate a man who is lost in confusion, desperate, and full of anxiety – Pak was consumed and trapped by his own mind. This hardly seems congruent with a focused and intentional asceticism but rather the product of a tortured human conscience. When I inquire about what exactly his ascetic practice entailed, the response is inevitably a generalized “he was seeking truth.”

Mentioning this second interpretive framework, one of confusion, desperation, anxiety, and neglect of personal responsibilities spiraling out of control, is not welcomed. Such suggestions are vehemently denied by members. However, for member who have firsthand experience of such depressive mental states, either personally or through family, or for those with a less mythic internal narrative, Pak’s all too human struggles are relatable and inspirational. For some that chose ordination, Pak’s early life story and the practice he promoted provide inspiration and a way out of similar feelings of hopelessness in what seems like an increasingly globally integrated yet individually isolated human experience.

This marks the earliest years of Pak's life prior to his awakening experience. From this point on, the nature and detail of the narrative changes, just as the direction of Pak's life radically changed. *History* continues its hagiographic idealism, but the nature of contested details changes. I attribute this shift to the normal influences of trauma and the problems of memory. Prior to awakening, Pak's life was beset with a complexity of personal and social complications, which were magnified by his inability to deal with his circumstance and by his self-absorbed mental obsession. With the geopolitical turmoil and the personal and family challenges, this period of Pak and his family's lives are run through with trauma, which greatly affects memory and recall (e.g. "darkened his memory"). The fact that wife and children are largely purged from this early part of the narrative speaks to patriarchal experiences of trauma, as patriarchal honor cannot accept that Pak ignored and left wife and children to fend for themselves for ten years, thus Pak's story must be wrapped in a cloak of a hero's journey and asceticism.

Song's knowledge of Pak's life, the primary source for the narrative, was both filtered through the memories of Pak and his family, and then filtered through Song's own intense devotion. When the order edited and compiled Song's writings into *History* and *Taejonggyǒng*, they add another layer of filtered memories, complexity, and institutional needs. The hard science of memory is quite clear: even individuals with highly superior autobiographic memory regularly create false memories. Our

mechanisms of memory are innately flawed, and we remember the past with a high degree of distortion.⁴⁵ Getting closer to fact requires more participants experiencing and remembering an event. There is no evidence or narratives that Pak or members of his family had foresight of him starting a religious order, and thus no need for them to remember such a narrative in detail. Song reconstructed these ‘historical’ details after he realized the need to document Pak’s life, and by this point, family and members of his fledgling order have realized Pak as a great leader, which would further influence and alter memories. After Pak’s awaking experience, as the narrative will show, he becomes engaged with building his religious order, members start following him, and thus we get a higher degree of clarity and less hagiography in the history, as there are more participants involved in actively remembering events. Up to this point, Song is not yet even part of the story.

Many members with whom I have discussed Pak’s early life acknowledge the hagiographic nature of *History*, and they often doubt specific details or narrative flourishes. They view inaccuracies and questionable parts of the narrative as the natural byproduct of human flaws, desires, and a propensity to embellish. Even though they may experience some frustration in dealing with the conservative and literal hegemonic narrative of Pak’s life, their personal and human view of Pak strengthens their devotion

⁴⁵ See Lawrence Patihis, et al., “False Memories in Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory Individuals,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (October 2013), accessed July 7, 2018, 110:20947-20952, pmid:24248358.

to Pak's teaching and to other like-minded members, further binding them to the community, while simultaneously cultivating a critical eye toward institutional authority.

Episode Five: Great Awakening at Norumok⁴⁶

This episode constructs the narrative around Pak's awakening, and it closes with some questionable statements. In visual arts, it is usually depicted with a numinous circle, the Wŏn Buddhist *irwŏn-sang* or mark of integral oneness, with trees or other natural scenery around it. It states:

On March 26, 1916 of the lunar calendar, Sot'aesan was [quietly sitting in the early morning, when] his mind was suddenly refreshed with a new energy. He immediately went out of his room and looked in the four directions, seeing the clear sky of the dawn still lit with the bright stars.

He strolled in the court of his house, and started to think of various things. He reflected on his previous livelihood which was full of hardship and started to wonder how he could avoid its roughness. He then thought about combing his hair, cutting his nails, and washing his face once the sun came out. When the sun started to shine brightly, Sot'aesan looked for materials to clean his body. This type of behavior was unusual to his family and so they could not help but look on as Sot'aesan continued to act strangely. This was the [early stage of Sot'aesan coming out of meditative absorption].

After eating breakfast, Sot'aesan, overheard a discussion between a few neighbors regarding the contents of the *Tonggyŏng Taejŏn* of Tonghak, [and noted the following passage]: "I have a hallowed amulet charm. Its name is a Miraculous Medicine. Its form is the Great Ultimate (K. *T'aegŭk*; C. *T'ai-chi*). Again, its form is a Kung-gung (a bow and a bow)." (K. *Oyu-yŏngbu kimyŏng-sŏnyak kihyŏng-t'aegŭk uhyŏng-kunggung*, 吾有靈符其名仙藥其形太極又形弓弓). At the particular moment of hearing this passage, Sot'aesan understood its meaning very clearly and a strange feeling came over him.

Later, two Confucians passed by Sot'aesan's house. They took a rest there and discussed the passage in the *Chuyŏk* (Ch. *I-ching*): "A great person

⁴⁶ *Changhang taegak-sang* 獐項大覺相

accommodates, having the virtue of Heaven and Earth, the brightness of the sun and the moon, the sequence of the four seasons, and having the good and evil of the spirit." (K. *Taein-yöch'ŏnji-hap-kidök yŏ-irwol-hap-kimyŏng yŏ-sasi-hap-kisŏ yŏ-kuishin-hap-ki-kirhyung*, 大人與天地合其德 與日月合其明 與四時合其序 與鬼神合其吉凶). When Sot'aesan heard this passage, he understood with perfect clarity its meaning. After these incidents, he felt different and considered that "these might be evidences of one's enlightened mind." Hence, Sot'aesan recalled all the doubts and questions (K. *ŭidu*) he previously raised, and realized their meanings with perfect clarity with a single thought. He finally had achieved great enlightenment.

Sot'aesan then declared, "All things in the universe are of a unitary noumenal nature and all *dharms* originate from the unitary fundamental source. From this, the principle of neither arising nor ceasing and the causal law of karmic retribution, being mutually grounded on each other, have formed a round, connected framework."

Thereafter, the status of Sot'aesan's mind became brighter, and his skinny face and body were full of energy and exuberance. He gradually recovered from his illness, and anyone who saw him was fascinated by this remarkable change.

Kilyong-ni, where Sot'aesan grew up, was a place of unusual poverty and a rare place for learning. Sot'aesan studied for two years without learning about the tenets and histories of certain religious organizations. Sot'aesan with his own mind and on his own accord, raised questions without seeing and hearing any outside influences. With utmost sincerity, he searched for the Way, and entered into deep *samādhi*, thus achieving great enlightenment. He experienced a complete awakening to the greatness and smallness, being and nonbeing of all things in the universe, realizing the Principle of *Ilwŏn*. His true nature was without delusion throughout the endless kalpas.⁴⁷

This episode marks the awakening experience of Pak at the youthful age of twenty-six.

Wŏn Buddhism celebrates this moment every year on the Western calendar date of April 28 as one of their most sacred holidays.

Overall, this narrative of Pak's experience of awakening is straightforward and

⁴⁷ *History*, 20-22; and *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1038-1040. Romanization and translation errors are the product of the original translator, and as previously noted, are left intact.

free of much embellishment. It is almost anti-climactic. After years of mental angst and struggle, homes falling into ruin, and deteriorating health, Pak's mind settles while sitting quietly on a crisp spring morning. The narrative shows Pak awaking with the early light of dawn and realizing something was different but not fully aware of what had changed. He immediately began to clean up his shabby appearance, an act his family noted, and his appetite returned. His wife noticed a change. She explained that before this moment, Pak was consumed by his seeking and she was often left to her own devices; but after this experience, he transformed not just into a more caring husband but also into something more.⁴⁸ It was not until Pak experienced several instances of people discussing religious and philosophical matters that he recognized his new-found awareness.

Like previous passages, *History* illustrate Pak interacting with two important contemporary cultural forces: Tonghak and Confucianism. Tonghak was a new religious movement that emerged as a reaction to the spread of Catholicism and foreign influences during the Chosŏn dynasty. Founded by Ch'oe Cheu (1824-1864), its emphasis on shamanic healing, Confucian ideals, human rights, democracy, and nationalism spread quickly among commoners dissatisfied with the ruling elites. Pak's area of the Cholla Provinces was a hotbed for Tonghak activities, and many Tonghak

⁴⁸ Jŏnghŭi Kim, "Onŭl nare ing'nŭn 10dae yŏsŏng cheja-ŭi saeng'ae-wa 'charyŏk yangsang," in *Kaebŷŏk-ŭi sidae-rŭl yŏn Wŏnbulgyo yŏsŏng 10dae cheja* (Iksan: Wonkwang University, 2017): 255-263.

followers participated in various social uprising against local ruling gentry. Eventually suppressed and splintered, it gave rise to the new religious movement of Ch'ondogyo, which was active in anti-Japanese resistance and part of the landscape of Pak's rural life.

After hearing discussions about various teachings of both Tonghak and Confucianism, Pak realized he understood the meanings, and this suggested that he had found his answers. He turns his attention to his previous doubts and questions, and in a single moment understands them in totality – Pak has fully awakened. In this moment, Pak becomes aware of the integral oneness of all things in the universe. This awakening forms the basic formula for the foundation of his teaching, which Pak later expresses as *irwŏn*. He recovers his health, and people begin to take note of Pak's new charismatic presence.

This episode ends with one particularly problematic claim. A popular trope in Wŏn Buddhist conversation and learning is that Pak had no knowledge of other religious teachings or history prior to this awakening experience. This passage mentions in the last paragraph that he neither heard nor saw any religious doctrines or histories. Wŏn Buddhists have immense pride that Pak had no master and had no previous knowledge of religions. He was a grassroots and self-made heroic figure. But when we contextualize and examine this claim, it appears rather weak and unrealistic.

A common nationalist criticism of the time was that Buddhism, Confucianism,

and Catholicism were all foreign – they were imported teachings and did not represent the true ethos of the people. Buddhism was a corrupt religious order imported from a distant land that caused the collapse of Koryŏ. Monks corrupted women of the Chosŏn court and retired to lives of comfort deep in the mountains. They lived off the toiling and efforts of a predominantly agriculturist population and contributed nothing to the welfare of common people. Confucianism was from its domineering neighbor China and was blamed as a root cause for the loss of national sovereignty. The royal courts and extensive bureaucracy spent excessive amount of time and resources on Confucian rituals and promoting the interests of Confucian literati. The national testing system, founded on Confucian learning, locked out commoners from gaining bureaucratic power, and the local landed Confucian gentry exploited commoners, living lives of excess as the people struggled with poverty. Catholicism was clearly a Western foreign influence spreading across their land, bringing teachings that opposed ancestor worship and other indigenous practices. Even though Chosŏn elites imported Catholic teachings that promoted social equality, increasing nationalist sentiments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries viewed it as an extension of foreign influences bent on controlling the peninsula. Relying on these teachings represented dependence on other-power rather than self-power – nationalist independence was the name of the game. By positioning Pak as beyond these influences and as quickly grasping their teachings, the narrative grants a cosmic legitimizing and nativist power to Pak over these lesser and

foreign tropes.

In this context, the Wŏn Buddhist order's desire to position Pak as independent from all these influences makes sense. Yet, there is another problem to this claim – Pak's narrative. The narrative repeatedly claims that Pak had been searching many years for the Way and for a teacher. As a highly inquisitive young man seeking answers to questions that plagued his mind, it seems unlikely he never came across any religious people or teachings. There were small Buddhist temples and hermitages throughout the area, and as the story goes, Pak got around in his quest. The *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*, had long been part of a culture of divination around the Korean peninsula, so much so that a national flag was developed in 1883 that sported four trigrams derived from the *Book of Changes*. More problematic, the new religious movement of Chŭngsan'gyo, an eclectic hybridity of all five of the dominant religious teachings of the time (Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Shamanism, and Christianity) was active in his area, as was Ch'ŏndogyo. Many of his family and first followers from the immediate vicinity were steeped in various Tonghak, Ch'ŏndogyo, and Chŭngsan'gyo teachings. Pak drew heavily on those communities and their teachings. Yet, he knew nothing of them before his awakening? Most importantly, no narratives exist in which Pak directly claims total ignorance. Many references exist to Pak stating that he never found a teacher, but he never claims complete ignorance of religious doctrines or histories. A senior female *kyomu* that grew up in the same rural area described it to me as

impossible that Pak would know nothing, and I must agree. After the conversation, she quickly added that I should not talk about it.

Because this passage about Pak's awakening experience presents the central narrative in the Wŏn Buddhist worldview, it is one of the few narratives I have identified where the way people remember or tell it is slightly, but importantly, different from the canonical history. The first time I ever heard a lay follower correct what a *kyomu* said revolved around this passage. I was living in a temple in Seoul eating lunch after a dharma service with a couple *kyomu* and a visiting devoted female lay member and her teenage son. I noted that the teen seemed odd and had some type of psychological condition (hindsight says he was probably on the autism spectrum). The lay member and one of the *kyomu* were discussing the dharma service content, and they ended up on the narrative of Pak's awakening. As the female *kyomu* was retelling the narrative, she characterized it as Pak sitting in meditation. The son blurted out loudly, "It says he was sitting quietly!" Everyone laughed a little, the mother looked a little embarrassed but lovingly patted him on the back, and they all dismissed it and continued with their conversation. Of course, this got my attention. I finished lunch and went to find the passage in the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, and sure enough, this odd young man was correct.⁴⁹ Up to this point, I had heard the story as Pak specifically sitting in

⁴⁹ *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1038. From others, I also had come to understand the story in the sense of "좌선 하다가," or as "as he meditated," but in the first sentence, the passage simply says "묵연히 [默然] 앉으셨더니," or "he was sitting silently and then..."

meditation and had never noticed this small detail. I found it interesting this young man could correct the story so accurately, but at that moment, I did not consider it important. But after this experience, when I heard people describe this episode, I often noted the use of words that implied Pak was indeed sitting in meditation or performing ascetic practices.

Several years later, a novice asked a *kyomu* about this passage during our studies. He asked why the passage simply states Pak was sitting quietly in the early morning, as if he got up early, had a cup of tea, and was contemplating the day. If Pak was so embroiled and consumed by asceticism and in a constant deep meditative state, as the story often implies, why is he just sitting quietly? Why not say he was meditating in the early morning? Or doing some ascetic practice? The *kyomu* replied that it was the same thing: Pak “sitting quietly” means he was “meditating.” The novice shook his head and commented that the text does not say that. I immediately thought of the odd young teenager saying the same thing.

I have refrained from making translation corrections to the official translated narrative, as I do not want this study mired in academic translation minutia. Most of the translation errors I note are awkward, yes, but minor and generally do not add or detract anything significant from the narrative. As I previously mentioned, I utilize the poor English translation of *History* so that English-speaking members can reference the official narrative available in the temples, which is the only English version available.

But in this first sentence of the passage, I feel compelled to make a correction. The official translation of *History* state, “On March 26, 1969 of the lunar calendar, Sot’ aesan was sitting in absorption (*samādhi*) in the early morning. As he meditated in his house in Norumok villiage, his mind was suddenly...” However, the canonical version simply states that he was “sitting quietly” and has no mention of the village name or anything about *samādhi* or meditation. This additional information inserted into the English translation mirrors the concerns of both the young teenager and the novice and reveals a need for the order to embellish what may be a more prosaic moment into a much more profound and significant narrative.

The insertion of “absorption” and “meditation” with the technical Buddhist term *samādhi* provide a profundity that is not part of the original text. While we may interpret “sitting quietly” as Pak sitting in a state of meditative concentration or absorption, adding these to the English narrative borders on interpolation. Interestingly, this translation error illustrates one of my general points about these contested narratives, that the order desires a more mythic, heroic, and grand narrative. “Sitting quietly” is a bit boring and anti-climactic compared to being absorbed in a Buddhist state of *samādhi*.

The English translation again interpolates after the part where his family notices him cleaning himself, and again, I have removed additional information that is not in the original. After his family notices Pak’s strange behavior, the official translation

states, “This was the initial awakening (K. *Chuljong*: awakening from *samādhi*) of Sot’aesan, what is called ‘Great Samadhi,’ or ‘the deep umbilical contemplation’ (K. *Tae-iphöng* or *Naga-taejöng*).”⁵⁰ The translators attempt to explain the term *ch’uljöng* 出定 (incorrectly Romanized in the text as *chuljong*) by adding this information. *Ch’uljöng* can mean: to come out of a state of concentration (*samādhi*) and literally get up off the cushion, i.e. to stop meditating; or, to come out of a deeper meditative absorption (Sk. *dyāna*).⁵¹ The inclusions of technical Buddhist terms in an English translation that are not in the original source material is problematic, particularly in a passage that characterizes the moment of Pak’s awakening and especially when they are not properly noted as additions.

The original text only states that this was the beginning stage of Pak coming out of a meditative state: it says nothing about “Great Samadhi” or “deep umbilical contemplation” and it does not clarify whether this is Pak emerging from a state of concentration or from a state of meditative absorption.⁵² The beginning of the passage states he is simply quietly sitting. Why not state he is meditating or absorbed in a

⁵⁰ As previous stated in the introduction, I leave all the romanization and diacritic errors intact from the original translation.

⁵¹ *Pulgyo sajön*, 865; and *Wönbulgyo sajön*, 1168.

⁵² I have not located any specific Wön Buddhist academic discussions on the use of the term in this passage. Based on the narrative of this being the initial moments before Pak’s full realization, I translate it as Pak coming out of meditative absorption (*dhāyana*), even though the text does not clarify how it is using the term *ch’ulchöng*. It may be more appropriate to translate it as Pak coming out of a state of “deep concentration.”

specific meditative state? Regardless, adding additional technical terms that are not in the text is problematic. The original text is prosaic in its depiction of this moment, and by adding an additional layer of complexity, the translators reveal the tendency of the order to interpret meaning through more heroic narrative flourishes.

My goal with these episodes is to illustrate ways in which interpretations of the narratives collide and interact. I am less concerned with the factuality of the narratives and more interested in how people interpret them. Looking closely at changes in content between versions requires a much larger analysis. All the narrative source material – Song’s original serialized publications, the order’s canonical history, and the English translations – beg for a comprehensive academic evaluation for consistencies and inconsistencies. By looking closely at how the order redacts or embellishes narratives, even slightly, we could learn more about how religious texts and narratives evolve quickly over time.

Episode Six: Building a Levee at Yǒngsan⁵³

Between Episode Five and this episode, other narratives in *History* also have contested interpretations, but Episode Six marks the birth of the economic foundation of the Wǒn Buddhist order and has special significance. This episode is visually depicted by Pak standing among his new followers alongside a flat floodplain near the bend of a river. Everyone is working hard at building a levee. The men are wielding hoes,

⁵³ *Yǒngsan pangŏn-sang* 靈山防堰相.

shovels, and mallets, or carrying heavy loads of earth or lumber on their backs. Pak is usually pointing at something, suggesting he directs the efforts; he is visually identified by a halo and often wearing a different colored shirt from the other men. The passage states:

In March of the third year of Won Buddhism (1918), Sot'aesan collected the funds and said, "With the money earned we can carry out important work. I have one plan in mind which you can think over." Pointing to the riverside tidal land in front of Kilyoung-ni, Sot'aesan said, "Look at that tidal land! That piece of land may be deserted, but we can build a dam and turn this tidal land into a rice field. It will take several years to complete, but it will surely help society and even the nation. How about starting this project for the benefit of the public welfare?" [Verified through their personal experiences, members during Sot'aesan's period were extremely faithful and absolutely obeyed his words without any scheming. All together they accepted this order with a genuine heart and offered an unwavering-until-death pledge to get it done.] The construction work for a [levee] commenced the next day.

The villagers, who had never seen any undertaking like this, expressed cynicism and ridicule. But the members of the union paid no attention to the criticisms, and silently concentrated on the [levee] work with unwavering will, full devotion and great courage. Despite the hot and cold weather, the members encouraged the workers and at the same time worked themselves with no sign of fatigue.

The project was completed after a year of labor in the third month *Won* Buddhist year 4 (1919). Approximately, twenty-five acres of tidal land was reclaimed for farming. Sot'aesan named the farmland "the farmland reclaimed with toiling and miling" (Chongwanpyong).⁵⁴ Sot'aesan's direct supervision and spiritual guidance, as well as the selfless work of the nine disciples enabled the project to be successful. This was not only a model of a new life--wholeness of both spirit and body—but it also provided the economic foundation for a new religious order.

After the completion of the project, the members' work was not yet over. It took some time for the [levee] to settle and a lot of work followed. In addition some money was lost for the following four to five years due to the salt in the

⁵⁴*Chōn'gwanp'yōng* 貞觀坪. See *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 993.

land. Several years after the completion of the project, the members alongside many volunteers continued to contribute to the cause both financially and physically. A special donator was Yoo Chungchun and seventeen other people.⁵⁵

This narrative happens four years after Pak's awakening experience, and after he has gathered a small group of followers. This passage represents a fundamental aspect of Wŏn Buddhist dogma – utmost devotion to the order and its endeavors. This levee and the surrounding farmlands are now Wŏn Buddhist sacred lands and the focus of pilgrimages.

Since the levee project directly involved the entire community, including Pak's main nine disciples, the details of this event are clear and uncontested: the more participants in an event, the higher the accuracy of the shared memory. Oral histories I have heard remain true to the official narrative and usually only expand on the toil and suffering of the individuals involved. These stories and the heroic effort of this project represent the self-sacrifice and effort expected from all members of the community.

When I experienced and expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of the order, *kyomu* frequently reminded me of the founding members and of their sacrifices and efforts. It was an effective message, and I felt shame for my weakness and complaining. Working in the rice fields near the levee on an autumn day, I sat down for a moment to rest with a few others. An older *kyomu* directing our efforts came over and told us to get up and keep working. Gesturing over to the levee, she asked if we thought the founding

⁵⁵ *History*, 33; and *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1049-1050.

members stopped to rest while building it. It is a powerful message that was often psychologically weaponized to urge us not to give up and continue unabatedly in our work, studies, and practices.

The official translation downplays the intensity of the passage by translating the end of the first paragraph as: “Members during Sot’aesan’s period were extremely faithful and vowed to do the project with a pure mind and devotion.”⁵⁶ I have restored the canonical version, which specifically mentions obedience, acceptance of orders, and an unwavering-until-death commitment to the order. The inclusion of the phrase “without any scheming” is also notable. We must assume from the inclusion of this phrase, along with many other calls to complete obedience, that some discontent among the rank and file existed after Pak’s passing. Such narrative passages would help the order aggregate its power and tamp down dissent. Absent from Pak’s writings or his doctrine, these calls to absolute obedience appear throughout other canonical sources, particularly Song’s teachings, and are often verbally invoked to quash or stifle complaints or dissatisfaction, reminding members that their troubles and concerns are just that – their own.

Novices and *kyomu* often talk about this topic with me. Narratives and

⁵⁶For the official English version, see *History*, 33. The canonical passage states: “조합원들은 원래 신심이 독실한 중에 몇 번의 증험도 있었으므로, 대중사의 말씀에는 다른 사랑 계교를 내지 아니하고 오직 절대 복종 하였다. 이에, 일제히 명을 받들어 오직 순일한 마음으로 지사불변(至死不變) 하겠다는 서약을 올리고...” See *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1050.

instructions that demand complete obedience go against several of Pak's fundamental teachings on equality and autonomy. A product of subsequent generations and the re-emergence of strong hierarchical social patterns that Pak criticized, many members are cognizant of the controlling flavor of some official narratives, including this passage. I do not meet members that doubt the historical facts of this event or the genuine sincerity of the early members that studied and devoted their lives to Pak; however, members have expressed to me that they find it troubling when devotion is weaponized to demand obedience. During one tense exchange between a young novice and a middle-aged *kyomu*, the *kyomu* chastised the novice in front of others for not following orders. Utilizing this type of psychological warfare, the *kyomu* questioned the sincerity of the novice. The novice responded, "You're not the Great Master!" Several hours of tension followed.

Episode Seven: Blood-Seal Dharma Authentication⁵⁷

This episode represents another central narrative to Wŏn Buddhist faith and is one of the few miraculous or mysterious narratives in the entire canon. A particularly sensitive topic, challenges to this narrative can bring out great frustration and consternation in members. In visual arts, this scene is often depicted with portraits of Pak and his nine chief disciples arranged in a circle. Pak is positioned at the top of the circle, and Song is in the middle of the circle. Behind them is a bucolic scene of the

⁵⁷ *Hyŏrin pŏbin-sang* 血印法認相.

reclaimed tidal flats and nearby mountains, with the corresponding mountains from the narrative near each member. This is often the first appearance of other figures with halos, which reveals a hierarchical ranking: Pak in the largest halo, Song in a slightly smaller one, and the other eight in slightly smaller ones than Song. The canonical passage states:

On August [11], in the fourth year of *Wŏn*-Buddhism (1919) Sot'aesan said to the members, "The devotion with which you have been offering prayers is truly praiseworthy. To reflect on my own experience, however, it is not sincere enough to move the will of the realm of Truth. It is because there is some egoistic element left in your mind. If annihilating your ego can propagate the correct dharma, would you carry it out?" To this, the nine disciples said in unison, "Yes, we will do it." Sot'aesan continued more solemnly, "There is an old saying, 'One sacrifices oneself in order to preserve one's integrity.' There were some who performed miracles by following this principle. How could the numinous spirits of Heaven and Earth not be affected if you gave your life for the well-being of all sentient beings? In the near future, a great Way with correct dharma will be established in the world and the disturbed mind of mankind will be corrected thereby, contributing to the blessings of sentient beings. If so, then you will be the saviors of the world, and the hidden merit of yours will be eternal. Hence, you must show your views on this matter from your true hearts."

The nine disciples were downcast for a while but in the end agreed with their whole heart that they would sacrifice their lives. With great admiration, Sot'aesan told them to carry out the sacrifice at their designated prayer site the next prayer day after ten days of ablutions.

On August 21, the nine disciples gathered in the dharma room, and Sot'aesan ordered them to arrange a bowl of clear water and daggers on the table. On the table there was a white sheet of paper on which was written, "Sacrifice with no Regret" and Sot'aesan ordered them to press their bare thumbs under their name as a form of signature. Then they were asked to prostrate and offer a silent confession on their determination to sacrifice their lives on behalf of all sentient beings. Sot'aesan examined the paper and saw that the places where they had pressed their bare thumbs had turned into nine fingerprints in blood. [Holding it up and showing them he said, "This is proof of your one mind," and immediately burnt and offered it to the Heavens]. He then ordered his disciples to [gather their things] and go to their prayer sites.

However, soon after they stepped out of the dharma room, Sot'aesan called them back, saying that he had one more thing to tell them. He said, "The numinous spirits of heaven and earth have already responded to your mind, and a planning in the realm of dharma has been completed; hence success of our plan has been assured by this. You have consecrated yourselves to the world. [As you proceed in all your endeavors and experience all kind of hardships and dangerous situations, do not change your mind. Even when faced with family attachments and the sensory desires, think only of today and they will not drag you down. Apply that unattached and genuine mind to all your discipline and work.]" Although the disciples understood Sot'aesan, their excitement could not be calmed.

After 11:00 at night, Sot'aesan ordered the nine members to go together to the top of the central mountain and return after offering prayers. Upon saying this, Sot'aesan assigned dharma names and dharma titles to his nine disciples, saying "The individual with the secular name has died. Now I give you a new name. With this universal dharma name your new life will begin in which you will deliver many sentient beings." [...] ⁵⁸ The nine disciples continued their prayer even after the event until Sot'aesan ordered them to stop in October of that year. The prayers of the nine members and the holy event of dharma authentication were the spiritual foundation of selfless service for the public well-being, which strengthened the followers' faith, solidarity, and public spirit for the founding of the new religious order. ⁵⁹

As mentioned in the final statement, this event represents the foundation of Wŏn Buddhist faith and provides a cosmic dharma-realm authentication for the initiation of the order. I now tread on most sensitive ground in publicly revealing some of the conflicting views behind this narrative. Many members will flat-out deny the existence

⁵⁸ *History* leaves out the list of dharma names given to the nine disciples. This omission does not change the meaning of the passage, so I left it as is. It is curious why the names were removed. Wŏn Buddhist translation committees normally adhere to a literal textual translation and omissions are purposeful. I could not find out why these names were left out. Several senior members suggested an inadvertent oversight, but that seems unlikely. See *History*, 39. For the original list of dharma names, see *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1056.

⁵⁹ *History*, 37-39; and *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1054-1057.

of such views, but these questions nonetheless burn in the minds of some members.

This episode starts after Pak has ordered his nine chief disciples to begin a period of prayer and discipline. They were nearing the end of the levee project, and Pak instructed them to offer prayers on the 6th, 16th, and 26th of each month, starting in April 1919. Each follower was designated a prayer site on a nearby hill top, and prayers were offered from 10am to 12pm, which consisted of them confessing transgressions, reading a prayer, and chanting.⁶⁰ The disciples follow Pak's instructions, but in August of the same year, Pak tells them he is unsatisfied with their efforts.⁶¹ He chastises them as being insincere and ego-driven and says that they would have to sacrifice themselves and their ego in order to truly serve the world. A bit upset but nonetheless committed, they gather again after ten days. Pak arranges daggers on a table for them to perform their sacrifice and asks them to make a pledge of no regrets by pressing their wet thumbs to a piece of paper. He then orders the nine members to prostrate on the floor and silently offer their intentions of self-sacrifice to the heavens. Pak sees bloody fingerprints on the pledge and holds up the paper to the disciples and declares it proof of their sincerity. He burns the pledge and orders them out to their sacrificial mission. As soon as they are all out and, on their way, Pak calls them back and declares that

⁶⁰ *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 1052-1054.

⁶¹ *History* incorrectly translates the date as August 21. The canonical source states August 11 (16th day of the 7th lunar month) ten days before August 21 (26th day of the 7th lunar month). I have restored the correct date in the translation. See *History*, 37; and *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 1054

Heaven and Earth has responded and authenticated their intentions. Psych! They no longer must sacrifice themselves and are ready to serve the world.

At the heart of this passage is an intense focus on self-sacrifice for the common good. Having even a small sense of ego is a hindrance to ‘true’ service, and you are better off sacrificing yourself than harboring any egoistic thought. If one can achieve this genuine state of non-self and self-sacrifice, in a coming utopic world, one will be considered a savior of the people and will enjoy infinite karmic merits. These nine men obeyed their teacher and were willing to sacrifice their lives for the common good; and thus, the Cosmos legitimizes their efforts by authenticating their sincerity through a mysterious sign. This cosmic legitimization is transmitted through the order’s lineage. It is a powerful message on a heroic scale. Such self-sacrifice is expected of Wŏn Buddhist members, even to the point of abandoning family attachments.

The intensity of this message plays out, again, in an interesting way with the official translation of *History*. In the fourth paragraph, I restore the original, which emphasizes a complete detachment from personal desires and family. Wŏn Buddhists are often sensitive to this intensity in their discussions with outsiders, particularly American Buddhists – the target of this translation.⁶² I have been unable to get an

⁶² The missing passage states: “...앞으로 모든 일을 진행할 때에 비록 천신 만고와 함지 사지를 당할지라도 오직 오늘의 이 마음을 변하지 말고, 또는 가정 애착과 오욕의 경계를 당할 때에도 오직 오늘 일만 생각한다면 거기에 끌리지 아니할 것인즉, 그 끌림 없는 순일한 생각으로 공부와 사업에 오로지 힘쓰라.” See *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1055-56.

answer as to why this passage was removed. I surmise that it was deemed too strong for an American audience. Through my extensive contact with a variety of communities, American members often criticize Korean Wŏn Buddhist *kyomu* as being too repressed and controlled by a domineering order, and as being ‘too Korean,’ attached inflexibly to their ways, and unrealistically demanding that Americans do things the ‘Korean way,’ even when those ways clearly go against Pak’s doctrine. They often wonder if Wŏn Buddhism is a cult, and members are sensitive to this charge, both in and outside Korea. Such a forceful call to complete individual sacrifice could provide canonical proof for many that the Wŏn Buddhist order seeks to control people through adroit manipulation of a self-sacrifice narrative. Still, the redacting of this important passage in the official translation is quite problematic, since the passage reveals the level of self-sacrifice and dependence the order expects from members.

While the general event itself is not contested, the mysterious occurrence of the blood-seal is debated. I have identified two main ways to interpret this passage. A common interpretation is a literal approach: the blood seals were real; Pak saw them; the disciples saw them; and Pak burned them in a sacred ritual gesture to Heaven and Earth. Although many members assert this interpretation, scrutiny of the passage reveals inconsistencies. Pak ordered the men to the floor for prostrations and confession; he then examines the paper, sees the blood-seals (they did not appear before he sees them), and holds up the paper saying, “This is proof of your one mind.” He then

burns it right there on the table and orders them to their prayer sites to sacrifice themselves. The passage never says the members saw the blood seals or that they even got up from the floor. One elder female *kyomu* described the scene like this: the disciples are all on the floor in prostrations; Pak examines the paper and (supposedly) sees the seals; looking up to hear Pak make the declaration of proof, they see him burn the paper; and then Pak sends them out. A dramatic scene indeed; and, the passage never says the members saw and examined the blood seals – which would be truly shocking and amazing. If the nine members saw the seals, they most likely would have noted it clearly, as it would have been quite something to see. Nine people witnessing and remember the same event should have more detail. As written, it never says they saw them, and there are no canonical sources that say they saw them. And of course, Pak burned it straight away, so there is no evidence.

The official English translation belies a tendency for the order to favor a literal interpretation. In the third paragraph, I have restored the original passage in the translation, which states, “Holding it up and showing them he said, ‘This is proof of your one mind,’ and immediately burnt and offered it to the Heavens.” The official translation states, “Showing the paper to them, Sot’aesan said, ‘Take a look at this paper and see it as evidence of your single heart.’ And with that he burnt the paper and

consecrated it to the realm of Truth.”⁶³ It is a slight variation, but a revealing variation, nonetheless. Pak never says, “take a look” or “see it as,” which give the impression that they are looking at the blood-seals. Pak is holding up the paper to show them, they are in prostration, and Pak declares in a simple sentence construction that it is proof of their one mind. These multiple additions of verbal forms of *to see* in the translation reveals a tendency to believe the disciples are seeing the blood-seals, which the elder female *kyomu* believes they did not. It also obliquely suggests knowledge of doubt about this event and a need to affirm its reality.

Questioning the literal interpretation implies that the blood-seal authentication may not have been real, and this directly challenges the narrative of a cosmic response from Heaven and Earth to authenticate the founding of the order; however, some view this as a mark of Pak’s awakening and genius - his skillful means (*upāyakauśalyas*, K *pangpy’ōn sōn’gyo* 方便善巧). Skillful means are a mark of the special teaching skills of buddhas and bodhisattvas; they are expedient means utilized to awaken people to the world as it is, and such skills can manifest in limitless, and sometime incomprehensible, ways. Framing the blood-seals as Buddhist skillful means positively spins an unlikely miraculous occurrence and switches the legitimizing authentication from a cosmic Heaven and Earth to Pak himself. In this interpretation, Pak recognizes the limitations

⁶³ *History*, 38; and, *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 1055. The original passage states: “이를 들어 단원들에게 보이시며 ‘이것은 그대들의 일심에서 나타난 증거라’ 하시고, 곧 불살라 하늘에 고하신후...”

and circumstances of his followers, and he utilizes skillful means to inspire them on their difficult path of self-cultivation.

In many canonical passages, Pak states that members find it difficult to understand his teachings and to abandon their old ways.⁶⁴ The majority of his followers are from rural areas, from commoner backgrounds, illiterate, and their lives have been full of Buddho-Daoist-shamanic beliefs and narratives about spirits, wandering sages, ghosts, the power of the heavens, and other supernatural and 'superstitious' things. In addition and by this time, Japan has occupied and been exploiting their nation for nine years, and life is not easy. Hopes are low, life is difficult, and needs are great. The completion of the levee project is vital to the success of this young community, and it requires all their attention and resources. Pak needs them focused on the bigger picture at hand. After recognizing that his main disciples may not be following him for the sincere and altruistic reason he hopes for and that they still harbor egoistic desires, Pak orders them to the mountaintops for further discipline and mental cultivation.

After four month, the situation is no better, and Pak steps up the challenge and demands they lay down their life for the common good. This powerful challenge breaks the hold of their egos, and Pak sees the change. The blood-seals are a skillful means to deliver a message of cosmic proportions and implications, and to illustrate the importance of the task ahead and the need for their complete commitment to the

⁶⁴ *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 1057.

community and each other. I have had many members characterize Pak as against superstitious beliefs and practices, and they often state that the few areas of the canon where such questionable things emerge are marks of his skillful means in teaching to an audience steeped in such understandings. The blood-seals were not real, and therefore Pak burns the paper straight away; burning the paper creates a cosmic mystery, which provides space for the cultivation of faith. This interpretation provides a positive explanation for doubts about the blood-seals and further legitimizes following the “Great Master.”

Even though this explanation relocates the legitimizing authority from a cosmic mystery to the real-world abilities that signify Pak’s awakening, it still challenges a cosmic narrative centered on mystery. I have witnessed members get angry when confronted by this narrative interpretation. When one novice broached the topic in a discussion on doctrine and faith, another novice began to fume. Angrily, she asked if the other novice thought that Pak was some type of trickster or fraud, and if they did believe that, maybe they should not become a *kyomu*. Even after the novice attempted to re-explain that this view indicated Pak’s awakened nature and his skillful means to lead people to the correct path, the other novice would not have it. She insisted that such an interpretation means that Pak lied, that the disciples themselves did not have awakened minds, or that the scripture was wrong: it was a black-and-white situation with no room for interpretation. When the other novice asked her if she had ever seen or known

anyone that has seen such a miraculous event, she replied that because she has not, does not mean it is not possible. She began to tear up and loudly demand that these are holy men, that we should believe what the scripture says, and that the conversation was over.

Another point that members use to question a literal interpretation of the blood-seals is Pak burning the paper. Members often question why. Why burn it immediately, right there without explanation? If it really happened, and Pak genuinely believed that such a thing was possible, why would it not become a sacred and treasured object for religious veneration? The answer I hear is always the same: Pak would not want the blood-seals to become fetishized or worshiped as sacred objects. The existence of such an object would lead people down the wrong path and encourage them to seek after miracles and supernatural powers, things Pak regularly discouraged people from seeking. The narrative itself encourages belief in the supernatural and unexplainable, so this explanation is insufficient to those who doubt. If Pak did not want things fetishized or worshiped as sacred objects, why would the order later claim him to be the new Buddha? For some members, there is no satisfactory explanation for Pak burning the blood-seals.

Episode Eight: Composing the Dharma at Pongnae⁶⁵

With the financial basis of Pak's new order established, he turns his attention to

⁶⁵ *Pongnae chebŏp-sang* 蓬萊制法相.

composing and refining his teachings and practice. With several of his disciples, he sequesters himself to an isolated location and dictates his awaking and vision, which his followers record. This episode is visually depicted as Pak sitting around a small writing table with several of his followers outside a small thatched cottage on a nice spring day. Pak is depicted in a halo, gesturing as if lecturing on some topic, and his followers are recording his words with brush and ink. This episode in *History* states:

In Bongnae Mountain in April of the fifth year of Wŏn Buddhism (1920), Soŭ'aesan decreed the religious principles of the new Order: the Fourfold Grace and the Four Essentials, [which are the essential ways of human life], and the Three Principles and the Eight Articles, [which are the essential ways of practice].⁶⁶

By the Fourfold Grace, he meant the indebtedness, gratitude, and ingratitude to the Graces of Heaven and Earth, Parents, Fellow Beings, and Laws. By the Four Essentials, he meant gender equality in rights, discrimination between the wise and ignorant, educating the children of others, and venerating the public-spirited. These are the due ways of life, which will become the essential dharma to better the world. The Threefold Study, which consists of Cultivation of the Spirit, Inquiry into Human Affairs and Universal Principles, and Choice in Action, is the due way for a practitioner to tread and will become the essential dharma that works for the salvation of all sentient beings through training in observing the precepts, preserving mental quietude through meditation, and attaining wisdom, of which the Buddha had spoken. The Eight Articles are belief, zeal, questioning, dedication, unbelief, greed, laziness, and ignorance. Belief, zeal, questioning, and dedication are the Four Articles to Develop; and disbelief, greed, laziness, and ignorance are the Four Articles to Abandon. All eight become the essential dharma to be applied to the Three Principles. The principles of the basic doctrines of the new order can be characterized as simple, clear, and integral, which will not only help all believers never to be deluded or partial, but will also guide them directly into the gateway to the Great Path.

⁶⁶ This bracketed information is original to the translation and not my own insertion. The order Romanized the mountain name as "Bongnae" in the official translation of *History*.

At this time, Sot'aesan also engaged in social dialogue with Buddhist monks outside the Order and listened to all the rules and regulations of conventional Buddhist temples. All of this was going on while Sot'aesan, together with his students, was internally occupied with the drafting of the first [texts] of the new order.⁶⁷ As a result *The Doctrine of Buddhist Reform in [Chosŏn]* and *The Essential Doctrine of Spiritual Cultivation and Inquiry* were published one after the other. *The Doctrine of Buddhist Reform* was intended for the edification of the masses by altering conventional Buddhism to meet the needs of the changing times. *The Essential Doctrine of Spiritual Cultivation and Inquiry* was the scripture for a practitioner to enter the true boundary of spiritual cultivation and inquiry into human life and universal principles. *The Essential Doctrine of Spiritual Cultivation and Inquiry* was published in May of the twelveth [sic] year of Wŏn Buddhism (1927) and *The Doctrine of Buddhist Reform* in April of the twentieth year of Wŏn Buddhism (1935). Each [one] was used as part of the first [texts] of the new order for quite a long time.

In July of the sixth year of Won Buddhism (1921), at the suggestion of Kim Namcheon, Song Jeokbyeok, and a few others, the construction of the new “*Silsang-chodang*” [a thatched cottage with a few rooms where Sot'aesan along with a few of his students resided] was erected behind the existing cottage and was completed in September of the same year.⁶⁸ It was named “*Seokduam*,” which is also known as “*BongraeJeongsa*.” Here using the newly drafted principles and [texts], Sot'aesan tested his students through preliminary training based on their respective ability to practice the Buddha's teachings. Their performances were very satisfactory and their understanding of the righteous dharma progressed further.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ I have corrected a misleading translation. *History* translates *kyosŏ* 教書 (lit. written teaching) as *books*, which in this English context gives the impressions of book-length documents, which the term does not specifically indicate. These are short monographs that were distributed within newsletters and printed into small traditionally bound texts. Wŏn Buddhists utilize the term *kyosŏ* as a catchall word to indicate any written text that instructs believers in the basic teachings (see, *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 115). Some *kyosŏ* are noticeably short, some are book-length, and some are smaller *kyosŏ* that were later edited together into a larger *kyosŏ*. Sometime this term is translated as *scripture*, but that is problematic, as several other terms are utilized that clearly carry a meaning of *sacredness* or *scripture*. If one insists that *kyosŏ* are ‘sacred,’ then *sacred texts* would be a more appropriate translation, but that would be interpolation. This translation problem is further complicated by Wŏn Buddhism's own inconsistent use of terminology for its canonical texts. For an outline of the problem, see Ko Siyong, “Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ'-ŭi sŏngnip-gwa sujŏng powan-ŭi pilyosŏng,” *Wŏnbulgyo sasang kwa chonggyo munhwa* 65 (September 2015):173-201.

⁶⁸ This bracketed information is original to the translation.

⁶⁹ *History*, 43-45; and *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1060-1062.

A few months after the completion of the levee project and the episode of the blood-seals, up to this point Pak has been teaching and encouraging his followers to practice various austerities, like saving rice and money, not smoking, and not drinking. He also focused on building a sense of common purpose through economic projects meant to provide a financial foundation for his slowly growing community of followers. He taught them individually and in small groups about his awakening experience and about his new understanding of Buddhist teachings. Even though people were attracted to his new clarity and charisma, Pak found most of his followers unable to understand his still-nascent teachings and refrained from in-depth religious instruction. In November of 1919, a few months after the blood-seal episode, Pak formally declared to his community that he would adopt the Buddha's teaching as his own and renamed his order the Buddhadharma Research Society.⁷⁰ In December of the same year, Pak went with three of his disciples to stay in a small thatched building near Silsang Temple on Pongnae Mountain.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Pak first named his group of members the Savings Association (Chöch'uk Chohap 貯蓄組合), after their initial efforts to raise money through austerities and pool their savings. When he formally declared the community would study Buddhism, he renamed his new order the Established Association of the Buddhadharma Research Society (Pulböp Yönguhoe Kisöng Johap 佛法研究會 期成組合) or Buddhadharma Research Society for short. On Song's suggestion, the order was renamed Wön Buddhism (*Wönbulgyo* 圓佛教) four years after Pak's death.

