Buddhism as Culture in Contemporary Korea

By Eamon Adams

This paper represents an attempt to lay-out the details for a possible research project concerning the role of Buddhism in contemporary South Korea. My hypothesis is that Buddhism is gradually becoming rebranded as a Korean cultural asset as opposed to a religious tradition and I wonder what the ramifications of such a change might be. In line with the theme of this conference, it seems to me that by selectively remembering and emphasizing one particular aspect of its past Korean Buddhism is attempting to craft an alternative future for itself in contemporary Korea. The past I refer to is the concept of Buddhism as ‘protector of the nation’ (護國佛教). Traditionally, this has been understood as a defensive concept – protecting the country from invasion and natural disaster. However, today this notion of ‘protector of the nation’ is, I think, being reinterpreted in service of Korea’s globalization project and Buddhism is being inducted into this project. In what follows I will try to situate this rebranding before concluding by highlighting some important questions arising from this development.

The Religious Landscape

Within contemporary Korean society there exists not only a vibrant religious atmosphere, but also a competitive one where different religious traditions both actively vie for new members and encourage full and active participation on the part of their adherents.¹

The most recent statistics for the religious make-up of Korea are from the 2005 census. It records the population distribution by major religions as: Buddhist 22.8%, Protestant 18.3%
and Catholic 10.9%, with a 46.5% group claiming no religious affiliation. It is within this dynamic situation that Buddhism finds itself having to adapt so as to play a more significant role in contemporary Korean society.

**The Buddhist Reality**

Hale and hearty are adjectives which come to mind when thinking about the health of Buddhism in contemporary Korea. Over the past number of years Buddhism’s visible presence in society has grown and developed in many ways. In fact, it would not, I think, be an exaggeration to speak of a renaissance of Buddhism in Korea.

All in all, today’s Buddhism is more vibrant and carries more influence within Korean society than it has for many years. In this paper one dimension of this rejuvenation will be examined in detail: namely Buddhism’s reclamation and reinterpretation of its perceived role as ‘protector of the nation’. First, let us situate this concept of ‘nation protecting Buddhism’ within its historical context.

From its arrival in Korea (372CE) Buddhism, faced with competition from the Confucian tradition, endeavoured to court favour with the country’s rulers by putting itself forward as protector of the country. A symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and the court eventually grew up with Buddhism acting as spiritual protector in return for financial backing and security. Among the most famous of Buddhism’s efforts to protect the country were the production of the wood carved Tripitakas in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries and later the mobilization of monks to form a militia in defense of the country against the invading Japanese armies (1592-98). In the early twentieth century Buddhists again played a central role in defense of the nation by taking part in the independence movement of 1919 against the colonizing Japanese. However, during the colonial period, 1910-1945, the situation was
extremely complex and demanding, with Buddhism both striving to modernize while also attempting to retain its identity in the face of colonizing Japanese Buddhism.

In the years after liberation the situation for Buddhism grew more difficult and convoluted. Questions regarding Buddhist collaboration with the Japanese colonizer and its attempt to once again portray itself as ‘protector of the nation’ led to the Buddhist community being torn asunder, with both violence and litigation employed to displace married monks and return major properties to those of the celibate tradition. Unfortunately, during this period the issue of collaboration became a potent weapon of cleansing: in the name of nationalism, married clergy were equated with collaborationists and celibate clergy with patriots. Up until the 90s this internal strife led a large number of Koreans to question Buddhism’s ability and credentials to play a constructive role in modern society.

Apart from Buddhism’s divisive infighting during the post-liberation period, another reality which did its popularity no good what-so-ever was its support for – or at least failure to oppose – the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee (1961-79). Park, while in power, set about building a form of nationalism which not only rejected all legacy of Japanese colonial rule, but also promoted a brutal anti-communist and totalitarian ideology which resulted in the imprisonment of thousands. Park, who considered himself a Buddhist, looked upon Buddhism as a foundational element of ‘pure’ Korean culture and identity. Through his policies he lent support to Buddhism, helped celibate monks in their efforts to displace the married clergy and latched on to the historical notion of ‘nation protecting Buddhism’ as a pillar in his nationalist ideology. Park bolstered this nationalist ideology by sponsoring scholarship which emphasized and manufactured a new type of Buddhist nationalism. And in so doing, I believe, Park’s influence not only emasculated critical Buddhist scholarship of that period, but also set later scholarship back decades. In short, it would seem that Park at
one and the same time manipulated as well as supported Korean Buddhism so as to help consolidate his position, reinforce his nationalist ideology and establish himself and his regime with the credentials of patriotism.

