

Countercurrents of Influence in East Asian Buddhism: The Korean Case

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One of the enduring topoi used to describe the dissemination of Buddhism is that of an inexorable eastward diffusion of the tradition, starting from the religion's homeland in India, leading through Inner Asia, until finally spreading throughout the entire East Asian region. Since the religion's inception in the sixth or fifth century B.C.E., this missionary impulse was an important part of Buddhism's self-identity. Soon after the Buddha began his dispensation, the *Mahāvagga* tell us, he ordered his monks to "wander forth for the welfare and weal of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare, and weal of gods and men." Buddhist missionaries, typically following long-established trade routes between the geographical and cultural regions of Asia, arrived in China by at least the beginning of the first millennium C.E., and reached the rest of East Asia within another few hundred years.

But this account of a monolithic missionary movement spreading steadily eastward is just one part of the story. The case of East Asian Buddhism suggests there is also a different tale to tell, a tale in which this dominant current of diffusion creates important eddies, or countercurrents, of influence that redound back toward the center. Because of the leading role played by the cultural and political center of China in most developments within East Asia, we commonly assume that developments within Buddhism would have begun first on the mainland of China and from there spread throughout the rest of the region where Buddhism also came to flourish and where literary Chinese was the medium of learned communication. Through sheer size alone, of course, the monolith that was China would inevitably tend to dominate the creative work of East Asian Buddhism. But this dominance need not imply that innovations did not take place on the periphery of East Asia, innovations that could have a profound effect throughout the region, including the Chinese heartland itself. These countercurrents of influence can have significant, even profound, impact on neighboring traditions, affecting them in manifold ways.

I am increasingly convinced, in fact, that we should not neglect the place of these "peripheral regions" of East Asia—Japan, Vietnam, Tibet, perhaps, but certainly my today, Korea—in any comprehensive description of the evolution of the broader "Sinitic" tradition of Buddhism. Korea was subject to many of the same forces that prompted the growth of Buddhism on the Chinese mainland, and Korean commentarial and scriptural writings (all composed in literary Chinese) were often able to exert as pervasive an influence throughout East Asia as were texts written in China proper. Given the organic nature I propose for the East Asian traditions of Buddhism, such "peripheral" creations could find their ways to the Chinese center and been accepted by the Chinese as readily as their own indigenous compositions. We have definitive evidence that such influence occurred with the writings of Korean Buddhist exegetes. In considering filiations of influence between the

traditions of East Asian Buddhism, we therefore must look not only from the center to the periphery, as is usually done, but also from the periphery toward the center, using the Korean case to demonstrate the different kinds of impact a specific regional strand of Buddhism can have on the broader East Asia tradition as a whole.

Korea's Role in the Eastward Dissemination of Buddhism

Notwithstanding the regrettable "hermit kingdom" appellation that early Western visitors gave to Korea, we should note that throughout most of history Korea was in no way isolated from its neighbors throughout the region. Korea was woven inextricably into the web of Sinitic civilization since at least the inception of the Common Era. The infiltration of Chinese culture into the Korean peninsula was accelerated through the missionary activities of the Buddhists, who brought not only their religious teachings and rituals to Korea but also the breadth and depth of Chinese cultural knowledge as a whole. To a substantial extent it was Buddhism, with its large body of written scriptures, that fostered among the Koreans literacy in written Chinese, and ultimately familiarity with the full range of Chinese religious and secular writing, including Confucian philosophy, belles letters, calendrics, and divination.

Korea played an integral role in the eastward transmission of Buddhism and Sinitic culture through the East Asian region. Buddhist monks, artisans, and craftsmen from the Korean peninsula made major contributions toward the development of Japanese civilization, including its Buddhist culture. The role of the early Korean kingdom of Paekche in transmitting Buddhist culture to the Japan islands was one of the two most critical influences in the entire history of Japan, rivaled only by the nineteenth-century encounter with Western culture. Indeed, for at least a century, from the middle of the sixth to the end of the seventh centuries, Paekche influences dominated cultural production in Japan and constituted the main current of Buddhism's transmission to Japan. Korean scholars brought the Confucian classics, Buddhist scriptures, and medical knowledge to Japan. Artisans introduced Sinitic monastic architecture, construction techniques, and even tailoring. The early-seventh-century Korean monk Kwallük, who is known to the Buddhist tradition as a specialist in the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna philosophy, also brought along documents on calendrics, astronomy, geometry, divination, and numerology. Korean monks were instrumental in establishing the Buddhist ecclesiastical hierarchy in Japan and served in its first supervisory positions. Finally, the growth of an order of nuns in Japan occurred through Korean influence, thanks to Japanese nuns who traveled to Paekche to study, including three nuns who studied Vinaya in Paekche for three years during the late-sixth century.