⁷¹ Silsangsa 實相寺 is one of the original so-called Nine Mountain Schools, nine of the early Chan schools established on the peninsula. Located in Namwön, North Cholla Province, it was founded in the ninth century during the Kingdom of Silla (57 BCE – 935 CE). Once an important center of Buddhist study and practice, by Pak's time it had burned down several times, fallen into disrepair, and had diminished in

This episode documents the initial drafting of the earliest layers of Pak’s teaching and the development of several fundamental doctrinal components. As the passage says, followers utilized these early writings for many years until Pak and some of his close followers edited them into the main doctrinal book, *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, published just after his death in 1943. Copies of these texts are still extant and cherished by the order and members. Since more people are involved and facts better remembered, the factualness of events in this episode are not doubted by members, but how events are characterized and what is often left out can alter meaning and significance.

The official translation states Pak “decreed” these teachings, as if in one moment of clarity, Pak declared these truths, and then him and his followers wrote them down. A strong choice of wording to translate a quite prosaic word that means *to announce, to present, to state, or to express* (*palp’yo* 發表), Pak actually dictated and developed his teaching with a couple key followers over several years. Who was with Pak is important: Song Hong’uk, his chief disciple and only twenty years old, Song’s thirteen-year old brother Song Toyŏl, and O Ch’anggŏn, a thirty-year old neighbor and one of the original nine disciples, all spent several years with Pak, now around thirty-years old, and helped him compose the first teachings. O offered a lot of assistance, as he had followed Pak since the beginning and had quickly grasped Pak’s intentions when others

importance. It is noted for a few of its remaining stone pagodas. Wŏn Buddhists frequently visit this temple during pilgrimage to various sacred Wŏn Buddhist sites.

had not. Song Hong'uk was also of notable importance to this process. He and his brother had received schooling in the classics, he came to Pak already with an interest in religious and philosophical teachings, and he could write the needed Chinese characters. All Wŏn Buddhists know Song as instrumental in the drafting of Pak's doctrine, helping Pak write large parts of it, and in some cases writing complete and important sections with Pak's oversight. We must not forget, as the narrative in *History* repeatedly emphasizes, Pak never went to school. Becoming more learned with effort after his awakening, he was illiterate well into his adult life. In this episode, *History* never states he wrote anything. He is always depicted saying, teaching, informing, or giving his instruction to followers. Visually this plays out too, as this episode is normally depicted as Pak sitting at a table while others write what he is saying. Pak's initial illiteracy is an endearing characteristic for some Korean members, as many find classical Korean and Chinese difficult to learn. And quality learning of the Chinese classics had long been the prerogative of the elites.

I have not noted variations in this narrative within the Korean heritage community, but I have noted an important variation within non-Korean heritage communities in America. American members who are not from within the Korean American community and who must rely on official translations, often believe that Pak wrote everything himself, not realizing he received quite a bit of assistance from Song and others. It seems that many Korean *kyomu* working in the United States leave this

detail unexplained. During an English meeting, an American member, who had been attending a temple for several years, made a comment about being impressed that Pak had written the teaching himself. When everyone was hanging around after for tea and conversation, I clarified to the member that Pak was not literate, that Pak had dictated most of his teachings to others, and that Song even wrote quite a bit of it. The American member was shocked. The member looked over my shoulder at the Korean *kyomu* leading the meeting, who I then realized was right behind me and listening closely. The member asked if I was correct; and the *kyomu* responded with a dismissive chuckle and claimed that it was still all Pak's teaching. I found the response disingenuous, as did the American member. That member has since left the community.

The American member's confusion about Pak's abilities stems from both the official *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* and the English translations. When the order edited Pak's only doctrinal book, *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, into the much larger canonical work, *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, they included ritual instructions, texts on propriety, the organizational constitution, the history, hymns, and more importantly, they included some teachings of Pak as recalled by his followers, the *Taejonggyŏng*. Editors inserted parts of Song's history of the order into the new text, which gives the impression of being recorded at the time rather than noted down later after the fact by Song. Only Pak's short doctrine and the *Taejonggyŏng* were originally translated into English, and they were the only translated material available for over forty years. *History of Wŏn Buddhism* was not available in translation

until recently and is still limited in publication and hard to obtain.

Taejonggyǒng opens with a passage that depicts Pak as quite literate, which contradicts much of what we know. The most current official translation in *The Doctrinal Books of Won-Buddhism* states, “As he read the *Diamond Sūtra* while perusing widely the scriptures of all the various religions after his enlightenment...”⁷² This gives a clear impression of Pak reading scriptures from all the various religious traditions in Chosŏn at the time. The first English translation by Chon Pal Khn states, “After his enlightenment, the Great Master read extensively from scriptures and *sutras* of other religions,” which gives an even clearer image of “reading extensively” versus the newer and more accurate version that translate the passage as casually “perusing widely.”⁷³

The source of this opening passage in *Discourses* is a passage in *History* that states:

Sot’aesan thought again, “There are three major religions in Asia: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Recently, several new religions have emerged in Korea. Although there are a few religions, I have not examined their doctrines in detail. Therefore, I will refer to their scriptures and make a comparison with my own attainment of the Truth.” He asked his neighbors to obtain various books and read them in their entirety.

The religious texts that Sot’aesan read were as follows: The Four Classics and the *Hyokyong* (C. *Hsiao-ching: Filial Piety*) of Confucianism; *The Diamond Sutra* (K. *Kumgang-panya-paramil-gyong* C. *Chin kang pan jo pop lo mi ching* S. *Vajracchedika-prajnaparamita-sutra*), the *Sonyo* (*Essentials of Ch’an*), the *Pulgyo Taejon* (*Great Canon of Buddhism*), the *P’alsang-nok* (*Eight Aspects of the Buddha’s Life*) of Buddhism; the *Umbugyong* (C. *Yun-fu Ching*), the *Okch’ugyong* (C. *Yu-shu Ching*) of Taoism; the *Tonggyong Taejon* (*Great Canon of Eastern Learning*) and *Kasa*

⁷² *Doctrinal Books*, 105; and *Wǒngbulgyo chǒnsǒ*, 95.

⁷³ *Scriptures*, 81.

(Hymns) of Ch'ondogyo; and the Old and New Testaments of Christianity...⁷⁴

This translated passage from *History* was not available to the American member, but as we can see, all these passages in translation give a clear image of a literate Pak reading some difficult writings. The original Korean version has Pak only generally perusing the outline or summary of the teachings, which is much different than translating it as “reading extensively.”⁷⁵ Since *History* is not widely available in translation, American members unfamiliar with the canonical history only know the history through *kyomu* and a few English summaries and introductions produced by devoted followers, which mostly provide the same impression.

Regardless of all the translation issues as to whether Pak was ‘reading’ or ‘perusing’ or just skimming the outlines, we must wonder how a young, mostly illiterate man could possibly read these texts, most of them in Classical Chinese, without schooling in the classics. This issue came up during my novice years when a novice specifically asked a *kyomu* how it was possible that Pak could read these difficult writings if he never went to school and spent all his time in ascetic practices. The novice noted that they had studied Chinese characters since middle school and still found

⁷⁴ *History*, 23-24; and *Wönbulgyo chönsö*, 1040-1041. I leave all the romanization errors, as they are part of the translation.

⁷⁵ The more extensive explanation in the canonical historical narrative states “...대략 열람하시었다.” See, *Wönbulgyo chönsö*, 1041. This could be translated as either “read over generally” or “perused the outline.” When this passage is edited into the discourses, it says “...두루 열람하시다가...,” which can be translated as “read extensively” or “peruse widely.”

reading these texts in Classical Chinese difficult and could not imagine Pak accomplishing such a task. The novice also expressed doubt that Pak had read the entire Old and New Testaments. Over the years, I have identified several responses to this important contradiction in the narrative.

A common explanation is that Pak was awakened, and his pure mind could now read. This explanation relies on Pak's attainment of supernatural powers, which Pak discourages people from seeking, so learned members often dismiss this explanation. This was the response the *kyomu* gave to the novice and then quickly moved to another topic. The novice eyed the rest of us novices with a look of dissatisfaction and frustration, a comical moment that is deeply engrained in my memory.

Another common response is that after Pak awakened, began to engage the world more, and started forming his order, he had to read and write more; and thus, his awakened mind became literate quickly. This explanation is possible, however, the narrative states clearly that Pak read all these materials shortly after his awakening, so it would be rather miraculous for an illiterate commoner that never went to school to pick these up and start reading them without formal training in East Asian classics. Reading the New and Old Testaments would have been particularly challenging. A third explanation is that Pak read them with his followers. Pak's new awareness and charisma attracted people, and he usually had followers around. As the narrative states, he asked his followers to find the texts, and then most likely read and discussed the

difficult texts with them over a period. The last explanation I have noted is that Pak did not actually read them and had the outlines and general meanings of the texts explained to him by others. I do not hear this explanation often but noted it several times from older members.

The main point here is not the problem with the narrative but rather the various positive ways members interpret and translate the narrative despite the inconsistency. Even though the canonical Korean history uses vague language that could easily be interpreted as either “reading in detail” or “skimming the outlines,” and despite the more important fact that the history repeatedly emphasizes that Pak never went to school, members often still interpret the narrative as Pak having read all these difficult text soon after his awakening. Since American members must rely solely on translations of secondary – not primary – summaries of historical narratives edited into the *Taejonggyöng*, their belief in a literate Pak reflects this more favorable interpretation.

Episode Nine: Turning the Dharma at Sinnyong⁷⁶

Pak has spent several years crafting his doctrine with Song and slowly gathering

⁷⁶ *Sinnyong chönböp-sang* 新龍轉法相. This is often translated as “spreading the dharma at Sinnyong” or “spreading the teaching at Sinnyong,” but with this title, Song intentionally alludes to the *dharmacakrapravartana* (chönpömyun 轉法輪), the famed first sermon of the Buddha at the Deer Park, when the Buddha first declared the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, thus establishing Buddhism and “turning the wheel of the dharma” in this world. Although Pak never claimed to be a buddha or the new Buddha, Song officially declared him such after Pak’s death. The title of this episode represents Song’s claim that this episode marks Pak’s new turning of the dharma wheel and Pak’s reestablishment of ‘correct’ Buddhism in the world. Thus, I translate it as “turning the dharma.” See *Wönbulgyo taesajön*, 984.

followers. Episode Nine is nine years after Pak's initial awakening experience. Pak is thirty-three years old and ready to officially open his new religious order. This episode is visually depicted with people toiling in rice fields and building thatched-roof buildings at the grounds of the new headquarters. Pak is often above the scene in a halo, with male and female members gathered around. Up to this episode, Pak is often visually shown in an age-appropriate way; however, this scene suddenly depicts him in his later years. I often note that images of Pak normally represent him as older, even though the most notable events outlined in the ten episodes all happened while Pak is relatively young: Pak's awakening experience happened when he was only twenty-five. This tendency to utilize images of an older Pak illustrates a concern for age-based authority, a Confucian value Pak criticized, which will be discussed later.

Episode Nine focuses on two key events: the inaugural general assembly and the founding of the headquarters in Iri City (now Iksan City). Since these key events represent the official founding of the order and the beginning of official records and general assemblies, the rest of *History of Wŏn Buddhism* reads matter-of-fact: specific dates appear frequently, more names of involved individuals appear, records of specific amounts of money are recorded, events and public endeavors are recorded, the formation and evolution of the various texts are documented, etc. More people are directly involved in events, which are thus remembered more clearly, and events are recorded in real time and verifiable. From this point on in *History*, Song and the later

editors are drawing from a trove of recorded documents, which are reproduced in the six-volume *Wōnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan* and the ten-volume *Wōnbulgyo charyo ch'ongsō*.⁷⁷ Except for a small part of Episode Ten that documents Pak's death, most of the events recorded between Episode Nine and the end of the canonical history appear free of any heroic or hagiographic flourishes.

Episode Nine is covered by two small passages in *History*, which as mentioned before, I included in their entirety since the official English translation is not easily found. The episode states:

In March of the ninth year of Wōn Buddhism (1924) Sot'aesan traveled from Seoul to Jeongju (at the home of Jeon Eumkwang) via Iri. Many believers from various parts of the country gathered together. Seo Jung-an and six of his other students discussed the preparations for the founding of the Buddhadharma Research Society as its initiators, when Sot'aesan spoke about the site for the General Headquarters. He said, "Since Iri and its vicinity are spacious and easily accessible from all directions, it seems to be a convenient location for those without property to live and the believers from various parts of the country to come and go. What say you if we decide to build the General Headquarters there?" All those present agreed with Sot'aesan's suggestion. Bokwang Temple was prearranged to be the venue for the Founding General Meeting.⁷⁸ The specific construction site for the General Headquarters was left to be determined at a later date after an on-site survey of the area was made.

⁷⁷ *Wōnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan* 圓佛教教故叢刊 is an invaluable source for the early years of Wōn Buddhism. *Wōnbulgyo charyo ch'ongsō* 圓佛教資料叢書 includes the three monthly newsletters, *Wōlmal t'onshin*, *Wōlbo*, and *Haebo* that were produced from 1928-1940. Both volumes need to be translated in their entirety for Western members to participate in and fully understand Wōn Buddhist narratives and teachings. Until these two collections are translated, English-speaking members will have a limited understanding of Pak and his teachings filtered through the order.

⁷⁸ Bokwang Temple (Pokwangsa 普光寺) is a small local temple building in Iksan City that is currently part of the Taego Buddhist Order, the second largest Buddhist order in Korea. Not a significant historical Buddhist temple, it is important to Wōn Buddhists as the location for the inaugural assembly of their order. It was loaned to them as a meeting place by the resident monk.

On April 29th, Won Buddhist year 9, the general meeting for the founding of the Buddhadharma Research Society was held at Bokwang Temple, at which time the existing cooperative association dissolved and the formation of the new religious order, temporarily named the Buddhadharma Research Society, was declared both within and outside the organization. The general meeting was attended by delegates such as Kim Kicheon and 13 others that represented the regions of Yeonggwang, Kimje, Iksan, and Jeonju. The meeting was called to order with an opening address by Song Mankyeong. The interim chairperson, Seo Jung-an, explained the purport of founding the new order. This was then followed by the adoption of the covenant draft. In accordance with the covenant, the Assembly selected So'taesan as the governor, Seo Jung-an as the chairperson, and Kim Gwangseon as the secretary. Contributions were accepted from the congregants for the construction of the General Headquarters building, which task was entrusted to the chairperson. Before closing the meeting, Jeong Hanjo of Si-Dae Ilbo, delivered a congratulatory address.

The covenant adopted at the meeting consisted of 22 articles divided into 6 chapters with regard to general provisions, members of the board, meetings, rights and duties of the members, entry and withdrawal, and accounts, etc. Seven departments were created to take charge of general affairs, religious affairs, research, cooperative association, farming, cooking, and laundry. The governor, the chairperson, several department heads, regular members of the council, and administrative secretaries were appointed. Four types of meeting were instituted, which included regular general meetings, special general meetings, meetings of the regular members of the council, and monthly meetings. Upkeep was prescribed to be funded through entry fees, annual donations, monetary contributions, profit gained through the sales of crops, and interest on deposits.

After the Founding General Meeting, So'taesan, accompanied by delegates of various regions, personally made a tour around Iri and its vicinity to select the site for the construction of the General Headquarters before finally settling on Sinryong-ri, Bukil-myeon, Iksan-gun in Jeolabuk-do. Seo Jung-an, the chairperson, donated money to purchase the lot (over 1.35 acres) and to partially cover the construction cost (over 600 Korean Won) and the congregants from various areas contributed substantial amounts of money (nearly 800 Korean Won).

A special meeting of the leading members was held in September, through which a resolution for the construction of the main building of the General Headquarters was passed. The construction was launched immediately following the meeting. In spite of the bitter cold winter, over ten dedicated *Jeonmu-Chulshin* [ordained disciples] and special sponsors helped to establish the Headquarters. In November, two units of wood-structured thatched roof homes

with a total of 17 rooms were completed, which marked the first construction of the General Headquarters for the new order. Moreover it was the special occasion to introduce the sign, “Buddhadharma Research Society” to the world.

In the year of the Founding General Meeting (Won Buddhist year 9 [1924]), the number of believers from various areas, including Yeongsan, Sinheung, Kimje, Jeonju, Buan, Seoul, and Jinan, totaled 130; 60 of which were male and 70 female. Thirteen of them, including Kim Gwangseon, were *Jeonmu-Chulshins* [ordained disciples] from Yeonggwang and Iksan. With regard to the organization of the departments, due to the insufficient number of staff and poor conditions, only three departments out of seven were formally in operation. The departments were as follows: the Department of General Affairs (with O Changki as department head and Song Doseong as secretary), the Department of Religious Affairs (with Song Mankyeong as department head), and the Department of Cooperative Association (with Jeon Eumkwang as secretary). The order’s assets included the rice field gained from the embankment in Jeonggwangpyeong and a few buildings in Yeongsan, Sinheung, Buan, and Iksan. The rice field was yet to be completely detoxified and thus generated very little profit. Therefore, although the system of a new order had been set in place, the means of operation of the General Headquarters and the livelihood of the *Jeonmu-Chulshin* seemed to be a long way off.⁷⁹

With the inaugural assembly and the founding of the headquarters, this passage records many of the first members and their roles in the fledgling order. The bylaws of the organization are drawn up, as are various departments, meeting types and times, membership dues, and how funds will be used to maintain the headquarters. A small plot of land for the headquarters is purchased, the first buildings are constructed, and the order is ready to begin establishing its financial foundation through various agricultural and economic endeavors. This passage also reveals an important aspect of Pak’s new order – its scope and size.

⁷⁹ *History*, 49-52; and *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1066-1068.

Nine years after his awakening, Pak has gathered a small group of about 130 followers. The majority were women, a characteristic that continues into the present; and most members come from the rural coastal areas of North and South Cholla provinces, between their two provincial capital cities of Chŏnju and Kwangju. Thirteen of the more committed members are specifically noted as coming from Iksan (Iri), a small town that is northwest of Chŏnju City, and Yŏnggwang, a small town that is northwest of Kwangju City. These two small towns represent the principal areas of Wŏn Buddhist activity: Yŏnggwang being the closest town to Pak's rural village near Yŏngsan, and Iksan as the choice for the headquarters.⁸⁰ Iksan would eventually eclipse all other areas as the main center for Wŏn Buddhist activity. The new order now has the farm fields reclaimed from the tidal flood plain, which as noted are not yet fertile, and a few buildings at the new headquarters, which also contains a small amount of farmland. Episode Nine thus takes us to the formal establishment of the Wŏn Buddhist order, at this time named Buddhadharma Research Society. Pak has gathered a core of disciples that will become some of the most well-known names in Wŏn Buddhist history.

Although the order has been established, the grounds for the headquarters secured, and the bylaws of their organization drawn up, this passage reveals a small

⁸⁰ Yŏngsan, sometimes romanized Yeongsan, is the name of the small mountain near Pak's village and is the name used by Wŏn Buddhists to designate the sacred grounds around his home village, the Yŏngsan Songji (靈山聖地). Wŏn Buddhist refer to the entire area as simply Yŏngsan.

organization not yet capable of sufficiently staffing itself. Most members were married agriculturists with no experience running a new religious order or its communal headquarters. The group is already spread thin across two rural provinces at a time when traveling was not easy. The political situation was precarious, and the Japanese were firmly in the middle of colonizing the countryside and draining its resources to support a growing empire. On top of trying to form a new religion, they had to deal with the harsh realities of colonization and poverty. But with a millenarian vision and charismatic ways, Pak urges his community forward and slowly builds his new religious order.

Nineteen years pass from the end of Episode Nine in 1924 until the death of Pak in 1943, which begins Episode Ten. Pak's order grows quickly. Through their austerities, collective savings, and fertility improvement of their new lands, the financial situation of the community improves. In 1925, Pak formally announces trainings that become the foundation of Wŏn Buddhist practices, and, in 1927, several small monographs were distributed that become the foundation of his doctrine. All these teachings encouraged thrift, saving, and personal cultivation, which further contributed to personal and financial well-being of the members. Pak enacted ceremonial reforms and severely curtailed spending on ancestral rites, an enormous burden in Chosŏn cultural practices, and encouraged members to use the saved money for public works in the order. Through pooling their shared resources, the savings

association grew and firmly established a financial center.⁸¹

In 1928, the beginning of Wŏn Buddhist publishing started with the mimeographed printing and distribution of *Wŏlmal T'ongsin*, *Wŏlbo*, and *Hoebo*, monthly newsletters that delivered Pak's teachings, news, announcements, and other information to members.⁸² Although produced in limited quantity, they were vital in distributing information and creating a sense of community among the dispersed members. Starting in 1930 and continuing until his death in 1940, Pak produced many small monographs with the aid of a few followers, all published under the guise of Buddhadharma Research Society.⁸³ Three years before his death and under his

⁸¹ He curtailed spending centered on five key rites: birth, rites of passage, matrimony, death, and ancestral memorials. Mostly achieved through the promotion of shared rites instead of personal rites, Pak at the same time promoted four new rites to observe instead: a joint birthday commemoration, which would celebrate both the birth of the order and the birth of new members; one holiday commemoration, supposed to take the place of many other conventional holidays of the time; one joint ancestral commemoration event; and a new year celebration. The purpose was two-fold: it alleviated the spending required by families for each event; and encourage members to donate some of the saved earnings to the order. Some of this spirit of frugality has disappeared, and many of the traditional ancestral, marriage, birth, and funeral rites are now again performed and often represent a significant amount of income for temples. See *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnso*, 603-627, 1077-1078; and, *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 896.

⁸² *Wŏlmal T'ongsin* 月末通信 (lit. end-of-the-month communication or correspondence). Thirty-four issues were produced from 1928-30. Publication stopped in order to focus on textual production. When it resumed, it was renamed *Wŏlbo* 月報 (lit. monthly report, bulletin, or review). Fourteen issues were produced from 1932-1933, when Japanese officials shut it down for not having a permit. After receiving a permit, it restarted as *Hoebo* 會報 (lit. society or association report, bulletin, or review). *Hoebo* was produced monthly 1934-1940, when it was produced quarterly due to World War II, and then production was stopped in 1941. See *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 827-828, 1239-1240.

⁸³ The four members charged with writing and editing his teachings were: Song Hong'uk, Pak's main disciple; Song Toyŏl, Song's younger brother and eventually Pak's son-in-law; Chŏn Segwŏn (1909-1960), who met Pak in 1923 and had study some Classical Chinese in primary school; and Yu Hŏil (1882-1958), a literate member of a local elite family, who at the age of 52 became a follower of Pak.

supervision, Pak directed five followers to edit the various monographs into one volume.⁸⁴ These various short monographs would later be edited together to produce the first book of Pak's teaching, *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, which was finished just before Pak's death and submitted for publishing on March 20, 1943, but was not printed until August of 1943, after Pak's death.

In 1931, 1934, and 1941 Pak oversaw the restructuring of the general rules and bylaws of the order enacted at the inaugural meeting. Under the final system, two of the most powerful positions in Pak's order were firmly ensconced: Head Dharma Master, the religious head of the order; and, the Executive Director, the administrative head of the order.⁸⁵ This new administrative structure was challenged by tensions caused by World War II and the death of Pak a few years later, and although some of this restructuring remains, the order issued a new set of rules in 1948 still used today, which greatly modified Pak's last restructuring. A thorough analysis of the changes of the bylaws and regulations from Pak's founding of the order until now may show that 1948

⁸⁴ Song Hong'uk, Song Toyŏl, Sŏ Kirhŭng (1910-1945), Pak Ch'ŏnsik (1911-2011), and Yi Kyŏngja (1896-1991). Sŏ was a nephew of Pak and became a devoted follower at the young age of eighteen. Pak was a graduate of Seoul National University that entered the order in 1934. I had the good fortune of meeting Pak while I lived in Korea. Yi is notable as the only woman to be involved in the compiling of Pak's teachings. She was educated and met Pak at the age of twenty-eight. She is highly revered as a model of an educated woman during the early years of the order.

⁸⁵ *Chongbŏpsa* 宗法師 (lit. head dharma teacher). Problematic in numerous ways, I have long opposed the use of 'Head Dharma Master' as a translation, as have many other Wŏn Buddhists who are more skilled with English. Pak was conscious of the power dynamics between lay and ordained members, and he attempted in his doctrine to assuage that power as much as possible. It is beyond this study, but this discussion has animated many conversations with members over the years.

marks the institutional death of Pak's Buddhadharma Research Society and the rise of Wŏn Buddhism, two different organizations.

Probably the most significant and impactful event that happened between Episode Nine and Episode Ten is arguably Pak's enshrinement of the sign for integral oneness, or *irwŏn-sang*, in the dharma hall of Headquarters in April of 1935.⁸⁶ Over the next few years, Pak directed his followers to enshrine the symbol in all of their small temples, and in November of 1938, he formally established and delivered his teaching on *irwŏn*. He had been lecturing and refining his teaching about his mystical awakening to *irwŏn* over the years, but it was not until he enshrined the image and formally delivered the teaching in 1938 that it became a central object of faith and practice in the order. An aniconic breakaway from Buddha images, the symbol of *irwŏn* represents the ineffable truth of the *dharmakāya*, the true nature of the Buddha: a transcendental reality

⁸⁶ *Irwŏn-sang* 一圓相 (lit. mark or sign of one circle). The transliteration of *irwŏn* 一圓 as 'one circle' is misleading in a Wŏn Buddhist context. *Wŏn* or 'circle' means 'sound,' 'complete,' or 'integral.' If you ask Korean members what they think when they hear the word *irwŏn*, they rarely say they think of the words 'one circle,' but rather imagine an interconnected world grounded in a oneness. Thus, I try to capture the meaning rather than transliterate. It is preferable to Romanize it as *irwŏn* than translate it as 'one circle.' Originally, Pak used the term *simbul irwŏn-sang* 心佛一圓相, which links his teaching closely to long-established Chan teachings connecting mind and buddha. *Irwŏn* represents an inherent awakened nature in sentient beings and is a mark of the *dharmakāya* or truth body of the Buddha. *Dharmakāya* imagery is often characterized through light and space (such as in assembly descriptions in the *Avatamsakasūtra*) which Pak also utilized. This radiant and empty nature interpenetrates all that exists in the Cosmos. It is important to note here that Pak's awakening to this 'truth' is not new and in-line with long-established Buddhist teachings in East Asia. Almost all previous studies of Wŏn Buddhism expound on the meaning of *irwŏn*, thus outside of this basic explanatory framework, I will not debate or explain it further. I refer readers to the numerous English-language publications in the bibliography that all adequately explain Pak's basic teachings.

and the essence of the universe. It represents the unity of all things in the Cosmos. Pak utilized it to break the mind away from attachments on preconceived ideas of 'truth,' e.g. images of the Buddha, and direct practitioners toward an awakening to the integral oneness of all things. The order estimates that by 1940, Pak's symbol of integral oneness had been enshrined in about 180 households in the area.⁸⁷

Originally small circles drawn in black ink or paint on wood or paper, what was meant to be an aniconic learning tool, ironically, has now been fetishized to such a degree that members wear large gold symbols of *irwŏn* like badges of honor during formal meetings and pay no expense to fill their lives with plastic, wood, ceramic, painted, glass, and even semi-precious gem, and gold images of *irwŏn*. They are worn, carried, put on calendars, hung on walls, attached to car dashboards, put on backpacks, erected on buildings, raised high on flags, back lit, and even tattooed. Symbols of *irwŏn* are everywhere. Trivial difference exists now between the symbol of *irwŏn* and any standard image of the Buddha: it holds the same reverence, occupies the same place of worship, and is the object of identical commercial endeavors.

Normal circular items are transformed into the sacred, and members often note anything circular in the mundane world as a sign of *irwŏn*. At first, when someone would note the circular shape of a mundane object and refer to *irwŏn*, I thought it cute, in a way innocent and endearing, a reminder of Pak's awakening, like the Zen trope of

⁸⁷ *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1087.

the finger pointing at the moon. After twenty years of it, it is rather annoying and trite. With some members, noting such things will elicit a sickening eyeroll or a paternalistic pat on the back. A symbol meant to free the mind from preconceptions has instead enthralled and enslaved the minds of many members, who cling to it like the proverbial raft from Buddhist teachings, dragging the order's dharma and dogma around with them. Members often claim a special status, a uniqueness, over the old, 'superstitious' Buddhist schools that pay homage to Buddha images, as if they hold the 'true teachings' of the Buddha. Devoted members firmly resist locating the order within a typical Buddhist framework and are unable to see the commonness behind Pak's Buddhist teaching or to see how much it fits with long-established teachings of Huayan schools and the Lotus Sutra. I have noted egregiously few members over the years who are aware that mystics and religious teachers, especially in Japan (mostly likely the source of Pak's inspiration), have used the circle for the same purpose in numerous religious traditions and with a remarkably similar meaning. When I state that fact, they will insist it is not the same.⁸⁸ The symbol of *irwŏn* has become a mark of uniqueness and legitimacy for Won Buddhists. With such an enduring impact on the community,

⁸⁸ My favorite example is the famous Freemasonic work of Albert Pike (1809-1891), "The Point within a Circle: A Masonic Study" (Pub un, cir. 1870s; reprint by Holmes Publishing, 2009). In this important Freemason monograph, Pike expounds on various occult meanings behind the circle, and states "the circle representing unending time and space is taken as the symbol of all things, of the universe, but more especially of the Heavens" (16). For Pike, the circle is the mark that indicates the source of all that is holy and divine.

Song's not choosing the enshrining of *irwŏn* as one of the major episodes suggests neither him nor Pak envisioned the profound impact of a circle drawn on a wood board.

Episode Ten: Nirvāṇa in the Year of the Water Goat ⁸⁹

The last few years of Pak's life were a frustrating time. The Japanese had increased their scrutiny and control of religious groups in their empire, and Pak's group was no exception. The Japanese authorities watched them closely and delayed several projects by denying permits. Pak urged his followers to work with the Japanese, to not cause trouble, and to not get involved in demonstrations or other risky political affairs. At this time, even with around five thousand believers and less than one hundred devoted members, the communal communities of devoted followers were scattered, small, and insignificant in the larger scheme of religious groups and political events. World War II broke out in 1941, and pressure from the Japanese authorities intensified. Japan was a Buddhist empire, and this allowed Pak some freedom to carry on in his efforts. He worked with the authorities, did as they requested, and continued to apply for required permits without objection. Being relatively insignificant, poor, and not a threat to their rule, Japanese authorities eventually granted permits and allowed Pak's community to carry on their Buddhist practices, farm their lands, and engage in

⁸⁹ *Kyemi yŏlban-sang* 癸未涅槃相 (lit. episode of nirvāṇa in year of *kyemi* or water-goat). The Year of the Water Goat refers to the sexagenary calendric cycle based on the orbital period of Jupiter, which continues to be used in variations in Central, East, and South East Asia. Wŏn Buddhism also utilizes the sexagenary calendric cycle to identify and designate periods of activity.

economic activities.

After restructuring the Buddhadharma Research Society, establishing *irwŏn* and its symbol as the central object of faith, and overseeing the compiling and editing of his teachings, Pak died in 1943, only two years before the liberation of Chosŏn and the birth of the contemporary Korean state. Episode Ten officially documents Pak's death, which is recorded in *History* with an introduction to Song's installation as the new Head Dharma Master, and states:

On June 1st, of the twenty-eighth year of Won Buddhism (1943), Sot'aesan passed away. On May 16th, he gave a dharma sermon at the regular dharma meeting held in the General Headquarters: "As a child grows up to become an adult, an unenlightened person awakens to truth to become a buddha, and a student learns to become a teacher. You are to equip yourselves with true ability to become teachers to your juniors and great leaders in the grand task of benefiting all sentient beings and healing the world. A buddha or a bodhisattva is no different from an unenlightened person where life and death of one's body is concerned, you are to believe not only in the person, but also the dharma and be especially heedful not to come and go in vain. Grave is the matter of birth and death and swift is impermanence. This is something one should not take lightly."

That afternoon, his health slowly declined and 15 days later, at half past two in the afternoon, he suddenly passed away. He was 53 years old and 28 years had passed since the founding of the Order. Mere words fail to describe how sad and painful it was for all of his students to endure his death. Society's lamenting over his demise never ceased. The dharma realm of voidness and myriad phenomena in the universe together mourned his passing away.

At 10 o'clock on the morning of June 6th, a solemn farewell ceremony was held in the great enlightenment hall at the General Headquarters. Thousands of mourners gathered from various parts of the country including monks belonging to the 7 denominations of the Buddhist Alliance in Iri. The farewell ceremony was followed by a cremation ceremony at the Iri Crematorium. After the final memorial service ceremony on July 19th, the remains were placed in a cemetery in the outskirts of Iri (Keumgang-ri). In the midst of everyone's grief, Kim Taeheup officiated the funeral rites from beginning to end. At the final memorial service, Ueno Shun-ei [sic], the celebrated Japanese Buddhist monk, who was revered by

the high officials of the colonial Japanese government, could not contain himself from sobbing during the sermon.⁹⁰

On June 7th, after *Sot'aesan's* funeral rites were conducted, the Head Circle Council elected Dharma Master Song Gyu, (who had been a central member of the Council since the Order's initial stage), as the succeeding Head Dharma Master Chöngsan. The inauguration ceremony for the incoming Head Dharma Master was held in the great enlightenment hall at the General Headquarters on June 8th.

Head Dharma Master Chöngsan was born on August 4th according to the lunar calendar, 16 years before the founding of the Order (1900) in Soseong-dong, Chojeon-myeon, Seongju-gun in Kyeongsangbuk-do as the eldest of three children and the son of Gusan Song Byeokjo and Juntawon Yi wunwe. Even at an early age, those around him could sense his wisdom and intelligence compounded with his great talent and ability. He was very gentle and of a sacred disposition. At age 8, following his family tradition he read the writings of Confucius from cover-to-cover. At the same time he enjoyed reading about the achievements of the enlightened masters of the past. He vowed to himself: "By way of the great practice under the heavens, I, too, shall do the great work and become a master in this world."

With this solemn pledge, he traveled across rivers, lakes, hills, and valleys in search of men with unusual spiritual ability or hermits and engaged himself in spiritual cultivation through meditation, and at times leading a reclusive life in a one-room thatched cottage. Sometimes, he experienced bizarre and mysterious signs, which astounded his neighbors. However, his vow deepened with each passing day. At age 17, he traveled to Jeolla-do to make a round of visits to various Buddhist denominations and while taking up his temporary abode in Hwahye-ri in Jeongeup, he was personally received by *Sot'aesan*. In July of the third year of Won Buddhism (1918), he joined *Sot'aesan's* group, was appointed to the position of Center of the Head Circle Council at the young age of 19, and secured the legitimacy of the new order through dharma Confirmation with 8 other fellow members by leaving their fingerprints on a sheet of white paper as a sign of acceptance of the injunction, "Sacrifice with no regret," which miraculously turned red.

From that time, he served *Sot'aesan* in Bongrae Mountain for five years,

⁹⁰ Ueno Shun'ei 上野舜穎 (1869-1947), also referred to as Old Teacher/Master Ueno 上野老師, was a Japanese Sōtō Zen monk from the Japanese colonial Hakufumi Temple 博文寺 in Seoul, which was torn down after liberation. He helped the order deal with Japanese officials on several occasions. See *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 529. I have not been able to confirm the claim that he was highly regarded by colonial authorities and have only been able to confirm his existence as a Sōtō monk at Hakufumi.

assisting him in drafting the Creed of the new order. From Won Buddhist year 9 (1924), he took pains in laboring with other fellow congregants in the construction of the General Headquarters in Iksan, and for 12 years he mainly took charge of developing teaching material and training potential leaders. For 6 years from Won Buddhist year 21 (1936), he devoted himself to the work in the sacred ground of Yeongsan and to train the younger generation while drafting *The Writing on the Foundation of Won Buddhism*. Upon returning to the General Headquarters in Won Buddhist year 27 (1942), he assisted in compiling the Principal Book while providing assistance in overall administrative affairs until he was appointed as the Head Dharma Master after Sot'aesan's passing away.⁹¹

Except for the hagiographic flourishes about all of society ceaselessly lamenting Pak's death (which did not happen) and about the dharma realm and universe mourning (typical Buddhist grieving flourish), Pak's official death narrative is unmiraculous. Song stated that if a realistic documentation of Pak's death was not recorded, people would create mystery and myth around this important lesson of life and death.⁹²

This episode is visually depicted in two ways: as either a luminous symbol of *irwŏn* on a non-descript background; or as a funeral procession moving down a country road alongside a creek. Banner carriers with white flags donning symbols of *irwŏn* lead the procession, pallbearers carry Pak's body aloft on a platform, and hundreds of mourners follow behind. Sometimes an image of Pak within a halo hovers above the scene. Although *History* hagiographically proclaims all of society lamented Pak's passing, for the most part, the procession and mourning was done by Pak's small

⁹¹ *History*, 93-96; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1098-1101.

⁹² *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 236.

community.

At this point, Chosŏn was predominantly rural, illiterate, and impoverished, a result of decades of exploitation by the local gentry and subsequent Japanese colonial rule. This small religious order of about five thousand general members, less than one hundred devoted disciples functioning as teachers and leaders, and around twenty small buildings scattered along several hundred miles of coastal farming areas between Seoul and Kwangju was still unknown throughout most of Chosŏn. However, Wŏn Buddhism experienced impressive and significant growth after liberation during the post-World War II period, when the order participated in government-lead relief efforts and attracted hundreds of thousands of believers in a brief time. Its message of a new Buddha for a new age must have been quite attractive and timely after liberation from the Japanese yoke and the founding of the new nation of Korea.

Several oral narratives and questions surround Pak's early death at age fifty-three. The primary sources do not specifically mention a cause of death, which is impossible to ascertain, since Pak died in the rural countryside, and his followers cremated his body without an autopsy. This unknown factor later leads to speculation and variations in the narrative. The most common explanation for Pak's early death focuses on the 'ascetic cultivations' (*kohaeng sudo*) of his early years.⁹³ In this oral

⁹³ *Kohaeng sudo* 苦行修道 (lit. asceticism and cultivations, or ascetic cultivations). This compound includes two Buddhist technical terms: *kohaeng* 苦行 (*duṣkaracaryā*), or 'difficult acts,' referring to the ascetic acts of the Buddha; and *sudo* 修道 (*bhāvanāmārga*), or 'path of cultivation,' a stage of realization on the Buddhist

narrative, Pak performed various ascetic cultivations since he was an eight-year old child, such as praying to meet the mountain god, searching for a Daoist sages and teachers, intense questioning and doubt, trance-like mental states, and he was known to have chanted various mantras in vogue at the time. Basically, his entire life before his awakening is characterized as ascetic. As previously stated, this led to Pak becoming mentally unstable, his home fell into disrepair, and his health declined. It was noted that splotches appeared on his skin, he lost weight, and was generally quite unhealthy for a period. The intense ascetic practices permanently harmed and weakened Pak's body; he never fully recovered, and never again enjoyed good health. The general agreement is that he died of a type of stomach tumor, ulcer, or digestive ailment.

Although this narrative is probable, it is impossible to know if his ailment was the result of asceticism. The entire framework of Pak intentionally performing ascetic practices is debatable, as previously discussed. The sources do not have Pak outlining such practices and are quite vague, explaining away Pak's entire troubled life before his awakening experience as ascetic cultivation. There is no doubt that Pak experienced intense mental stress during his years prior to his awakening, and the intense mental pressure finally released itself in a breakthrough moment of clarity and realization;

path. Wŏn Buddhists use this compound to characterize Pak's troubled life up to his awakening experience. Even his questioning about the clouds in the sky as a child is characterized as part of his ascetic practices. The entire framework of Pak performing ascetic cultivation is debatable, as previously discussed, especially when it is characterized using this Buddhist technical terminology, as these are specific practices laid out in Buddhist teachings. See Buswell and Lopez, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 113, 255-256, and 275.

however, explaining his youth away with a highly technical Buddhist term ‘ascetic cultivations’ is problematic. One senior member explained the problem as applying to Pak a specific Buddhist intentionality and specific practices that objectively were not there. It becomes a catchall phrase to explain away a lot of uncertainty, questions, and problems about how Pak lead his life prior to awakening. Another member said ascetic cultivation is a much more positive and encouraging narrative than stating Pak could not handle his life or the political situation and went a little nuts before experiencing a breakthrough. Even though this may be the most realistic narrative, for many it challenges the heroic narrative of ascetic cultivations and is not acceptable.

Another variation of this narrative revolves around ascetic practices but also incorporates some supernatural elements. I have found this narrative told by members that have leanings toward the supernatural powers of the Buddha and those who believe deeply in the pseudoscientific power of Qi (氣 K. ki), the vital force animating the Cosmos and a fundamental principle of East Asian thought and traditional healing arts. In this narrative, Pak’s body reacted to the stresses of his intense ascetic cultivations by producing disease, a natural product of Pak’s inability to balance the cosmic vital forces within his body. His cultivation was so intense, he permanently damaged his body; however, once he awakened to the ineffable truth of *irwŏn*, he obtained the ability to control and manage the yin-yang vital forces in his body. Even though Pak severely damaged his body, he was able to revive and keep it going long

enough to accomplish his goals, staving off death through the power of his mind.

Even though not the most popular, variations of this supernatural-powers narrative animate the faith of some believers. But members are quick to point out that such narratives fly in the face of what Pak taught. Pak encouraged members to investigate closely the principles behind matters and events.⁹⁴ He was firmly against concerns about supernatural powers or mysterious and superstitious beliefs. Pak did utilize yin-yang theory in explaining meditation and in explaining the cosmic reciprocity of karma, but to interpolate that as acknowledging supernatural control over the body in such a way is questionable. Song was also concerned about such mysterious and mythic narratives developing, and as previously noted, tried to record Pak's death in a realistic way.

More problematic than the supernatural element behind this narrative is the implication that Pak possessed secret knowledge of practices that preserved his life and fended off death. Pak pointedly rebuked claims of secret knowledge and powers. He criticized the past tradition of secret dharma-transmission verses from teacher to

⁹⁴ *Sari yōngu* 事理研究 (lit. inquiry or investigation of the reason or principles behind matters or affairs), as previously footnoted. This phrase has seen several interpretations. The latest *Doctrinal Books* translates it 'inquiry into human affairs and universal principles,' but this is based on interpreting a single passage in the doctrine and negates the general meaning of *sari* as the logic or meaning of things in general. See *Doctrinal Books*, 48-50. Regardless, what is important is that *sari yōngu* implies investigating and understanding things fully so that one can distinguish between what is true and false to understand the nature of things and avoid suffering. Although technically incorrect, Chon originally translated the phrase as 'the study of facts and principles,' but this does capture the spirit of the phrase more accurately in translation. See *Scriptures*, 29-31. For a thorough understanding of Pak's intention behind *sari yōngu*, see *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 47-49, 109-110, 113-114, 141-142, 146-147, 157-159, 180-181, 243-244.

student and publicly released his dharma-transmission verse to the entire order before his death.⁹⁵ I have heard Wŏn Buddhist members claim knowledge of secret teachings passed down from Pak; however, many senior members, some direct descendants of the first three Dharma Masters, and the fourth Dharma Master himself strongly rebuked such claims to me as dangerous and anathema to Pak's teaching and mission. Those claiming secret knowledge, predictably, claim senior members with secret knowledge must claim ignorance. Considering how almost immediately we have mythic narratives and narratives centered on superhuman abilities, even when the 'new buddha' himself and his heir warn of such developments, we can surmise that this tendency to glorify and enhance narratives is an organic development of the charismatic and salvific dynamism of the founder meeting the down-to-earth needs and desires of all-to-human minds.

Another minor but poignant variation to Pak's death narrative centers on interpretations of his nirvāṇa. Wŏn Buddhism utilizes the term nirvāṇa in three ways: as 'nirvāṇa with remainder' or the extinguishing of the three poisons upon awakening but the body and mind still remain in the world; as 'nirvāṇa without remainder' or 'final nirvāṇa,' which is the final extinguishing of body and mind with nothing to be reborn;

⁹⁵ *Chŏnpŏp kesong* 傳法揭頌 (lit. dharma-transmission gāthā verse), see *History* 87-89; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 1094-1096; *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 46-47, 984. Death-bed dharma-transmission verses (遺揭 K. yuge, C. yiji) have a long history in East Asian Buddhism. These dharma transmissions verses were passed on to successors in secret as authorization to teach the dharma.

and as a general honorific term for the death of any person.⁹⁶ These uses are common throughout East Asia, and Pak did not teach anything different on this subject. Neither the doctrine, discourses, or histories indicate whether Pak experienced nirvāṇa with or without remainder; however, since Song declared Pak the ‘new Buddha for a new Age’ and the order promotes Pak as the new Buddha, we must assume the intent is to depict Pak as fully awakened and experiencing final nirvāṇa without remainder at death.⁹⁷ If Pak did not experience final nirvāṇa, then he would be more akin to a bodhisattva, a characterization not applied to Pak. Although many members believe Pak to be the new Buddha for a new age, in effect Maitreya Buddha manifest in the world, an alternative oral narrative complicates this millenarian vision.

The first time I heard this oral narrative, I was taken aback. I was with an elder *kyomu* in a small forest of pine trees at the Headquarters. The *kyomu* started talking about karma and rebirth and commented on how the two of us must have a special karmic connection. How else could a suburban white boy from the middle of America end up strolling with this old Korean teacher and studying in the headquarters of the order, the place that Pak dispensed his new teaching? On top of this, I was the first American to formally enter training. For the *kyomu*, no explanation existed outside of

⁹⁶ *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 720.