On the Buddhist side of the relationship, Henrik Sorensen sums up the situation well: ‘…it appears that the vast majority – lay and clergy alike – were relatively content with the military government.’ During Park’s dictatorship there were some dissenting voices from within the Buddhist community; however, the position adopted by the majority, particularly those in leadership roles, was predominantly pro-government. As a result of this stance, for many years the public image of Buddhism was tainted, especially in the eyes of those who had been involved in the democracy movement. It was not until Chun Doo Hwan took over the reins of control after Park’s assassination in 1979 that Buddhism began to play a part in the democracy movement.

From the 80s onwards, another phenomenon appeared within the Buddhist community: minjung Buddhism. Even though this form of socially engaged Buddhism never enjoyed majority support, for a period in the 80s it did present an alternative vision for Buddhism to follow. Among the issues it tackled was to challenge the accepted interpretation of the notion ‘nation protecting Buddhism’. This it did by suggesting a reinterpretation of the 'nation' concept: instead of understanding 'nation' primarily as state or government, minjung Buddhism presented the masses or people as the essential element of the concept 'nation' thus designating Buddhism as the 'protector of the masses'. This project of socially engaged/liberation style Buddhism was short lived and has all but disappeared in contemporary Korea.

Rebranding ‘nation protecting Buddhism’
In 2011 the head of the Jogye Order, the Venerable Jaseung, visited Paris to promote Korean Buddhism. During his visit he made some telling statements, including sharing Korean Buddhism’s intention to become a globalized religion. However, as often happens, the devil was in the detail. In a press conference he explained how globalization of Korean Buddhism would not only promote Korean Buddhism but also the Korean ‘national brand and status’ as well as the ‘national economy and tourist industry’.\(^1\)\(^2\) In short, little if any distinction was drawn between Korean state and economic globalization on the one hand and Korean Buddhist globalization on the other.

As an aside, the above message demonstrates how minjung Buddhism’s effort to distance itself from the traditional concept of ‘nation protecting Buddhism’ has been forgotten. I would claim that a survey of the current situation might illustrate how Buddhism is in fact moving closer to the state by reinterpreting the concept ‘nation protecting Buddhism’.

Imagining things from the standpoint of the state, this nurturing of a relationship with Buddhism is understandable and, indeed, desirable. Three reasons for this spring to mind: 1) politically, the ruling Saenuri Party (New Frontier Party) has fences to mend with Buddhism after being accused of harbouring pro-Christian bias during the presidency of Lee Myung-bak.\(^1\)\(^3\) 2) On the international stage, there has been much made of the successful phenomenon known as *hallyu*, in English ‘The Korean Wave’; however, this trend seems to be running out of steam and new ways to promote Korea overseas are being sought, one of these is through heritage promotion. Here Buddhism has been very willing to take up an active role. 3) In a rapidly changing and globalizing world it seems as though the Korean state is attempting to rehash its nationalist ideology in a more acceptable form – through a form of ethnic-cultural nationalism. Gi Wook Shin states it thus: ‘Ethnic nationalism is also the underlying principle of current globalization processes in [South Korea].’\(^1\)\(^4\)
An example of the enthusiastic manner by which the government has entered into this reciprocal relationship can be found by examining the financial backing provided to Buddhism. Over a four year period, from 2010-2013, the government provided backing to the three major religions organizations to the sum of: Protestant Church € 4,557,000, Catholic Church € 6,232,000 and Buddhism € 24,428,000. In other words, Buddhism received about five times more financial support from the government than the Protestant tradition and roughly four times that of the Catholic Church. Locally, the Seoul Metropolitan Government also, over the past six years, has provided € 2,031,000 for an annual lotus lantern parade to celebrate Buddha’s Birthday. And in a 2009 presentation on tourism and the Temple Stay Program the Ministry for Culture, Sports and Tourism pledged € 17,235,000 over a period of ten years to improve temple facilities for the better running of the Temple Stay program.  

Having examined the government’s position, let us now turn to Buddhism’s stance. On the website of the Jogye Order there are many references to Korean Buddhism as one of the central pillars of Korea and Korean culture. For example, one banner on the site states: ‘Buddhism, more than a religion: the cradle of national culture.’ Other Buddhist publications often tend to emphasize the cultural aspect of Buddhism to the detriment of its religious dimensions and many monasteries and temples now conduct cultural programs such as tea making, temple food preparation and classes in Korean culture and history.

Another interesting example of Buddhism’s position of prominence in the spheres of culture and tourism is the above mentioned annual Lotus Lantern Festival. This has become one of the biggest festivals in Seoul and was promoted this year under the title: ‘Communication and Global Harmony’. Although the festival is religious in nature, it has, of late, taken on a new dimension orientated towards tourists and families enjoying a day out, with one of its main promoters being the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO). In a similar vein, the Temple Stay
Program is today one of the jewels in the crown of the KTO and is promoted as a cultural experience program. In line with this, the Buddhist International Seon Centre in Seoul describes its goal as: ‘...the globalization of Korean Buddhism and Korean Traditional Culture.’¹ ⁸ In short, it seems that Buddhism is more than happy to play a role in the promotion of Korea by presenting itself as a guardian of Korean traditional culture.