Korean Influences in Chinese Buddhism and Beyond

Despite their apparent geographical isolation from the major scholastic and practice centers of Buddhism in China, Korean adherents of the religion also maintained close and continuous contacts with their brethren on the mainland throughout much of the premodern period. Korea's proximity to northern China via the overland route through Manchuria assured the establishment of close diplomatic and cultural ties between the peninsula and the mainland. In addition, during its

Three Kingdoms (4th – 7th centuries) and Unified Silla (668-935) periods, Korea was the virtual Phoenicia of East Asia, and its nautical prowess and well-developed searoutes made the peninsula's seaports the hubs of regional commerce. It was thus relatively easy for Korean monks to accompany trading parties to China, where they could train and study together with Chinese adepts. Ennin (793-864), a Japanese pilgrim in China during the middle of the ninth century, remarks on the large Korean contingent among the foreign monks in the T'ang Chinese capital of Ch'ang-an. He also reports that all along China's eastern littoral were permanent communities of Koreans, which were granted extraterritorial privileges and had their own autonomous political administrations. Monasteries were established in those communities, which served as ethnic centers for the many Korean monks and traders operating in China. Koreans even ventured beyond China to travel to the Buddhist homeland of India itself. Of the several Korea monks known to have gone on pilgrimage to India, the best known is Hyech'o (fl. 720-773), who journeyed to India via sea in the early eighth century and traveled all over the subcontinent before returning overland to China in 727.

The ready interchange that occurred throughout the East Asian region in all areas of culture allowed indigenous Korean contributions to Buddhist thought (again, all composed in literary Chinese) to become known in China, and eventually even beyond into Central Asia and Tibet. Writings produced in China and Korea especially were transmitted elsewhere with relative dispatch, so that scholars throughout East Asia were kept well apprised of advances made by their colleagues. Thus, doctrinal treatises and scriptural commentaries written in Silla Korea by such monks as Ŭisang (625-702), Wŏnhyo (617-686), and Kyŏnghŭng (ca. 7th century) were much admired in China and Japan and their insights influenced, for example, the thought of Fa-tsang (643-712), the systematizer of the Chinese Hua-yen school. Korean Buddhist pilgrims were also frequent visitors to the mainland of China, where they were active participants in the Chinese tradition itself. Although many of these pilgrims eventually returned to the peninsula, we have substantial evidence of several who remained behind in China for varying lengths of time and became prominent leaders of Chinese Buddhist schools. This ready interchange between China, Korea, Japan, and other neighboring traditions has led me to refer to an "East Asian" tradition of Buddhism, which is something more than the sum of its constituent national parts.

Why would monks from Korea have been able to exert such wide-ranging influence, both geographically and temporally, across the East Asian Buddhist tradition? I believe it is because Buddhist monks saw themselves not so much as "Korean," "Japanese," or "Chinese" Buddhists, but instead as joint collaborators in a religious tradition that transcended contemporary notions of nation and time. These monks' conceptions of themselves were much broader than the "shrunken imaginings of recent history," to paraphrase Benedict Anderson's well-known statement about nationalism. Korean Buddhists of the pre-modern age would probably have been more apt to consider themselves members of an ordination line and monastic lineage, a school of thought, or a tradition of practice, than as "Korean" Buddhists. If they were to refer to themselves at all, it would be not as "Korean Buddhists" but as "disciples," "teachers," "proselytists," "doctrinal specialists," and "meditators"—all terms suggested in the categorizations of monks found in the

various *Kao-seng chuan* (*Biographies of Eminent Monks*), which date from as early as the sixth century.

But unlike many of the other peoples who lived on the periphery of the Sinitic cultural sphere, Koreans also worked throughout the premodern period to maintain a cultural, social, and political identity that was distinct from China. As Michael Rogers has so aptly described it, Koreans throughout their history remained active participants in Sinitic civilization while also seeking always to maintain their “cultural self-sufficiency.” Paralleling this concern with maintaining Korea’s separate identity, Kim Pusik (1075-1151) in the preface to his *Samguk sagi* (*Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms*; ca. 1122-1146) laments the ongoing neglect of Korea’s own indigenous history and cites this neglect as one of the principal reasons for compiling his new history.

Simultaneous with their recognition of their clan and local identity, their allegiance to a particular state and monarch, their connection to Buddhist monastic and ordination lineages, and so forth, Buddhist monks of the pre-modern age also viewed themselves as participating in the universal transmission of the dharma going back both spatially and temporally to India and the Buddha himself. With such a vision, East Asian Buddhists could continue to be active participants in a religious tradition whose origins were distant both geographically and temporally. East Asians of the premodern age viewed Buddhism as a universal religion pristine and pure in its thought, its practice, and its realization; hence the need of hermeneutical taxonomies to explain how the plethora of competing Buddhist texts and practices—each claiming to be pristinely Buddhist but seemingly at times to be almost diametrically opposed to one another—were all actually part of a coherent heuristic plan within the religion, as if Buddhism’s many variations were in fact cut from whole cloth. This vision of their tradition also accounts for the persistent attempt of all of the indigenous schools of East Asian Buddhism to trace their origins back through an unbroken lineage of “ancestors” or “patriarchs” to the person of the Buddha himself. Once we begin tracing the countercurrents of influence in East Asian Buddhism, however, we discover that the lineages of these “patriarchs” often lead us back not to China or Japan, but instead to Korea.

NOTE

*This address is adapted from the introduction to my forthcoming edited volume *Currents and Countercurrents: Korean Influence on the East Asian Buddhist Traditions* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming November, 2005).