⁹⁷ Song used the term *chusebul* 主世佛 to originally declare Pak the new Buddha. Although this does not specifically declare Pak the new Maitreya Buddha, it directly implies such and has the same millenarian ring. In popular discourse, Pak is commonly characterized as the new Buddha and many members believe Pak to be Maitreya Buddha. *Doctrinal Books*, 533; *Wōnbulgyo chōnso*, 763; *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 1078.

karma and rebirth. The *kyomu* stated that our current roles of elder teacher and young student must have been reversed in our previous lives. I expressed my doubt and said such things are unknowable and irrelevant. The *kyomu* stopped walking, looked at me seriously, and asked if I knew that Pak said he would be reborn in the United States? The *kyomu* continued to explain that anyone called from so far away to study Pak's teaching, without ever knowing any Wŏn Buddhists, must have had a significant role at the beginning of Wŏn Buddhism. I asked how anyone could know that for sure, and the *kyomu* again stopped and looked at me seriously and said, "I know."

After this, I inquired to others and found out that an oral story of Pak saying he would be reborn in the West in his next life did exist. Over the years on several occasions in public spaces with many people around, an older member would mention this story and remind me and any other novices around about the workings of karma and rebirth, the importance of our efforts to become part of the order, and our strong karmic affinities with each other as Wŏn Buddhists. On several occasions, senior *kyomu* utilized this supposed strong karmic connection that brought me across the planet to legitimize the order's mission – only an important order could attract someone from so far away. Many members have told me that Pak will be reborn in the world and return to Wŏn Buddhism, and many pray for him and other founding members to return to the fold. I had not thought about the implications of this until a novice asked a *kyomu* how Pak could be reborn if he was the fully enlightened new Buddha and had

experienced nirvāṇa. Pak should not come back if he is the fully-realized new Buddha and enters nirvāṇa – the whole goal of Buddhist soteriology is not to return. The *kyomu* responded that the powers of a Buddha like Soŕ'aesan are truly unimaginable and changed the subject. Although this oral narrative is not utilized to challenge the awakened status of Pak or his sacred status, it confronts one of the most important claims in Wŏn Buddhism – that Pak is the new Buddha for a new age.

I do not present all these variations of contested narratives around the ten episodes of Pak's life to challenge historical factualness or any specific claim. The importance of the variations and tensions produced lies in revealing a complexity of beliefs that animates the order. By far most of the English and Korean scholarship on Wŏn Buddhism promulgates the official narratives and never reveals the complex constellations of conflicting beliefs and interpretations. Beyond a doubt the two most important studies on Wŏn Buddhism, *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism: a Translation of the Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn with Introduction* and *The Dharma Master Chŏngsan of Wŏn Buddhism: Analects and Writings*, both simply edit down the official histories and present them monolithically as the only view of Pak, Song, and Wŏn Buddhism.⁹⁸ Wŏn Buddhists are

⁹⁸ Korean Wŏn Buddhist scholars may question my characterization of Chung's works as the most important, but having read a lot of the Korean scholarship, Chung's works are by far the most important. Primarily because they summarize and draw on all the previous scholarship and by writing in English and publishing through the University of Hawai'i and SUNY Press, they undoubtedly have had a much wider impact than any of the Korean scholarship, which is often limited to interests within the order itself. Most of the Korean scholarship on Wŏn Buddhism repeats itself endlessly, recycles the same information, and rarely moves beyond official rhetoric. Recently, some academics have expressed tempered critical views in the Wonkwang University journal *Wŏnbulgyo Sasang-gwa Chonggyo Munhwa*.

not a monolithic group of believers under the sole influence of an official narrative. Members hold a variety of opinions and views that challenge official narratives and, in some cases, even challenge the divine status of Pak as the new Buddha. By exploring such contested narratives in a new religious movement, we not only learn about the complexity of Wŏn Buddhist beliefs, we can also see that members of a new religious movement, from the beginning, quickly challenge and change narratives to fit their own needs, regardless of what sacred founders teach. Aspects of sacred narratives that cannot be independently verified or confirmed have a high probability of being shaped through the desires and needs of individuals in religious traditions.

The New Buddha

By the time I first read Chon Pal Khn's translation *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism*, I was familiar with the narrative of the future Buddha Maitreya through the Theosophical Society, which believes in ascended masters and predicts the coming of a world-changing teacher. Equating the Maitreya with the coming world saviors prophesied by numerous religions, Theosophical Society members thought Kiddu Krishnamurti was that figure. Unfortunately, that did not go as planned, and Krishnamurti rejected the claim, left the Theosophical Society, and went on to become a

Being critical of the order, especially in public, is highly frowned upon and discouraged within organizational rules. I have heard members disparage Chung and accuse him of harboring a personal agenda for pointing out problems with the redacted versions of the canon in a footnote and an appendix entry in *The Scriptures of Won Buddhism*. For this alone, I consider his works more important than most Korean scholarship to date.

philosopher and famous public speaker. I also heard of Maitreya through various Buddhist texts and books, and even with my limited knowledge of Buddhism, I knew that many people since the days of Buddha have claimed to be Maitreya.

The mythology states that Maitreya is the bodhisattva that lives in Tuṣita Heaven while waiting for the right time for his final birth in this world, which should happen when the teachings of the current Buddha Śākyamuni have begun to decay, gone through a period of distortion, and finally disappeared. In the Mahāyāna, Śākyamuni and Maitreya are only two buddhas in a chain of buddhas unfolding the dharma within an infinitely long cyclical timeframe of Buddhist teachings emerging and disappearing. This narrative of dharmic decline and renewal, of Buddhism's own ultimate impermanence, is a popular trope in East Asia, where predictions of Maitreya and claims of dharmic decline manifest during social upheaval, political turmoil, natural disaster, or other stresses both internal or external to Buddhism.⁹⁹ When the dharma declines and Maitreya recognizes the time is near, he will reincarnate in the world and again turn the wheel of the dharma as have many buddhas before him. It is an old story, well known to Buddhists and professionally researched by scholars. A powerful millennial message of change and renewal, it can deliver hope and encouragement to those struggling in a bitter sea of human suffering, while also serving the needs of

⁹⁹ See Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991): 119-132.

power-hungry individuals seeking cosmic legitimization.

I distinctly remember noting several passages about Maitreya the first time I read *The Scripture of Wŏn Buddhism*. I had already noted that Pak never once in his doctrine or discourses claimed to be Maitreya or any other Buddha. It was clear he did not want people to worship him. His doctrine encourages members to be independent, closely examine the world, and trust in the dharma above any one individual. Pak instructed in the vein of *tathāgatagarbha* teachings, which promote the inherent potentiality of an awakened buddha-nature in all people and the goal of practice being to reveal that awakened nature in this life. His doctrine firmly rooted in established Mahāyāna discourse, it appeared simple, concise, and reasonable to my young mind. When I first read the passages about Maitreya, I remembered my background with the Theosophical Society and their problematic claims to Maitreya.

Toward the end of *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism* in the translation of *Taejonggyŏng*, which as previously noted was the only translation available for at least forty years, five different members question Pak on Maitreya and the establishment of Maitreya's mythic Dragon-Flower order.¹⁰⁰ Fishing for Pak to declare himself Maitreya and declare their order the prophesied order of legends, Pak instead explains Maitreya and the Dragon-Flower order as metaphorical states of existence in which practitioners realized and manifest their Buddha nature in the world. When one member finds that

¹⁰⁰ Chon, *Scriptures*, 377-379; *Doctrinal Books*, 465-467; and *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 390-391.

response unsatisfactory and presses Pak to agree that one person would have to appear as the first master, Pak deflects and says, “Whoever awakens to the truth bit by bit will become one of the masters.” Pak is repeatedly given the opportunity to declare himself Maitreya, and he refuses. Instead, he uses the opportunity to declare Maitreya a metaphor for self-cultivation and refuses to acknowledge the corporeality of this mythic Buddha figure. Pak’s response is completely congruent with *tathāgatagarbha* teachings, with teachings in the popular Lotus Sutra, with the highly influential Avataṃsakasūtra, and with his own aniconic position.

The sources are clear – Pak never claimed the status of Buddha. Not once. There is no way around it. Even when pressed and given the opportunity, he denies the existence of a mythic future buddha. Pak speaks of sages and wise men coming into the world to help set things straight, he speaks of dharmic decline and renewal, and the millenarian coming of a new age of prosperity and peace, and even the founding of his new religion, but he never once declares himself a new Buddha or the Maitreya. This is significant, and something many members note. This is also one of the most sensitive and delicate things to discuss with members, as approaching it in the wrong way can really piss people off. Even Chung, a devoted follower, in his lengthy and important introduction to *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism* never addresses this obvious pink elephant in the room. Although Pak never claimed himself the new Buddha, many of his followers do. In his first public addresses to the community, the sixth Head Dharma

Master and new head of the order, elected on November 4, 2018, referenced Pak as the Buddha of a new age.¹⁰¹ This hegemonic view is rarely questioned.

When you ask members, particularly older members, about the source for Pak being declared the new Buddha, it comes down to one person – Song. His declarations of faith in Pak as the new Buddha are recorded in the *Chǒngsan chongsa pǒbǒ*, which was compiled, edited, published, and canonized in 1972, ten years after Song’s death. Since Song did not edit *Chǒngsan chongsa pǒbǒ* himself, we can question its accuracy, but consensus exists orally and, in the sources, that Song is the force behind promoting Pak as the new Buddha, and passages attributed to him are used to justify this view.

Reading the *Chǒngsan chongsa pǒbǒ*, Song’s veneration and obedience to Pak is clear.¹⁰² Two passages lay the foundation for framing Pak as the new Buddha. The most-cited passage states:

The Master [Song] said, “Although many buddhas have passed through the world, there has never been in the past, and never will be in the future, a teaching as consummate as that of our Founding Master. This is because, first, the Founding Master has enshrined the faith, and the model of practice; by integrating everything into this *il-won*, he enabled us to apply it directly to our faith and our practice. Second, by elucidating the great moral principle of the Fourfold Grace, the Founding Master perfectly clarified not only the moral principle governing the relations between human beings, but also human beings’ relations with heaven and earth, parents, fellow beings, and the law. Third, not mentioning miracles but taking the essential dharma of the Way of humanity as

¹⁰¹ Kim Juwǒn, “Na-rŭl saeropke! Kyodan-ŭl saeropke! Sesang-ŭl seropke!” *Ch’ulga kyohwa danbo*, no 320 (December 2018): 1.

¹⁰² *Doctrinal Books*, 529-540; and, *Wǒnbulgyo chǒnsǒ*, 759-767.

the core, he bestowed the true dharma of delivering the masses through the consummate great Way that accords with truth and reality. There still are not many who truly recognize the Founding Master, but in the future as the world develops more and more, the world will widely acknowledge the Founding Master as the new presiding Buddha of the age.”¹⁰³

Song positions Pak not just as the new Buddha of the age but also declares his teaching more complete than past or future Buddhadharma. Pak repeatedly implored his followers to study the Buddhadharma (which will be discussed more later), but now the order predominately studies Pak and Song’s discourses produced by their followers – the Buddhadharma has taken a backseat to the scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism. All throughout my training and study with Wŏn Buddhists and despite the text repeatedly encouraging people to study the Buddhadharma, I continually find members’ lack of knowledge of basic Buddhist teachings and material shocking. We rarely studied it. Many Americans who have studied with Wŏn Buddhists state the same observation to me. I have been told many times by Wŏn Buddhists that there is no need to study the old, complicated scriptures now that we have Pak and Song’s teachings.

A second often-cited passage more precisely lays out this tension between what many Wŏn Buddhists view as the old, outdated, and decayed Buddhadharma and Pak’s new dispensation:

Every year in June, the Master [Song] addressed the sacred spirit of the Founding Master: “As a rule, because there is morality in the world, the human spirit may be cultivated; because there is the Buddha, morality may be elucidated; and because there is an order of his adherents, the Buddha’s radiance may extend

¹⁰³ *Doctrinal Books*, 533; and, *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 762.

widely. The Buddha's radiance is a lamp for the world and the spiritual life of sentient beings. Alas! Three-thousand years had already passed since the assembly on Vulture Peak and it had also been a long time since the traces of the sages had vanished everywhere in both East and West, so that true edification was unable to be carried out and the right dharma could not stand. At this crisis point, the Founding Master rekindled the fading sun of the Buddha and turned again the dharma-wheel that was about to come to a stop. Hence, we anticipate that, in the future, as the fortunes of this Way long prosper through an infinity of kalpas and your doctrines spread widely, the whole world will turn in to the utmost bliss of the *Il-Won* and sentient beings will all become true sages."¹⁰⁴

In this passage, Song steps up the millenarian rhetoric and not only claims Pak as the new Buddha, but also that all traces of the sages had vanished from the world, the 'right dharma' could not stand or exist, and real or genuine edification was not taking place.

In a nutshell, Song is claiming that all religious teachings are null and void and the world is in a moral crisis. Only Pak's teaching can once again spin the dharma-wheel and save the world. He utilizes the dharma-wheel metaphor in the title of Episode Nine, "Turning the Dharma at Shinyong," again in this passage. The turning of the dharma-wheel is a classic narrative device to declare the Buddha has set things straight and established the correct dharma in the world. It marks the beginning of the teaching of the Buddha, and in this context, Song utilizes it as a direct claim to legitimization over all other Buddhist teachings. When contextualized within the last years of the Japanese occupation and the coming war, messages of renewal, emergence of the new

¹⁰⁴ *Doctrinal Books*, 536; and, *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 764. I have not been able to discover why Song claims it has been over three thousand years since the Buddha. Maybe this was an ordinary understanding at the time, but I have not been able to verify it.

Buddha, and the re-turning of the dharma-wheel are particularly powerful. The claim of a worldwide moral crisis most likely seemed imminently real to those with little knowledge of the world outside of a ravaged rural Chosŏn.

This is a much stronger claim than Pak ever made. Followers recall in *Taejonggyŏng* that Pak spoke about decaying dharma and the need to renew Buddhist institutions, but he never claimed the Buddhadharma had died out. Instead, Pak claimed that the institutional structure around Buddhism prohibited the teaching from functioning as a great vehicle (Mahāyāna) to help everyone out of their suffering. This is outlined in *Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏksin-non*, his critique of Chosŏn Buddhism, which was edited into and canonized in the general introduction to his doctrine:

Buddhism is the unsurpassed, great path; its truths and expedients are immense, so that numerous spiritual mentors have taken them as the basis of various schools and sects, thereby opening the gates of propagation and teaching countless people. ...

Looking especially at the Buddhism of the past, its institutions were organized mainly in terms of monastic orders, which were not well suited to people living in the secular world, so that anyone who wished to be a true Buddhist had to ignore one's duties and responsibilities to the secular life and even give up one's occupation. In such a situation, no matter how good the Buddhadharma, it would be difficult for all the many living creatures in the boundless world to gain access to the buddhas' grace. How could this be the consummate, great Way?¹⁰⁵

Pak's critique targets the monastic focus of Chosŏn Buddhism, which in Pak's time existed primarily deep in the bucolic mountainside and not easily accessible to

¹⁰⁵ *Doctrinal Books*, 18; and, *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 21-22.

everyday people. He does not claim the death of morality in the world, or that he is the new Buddha rekindling morality or the dharma, but rather that the established Buddhadharma is the way to go and that it needs to be more accessible to the masses. If the Buddhadharma had disappeared from the world, as Song claims, how did Pak ever come across it?

Pak highly praised Song as his most adept follower. Song was one of Pak's few followers that generally understood his teaching, Song was literate and could help Pak compose and write when most of his followers could not, and Song was already familiar with many philosophical and religious texts. Song worshiped and obeyed Pak's every word. Pak was aware of this and is recorded as encouraging Song to be more independent:

The Founding Master one day said to Song Kyu, "Ever since you met me, you have done everything as I instructed, never insisting on your own opinion. I know this is because you have such deep faith in me. But what would you do if I were suddenly to leave you for a long time? From now on, I want you to try also to express your opinions on all matters and to lead the congregation using your self-power."¹⁰⁶

Song is a yes-man, and Pak is politely telling him to start thinking for himself. One central theme of Pak's teaching is personal autonomy or 'self-power' (*charyōk* 自力), a popular slogan around the turn of the century and throughout Japanese occupation. The whole point for removing Buddha images was for practitioners to learn not to rely

¹⁰⁶ *Doctrinal Books*, 478; and, *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 401.

on a Buddha for anything and to cultivate their own awakened nature in order to take care of themselves and others.

Deifying Pak hobbles his living example and turns him and his teaching into objects of worship, exactly opposite of what Pak taught. If Pak was the new Buddha, a Maitreya for a new age, why would Pak not make the claim to Song? When he was given the chance to claim the title, why did he defer for a more metaphorical explanation of Maitreya and his prophesied Dragon-Flower order? Several oral narratives attempt to explain this.

One explanation is that Pak could not make such claims because the Japanese authorities closely monitored their activities. Pak did not want to attract their attention and was protecting the community. After liberation, Song was able to declare Pak the new Buddha publicly. We do know that Pak was under the watchful eye of colonial authorities – all social, political, and religious groups were watched closely. Pak's group was hardly exceptional. We also already know that efforts to control and monitor groups increased over time, especially as war approached and the Japanese Empire began to lose ground. Still for the most part, the canonical sources, records, and narratives show that colonial authorities usually granted Pak and his organization the permits they requested and allowed them to continue their activities. In fact, the canonical narratives reveal Japanese authorities and religious leaders, on many occasions, displaying congenial sentiments toward Pak and his community. This was a

small, poor, and rural community of believers scattered over a large area of farmland and rice fields, and Pak did not allow his community to get involved in anti-colonial activities. What threat were they, really? None. Compared to Christianity, Ch'öndogyo, Chŭngsan'gyo, and numerous other religious groups with hundreds of thousands of believers active in anti-colonial movements, Pak's Buddhadharma Research Society toiling quietly away in the countryside, building a levee, and studying in their small thatched-roofed meeting rooms was hardly a threat. Pak lectured on following the law, worked with authorities, and showed respect toward the Japanese. He enshrined in his doctrine that people show gratitude to laws, lest they suffer confinement and constraints and not enjoy tranquility and order in their lives.¹⁰⁷ Real liberation came from mental cultivation.

This narrative of colonial threat also falls flat in *Taejonggyöng*. In no canonical secondary narratives told by followers does Pak make a direct claim to the status of a new Buddha or Maitreya – none. Pak's discourses were compiled and edited after liberation from Japanese colonialism. If Pak believed himself to be the Maitreya Buddha and his order to be the destined Dragon-Flower order that would transform the world, he would undoubtedly indicate this in private to his most devoted and trusted followers. If Pak made such claims, they would have been made public after liberation from Japanese occupation or at least remembered or memorialized in secondary source

¹⁰⁷ *Doctrinal Books*, 36-38; and, *Wönbulgyo chönsö*, 36-39

material. The narrative would be quite different. Among five thousand members, not one person ever heard him make such a claim. This is an important fact that members cannot refute.

Another oral narrative to explain why Pak never claimed to be the new Buddha requires some mental gymnastics, and I cannot claim a thorough understanding of this perspective. I have attempted on several occasions to have it explained by those who believe it, but the logic goes beyond my limited understanding. In this explanation, the fact that Pak never made the claim is used as proof that he was in fact the Buddha. Since Pak's awakening was perfected, he recognized that no distinction exists between ordinary people and Buddhas: everyone can awaken and become a buddha. Thus, there really are no buddhas. Pak's redefining of the meaning of 'Buddha' (which he did not do), encouraging people to realize their already awakened buddha-nature, setting the dharma straight, and re-establishing a true Buddhist order and practice in the world, makes him a 'new Buddha' and not the Maitreya. In this narrative, Pak is establishing a new Buddhism outside of the old and decayed Buddhism. This of course begs the question as to why Pak would repeatedly declare Śākyamuni Buddha as the sage of all sages, adopt Buddhist teachings, and repeatedly encourage his followers to study the already-established Buddhadharma. Why not create something completely new and not rely on the decayed teaching as the foundation of his doctrine? There are so many holes in this argument that each time I hear it explained, I become more confused.

The explanation of colonial repression is by far the most common explanation as to why Pak never made such a claim. I have noted a few others, but they often do not make sense, and I am reticent to attempt summarization. The final and not often spoken explanation is the most obvious – Pak was not the new Buddha. Regardless, bringing this line of questioning forward in conversation can really excite tempers. I have seen friendships tested, feelings hurt, and accusations of heresy and faithlessness hurled over suggestions that Pak was not the new Buddha. Ordained and lay members alike learn quickly to discuss such heresy with like-minded individuals only.

The contested narratives, redactions, and translations of the narratives of Pak reveal a tension between the more mundane reality on the ground and the lofty ideals and desires of the followers. Claims to Pak's divinity and status as the new Buddha are later additions not represented in the early layers of source material or narratives of the Buddhadharma Research Society and not represented in the recorded discourses of Pak. One member explained to me the primary problem with making such a claim: declaring Pak as the new Buddha makes the order look like religious zealots. Pak tried to reform Buddhism away from distinctions between lay and ordained, young and old, rich and poor, awakened and un-awakened, between individuals and the Buddha. He purposely did not teach his followers to worship the Buddha, and purposefully created a lay-centered order. Claiming Pak as the new Buddha brings in a power dynamic that, in the long term, has been detrimental to the order itself. It removes the focus on Pak's

message of personal autonomy and self-cultivation and sets up a cosmic dependence on Pak as a new savior. Instead of Pak's teaching of autonomy and an insistence that his followers rely on the dharma and not people, we get Song's quote above, in which Pak is now the new light and savior of the world. All other traditions and teachings are now secondary and insufficient. It creates a palpable tension and claims Wŏn Buddhism as the center of morality and salvation. It locates Wŏn Buddhism within an lengthy list of other new religious movements claiming their founders as new buddhas or Christ-like figures, claiming a moral center of the universe, and claiming only they have the means to true salvation.

In one of the few studies of Wŏn Buddhism by a non-Wŏn Buddhist, Walraven notes this centering of Pak's Buddhadharma Research Society as the axis of a moral world order. He locates this perspective within colonial and post-colonial concerns for independence and in an older traditional Confucian worldview of Chosŏn as the bearer of the heavenly mandate after the fall of the Ming Dynasty to the barbarian Manchurian Qing Dynasty. He suggests that the emphasis on autonomy and self-power functions as a strategic framework of agency in an out-of-control situation of colonial oppression.¹⁰⁸ I agree that the colonial situation had a profound impact on the development of this center-of-the-world narrative, and that during the early years, Pak's encouragements to

¹⁰⁸ Boudewijn Walraven, "Iksan as the Center of the World: The Global Vision of the Pulbŏp yŏn'guhoe," *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 27 (2003): 148-150.

his community had many nationalist sentiments; but, I do not give them much weight when compared to the cosmic claim to status as the new Buddha or within the context of Pak's entire teaching.

The nationalistic centering of Korea as a moral force in the world was definitely a small part of Pak's teaching, and such rhetoric probably helped foster a sense of hope for the future within his poor and struggling community; but, more salient are post-Pak Wŏn Buddhist cosmic claims to a religious order founded by a new Buddha, a claim that transcends nationalism. Post-Pak Songism was more nationalistic and had a stronger affect than the nationalist sentiments of Pak and the Buddhadharma Research Society.¹⁰⁹ I would argue that Song's deep belief and promotion of Pak as a savior and new Buddha represent the most powerful force positioning Wŏn Buddhism as the center of the Cosmos. Pak's order died with him. With the transformation of Pak into the new Buddha, Song's new order of Wŏn Buddhism also transformed the teaching by moving it away from its Buddhist roots and establishing it as a new dharma, for a new Buddha, in a new world order.

¹⁰⁹ I use the term *Songism* to describe Wŏn Buddhist belief and practice post-Pak, particularly after the 1948 reconstruction of the order as Wŏn Buddhism. *Songism* is a combination of Song's teachings and the teachings of the third Head Dharma Teacher Taesan, a student of Song's, and characterizes the contemporary hegemonic view of teachings and practice. It is heavily Confucian, emphasizes the importance of *kyomu*, and is significantly more nationalistic than Pak.

Chapter Two: The Teaching

I remember learning that *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* was not the original text of Pak's seminal statement of his doctrine and practice. Since the text states that Pak wrote it, I never questioned that it might have been edited or changed, and for the first three years I was in Korea, I never heard about there having been such a redaction. I had started on my quest for religious teachings at an early age, and I already understood that translation and editing matters; and as I studied the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* in Korean, the different flavor of the Korean-language version drew my attention to the importance of translation. While studying the history of Wŏn Buddhism and learning about the original text, a novice explained that the order compiled the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* in 1977 to bring together various doctrinal books into one canonical volume for convenience. When I asked if Pak's doctrinal part was the same as the original, the novice assured me it was, and I did not give it further attention. This was before Google. No internet to find digital copies of originals for comparison. No English material on the history of the order or the development of the text was available at this small Wŏn Buddhist school deep in the countryside of Korea, and the topic never came up in my classes. Later I found out the young novice's response was not completely accurate.

After returning to the United States and finishing an undergraduate program, I spent a summer at the Won Buddhist Manhattan temple. During that time, I was given a copy of a recent publication by Bongkil Chung, *The Scriptures of Wŏn Buddhism: A*

Translation of the Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn with Introduction. On the second page of the preface

he states:

The Korean original of this translation is the 1962 edition of the *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn*, translated here as *The Scriptures of Won Buddhism*, which consists of two books: the *Canon*, and the *Scriptures of Sot'aesan* [Scriptures of the Great Founder]. Until this edition (1962) was published, the Won Buddhist order used the *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* (Correct canon of Buddhism) published in 1943. The *Canon* of the 1962 edition is a redaction of the *Canon* of the 1943 edition. During the redaction process some tenets crucial to the integrity of the doctrine were altered with the effect that the light of the original writer's wisdom was significantly dimmed. I have restored in my translation those crucial points and tried to persuade the Supreme Council of the Won Buddhist order to acknowledge the importance of the restoration. Although the current leaders of Wŏn Buddhism are convinced of the importance of restoration, they are unwilling to bear the responsibility of correcting the errors themselves. The second patriarch of the Wŏn Buddhist order had decreed that the 1943 edition be preserved permanently; some external scholars will compare the two editions to see the errors made during the redaction. It is my firm conviction that those altered parts should be restored to the original writings not only in the translation but also in the Korean original, lest its doctrine be like an inefficacious drug. The founder viewed his new form of Buddhism as a medicine to cure the world of illness and save sentient beings from suffering in the bitter seas of misery. The points of restoration can be found in the relevant notes and in appendix 1.¹

This paragraph flooded my mind with questions. Personally, it fascinated and perplexed me that Wŏn Buddhist leadership would redact their self-proclaimed Buddha's teaching, which implied that his text was faulty or that they had a greater understanding than their perfectly enlightened savior. Academically, I found it illuminating that his text had already been redacted and significantly rearranged several times within fifty years. We know religious texts and canons change over time,

¹ Chung, *Scriptures*, xiv.

but not often do we find redacted texts that can be directly correlated with an original text by the founder of a religious tradition.

I contacted a *kyomu* in Korea and requested a copy of the *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn* in its original format. She said it was surprisingly difficult to find: the headquarters' bookstore had only one copy on an out-of-the-way shelf. After receiving it, I noted immediately that several critical points were not addressed by Chung. When I tried to discuss this with other members, they were hesitant. I quickly learned that expressing concerns about the redaction was a sensitive matter. I also quickly learned that some members criticized Chung for making his observations public to the English-speaking world. Fifteen years after the publication of his book, I still hear members snidely remark about Chung having an 'agenda,' an oblique jab at a lack of Buddhist selflessness and lack of respect for the order. Recently when I raised a critical issue about the official English language translations and the previous redactions, I was rebuked publicly by a Korean member for daring to question the work of senior members, which caused an uproar in the room. It remains difficult to critically discuss translation and redaction openly with many members of Wŏn Buddhism.

This chapter will explore several aspects of Pak's doctrine and the redaction of his seminal text. While I will provide a general overview of parts of his teaching, I will not go into the detail already offered in other texts: the basic teachings have already been well explored in English materials and need not all be repeated here. Pak's

teachings are not hard to follow, and they are not meant to be. Instead, I will provide some historical context, present an overview of the development and redactions of the primary texts, and attempt to address the question of whether Pak's teaching is Buddhism, a new Buddhism, or some other type of hybridity. Although my position continually evolves, I will argue that Pak's teaching is basic East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism and that the redactions reflect a quick institutional shift back toward a primacy of ordained religious specialists, the monastic-centered system Pak criticized.

Reforms and Revivals

Pak lived during a time of intense social and political upheavals. Occupying an important geopolitical location, Chosŏn Korea was the target of Japanese, Russian, Chinese, and American attention. With this attention came the influence of rapid industrialization and technological modernization. Japan closed in and colonized Chosŏn in 1910, bringing significant social change, exploitation, poverty, and war. Christian missionaries were quite active in East Asia, and religious and political leaders in China, Chosŏn, and Japan interpreted Christian missionary and charitable activities as a model for 'modern' religious practices. When the Japanese colonized Chosŏn, they brought a new attention to Buddhism, which Confucian scholar-officials had aggressively marginalized since the founding days of the dynasty. Combined with the constant external pressure of foreign powers, internal class struggles, and the spread of modern technologies, this dynamic circumstance stimulated the reformation of existing

religious structures and the formation of numerous new religious movements, which arose to meet the needs of people living within rapidly shifting political dynamics.

Buddhism experienced its own reformations and revivals.

In both Meiji Japan and Chosŏn Korea, Buddhism was castigated as a corrupt foreign tradition full of superstitious beliefs and as anti-social in its perceived rejection of family life. Many Japanese intellectuals viewed Buddhism as a hinderance to industrialization and modernization, and the Meiji government took active steps to repress it. Many Chosŏn Confucian scholar-officials viewed Buddhism as a corrupting influence and financial drain on the royals, aristocrats, and the bureaucracy, and they actively marginalized it from official bureaucratic participation. Buddhism remained an important part of the religious landscape, but this stigma persisted throughout the colonial period.² In response to such circumstances, East Asian Buddhist reformers arose to defend their traditions in the face of modernization. Some worked from within the established orders by reforming the monastic and lay communities. Others worked from outside by forming new Buddhist movements. New Buddhist movements and reformations swept across the Buddhist world. Before Pak was born, Chosŏn Buddhism had already experienced reform efforts, both directed from within its fold and forced on it by external forces.

² See Hwansoo Kim, "Social Stigmas of Buddhist Monastics and the Lack of lay Buddhist Leadership in Colonial Korea (1910-1945)," *Korea Journal* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 105-132. Unfortunately, Kim, like many scholars, ignores Wŏn Buddhism is this otherwise excellent study.

Chosŏn Buddhist reform efforts were stimulated by the opening of Chosŏn ports in 1876, which brought foreign Christian and Buddhist missionaries. Japanese Buddhists adopted Christian missionizing tactics and began forming social charities and lay organizations, proselytized in schools and industrial centers, and produced academic studies. In 1895 (Pak was four years old), Japanese Buddhists petitioned the Chosŏn government to lift restrictions on monks and nuns moving freely in the capital, which it granted. After being labeled undesirable for hundreds of years, Chosŏn Buddhists were encouraged by the religious fervor and learned quickly from the Japanese Buddhists. Many, if not most, of the reforms that Pak initiated in the 1920s had already been discussed, proposed, or enacted in Chosŏn Buddhism.³

This complex and diverse reaction to modernizing activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is often termed 'Buddhist modernism.' Buddhist modernism, sometimes referred to as 'modern Buddhism' or 'Neo-Buddhism,' covers a wide array of traditions and developments, which are not always congruent or related. As a distinct category of analysis, it emerged early in the twentieth century and continues to influence research and academic studies.⁴ Aligning with my critique of

³ Kim Hwansoo Ilmee offers the best in-depth study of the dynamic relationship between Japanese and Korean Buddhists in the years prior to colonization. See Kim Hwansoo Ilmee, *Empire of the Dharma: Korean and Japanese Buddhism, 1877-1912* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

⁴ Poussin used the concept as early as 1910; see, Poussin, "Buddhist Notes: Vedanta and Buddhism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 42, no 1 (1910): 129-140. Contemporarily, McMahan and Lopez have both produced important texts on the topic; see, David McMahan, *The Making*

modernity as a poor framework for analysis, I also take issue with this category. In accordance with Gustavo Benavides' critique that the concept of modernity has mostly been used in relation to reform movements and their political aspects and not in relation to the characteristics of the teachings, I view 'Buddhist modernism' as a category that implies a rupture with established schools of Buddhism and creates a distinctly Western point of reference centered on 'modern' (i.e. liberal, democratic, industrial, capitalistic, etc.) developments.⁵

I have come to understand this nebulous category as encapsulating developments from 'traditional' Buddhist structures to 'modern' structures: deemphasizing myths, rituals, clerical hierarchies, iconography, and monasticism; lay-focused, activist, engaged, positive, optimistic, personal, and humanistic; equitable and non-discriminatory; rational, realistic, philosophical, and scientific. Many religious traditions and new religious movements have wrestled with these developments since the industrial revolution. Such developments are important and worthy of attention, of course, but I see profound continuities with the past, i.e. the background understanding remains intact in 'modern' Buddhism.⁶

of Buddhist Modernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Donald Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

⁵ Gustavo Benavides, "Modernity and Buddhism," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol 1, edited by Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004): 545.

A few contemporary tangents move away from the Buddhist background understanding. Glenn Wallis' biting speculative non-Buddhism discourse, for instance, strips Buddhism of many of its core beliefs and confronts contemporary developments in Buddhist intellectual and social life.⁷ Many prosaic Buddha-in-a-box reinterpretations of the religion cherry-pick the Dharma to confirm personal interpretation of 'spiritual truths,' re-package them for mass consumption, and move Buddhism away from its challenging core teachings in favor of blasé mental health and stress reduction through 'mindfulness.' However, for most of the world's Buddhists, the background understanding remains constant: Four Noble Truths, suffering, liberation, reincarnation, karma, dependent origination or interdependence, non-self, nirvāṇa, etc. From my personal experience with a variety of non-Asian American Buddhists, this background understanding often functions as the main attraction.

Regardless of technical problems with this category, contemporary Wŏn Buddhism promotes itself as a modern reformed Buddhism different from other forms of Buddhism. Pak himself never used any terms related to a concept of Buddhist modernism, but he did position his order as a modernizing force working outside mainstream Chosŏn Buddhism. Focusing on several key elements now identified as

⁶ A Buddhist 'background understanding' reference the core teachings of the religion that shape the individual sense of self and their position in the universe. This refers to Charles Taylor's communitarian philosophy discussed in the introduction.

⁷ Wallis is gaining a lot of attention through his speculative non-Buddhism website, which publishes most of his writings. See <https://speculativenonbuddhism.com>.

part of Buddhist modernism – lay-centeredness, gender equality, anti-ritual, iconoclasm, humanistic practices, and eleemosynary activities – Pak joined the already existing chorus of criticism and reform efforts. In the general introduction to the *Principle Book of Wŏn Buddhism*, Pak lays out his position:

Looking especially at the Buddhism of the past, its institutions were organized mainly in terms of monastic orders, which were not well suited to people living in the secular world, so that anyone who wished to be a true Buddhist had to ignore one's duties and responsibilities to the secular life and even give up one's occupations. In such a situation, no matter how good the Buddhadharma, it would be difficult for all the many living creatures in this boundless world to gain access to the buddhas' grace. How could this be the consummate, great Way?⁸

With his focus on lay practitioners and on making Buddhist practice accessible, Pak's teaching and new religious movement align with numerous other lay-centered movements throughout Asia that sought to revive Buddhism from outside the monastic orders.⁹

Pak aligned his order with the modernizing forces of the time. In some respects,

⁸ *Doctrinal Books*, 18; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 22.

⁹ The similarities between Pak's reform movement and the Vietnamese new religious movements of Hòa Hảo and Cao Đài are particularly striking. Since Vietnamese Buddhism had a long history of interacting with Confucianism and Daoism (similar to Korea), and was impacted by both French colonialism and the invasion by the Japanese Empire, these two religions are in many aspects identical to Wŏn Buddhism, particularly in their early years and in the teachings of their founders. A thorough comparison between the nineteenth and twentieth-century new religious movements of Vietnam and Korea would make for an interesting research project. See Sergei Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and its Leap into Modernity* (Huntington: Nova Science Publishers, 2001); Long Thành Nam Nguyễn, *Hoahao Buddhism in the Course of Vietnam's History*, translated by Sergei Blagov (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003); Hue-tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); and Jayne S. Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasants and Priest in the Caodai in Viet Nam* (New Haven: Yale University South East Asia Studies, 1981).

Pak participated in modernizing Buddhism; but, in many ways, Pak's movement is a retrenching of traditional values and worldviews. Working together, these opposing threads of modernization and traditional worldviews give the impression of something new and 'modern,' but the structure of new practices simply obscures the entrenchment of foundational worldviews embedded in the background understanding. Compared to the current Wŏn Buddhist order, which publicly presents itself as modern Buddhism, Pak's original Buddhadharma Research Society was much more progressive for its time.¹⁰ After the death of Pak and in the absence of his charismatic presence, the structure of new practices realigned itself back to a conservative foundation of long-established traditions. Wŏn Buddhism has become a bastion of traditional values, clinging to old ways that Pak rejected, while the world around it changes and renders it obsolete and irrelevant. After listening to a recent podcast by David McMahan about Buddhist Modernism and discussing it with others associated with Wŏn Buddhism in the United States, we quickly observed how far the order has moved away from any relevancy with Buddhist Modernism.¹¹ It talks the talk but fails to walk the walk.

¹⁰ Any number of official publications and website can be referenced to illustrate their claim to Buddhist modernism, and it is repeated constantly by members. I would point anyone wishing to support this to search Google, go to any top result, and then reference the 'about Wŏn Buddhism' or similar section to find references to being 'modern.' Or, simply ask a Wŏn Buddhist member do define their teaching. They will, inevitably, define it as a modern, reformed Buddhism.

¹¹ "David L. McMahan on Buddhism, Science & the Humanities, & Modernity," by *The Imperfect Buddha Podcast*, podcast audio, February 19, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/post-traditional-buddhism/46-ibp-david-l-mcmahan-on-buddhism-science-the-humanities-modernity>.

Redacting Buddha

The evolution and redaction of its sacred text should be one of the most important topics in the study of Wŏn Buddhism. The import does not lie in its doctrinal or dogmatic content but rather in how members moved quickly to make significant edits and additions after Pak's death. Most of the ancient religious traditions of the world have no extant texts dating to their beginnings. We do not have autographs or first editions of the Pali, Tibetan, or Chinese Buddhist canons, and our textual knowledge is quite limited until the third to sixth centuries C.E.¹² No original version of the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, or the Quran. Some of the oldest extant Vedic texts only date to the eleventh century. Fragments of parchments and inscription on temples and archeological ruins offer insights, but most of what we know about ancient scriptural development is through academic textual comparisons and theorizing, which constantly changes with discoveries of a new piece of parchment or a lost scroll found in a cave. Our knowledge is fragmented, limited, and superficial.

Many new religious movements, on the other hand, can provide contemporaneous insights into how religious communities produce, transmit, and redact texts and canons. Wŏn Buddhism has preserved most of its writings. Anyone can

¹² This is debated, but I go with Gregory Schopen's analysis of reliable textual knowledge. See, Gregory Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit," in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 23-29.

trace Pak's teachings from its nascent years, to the final production of his *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, and then to its contemporary redaction and rearrangement in *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*. My interest is not in the evolution of Pak's thought but in how *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* changed after his death in subsequent redactions. By looking at these changes, we see that even though members revere Pak as a salvific new Buddha and believe his teaching to be a panacea for a troubled world, they quickly redact his text to fit their own needs. Such quick action to revise Pak's text within one generation makes me wonder about the profound changes that must have happened in the five hundred years between the Buddha and the emergence of Buddhist texts, despite claims of consistency in maintaining oral transmissions.

Foundational Texts

Pak and his followers produced *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* by assimilating new material and editing together older monographs into a seamless presentation of Pak's teaching. Since we have no accounting of these earlier writings in English scholarship, I will provide a brief review of the most important monographs that contributed to Pak's final scripture. Some of the content of these short monographs was incorporated into *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* and thus available through its translations, but none of them are yet individually available in translation for non-Korean members.

Pulbŏp yŏn'guhoe kyuyak (佛法研究會規約), known in the tradition as the *Yellow Book of Regulations* (*Noran kawī ch'wichwisŏ* 노란可謂趣旨書) due to its yellow cover, was

the first important and comprehensive doctrinal publication by the Buddhadharma Research Society.¹³ Published in March of 1927 and again in May of 1934, it evolved out of the initial regulations of the 1924 inaugural assembly and constitution. In addition to the general regulations, this small monograph contains an introduction to the society, basics of the threefold training (*samhak* 三學), the precepts (*kyemun* 戒文), the eight articles (*p'alcho* 八條), “The Essential Discourse on Commanding the Nature” (*solsöng yoron* 率性要論), and “The Dharma Instruction on Suffering and Happiness” (*korak-tae pömmun* 苦樂對法門), all of which were further developed and incorporated in *Pulgyo chöngjön*. The first version of the doctrinal chart (*kyori-do* 教理圖) was added to the 1934 edition, as was a general layout of the organizational structure. The *Yellow Book* was used by members and temples as the main religious book of regulations, doctrine, and practice for several years.

In May of 1927, Pak published his first important work, *Suyang yön'gu yoron* (修養研究要論) [Essentials of cultivation and inquiry].¹⁴ This short monograph outlines Pak's version of the Buddhist threefold training: cultivation of awareness (*chöngsin suyang* 精神修養), i.e. training the mind (Sk. *citta*); inquiry into human affairs and

¹³ *Pulböp yön'guhoe kyuyak* 佛法研究會規約 (Regulations of the Buddhadharma Research Society). See, “Pulböp yön'guhoe kyuyak,” in *Wönbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol. 4 (Iri: Wönbulgyo Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 11-33.

¹⁴ *Suyang yön'gu yoron* 修養研究要論 (Essentials of cultivation and inquiry). See, “Suyang yön'gu yoron,” in *Wönbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol. 4 (Iri: Wönbulgyo Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 34-49.

universal principles (*sari yŏn'gu* 事理研究), i.e. training in wisdom (Sk. *prajñā*);¹⁵ and choice in action (*chagŏp ch'wisa* 作業取捨), i.e. training in morality (Sk. *śīla*) through control of body and speech as laid out in the precepts.¹⁶ Even though much of this important text was incorporated into *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, its Buddhist flavor was modified in the 1962 redaction. The importance of this text cannot be overstated, and I encourage the Wŏn Buddhist order to officially translate and publish this short text so that English-speaking members can see some of the doctrine and regulations in their earliest form.

Pulbŏp yŏn'guhoe t'ongch'i chodan kyuyak (佛法研究會統治團規約) [Regulations for governing the *tan* in Buddhadharma Research Society] was published in July of 1931 and laid the foundation for how the order would structure its training units for edification.¹⁷ Starting with Pak at the top, members were organized into ten-member groups (*tan* 團), with one person as the head of the group and one as a leader or second in charge. Each member under the lead would then be a head for another group.

¹⁵ For *sari yŏn'gu*, see footnotes 87 and 149.

¹⁶ I list them in the order as they appear in the Wŏn Buddhist texts, as opposed to a standard ordering of morality, mind, and then wisdom. This order reflects Pak's alignment with a sudden-gradual framework, where awakening to the nature of suffering and to reality as it is should precede a gradual practice that eventually circles back to a higher level of awareness. Although I would reverse the order of the second and third and have the *sari yŏn'gu* last, since observance of the precepts is fundamental to the cultivation wisdom. Pak emphasized the simultaneous cultivation of all three, so the order is often not emphasized.

¹⁷ *Pulbŏp yŏn'guhoe t'ongch'i chodan kyuyak* 佛法研究會統治團規約 (Regulation for governing the *tan* in Buddhadharma Research Society). See, "Pulbŏp yŏn'guhoe t'ongch'i chodan kyuyak," in *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol. 4 (Iri: Wŏnbulgyo Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 50-67.

Members were encouraged to bring nine new members into the order, building and leading their own group of ten members. This was an efficient organizational structure that allowed the quick dissemination of information, effective religious edification, oversight, and a tight group dynamic.¹⁸ This text also provided the first iteration of self-evaluation checklists that helped track and appraise personal discipline and cultivation in the threefold trainings. Versions of these checklists are still in use today, as are various electronic devices and apps to quickly record both transgression and obedience to the doctrine.

Published in 1932, *Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng* (寶經六大要領) [Six essential principles of the treasured scripture], or simply *Yuktae yoryŏng*, is the first systematic presentation of Pak's doctrine.¹⁹ Similar to its predecessors, it was published in mixed Korean Han'gŭl and Chinese characters, which was challenging for members. Recognizing that mixed script was still too difficult for most members, a Korean Han'gŭl version was quickly issued that contained only some headings in Chinese characters, making the text more widely accessible. *Yuktae yoryŏng* introduces several fundamental teachings that shaped all later texts, such as Pak's teaching on the fourfold beneficence (*saŭn* 四恩)

¹⁸ The use of this system deteriorated with the incredibly fast growth of the order in the post-liberation and post-war periods. Members are not assigned to a *tan* as novices, and the formal education system for *kyomu* now rests in the three Wŏn Buddhist departments within their schools. Edification mostly happens at Sunday Dharma meetings. Many in the community have called for the revitalization of the *tan* system for edification and training.