Finally, as alluded to above, during the presidency of Lee Myung-bak, many Buddhists accused the government of adopting a pro-Protestant stance demonstrated, they claimed, through policy and appointments. During this period relations between the government and Buddhism were strained. In 2008, during the anti-US meat protests, this situation led to an interesting stance being adopted by Buddhism. All across the country temples were adorned with banners and meetings were held opposing the importation of US meat and promoting the consumption of Korean produced meat. This phenomenon was interesting for several reasons: first, the slogans adopted were very nationalistic in tone; second, these protests were in direct opposition to government policy; third, although an oft heard criticism of Japanese Buddhism in Korea is about the consumption of meat by Japanese Buddhists here Korean Buddhism was actually promoting the consumption of meat, but it must be noted only Korean meat. On this occasion, Buddhism's position was noteworthy because it stood in opposition to the Korean state, but, at the same time, adopted a nationalist and protectionist stance on the question of meat importation.

**Conclusion**

What I have attempted in this paper is briefly to introduce the concept of ‘nation protecting Buddhism’ and demonstrate how this is being reinterpreted by both the state and Buddhism to better fit into the modern Korean globalization project. At this point rather than draw conclusions I would like to put forward four questions worthy, I think, of further investigation
in light of the above..

a) With relation to the possible tension between religious tradition and cultural heritage: what are the possible implications for Buddhism if it continues to play down its religious credentials and represent itself more as a guardian of Korean cultural? A cultural ambassador for Korea.

b) To what extent can Buddhism’s new role as ‘cultural guardian’ be understood as a modern reinterpretation of the traditional concept ‘nation protecting Buddhism’?

c) In a late-modern/postmodern society to what extent is it possible for a religious organization to reinterpret its role without losing authenticity in the eyes of its adherents? A question of rebranding?

d) In a multi-religious Korean society, what might the repercussions be if Buddhism is granted, by the state, a special position as cultural protector of the nation?

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2 Census information is from the government Statistics Korea Office (KOSTAT) – (www.kostat.go.kr). An interesting comparison can be drawn between figures from the 2005 census and those from the 1995 census. In 1995 the recorded figures for the main religions run: Buddhism 23.2%, Protestant 19.7% and Catholicism 6.6%. As above see Statistics Korea Office (KOSTAT) – (www.kostat.go.kr).

3 In the following discussion any references made to Buddhism in fact refers to the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (大韓佛教曹溪宗). This is the biggest order in Korea and in today’s form was founded in 1962. This order has got over nine million adherents and about ten thousand clerics.

4 Today, Buddhism is involved in many varied types of work and ministries including organic farming, hospices, military chaplaincy and media. There is also marked growth in attempts to promote ‘Korean Buddhism’ overseas by establishing branch temples and producing English language materials, both academic and popular. (The two well-known are Indra’s Net Life
Community and the Ecological Village of the Fourfold Community. See Yoo Jung-gil’s ‘Korea’s Buddhist Communities and the Future of Buddhism’ in The Crisis of Modern Society and the Role of Religious Communities, Seoul: Bulkwang Research Institute, 2013, pp.144-148.)


8 For a detailed study of participation in the pro-democracy movement over the years see, South Korea’s Democracy Movement (1970-1993): Stanford Korea Democracy Project Report, Stanford University, 2007. Chapter 2 in particular deals with the social make-up of the different social groups who participated.

9 It should be noted however, Chun was a devout Christian who had a mistrust of Buddhism and as a result withdrew much state support for Buddhism. This fact did, it seems, play a large part in rousing the Buddhist community’s animosity towards the government during Chun’s presidency.


13 This played heavily in the Korean press, but was also reported by the international media. See The New York Times report of 14/10/2008 at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/14/world/asia/14iht-buddhist.1.16935374.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 accessed on 21/04/2014.


15 See the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism’s ‘Temple Stay Programme, Korea’ in OECD (ed.), The Impact of Culture on Tourism, Paris: OECD, pp.115-127.

16 Accessed at http://www.templestay.com/common/foot_intro/agency_intro.asp (22/04/2014) on
a Jogkye Order website promoting the Temple Stay Programme.

17 For example the English language magazine *Buddhism and Culture* published by the Korean Buddhist Promotion Foundation.

18 Found in the International Seon Centre’s information booklet. Also available at: www.seoncenter.com