¹⁹ *Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng* 寶經六大要領 (Six essential principles of the treasured scripture). See, "Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng," in *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol. 4 (Iri: Wŏnbulgyo Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 68-92.

and integral oneness (*irwŏn* 一圓). Prior to this publication, Pak's teachings are scattered among shorter texts and newsletters, not as systematic in presentation, and usually included with the general regulations of the order. With *Yuktae yoryŏng*, a clearly religious text developed that focused on doctrine and practice. The form of his final text, *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, visibly emerges in *Yuktae yoryŏng*. This was followed up in 1934 by the similar *Pogyŏng samdae yoryŏng* (寶經三大要領) [Three essential principles of the treasured scripture], which expanded on *Yuktae yoryŏng* and provided a clearer framework for the creation of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*.²⁰

In April of 1935, the Buddhadharma Research Society published Pak's *Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏksin-non* (朝鮮佛教革新論) [Treatise on the reformation of Chosŏn Buddhism], a short monograph dictated in 1920 that appears piecemeal throughout various texts and newsletters.²¹ This monograph outlines Pak's understanding of Chosŏn Buddhist history and of contemporary reform discourse. Portions of this monograph were adapted as the introduction to the *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* and incorporated into the official statement on the motive and purpose for forming the order. The fact that Pak composed this text in 1920, only four years after his awakening experience and during the busiest

²⁰ *Pogyŏng samdae yoryŏng* 寶經三大要領 (Three essential principles of the treasured scripture). See, "Pogyŏng samdae yoryŏng," in *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol. 4 (Iri: Wŏnbulgyo Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 92-96.

²¹ *Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏksin-non* 朝鮮佛教革新論 (Treatise on the reformation of Chŏson Buddhism). See, "Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏksin-non," in *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol. 4 (Iri: Wŏnbulgyo Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 96-104.

time of his career, suggests that, as previously argued, Pak likely had some knowledge of Buddhist history and teachings, contrary to what is depicted in *History*. As a latecomer to Buddhist reform efforts, we must assume some awareness of contemporary Buddhist reform discourse, since other famous Chosŏn Buddhist reformers, such as Manhae Han Yongun (1879-1944), had already published similarly-titled proposals.²² A translation of this important monograph is absolutely needed for English-speaking members to fully understand Pak's motives in founding a new Buddhist order.

The last important early text produced prior to the editing and creation of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* is *Pulbŏp Yŏn'guhoe kŭnhaengbŏp* (佛法研究會勤行法) [Buddhadharma Research Society method of diligent practice], or *Kŭnhaengbŏp* for short.²³ Published in 1939, it provides a general overview of Buddhist teachings, includes a selection of fundamental Buddhist texts, outlines the method of daily practice, and adds on a few important teachings to the previous texts. Parts of *Kŭnhaengbŏp* are incorporated into *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* and some parts become *Tokkyŏngchip* (讀經集), a small booklet of Wŏn Buddhist and Buddhist texts and prayers for chanting.

²² Adams compares Pak's text with those of two other contemporary Buddhist reformers, Manhae and Yi Yŏngjae (1900-1927). See, Eamon F. Adams, "Toward the Reform of Korean Buddhism: Buddhism during the Japanese Colonial Period, 1910-1935" (Dissertation, University of London, 2010).

²³ *Pulbŏp Yŏn'guhoe kŭnhaengbŏp* 佛法研究會勤行法 (Buddhadharma Research Society method of diligent practice). See, "Pulbŏp Yŏn'guhoe kŭnhaengbŏp," in *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol. 4 (Iri: Wŏnbulgyo Ch'ulp'ansa, 1994), 135-139

These early texts are the main body of official publications. Much of the content of these small texts appears within the monthly newsletters produced by the Buddhadharma Research Society, but these monographs formally systematize and officially present the teachings. A few other monographs were produced in between, but those focus on etiquette, regulations, and other miscellany not included in the *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*.²⁴ In September of 1940, three years before his death, Pak instructs several of his more capable and literate members to compile the doctrine and edit it into one volume. Under Pak's close guidance, they finish within a few years and published it on March 20, 1943, a few months before Pak's death. Unfortunately, Pak dies before seeing the final product in print.

Pak's Authorized Text

Pulgyo chŏngjŏn became the primary text used by the community until its 1962 redaction and reorganization. *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* represents the culmination and systematic organization of Pak's teachings – as approved by Pak. It fell out of use after the redaction, expansion, and further compilation of the principal texts into the much larger canonical work *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, the main book utilized by members and temples today. With its mixed-script and copious use of Chinese characters, *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* is more challenging to read than current redactions, especially for younger generations who are less familiar with Chinese characters. Senior members are quite

²⁴ The few others are listed in the Bibliography under "Primary Canonical Sources."

familiar with *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, and many grew up only knowing it. For those under fifty years of age, I find only the nerdiest members and academics have read it; and as previously noted, they often believe it is the same as the current redaction or do not recognize the significance of the edits. I still hear members claim that it is the same as the current text, which simply is not correct.

Just after Pak finishes compiling *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* with his followers and sends it for printing, they recall him saying:

Since time is short, the book may not be perfect at this point, but the broad essentials of my whole life's aspiration and vision are for the most part expressed in this one volume. Hence, please receive and keep this book so that you may learn through its words, practice with your body, and realize with your mind. Let this dharma be transmitted forever throughout tens of thousands of later generations. In the future, people in the world will recognize this dharma and be greatly impressed, so that there will be countless numbers of people who will respect and revere it.²⁵

Due to failing health, Pak knew his death was imminent. He felt a pressing need to finish this text and leave a definitive version of his doctrine organized into one volume.

His followers recall Pak instructing them to keep the primary teachings and practices intact, while allowing them to change minor points to fit the era or country.²⁶

Fortunately, we know exactly what Pak considered the primary parts of his teaching,

²⁵ *Doctrinal Books*, 477; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 400.

²⁶ *Doctrinal Books*, 16; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 407.

because he released the final version of his doctrinal chart in January of the same year, outlining the essential aspects.

Pulgyo chŏngjŏn was published as a two-volume set. The first volume contained Pak's doctrinal chart and his teaching in three parts:

Part One: *Kaesŏn-non* (改善論 treatise on reformation)

Part Two: *Kyoŭi* (教義 doctrine)

Part Three: *Suhaeng* (修行 practice)

This small volume delivers the whole of Pak's dispensation, and even in its redacted form, it remains the main book of study and the go-to text when final authority is sought on any matter. Originally published in mixed Han'gŭl script and Chinese characters, it is currently published in Han'gŭl with only a few critical terms listed with their corresponding Chinese characters in parenthesis.

The second volume was divided into two parts and contained Buddhist teachings that Pak deemed essential for study:

1. Part One

a. *Kŭmgang kyŏng* (金剛經 *Diamond Sūtra*)²⁷

b. *Panya paramilta sim kyŏng* (般若波羅蜜多心經 *Heart Sūtra*)²⁸

²⁷ *Vajraccedikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra* (Diamond-cutter perfection of wisdom sutra). In *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, this important and well-known Mahāyāna sutra is reference by its abbreviated name, which is common in East Asia. In English, it is known as simply the "Diamond Sūtra." In the redacted and expanded *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, the editors decided to list it by its full name, *Kŭmgang panyaparamil kyŏng* (金剛般若波羅蜜). See *Doctrinal Books*, 885-911; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 413-445; *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 155-157.

- c. *Sasibi chang kyöng* (四十二章經 *Scripture In Forty-Two Sections*)²⁹
- d. *Pulsöl choebok po'ūng kyöng* (佛說罪福報應經 *Sūtra in which Buddha Explains the Requit of Transgression and Fortune*)³⁰
- e. *Pulsöl hyönja obokdök kyöng* (佛說賢者五福德經 *Sūtra in which Buddha Explains the Five Types of Merit Enjoyed by the Sage*)³¹
- f. *Pulsöl öppo ch'abyöl kyöng* (佛說業報差別經 *Sūtra in which Buddha Explains the Differences in the Karmic Recompenses of Action*)³²

2. Part Two

- a. *Susim kyöl* (修心訣 *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*)³³

²⁸ *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra* (Heart of the perfection of wisdom sutra), known in English as the “Heart Sutra.” See, *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 336-339.

²⁹ A popular collection of short moralizing Buddhist stories, like the *Dhammapada*, pulled from various canonical sources and most likely compiled in China. See, Robert H. Sharf, “The Scripture in Forty-two Sections,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 360-364; and *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 470.

³⁰ This short scripture was removed in the 1962 redaction due to its similarity in content with another scripture, *Pulsöl öppo ch'abyöl kyöng*. See, *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 1075.

³¹ In the official Wōn Buddhist translation of this text, a note is added that the Wōn Buddhist version is slightly inconsistent with the Buddhist canonical sources. See, *Doctrinal Books*, 931 fn 6.; and *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 1225-1226.

³² A short version of the “Sūtra in which the Buddha Explains the Difference in the Karmic Recompenses of Action to the Lay Patron Śuka” (佛爲首迦長者說業報差別經). See, *Doctrinal Books*, 934-959; and *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 708.

³³ A popular text by the famed Koryō monk Pojo Chinul (普照知訥, 1158-1210), one of the most influential monks in the Korean Sōn (Zen) tradition. See, Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 140-159; and *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 620.

- b. *Moku sipto song* (牧牛十圖頌 Verses to the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures)³⁴
- c. *Huhyuam chwasŏn mun* (休休庵坐禪文 Text on Seated Meditation by the Master of Rest and Repose Hermitage)³⁵
- d. *Ŭidu yomok* (疑頭要目 Compendium of Topics of Inquiry)³⁶

Published with the Classical Chinese versions and vernacular Han'gŭl translations, the order shortened this second volume of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* from ten to eight Buddhist texts and renamed it *Pulcho yogyŏng* (佛祖要經 Essential scriptures of the Buddha and patriarchs) in 1965. I will not explore here this second volume, the individual Buddhist texts, or the vernacular translations; however, a thorough assessment of their redaction and vernacular translation is needed.

In 1953, ten years after the death of Pak, members of the Supreme Council (*Suwidan* 首位團) decided that *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* needed further editing and that Pak's teachings needed further compilation. After some delay, efforts began in 1955 on compiling the oral teachings and deeds of Pak and on edits of the *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, all

³⁴ A series of short poems that accompany ten drawings used by various Chan, Sŏn, and Zen traditions to illustrate the stages of gradual progress toward awakening. There are many variations, and Wŏn Buddhism utilizes the verses by Song Dynasty Chan monk Pu-ming (d.u.). See, *Doctrinal Books*, 997; and *Wŏnbulgyo taesajon*, 288-289.

³⁵ Attributed to the Chinese monk Mengshan Deyi (c. 1232-1308), this short passage is chanted daily by Wŏn Buddhists. See, *Doctrinal Books*, 1001; and *Wŏnbulgyo taesajon*, 1250-1251.

³⁶ A selection of forty-seven standard *ŭidu* (疑頭), a Wŏn Buddhist term referencing the mainstream Zen tradition's terms *kongan* (公案, C. gong'an, J. kōan) or *hwadu* (話頭, C. huatou, J. watō). In the redaction, this list was removed from Part Two, reduced in number to twenty, and inserted into the practice section of the first volume. See, *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 867-869.

under the guidance of the Supreme Council and Song. Song dies in January of 1962 at the age of sixty-three, only a few month before publishing the final redacted version of the scripture.³⁷ Song worked closely with the edits of the scriptures and advised the Supreme Council to preserve the original *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn* for further study.³⁸ Once the edits of the first volume of *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn* were finished, and the compilation of Pak's oral instructions and deeds organized and completed, they were published together in September of 1962 as two books in one volume under the new name *Wǒnbulgyo kyojǒn* (圓佛教教典 Scriptures of Wǒnbulgyo), still used today, with the Buddhist scriptures published separately as *Pulcho yogyǒng*.

Book one of *Wǒnbulgyo kyojǒn* contains the redacted version of the first volume of *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn*, which was renamed simply *Chǒngjǒn* (正典 Principal Book), removing the reference to Buddhism (*Pulgyo*). *Chǒngjǒn* contains the same three parts as the first volume of *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn*: a general introduction, the doctrine, and the practice. The newly compiled *Taejonggyǒng* (Scripture of the great founder), the compilation of Pak's oral instructions and deeds, is added as book two of *Wǒnbulgyo kyojǒn*. With the *Chǒngjǒn* and the *Taejonggyǒng* published in a single volume as the *Wǒnbulgyo kyojǒn*, the Buddhist scriptures originally published with Pak' doctrine become a separate text: his followers' *Taejonggyong* takes the place of the Buddhist scriptures, and stories about

³⁷ Strangely coincidental to Pak dying shortly before the publishing of *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn*.

³⁸ *Wǒnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol 6, 288, cited in Chung, *Scriptures*, 356.

the new Buddha supplant the now outdated teachings of the ‘traditional’ Buddha and patriarchs. In 1977, the *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn* and the *Pulcho yogyŏng* are published together in the now-standard and much larger black bible-like *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* (collected works of Wŏn Buddhism), which also contains Song’s discourses, the official history, ritual proprieties, etiquettes, and hymns. The *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn* (without the Buddhist texts), is considered a cohesive, stand-alone text, often published and translated on its own.

In the redaction of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, I consider four changes to be of paramount importance: the removal of *Kaesŏn-non* (改善論 treatise on reformation); the editing of the doctrinal chart; the relocation of *Sadae kangnyŏng* (四大綱領 four great platforms); and the insertion of *Taejonggyŏng*. Three of these and two others are noted and briefly treated by Chung in an appendix to his translation of Wŏn Buddhist scriptures, but for him, the trouble with the redactions are purely doctrinal.³⁹ I am in complete agreement with Chung’s analysis that the redactions hobble Pak’s dispensation and that order should restore the original content. Beyond the doctrinal issues, the redaction reveals institutional concerns with identity, downplays Pak’s strong emphasis on the study of Buddhadharma, elevates the status of the ordained members, and overall alters the flavor of Pak’s teaching.

³⁹ Chung, *Scriptures*, 353-358. I do not want this to become a discussion on doctrine, so I will not go into the doctrinal aspect of his critique.

Chung reveals his frustration with the current order in his preface and appendix. Although his analysis and critique are lucid and doctrinally well-supported, the order rejected his proposal for restoration of the text. I do not foresee the current leadership of the order restoring the original text, either. The order reverted to intensely conservative Confucian leanings since the days of Pak and Song, and I cannot imagine the order publicly admitting that early founding members could have made mistakes. Suggesting such changes would be disrespectful. As previously stated, I have experienced resistance and rebuke in bringing up the topic with many Wŏn Buddhists, and I have heard Chung derided as having a personal agenda in making his suggestion public. Interestingly, followers memorialized Pak expressing concern over their inability to understand his teaching. A few months before his death in 1943, Pak reveals the definitive version of his doctrinal chart, a shorthand guide to the essential parts of his teaching; and, after several decades of teaching and observing his followers, he is remembered stating:

The quintessence of my teachings and dharma lies herein: but how many of you can understand my true intention? It seems that only a few of you in this congregation today can receive it fully. This is due to your lack of one-minded concentration because, first, your spirits tend toward wealth and sex and secondly, you are inclined toward reputation and vanity.⁴⁰

Troubled by how few understand his teaching and intentions, he continues:

I have been teaching you for a long time, but there are three things I regret. First, many of you talk about the arcane, sublime truth with your mouths, but rare are

⁴⁰ *Doctrinal Books*, 480; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 402

those whose conduct and realization have reached an authentic state. Second, although you see with your physical eyes, rare are those who perceive with their mind's eye. Third, many of you have seen the transformation body of the Buddha (*Nirmānakāya*), but rare are those who have clearly seen the Dharmakāya Buddha.⁴¹

Pak criticizes his community for talking the talk but failing to walk the walk. Other passages also reveal doubt about the abilities of his disciples to understand and transmit his teaching. With such passages memorialized in scriptures, the fact that the order readily redacted his teaching is notable.

The first important redaction of volume one of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* is the complete removal of *Kaesŏn-non*, a ten-page introductory treatise of ten short chapters that provides a brief overview of key concepts, lays out the relationship between Pak's teaching and Buddhism, and provides a glimpse of Pak's modernist reforms.⁴² In its place, the paragraph-length "Founding Motive" and "Preface," which both appeared as front matter in the *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, have been inserted with some revision as a general introduction.⁴³ Drawing on material from Pak's *Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏksin-non* (Treatise on the reformation of Chosŏn Buddhism), the removal of *Kaesŏn-non* alters the flavor of the doctrine and severs continuity with historical context and Buddhist teachings.

⁴¹ *Doctrinal Books*, 482-483; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 404.

⁴² *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol 4, 146-151.

⁴³ *Doctrinal Books*, 17-19; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 21-22.

Five chapters of *Kaesŏn-non* deal directly with Buddhism. Chapter One is a two-page abridged version of *Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏksin-non*, providing the historical context and motivation for Pak aligning himself with Buddhist teachings.⁴⁴ In Chapter Four, Pak makes a nationalist plea to transform Buddhism from a religion dominated by foreign influences (Indian and Chinese) and by difficult texts into a Buddhism of the common people with text written in accessible vernacular.⁴⁵ Chapter Five calls for deemphasizing monastics and ordained lineages and for reforming Chosŏn Buddhism into a lay-centered system for the masses.⁴⁶ Other chapters petition for changes to worship, prayer, and rituals. By starting off his text with *Kaesŏn-non*, before any discussion of doctrine or practice, Pak unequivocally connects his order to the Buddha and Buddhist teachings, and outlines that his reforms are a reformation of the community rather than of the teachings. *Kaesŏn-non* provides a frame of reference for the doctrine. Although Pak incorporates a few Confucian and Daoist elements into his teaching, *Kaesŏn-non* points to a background understanding and cosmic worldview that aligns with Buddhist epistemology, ontology, and soteriology.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol 4, 146.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

⁴⁷ Liam Kelley notes that, despite the unification of these three teaching being a common feature of many new religious movements, one teaching was usually privileged over the others. Wŏn Buddhists like to claim a synthesis of the three teaching to distinguish themselves from 'traditional' Buddhism, but in reality, Pak's teaching is typical East Asian Buddhism with a sprinkling of popular Confucian and Daoist

Contemporary Wŏn Buddhists continue to wrestle with identity. Are they Buddhists, Confucians, or Daoists? A new folksy mix of the three? Are we modernist or traditionalist? Are we the center of a new world order that will deliver all humans to paradise, or just another new religious movement among thousands of others? These topics of discussion persist, and my personal experience is that Korean Wŏn Buddhists, despite Pak's unequivocal alignment with and promotion of Buddhism, tend to adopt an exceptionalism position: Pak is *the* new Buddha, Wŏn Buddhism is *the* new Buddhist order for a new age, and Pak's teaching is *the* teaching to lead the world to paradise and salvation. With this comes a tendency to downplay and criticize a now outdated 'traditional' Buddhism. When the current order formed a new commission for the translation of the scriptures, they desired to produce translations "with no 'smell' or 'color' of Buddhism."⁴⁸ The complete removal of Pak's introductory *Kaesŏn-non* reveals this wrestling with the construction of new institutional identity. Without historical or Buddhist contextualization, the redacted text opens immediately with teachings on integral oneness (*irwŏn* 一圓), Pak's core insight and now a strong part of Wŏn Buddhist identity.

Kaesŏn-non did not disappear completely. It was redacted and moved into the

elements. See Liam C. Kelley, "'Confucianisms' in Vietnam: A State of the Field Essay," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (February/August 2006): 336.

⁴⁸ Chung, *Scriptures*, 356.

middle of the introductory chapter of *Taejonggyōng*.⁴⁹ One might argue that *Kaesŏn-non* still delivers its message since the content remains in the redaction. I see several problems with this position. In the *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, *Kaesŏn-non* appears as an official statement introducing the doctrine and abridges Pak's *Treatise on the Reformation of Chosŏn Buddhism*, his first formal written composition and declaration of intention. When editors moved *Kaesŏn-non* into *Taejonggyōng*, they edited it into a conversational discourse format, which removes its formal gravitas as an official written proclamation: it becomes a spoken discourse of Pak, among hundreds, that the order chose to present in *Taejonggyōng*. Since it now appears a hundred pages after the beginning of the doctrine, it loses its framing effectiveness. Had the order chose to include Pak's short *Treatise on the Reformation of Chosŏn Buddhism* in the collected canonical works of *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, the import of this redaction would be lessened; but, they did not. By editing and relocating *Kaesŏn-non* further back into the text, the order effectively removes Pak's Buddhist framework, downplays Pak's alignment with the Buddha, elevates Pak's status as *the* new Buddha, and promotes an identity independent of 'traditional' Buddhism.

⁴⁹ *Doctrinal Books*, 114-124; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 102-110.

The editing of the doctrinal chart is also a significant aspect of the redaction of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*. An early version of the doctrinal chart appears in the 1932 publication

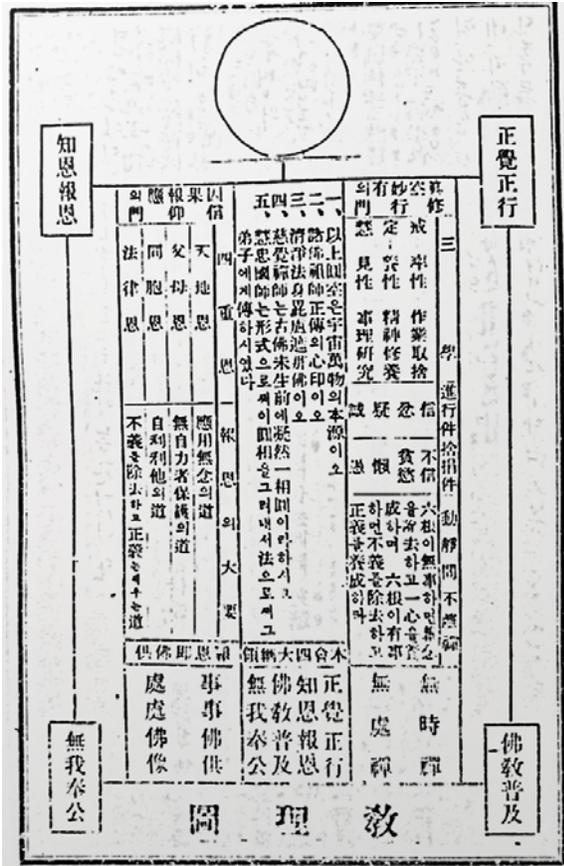


Figure 1 1943 Doctrinal Chart

of *Pogyŏng yuktae yoryŏng*, but after further development and refining, Pak redesigned it for the definitive version of his doctrine.⁵⁰ Pak issued the new chart a few months before his death and just before the completion of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*. It outlines the doctrinal basics and functions as a road map to his practice (Figure 1).⁵¹

Without going deeply into Pak's teaching, which others do quite well, Pak's doctrine has two main tracks of self-

cultivation: a firm trusting confidence in the cause-effect response of the universe;⁵² and

⁵⁰ *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol 4, 69. This version is ineffective in fully mapping Pak's teaching. Comparing this version with the definitive version may help illustrate the evolution of Pak's doctrine, but that is beyond this study.

⁵¹ *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, 9.

⁵² *Ingwa poŭng-ŭi sinang* 因果報應-信仰. See, *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 909-911. *Sinang* (信仰) is translated in the charts and English translations as "faith," however I strongly disagree, as do many others, with that loaded translation and all the baggage that comes with the English word "faith." I translate *sinang* as "trusting confidence."

a practice based on a correct awakening to the truly empty yet fully complete reality of existence.⁵³ These two tracks are charted in the vertical columns on the right and left of the center, respectively. They provide a personal and social positioning for the

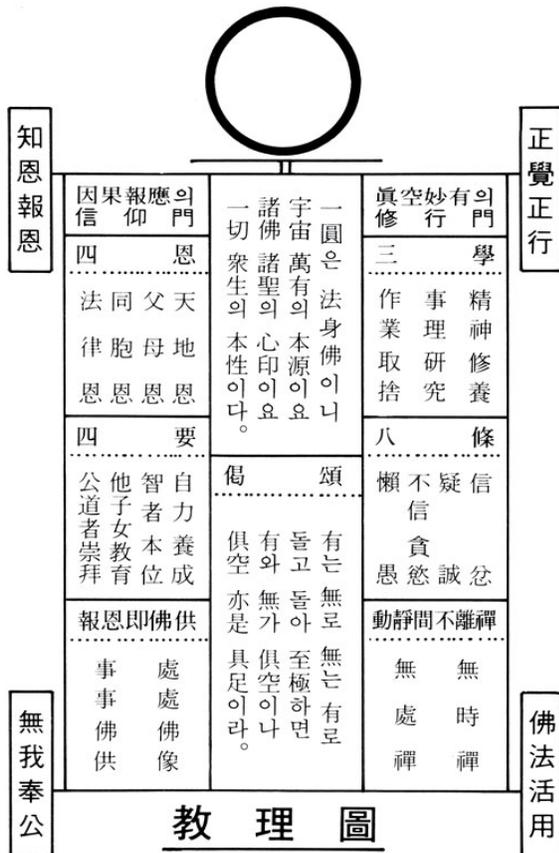


Figure 2 1962 Doctrinal Chart

practitioner: personally, one should focus on cultivating correct awareness and diligently apply oneself to the threefold study; when facing and dealing with the world, one should maintain a solid trusting confidence that the principle of cause-effect is always at play, and remember that one is indebted to the world in many ways. These two mindsets are rooted in an awe for and awareness of the ineffable integral oneness of existence (*irwŏn*), represented in the center column on

the chart and by the symbol of the circle.

This framework remains from the 1943 doctrinal chart; however, important parts were redacted in 1962 (Figure 2). Some changes were helpful. For instance, the meaning of *irwŏn* outlined in the middle column immediately below the circle was shortened.

⁵³ *Chin'gong myoyu-ŭi suhaeng* 真空妙有-修行. See, *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 1110-1111. This has been rendered in the charts and English translations as “practice based on true voidness and marvelous existence,” one of the characterizations Pak utilized to explain correct awakening.

The main points remain, and the edited version fits better into the chart. Directly under the meaning of *irwŏn* in the 1943 chart was *sadae kangnyŏng* (四大綱領 four great

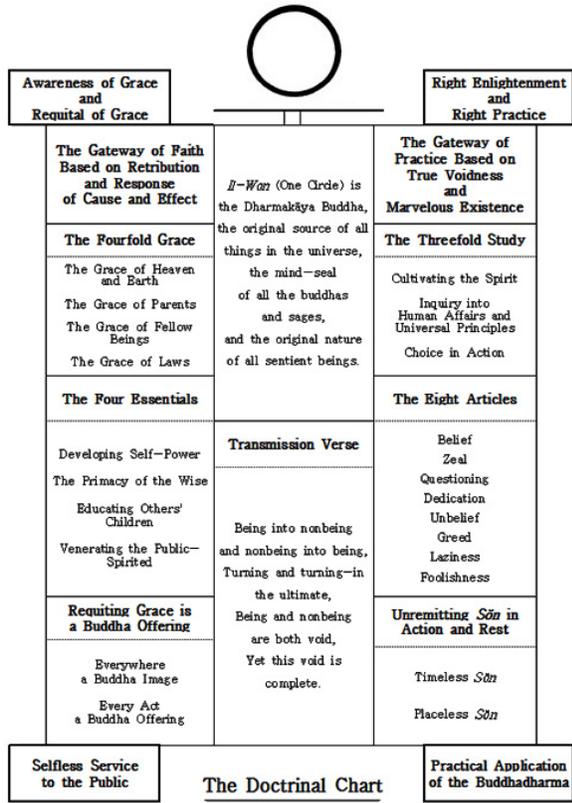


Figure 3 Official English Translation

platforms), but this repeats each of the platforms that already frame the entire chart in the corner boxes. Instead of repeating these four platforms, the editors inserted Pak’s transmission verse (*kesong* 偈頌) that he publicly transmitted before his death. This is completely appropriate, expands on the meaning of *irwŏn*, and provides Pak’s ultimate vision for his teaching of *irwŏn*.

Since transmission verses were traditionally secretly passed from master to dharma heir,

having it appear in the doctrinal chart emphasizes that Pak transmitted his whole teaching equally to everyone – there is no special ingredient or secret sauce to the recipe. While these changes were helpful and appropriate, several others are problematic.

In line with efforts to downplay the Buddhist flavor of the doctrine and emphasize a Wŏn Buddhist identity, the editors removed three key expressions in the threefold study (*samhak* 三學): *śīla* – follow [Buddha] nature (*kye* – *solsŏng* 戒-率性);

samādhi – foster [Buddha] nature (*chōng – yangsōng* 定-養性); and *prajñā* – see [Buddha] nature (*hye – kyōnsōng* 慧-見性).⁵⁴ Chung notes that this edit removes the connection between the practice of the threefold study and the fundamental awareness of *irwōn*, “severing the artery of practice.”⁵⁵ Although the edit could have that effect (I am not convinced it does), these three phrases are more important in revealing a clear connection between Pak’s practice and specific Buddhist practices.

Without these three Buddhist terms, the editors present Pak’s threefold study in intellectual isolation, as if his own invention. Pak’s threefold study simplifies the classic Buddhist threefold study to make it accessible to a broader audience – it is not new. One could argue that the reference to the threefold study is enough to connect it to Buddhism, but that only applies if a reader is already familiar with the practices of Buddhism. Since Pak encouraged his followers to study the teachings of Buddhism, these terms are essential for framing Pak’s teaching and directing the practitioner to further study of related Buddhist teachings. By removing three of the most important terms in Buddhism – *śīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *prajñā* (‘wisdom’ or correct understanding) – Pak’s own method of cultivating the threefold study is emphasized: the Buddhist goals for cultivating the threefold study are purged.

⁵⁴ Although *solsōng* and *yangsōng* are both key concepts in Neo-Confucianism, Wōn Buddhism uses them in the sense of buddha-nature (*pulsōng* 佛性). See *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 598, 702.

⁵⁵ Chung, *Scriptures*, 354.

Continuing down the right column (left in the English version), the editors removed a short explanatory passage on the teaching of unremitting meditation in action and rest (*tongjön'gan pulli sŏn* 動靜間不離禪). While I agree with Chung that this short explanatory passage is important, I do not find its removal doctrinally problematic.⁵⁶ The method of timeless meditation (*musi sŏn pŏp* 無時禪法) preserves the information, and removal of the explanation emphasizes the connection on the chart between unremitting meditation and the practice of timeless and placeless meditation.⁵⁷ Still, removing it does not clarify the chart and including the explanatory passage reveals how one accomplishes timeless and placeless meditation. Restoration of the method would be helpful.

Moving to the other side of the doctrinal chart containing the track of trusting confidence in the cause-effect response of the universe, the editors significantly altered the teaching by removing the outline of requiting beneficence (*poŭn taeyo* 報恩大要) and inserting four essentials of social reform (*sayo* 四要). Next to his mystical awakening to the ineffable integral oneness of existence, the fourfold beneficences (*saŭn* 四恩) represents the foundation of Pak's ethics and the chief salient characteristics of his dispensation.⁵⁸ Chung argues that this edit pointedly alters the ethical system and

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Doctrinal Books*, 77-81; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 72-75.

⁵⁸ *Saŭn* is often translated as "four graces," but this translation is egregiously problematic and wrapped in Christian ideas of God's grace and benevolence. Chung correctly does not translate it as "grace" and

makes it difficult to practice.⁵⁹ A well-argued point, Wŏn Buddhist leadership would be wise to consider Chung's advice for restoration. In addition to stultifying the ethical system, this edit reveals an important shift after Pak's death – a move toward emphasizing the primacy of ordained members.

The main philosophical insight of the Buddha is *pratītyasamutpāda* (K. *yŏn'gi* 緣起), often translated as “dependent origination,” which states that all of existence comes into being through a chain of causality. Since all of existence arises through a chain of causality, all of existence originates through dependence on prior causes, thus all of existence arises through dependent origination.⁶⁰ Since all things dependently originate, they have no permanent, unchanging essence or self (*anātman*, K. *mua* 無我). In Mahāyāna Buddhism, this lack of self or non-self of all of existence is characterized as emptiness (*śūnyatā*, K. *kong* 空). This ultimate emptiness of existence is masked by our relative sensory experience: body and mind keep us occupied and unaware of the reality of emptiness. Emptiness is not a denial of existence nor a nihilist existentialism, but simply an observation of existence as it is. Through the threefold study, the

neither will I. Even though “fourfold beneficence” is also a bit problematic, I will utilize it for consistency with Chung, and many Wŏn Buddhists are familiar with that translation. Pak's idea of beneficence is based on an impersonal cause-effect relationship with the world, not on a benevolent granting or bestowing of blessings. “Grace” is a deeply problematic translation, and it is unfortunate that, even though many learned Wŏn Buddhists know this, they refuse to give up the term because it is catchy, pithy, and now a habit. A thorough critical evaluation of this translation problem is needed.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 353-354.

⁶⁰ See Buswell and Lopez, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 669-670.

practitioner cultivates an awareness of dependent origination and emptiness, which results in freedom from suffering – the primary focus of all Buddhist doctrinal systems, ontology, epistemology, and soteriology. This grossly oversimplifies these complex core teachings, which even after twenty-five years of study, I still find terribly difficult to summarize.

The doctrinal chart reflects this general outline. Integral oneness, marked by the symbol of a single circle, represents that ineffable emptiness that pervades all of existence. An awareness of integral oneness grounds the practice and is represented in the central column of the doctrinal chart. The practitioner faces the ultimate with an awareness of the integral oneness of all existence: integral oneness is the axis mundi of a cosmic perspective and the elementary understanding of doctrine and practice. The two external columns reveal how to deal with the relative existence of self and world; and the left column (right on the English translation) provides a path to dealing with the world, i.e. Pak's ethical system of a fourfold beneficence (*sañn*).

The fourfold beneficence is a simplification of dependent origination. Since all of existence dependently arises, all of existence is interdependently connected through a multivalent web of causal relationships. If one steps back from the minutia of individual causal relationships to look at the big picture, our human existence is dependent on four chief causal relationships: heaven and earth (*chǒnji* 天地), our parents (*pumo* 父母), our fellow beings (*tongp'o* 同胞), and the various moral and legal laws that govern our lives

(*pŏmnyul* 法律). From these four relationships, an unimaginable and endlessly interconnected plethora of cause-effect responses shape our life. Depending on a practitioner's level of awareness of indebtedness to these relationships, they react in particularly ways to the circumstance of their lives. Based on that reaction, the impersonal universal process of karma responds. With a trusting confidence (faith) in this karmic response and by cultivating awareness of a dependence on this fourfold beneficence, practitioners can act ethically, re-shape their existence, and deliver themselves and others from suffering. The fourfold beneficence is Pak's ethical prescription for a practitioner's relationship with the world.

In the 1943 doctrinal chart (Figure 1), each beneficence is listed in its own column, and directly below in the same columns are corresponding ways to respond to each beneficence. One must cultivate the corresponding essential attitude in order to requite the benefit received from each of the four beneficence. To repay the benefits from the Cosmos, which indiscriminately supplies us with all that is necessary to exist, a practitioner must cultivate an attitude of selfless giving.⁶¹ To requite the benefit of parents, who provide us our bodies and raise us from helpless babies, practitioners must cultivate an attitude of concern and protection for those who are unable to help themselves.⁶² To recompense the benefits we receive from our fellow beings (including

⁶¹ *Doctrinal Books*, 25-29; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 27-31.

⁶² *Doctrinal Books*, 31; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 32.

animals) living in this world, practitioners must cultivate a sense of mutual benefit in their livelihoods and dealings with other beings.⁶³ Finally, in order to repay the debt we have to the various equitable moral, social, and legal rules and laws that govern numerous facets of our lives, practitioners should know the various laws, act accordingly to maintain peace and order, and strive to promote justice and eradicate injustice.⁶⁴ These four attitudes are an essential component of Pak's practice of requiring the fourfold benefits.

By requiring the four chief benefits and disciplining oneself through the threefold practice of cultivating morality, concentration, and correct understanding, Pak presents a simplified version of the Buddhist eightfold path: right speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, concentration, view, and resolve. The summation of his practice is to see Buddha everywhere and perform all actions as an offering to Buddha (*ch'och'opulsang sasa pulgong* 處處佛像事事佛供), which appears at the bottom of the column. This track of the chart, which aligns the practitioner to a selfless relationship with the world, hinges on the four-point outline of attitudes toward the fourfold benefits. Editing this out eviscerates the crucial component of how to put a trust in the karmic response into practice.⁶⁵ This redaction obfuscates how the practitioner connects two

⁶³ *Doctrinal Books*, 34; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 34-35.

⁶⁴ *Doctrinal Books*, 36-38; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 36-39.

⁶⁵ Chung, *Scriptures*, 353-354.

fundamental cornerstones of Pak's doctrine, an awareness of the fourfold beneficence (represented at the top of the column) and a life of selfless public service (represented at the bottom of the column).

Pak stated that the doctrinal chart represents the fundamental and unchangeable parts of his teaching: other details of his doctrine can be adjusted to fit the time and place. The other edits made to the chart are minor. They simplify or summarize existing teachings that remain in the chart, or, in the case of adding the transmission verse, they replace a redundancy with something that relates to and enhances the teaching on integral oneness. This major edit to the doctrinal chart guts Pak's practice of trusting confidence and replaces it with Pak's vision of four essential social reformations (*sayo*) that are culturally dependent on time and place. These four essential social reforms are important, of course, but they are not essential to an awareness and requital of beneficence, to a trusting confidence in cause-effect response of the universe, to the cultivation of a life of selfless public service, or to the practice.

Everything on the 1943 doctrinal chart can be connected to Buddhist teachings, directly or indirectly, and those with knowledge of Confucianism will recognize its influence on the fourfold beneficence. Even with this Confucian element, the heart and focus of Pak's doctrine and practice are unequivocally Buddhist. His simplification of Buddhist doctrine and practice remain so familiar to East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, that when people ask me what is special or unique about Wŏn Buddhist teachings, I

have little to say. I usually respond that his religious doctrines are less important compared to his social agenda and reforms, and those are epitomized in the four essential social reformations (*sayo*).

In the *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* and all subsequent versions and compilations, Pak's four essential social reformations appear directly after his teaching on the fourfold beneficence, representing his social and religious reformations, respectively. The four essential social reformations contain a variety of social ills Pak witnessed and experienced in Chosŏn society and under Japanese colonization. To alleviate the suffering in his community resulting from these ills, he prescribed four reforms: fostering personal autonomy; the knowledgeable as the standard; the education of all children; and the veneration of public servants. A brief exploration of these four social reforms reveals why Pak did not place them on the doctrinal chart and why their inclusion in the redacted chart illustrates an increasing emphasis on the primacy of ordained members.

Pak prescribed the fostering of personal autonomy (*charyŏk yangsŏng* 自力養成 lit. foster or cultivate self-power, in other words personal autonomy) in order to alleviate two social ills of his time: excessive dependence on immediate family and extended relatives; and the dependence and subjugation of women due to social customs and general inequality.⁶⁶ This autonomy can be applied personally, institutionally,

⁶⁶ *Doctrinal Books*, 39-41; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 39-41; *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 958-960.

nationally, and culturally. For instance, practitioners should cultivate an autonomy from supplicating the Buddha, gods, or ancestors for blessings and instead actively do virtuous deeds, and ordained members should not be dependent on the order for income and be allowed to maintain a profession. Pak called for the education of both men and women, and their equality in the workplace. The theme of autonomy was popular with Chosŏn intellectuals at the time, as it was with many cultures experiencing colonialism, imperialism, and modernity; and Chosŏn women had already initiated their New Women's (*sinryoja* 新女子) movement, a trend throughout East Asia at the time.⁶⁷ Although Pak was a little late to the various struggles for independence, he acted quickly on his words.

Pak's empowerment of women within the highest ranks of his order by 1931 is a striking development within Korean history. Despite the New Women's movement and national promotion of education for women, Women at the time enjoyed limited institutional, governmental, and religious power; so, Pak seating women equally on the Supreme Council is no small deal. Receiving no attention in English language scholarship, American historians of Korea would do well to pay attention to this important development in the countryside of colonial Chosŏn Korea. Pak's promotion

⁶⁷ Kang Wi Jo provides a good discussion on the influence of independence and self-determination in Ch'ondogyo, a much more active religion at the time. See Kang Wi Jo, "Belief and Political Behavior in Ch'ondogyo," *Review of Religious Research* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1968): 38-43.

of women's independence and the independence of laity from a priestly class of ritual specialists was a primary draw for people, particularly women. A study on the first ten female disciples reveals their ardent desire for personal autonomy and freedom from the yokes of family, marriage, and social conventions.⁶⁸

Although obliquely related to the requital of the fourfold beneficence, fostering autonomy is not essential to any beneficence, but rather a positive byproduct of properly requiting beneficence. The requiting of beneficence makes this reformation possible. Similarly, we can imagine a circumstance where gender inequality is less of a social ill and maybe some other ill, such as an over-reliance on government support, is the ill of the time and place. Currently in South Korea, the education of women is not as problematic, and equality in many areas of employment and government is improving. Likewise, women are no longer attracted to the Wŏn Buddhist order as they were during Pak's generation, and their ordination numbers have dramatically decreased: for too many women, joining the order is no longer a liberating experience leading to independence but rather an enchainment to traditional patriarchal systems leading to dependence. Pak's teaching on fostering personal autonomy could be altered to fit other situations of dependence or completely removed – it is not an essential method to requite beneficence.

⁶⁸ Wŏnbulgyo Sasang Yŏn'guwŏn, *Kaebŏk-ŭi sidae-rŭl yŏn Wŏnbulgyo yŏsŏng 10dae cheja* (papers present at the 37th Wŏnbulgyo Sasang Yŏn'guwŏn Haksul Taehoe, Iksan, 2017).

The second of the four essentials inserted into the doctrinal chart contains Pak's observations on social inequalities of his time: discrimination between nobles and commoners, between legitimate and illegitimate children, between young and old, and between male and female. In order to avoid these unreasonable systems of discrimination plaguing their community, Pak suggests those with actual knowledge become the standard of measure (*chija ponwi* 智者本位): people should seek those with actual knowledge, understanding, and wisdom as teachers and advisors. Because someone is male is not enough to consider him knowledgeable or important. Just because I speak English does not make me an English teacher. Because someone is old does not mean they are knowledgeable or wise. For Pak, concrete knowledge and expertise should be the ruling guide for seeking advice, council, and learning.

The details of this teaching are situational, malleable, and not essential to the practice of requiting beneficence. Their conditions have already changed socially, and the order has already redacted them in the text. Korea no longer has nobles and commoners, but in Chosŏn Korea, those roles were fixed at birth. Pak was born a commoner. A more relevant discrimination of our time would be between rich and poor. Discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children had long been an issue in Chosŏn culture, since men could have multiple wives or marry again after the death of a wife, and children of secondary wives, concubines, or mistresses had no claim to inheritance or family property. Discrimination between legitimate children was

common, with all focus and wealth often directed toward the first-born son. This part of the teaching has little application today, and English members in the United States often wonder what this even means. Discrimination between young and old, and between male and female will be discussed further. These two forms of discrimination continue to haunt the Wŏn Buddhist order and are a continued source of controversy.

The 1962 redacted version of the text contains evidence that the four essentials inserted into the doctrinal chart are malleable and not essential to the practice. When Pak stated that his doctrinal essentials are contained in the chart, he meant it: there would be no reason to create a doctrinal chart using changeable secondary or situational teachings. In the redaction, the order added racial discrimination as a fifth social ill. An excellent addition for sure, but still situational to time and place.⁶⁹ This part of the four essentials that outlines various discriminations is not essential to the fourfold beneficence, to practicing requital, or to aligning oneself to the world in a karmic relationship. Rather, the practice of requital is a means to establish knowledgeable people as the standard and remove unfair discriminations. This situational teaching on reformation should not be included on the chart.

⁶⁹ Such additions to Pak's teaching should be clearly noted in the texts, but they are not. Pak never specifically promoted racial equality. In fact, some of Pak's teachings have a flavor of nationalist exceptionalism, which has grown much stronger in the order. In a post-Pak and post-war environment, racial equality became a popular theme with later heads of the order. In America, they have yet to fully materialize this vision, with most of the temples running separate American and Korean congregations and services, even though most Korean members speak English. Korean members have a firm hold on leadership roles in most temples and centers.

The insertion of the third of the four essential is more problematic, as Chung indicates.⁷⁰ Pak often mentions education as one of the key issues of his time. For five hundred years, education was for nobles and royals, and a rigorous national exam system for appointment to official posts locked out commoners. Himself an uneducated commoner, Pak considered equal access to education essential for social reform and promoted the equitable education of all children (*tajanyŏ kyoyuk* 他子女教育, lit. education of other's children).⁷¹ Pak is not alone on this point and hardly an innovator for the time. Chosŏn intellectuals recognized the need for mass education. Christian missionaries in East Asia had pushed educational reforms for over a hundred years and had been on the march in Chosŏn for over forty years. Although it never fully materialized in an equitable fashion and had nefarious ulterior motives, the Japanese colonial government and missionizing Buddhist organizations promoted education for the masses in their Empire. The Chinese also promoted public education and recognized the importance of educating women to transform Chinese families and culture. During Pak's time, his order focused on educating each other and helping the mostly illiterate members learn to read; and, in the post-war environment of rapid

⁷⁰ Chung, *Scriptures*, 353.

⁷¹ *Doctrinal Books*, 42-44; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 42-44; *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 1175-1176. The original phrase states, "education of others' children." The text mentions once about educating others' children as if they were our own, thus the expression "others' children," but this fine point gets lost in translation, and it is unnecessary to translate it as such. The main point is that all children have equal access to education, despite their economic or social background. Thus I translate it as "the education of all children."

growth, Wŏn Buddhism built primary schools, high schools, orphanages, and eventually a large university. Wŏn Buddhist members are now highly educated and enjoy a middle class, upper-middle class, and wealthy social status. The promotion of education has been central to this development.

The problem is not the promotion of education but rather the insertion of this into the doctrinal chart, as if a practice of requiting the fourfold beneficence pivots on the practitioner educating people. How could this be possible for most people? It would make a practice of requiting difficult except for ordained members who spend their life teaching Pak's doctrine. The passage explaining this specifically encourages religious orders, societies, and nations to recognize and honor those who educate children. So, only the ordained in the community will be honored? Maybe a few others that choose the teaching profession? Hardly the broad and consummate way Pak envisioned for his doctrinal chart, this redaction draws a sharp line between what ordained and lay members can do and elevates the primacy of ordained members. In addition, some societies have already established this state of equity (unfortunately not in America yet), rendering this entire section moot in those circumstance. Even though an important part of establishing one personal autonomy, I cannot imagine Pak offering education a cosmic significance and making this situational and specific social reform central to his doctrinal map. It appears as an ordained class' demand for power and prestige, which is more visible in the next of the four essentials.

The final of the four essentials inserted into the chart is the veneration of public servants (*kongdoja sungbae* 公道者崇拜).⁷² Here ‘public servant’ does not mean ‘civil servant’ and is not limited to government-funded workers. Public servants are any individuals that devote themselves to working for the public good: social workers, religious leaders, educators, civil servants, charity workers, soup kitchen volunteers, the staff in your local non-profit providing services for the homeless – anyone that performs selfless action for the betterment of society without concern for personal profit. Pak identifies a host of problems in Chosŏn society related to the promotion of public service, the providing of public services, and respect for those dedicated to the public’s welfare. His solution to solving this social ill and promoting participation in social welfare activities is for governments and religious orders to promote the veneration of public servants. If public service is honored and those participating in it supported in their old age, more people will come forward to perform public service.

Undeniably a positive behavior and position to promote, again, the problem is not with venerating public servants. Most societies could use more veneration for their public servants. The United States would benefit greatly by honoring and caring for those dedicated to public services, instead of honoring only those that donate large

⁷² *Doctrinal Books*, 44-46; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 44-46. *Doctrinal Books* translates this as “venerating the public-spirited,” but there is a fixed Korean expressions that better capture the meaning of “public-spirited” (*kongkongsim* 公共心). I find using the term “spirited” in this religious text problematic. In addition, the similar expression *kongdo saŏp* (公道事業) is translated as “public service,” so I prefer the translation of “public servant” for consistency.

sums of money or honoring only wealthy and famous politicians. Public-school teachers come to mind: we hardly respect, honor, and care for them. Society treats them like glorified babysitters for spoiled children, parents dismiss or criticize teachers when they point out behavioral issues in their children, they are severely underpaid, and governments grossly underfund public schools. Our society would benefit if we supported and honored those dedicated to the public welfare.

The problem with inserting this into the doctrinal chart is that it does not fundamentally relate to an individual's act of requiting beneficence. Situational and changeable, this social ill is restricted by time and place. For instance, democratic socialist nations have solved this problem and provide a supportive environment for their public servants. In some situations, we also support them here in the United States. I can envision a time and place where some other social ill renders this teaching moot. This is a secondary teaching that utilizes the outline of requiting beneficence that was originally on the chart, it is not central and vital to Pak's teaching on the awareness and requital of beneficence through a trusting confidence based on a cause-effect response. It is a result of such belief and actions. More so than the education of children, making this veneration central to Pak's system of trusting confidence greatly elevates the ordained members of the community. It makes honoring them central to practice, which I am convinced that Pak would argue against.

Not only is it dangerous in further elevating the ordained members, it could

contribute to inflated egos and an exaggerated sense of entitlement by those involved in public service, hindering them on an already difficult path of personal cultivation and self-effacement. I have been faced with this sense of entitlement on numerous occasions when discussing the contemporary issue of requiring uniforms for ordained members. Pak never required uniforms, and oral history states he was firmly against it. For a long time, only the ordained women were expected to wear a uniform, and to solve that discrimination, the order now encourages men to also wear a uniform. Numerous members are against the uniforms, and when I debate the requirement with *kyomu* who support it, the discussion inevitably revolves around them expecting deference and respect from the community. Several *kyomu* have directly challenged me by asking how people in society will know to honor and treat them with respect if they do not visibly look different, directly contradicting Pak's teaching on *selfless* public service.

These four essentials of social reform benefit and aid society in general. Pak's experience with Chosŏn culture and the harsh circumstances of Japanese colonization informed them all, and each one is intimately tied to culture, time, and place. Pak did not place these four essentials of social reformation on the chart for a reason – they are not integral to his roadmap of trusting confidence and practice. They are a temporal prescription to aid in the alleviation of human suffering and represent ways for the practitioner to apply their practice in time and space. I completely agree with Chung's analysis that the original outline for requiting beneficence should be restore to the chart.

Expanding on Chung's analysis, the insertion of these four essentials of social reform contributes to an elevation of the primacy of the ordained members and complicates the practice itself.

After the removal of *Kaesŏn-non* and the problematic edit of the doctrinal chart, one of the next important edits to *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* was the relocation and edit of *Sadae kangnyŏng* (四大綱領 four great platforms).⁷³ These four platforms function in the same way as *Kaesŏn-non* by framing the doctrine and providing a starting point for practitioners. Their relocation from the beginning of the doctrine to the end, as Chung points out, implies completion or summation of doctrine, even though these four platforms are not doctrine.⁷⁴ Chung also mentions that the four platforms were edited, but does not explain in what way. The edit and relocation of the four platforms not only creates doctrinal problems but also downplays the relationship between Pak's teaching and Buddhism, revealing the order's desire to distinguish itself as something different from other Buddhist schools and to promote an independent identity.

In the 1943 doctrinal chart (Figure 1), the four platforms appear twice: in the four boxes framing the entire chart, and again in the center column at the bottom. They were removed from the center column and replaced with Pak's transmission verse, which is

⁷³ I borrow the term "platform" from Chung, who uses it interchangeably with "principle." Inconsistency in translation of technical terms is confusing, and I will use "platform" throughout the discussion.

⁷⁴ Chung, *Scriptures*, 355-356.

not problematic (Figure 2). Redundancy in the chart serves no purpose, and the addition of the transmission verse further enhances the center column's explanation of integral oneness. As framing elements, these four platforms are connected through the exterior lines of the chart. This illustrates the interconnected nature of the four platforms, their direct relationship to full awakening as represented by the circle, and that each part of the chart, from any single position, is interdependent overall. The doctrinal chart is often referred to as a turtle with four legs, in which the head (an awakening to integral oneness) directs the practice that moves on the four legs of the platforms: remove one leg and the whole thing can stop moving. Not doctrine themselves, the platforms support and frame the doctrine and provide direction.

In *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, these four platforms were the first chapter of the doctrine (Part Two of Volume One), appearing just after the introductory *Kaesŏn-non*. Since *Kaesŏn-non* was removed and replaced with a short two-page general introduction containing the edited preface information from *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, Chung's restoration of the four platforms to the general introduction is reasonable if not completely appropriate. Although, I am surprised Chung does not restore them to their original form. While the redaction of the passage to the end of the doctrine is perplexing and, frankly, incorrect, the edits reveal further attempts to disconnect the order from established Buddhism.

The first two platforms in *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* are: correct awakening and correct

practice (*chōnggak chōnghaeng* 正覺正行); and awareness and requital of beneficence (*chiŭn poŭn* 知恩報恩).⁷⁵ Each one appears at the top of the chart and provide ontological, epistemological, and soteriological references for the doctrine. They orient the practitioner's relationship to self (correct awakening and practice) and to the world (awareness and requital of beneficence), and they inform the practitioner of what they must know to move forward in the practice. These two remain unchanged in the 1962 redaction of the chart and text.

The second two platforms were altered in the 1962 redaction of the chart and the text. In *Pulgyo chōngjōn*, the third platform is the dissemination or propagation of Buddhism (*pulgyo pogŭp* 佛教普及).⁷⁶ Dissemination or propagation of Buddhism is not performed through proselytizing but rather through becoming a living example of the Buddhadharma. If we start at the top of the chart and move down, the propagation of Buddhism and the Buddhadharma arises from being oriented toward a correct awakening and practice and then following the threefold study. If practitioners apply the practice to their everyday lives, they will free themselves from suffering, and the Buddhadharma will propagate and disseminate widely. The practitioner becomes a living example of the Buddhadharma and inspires others to the path.

In the redaction, this is edited as the utilization of Buddhadharma (*pulbōp*

⁷⁵ *Doctrinal Books*, 54-55; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 52-53; *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 451-452.

⁷⁶ *Pulgyo chōngjōn*, 10-11; *Wōnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol 4, 152.

hwalyong 佛法活用), and is altered on both the doctrinal chart and in the text. In the text, not only are references to disseminating Buddhism removed, the last sentence about the Buddhadharma naturally propagating on its own through practitioners becoming living examples of the teaching is deleted. This edit results in two effects. First, it downplays the importance of the Buddha and his community (two of the Three Jewels), by emphasizing only the Buddhadharma: i.e. we Wŏn Buddhists and our new Buddha and new dharma can use the old Buddha's teaching without propagating old Buddhism or needing the old community. Second, it turns Pak's outcome of practice from becoming living examples of the Buddhadharma and spreading Buddhism for the salvation of others into a utilitarian teaching that betters individuals and makes them useful to the order, a subtle but important change. Of course, the practical application of Buddhadharma is vital and part of Pak's reformation, but the utilitarian application is useless if not spread to others. The point of Pak's reforms is to make Buddhism useful to a wider audience, so it spreads and inspires other to enter on the Buddhist path. Without that, there is no transformation of the world, no alleviation of the suffering of others, but only the alleviation of the practitioner's suffering. One could utilize the teaching for personal wellbeing without ever inspiring others to the path, contrary to Pak's example. Replacing a foundational platform of spreading Buddhism with a personal practice renders the doctrinal turtle lame in one leg.

The edit of the fourth platform switches an ultimate outcome with a doctrinal

practice. In *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, the doctrinal chart shows the fourth platform as selfless public service (*mua ponggong* 無我奉公), but in the text it lists the fourth platform as devotion and service to country (*chinch'ung poguk* 盡忠報國). In the explanation of the fourth platform, selfless public service is a means to achieving devotion and service to country, and selfless public service appears in many places in the doctrine and practice. But as in the third platform, selfless public service is not the ultimate outcome. The result of selfless public service is that one acts to requite beneficence and serve society, in other words displaying loyalty and service to one's fellow citizens.

Instead of correcting the doctrinal chart and replacing selfless public service with devotion and service to country, the passage explaining the fourth platform is altered to fit a notion of selfless public service; but the editors go beyond just selfless public service. In the redacted version, all references to country are removed and replaced with calls to deliver and save all beings in the world.⁷⁷ If making Buddhadharma accessible to everyday people is the goal, centering the fourth platform on selfless public service to save all sentient beings in the world sounds a lot like the traditional role of bodhisattva saviors and monastics. The average Joe or Mary can act with fidelity and lend his fellow citizens a hand, as would the service of an ordained person, but this more cosmic effort is often reserved for religious workers. This edit makes the path difficult for the average householder, who may find it challenging to deliver all sentient

⁷⁷ *Doctrinal Books*, 55; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 53; *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol 4, 152.

beings in the world between jobs and raising families. It transforms a tangible and concrete object for selfless service into a vague and abstracted other. Saving the world is part of the overall founding motive (the source of the four platforms) and not a platform itself.

These four platforms or objectives orient the practitioner to the bigger picture of Pak's vision of a world freed from suffering. They are not doctrinal points themselves but objectives of practice. Relocating these four platforms to the end of the doctrine and editing their content results in a less clear doctrinal framework, obfuscates the relationship with Buddhism, and contributes to elevating ordained members. Chung points out that these four platforms answer the question, "What is Wŏn Buddhism?" and clearly reveal a Buddhist worldview.⁷⁸ In their zealotry to remove any flavor of Buddhism and to construct a new identity, editors altered the framework a bit too much and create a division between lay and ordained that Pak specifically opposed. The official reason for these edits is the same reason they give for many changes since Pak's time – the Japanese.⁷⁹ There is no straightforward evidence that the third and fourth platforms were purposefully altered to hide from and fool the Japanese (hide what remains unclear). And these small but significant changes would not have made much

⁷⁸ Chung, *Scriptures*, 355-56. Although I completely disagree that the four platforms answer the question "What is Wŏn Buddhism?" The four platforms answer the question "What is Pak's teaching for?" "Wŏn Buddhism" is a contemporary identity separate from Pak and his time.

⁷⁹ *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, 422, 1118.

difference to colonial authorities. I remain unconvinced that these edits are the result of the Japanese occupation.⁸⁰ They seem more in line with the purging of connections to ‘traditional’ Buddhism, the creation of a new identity, and the elevation of the ordained.

The removal of the treatise on reformation, the editing of the doctrinal chart, and the edit and relocation of the four platforms created doctrinal issues, reveal institutional concerns with identity, downplay Pak’s strong emphasis on the study of Buddhadharma, elevate the status of the ordained members, and overall alter the flavor of Pak’s text. Regardless if one considers the edits minor, major, relevant, or irrelevant, *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn* and *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* are of a contrasting character to *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*. Of the previously discussed edits, however, none impacted the text as much as the insertion of *Taejonggyŏng*.

Pulgyo chŏngjŏn originally comprised two volumes. The first volume contained Pak’s doctrine and practice; the second volume contained a collection of Buddhist texts he deemed essential to understanding his teaching and Buddhism. Pak first volume provides a doctrinal roadmap through Buddhist teachings to make those teachings more accessible, essentially providing a Buddhism-for-dummies. Thus, these two volumes are a single package and inextricably linked: volume one was created in direct

⁸⁰ Many references to Japanese oppression in both written and oral histories of Wŏn Buddhism may also be a reaction to the serious charge of collaboration in the post-liberation environment and still relevant today. Since Pak was convivial with the Japanese, kept his followers out of their way, and could exist mostly unfettered, references to Japanese oppression may be interpreted as cover for charges of collaboration. This subject needs more investigation.

conversation with volume two, and they were often published together in one book. In his doctrine, newsletters, his few short writings, and as memorialized by his followers in his discourses, Pak repeatedly encouraged his followers to study the Buddha's teaching, and his entire teaching is firmly rooted in a Buddhist worldview and practices. He declares the Buddha the sage of all sages and the Buddhadharma as the supreme way, and he traces the source of his inspiration to the Buddha.⁸¹ There is no question that Pak considered his teaching to be Buddhist. Downplaying or attempting to remove from his writings any color or flavor of Buddhism is futile.

I previously mentioned being struck initially by the simplicity of Pak's doctrine. I had been casually studying Buddhism for ten years and found many texts difficult. The language was technical or foreign, and I constantly had to look up specialized vocabulary and jargon. Good books were expensive and hard to find before Amazon. I wanted to learn and study more, but no Buddhist school called to me. They all seemed old fashioned, masculine, and sexist. The translation of *The Scriptures of Won Buddhism* by Chon Pal Khn was the first non-mainstream Buddhist text I had read, and its simple presentation clarified many of my questions. The text encouraged me to study Buddhadharma, which I was doing, and it inspired me to leave my mundane life and enter their order without ever meeting a Wŏn Buddhist. I went to Korea expecting to study Buddhadharma thoroughly. That is not what happened. We rarely studied

⁸¹ *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 95-96.

Buddha's teachings and almost exclusively read Wŏn Buddhist scriptures, which are purposefully basic and simple. Once I became familiar with the Korean texts and the order itself, I realized why we never studied Buddhist texts: it was because of an institutional fixation on *Taejonggyŏng*.

In 1951, about one year after the start of the Korean War, the Supreme Council formed committees to work on an updated version of the scriptures. Later in the same year, a committee was formed to create *Taejonggyŏng*, Pak's oral dispensations and actions as recorded in various newsletters and in the personal records of his followers. When redaction and compilation efforts were finished, committee members separated the two-volume *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* into two texts, effectively ending the use of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*.

Pak's doctrine and practice in the first volume of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* was edited and renamed *Chŏngjŏn* (正典 Principal Book). *Chŏngjŏn* is often published on its own as a small booklet or pocket version. Depending on the format, it runs about seventy to ninety pages. Published in Korean script, most of the Chinese characters have been removed except for a few technical terms. Pak's selection of Buddhist texts in the second volume of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* was also edited, renamed *Pulcho yogyŏng* (佛組要經 Essential Scriptures of Buddha and Patriarchs), and published separately in about one hundred and fifty pages. It contains the original Classical Chinese versions of the included Buddhist texts with vernacular Korean translations. The separating and renaming of the

volumes into two separate texts is significant: Pak's teaching is no longer tied directly to the Buddhadharma. It becomes separate and unique, reflecting the desires of the members to be a separate and unique lineage from traditional Buddhism, even if their teaching is standard East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Separating the two volumes marks a shift in the focus of Wŏn Buddhist teaching and study, and the addition of the *Taejonggyŏng* cemented that shift. When the editors published the redacted first volume of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* and renamed it *Chŏngjŏn*, they appended the *Taejonggyŏng* to Pak's doctrine and renamed this new publication *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn* (圓佛教教典 scriptures of Wŏnbulgyo). The *Taejonggyŏng* dwarfs the doctrine by about three hundred pages, and together with the new name of the order in the title, *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn* became the primary book and the main object of study and worship. With the changing of the order's name to Wŏnbulgyo in 1948, several reissues of the constitution and regulations, the subsequent rapid growth during the post-liberation and post-Korean war environments, the death of Song in 1962, the appointment of the third leader of the order, the 1962 publication of the redacted text bearing the name of the new order, and the purging of some Buddhist elements, the order constructs a whole new identity for itself only twenty years after Pak's death, an identity that carries forward to this day.

In 1977, the *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn* is published together with the Buddhist scriptures in the current edition of the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* (圓佛教全書 collected works or canon of

Wŏnbulgyo), which is still in use today. Published as a small black bible-like book with about 1,400 pages of gilded-edged onionskin paper, it contains all the redacted doctrinal books, edited Buddhist scriptures, ritual propriety, Song's own lengthy scriptures, *History of Wŏn Buddhism*, and 162 hymns. Used for general study, temple use, ritual use, and for delivering official historical narrative, the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* serves many purposes and facilitates the easy reference of essential doctrine. Even though the *Wŏnbulgyo kyojŏn*, or simply *Kyojŏn* for short, is technically only the first two books in *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, the entire canonical collected works is also referred to as *Kyojŏn*. In fact, when someone asks to pass them a *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* in temple, they will inevitably simply say "hand me a *Kyojŏn*." Since the cover page is printed in Classical Chinese, I only realized after several years that a *Kyojŏn* was a *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*.⁸²

Even though the *Chŏngjŏn* and the *Pulcho yogyŏn* were brought back together in the canonical collected works, the Buddhist scriptures were separated from Pak's doctrine by over three hundred pages of collected words and deeds – stories about Pak written by his followers. And with this separation came decreased attention. Of all the parts of the canonical collected works I studied in official training programs and curriculum, the Buddhist scriptures received by far the least amount of attention.

⁸² This confusion of titles and divisions was already noted. The inconsistent application of terms for Wŏn Buddhist scripture has caused much confusion in translation efforts. See, Siyong Ko, "Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ'-ŭi sŏngnip-gwa sujŏng powan-ŭi pilyosŏng," *Wŏnbulgyo sasang kwa chonggyo munhwa* 65 (September 2015):173-201.

During my four-and-a-half year stay in Korea, I only had one semester that contained a few weeks of studying the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra*, a short Buddhist scripture that Wŏn Buddhist practitioners chant daily.

We spent most of our time studying Pak's doctrine, Pak's words and deeds, Song's discourses, and the order's rules on ritual propriety. We spent little time on the history of the order or the Buddhist sutras. The novice curriculum is dominated by Pak and Song's collected words and deeds, and the ordination test focuses heavily on those two areas. When I studied with students in Korea, they spent most of their time memorizing Pak and Song's discourses so they could regurgitate the information on the ordination test. There was little study of Buddhist texts and no study of other Buddhist schools of thought. This explains why I often hear comments from Americans involved with Wŏn Buddhism that most Korean *kyomu* know little about Buddhist teachings outside of the small collection of Buddhist scriptures in the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, and what they do know is often wrong or heavily biased toward Mahāyāna or Sŏn (Zen) doctrine. Recently I heard a Wŏn Buddhist *kyomu* use the pejorative term Hinayana to describe Theravāda Buddhism and refer to Theravāda practice as the "self-centered small vehicle:" an old, outdated, and pejorative Mahāyāna reference to earlier mainstream Buddhist teachings, which has nothing to do with the contemporary Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia. This left an American practitioner with a background in the Pali canon and Theravāda teachings aghast and speechless. The *kyomu* was clueless.

The addition of the *Taejonggyōng* creates a hierarchical relationship with Buddhhadharma: Pak's dispensation is primary and the Buddhhadharma is secondary. The *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō* clearly displays this hierarchical relationship in its structure, and the order reveals it in its practices and educational programs. Combined with the other edits and reorganizations of the text, Pak's teaching is significantly altered. Through their efforts to forge and promote a new independent identity and purge Buddhist flavors from Pak's dispensation, the redaction committees inadvertently directed practitioners away from the Buddhhadharma and toward their own center of gravity. This redirection uproots Pak's teaching and creates an insular order focused more on itself and its own teachings and traditions. This manifests in a relationship to the world that places Wōn Buddhism front and center in delivering sentient beings to a new Buddhist paradise. All other religions, including Buddhism, fall short.

Wōn Buddhism has been struggling for some time. When I joined the order and moved to Korea in the 1990s, Wōn Buddhism was already losing members and struggling to attract new ordinands. The situation has only become worse. In a recent newspaper editorial, a *kyomu* commented on the difficult situation, lack of new members, and the particularly noticeable drop in ordained female members. She noted the inability of the order to adjust and called for a return to original methods and practices of Pak's order.⁸³ If we look at the redaction of Pak's text, the root cause of

⁸³ Lee Songha, "Muōsŭl seropke hal kōsinga," *Wōnbulgyo sinmun*, January 23, 2019.

many of the problems is reflected in the redactions. By shifting the focus away from Buddhist teachings and onto the scriptures of Pak and Song's words and deeds, the order's sense of self-importance strengthened, which flies in the face of Pak's teaching on personal autonomy and selfless service.

If Wŏn Buddhism wishes to participate in, and benefit from, the contemporary revival of Buddhism and contribute to Pak's vision of delivering people from the grips of suffering, they should consider Chung's suggestion to restore the text. I would go a step further and call for the complete restoration of *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, in its original form, to the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*. The outline for requiting beneficence should be restored to the doctrinal chart. *Kaesŏn-non* and *Sadae kangnyŏng* should be restored to their original place. *Pulcho yogyŏng* should be reconnected with Pak's doctrine and moved up in *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*; while *Taejonggyŏng* should be moved back after the Buddhist sutras. Such restorations would reconnect Wŏn Buddhism to its Buddhist roots, something it should embrace and not deny or expunge, lest it look cultish. If Pak is truly the new Buddha for a new age, then the order should heed his advice, study the Buddhadharma more, and refrain from redaction of his texts and teachings. It might be prudent to avoid redacting buddhas at all.

Sudden Awakening-Gradual Cultivation

Although I reject attempts to change the Buddhist flavor of Pak's teaching, I understand the Wŏn Buddhist desire to shape a separate and unique identity in the face

of ancient and large religions and numerous other new religious movements. Religions compete for members and resources, and humans predictably desire to stand out from the crowd and say, *hey*, we have got the way to freedom and salvation – our master is truly the awakened one. Millennial visions of the end or beginning of the world are a dime a dozen: Pak’s order belongs to a long list of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century new religious movements claiming that their person is *the* savior and that their teaching is *the* way out of a troubled world (and every year time proves another group wrong in their prediction for the end of days). I understand the desire to be special, I see it in myself, but in the case of Pak’s teaching, it seems almost impossible to liberate it from its Buddhist foundation. The clear background understanding grounded in Buddhist ontology, eschatology, and soteriology; the inclusion of traditional Buddhist texts (none from Confucianism or Daoism); the adoption of Buddhist practices; the numerous encouragements to study Buddhadharmā; the claiming of the Buddha as the sage of all sages and as Pak’s personal inspiration; and textual redactions that aim to distinguish it from Buddhism: all of these facts point to its foundation in Buddhist teachings. Scholars and members of the order can label it a new religious movement, a new hybridity resulting in something uniquely separate from Buddhism, or a modernist reformation, but it is still, undeniably East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Exploring the alignment of Pak’s teachings with an important and classical

Buddhist framework reveals another incontrovertible connection to Buddhism. Debates and discussions about the relationship between awakening and practice animated East Asian Buddhist discourse going back centuries; and, the *sudden awakening-gradual cultivation* soteriological schema influenced many Korean Buddhist teachings. In this model, one must first awaken to one's 'original nature' and then gradually cultivate this awareness through practice. The famed Koryŏ monk Chinul (1158-1210), a major proponent of this view, explains:

As for "gradual cultivation," although he has awakened to the fact that his original nature is no different from that of the buddhas, the beginningless proclivities of habit are extremely difficult to remove suddenly. Therefore he must continue to cultivate while relying on his awakening so that this efficacy of gradual suffusion is perfected; he constantly nurtures the embryo of sanctity, and after a long, long time he becomes a sage. Hence it is called gradual cultivation. It is like the maturation of an infant; from the day of its birth, [and infant] is endowed with all its faculties, just like any other [human being], but its physical capacities are not yet fully developed; it is only after the passage of many months and years that it will finally mature into an adult.⁸⁴

The literature on this schema includes other permutations, such as *sudden awakening-sudden cultivation* and *gradual awakening-gradual cultivation*, and exegetes debated the various permutations; however, for the most part, the sudden-gradual schema prevailed. Pak was convinced.

While studying in the novice training program in Korea, we briefly explored

⁸⁴ *Susim kyŏl*; translated in Robert E. Buswell, Jr., ed., *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*, vol. 2, *Chinul: Selected Works* (Seoul: Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012), 216-217.

Susim kyōl (修心訣 Secrets on cultivating the mind), Chinul's famed discussion on the relationship between awakening and practice. Despite its inclusion in *Pulgyo chōngjōn*, this influential text was peripheral and rarely utilized in our studies. During one of the few discussions about *Susim kyōl*, the instructing *kyomu* focused on Chinul's explanations of original nature, its ultimately numinous quality, and the importance of practice in clearing away the habitual behavior of a conditioned mind. Recognizing that the *kyomu* was ignoring the sudden-gradual aspect of Chinul's text, an older female novice asked the *kyomu* about the importance of first awakening to Pak's core teaching of integral oneness. She expressed concern for only superficially understanding the nature of Pak's awakening and thus worried that her practice would not progress without a firm awakening. The *kyomu* responded that her trust in the truth of Pak's teaching was more important than awakening to it. I scribbled in my *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō* near the title of Chinul's text "trust more important?" – with a large question mark.

This answer did not sit well with the female novice, and the *kyomu* offered no further explanation. At the time, I knew nothing about the sudden-gradual debate and later inquired about her question. She briefly explained that the sudden-gradual debate had long informed doctrine and practice in Korea and questioned whether the *kyomu* understood the importance of the text. How could she have a strong trust in the teaching, let alone practice it, if she did not fully realize the essential truth of Pak's awakening? Is not trust in the doctrine without comprehending the fundamental

teaching of integral oneness characteristic of a “limited faith”?⁸⁵ Is trusting the doctrine more important than awakening to it? These questions bothered her. Building on the novice’s question, since Pak included *Susim kyöl* in *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn*, does his teaching fit therefor into the sudden-gradual framework? Pak never directly engages the subtle sudden-gradual discourse of learned monks in his lay-centered *Pulgyo chǒngjǒn* but instead seamlessly interwove it into his teaching. The *kyomu* correctly points out the importance of trust, but declaring trust as more important than awakening mischaracterizes the teaching and downplays the influence of this important Buddhist framework.

Pak does not directly address the sudden-gradual schema or its various permutations in his doctrine, but one reference does exist in his remembered discourses. A disciple asks Pak about the possibility of *sudden awakening-sudden cultivation*, wondering if an adept with high capacity could accomplish both awakening and practice simultaneously. Pak responds that, among the ancient buddhas and patriarchs, a few have achieved both simultaneously; however, he clarifies that such individuals went through endless training over multiple past lives. He implies that our limited awareness cannot see the infinite reincarnations and myriad previous actions that

⁸⁵ In his discourses, Pak criticizes a Christian man’s faith as limited, as it rested in the power of a deity without understanding the fundamental source of truth (i.e. integral oneness). Limited faith and blind faith are both repeatedly criticized as less than ideal by Pak. See Chung, *Scriptures*, 297. This distinction between Buddhist and Christian ‘faith,’ is another reason why I translate *sin* (信) as *trust*.

enable advanced practitioners to perfect awakening and practice – a cliché response offered by proponents of the sudden-gradual model.⁸⁶ Other than this brief mention, we must turn to Pak’s doctrine and practice to observe his dedication to the sudden-gradual model.

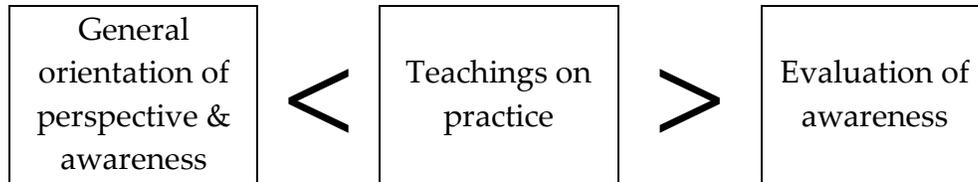


Figure 4 Sudden-Gradual Framework

Pak focused on creating a doctrine easily understood by those of lower capacity and yet still recognized and utilized as a correct path by advanced practitioners. An advance practitioner familiar with Buddhist discourse would recognize the validity of his path and the overall structure.⁸⁷ *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* starts from the most essential aspects of awareness and perspective (*Kaesŏn-non* and doctrine), moves into the specifics of practice, and culminates finally in an evaluation of the cultivation of awareness through a graduated scale (Fig 4).⁸⁸

Kaesŏn-non provides an orientation for Pak’s teaching, and *Sadae kangnyŏng*

⁸⁶ *Doctrinal Books*, 303; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 257.

⁸⁷ Pak divided practitioners into low, medium, and high capacity. Those of low capacity awaken through an initial firm trust in the doctrine and teachers and subsequent practice. Those of medium capacity have a difficult path as they tend toward capriciousness, criticism, and insincerity. Difficult to teach, they require great personal exertion. Those of high ability readily awakened upon encountering correct dharma and quickly progress in practice. See *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 305-306.

⁸⁸ Another reason why the location of *Kaesŏn-non* and *Sadae kangnyŏng* are important and should be restored to their appropriate place in the canonical works.

provides the four essential platforms. As previous noted in the doctrinal chart, an awareness of beneficence grounded in an awakening to integral oneness is vital to practice. The first platform encapsulates the importance of initially awakening to Pak's vision:

As for right enlightenment and right practice, it is to engage in that consummate practice which is free from bias or reliance, excessiveness or deficiency, whenever we make use of our six sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, by gaining awakening to the truth of *irwŏn*, which is the mind-seal rightly transmitted by the buddhas and enlightened masters, and modeling ourselves wholeheartedly on that truth.⁸⁹

Correct awakening (right enlightenment) defines practice: without correct understanding of one's fundamental awakening to orient, guide, and ground behavior, correct practice cannot be fully made manifest. The other platforms all depend on correct awareness, thus the female novice's concern about understanding the nature of Pak's awakening was well founded. Without awakening to this basic understanding, how can she clear away the buildup of bad habits and conditioned perspectives?

Pulgyo chŏngjŏn moves from the four platforms that emphasize awareness and awakening into a detailed explanation of the nature of the required basic awareness and awakening, i.e. integral oneness. To do this, the text explains the meaning behind the circular-mark:

[*Irwŏn*] is the original source of all things in the universe, the mind-seal of all the

⁸⁹ *Doctrinal Books*, 54; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 53; Chung, *Scriptures*, 118.

buddhas and sages, and the original nature of all sentient beings; the realm where there is no discrimination regarding great and small, being and nonbeing; the realm where there is no change amid arising and ceasing, coming and going; the realm where wholesome and unwholesome karmic retribution has ceased; the realm where language, names, and signs are utterly void. Through the light of the void and calm, numinous awareness, the discrimination regarding great and small, being and nonbeing, appears; whereupon the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome karmic retribution comes not being; language, names, and signs also become obvious, so that the triple worlds in the ten directions appear like a jewel in hand; and the creative transformations of true voidness and marvelous existence freely conceal and reveal themselves through all things in the universe throughout vast eons without beginning: this is the truth of [the circular mark of *irwōn*].⁹⁰

Although this passage does not specifically mention the sudden-gradual framework, its location at the beginning of the discussion of doctrine, prior to any treatment of practice, illustrates the importance of initial awakening. This statement on the meaning behind the circular mark of integral oneness immediately precedes the explanations of trust in, practice of, and personal vow to integral oneness, which also suggest a fundamental connection to an initial insight into integral oneness.⁹¹

Only after thoroughly outlining a general orientation of perspective, awareness, and awakening does the text move into a discussion of practice. The practice provides eleven regular practices to cultivate awareness and gradually remove defilements of

⁹⁰ *Doctrinal Books*, 20; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 23; Chung, *Scriptures*, 120-121.

⁹¹ *Doctrinal Books*, 21-22; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 23-24.

both mind and body. Since Pak does not equate awakening with the elimination of habituation, practice through gradual cultivation is the way to manifest awareness of integral oneness in one's mind and body.

Many references to the importance of an initial awakening pepper Pak's practice. Toward the end of his teaching on timeless and placeless meditation, Pak addresses members who may view meditation as difficult and the sole realm of advanced members. Buswell reveals this common view in Korean Buddhism by illustrating the attentive focus applied to Korean meditation monks. This select minority of monks engage in strict meditative practice, and the operations of many temples revolve around serving and maintaining this elite group.⁹² Pak attempted to demystify meditation and attributes this discriminating disparity to an initial lack of awareness of the nature of *irwŏn*:

Recently groups that practice [meditation] think that [meditation] is extremely difficult. There are many who hold that it is impossible to do for someone who has a family or who pursues an occupation, and that you can only practice [meditation] by entering into the mountains and sitting quietly. This view derives from their ignorance of the great dharma, in which all dharmas are nondual. But if one can only practice [meditation] while sitting but not while standing – this would be a sickly [meditation] indeed; how could this become the great dharma that can save all sentient beings?⁹³

⁹² Robert Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁹³ *Doctrinal Books*, 80; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 74-75.

Although this short passage is pregnant with critiques leveled at Korean Buddhist monastics, Pak blames ignorance of meditation on a lack of awareness of integral oneness. Challenging the need to leave home to enter on the Buddhist path, a lack of awareness defines how practitioners approach the path itself.

Another indispensable aspect of Pak's practice is repentance. Members repent transgressions through the practice of inquiry into facts and principles and the practice of mindful choice in the production of karma. Practitioners utilize diaries and morality books, popular with many religious traditions of the time, to check their actions daily against the precepts to gradually remove defilements and lessen the production of transgressive karma. Pak defines repentance as two-fold:

The method of repentance is of two types: repentance by action and repentance by principle. "Repentance by action" means that you sincerely repent from past mistakes before the Three Jewels and practice day by day all types of wholesome actions. "Repentance by principle" means that, awakening to that realm in which the nature of transgressions is originally void, you internally remove all defilements and idle thoughts.⁹⁴

One can repent transgressions through action by comparing one's daily actions against the precepts and amending transgressions; however, identifying and eliminating the source of the defilement, arguably much more important, requires awakening to the integral oneness and emptiness of all of existence and then eliminating the source of the defilement. The female novice recognized the paramount nature of awakening

⁹⁴ *Doctrinal Books*, 83; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 77.

regarding practice.

In this discourse on repentance, Pak engages the question posed to exegetes of the sudden awakening/gradual cultivation schema, namely if one has awakened to the truth, what need is there for any subsequent practice? In Pak's view, awakening represents the starting point of practice and does not remove defilements and habituated behavior *in toto*; thus, repentance remains vital. Commenting on the misconception that awakening represents the end goal and that practice and precepts themselves are empty, Pak states:

Recently there have been groups of self-styled enlightened ones occasionally appearing who, making light of the precepts and discipline and of cause and effect, have acted as they pleased and stopped as they pleased under the guise of "unconstrained action," thus sullyng in some cases the gateway of the Buddha. This occurs because they realize only that the self-nature is free from discrimination, but do not realize that it also involves discriminations; how can this be knowing the true Way that transcends being and nonbeing? Furthermore, there are many people who think they have completed their practice just by seeing the nature and have no need for further repentance or subsequent practice. Even if seeing the nature has occurred, the myriad defilements and all manner of attachments are not simultaneously annihilated and, even if one has gained the three great powers and achieved Buddhahood, one cannot avoid one's own fixed karma. One must pay close attention to this point and avoid falling into perverted views or making light of transgressive karma by misinterpreting the words of the buddhas and enlightened masters.⁹⁵

Pak wholeheartedly agrees with the importance of an initial awakening. For practice to

⁹⁵ *Discourses*, 84-85; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 78

be fruitful in eliminating habituation, one must first awaken to the integral oneness of all existence and then apply it through correct practice. Chung notes that this central understanding reflects Chinul's teaching on the importance of an initial awakening, and he quotes Chinul's quotation of Tsung-mi, "Cultivation prior to awakening is not true cultivation."⁹⁶

Other references support an understanding that initial awakening undergirds practice, but one of the most salient is the closing doctrinal discourse on the ranking of dharma stages (*pöbwi tūnggŭp* 法位等級).⁹⁷ This ranking system offers a means to gauge awakening based on actions and deeds.⁹⁸ The stages are intimately linked to the fulfillment of thirty precepts, which Pak divides into three progressive levels.⁹⁹ The ten precepts for the ordinary stage (*pot'onggup sipkyemun* 普通級十戒文) proscribes killing, stealing, adultery, drinking alcohol, gambling, speaking evil, quarreling, embezzling, borrowing and lending money, and smoking. The ten middle precepts for the stage of special trust (*t'uksin'gŭp sipkyemun* 特信級十戒文) proscribes handling public affairs

⁹⁶ Chung, *Scriptures*, 81.

⁹⁷ *Doctrinal Books*, 98-101; *Wönbulgyo chönsö*, 89-91. Although Chung does effectively outline the main principles of Pak's doctrine and correctly identifies problematic redactions, surprisingly his lengthy introduction offers no discussion on the Dharma stages.

⁹⁸ Pak's Dharma stages are most definitely related to the Mahāyāna bodhisattva stages or *bhūmis*, as represented in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, the *Śūrangama Sūtra*, and others. A close comparison of the two is beyond the scope of this discussion.

⁹⁹ *Doctrinal Books*, 89-90; *Wönbulgyo chönsö*, 81-82.

alone, speaking of other's faults, seeking riches, wearing luxurious clothing, associating with unjust people, interrupting others, untrustworthiness, flattery, sleeping at improper times, and improper singing and dancing. The ten advanced precepts for the stage of struggle between dharma and *Māra* (*pōmma sangjōn'gūp sipkyemun* 法魔相戰級十戒文) proscribes conceit, having more than one spouse, eating red meat, laziness, speaking with a double-tongue, absurd speech, jealousy, desire, aversion, and delusion.¹⁰⁰ The precepts start with basic Buddhist proscriptions such as killing, theft, fighting, etc., and end with the complete eradication of the three poisons (*triviṣa*, K. *samdok* 三毒) of desire, aversion, and delusion, the ultimate source of all transgression in Buddhist soteriology. Success in following each group of precepts results in advancement on the path.

In East Asian meditation traditions, authentication of awakening was often established by a senior Buddhist practitioner evaluating another's level of awakening, usually by questioning them in the dharma through *koans* or abstruse questions. The response was often purposefully nonsensical. Pak took issue with this method of authentication when a visiting monk attempted to evaluate one of his young female followers after he had already coached her on how to respond:

The *Sōn* master went right up to Ch'ōngp'ung and said in a loud voice, "Without moving your feet, show me the Way!" Ch'ōngp'ung stood perfectly still, raising

¹⁰⁰ In Wōn Buddhism, *Mara* represents the three poisons; see *Wōnbulgyo taesajōn*, 359-361.

the pestle up into the air. The *Sōn* master went inside without saying a word, and Ch'ōngp'ung followed him in. The *Sōn* master asked, "Can you make that Bodhidharma hanging on the wall walk?" Ch'ōngp'ung answered, "Yes, I can." The *Sōn* master responded, "Then make him walk." Ch'ōngp'ung stood up and walked several steps. The *Sōn* master slapped his knee in amazement and sanctioned her enlightenment, saying that she had awakened at the age of thirteen! See this sight, the Founding Master smiled and said, "Seeing the nature neither does nor does not involve words. However, from now on, one will not be able to give the seal of approval to 'seeing the nature' by such a method."¹⁰¹

Pak emphasizes that awakening to integral oneness is not enough to evaluate one's subsequent level of awareness, implying that awakening remains the starting point and that practice reflects one's level of awareness through actions and deeds over time. The monk assumes that this thirteen-year old novice has fully matured in her awakening through a few historically well-established responses to his standard line of questioning. For Pak, determining awakening comes only through comparing the individual's mind and behavior to the dharma: does awakening hold up and persist over time? Practice continually tests awareness.

The dharma ranks critique existing authentication standards and reveal a dedication to gradual cultivation. Pak observes six grades of dharma rank: ordinary (*pot'onggŭp* 普通級), special trust (*t'ūksin'gŭp* 特信級), dharma-*māra* struggle (*pōmma sangjōn'gŭp* 法魔相戰級), dharma's subjugation of *māra* (*pōpkang hangmaŭi* 法强降魔位),

¹⁰¹ *Doctrinal Books*, 309-301; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 262-263.

leaving the household (*ch'ulgawi* 出家位), and great awakening of the Tathāgata (*taegak yōrewi* 大覺如來位).¹⁰² The first three Dharma ranks link directly to the three divisions of the precepts, as demonstrated in their names. Since the thirty precepts end in the elimination of the three poisons, anyone accomplishing the third grade should be free from the root causes of suffering – no small feat!

The lowest grade is reserved for those who enter the practice, regardless of knowledge, gender, age, moral behavior, or social status. Taking refuge in the dharma and receiving the first ten precepts is the only requirement. If one successfully holds and practices the first and second group of precepts and if one can understand generally the doctrine and regulations, advancement to the second rank is possible. For the third rank, one must practice and hold all thirty precepts and meet the previous level's requirement on general understanding; however, beginning with the third rank, Pak adds additional requirements for evaluation:

...analyze each and every aspect of dharma and Māra and make no serious mistakes in interpreting our scriptures; delight in eliminating perverse states of mind amid myriad sensory conditions and do not meddle in things that are not their business; understanding the significance of the battle between dharma and Māra, engage in that battle; do not commit any major offense against the essential Way of human life and the essential Way of practice; and for whom, even in minute matters, dharma wins more than half the time.¹⁰³

¹⁰² *Doctrinal Books*, 98-101; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 89-91.

¹⁰³ *Doctrinal Books*, 99; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 90.

The fourth rank involves meeting all the third-level conditions, plus dharma must always triumph over *māra*, one completely masters the scriptures and the principles of absolute and phenomenal, and one must be liberated from the suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death. The fifth rank accomplishes all the previous, plus correctly determines the validity of right and wrong in human morality based on the vicissitudes of being and nonbeing, is well-versed in the essential doctrines of the world's religions, and eliminates estrangement and closeness in dealing with others. The sixth and final rank characterizes the nature of complete buddhahood: one meets all the requirements of previous ranks, saves all sentient beings by skillful means, acts according to the circumstance without straying from justice and without revealing one's skillful means, and one's discriminations are free from partiality and in accord with dharma, whether in action or at rest.

The practitioner moves through increasingly difficult precepts in stages one through three, and stages three through six are characterized by gradually expanding levels of awareness grounded in action: one first battles with *māra* and then fully subjugates *māra*. Once the practitioner has overcome *māra*, the final two stages illustrate an increasing level of awareness of not only one's action but also of human affairs and even other religious beliefs. This culminates in the final proclamation of the sixth grade, where one is completely liberated from discriminating thought when active and at rest. Only in the final stage does the light of the empty and calm, numinous awareness,

spoken of in Chinul's *Susim kyōl*, fully appear.

This system of evaluation is not foolproof. Since the determination of the grade requires both the evaluators and the evaluated to process, interpret, and evaluate behaviors through the mind, error and distortion is guaranteed. Much of this relies on self-reporting. A person may be skillful at memorizing and expounding on the dharma, but how can any individual truly evaluate another's complete elimination of the three poisons or determine if another is absolutely free from the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death? These are feats that most Buddhists would consider nearly impossible except for a perfectly awakened Buddha. Such claims can even be interpreted as the product of a deluded ego. Many of the traditional Korean values that Pak condemned, such as ageism and sexism, immediately crept back into the order and became institutionalized. If this is fact and women are treated different by the order, restricting their lives and bodies, and expecting them to remain celibate and unmarried when men have a choice, how can any ordained member claim they have moved beyond such delusional discrimination? The order itself becomes ipso facto an institution of oppression and is not following Pak's original intent.

Although the order promotes traditional values condemned by Pak, the leadership elevates itself to the highest dharma grades while violating the essential ways of practice as stated in the third grade. Since the institution itself could not possibly accomplish the third grade, how is it the leadership moves beyond the third

grade? Senior members have a tough time explaining and justifying the obvious disparity between practices and doctrine, some refuse to talk about it, and some will even flatly deny there is any disparity. According to Pak's analysis of gradual cultivation, higher grades should have no problem explaining and correcting these disparities in the order; their minds should be free from desire, aversion, and delusion. Even so, obvious disparity continues. With numerous 'masters' granted high status, something is amiss.

These questions and issues regarding the dharma ranks are a hushed hot topic in Wŏn Buddhist circles. People know the system is flawed and manipulated. Many ranks, honorary titles, and other distinctions doled out by the order seem based on age, financial donations, conversion of new members, or reasons other than a fully vetted practiced-based authentication – Pak's standard of measurement. Some *kyomu* remain suspect of the awarded grades: in small communities, people know each other well. Claiming complete eradication of the three poisons or freedom from suffering related to birth, old age, sickness, and death seems supernatural and ultimately challenging, indeed.

Regardless of the problems with Pak's grading system, his commitment to the *sudden awakening-gradual cultivation* schema remains consistent from the opening of his text with *Kaesŏn-non* to the closing with the dharma-ranking system. Through this commitment to a sudden-gradual schema, we see Pak's strong reliance on long-

established Buddhist teachings and his thoroughly Buddhist soteriology, reflected not only in the doctrine and practice but also in the structure of the text. No reason exists to wonder how to classify Wŏn Buddhism – its background understanding is firmly grounded on Korean Mahāyāna Buddhism within a sudden-gradual framework. This reliance on a sudden-gradual schema for both his teaching and his text further emphasizes the important of restoring *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* to its original content and structure. Redacting buddhas is a risky endeavor perhaps best left to other buddhas.

Chapter Three: The Community

Of the Three Jewels of Buddhism, Wŏn Buddhist and non-Wŏn Buddhist English material has focused on Pak and his doctrine (Buddha and Dharma) and overlooked the living community (Sangha). For this reason, we get histories and presentations that function more as didactic propaganda than scholarly assessments.¹ Academics from within the community provide hagiographic idealizations of Pak and the order, gloss over contemporary critical issues, or focus on proving the value and validity of Pak's doctrine in relation to other religions. Academics from outside the community replicate doctrine and official documents, thus appearing uninformed of issues being discussed within the community. Of all the English books and articles produced on Wŏn Buddhism over fifty years of continuous active engagement with the English-speaking world, few move beyond a superficial exploration of the tradition. This is particularly problematic for the English-speaking community, since Wŏn Buddhism itself provides little beyond a handful of learning materials and a few translations of doctrinal texts.² If

¹ There are two important exceptions. First, a single chapter in Bokin Kim's *Concerns and Issues in Wŏn Buddhism* introduces a discussion on celibacy for female members. Palpably walking a fine line due to her prominent position in the order, Kim unfortunately does not supply any details about the problems forced celibacy creates in the order or its real impact on the lives of women. Second, Lee Chung Ok's unpublished dissertation "Theory and Practice of Gender Equality in Wŏn Buddhism" reveals purposefully unrecorded and repressed gendered histories in the order.

² The lack of English materials was noted several years ago by an American member who has since left the community, but her call for materials has produced no result. See Carol Craven, "Kyodan ch'awonesŏ chŏkchŏlhan kongbu charyu chekonghaeya hal ttae" (Now would be a great time for the order to begin providing publications), *Wŏnbulgyo Sinmun*, March 28, 2014.

you cannot read or speak Korean, you cannot know Pak or Wŏn Buddhism: you will only get official history and information filtered through cautious minds.

Wŏn Buddhism holds a rich body of materials about the early community waiting for translation. The entire collection of early documents has been compiled in a multi-volume collection; and yet the order focuses on producing more translations of the same few doctrinal books and other didactic secondary and tertiary tomes that do not connect with English readers.³ Numerous personal journals, diaries, autobiographies, and biographies of early members have been produced that must be translated; but instead, efforts are spent producing sophomoric English novice practice journals that no one will read or English newsletters that are irrelevant in an age of websites and Twitter. All efforts should be made to establish a translation center at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies, but instead efforts are focused on conducting mindfulness seminars with little attendance, didactic presentations of Wŏn Buddhist

³ One example is *To Make a Happy Home: Observe Family Moral Standards and Establish Family Traditions*. Some American members who have seen this not-well-distributed volume derided it as a sexist, patronizing, and ineffective attempt to criticize and shape American culture by promoting Korean traditional and often superstitious patriarchal beliefs. For example, pregnant woman “should be careful in cooking not to break any dishes, not to put her hands into hot or cold water, not to use sharp knives, and not to cut live things with a knife,” and “should not stand on one foot, stand leaning on a column, step on dangerous things, or walk on a slanted road.” The entire book is a roadmap to becoming an ultra-conservative Neo-Confucian Korean vis-à-vis Wŏn Buddhism, and the few Americans I know who have read it were insulted and angry that the order would consider this an important book for distribution. This three-hundred-page book even prescribes trite acceptable songs for families to sing together. It displays a fundamental lack of basic understanding of values, cultural norms, and political freedoms cherished by Americans from diverse backgrounds. Not even Korean American Wŏn Buddhists live the ultra-conservative ideation in this text. See *To Make a Happy Home: Observe Family Moral Standards and Establish Family Traditions*, edited by Department of International Affairs (Iksan: Won-Buddhism Publishing House, 2005).

doctrine at academic conferences, and inter-religious dialogue sessions with little concrete results: none produce much benefit for the English-speaking community. The order concerns itself with building public reputation and unsuccessful proselytizing, while remaining unconcerned with providing useful information to an English-speaking audience. I constantly hear complaints from American adherents of misdirected efforts, misused funds, a disinterest in consulting with Americans about what they need, and a tendency to interact in a patronizing way as if Americans need their prescription for salvation.⁴

This chapter will attempt to provide information on both the order and a few critical issues they face. Since we have no accounting of daily life within various Wŏn Buddhist communities, I will provide a look at what goes on behind the walls and closed doors of a few communities in both Korea and America. This will reveal a

⁴ A contemporary controversy was the construction of the Won Dharma Center in upstate New York. The construction of this multimillion-dollar retreat center far from any population center raised more than a few eyebrows and sparked some quiet criticism even within the Order. The center provides little benefit to the laity and must be rented out regularly to outside groups to maintain operational costs. It still requires financial support from the Headquarters. Pak encouraged his community to construct temples and community buildings where the people live and in city centers. This vanity project of the Wŏn Buddhist order has one single purpose – to impress. Laity cannot readily utilize this retreat facility, and if they do, they must spend significant money and time traveling to a center that is not even near a major airport. Many Korean and American members criticize this wasteful use of valuable and already stretched-thin Wŏn Buddhist resources. Since Won Dharma Center was built with an expectation of it becoming a future headquarters for North America and with great monetary investment for its role in spreading Wŏn Buddhism, there has been no public criticism to date. For reference to the expectations placed on Won Dharma Center, see Pak Dŏgyŏn, “Wŏndalma sent’ŏ kŏnnip kwa Wŏnbulgyo sekyehwa,” *Wŏnbulgyo Sinmun*, October 2, 2009.

tension between a dynamic, active, and devoted community derived from Pak's doctrine, and a community starkly divided between the ordained and the laity.

Membership

Pak created a religious order that mitigated the sharp distinction between lay and ordained adherents that was characteristic of mainstream Buddhism. Membership was obtained through paying a small membership due, involvement in the community, and committing oneself to the teaching and practice. Rank and responsibility were determined solely by one's commitment and service to the community, and most of the earliest leaders, male and female, were married with families. A distinction between lay and ordained became more evident after rapid growth in the post-liberation and post-war periods, when the order attracted many fully committed members willing to give all their time, energy, and lives to the order. Throughout Pak's time, lay members participated in all levels of the community and performed both administrative and instructional roles at the highest levels. Lay and ordained were distinguished only by their dharma ranks, which were applied equally to members.

It was visually impossible to distinguish between ordained and lay members: they dressed the same in every-day clothing of the time. Old pictures of the Buddhadharma Research Society reveal a community not interested in visually distinguishing itself, and Pak never required uniforms or monastic raiment. All members were instead encouraged to dress conservatively according to time and place

and not engage in ostentation. Members were free to wear traditional Korean clothing, which most did, or Western-style clothes. Pak's liberal attitude toward clothing is important to note, and oral history has Pak opposed to adopting a religious uniform for his adherents.⁵ Unfortunately, we have no official record on Pak's position on clothing other than encouraging a conservative, tidy, and clean appearance appropriate to time and place.

Terminology used to designate members were basic and not laudatory. Members were addressed by dharma name or dharma title, and everyone was equally a member of the congregation (*hoewŏn* 會員) and a member of an edification group (*tanwŏn* 團員). The early material does not reveal any distinguishing of members through formal titles, other than using generic, common terms for religious followers, administrative positions, or leaders of a group. The original regulations outlined two membership levels: *chega kongbuin* (在家工夫人 lit. someone studying while staying home, i.e. the laity), viz., members that did not have any formal administrative or training commitments; and *ch'ulga kongbuin* (出家工夫人 lit. someone studying while having left home, i.e. fully-committed members), viz., members who took on additional

⁵ I have heard two version of this oral history. In one, Pak opposed uniforms because it sets up a situation where the community demands someone do something they may not want to do, which Pak specifically prohibited (See *Doctrinal Books*, 91; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 84). In the other, Pak opposed it because it drew an artificial distinction between members. We could infer that he had some awareness of the authority invested in religious clothing and that he must have been opposed to such artificial displays.

administrative, teaching, and training commitments.⁶ There were no ‘ordained’ members. *Ch’ulga kongbuin* were members who had more leadership responsibility and had committed to attending two three-month training sessions during the agricultural off-seasons of winter and summer. *Chega kongbuin* attended trainings sessions, attended monthly temple meetings, helped with the order’s numerous activities, provided support and assistance, but they did not hold formal administrative responsibilities. During the agricultural busy times of spring planting and autumn harvest, *chega kongbuin* spent time working the fields; the more committed *ch’ulga kongbuin* continued working on public projects for the order. If *ch’ulga kongbuin* had farms, businesses, or family responsibilities, those were secondary to their commitment to the order’s public projects; in addition, it is important to note, they were not restricted from dealing with such personal affairs in the regulations.

Several terms developed to identify fully committed *ch’ulga kongbuin*. By 1924, the now standard term *chŏnmu ch’ulsin* (專務出身, loosely meaning one who has advanced to leadership or management status) was in use.⁷ Invested with leadership roles in the community, *chŏnmu ch’ulsin* functioned as the main administrators and teachers, faithfully attended all training sessions and retreat periods, attended regular meetings, and dedicated their time and resources to building the order and managing

⁶ *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch’onggan*, 17-18.

⁷ For a brief history of the development of the term, see *Wŏnbulgyo taesajon*, 981-982.

its endeavors and activities. Some lived and worked communally at public properties, and some maintained their own homes, farms, and businesses; some remained single and devoted completely to the order, but most were married with families. It was a category of membership that blurred the line between those at home and those more committed, since many of these fully committed members still had homes and families. There were no restrictions on marriage, no demands of celibacy, no formal clothing to wear, and financial independence was expected. Pak and Song were both married with children, obviously not celibate since they fathered children during this time, and still had their own homes. They spent much of their time at the communal facilities and the headquarters, leaving their wives to manage family and home affairs as much as possible; but they still had their homes and could still help with family affairs.

By the last version of the regulations used before the new constitution enacted by Song, the categories to indicate lay and committed members evolved into *ch'ulga hoewŏn* (出家會員 lit. a member who has left home) and *chega hoewŏn* (在家會員 lit. a member living at home). The designation of *chŏnmu ch'ulsin* remained in use, and this version of the regulations reveals a more developed idea of committed ritual specialists.⁸ Enacted prior to the realignment of the order under a new constitution in 1948, these regulations still have a strong sense of freedom for committed members, as long as they live up to their responsibilities. Their role is defined by expectations rather than restrictions.

⁸ *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, 297-300.

Pak utilized the Buddhist categories of *ch'ulga* and *chega* to distinguish two levels of membership. These terms are misleading in a Wŏn Buddhist context. Buddhist *ch'ulga* (Sk. *pravrajita*, lit. going forth) is a technical term to indicate when someone has completely renounced family responsibilities to live as a celibate practitioner within a Buddhist order. Originally an uncomplicated process of taking refuge, Buddhist ordination evolved into a two-step process of a novitiate followed by full ordination. Committed members of Pak's order initially took on the responsibility of *ch'ulga* by paying a small membership due and committing themselves to work and practice. There was no formal 'ordination.' After his death, the process of becoming a *ch'ulga* evolved into a three-step postulant-novitiate-initiation process, with a lengthy six- to eight-year period before full initiation. This change has crippled the order and left it with an ever-dwindling number of ordinands. Unlike the mainstream Buddhist traditions, Wŏn Buddhists do not abandon their families; and even celibate *ch'ulga* may occasionally have to shoulder family responsibilities or travel to aid an ailing parent or family member.

In the current constitution, the distinction between laity and ordained is defined simply as *ch'ulga* and *chega*, removing reference to 'membership' or 'study' in the designation. The distinction rests now on leaving the household life. Since the order defines *ch'ulga* as devoting one's life to the order through public service, and since the path of *ch'ulga* still enshrines the freedom to marry, it is misleading to use the term

ch'ulga in reference to fully-committed members: they do not in fact leave their families. Now that the order has evolved a sharp division between lay and ordained members, this edit of the two membership levels makes sense; however, these terms are still misleading. Many lay members have much greater understanding of doctrine, perform incredible acts of public charity and service to the order, are intensely committed, and are not afforded the same rank as *ch'ulga*; many male *ch'ulga* are householders with families, and some *ch'ulga* have only a superficial understanding of the teaching and function as glorified temple administrators.

Translating *ch'ulga* as 'ordained' is misleading in a Wŏn Buddhist context. I utilize the term to be consistent with official English material, but *ch'ulga* are not ordained with any particularly ritual power or authority. They do not consecrate, bless, or act as an intermediary for any otherworldly, supernatural, or 'spiritual' power. *Ch'ulga* are endowed with administrative power to act on behalf of a temple, to make decisions on the day-to-day administrative and financial operations of temples and organizations, and to lead rituals and ceremonies; however, important temple decisions are always made in conjunction with lay leadership. *Ch'ulga* receive training in the doctrine, regulations, and rituals, but they are not the sole conductors or officiators of ritual: any member can conduct public rituals, and they often do. Ritual etiquette and protocol are all listed in the *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* for anyone to utilize, and they do not require special training to perform. When considering the unclear line between the two

groups in the early years, the best translation of *chega* and *ch'ulga* is simply 'member' and 'full-time member;' any other distinction is misleading. Originally quite similar, the two groups now appear distinct, but under scrutiny, the elevated position of *ch'ulga* is an artificial construct.

The order moved away from Pak's simple framework of equal members distinguished by dharma ranks with a group of committed members (*ch'ulga*, i.e. *chõnmu ch'ulsin*) leading as administrators and teachers. Both groups are now further subdivided. The laity are divided into *sindo* (信徒 general devotee), *kyodo* (教徒 adherent), and *kõjin ch'ulchin* (居塵出塵 lit. in and out of the mundane). *Sindo* are devotees of Pak's teaching or attendees at meetings that have not entered the order through initiations and do not have a dharma name. *Kyodo* are adherents that have gone through initiation and have receive a dharma name. They represent the vast majority of Wõn Buddhists, and they may or may not attend meetings regularly. Once someone becomes an adherent, they are permanently registered in the order. *Kõjin ch'ulchin* are unwavering devoted lay adherents that attend regularly and contribute greatly to the order and its works. Distinguishing between *ch'ulga* and *chega* was quite difficult and for all purposes unnecessary in the early years, as member equally participated in the order. In the end years of the Buddhadharma Research Society before Song transformed the order into Wõn Buddhism, the status of *kõjin ch'ulchin* differentiated members who were indistinguishable from *ch'ulga* in their efforts, practice, and involvement in the

order but had not formally taken on leadership responsibilities: they built the temples and filled the coffers, but they did not have keys to the door. Lay members are ranked into five levels and subdivided into provisional levels between each level based on dharma ranks, achievements, and contributions to the order.

Chõnmu ch'ulsin (i.e. *ch'ulga*) are now divided into three categories: *kyomu* (教務 lit. duty to edify, or teacher), *tomu* (道務 lit. duty to the way), and *tõngmu* (德務 lit. duty to be virtuous). These are further divided and ranked into five levels and subdivided into provisional levels between each level based on their dharma ranks, the work they have done, and various achievements. Until they rise in the hierarchy and receive dharma titles based on high rank, age, or service, these titles are used in conjunction with their dharma name by attaching the honorific suffix *-nim*, so *kyomu-nim*, *tomu-nim*, and *tõngmu-nim*.

While the term *kyomu* was around and used sporadically in some of the early documents to indicate a religious worker, it was not used as a title or category. It began to be used as a title for *chõnmu ch'ulsin* in the 1960s, when the five graded levels for *chõnmu ch'ulsin* were established and when membership as a *chõnmu ch'ulsin* became more restrictive. In 1976, the Supreme Council, composed of *chõnmu ch'ulsin*, established *kyomu* as an honorary title and formal means of address for *chõnmu ch'ulsin*. The lives of *kyomu* are strictly regulated by the now-lengthy regulations governing *chõnmu ch'ulsin*. Many of the freedoms they enjoyed during Pak's time are gone and

following additional rules not listed in the governing regulations, such as female celibacy, is expected.⁹ Current regulations are characterized more by restrictions rather than expectations, unlike the initial regulations.

Established in 1994, the honorary title of *tomu* is granted to devoted members who work closely with temples, Headquarters, or the numerous school and hospitals run by the order, usually in full-time jobs. They provide various administrative, research, medical, or educational services, and may live at home or live in a temple, at Headquarters, or other property run by the order. They are acknowledged for their dedication, practice, and knowledge of the teaching, and are usually financially compensated less than regular employment in their field, if they are compensated at all. A means to recognize their service and practice, it is an honorific but empty title that holds no authority, and they are not usually promoted through the ranks of the order to positions of power.

Tōngmu are even lower and provide general and skilled labor. They perform such tasks as farming the fields, cooking food, working as maintenance or facility managers, driving vehicles, or delivering goods, and are recognized for their deep devotion to the order and the teaching. An honorific title, yes, but also empty of any authority or privilege. As a novice, I worked and lived with *tomu* and *tōngmu* and found

⁹ The order officially romanized *chōnmu ch'ulsin* as *junmoo-choolshin* in the translation of the regulations, which follows no standard form of romanization. See "Regulations Governing Junmoo-choolshin," in *Wōnbulgyo yōng'ō hyōn'gyu chip*, 45-68.

them to be the humblest, truly selfless, and most under-appreciated and overlooked individuals in the entire community. They often have a deep understanding of Pak's doctrine and teachings and quietly remain on the sidelines. Usually married with children, *tomu* and *tõngmu* will often arrive at temples or Headquarters early for morning meditation or work late and participate in evening meditation. Many of my most cherished moments and profound conversations in Korea were spent talking with a *tomu* or *tõngmu*, while they prepared food in the kitchen, pulled weeds in the greenhouse, obediently acted as personal assistant for a busy *kyomu*, or cleaned up the grounds.

Enshrined in the doctrine, all versions of the constitution have forbidden discrimination between *ch'ulga* and *chega*. Originally both groups worked, lived, and practiced together and shared all levels of responsibility. In the current constitution, all members share a basic set of rights and obligations. Members are obliged to pray in the morning and evening, attend meetings, help each other, and guide others to Wõn Buddhism. These obligations are not part of the early version of the constitution. Members also share the right to vote, be elected, and participate in the administration of the order "in accordance with the rules" (the regulations, of course, further restrict who can do what). Although lay members share these rights in the new constitution, *kyomu* dominate the upper echelon of the order and hold the highest administrative positions. Lay members work full-time jobs outside the order, attend dharma meetings and

retreats, build the temples, and supply all the materials and goods to keep the order going; and *kyomu* no longer work outside the order and are now the temple-key holders and primary decision makers.

Governance

The community is led by the Head Dharma Master (*chongbōpsa* 宗法師) and the Supreme Council (*suwidan* 首位團), all senior *chōnmu ch'ulsin*. The Supreme Council recommends candidates for and elects the Head Dharma Master, who also functions as the head of the Supreme Council. Together, these are the highest governing representatives of the Wŏn Buddhist community. They are elected to six-year terms and may serve two terms. Although the Head Dharma Master leads the order, his power is constitutionally limited, and his office has little independent power. All decisions are made with approval of the Supreme Council. Even administrative appointments, a main function of the Head Dharma Master, must be approved by the Supreme Council. Each Head Dharma Master establishes an independent committee of elders that serves as an advisory body to the office of the Head Dharma Master. This committee has no direct reports, and members have usually served on the Supreme Council or have served in other high-ranking administrative positions.

The Head Dharma Master and the Supreme Council govern the three executive branches of the community: the central council of *kyomu* and lay leaders (*chungang kyōihoe* 中央教議會), the main administration, and the judiciary. The central council

passes resolutions and makes decisions on the constitution, budgets, public assets, and important administrative policies. Representatives are chosen from throughout the community. The heads of the council are elected to three-year terms and manage the office of the central council. The council meets once a year to vote on various matters, and the Head Dharma Master may call a special vote at any time.

The judiciary audits, inspects, and disciplines the community. The director of the judiciary is appointed by the Head Dharma Master, with approval of the Supreme Council. They lead various judicial committees and are ultimately responsible for breaches of regulations, enforcement of the constitution and regulations, disciplinary actions, execution of administrative resolution, recognition of exemplary acts of members, and the inspection and auditing of all public works. Both the central council and the judiciary may pass resolutions through their various committees, but all resolutions must first be approved by the Head Dharma Master before advancing through the administration.

The main executive administrative branch of the community is by far the largest administrative unit. The executive director of the administration is appointed by the Head Dharma Master, with approval of the Supreme Council. This executive director is considered the second in charge of the order, after the Head Dharma Master, and wields considerable power as the head of the governing board of the central administration, which is comprised of the heads of each administrative department.

The central administration is comprised of eight departments: Planning and Coordination, Edification and Training, General Affairs, Finance and Business, Education, Welfare and Philanthropy, Cultural Affairs, and International Affairs. These departments govern all subsidiary organization, district offices, temples, and institutions. Considering that Wŏn Buddhism has over five hundred temples, several hospitals and clinics, primary and secondary schools, a large university, retirement homes, retreat centers, cemeteries, and Headquarters, it is impressive that the entire executive administration is run out of a few small buildings. The administration function as the primary executive body that makes important policy and procedural decisions and archives information related to the community's numerous public projects. Except for major decisions, most of the administrative authority is decentralized within the various district offices, schools, and other affiliated organizations, which function independently from but report to the central administration. *Kyomu* dominate all three executive branches, and most of the central administrative branch leadership are *kyomu*. Most of the large institutions and subsidiary organization are also controlled by *kyomu*.

Postulants and Novices

Since *kyomu* have the highest administrative and ritual responsibilities, they require more training. Originally, *chŏnmu ch'ulsin* participated yearly in two three-month retreat-like practice sessions as their additional commitment to the order: paying

your fee and showing up to the sessions endowed you with the status of *chõnmu ch'ulsin*. Now, becoming *chõnmu ch'ulsin* is a long progression, and *kyomu* go through a three-step process of service and education before a full-initiation ceremony: one to two years as a postulant (*kansa* 幹事); four years of novice 'undergraduate' education in Wõn Buddhism; and finally two years of novice 'graduate' education in Wõn Buddhism. During this time, they live communally in a temple or dormitory with other postulants, novices, and *kyomu*. The result is a bachelor's degree in Wõn Buddhism, a master's degree in Wõn Buddhism, and formal initiation as a *kyomu*.

Postulants (*kansa* 幹事 lit. general worker, manager, administrator) can serve at Headquarters or any temple. Postulants live and work with *kyomu* for one to two years, which provides time to experience life within the order and time for *kyomu* to discern the dedication of the postulant. Many postulants serve at busy regional head temples and at Headquarters. They live together under the supervision of assigned *kyomu* and in gendered groups. Generally, postulants are young and often right out of high school, but this is not a rule. I worked as a postulant at Headquarters, and at that time, I was the oldest at twenty-five years old. Most of the postulants were young and came from male *kyomu* families or from families of devoted lay people. I met few postulants who chose the path of *kyomu* on their own or who came from outside the community: family and temple members had preened and encouraged them to become *kyomu* since an

early age. The few postulants I met who had chosen the path on their own and came from outside the order were in their mid to late-twenties or older.

Life as a postulant is busy with no time to relax. Postulants wake up early in the morning for meditation with the *kyomu* and work the entire day. Each postulant is assigned a specific duty, office, or *kyomu*, and they perform most of the grunt work for that assignment. *Kyomu* task postulants with anything from personal errands, helping with office work, setting up meetings, serving refreshments, driving, cleaning, cooking, laundry – anything. If a postulant has a special skill or aptitude, the order may utilize that skill, but, for the most part, they provide low-level free and unpaid labor for the administration of temples and Headquarters. There is lots of bowing, full prostrations, regular kowtowing, and the occasional performed winsomeness.¹⁰ A postulant never says no to a request: complete obedience is expected. *Kyomu* treat them tenderly and lovingly but firmly, and usually address them publicly in a low-form style of familiar Korean language as if they are young children. The more obedient and compliant the postulant, the more they will be praised as excellent *kyomu* material. As a twenty-five-year-old American who left home at eighteen, had been working full-time since fifteen, had already moved across the United States twice, and gave up a high-pressure

¹⁰ Performed winsomeness (*aegyo* 愛嬌) is the performance of infantilized cuteness or child-like charm. Within Korean culture, *aegyo* is a somewhat acceptable form of maintaining face (*ch'emyun* 體面) or displaying one's situational social intelligence (*nunch'i* 눈치). See Aljosar Puzar and Yewon Hong, "Korean Cuties: Understanding Performed Winsomeness (Aegyo) in South Korea," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* (June 2018), DOI: 10.1080/14442213.2018.1477826.

advertising career to move across the Pacific to join the order, I found the experience overly patronizing, juvenile, controlling, and condescending. A shared sense of suffering through the experience pervades the life of postulants. I still cringe when I hear *kyomu* speak in a cutesy, infantilized low form of Korean to postulants or tell them to make a cup of tea.¹¹ I did not make a good servant.

On top of the normal work schedule, postulants study the doctrine in groups with a *kyomu* and have several regional and national gatherings at head temples or at Headquarters. Several times a year they go on outings or pilgrimage to various sacred Wŏn Buddhist sites or other Buddhist temples. The postulants form strong and lasting bonds during this intensely social experience. At Headquarters, they live together in a large room of one of the original traditional buildings, with men in one building, women in another. When given some free time, postulants do similar things as other young men and women in Korea: meet at cafes, go shopping, go see movies, go to game rooms, sing karaoke, talk about girls and boys and pop culture, go visit family or

¹¹ Many *kyomu* will balk at this depiction and explain that speaking in cutesy familiar form is a way to express affection, concern, and closeness with postulants. Such explanations contradict Pak's prohibition on discrimination based on age and rank. One of my Wŏn Buddhist mentors, a senior and well-known female *kyomu*, told me early on to never publicly speak low-form Korean to anyone in the order, especially lay members. She always spoke in a familiar but polite form of Korean in public, even to postulants and *kyomu* much lower in status, and reserved low form for private conversation with close friends. Her reason was simple – human emotions. Becoming too close and familiar will only lead to trouble in the order. She advised me to be friendly, familiar, and close to everyone equally, and to maintain a sense of decorum and distance or risk becoming too attached or biased in dealing with people in the order. She was a religious teacher, first and foremost, and had to lead by example. After this, I always had a tough time speaking low-form of casual Korean with anyone. My friends outside Wŏn Buddhism got angry and demanded I stop using the polite form with them, which I tried but still find difficult.

friends, and sometimes grab a beer (usually without telling *kyomu*). The occasional secret sneaking out over the walls for a night out with friends was not uncommon. Although a difficult and challenging time full of arduous work and long days, the attitude is one of suffering through it together. Not all of them make it through.

Devout families often pressure teens to enter the order. Several postulants I met in Korea were terribly unhappy and confused. They wanted to please their family, did not dare challenge parental wishes, and worked hard to do their best; but they did not want to be there. They had mixed feelings about the order and dreamed of doing anything else. Most of them were virginal (the preferred status for postulants) and going through sexual and hormonal changes in a hyper-conservative religious environment. In such close quarters working day and night, sexual tensions emerged, along with some secret fooling around. When they expressed doubt or confusion, *kyomu* would encourage them to be more 'selfless' and to live up to this great calling or dismiss their concerns through micro-aggressive comments like "Oh, don't say that! What would your family think?" or "Be strong like the founders!" Over time, these microaggressions would whittle away at the self-esteem of those with doubts and fears about this path chosen for them. I saw several postulants disappear and never return. It was difficult to watch devoted young men and women burdened by the heavy karmic responsibility forced upon them. This was particularly so for the closeted gay men and

lesbian postulants I met, who often felt forced into the order due to their families sensing something was different about them.

For the majority that make it past the postulant stage, a senior *kyomu* recommends and sponsors them as a novice (*yebi kyoyōkcha* 豫備教役者 lit. preparatory religious worker or *yebi kyou* 豫備教友 lit. preparatory religious friend). They hold a novice ceremony and make a public vow to the fourfold beneficence that they will complete this great and challenging task and sacrifice themselves for the community and the salvation of the world. A poignant and uplifting moment, the ceremony is full of good cheer, encouragement, and praise. Novices in the order are valued and cherished members of the community, and once they enter this path, respect and honor are given, and all efforts are made to counsel and keep them going in the *kyomu* fold. Novices enroll in one of the ‘undergraduate’ programs at the two schools that offer Wŏn Buddhist studies: Wonkwang University and Youngsan College.

Novice life is also terribly busy. On top of scriptural studies, novices participate in a variety of religious, physical, and charitable activities. They help with spring planting and fall harvests of crops. They help with various physical labor. They have numerous social and study groups, as well as meetings, conferences, and retreats. They live communally in male and female dormitories, and each dorm has a *kyomu* in charge who lives with and mentors them. Each room has three to four (or more) novices, depending on available space and the number of students. I attended Youngsan

College, a small school exclusively for novices tucked deep in the countryside of Pak's home village at the original site of the order and its inaugural levee project. The male dormitory had extra room, so a few senior students lived two in a room, while the freshmen had four in a room. Since the male dormitory had empty rooms, the school administrators compassionately decided I should have my own room since I did not grow up living with multiple people in a small room. This allowed me private conversations with novices and *kyomu* that otherwise would have been difficult: privacy was hard to find. The male dormitory was a drafty old building in the post-war concrete Soviet block style with Korean flare, old wood floors, and typical yellow vinyl in the rooms. The female dormitory was a new, multi-storied, granite-clad, modern Korean-style building with a blue-tiled roof, tiled hallways, nicer yellow vinyl in the rooms, built-ins, and more spacious.

Novices wear a uniform for formal occasions like Catholic high school uniforms. This has changed over the last few years, but at the time I was there, the men wore black suits, white button-down shirts, and black ties for formal occasions and dharma meetings. Men wore contemporary street clothes the rest of the time, and everyone dressed like young conservative religious people in the United States. They could also wear casual and formal Korean clothing, which was encouraged, but not required. They still wear a suit in formal settings but now wear a collared shirt like a Catholic priest, without the black tie. This change compensated for the clothing restrictions expected

from the women, a topic too controversial and sensitive for the community to deal with: instead of loosening the unreasonable and discriminatory restrictions for women, they took the less-challenging route and created a male uniform for formal occasions. Men in Korean culture still have more power and independence than women, and male novices and *kyomu* still wear normal everyday street clothes, blending into society whenever they want. Some male *kyomu* and novices also wear the optional Korean style casual clothing, which is always acceptable for both sexes.

Female novice formal clothing, like that of men, also looks like a black Catholic high school uniform. They wear long calf-length black skirts with white button-down shirts. Their shirts hide their breasts, and effort is made to not have one's breast stick out. Hair is usually cut in an unflattering, banged shoulder-length bob or shorter, and sometimes pulled back into a short ponytail with a clip or bow. They do not wear makeup or style their hair. For casual wear, they dress in gender-neutral Western clothing that hides their feminine form or wear gender-neutral traditional Korean casual wear. When they wear Western-style clothing, they wear unflattering straight-legged pants and ill-fitting or over-sized button down white or polo shirts, which often makes them look boyish. Being a young gay man, when I first saw a couple of female novices dressed casually and walking around Wonkwang University campus, I was genuinely excited and thought "Cool! Korean lesbians!" I seriously thought they were a

lesbian couple dressed like boys and holding hands.¹² When I asked my Korean roommate, who had studied abroad and was not a Wŏn Buddhist, he laughed out loud and told me they were novices and that he did not know why they dressed like that. They do not dress like other young Korean women and stand out.

This habit has relaxed a bit. Women still dress to hide their female bodies, but for casual clothing they may now wear large t-shirts instead of button-down white shirts or polo-type pullovers. I rarely see female novices wear fashionable clothing, summer dresses, feminine blouses, a tank top, fitted jeans or slacks, or anything remotely revealing of the female body. I have never seen a female novice dress in any contemporary feminine clothing typical of an average Korean or American woman. Male novices, of course, do not dress to hide their male bodies and wear contemporary conservative men's fashion. I do see more female novices opting for the gender-neutral traditional Korean clothing these days. The pressure to not reveal their femininity and dress in a neutral and un-sexed way emanates from the elder female *kyomu* in the order. I hear many complaints from young female novices that detest the way they are expected to dress, as if they live, as one young novice noted, in small-town 1950s communist China. When I met up with a female novice friend in Seoul away from other Wŏn Buddhists, it was refreshing to see her dressed in normal women's clothing, which

¹² Holding hands with members of the same sex is quite common in Korea. This was completely my misreading of the situation.

she wore because no *kyomu* were around. Her demeanor relaxed, and she told me why – she did not stand out in the crowd. She blended in and looked like an average young woman, which is what Pak expected from his order in terms of clothing. She was very devoted to the teaching but eventually left the order due to the extra restrictions on women.

During the week, novices have a busy schedule. The day starts at five in the morning with one hour of meditation and chanting, followed by about thirty minutes of calisthenics and yogic stretching. After that, about an hour of cleaning or other manual labor around the dormitory, school, Headquarters, or other public areas. Since I had an interest in farming and knowledge of plants, I was assigned work in the greenhouse and fields. After breakfast in the cafeteria and a short break, classes started and went until lunch time. After lunch in the cafeteria, more classes or individual studying until dinner. After dinner, students are free until the evening chanting and meditation session at nine, but most continue studying. After the evening chanting and meditation, students spend time reflecting on the day, checking and recording their behavior and compliance with the precepts in a morality book, and journal any poignant thoughts, awakenings, or concerns they had from the day.¹³ We were asleep by ten-thirty, which

¹³ Their morality books and journals are regularly checked by *kyomu* in charge of edification. The journaling and checking of precepts in morality books had a strong performative aspect, since everyone knew they would be reviewed by *kyomu*. Several novices told me they never wrote anything too serious or pointedly critical in their journal and purposely wrote what they thought would look good to *kyomu*. Journaling and the use of morality books are part of Pak's practice, but the journaling aspect was more for personal reflection and not assessment. See *Doctrinal Books*, 74-77; *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*, 70-72.

was not difficult for most students after a busy day, but sometimes students would stay up later. Since I had my own room, I often had someone sneak up to my room for a late-night conversation or other hushed nonsense. Weekends are spent studying and doing chores, and Sunday is the main dharma service. Students are expected to remain at the dormitory on the weekends, but it was not unusual for a student to visit family, a temple, or Headquarters.

The curriculum of the 'undergraduate' program is comprised of courses on doctrine, regulations, ritual etiquette, history, Pak and Song's scriptures, journaling, Wŏn Buddhist-style homiletics, meditation, shamefully basic study of a few Buddhist scriptures, and one or two survey courses on world religions and Buddhism. It is not a proper undergraduate program: no critical evaluation or engagement with texts, history, or theory; no utilization of standard academic methodologies; no significant exploration of Buddhism outside of Wŏn Buddhism; no core curriculum in humanities and the sciences; and the coursework and materials are not challenging. Wŏn Buddhist studies is a lot of memorization and a lot of reading and re-reading of already familiar texts. It is a high school-level trade school for Wŏn Buddhist *kyomu*, which could be accomplished without the faux-academic study or conference of 'degrees.' The poor level of unchallenging education was one reason I left.

While it was a rigorous and busy life, it was just that – busy. It seemed like too much busy work for people being trained as religious leaders. I thoroughly appreciated

the regulated schedule, the manual labor, working in the fields, and the day-to-day discipline of chores; but, I expected a lot more meditation, contemplation, and chanting, more delving into the fundamental principles behind Pak's teachings, more critical engagement with his teaching, higher-level conversation, more exploration of Buddhist texts (as Pak continually pressed his followers), and generally more religious discipline and training. While we did live with a few *kyomu* who had strong practices, most were subpar at best. They had no training in teaching and no understanding of modern pedagogy or young psychologies. They were not academics. Meditation was a chore for almost everyone, and even the *kyomu* were half-asleep during morning meditation. One hour of meditation and chanting in the morning seemed low for *kyomu* training, so I usually got up at four in the morning and was in the meditation hall by half past four by myself. Sometimes I got up earlier. Except for the president of the school, who showed up regularly a bit earlier, everyone else rolled in right at five, and at least one *kyomu* or novice would regularly show up late.

It was a boarding school for religious youth. Most of the novices were quite immature for life as a religious adherent: they played games, sang songs, and joked around like high-school kids. By the time I entered the novice program, I was twenty-seven and older than other novices. Except for one serious female novice in her thirties, and one rather lazy male novice in his thirties, most were in their early twenties. Most had never worked to support themselves and had no experiences outside of high school

or a few years in college. Even though my fellow novices had made it past the postulant stage, the same problems plagued many: sexual frustrations, mixed feelings about becoming a *kyomu*, family pressures, and general early-twenty angst and uncertainty about their lives. Most of them were not ready for such responsibility and had not chosen their path. In the brief time I was there, we lost two novices.

The life of male novices was easy compared to female novices. The head of the male dormitory was a *kyomu* in his late forties who was patronizing, bossy, abrasive, not engaged, and lazy. He seemed to relish the authority, expected the bare minimum, and rarely encouraged extra meditation or chanting sessions. The novices kowtowed as expected, but we frequently rolled our eyes behind his back. The dormitory was gross. Since most Korean men are not raised doing house cleaning (woman's work), he had no ability to train the male novices in how to thoroughly clean, and women never used the building. The bathroom was disgusting and unsanitary. Imagine around twenty men in their early twenties sharing a public shower, toilet, and laundry room without one person that knew how to clean. All they did was push dirty towels and mops around on the floor: nothing ever got clean. Toilets had dried crap on the sides of the bowls, stalls had boogers wiped on the walls, sinks full of phlegm.

I was so appalled one day when I got into the shower and found a mass of phlegm, hair, soap scum, dirt, grass, and a big dead grasshopper clogging the drain of the fifthly shower stall, that I started cleaning, missed meditation, morning chores, and

breakfast and was found cleaning the facility in a frenzy. I stopped after six hours and had only removed the foulest of dirt and grossness from the showers, toilets, and laundry area. The male novices and *kyomu* saw that I knew how to clean (my mother taught all her children, fortunately), and thus I was put on weekend bathroom cleaning duty. I did not mind. From that point on, I could at least shower and shit in a clean environment, and I always made sure one toilet and one shower were extra clean. Although we were busy with our studies, dormitory life for the male novices was a lazy life of low expectations. It was not uncommon to hear sports blaring on the single TV in the building and to hear young men cheering their favorite team. Sneaking out at night was quite common. The female novices lived in a whole other world of cleanliness and discipline.

As soon as I arrived at Youngsan College, I gravitated toward a senior female *kyomu* in her mid-fifties. She was second in charge after the school president (who we rarely saw or engaged) and in charge of the female dormitory. I immediately recognized she had a strong practice, lived a disciplined life, was incredibly open minded for a conservative Wŏn Buddhist, and was keenly aware of problems in the order. I was able to speak freely and could ask her any question. She offered solid, well-reasoned advice and challenged me both intellectually and personally. I told her I needed more guidance and wanted her mentorship, so she invited me regularly into the female dormitory, which men rarely entered. I quickly befriended the female novices,

and they felt comfortable with me coming and going. Most knew I was gay and kept that knowledge private. The *kyomu* lead a disciplined, quiet, and clean dormitory. The female novices lead studious and contemplative lives, and chores were doled out with nothing overlooked. You could eat ramen out of their toilets. The *kyomu* was strict about following the time schedule, the female novices usually showed up to morning meditation on time, and lights-out was enforced. She was engaged in their lives, aware of their difficulties and problems, and talked openly and respectfully with them and me about the contemporary challenges facing the order. For some of the young female novices, it was horribly strict, but in my eyes, it was a proper life for a religious community. I wanted the structure and discipline they had.

Although life for the female novices was regimented and they had a stern but caring dorm leader, most of them were too young and immature for life as a *kyomu*. Many struggled with sexual desires, a taboo topic unaddressed by *kyomu*, and they struggled with the stark discrimination between men and women. Several of them wanted to get married and have children. These were smart young women growing up in contemporary South Korea: they easily recognized the obvious gender inequality and knew that it was the reason for the decreasing number of female novices. The thought of being forced into a life of celibacy, when the men could choose and Pak expressly forbid such discrimination, created profound emotional stress and confusion.

Some sincerely wanted to be *kyomu*, but they did not want the discrimination and did not know if they could handle it for the rest of their lives. Several did not want to be there. One young novice told me through tears that she was forced by her family to become a *kyomu*. Family is everything in Korea. She was from a devout family and grew up within the community; and the psychological stress of disappointing everyone made her physically sick and frail. I developed an intense brotherly love for her and wanted to protect her from the psychological nightmare she was experiencing, but all I could do was listen to her problems and offer emotional support. She became *kyomu* but later left the order. The palpable disappointment in *kyomu* voices when they told me she left made me angry: I was elated to learn that she finally left, but I know the stress and guilt will never leave her. *Kyomu* make a cosmic vow to commit themselves till death, and she will bear that burden for life. Leaving is no light affair, and it comes with a lot of beseeching to stay and expressed disappointment. After a year and a half of listening to and witnessing the psychological stress of the discrimination inflicted on devoted female followers, I left with a heavy heart. I could not stomach it anymore and felt complicit. I raised my voice as much as I could, but it was not my place to criticize the hyper-conservative and patriarchal Korean culture. My verbalized observations did more harm than good, and I was not so skillful in my twenties at expressing myself in a productive way. Leaving after talking a vow, however, will always eat at my mind.

After the first four years, novices graduate from the undergraduate program and advance to graduate studies. Graduate school is only offered at Wonkwang University in Korea or at Won Institute of Graduate Studies in the United States. Only a select few are granted the chance to study in the United States; sometimes as few as one or two a year. Allowing students to study in America presents risks: they will be exposed to cultures, ideas, and experiences that may generate doubt at a critical time in their education. Graduate school is identical to the undergraduate program, with more emphasis on temple management and homiletics. Like most graduate programs, it lasts two years, and most of that time is spent studying and memorizing text for the ordination exam. The didactic curriculum at both Wonkwang and Won Institute would not pass for a typical American or European graduate program in Buddhist studies. The focus is Wŏn Buddhism, with no critical engagement through standard methodologies. It is another two years of high school-level training for Wŏn Buddhist ritual specialists. Wŏn Buddhist intellectuals who desire further study attend schools like Seoul National University or study abroad.

Overall, novice life is busy but lacking in challenging intellectual engagement, rigorous discipline, and mental cultivation. Instead of following the practice outlined in the teaching, one of training in small groups and fixed retreat periods, the order has forced training into a faux higher-education format. The meditation training is lackluster, and few meditation masters are available, even though meditation and

practice are the heart of Pak's original training. There is lots of ritual training, training in details of the doctrine, training in etiquette, and memorization of texts, but even lay people recognized that young and newly-ordained *kyomu* assigned to their temples are usually too immature and green to offer emotional and psychological support or advice and guidance in real-world issues. Lay members frequently comment about finding it difficult and boring to listen to a young *kyomu* speak at a dharma meeting about the nature of suffering and awakening when they have such little life experience. I still hear from many novices that the current model of *kyomu* training and ordination is seriously lacking, uninspiring, and a waste of time, energy, and money.

The problem of the current method of 'academic' training and testing is discussed privately within the community, but no solution has been reached. The most viable proposal for reformation that I hear is a return to the original method of training: alternating periods of three months of retreat, and three months working in a temple or other facility – the seasonally-based model of training that Pak prescribed. This would involve a full return to the edification *tan* system with training in small, intimate discussion groups, rather than training in classrooms listening to lectures, or dispersal of the novices throughout the community in an apprentice-type training where they join an edification *tan* of senior members. Training could easily be accomplished in a one-year postulant period followed by a two or three-year novice training that ends in full initiation as *kyomu*. The current six to eight-year period of postulancy and novice

training is excessive and unnecessary. With the original edification system of small groups, evaluation of novices would not require a comprehensive ordination exam but rather evaluation by the *tan* one step up from their own edification group. Since Pak promoted perpetual training in the three-month cycle for *chõnmu ch'ulsin*, which is no longer the case, reinstating this method of training would not only aid in *kyomu* training but would also revitalize the order of *chõnmu ch'ulsin*. It would reorient the entire force of *kyomu* back into practice-based training and teaching rather than performing dull and insipid, poorly attended, once-a-week Sunday dharma services. Academic training (which is not currently taking place anyway) should be left to those who desire becoming academic researchers and university professors. Such proposals are discussed, but no head administrator or leader in the order with the vision to accomplish such a reformation has come forward. The order continues to diminish in size with an aging population of *kyomu* and remains locked in an unsustainable pattern of superfluous and unnecessary training to which few members wish to commit.

After training has been completed, the ordinates participate in an initiation ceremony (*tũkto ũisik* 得度儀式), where they make a public vow to dedicate their lives to the community and to saving all beings from the bitter sea of suffering. A formal, solemn, and serious event meant to strengthen the resolve of the new initiate's vow, it is also a joyous event followed by lots of celebration, both public and private. The new *kyomu* is assigned to a temple, regional office, or Headquarters, as needed, and enters as

a low-level *kyomu* who assists a head or lead *kyomu* of a temple or office. Most *kyomu* will not lead a temple until they have served for many years, and even then, some may never lead their own temple.

The Ordained

Kyomu are regularly moved around and reassigned, but some may stay in an assignment for many years. Reassignment depends on the needs of the order, the laity, and the *kyomu*. The desires and skills of the *kyomu* are considered, and they may request an assignment; but a preferred assignment is not guaranteed. Some *kyomu* who achieve notoriety or fame and successfully missionize through a temple may receive repeated assignments at the same location, in all practical purposes being permanently assigned to the temple. One notable contemporary example is famed *kyomu* Pak Ch'ongsu 朴清秀 (b. 1939) at Kangnam Temple in Seoul. Known internationally as Mother Pak, she and Kangnam Temple members were active in charity works throughout Asia, building schools and hospitals for the poor and shipping many containers of clothing and aid to needy communities. Pak lived and worked on the third floor of the temple in a large suite with its own small dharma hall, and she spent most of her later career at Kangnam Temple in a permanent assignment until her recent retirement. *Kyomu* who have such a special and successful relationship with their Temple can stay for many years, but most will cycle through several temples and assignments until they reach the mandatory

retirement age of sixty-eight, which may be extended an additional three years only once and with approval of the head of the order.

Unlike during Pak's time, *kyomu* now wear uniforms. Uniforms and ritual clothing are a constant and sensitive topic of discussion. My experience has been that the majority do not want to require uniforms for *kyomu*; however, a strong opposition of powerful and vocal *kyomu* and lay members continually pushes for uniforms, which creates tension within the community, particularly among the *kyomu*. The main issue is the gendered inequality in clothing expectations and style of uniform, an inequality forced on the women by other women.

When I was in Korea during the 1990s, male *kyomu* had worn whatever they wanted since the time of Pak. For formal occasions, a Western-style black suit and tie were expected but not required. I saw male *kyomu* wear all sorts of suits, shirts, and ties, all made of various materials, shades of color, and styles. Most male *kyomu* dressed like conservative Korean businessmen. Many older and senior male *kyomu* wore traditional Korean formalwear in shades of white, grey, and black, for both casual and formal occasions. Never wearing colored fabrics or clothes with embroidered designs, they dressed like typical Koreans seen in old pictures of the Chosŏn countryside. A cottage industry of Wŏn Buddhist seamstresses and tailors makes their Western-styled suits and traditional clothing at a discounted price and sometimes for free. Quality traditional Korean formalwear is far more expensive than a Western-style suit. When

Chon Pal Khn purchased a set of formal Korean winter clothes for me, I was shocked at how much it cost, even at a heavily discounted price for the first white guy to enter the order. I refused a set of Korean-styled summer formal clothes and stuck with a simple and inexpensive black suit. Male *kyomu* had this choice of formalwear, as long as clothes fit general parameters for color, style, and conservativeness.

For casualwear, most male *kyomu* dressed like average Korean men of their age. I saw them wear jeans, slacks, kakis, shorts, sweatpants, cargo pants, and even tight biking shorts. They wore t-shirts, button-downs, flannels, pull-overs, polo shirts, stripes, prints, whatever. Baseball hats and visors were popular. The multi-pocketed tan or green vest is always a favorite with men in their forties and older. Many male *kyomu* wore traditional Korean hemp summer clothes, since they breathe and stay cool in the hot and humid summer. Lots of linen in the summer, too. Korean men were completely free to wear whatever they wanted, as long as it appeared clean, conservative, and not ostentatious. For the most part, male *kyomu* still enjoy this freedom. With suits, they now wear a collared Catholic priest-like shirt instead of a white shirt and tie, the same as novices. For casual wear, more of the men wear traditional Korean clothing than before. They still wear normal street clothes like average men and can easily blend right into Korean and American crowds. The situation is completely different for women *kyomu*.

Women *kyomu* are famous for their black and white *hanbok* 韓服 (traditional Korean clothing) uniform and are expected to wear it often: a long, ankle-length and high-waisted black skirt; and the half-length and long-sleeved white, grey, or black top shirt. They are also known for their black hair parted down the middle and pulled back tight into a small chignon, a standard style for commoner women in Chosŏn. In their formal wear, they look like late-Chosŏn conservative rural women. *Hanbok* are restrictive, especially around the breasts, and camouflage the female form: breasts, hips, and butts disappear into the folds of fabric. Always heavily starched, in summer they wear light hemp or linen tops, and in winter they wear heavier and sometimes quilted cotton tops. Skirts are always black. They usually wear flat or very slightly heeled black slip-on shoes. In winter, they may wear a matching traditional Korean coat, but many wear modern coats, almost always black. Their hair is always pulled back into a chignon, even if not in formal wear. At Headquarters, many women, especially those in charge, wear the uniform every day to work; and at temples, the uniform is worn for all temple events and formal meetings. Depending on age and personal preference, some women always wear the uniform in public and only wear casual clothes in temples, dormitories, or within the grounds of Headquarters. Although it is not designated as mandatory clothing in regulations, wearing the restrictive *hanbok* uniform and hair style is not an option. Fetishized, they are now a look, an image, and a symbol of conservative Wŏn Buddhism. The form and look are so important, I often saw women

kyomu ripping gray hair out by the root or dyeing gray hair black, and to this day, I rarely ever see women *kyomu* with gray hair. Conformity to this form and image is rigidly expected.

Women *kyomu* dress the same as female novices for casual wear. They normally dress in gender-neutral and unflattering clothing that makes them look boyish to Western eyes. Clothing is usually long-sleeved shirts and full-length pants. The difference from novices is that *kyomu* keep their hair pulled back in a tight chignon, even when wearing casual clothing. Like many rural Korean women working outside or in the fields, they will also wear scarves around their necks and don the customary huge visor or bucket hat. Women *kyomu* in casual clothing stand out in a crowd and look awkward, even in Korea and especially in the United States. Unlike the order under Pak's instruction, a visibly stark division between female *chega* and *ch'ulga* is now standard. Like the young novice woman said, *kyomu* look straight out of 1950s communist China in their casual clothing. Women *kyomu* casual clothing is reminiscent of Mao's destruction of femininity through a patriarchal and hyper-masculine attempt to create a visually gendered equality by controlling female sexuality. It is not appreciated or wanted by all the women *kyomu*.¹⁴

¹⁴ Women *kyomu* are reticent to speak publicly or publish op eds about this issue. It is seen as an internal matter, and public rebuke of the traditional clothing is viewed as rude and disrespectful. One notable exception is Bokin Kim, the daughter of the third Head Dharma Master and president of Won Institute of Graduate Studies. Kim is a voice for reform within the order and often the only senior woman *kyomu* not wearing a *hanbok* at formal events in the United States. Even still, in Korea, she wears the *hanbok*.

Some women *kyomu* have been trying to remove or change clothing expectations for many years: it had been discussed long before I joined. Every few years, rumors of change will circulate, but change never comes. The greatest push for change has come from overseas temples, where traditional Korean clothing and the black-haired tight chignon are completely out of place. The United States community attempted reform several years ago but failed, with few women *kyomu* brave enough to show up in public spaces and events dressed differently than older *kyomu*. The pressure to conform is extremely intense: young and old women *kyomu* that experiment with change eventually end up bending to the will of the group.

Women *chega* and *ch'ulga* resist change, and reasons to keep the uniform vary. For some, it is an issue of respect for elder women *kyomu*. Elder women grew up during extreme patriarchy; and wearing the uniform was empowering many years ago. Forcing change when so many women spent their entire lives having to wear the uniform seems dismissive of their sacrifice. Despite contemporary cultural changes, patriarchy is strong, and inequality still exists throughout the world; so, for some women, the uniform is a way to escape control by men and gendered social expectations. For many young women in the order, this logic plays right into patriarchy by controlling their bodies and sexuality. Their bodies become a battleground for patriarchy. I have met lay women and *kyomu* that say female *kyomu* are a sign of power, chastity, and purity and must wear the uniform to distinguish them from other people. As a sign of power,

female *kyomu* have insisted to me that uniforms are important: how else would people know to treat *kyomu* differently? I have heard such logic from both old and young women in the order. With religious clothing comes power and authority. After twenty years of discussing this topic with women *kyomu*, my current position is that religious power lies at the heart of the problem. Removing the uniforms threatens a power that rests tenuously within their grasp. Remove that power, and *kyomu* become too much like laity. Some women *kyomu* and laity are threatened by that possibility. Ironically, tearing down the distinction between lay and ordained was the heart of Pak's intention to create a new order: otherwise, one might as well join the existing Buddhist order.

My extensive firsthand experiences and conversations reveal that men in the order largely do not care about this issue. Male *kyomu* and lay members quickly defer to the women to decide whether to change the outfit, keep the restrictive *hanbok*, or do away with a uniform all together. Although male *kyomu* are expected to fit into some clothing norms, they have more freedom and know they will not be shunned if they transgress such norms. I recently dined with the male heads of the congregation of two large temples in Seoul. Neither of them cared whether the women were celibate and neither cared about the uniforms; but both said their wives did. They deferred to their wives and rarely discussed it, even though they stated that gender inequality contributed significantly to the decline of their temples and the order. The problem is exacerbated by this ambivalence and equivocation of male members: to avoid conflict

with wives and resistant female *kyomu*, men evade becoming a vocal ally for the considerable number of women *kyomu* struggling for equality. The men shrug off responsibility and let the elder women *kyomu* and lay women force inequality onto younger women, even though Pak clearly prohibited such discrimination, which everyone knows. An intense internalized patriarchy infuses some older female *kyomu* and lay members, and they refuse to allow women *kyomu* the freedom to do with their bodies as they see fit. They see strict control – a truly patriarchal perspective – as the only way out of inequality; and they stubbornly refuse any call for equality, even when the call is grounded in Pak’s doctrine. The clothing issue is immensely problematic for the order. The blatant inequality manifested in the uniforms is a contributing factor for the current stagnation of the order: such restrictions unequivocally contradict the doctrine, and people easily recognize it. This starkly gendered inequality is one of the main reasons Wŏn Buddhism has not enjoyed popularity in the United States on par with other Buddhist groups.

As the first white guy to enter the order, I was granted the privilege of meeting many senior members, often in private without others around. On one occasion, I was granted time alone with the fourth Head Dharma Master Yi Kwangjŏng, a honor, since he was always busy with a retinue of attendants and guests (one attendant continued to lurk in the shadows throughout my visit). The head of the order usually wears the full Korean traditional outfit, but sometimes Yi would dress down and wear khakis, hiking

boots, the popular multi-pocketed vest, and bucket hat to go on outings with other *kyomu* or work the grounds. This day he was in his full regalia, and being the young and dumb American, I never hesitated to ask him pointed questions others would not dare ask. I asked him about the clothes. I specifically asked why he wore the fancy robes when Pak never did, and why women were forced to wear *hanbok* when the men could choose. Usually always so composed and calm, he looked startled and chuckled for a minute until he realized I was dead serious. He said that although Pak did not require uniforms and wore conservative and inexpensive clothing, the lay members now expected the head of the order to dress in formal traditional Korean clothing, so he complied. He said the same about the women *kyomu*: because most members want the women to wear *hanbok* uniforms, women *kyomu* should selflessly obey. I asked if he thought it was necessary and essential to the practice. He looked at me squarely in the eye and said no. I then asked if the teachers do what the masses want, which Pak never did, then who is the teacher? If he did not find all the regalia and special clothing necessary, why not teach that and not do it? He just chuckled more, looked uncomfortable, and I changed the topic. This is the general attitude I get from male members and male leadership: just do it, do not ask about it, do not worry about.

Other than formal and casual clothing, the order also has two pieces of ritual vestment. These may be worn by any member officiating a ritual, speaking at a dharma meeting, or assisting with ceremony. The first is an over-robe called a *chǒngbok* (正服

ceremonial clothing), a light and translucent white hemp cloth for summer or a heavier gray cotton for cool weather. The *chǒngbok* is worn over the individual's clothing; in the case of *kyomu*, it is worn over their formal attire. Wearing the *chǒngbok* has two functions: conveying to others the ritualistic role of the individual; and reminding individuals of their sacred role in ritual participation. They are often worn before and after the ceremony until the person can return to a room and take them off. Over this robe is worn a short, waist-length brown ritual bib with a gold circle called a *pǒmnak* (法絡 lit. dharma halter, wrap, or bib). *Kyomu* receive a *pǒmnak* at their full initiation ceremony, and laity receive one when they first rise in dharma rank. While both are handled with care and cherished, these ritual vestments do not hold any sacred power themselves and do not invest the wearer with special status.

Neither of these items were worn by members during Pak's time. During the days of the Buddhadharma Research Society, members participating in ceremony and study wore a black Japanese-style ritual vestment with a brocaded trim around the neck. Since these were later, understandably, seen as reminiscent of Japanese occupation, the ritual vestment was changed to the current Korean style. Pak never wore any circular symbols on his person (pictures of Pak wearing them are imaginative re-creations and not based on fact), and some members find the large gold emblem emblazoned across the ritual bib ostentatious. As previously noted, the symbol of integral oneness, particularly the gold one, has become extremely fetishized. It appears

on everything and everywhere, and it has become central to Wŏn Buddhist identity. Pak used a black circle drawn on wood or paper as an aniconic teaching device to move practitioners away from the fetishization of icons; however, just like a Buddhist temple covered with images of the Buddha, Wŏn Buddhists now surround themselves and their environments with this gold icon, even wearing big circular gold bling around their neck. I have heard members reference supernatural powers contained in some icons, but most members will quickly point out such beliefs as superstitious nonsense.

The daily life of *kyomus* depends on their assignment, but generally they follow the same pattern previously describe for novices. Morning meditation and chanting begins at five or six, sometimes later depending on the location, but normally early in the morning before the workday begins. At Headquarters and larger locations, a hanging dharma bell (*pŏpchong* 法鍾) breaks the quite of the early morning and signals time for meditation, and the individual meditation sessions begin by striking a smaller floor bell seated on a cushion next to the alter. Most *kyomu* file into the dharma hall five minutes before the start, and it is not uncommon for them to arrive late. Except for novices, attendance is not enforced but expected. At Headquarters, you quickly identify the slackers, and I was surprised by the numbers, especially among the men. At temples, the *kyomu* in charge will set the tone for practice. I lived at one temple with a head female *kyomu* that strictly enforced morning meditation, but at another the head *kyomu* was more relaxed and herself did not always show up.

The level of meditation aptitude varies. A small handful of *kyomu* have strong and solid meditation practices, but for many it appears a great burden. The majority of *kyomu* have a tough time staying awake during morning meditation and spend the time nodding off. On the advice of Yi, I woke up at least thirty minutes before meditation, showered and finished with a cold-water rinse, and never meditated with my eyes fully shut. He told me the main problem was that *kyomu* wake up a few minutes before, roll out of bed, and head off to meditation, still basically asleep. My problem was keeping my racing mind still. My mind frequently wondered. I often found myself looking around the hall, listening to sounds outside, or distracted by someone breathing heavy, snoring, burping, or farting. Since my problem was not sleep but hyper-awareness, I frequently noted the state of *kyomu*. It was easy to see them nodding off, slouching forward, or suddenly jerking their body awake. I found this the norm in every Wŏn Buddhist location and facility in which I lived and practiced. Sometimes it disappointed and frustrated me, but after some time and maturity, I finally understood the difficulty of meditation and that staying awake at five in the morning takes a lot of effort and discipline. Now I chuckle to myself when my mind races, I get distracted, and I look forward at a nodding-off *kyomu* leading meditation.¹⁵

¹⁵ The lack of meditation masters in the community is noted by American laity and acknowledged by *kyomu*. Americans will come to temple for a while but leave without any strong guidance in the temple. Many of the English services are run by young *kyomu*, and the senior *kyomu* in the community often do not show up. Without the presence of master meditators and senior *kyomu*, English-speaking meetings are too informal and casual for many practitioners seeking serious meditation groups.

After morning meditation, activities vary depending on the location and assignment. At Headquarters, retreat centers, or other larger institutions, many participate in public exercise, cleaning, and grounds work. Except for postulants and novices, no one is walking around checking who is working and who is not, but morning chores or work is expected. Disciplined *kyomu* will faithfully perform the same tasks every morning and follow a strict personal regimen; but many *kyomu* return to their room and sleep. Temples are the same. Some *kyomu* will perform regular activities and have a strict morning routine, but many return to bedrooms and pass out for an hour or so before breakfast. Breakfast is usually around eight or nine, depending on the location. After breakfast, the average workday is dependent on the location.

At Headquarters and other large facilities, most *kyomu* show up to the offices by nine. Some will come early, some a little later. By ten everyone is busy working. Life for administrators can be quite busy, especially for mid- and lower-level administrators. Like most corporate environments, the brunt of the work falls onto middle management and lower-level staff. Headquarters is no different. Senior management spend a lot of time in meetings, consulting with professional lay people providing services, going for lunch with members and leadership, reviewing activities and decisions made by those in their charge, and communicating with other senior management. I often saw unashamed department heads, usually men, sitting around for hours reading the morning newspaper while everyone busily worked around them. After lunch, everyone

keeps working until dinner. After dinner, someone might return to work if they have something important to do, but most *kyomu* at Headquarters are done and free for the rest of the day.

Evening meditation and chanting begins at nine and is usually performed in dormitory halls, meditation halls, and individual residences instead of everyone coming together like morning meditation. Evening meditation focuses on chanting Wŏn Buddhist mantras, Buddhist scripture, and Amitābha Buddha's name. Prayers may be offered for general well-being or for the success of an activity, upcoming event, or task. I particularly enjoy evening meditation at Headquarters. The sound of dharma bells, bamboo clappers (*chukpi* 竹籠), and wooden fish (*mokt'ak* 木鐸) dispersed over the large campus mixes with the chanting of the *kyomu* and intoxicatingly rises into the night sky, filling the evening with a divine resonance.¹⁶ Since everyone is awake, evening meditation has more presence: *kyomu* are more focused, engaged, and energetic, which is easily discerned in their chanting and breathing.

The daily schedule at temples varies, depending on the activities and size of the congregation. At a busy temple, *kyomu* will follow a similar schedule as at any large Wŏn Buddhist institution, but instead of working in an office, they do temple

¹⁶ Bamboo clappers are pieces of dried bamboo, or other woods carved to look like bamboo, that have been slit down the middle from one end to a handle area, which are held in one hand and slapped against the palm of the other hand to make a clapping sound. They are used to start and end meditation, prayers, and meetings. Wooden fish, or Chinese temple block, is a wooden percussion instrument used in East Asian Mahāyāna traditions to keep the rhythm during chanting.

paperwork in their room, prepare for Sunday service, and meet with members in person and on the phone. Evening meditation is usually done all together in one of the temple dharma halls. Of course, this life is much slower and more casual than Headquarters or a regional office; but, during busy times and events, it may be quite hectic. In a large temple, we sometimes worked late into the evening, unlike at Headquarters, due to an event or ceremony that evening or in the morning; and some weeks we had truly little work and were free to relax or go meet friends and family. Many temples have daycare, and *kyomu* taking care of the children work a fixed schedule; but if the temple is small and has no other business activities, life is on average slow and free. At one small temple I lived that had no daycare or any other special activities, the head *kyomu* spent much of her time sitting around reading and watching TV. It was a slow temple: the congregation was older and small, the younger generation did not attend regularly, and the main temple activity was the Sunday dharma service.

Another factor influencing temple life is the drive and aptitude of *kyomu* themselves. Some are continually active, organize activities for lay members, engage the religious community in their city, conduct workshops and study session, and put much effort into proselytizing. Rare super *kyomu* are truly exceptional and never stop moving or building their community. Always on the move, they go above and beyond in their religious zeal. Many *kyomu* are homebodies, quiet, somewhat introverted, focused on

the members at their temple, and not engaged in proselytization. Some *kyomu* are plain lazy; and every now and then, I meet a *kyomu* that laity and other *kyomu* simply do not like. Life in a Wŏn Buddhist temple is dependent on the individual *kyomu*, the size of the temple, and the expectations of the laity; and a whole spectrum of temple communities exist, from bustling and constantly busy temples with many *kyomu* in residence, to small and dead temples with almost no activity and one or two *kyomu*.

Temples, Rituals, and Dharma Meetings

Wŏn Buddhist temples (*kyodang* 教堂) vary in both size and style, but every temple has a main dharma hall (*taegakchŏn* 大覺殿) with an enshrined circular mark of integral oneness. Pre-liberation temples were built in a traditional Korean wooden building style with clay walls and tile or thatched roofs. Several of these early temples remain and have been rebuilt over the years. These older buildings, particularly those at Headquarters, exhibit typical architectural influences of Japanese occupation, such as front entrances with areas to remove shoes and narrow wooden passageways around the outside.

Since the '60s, '70s, and '80s were the strongest periods of growth for Wŏn Buddhism, many temples date to those years. Most temples are multi-storied concrete and brick structures of various contemporary designs. They open into an area to remove and store shoes, and they often have a first floor and basement that contain living quarters, a kitchen, a living room, a less-formal dharma hall for morning and

evening meditation that also serves as a meeting place for guests and other activities, and other meeting rooms. These two floors are where most daily activities take place. They are decorated in a typical Korean open-room style that allows life to be lived on heated floors, and the quality of the décor depends on the members that attend. Much of the décor is donated from member homes. Each room usually has large cabinets and pieces of furniture for storage, which are spread around the outer edges of the room. Some temples will have modern kitchens with a kitchen table and chairs, but many will sit on the floor and use tables that are folded away when not in use. Most rooms, including *kyomu* residences, are multi-purpose and may be used for anything.

The second floor is often the main dharma hall. Larger temples may have a small nursery with windows looking out over the hall or an audio-visual room to handle lights, sound, and other electronic equipment near the back. The altar is usually modest and elevated up on a platform or podium, with the circular mark of the *irwŏn* dominating the scene. The circular images are either black or gold and almost always quite large, some over three or four feet in diameter. Often perpetually back lit or illuminated by a spotlight, the circle is visible from the entrance and members bow to the altar upon entering. Large gold-gilded *irwŏn* really stand out and are quite expensive. The circular marks during Pak's time were simple, small, and usually drawn or carved into a wood board. I have had many conversations with lay members about the use of gold circles versus black circles: some members find the gold ones distasteful,

ostentatious, and a waste of money. On the altar below the circle are two or four large candlestick holders, a bowl of water, and an incense holder filled with sand, all typical accoutrements for Korean ritual altars. As noted in the introduction, to the right of all altar areas is a large framed portrait of Pak. The hall is filled with church pews as in a typical Western-style church. Some temples have a display shelf for donation envelopes with members' names. Members will put donation money in the envelopes and place them in donation boxes on the altar or near the door.

Some temples may have floors above the dharma hall. They usually contain residences, offices, or small meditation halls. Such temples are exceptionally large and busy. Temples are modest in décor and somewhat old, dated, and showing wear. I lived in one temple with a terrible black mold problem that continually went unaddressed. Some temples are exceptionally nice. The quality depends on the means of the temple members. Some nicer temples are built in a contemporary traditional style, and others are modern and posh, like the new Kangnam Temple in Seoul, which looks like a high-tech glass office building.

Temples in America also vary. A few temples in Los Angeles, California, and Flushing, New York, have many Korean and Korean American members and, after many years of saving, have been able to construct modest new buildings. Some run their communities out of previous Christian churches and purchase a nearby house as residence for the *kyomu*. Several temples are in homes, in which a living room or

basement are converted into the main dharma hall. The Manhattan Temple is a townhome near the Upper Eastside, and the grand room on the second floor was converted into the main dharma hall, with residences on the third floor. The Denver temple is a modest '80s style tri-level suburban home with the dharma hall in the downstairs family room. The Philadelphia temple is in an old Christian church. The temple in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, one of the most successful with non-Korean Americans, is a brand-new building built with donations from Korea that mixes Korean and American architecture in a rambling ranch-style home. American temples reflect the diversity of American architectural styles and mix in Korean flare.

Temples are governed by district offices or temples, which report directly to Headquarters. Each temple is led by a head *kyomu*, who runs the day-to-day operations. Important matters are decided by a committee of *kyomu* and lay members under the guidance of a temple council. Each temple is expected to organize edification groups for adults, young children, middle and high school students, and university students, as well as groups based on the various community factors or workplace demands (e.g. an edification group for numerous members at a factory or office). These edification groups vary among temples, depend on the needs of members, the abilities of the *kyomu* and lay members, and are not all well attended by the laity.

Each temple is financially independent and relies on donations from members or other revenue collected from business activities run by the temple, such as daycare,

yoga classes, or public meditation sessions. A temple budget is drawn up by the temple council, approved by the head *kyomu*, and then submitted to a district administrator for record and audit. Temples may open branch temples and provide financial assistance to the branch for a while, but branch temples are eventually expected to become financially independent. Donations from members are the primary source of income for all temples.

Members donate money at each dharma service, at special ceremonies and celebrations, and at any family ritual performed by the temple *kyomu*. Donations are meticulously recorded by the temple and reported to Headquarters. Members who give regularly rise in rank. Wŏn Buddhist lay members are notably generous, and wealthy members donate incredible amounts of money. Several in the upper echelons of Samsung corporation and in a few others notable Korean corporations are Wŏn Buddhist adherents and provide substantial financial support. The funds for the purchase of the main building for Won Institute in Philadelphia was provided largely through a generous donation of Samsung Corporation and is named Samsung Hall; and the residence hall, a historic civil-war era mansion perched on a hill in suburban Philadelphia, was also purchased through a private donation of a wealthy member.

In some American temples where the community does not have a large Korean population, financial responsibilities often fall on a few devoted Korean members until a large enough American congregation is formed. Even then, many American temples

struggle to stimulate the same donation rate as a typical Korean temple. American membership turnover is high, and temple councils are often dominated by Korean members. A couple American temples have reached financial independence relying primarily on non-Korean American members, but they are uncommon.¹⁷

At all temples, *kyomu* function as the main ritual specialist. They organize and oversee all the ritual activities and ceremonies. Originally, Pak restricted ritual activities to a few shared rituals and focused temple activities on the practice and public works. Instead of members celebrating every family or ancestral rite, of which there are many in Korean society, family and ancestral rites were performed once a year in a group event. For example, instead of each member performing multiple grieving rites for family members that may spread out over a year or more, one deliverance or death rite was performed each year for all the ancestors. Pak's anti-ritualism was a common critique of the time, and many Korean intellectuals and reformers pushed to simplify or eliminated burdensome rituals. Pak's simplified ritual life is not the case anymore.

Wŏn Buddhists now perform the same family and ancestral ritual events as other Koreans. Even though Pak targeted cumbersome death rituals for simplification, now

¹⁷ Craven obliquely addresses the economic challenges faced by American temples. She identifies the problem as a combination of *kyomu* being uncomfortable in asking for donations and of American members being disconnected from temple management. The problem is more complex. Korean and non-Korean American laity are divided, operating in two completely different realities: they are often not a unified body. Korean members take control of temple management and have their own meetings separate from the English community. The two groups will often only come together on special celebrations, and even then, the meeting will be more Korean oriented. See Carol Craven, "Mikukin kwa ūnhyeroun kwan'gye chosŏng," *Wŏnbulgyo Sinmun*, May 25, 2012.

the whole series of forty-nine-day funeral rites are performed, and if members want other additional rites performed on traditionally designated days, *kyomu* accommodate those requests. On top of the numerous traditional family and ancestor ritual events, Wŏn Buddhism also has its own religious rites. Wŏn Buddhist life is now full of more ritual than the average Korean, which is exactly the opposite of Pak's intention.

Kyomu are usually responsible for conducting all the officially recognized family rites and ceremonies, which include:

Newborn Naming Rite (*myŏngmŏng-sik* 命名式)

Newborn Seventh-Week Prayer (*ch'ilchu kiwŏn-sik* 七週祈願式)

Coming-of-Age Rite (*sŏngnyŏn-sik* 成年式)

Engagement Ceremony (*yakhon-sik* 約婚式)

Marriage Rite (*kyŏrhon-sik* 結婚式)

Sixtieth Birthday Rite (*hoegap* 回甲)

One Hour of Death Rite (*yŏlban-sik* 涅槃式)

Placing in a Coffin Rite (*ipkwŏn-sik* 入棺式)

Funeral Procession Three Days after Death (*parin-sik* 發柩式)

Burial Rite (*ipchang-sik* 入葬式)

Twenty-first Day after Death Deliverance Rite (*samch'ilchae* 三七齋)

First Deliverance Rite [seven days after death] (*ch'ojae* 初齋)

(six more deliverance rites spaced seven days apart)

Final Deliverance Rite [forty-ninth day after death] (*chongjae* 終齋)

Hundredth Day Deliverance Rite (*pegil ch'ōndojae* 百日薦度齋)

Comfort the Spirits of the Dead Deliverance Rite (*wiryōngjae* 偉靈齋)

Water and Land Deliverance Rite [for wandering spirits] (*suryukchae* 水陸齋)

Ancestral Ceremony on the Anniversary of Death (*yōlban kinyōmje* 涅槃紀念齋)

Rituals are held at the temple or any necessary location. *Kyomu* conduct these ceremonies, but technically, any member can lead a ritual. I have attended many rituals without a *kyomu* present. All ritual etiquette and procedures are available in the *Wōnbulgyo chōnsō*; however, since a chief role of the *kyomu* is that of ritual specialist, *kyomu* often conduct these rites.

In addition to family and ancestor rites, *kyomu* also conduct rites and rituals of the order. Since these rituals have a sacred bind to the community, *kyomu* normally conduct them whenever possible, but again, it is not required. The main rituals and ceremonies of the order include:

Enshrinement of Dharmakāya Buddha, the symbol of *irwōn* (*pongbul-sik* 奉佛式)

Dharma meetings (*pōphoe* 法會)

Initiation Rite (*tūkto ūisik* 得度儀式)

Pledging of Sworn-Family Ties (*ūnbōp kyōūisik* 恩法結義式)

Dharma Rank Advancement Rite (*sūnggūp-sik* 昇級式)

Inauguration and Retirement of Head Dharma Master (*taesa ūisik* 戴謝義式)

Dedication Ceremony (*ponggo-sik* 奉告式)

Special Prayer Ceremony (*t'ŭkpyŏl kido* 特別祈禱)

New Year Celebration (*sinjŏngjŏl* 新正節)

Great Awakening and Founding Celebration (*taegak kaegyŏjŏl* 大覺開教節)

Śākyamuni Buddha's Birthday Celebration (*Sŏkchon sŏngt'anjŏl* 釋尊聖誕節)

Dharma Authentication Celebration (*pŏbinjŏl* 法認節)

Ceremonies for Occasional Celebrations (*susi kyŏngch'uk ŭisik* 隨時慶祝儀式)

Official Funeral Rite (*kyohoechang* 教會葬)

Great Memorial Rite (*taeje ŭisik* 大齋儀式)

Many of these are large events performed at all temples on the same day. In those situations, *kyomu* always conduct the rite. Others such as Enshrinement of Dharmakaya Buddha or Dharma meetings can happen in the home or other location and may or may not be performed by a *kyomu*. Official functions such as an Initiation Rite, Inauguration of the Head Dharma Master Rite, or Official Funeral Rites are always performed by high-ranking *kyomu*. Although *kyomu* receive training in all these rituals, their main function is to open the ceremony, lead the congregation through the ritual, read the ritual passages in *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, indicate to members when to bow or prostrate, and close the rite. Since all the information is in *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ* and the rituals are quite simple, members who attend regularly know exactly how these rituals are performed,

and if needed, can assist or lead a ceremony. Pak transmitted his dharma authority equally to all, and *kyomu* do not channel sacred authority by leading a ritual.

When I first lived in a temple, I was surprised by the number of rituals in which *kyomu* participate. I had lived at Headquarters for a year and did not witness individual family rituals and already thought the order's rituals were excessive. Many social reformers of Pak's time criticized the costly expense and burdensome commitment of seemingly perpetual Confucian and Buddhist ritual obligations. The expenses could drive a family financially into the ground. Pak's text has a clear anti-ritual bent, and he tried to alleviate all the ritual obligation by combining much of the rituals into four community-wide joint rituals: a joint birthday commemoration for celebrating the birth of the order and the birth of new members; one holiday commemoration, supposed to take the place of many other occasional holidays of the time; one joint ancestral commemoration event; and a new year's celebration. That was it! This proliferation of rituals is a far cry from Pak's original anti-ritualism.

Pak's anti-ritualism was a draw for me coming from a Catholic background. I was not attracted to Tibetan Buddhism because it reminded me of Catholic pontifical and supercilious ritual majesty. Wŏn Buddhist ritual is simple and uncomplicated. Anyone can read along, participate, and even lead a ceremony if needed. The vestments are basic and not grand. But the frequency of rituals and meetings, and sometimes the over-the-top expenses for larger celebrations is mindboggling. I was in Korea in 1998

when the third head of the order, Kim Yŏnggho (金榮灑 1914-1998, Dharma title Taesan 大山), died and a memorial service and commemoration was held at the headquarters.

It was enormous and a huge amount of money was spent on the event. I understood the importance of the event: Kim had led the order for over thirty years through some of the most intense periods of growth and change. Yet, through the entire grand event, I could not help but think of Pak encouraging his followers to take the money saved on expensive rituals and invest it back into the community through public works. The money spent on Kim's memorial service could have fed thousands of struggling rural grandparents left along in their homes, helped fund a social program for the growing number of homeless, or rebuilt several rural temples in dire need of repair.

Many *kyomu* argue that all these rituals are needed and demanded by the members. They usually follow the same argument put forth by the order, that ritualized formalities are required to build a strong family foundation and thus create a righteous and orderly religious community, society, and nation.¹⁸ I tend to agree with members who find all the rituals a bit excessive, particularly all the death rituals, and who do not participate in many of the formality. All these rituals need reevaluation and reformation.

Of all the rituals that *kyomu* preside over, the regular dharma meetings are the

¹⁸ *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 603.

most frequent. Wŏn Buddhists have regular meetings on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings. Sundays are by far the busier service, usually conducted by the head *kyomu*, and may have a visiting *kyomu* for a special sermon. The Wednesday evening meeting is much smaller and often conducted by a lower level *kyomu*. Most of the temples I have visited pull in a younger and middle-age crowd on Wednesdays. All regular meetings, and many of the specialized rituals, follow a similar pattern: opening bell; chanting and meditation (rough average of twenty minutes); hymn; silent contemplation and special prayers; scripture reading; recitation of the Essential of Daily Practice;¹⁹ scripture reading for the sermon; hymn; sermon; questions or responses to the sermon; announcements; closing hymn; and adjournment. The Wednesday evening meeting is often shorter on readings and sermon and longer on meditation and chanting, depending on the laity.

Many commentators covered in the review of English material in the introduction to this study note the Christian influence on Wŏn Buddhist services, especially the singing of hymns, the sermons, and the church-like environment with pews. The format of contemporary Wŏn Buddhist service developed after Pak's time and in response to the noticeable success and quick spread of Christianity. Early Wŏn

¹⁹ The Essential of Daily Practice (*Ilſang suhaeng-ŭi yobŏp* 日常修行要法) is a nine-point summary of mental attitudes and disciplines to cultivate. This short passage appears between the sections on doctrine and practice, functioning as a connector for the two. All Wŏn Buddhists know this summary by heart. It is recited during morning meditation, evening meditation, all dharma services, and other rituals.

Buddhist dharma halls were traditional-style buildings, and members sat on the floor, which seems appropriate considering the centrality of meditation in the practice. I found the contemporary use of church pews artificial, extremely uncomfortable, and inconvenient for meditation. As an American interested in Buddhism, Wŏn Buddhist dharma halls are off-putting with their church-lady feeling. The current sermons are in a Christian style and nothing like a Buddhist dharma talk of Pak's days, which was often done in response to questions. *Kyomu* choose a topic and spend at least twenty minutes pontificating, during which time I usually meditate and tune out. They can be exceedingly boring and insipid, usually provide no deeper insight into the teaching than the scriptures, and often recycle what others have said before.

By far the most striking Christian influence is the morose and depressing hymns. The content of the hymns draws on the doctrine and were encouraged by Song, but the early ritual etiquette and texts have no songs. The *kyomu* and a few members sing them with gusto, while the rest just mumble along like in many churches. The use of poorly composed Christian-style hymns was a major disappointment and culture shock for me, and English dharma meetings in the United States do not usually sing hymns. The last thing American Buddhists want is to sing dull, monotone, Christian-like hymns at a dharma meeting. After my first dharma meeting within a month of being at the headquarters, I almost left Korea. I did not have to understand the material: the format and tone was so much like a Western church, it freaked me out. *Kyomu* in America are

aware of these problems, but they fail to adjust the meetings and often separate the congregation into Korean and English-speaking communities, each attending their own service in their own style, since many Korean members insist on things done Korean style. Even in Korea when I invited a Korean friend who was curious about Buddhism to a dharma meeting, he came once, never came back, and told me the singing and sermon both freaked him out.

On this point, it remains difficult for me to discuss with Korean members why Americans interested in Buddhism find their hymns odd and disconcerting and their dharma meetings dull. I think it safe to estimate that when Americans, particularly those interested in Buddhism, think of a Christian church service, they imagine the droning on of hymns and boring sermons. Even American pop culture caricatures for comedic effect Christians singing terribly and ministers droning on in sermons. Buswell sums up Korean Buddhist hymnal singing during the 1970s and raises an important question:

...[A]ttempts at adapting Christian missionary techniques seems at times artificial and trite. One of the examples I found to be most blatant began among lay Buddhists in the cities and has spread even to monastery support organization: the Buddhist adaptation of hymn introduced by Christian missionaries. ...The urban laity in Korea also began to sing traditional Buddhist ritual chants to the melodies of Christian hymns. These new songs have become so much a part of urban lay Buddhism, that the monks from the mountain monasteries acquiesce and let the laity use their own chants in joint ceremonies. The culture shock is striking when mountain monks participate in urban services. While the laity sing their Buddhist hymns, often with piano or organ accompaniment, the monks perform in traditional *pŏmp'ae* style, with its cacophony of sound. Often neither group knows the other's chanting style, and both must stand in mute silence

until their fellow adherents are finished – striking testimony to the rapid changes Buddhism is undergoing in Korea, prompted by pressures from its religious rivals. Still, one has to wonder to what extent the success of Buddhist proselytization efforts will depend on song rather than the relevance of its underlying message to contemporary Koreans.²⁰

Wŏn Buddhist proselytization efforts with Americans interested in Buddhism suffer from the hymns and Christian-like service. I am asked frequently for recommendations for Buddhist groups by Americans, and I usually refer them to Zen groups: I worry that referring them to a Wŏn Buddhist temple will scare them away from Buddhism all together. I brought several Americans to temples in Korea, and they all found it frightening and jarring. In Korea, the older generation enjoys the hymns, but many young members I spoke to found them awful and a big turn off. They find the entire dharma meeting a turn off and want more meditation, chanting, and practice and less singing and sermons by *kyomu*.

American services vary depending on the community. Most have a main English-speaking meditation service during the week, which focuses on sitting and moving meditations. This is often the main English-speaking event at the temple and are better attended than dharma meetings, as it purges all those elements typical of Wŏn Buddhist dharma meetings: no singing, no scripture reading, and no sermon. Usually conducted by a lower level *kyomu*, they are very casual and have no particularly Wŏn Buddhist characteristic. Some temples have a weekly formal English

²⁰ Buswell, *Zen Monastic Experience*, 144.

dharma meeting on Saturdays or Sundays. These will follow the ritual pattern as Korean service but will have a bit more meditation and no hymns. These are often less well attended by Americans, since *kyomu* sermons get boring after you have heard them several times, and many American Buddhists do not want to go to church and have someone lecture them. The weekly English-language meetings are usually not attended by Korean members, who predominantly attend the Sunday Korean-language service. This bifurcation of some communities is palpable. The most successful American temples are either all American style or all Korean style. Bifurcated temples are often somewhat stagnant, since the American and Korean communities never join in complete solidarity.

Problems with rituals and dharma meetings are discussed, and the Wŏn Buddhist newspaper runs articles about needing to revitalize and update everything. Still, no single solution or model has emerged for the entire order to follow, and *kyomu* and lay members are often hesitant to try new ways. There are a few examples of temples in Korea moving away from Christian-style services with success, but most temples have not changed. In my opinion, the solution is rather simple: return to Pak's prescription and follow his example. People want the practice, they want to participate in learning groups, like the early years of the order, and share their practices and challenges with others. They do not want pontificating *kyomu* at a podium droning on about something they can read in the scripture while being forced to sit still in a church

pew. Pak's teaching is purposefully easy and designed as something to do – not something to talk about. Members want to discuss their thoughts with others, discuss the dharma, chant, meditate, and contemplate the teaching, which Pak's small-group system was designed to cultivate. Pak's teaching does not need Christian-based proselytizing and church-like services to succeed: he did not use it to build the Buddhadharma Research Society. Wŏn Buddhism's current challenges in attracting ordinates and new members speak loudly to the failure of the current model.

Additional Critical Issues

Through my own extensive interactions with the order and not through any exhaustive survey, I identify five groups of members: ultra-conservative, conservative, centrist, reformist, and neutral. Ultra-conservative members are a minority who advocate increasingly conservative reforms to the lives of the *chŏnmu ch'ulsin*. They will often deny that low temple attendance and low ordinand numbers are due to well-known critical issues and insist the solution is more strict controls: they advocate no marriage, required celibacy, no outside work, and uniforms for all *kyomu*. These members tend to be older than sixty years old and can be either *kyomu* or laity. Despite the numerous teachings that oppose such hardline positions, ultra-conservative members will often note the contemporary revival of Korean Buddhism or the success of Tibetan and Japanese Buddhism in the West as reasons for stricter control of *kyomu*, even though such a position is difficult to support doctrinally. They want more

regulations and limitations for the male *kyomu*, like those for the women, and are staunchly opposed to women *kyomu* gaining power over their bodies. Nationalism often influences their views, and they want all international *kyomu* and temples, of which there are only a handful, to do everything Korean style, without exceptions. Like any religious zealot or fundamentalist, their positions are usually extreme and not supported by the majority.

Conservative members are satisfied with the status quo. They seem oblivious to the various forms of discrimination within the order and will often deny or ignore them when asked. Discussing problems about the order with them is uncomfortable and awkward. They do not see any reason to return to the original model of practice and will blame the current stagnant state on changes in society, always pointing the finger somewhere outside the order. They cannot imagine women *kyomu* married, having sex, or having children. Discussion of such things are shocking and avoided. These are often senior members, usually over sixty or seventy years old. They witnessed the ravages of war and the incredible growth of the order and Korea in the post-war climate, and they are happy with things as they are: change is unnecessary. Together with the ultra-conservatives, they have strong nationalist views and see the Wŏn Buddhist order in its Korean glory as salvific for the world.

Centrists make up a silent majority of the Wŏn Buddhist community. They know that Wŏn Buddhism is having difficulties and acknowledge many of the critical issues,

but they hesitate to openly criticize the order and enact changes. Not necessarily happy with the status quo, they are also not terribly troubled by it. If change presented itself, they would roll with it. They acknowledge that celibacy and marriage for women *kyomu* are a big problem, but changing the system seems overwhelming and difficult. They find pushing hard to change the system disrespectful to an entire generation of elders that built Wŏn Buddhism and sacrificed their lives. The current system has been around since the 1950s, and for many, this is the only form of Wŏn Buddhism they have known. Virtually none of them knew Pak. Even if they advocate for change, they often resign themselves to leave it for a later generation. They do not want to rock the boat and often believe it must be their karma to live through such difficulties.

Increasing every year, reformists desire to completely reshape the Wŏn Buddhist order. Most reformists are under sixty years old, and I would describe the majority of younger *kyomu* as reformists. Inspired by the forward-looking and non-conformist life of Pak, reformists call for a return to Pak's methods of training, for a complete transformation of the ordination system, and for less control of the *kyomu*, particularly a loosening of outside work restrictions and extra restrictions on the women *kyomu*. They advocate for female *kyomu* marriage, for officially ending celibacy expectation for women *kyomu*, and the removal of all clothing restrictions. They desire a transformation in the dharma meetings, more practice-based training and less sermons, and a revolution in the role of *kyomu* in the temple. Many reformists outside of Korea desire

the establishment of a separate order not controlled by Korea, which is permitted by the constitution but has yet to be established. They are often frustrated by the intractable nature of the Korean community and feel true reform will only happen outside Korea. Hopes have recently been raised by the election of the sixth Head Dharma Master, who is seen as more left-of-center and sympathetic to reform efforts, but still they worry they may wait in vain if a new, independent order is not formed.

Neutral members are a large group of outliers that continue to be casually involved with the current order but not deeply invested in its activities. At one time they may have been more involved or may come from devoted Wŏn Buddhist families, but they are now relatively disengaged and only attend temple for a few special services each year, if at all. Pak's teaching may have personally and profoundly influenced their lives, but the order has no value for them, and they hold little hope for change. This group is particularly large in America. I have witnessed American temples completely turn over their membership in a relatively brief time, unable to maintain a devoted group of American members. Some members are turned off by the gender disparity or the lack of meditation masters in the order; other have been slighted or offended by nationalist attitudes, religious zealotry, sexism, or homophobia of Korean members; and some have been rejected when they tried for ordination or realized the order or temple would not grant any significant involvement outside of basic lay

membership. They hang around the periphery hoping for change but expect little. They are a quiet group that the Korean members too quickly forget.

Like all religious communities, the Wŏn Buddhist community is diverse. People from all walks of life and all levels of society come through the doors. Whether the order wants to publicly address it or not, the community is struggling. Attendance by the younger generations is low, the number of new ordinands is strikingly low, *kyomu* are predominately older, temples struggle for financial security, and growth outside the Korean community is limited. The community has talked about it privately since before I attempted ordination, but nothing has changed during the last thirty years of discussion, except that attendance is lower and the order has become more conservative. In a recent interview, one of the most senior female *ch'ulga* in the order, Song Yŏngbong (b. 1927), called on the order to stop being so timid and for the new Head Dharma Master to boldly bring Wŏn Buddhism back in step with the rest of the world, obliquely acknowledging the serious problem without direct criticism.²¹ Such public statements calling for change by ranking members are exceedingly rare, and most discussions remain private.

Pak was a social reformer. While he did make Buddhadharma accessible by simplifying the complex teaching of *pratītyasamutpāda* through the fourfold beneficence,

²¹ Chŏng Sŏnghŏn, "Seroun chongbŏpsa-nŭn kyodan-ŭl segyehwa heya he," *Wŏnbulgyo Sinmun*, September 19, 2018.

his doctrine and practice remain firmly grounded in popular East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings and practices. Pak's important four essentials of social reform outlines his critical stance toward social practices of Chosŏn culture, and his discourses in the *Taejonggyŏng* reveal a millenarian vision of a world free from suffering. This study cannot address all the critical issues faced by Won Buddhism, but I will briefly outline three critical points of tension within contemporary Wŏn Buddhism: autonomy of ordained members, sex discrimination, and recognition of LGBT members.

Autonomy of Ordained Members

The cultivation of personal autonomy, or self-power (*charyŏk* 自力), is central to Pak's doctrine on social reformation. Unless one is an infant or young child, an elderly member of society, or unable to work due to disability or sickness, Pak taught that each member of society and the order has a personal duty and responsibility to cultivate independence and pull their weight. In his social agenda, this manifested as encouraging personal financial autonomy and equality between the sexes.

Financially, individuals should not expect to live idly dependent on family; and those with the ability to lead independent lives should be denied financial support. Inheritances should be divided equality among children instead of favoring only an eldest son, a customary practice at the time. Women and men should maintain their own financial autonomy after marriage, and all the children in a family should equally share the responsibility to care for elderly parents. Adherents should shoulder their

own financial responsibilities and not expect family to bail them out of any financial burden.²²

To cultivate personal autonomy, woman cannot be dependent on men and must enjoy equal access to education and financial resources. Women must enjoy the same social rights as men and receive an equal share of family inheritances. A woman's body and mind are hers and hers alone, and women must be allowed to make their own decisions. To cultivate this personal autonomy, women must receive the same education as men so they may be active in all levels of society. Women must be allowed to work at a chosen occupation, gain autonomy, and share equally in all duties and responsibilities to family and society. Pak's promotion of women's autonomy attracted many women to his order, and to this day, the activities of women in the order keep Wŏn Buddhism alive.

The cultivation of personal autonomy also extended to the ordained community. One of Pak's main critiques of the existing Buddhist organizational structure was the financial dependence of the ordained members on the laity. In *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn*, this critique appears in the introductory *Kaesŏn-non*, the abridged version of Pak's *Chosŏn pulgyo hyŏksin-non* (treatise on the reformation of Chosŏn Buddhism), and parts of it are preserved in *Taejonggyŏng*.²³ Pak makes it clear that dedicated members of his order

²² *Doctrinal Books*, 39; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 39-41.

²³ *Wŏnbulgyo kyogoch'onggan*, vol 4, 96-103, 146-151.

must be allowed to work, to choose an occupation based on their personal situation, and to decide whether or not to marry.²⁴ Many *ch'ulga* during Pak's time continued to manage family affairs, maintain farms, work at professions, and work outside of the order to help not only with their own household needs but also to contribute further to the order. The only requirement for membership as *ch'ulga* was a deep commitment to the order, a commitment to the teaching, and a commitment to practice and training. If fully committed members wanted to remain unmarried and devote themselves completely to the order, that was gratuitously welcomed but not required.

This autonomy of the *ch'ulga* blurred the line between ordained and lay members. The system of *ch'ulga* functioned in an analogous way to the rabbinical system prior to its professionalization in the nineteenth century: adherents received minor compensation for their services and could supplement their income through other means if needed to support their own families. They functioned as the religious teachers and administrators of their community and were otherwise free to live their lives. If one was single, devoted one's life to the order, and lived communally with the order, one had little need to supplement one's income.

With the enactment of the new constitution in 1948 and five revisions over the following fifty years, and with the subsequent enactments in 1968 of formal regulations

²⁴ *Doctrinal Books*, 122; *Wŏnbulgyo chŏnsŏ*, 108-109.

that govern the lives of ordained members and the numerous amendments over the following years, the body of Wŏn Buddhist *kyomu* has evolved into the monastic-centered system Pak critiqued. *Kyomu*, particularly female members, have been restricted to a life within the temple. No longer allowed to work outside of Wŏn Buddhism or choose their own professions, *kyomu*'s lives are strictly controlled and regulated by Headquarters. In the case that such outside employment may benefit the order, *kyomu* still require the consent of the head of the order and the Supreme Council.²⁵ *Kyomu* are expected to live communally in the temple and staying in a private residence is restricted outside of exceptional circumstances or marriage. Prohibited from engaging in business or political activities, they may join non-profit and non-political organizations but only to further the edification efforts of Wŏn Buddhism.²⁶ One particularly harsh rule is that no ordained member may even leave a temple or place of official business without permission from a superior.²⁷ All family matters must be entrusted to the spouse or other members of the family.

With these restrictions come much hardship for *ch'ulga*. Married male *kyomu* can no longer support their families. The stipend they receive for their service is pocket change for a contemporary family, and they often rely on monetary gifts from temple

²⁵ *Wŏnbulgyo yŏng'ŏ hyŏngyu chip*, 53

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

members and family, exactly opposite of Pak's wishes. Wives of male *kyomu* are expected to be the main breadwinners in the family, burdening them with more than the already troublesome load of the traditional role of mother. With the changing demographics of the contemporary workforce, for some *kyomu* families this is not a problem: the wife is able to support the family and enable her husband's mission of service to the community. But this is assuredly not the case for all families, and lay organizations have formed to support the wives and children of male *kyomu* in need, further adding to a life of dependency on the order and its lay members. *Kyomu* and their families are afforded medical care by the numerous Wŏn Buddhist hospitals, but this is hardly compensation, as South Korea already has a system of national healthcare. On top of this difficult situation, the small extra living subsidy married male *kyomu* receive to assist their families creates tension with the non-married *kyomu*, the majority of whom are women: why should married male *kyomu* get paid more for the same, and often less, work?

Because female *kyomu* are restricted from marrying, their lives are even more dependent on the order, especially when young. While a young married couple could work together to establish their financial autonomy and offer some level of autonomy to an ordained spouse, only female *kyomu* from families of great means or those with extraordinary abilities entrusted with important tasks can achieve such financial autonomy. In Pak's time, which we must remember had only about eighty ordained

members, many women *ch'ulga* chose to be single and not be restricted by a life of marriage. Joining Pak's order represented liberation from a patriarchal structure. But that was a choice and not a requirement. Most of the early founding women were married with children and homes: they were more than capable of complete devotion to the order, to the teaching, to their practice, capable of continued support and involvement with their families, and many worked jobs outside the order.²⁸

Wŏn Buddhists, like many other Buddhist groups, participate in an economy of merit: giving and supporting the order and *kyomu* is karmically beneficial. Thus, although *kyomu* are not compensated adequately by the order for their work, they often receive gifts of support from members and from other *kyomu*. An economy of gift-giving helps support these members, and if they remain single, life is not too much of a struggle, since basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare are met. But, is this the system of personal autonomy Pak envisioned? Or is this the exact system of dependence on laity for which Pak criticized established Buddhist institutions? There is little doubt it is the later, and it has become the very system criticized in the doctrine, the practice, and the early documents. With this system of control and regulations, we do not have to wonder why the order struggles to attract new ordinands. The doctrine enshrines personal autonomy of ordained members, but the order now restricts their

²⁸ See, Wŏnbulgyo Sasang Yŏnguwŏn, eds., *Kaebiyŏk-ŭi sidae-rŭl yŏn Wŏnbulgyo yŏsŏng 10-dae cheja* (papers present at the 37th Wŏnbulgyo Sasang Yŏnguwŏn Haksul Taehoe. Iksan, South Korea, February 2017).

lives and bodies; the practice encourages and cultivates a life of social and financial autonomy for ordained members, but the order now demands a life of dependence and strict control. With such glaring contradictions, it is difficult to attract bright and aware individuals, and too many have left the order. Young Wŏn Buddhists today simply do not want to become *kyomu*.

My insistence on personal autonomy resulted in tension with members and contributed to my final departure from the order. Having only read the teaching before joining, I had no experience of the Wŏn Buddhist community: I only knew the translated doctrine and Pak's discourses. Both paint a clear image of autonomous ordained members, who are free to marry, free to work other jobs, and free to decide on their level of participation. Any devoted lay person could become *chŏnmu ch'ulsin*. Based on the text offering such freedom, I joined. I did not want to marry or have a family, and I wanted to fully devote myself to the order and remain independent. Having the option made the choice more significant and relevant. I learned quickly that these choices were no longer present, especially for women, and that disturbed me.

My first direct experience with the excessive control that contradicts the doctrine happened when I began teaching English outside the order. Unlike most young Korean postulants, I did not have a network of Wŏn Buddhist family and home-temple support. No one was buying me clothes, paying for the occasional lunch with friends, or paying off my small credit card bill from the United States. During my first year of

postulancy in the Department of International Affairs, the department director would occasionally give me an envelope of forty to fifty dollars for pocket money. I greatly appreciated it, but I had to rely on my small savings to keep me going. After the first year, the headquarters moved me to Seoul for further study at Sogang University, and I moved into a busy and wealthy Wŏn Buddhist temple.

The headquarters paid for my tuition and the temple gave me just enough money to send me back and forth to the school on the subway. But this was not the Korean countryside, and Seoul was a bustling international city and expensive. After a brief time at Sogang University, I was offered a side job teaching English to an attorney's family, helping them build their conversation skills. It was easy and the pay was extraordinary. Working five to ten hours a week, I no longer required the temple to purchase my subway fare. Since it brought me home no later than before, I kept the work to myself. Having worked full-time since I was fifteen years old, it felt good contributing to my education and not relying on the temple for support. The more I read and practiced Pak's teaching, the more certain I became that I was doing exactly as he taught.

One day I innocuously mentioned to a *kyomu* about my teaching English outside the temple and everything changed. I was scolded like a child, told I should not be working outside the temple, and told I should have asked to do anything outside of my attending Sogang University. As a twenty-six-year-old American who had worked full-

time jobs for over ten years and had moved out on my own at seventeen, this did not square with what I had read in the teaching. When I brought up the doctrine and Pak's teaching on allowing *ch'ulga* to work their own professions, support themselves, and be financially autonomous from the laity, I was told I did not understand and that postulants had to do exactly what they were told. After a lot of conversation in broken Korean and English, I learned that *kyomu* were no longer free to make such choices. I met with a few lay members that spoke English, and they explained the current system and encouraged me to understand that this was Korean culture and that some things had changed since the time of Pak. Still, no one offered to solve my financial situation. I did not want to upset the women *kyomu* with whom I lived and had profound respect, so I told them I would stop teaching; but I kept working. They never noticed, but it did not sit well with me. My grandmother died shortly after this happened, and a small inheritance allow me to quit teaching while I was at that temple, as I said I would.

I was relocated to another temple and ended up taking another side job teaching English. The pay was too good to pass up, and it did not interfere with my studies, my work at the temple, or my practice. This time, I kept it to myself and made no promises to anyone. When I enrolled as a novice at Youngsan College, I also took on a part-time job in nearby Youngsan City, also keeping that to myself. I eventually left Korea and came back to the States. After undergraduate studies, I enrolled at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies and returned to the Wŏn Buddhist community with the intent of

continuing my life as *ch'ulga*. The situation was no different. The American temple that sponsored me had only a few members and no extra money for supporting a novice, and my financial need had been exacerbated by student loans. Still, I went. Once I enrolled in the ordination program and moved into the communal house, the harsh reality of financial need returned. The other young novices had family and temples supporting them, were flying back and forth to Korea, enjoyed travel, and seemingly had no want of money. I was nearly destitute. In my need, I took a part-time job at a local café.

No one paid any notice. I planned my schedule around the needs of the community, and my work at the café had no impact on my studies or practice. The café knew my situation and always worked with me in terms of scheduling. It was perfect and afforded me just enough money to not rely on the community for support. I was again financially autonomous, as Pak promoted, and still committed to the teaching. My personal autonomy was short-lived. The two male *kyomu* in charge of the students found out I was working, would not have it, and demanded I quit the job. When I asked who would support me, they balked and said that is the life I chose. I had to obey their orders or leave the community.

The senior female *kyomu* of the community was more understanding and sympathetic. She took the time to understand my situation, and when I questioned her about Pak's teaching, she acknowledged that I was correct, but life for *kyomu* was now

different. She met with the male members and argued vigorously for them to understand my situation, make an exception, and let me work. When I questioned them about the doctrine, they got huffy and demanded that I do as they ordered. They stated I was far too independent and not ready to submit to authority and control. Ironically, both men had weak practices. They could barely stay awake during the short morning meditation and were both lazy, sitting around their rooms watching TV and sluffing off the demanding work of the community to more junior members and the women *kyomu*. The bathroom I shared with them was disgusting, because both refused to clean. It was insulting having lazy men of low abilities question my devotion based on subjugation to their imagined authority, when Pak's teaching taught exactly the opposite. Afterword, the female *kyomu* was flustered and speechless. She asked me not to give up on ordination, encouraged me to understand the situation with compassion and not let it disturb my mind, and said she would figure it out. The men successfully forced me out.

Young *kyomu* living abroad are hopeful that the new Head Dharma Master will remove the working restrictions in the current regulations. I have talked with many that desperately need to work a part-time job but must rely on lay members, family, or wives to support them, since the stipend they receive from the order is so small. Many of the American communities are small and finances are tight, and the restriction on working only exacerbates the situation for *kyomu* and for the temple. Many work

regardless, but that sets up a situation where regulations are secretly broken, which is never ideal or desired. Bottom line – prohibitions on outside work are not supported by Pak's doctrine. Pak did not want an order of *ch'ulga* dependent on donations from laity, and the early community of committed members remained financially autonomous while devoting themselves to the order. Unfortunately, there are many ultra-conservative and conservative members who now absolutely reject the idea of a working *kyomu*, but they also do not come up with a system to financially compensate them in a way that would lead to financial autonomy: they keep them dependent and in perpetual servitude to the order and temples.

Sex Discrimination

Pak's proscription against sex discrimination crosses over into several aspects of his doctrine and was a fundamental perspective that attracted numerous women. Three of Pak's four social reforms outline equality for women, women *ch'ulga* and *chega* participated in all levels of the Buddhadharm Research Society, and women were given an equal number of seats on the Supreme Council. Pak attracted women from a variety of backgrounds: first wives, secondary wives, widows, young, old, illiterate, educated, mostly commoners and poor, and a few elites. They all sought the self-determination Pak promoted and they all desired to participate in the liberation of

women from Confucian patriarchy.²⁹ Joining Pak's order was empowering, liberating, and radically changed the lives of many women. They participated equally with the men in the governance of the community, received education, were encouraged to lead and teach others, trained to work and get jobs, and were assigned responsibilities traditionally reserved for men.

The history of women in Buddhism has always involved controversy, and Pak's community was far from a utopian, harassment-free experience: women still had to bear the attitudes of men raised in an intensely patriarchal Confucian world. Even though Pak made sure that women *ch'ulga* had the choice to be celibate or not, in the face of intense patriarchy and discrimination, many women chose celibacy after joining as *ch'ulga*, even if they were married with children. Many oral histories and a few biographies about the early years of the order illustrate the difficulties founding women faced within the community. Although some men agreed with Pak, many did not share the same vision of complete equality, and women still had to deal with discrimination and harassment. If this had not been the case, Pak would not have given sex-discrimination such a central position within his doctrine. Pak and Song both encouraged women to stand up for themselves and castigated men when they insisted on male superiority. Even though the official history and scriptures do not reveal any of

²⁹ Lee provides a brief description of the variety of women attracted to the early years of the order. See Lee, "Theory and Practice," 93-104. See also each individual narrative in *Wönbulgyo Sasang Yönguwön, Kaeb'yök-üi sidae-rül yön Wönbulgyo yösöng 10-dae cheja*.

the intensity of the female experiences, opting instead to illustrate the order's historical landscape through rose-colored glasses, oral histories and biographies reveal that lots of arguing and bitter feelings between men and women animated the early years.³⁰ It was an endlessly bumpy ride that culminated in an event purged from the official history.

Women *ch'ulga* and *chega* during the early years worked in the order and often worked in factories or other outside employment. They contributed greatly to the economic improvement of the order, especially women who remained single and devoted to the order. Women lay members were the main collectors of donations, and much of the money for the order was funneled through women's hands. After decades of Japanese colonization and three years of war that wrecked the fledgling nation, much of Korea was left in poverty. Community members, who were predominately rural agricultural workers, experienced intense poverty and suffering. The finances and governance of the community were shared by the men and women, and right after the end of the Korean War, the men wanted to invest a substantial portion of the order's savings into a new business venture they felt would deliver a quick return. The women rejected the proposal as too risky. Ignoring women's equal position in the order and their overwhelming rejection of the proposal, the men took the money and invested it. The venture failed, and the women saw all their years of work and savings disappear.

³⁰ Ibid., 165-225. Lee provides the only English-language study to document detailed interviews of women and their struggles during the early years of Pak's order.

Greatly angered after years of discrimination, harassment, and being ignored, on April 27, 1954, the women joined together in a five-day hunger strike during which they refused to do any work. Men were forced to cook and take care of things they had never imagined doing. Some women demanded an independent women's order that would be governed and financed separately, and they began talks on how to separate the property and finances. In the end, the women successfully demanded a pledge and commitment from the men for equal treatment in the order, which continues to this day. In the middle of this event, a severe dust storm mixed with rain swept through the area, causing a dirty rain to fall. The women took this as a sign of their righteous efforts, and thus they remember this as the Soil Rain Event (*Hŭkpi sagŏn* 흙비사건).³¹ This event had enormous impact on the psyche of the women *ch'ulga* and was a turning point in gender relations for the order. Overall satisfied with the men's response and acquiescence, the community of women agreed to conceal the event, since such a challenge to authority could reflect badly on the order and they did not wish it to become a point of pride. The men obviously had no problem with this, as they did not want to look foolish either. They agreed to record nothing about the event. The head of

³¹ This event is of such profound importance, it is unspeakably disappointing that it is not officially recognized by the order. It does not appear in *History*, in *Wŏnbulgyo taesajŏn*, nor appear on official timelines. In Lee's investigation, she found no written record of this event, even though many senior women remembered and participated in it. Twenty years later, nothing has changed. *Ibid.*, 226-253.

the women's group and youngest woman ever elected to the Supreme Council resigned and left the order over the entire matter, which is officially denied to this day.

While it seems noble for the women to agree to conceal the event out of concern for the order, the purging of this important event from official history is shocking, scandalous, and ultimately an expression of patriarchal control. Every year the order continues to publicly conceal this event, it further denies the equality of women and delegitimizes their experiences. This event should be celebrated. Most Korean lay members I know have never heard of the Soil Rain Event. It is not taught in classes or temples. When I mention Lee Chŏng Ok's English-language study, members deny such a study exists or dismiss it as problematic or false. When I first found out about Lee's dissertation directly from her, it confirmed to me that women have never been fully equal members in the order, despite their overwhelming numbers and contributions. Six Head Dharma Masters have been elected, and not one has been a woman. During the last election, many wondered if a woman would finally be elected, until word went around that there were no women of high-enough dharma rank in the appropriate age bracket: of course, there were many men.

I cannot review the history of women in Wŏn Buddhism, Women in Buddhism, or women in Korean religions; that is beyond this study and many fine tomes already

exist.³² I want to focus in this study on the current situation in Wŏn Buddhism and reveal the complexity of the situation. While patriarchy is a major contributor to the situation, the problem has evolved to be more complex than simply patriarchy. In their efforts to evade patriarchy and regain control, agency, and power in the community, female *chega* and *ch'ulga* inadvertently set up a situation that has now evolved into a system of oppression and suffering for women. This is demonstrated by the marked decrease in enrollment of women *ch'ulga*, which has deteriorated to a trickle today.³³ Three key issues related to sex discrimination complicate life in the contemporary community of ordained women: celibacy, marriage, and clothing.

Since the very beginning of Pak's doctrine and order, celibacy was an option, for both men and women *ch'ulga*. Pak was not celibate and fathered children with Yang Misang before and after his awakening. Yang was arguably the most visible woman and still one of the most famous in the order, and she also was not celibate. Song was married with children, as was the third Head Dharma Master. Some of the most famous members of the contemporary order are the children of the first three Head Dharma

³² See Eun-su Cho, "Reinventing Female Identity: A Brief History of Korean Buddhist Nuns," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 1 (June 2009); Eun-su Cho, *Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen* (Albany: State University of New York, 2011); Marianne Dresser, ed., *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1996); Susan Jean Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994); Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publication, 1995).

³³ Lee, "Theory and Practice," 105.

Masters. The model for Pak's practice did not require celibacy, but Pak acknowledged it as a choice and a valid method of practice. For the most part, male *ch'ulga* tend to be married with children, but there are many who chose to remain single or celibate; both vocations are a choice.

Women also had the freedom to choose. Recognizing the difficult situation for married women in Chosŏn Korea, Pak acknowledged that celibacy and remaining single would provide women a way to complete independence and autonomy; but even still, he memorialized the importance of personal agency in his doctrine. Women who were single and came to the order for total commitment, usually remained single and celibate, since this was their fastest way to independence and autonomy; those who were already married remained married and sometimes became celibate within marriage. In the early years of the order, these were options for women. After Pak's death and the rapid growth of the order, this choice evaporated into an unwritten expectation, and quickly all new women *ch'ulga* came to be celibate and single. Kim notes this hardening of expectations:

In principle, clergy, both male and female, can choose married life or celibate life since marriage is optional to the Wŏn Buddhist clergy. However, under the traditional rules, clergywomen have been required to be celibate. As long as this conventional distinction served its purpose, there seemed to be need for continuity. However, even when there are conflicting views – whether these conventions should continue or change – religious institutions in general tend to prefer continuity to change. Sot'aesan's advocacy of celibacy in practice for female clergy gradually hardened into an absolute condition – namely that all clergywomen are required to be celibate. While developing into a stable

institution, the Wŏn Buddhist order was more concerned about the continuity of conventional rules than the realization of the creative vision of the founder.³⁴

Since this has been the convention for quite some time, the order sticks with the status quo. Despite celibacy being a growing issue for well over twenty-five years, senior women *kyomu* and many conservative and ultra-conservative lay women continue to insist on celibacy. This convention has lost its purpose and now hinders growth of the community as an indicator of severe sexism.

What is often overlooked in discussions is that enforcement of celibacy comes predominately from women in the order. The men resigned themselves to following the women's lead on this issue. Since first joining the order many years ago, I have repeatedly heard from male *chega* and *ch'ulga* that this is a women's issue: men have no position to tell women what to do. Every heated discussion I have ever had about celibacy and marriage has been with women members insisting on control of female bodies. For the men, the very topic is like hot potato – nope, nope, nope, not my business...next! The most resistant faction in the order are the conservative and ultra-conservative female members, with many centrist women unwilling to rock the boat or raise their voices. For many senior women that grew up under severe sexual discrimination and harassment, sometimes from their own family members, the Wŏn Buddhist community is revolutionary and paradisiacal. They do not see society having

³⁴ Kim, *Concerns and Issues*, 165.

changed radically yet, and women are still held to many gendered expectations: but times have changed, and views on gender, patriarchy, agency, and women's rights have evolved much since Pak's death in 1943. Young women grow up with a separate set of expectations and hopes, and young women *kyomu* now experience this sexualized control of their bodies as an extension of patriarchal repression. As Lee points out about the women members internalizing their oppression, "in this way they became their own oppressors."³⁵

Discussion and debate on this issue in Wŏn Buddhist circles inevitably conflates celibacy with marriage. Note how Kim opens the above passage with a binary choice for women between marriage and celibacy. These are not mutually inclusive or exclusive categories. One can be single and not celibate, or single and celibate; one can be married and celibate, or married and sexually active. The internalization of patriarchal and heteronormative controls manifests in this binary choice and conflation, a choice that men do not have to make. The thought of sexually active single women *kyomu* is never mentioned in any Wŏn Buddhist literature as an option, despite it being an unrecognized reality. Women *kyomu* who have refused to take a vow of celibacy, inevitably remain celibate or project the impression of being celibate or chaste. The thought or mention of two sexually active lesbian *kyomu*, another reality left ignored, borders on heresy. The choice for women is always one between marriage and celibacy:

³⁵ Lee, "Theory and Practice," 313.

self-control through sexual abstinence, or self-control through heteronormative marriage vows. A free and sexually liberated women is never imagined or openly discussed. Thus, although Pak does provide the option for both sexes and appears progressive for his time, he also strengthens conservative and heteronormative views on gender, sex, and sexuality by providing only a binary choice. In practice, of course, men and women do choose to be single and not celibate, regardless of vows and expectations.

There is some hope coming from the sixth Head Dharma Master on issues of celibacy and marriage for women. Over thirty years ago, a male and female *kyomu* who moved to Canada married despite the convention of non-marriage and celibacy for women. In this quite controversial and publicly repressed situation, the female member lost her status as *kyomu*. In April 2019, the Head Dharma Master reinstated the now retired member's status as *kyomu*, quietly and without fanfare or public acknowledgment. Does this decision foreshadow more change to come? Many young *kyomu* hope so. For over seventy years, Wŏn Buddhism has remained resistant to Pak's vision of equality and completely liberating women from patriarchal bounds, so we will have to wait and see.

The gendered discrimination between clothing has been outlined above. This discrimination is more noticeable in Korea, since the women *kyomu* are expected to wear their hair and traditional Korean-style uniform more often. Even with the newer

Catholic-style collared shirt the male *kyomu* wear in formal situations, the men still have more freedom and fewer expectations. They have the choice between contemporary clothing or traditional Korean clothing. When they do dress in casual contemporary clothing, they do not stand out in a crowd and look awkwardly out of style. The women do. With fewer options, women are always expected to fit a certain mold and dress a certain way. For older women *kyomu*, the uniform is less problematic and empowering, and frankly, they are used to it; for many women under fifty years old, forcing them into the traditional Korean dress and genderless casual clothing, when the men are not so forced, smacks of patriarchal repression and is experienced as a form of suffering. It is not empowering. Although this is the situation for many women, since all women experience it together, many young women grin and bear it as a form of karmic repentance. I could not find any contemporary discussion in the Wŏn Buddhist newspaper on the topic of religious clothing, and for the most part, this remains a discussion for members only, and the complaints of women *kyomu* are not made public.

In America, the problem is more pronounced and public. American members immediately recognize the disparity between men and women's clothing and do not hesitate to question or bring it up. The problem is often explained to Americans as "Korean culture," but it is not so easily dismissed in America. Since the doctrine prohibits such discrimination, all issues related to sex discrimination are significantly amplified in America. Korean women *kyomu* living in America did successfully petition

Headquarters for a trial period of changing the uniforms to something more contemporary that fits with American culture; however, no consensus was reached by the American community of women *kyomu* and pressures to conform to Korean standards prevailed. In formal situations, even at temples that are predominately American, the women *kyomu* still wear their hair in a chignon and the traditional *hanbok* uniform. Most women *kyomu* in America do not wear the *hanbok* outside of Sunday service or formal rituals and ceremonies, and now wear traditional Korean casual wear, which is genderless, for casual attire. In America, this makes them stand out in all situations, unlike in Korea.

A few women *kyomu* in America have spearheaded changes to everyday clothing by wearing Western-style pantsuits for work and formal occasions and keeping their hair out of the chignon, but in the most formal of situations, they will still put on the *hanbok* and pull their hair back. As of 2019, women are still not free to control their bodies. *Kyomu* in America know that this is an important problem and that it inhibits growth of Wŏn Buddhism in America, but most feel their hands are tied. They refuse to buck the system, stand in unison on the strength of doctrine, and change their situation. They wait for an independent American Wŏn Buddhist order to form or wait for leadership in Korea to change the situation. I suspect both are a long way away, and neither will quickly change their situation.

LGBT in Wŏn Buddhism

As a young gay person growing up in the United States in the '70s and '80s, I learned early in life to survive by detecting threatening or dangerous people and situations. I never fit an acceptable mold of American masculinity and continuously feared that the way I spoke or moved would give me away. I lived hyper-attentive to the people around me and to my own presence, and I lived with a constant threat of violence, even from my own family. Moving to Korea was liberating, since Koreans did not hold the same view of masculinity. Gentleness and refinement were not derided as faggot or gay, and the way I spoke or moved did not give up the ghost and put me in threatening situations. Male friendship was more intimate, and in Korea I first learned the close feeling of a non-sexual touch by a male friend. Although I knew right away that Korea was a safe zone and that I was temporarily liberated from the previous twenty-five years of continuous threats of violence, I also knew right away that Korea was not out.

After a month of being in Korea and recognizing that Korea was not out, I still felt comfortable and safe enough to ask one of my Korean language teachers at Wonkwang University if Korea had a gay culture. I was in small-town Korea and did not see any obvious signs of what I would consider gay culture but was curious if it was there. She was a liberal and boisterous middle-aged Christian woman with a tight perm and lots of makeup, and she looked at me surprised and said gently in a hushed voice,

“Oh no, we have no gay.” I thought to myself, “yeah, right!” After several months and getting to know a few more Koreans and Wŏn Buddhists my age, it became clear that openly living as gay or lesbian was out of the question. Being LGBT was akin to mental illness and a gross perversion of the Confucian worldview.

Although I recognized the difference between American and Korean ideals of masculinity and sincerely appreciated and warmly accepted the Korean heteronormative male intimacy, sometimes I got mixed signals. It was hard to tell if a lingering male eye was due to my foreignness in small-town Korea or a sign of attraction. In America, it was much easier to tell and my gaydar was often correct: in Korea, I was often wrong and confused, in a comical, challenging way. I met a lot of people living at Headquarters, and men would immediately shake my hand instead of offering the customary Wŏn Buddhist palms-together greeting with a half bow. After working at Headquarters for about three months, a tall and attractive male *kyomu* in his 40s came to the office to greet the department head. He would not take his eyes off me while they met. After their meeting and on his way out, he practiced his English with me, asked me a few questions, and then shook my hand before leaving. He tightly held my hand a long time and told me he would be around Headquarters for several weeks. Just before letting go of my hand, he used one of his fingers to tickle my palm. This was the second time an older male *kyomu* shook hands like that. I was confused and was not sure if I should be flattered or if this was Korean male bonding.

A few days later in my room, I was talking with a male postulant who was visiting for several days from Seoul. He could speak English that was much better than my Korean, so we bonded quickly. I got a gay vibe, but since we were both postulants, I did not ask. I was afraid of misinterpreting his friendliness. I could not get that weird handshake out of my head and asked him if it meant something. He smiled, looked a bit uncomfortable, and then said that it meant the *kyomu* liked me. We started talking and revealed we were gay to each other. We both thought the male *kyomu* was attractive, so like two young giddy gay boys, we laughed and joked around for about an hour, reveling in our new-found secret friendship. He described the vibrant gay culture of Seoul and the difficulty of being gay in Korea. He was totally closeted to family and friends and said he would probably get married and have children. He revealed that gays and lesbians in the order are completely closeted and absolutely will not talk about it with anyone who is not gay or lesbian. We promised to never tell anyone, but I found out he secretly told several other gay men in the order. I understood: how could he not mention that the first white American postulant to join the order was gay? It was a possible scandal of epic proportions.

Next week on a beautiful summer night with a full moon, I saw the *kyomu* at evening meditation, and, again, his eye lingered. As I left, he nodded to me while he spoke with older men outside the dharma hall. I walked back to my room with the other postulants. After about twenty minutes when people cleared out of the area, the

kyomu was gently knocking on and sliding open my door. Sitting alone on the floor of my room in the old traditional building, we had been talking for about an hour when he put his hand on my leg. I asked him if he was gay. He acknowledged it, and we spent the next several hours talking about life for him in Korea and the difficulty of being a closeted *kyomu*. He was very devoted to Wŏn Buddhism and the order, and he came from a prominent Wŏn Buddhist family. Several times he teared up when speaking about his life. Even in our broken Korean and English, it was an intense conversation burned into my memory. He stayed the night and gave me a private lesson on how Korea has no gay.

During my time in Korea, I met gay and lesbian postulants, novices, *kyomu*, and lay members. All of them were closeted from their families and the order, all of them were deeply devout practitioners, and several were in heterosexual marriages. Meeting them was inspiring and heartbreaking. Their knowledge of and deep admiration for Pak's teaching, despite the discrimination they faced, moved me to study harder; but their personal stories and experiences eventually crushed my hope of continuing with my studies in Korea. All of them spoke of hearing members say that homosexuals are mentally deficient or diseased, and that popular opinion on the topic was identical with hateful Christian rhetoric in the United States: gays and lesbian are child molesters, perverts, and depraved. Many of them had tried over the years to discuss the topic with members through doctrine, but it always came to no avail. At that time, Korea was not

ready to even acknowledge it had gays, gay clubs, gay host bars, or anything remotely related to LGBT people. Some of the young postulants, novices, and *kyomu* were ok with LGBT people, but they would quickly tell you that there was no way the order or the members would accept it as a viable lifestyle, especially for *kyomu*.

When I returned to Wŏn Buddhism seeking ordination, I already knew the position of the order on LGBT members; but now I was completely out and not going to live in the closet. Anyone familiar with American Buddhism knows well that LGBT are a cornerstone of the community. They have been for a long time. I asked *kyomu* and lay members at American temples what the official view of the American Wŏn Buddhist community was on gays now. I was assured by several *kyomu* that being gay is not an issue in the American community. I was told that if I really wanted to become *kyomu*, it would be easier this time since Won Institute did things American style. I was open about not living in the closet, and I refused to live closeted within an American Buddhist community. Discrimination against LGBT is not how American Buddhists roll.

Once I got to the Won Institute, I realized the situation was the same as in Korea. The community of *kyomu* in America are much more open to LGBT people, of course. They are exposed to LGBT Americans who come to learn about Wŏn Buddhism, and many American members have LGBT people in their families. Korean *kyomu* in America have learned that LGBT people are not mentally deficient or diseased, as is believed in

South Korea, and are normal people like everyone else. Many young *kyomu* in America are particularly open to LGBT people. They will readily talk about Korean pop icons who have recently come out and unequivocally state that LGBT people should not be discriminated against; but when push comes to shove, they back down to senior members and do not stand as allies. Regardless of supportive members, it was clear that many older members remain against admitting LGBT into the order, and there were no out *kyomu* in America.

A very prominent and famous senior male *kyomu* 'master' living in America, knowing I was gay, told me over tea in his room that he did not understand why so many gays come to Wŏn Buddhism. He then stated no gay man, especially one with tattoos like me, will ever become *kyomu*. He calmly said with a cup of tea in his hand that he would go to headquarters and personally oppose my ordination because a tattooed gay man is not the image of *kyomu* they want. Since I would be the first, at that time, it was a non-starter for the old *kyomu*. When I asked him about the meaning behind the *Heart Sutra*, emptiness, and non-self, he shushed me and told me to stop talking. When I asked about various doctrinal points in Wŏn Buddhism that adamantly oppose his position of rejection and asking me to leave, he said tea was over and to "take off tattoos" and "stop the gay" or leave. This concerned me since I had already been studying for two years at Won Institute. The two other male *kyomu* had already asked me to leave for working, contrary to doctrinal standards, and now a senior male

kyomu was telling me to leave because I was tattooed and gay. I asked about ordination and being gay to the senior women *kyomu* that stood up for me working a part-time job. She was discernibly disturbed by my question and what the *kyomu* said to me. After a few days and consulting with others, she told me that to be ordained as *kyomu*, I would have to be closeted and never tell anyone in Wŏn Buddhism. If I could do that, she could work with the other issues, but the order was not ready for an openly gay *kyomu*. She knew it was wrong and against the doctrine, and it visibly troubled her to tell me. I said nothing to any of the Americans in the administration and left. As far as I know, this was the first time any person had been specifically denied ordination for being openly gay.

Years later while in Korea, I learned of another situation involving a gay novice. A young Korean American male novice, the first of his kind, was discovered to be gay and being kicked out just before completing his first four years of novice training. In the age of social media, a picture of him kissing his boyfriend surfaced and got back to leadership at Headquarters. Representatives of the order told him that he had a mental illness, could not live with the men, and would have to leave. A bright and devoted young man, he had the support of many novice and *kyomu*, and Headquarters was trying to quietly send him away. News travels fast in the Wŏn Buddhist community, and the news spread quickly to the American community. Letters of support were issues from the Won Institute, several prominent Buddhist scholars weighed in on the

issue and sent letters of protest, many *kyomu* and members protested the decision to send him out, and it became clear they had an issue on their hands. In America, it was easy to brush a white guy like me with no family connections to the order under the rug; but this was in Korea, at Headquarters, and the young man was Korean American from a Wŏn Buddhist family.

Headquarters let him finish his last year of undergraduate novice education, but he had to move out of the male dormitory (no surprise, since gays are perverts and deviants). A period of discussion and research on the topic of gays and ordination was initiated, and final decisions would be made later before he advanced to the graduate program. This was an effective way to temporarily sweep the issue under the rug, and once he finished undergrad education, they said no to ordination with less fanfare and protest. Several *kyomu* and novices tried to gather support, but in the end, even his classmates and supportive *kyomu* refused to publicly go against the order. After almost fifty years in America, the order had not produced even one American *kyomu*, and since the American community has dire need of American-born and native English-speaking *kyomu*, this young devoted practitioner would have been an ideal *kyomu* for proselytizing American members. I personally know several American lay members who no longer attend temple because they heard about this event. Headquarters and temples have been effective at keeping this quiet, and the issue was never made public.

Kyomu in America are also effective at accepting LGBT members into their community while not revealing the order's true beliefs about LGBT issues.

Many people ask me why I stay associated with Wŏn Buddhism. Why not be part of a Buddhist community that does not disavow my existence and human dignity? I offer the same reason as many in the order: Pak's teaching and the community. I see strong roots of profound understanding in Pak's doctrine. After studying, practicing, and meditating on Pak's teaching, learning the history of his order, and living and working with the community for over twenty years, I am quite confident that were Pak alive today, equality for LGBT members would be enshrined in his four social reformations. It is like having a weird and hateful bigoted uncle or aunt: even though they say and believe wretched things about others, they love and care for you, and you have memories and experiences that bind your heart to them. Abandoning family is difficult.

There are no studies on the numbers of gays and lesbians in the order: such a study is currently impossible. Based on my personal contacts with the order and from my own individual experiences, I am quite certain that the percentage would be notably higher than expected by any Korean members. Studies on East Asian or Korean LGBT are few and far between. My academic career in East Asian studies has been dominated by a hegemonic heteronormative perspective. In East Asian studies today, there is virtually no gay. I am sure no lesbians participated in New Woman movements in the

early twentieth-century Korea, and no gay men participated in liberation movements and protests during Japanese occupation. I am sure no lesbians escaping the oppressive, groping hands of Confucian patriarchy helped build Pak's Buddhadharma Research Society. Everyone was heterosexual, of course. I hope the clues exist, waiting for discovery in personal journals and letters; but for now, the dearth of knowledge about current and historical LGBT members in Wŏn Buddhism – and much of Korean history – reveals the stark limits of our actual historical knowledge. Stora correctly noted that discourse on the present controls our understanding of the past; but our historical imagination dreams about the past and can also homogenize a multifaceted present.³⁶ It works both ways, mutually reinforcing the narratives we desire.

³⁶ Benjamin Stora, "Maroc-Algérie retour du passé et écriture de l'histoire," *Vingtième Siè. Revue d'histoire* 68 (octobre-décembre 2000): 109-118.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to move the conversation about Wŏn Buddhism beyond the limited confines of official narratives and didactic introductions. Academic interest in Wŏn Buddhism remains limited, and my humble hope is that this discussion stimulates more sustained investigations into topics presented herein, even if as strong refutations of my characterizations. Under a complex constellation of narrative, doctrine, and praxis, Wŏn Buddhism reveals that new religious movements may indeed be rich sources of knowledge for the field of religious studies in general.

Most religions put forth legendary stories of their founder, and this superficial exploration of Wŏn Buddhist sacred scripture reveals a readiness of followers in the first generations to alter and change text and narrative, regardless of the perceived divinity of the founder. Pak himself never claimed divine status as the future Maitreya Buddha and repeatedly rejected the existence of such a legend; even so, after his death, followers had no issue with granting such status and shaping narrative and texts to fit their own need for a divine savior. Unsatisfied with the commonness and humanity of Pak, the community shapes him and his life story into myth, legend, and divinity, providing them legitimacy in a competitive religious market. On this trajectory, we can easily image a more fictional and fantastic narrative emerging after several hundred more years of development.

Relying heavily, and almost exclusively, on well-established East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, worldviews, and background understandings, Pak created a simple doctrine and practice for his followers and repeatedly encouraged them to further their studies of Buddhist teachings. He clearly framed his teaching as Buddhism and delivered it within a structure that revealed a commitment to East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist understandings and schemata. Immediately after his death, the order redacts his teaching in attempts to assuage and attenuate its connection to established Buddhism. Desiring to emphasize their claim to a cosmic new Buddha, the order edited, augmented, and restructured Pak's *Pulgyo chŏngjŏn* in ways that downplayed its Buddhist connection and emphasized an imagined uniqueness. They altered his doctrinal chart and revealed a desire to elevate their importance as 'ordained' members. With these changes came drastic alterations to the very structure and flavor of Pak's community.

Within a brief time, Pak's egalitarian community of *ch'ulga* and *chega* members, who worked and practiced closely together, divided into a complex hierarchy defined by a strong, centralized bureaucracy dominated and controlled by a priestly class of administrative and ritual specialists. Originally unable to visually distinguish between ordained and lay members, the community evolved into one that visually distinguishes the two classes of members, opting for power- and authority-conferring religious vestments for ordinands. Although Pak originally attempted to liberate women from

the confines of male patriarchy, the order moved back into clearly defined patriarchal gender roles, which now appear hyper-conservative when compared to contemporary Korean culture. The community swiftly transformed itself into the very same monastic model Pak heavily criticized and attempted to steer his community away from becoming. Interestingly, all these changes have created a situation in which the order is faced with a stagnating community and sharp decline in the number of ordinands, forcing it to re-evaluate itself in a rapidly shifting world. Even within a contemporary revival of Buddhism in many of the most developed countries of the world, Wŏn Buddhism fails to enjoy this renaissance and struggles to attract the attention it desires.

This rapid transformation of the community, almost immediate redaction of the text, and instant deification of the founder has possible implications for the field of religious studies in general. We know egregiously little about the early years of many of the world's largest religions, and new religious movements, such as Wŏn Buddhism, provide an interesting laboratory to examine how nascent religious communities shape and alter text, narrative, belief, praxis, and organizational structures. Profound, rapid, and currently unknown changes may have shaped the earliest years of many of the world's religions, and how we imagine their beginnings and the formation of their texts may be radically different from reality.

This study is also a personal accounting of involvement in the early years of a new religious movement as it spreads beyond its national and cultural confines - a clash

of two worldviews. Wŏn Buddhism grew quickly after Pak's death, and although currently in a period of stagnant growth, it will most likely survive well into the future. Even though I no longer consider myself an active member of the current order, the Wŏn Buddhist community and its members continue to impact my life. Researching and writing about a personal religious experience and tearing off the bandages that often cover such relationships exposed my own fear and trepidation. Revealing the wounds and scars left by such an experience, for myself and many others, will undoubtedly create tensions with many devoted members. Life within a religious community is a powerfully emotional experience, especially when whole lives are devoted to its propagation. Many of my Wŏn Buddhist brothers and sisters will disagree with or out-right reject some of what is stated herein. To that I can only offer my sincere intention, with palms joined, to depict a more complex and human, and thus naturally flawed, community, one which I intensely appreciate and value.

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