A Shared Cultural Realm: Literary Exchanges between Scholar-Officials and Poet-Monks in the Mid Joseon Period*

Sung-Eun Thomas Kim

The intent of this paper is to challenge the notion that Buddhism under the oppressive policies of the Joseon state became isolated and limited mostly to popular religious practices. When we shift our focus away from state polemics and elite ideologies, we can perceive Buddhist cultural activities in which monks were active participants in a larger burgeoning literary culture, if not part of the cultural elite of Joseon society. In the literary realm of the scholar-officials, what we notice are active exchanges between Confucian scholar-officials and Buddhist “poet-monks.” This portrays a picture of cultural solidarity wherein Confucian-Buddhist exchanges seem more important than the inter-traditional conflict or separateness. Similarly, Buddhist temples were in fact cultural centers of literary activities that were intimately connected to the lives of the literary elites, including the scholar-officials.

Keywords: Joseon Buddhism, Buddhist-Confucian cultural exchange, Buddhist literary culture, Joseon scholar-officials, poet-monks, recitation exchanges

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The discourse of Confucianism and its domination, mostly in the form of sociopolitical and state ideologies, has become a common one and has determined the focus of scholarly discussions of the Joseon period (1392–1910). It has framed much of our discussions on the social and religious history of the Joseonites and has skewed our understanding of the period.\textsuperscript{1} Much work over the past two decades has challenged the entrenched approaches to Joseon Buddhism and strides have been made in going beyond the Confucian polemical discourse of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.\textsuperscript{2} However, despite the challenges and alternatives to the polemical discourse, there is still an underlying acceptance of the isolationism and degeneration of Joseon Buddhism as the benchmark from which research begins.\textsuperscript{3} As an example, two pioneering scholars on Joseon Buddhism who have painstakingly revealed the successes of the Buddhist responses to the dire oppressive circumstances have not escaped the paradigm of Buddhist degeneration and isolationism but have worked within it. In the case of Nam Huisuk, she has uncovered how popular Pure Land cults and practices have successfully maintained the Buddhist tradition through the Joseon period by noting the extensive publishing of ritual texts from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{4} In another case, Han Sanggil, by focusing on the extent records of temple fraternities, highlighted the active formation of

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] The problematic of applying the discourse of Confucian domination to the overall development of Joseon Buddhism has been extensively argued. See for example, Sung-Eun Thomas Kim (2013).
\item[2.] Anti-Buddhist polemics was forwarded by the Neo-Confucian literati arguing that Buddhism was a degenerated and deluded practice. A famous representative figure in this polemic and the key figure who masterminded the founding of the Joseon dynasty was Jeong Dojeon 鄭道傳 (1343–1398). Jeong was the author of the well-known Bulssi japbyeon 佛氏雜辨, which provided the ideological foundation for these anti-Buddhist polemics. For a succinct discussion of the Neo-Confucian polemics against Buddhism as part of the ideological basis for the founding of the Joseon dynasty, see Yi Bongchun (1990). For a thorough discussion of the Neo-Confucian discourse of orthodoxy/heterodoxy at the time of the founding of the Joseon dynasty, see Goulde (1985).
\item[3.] A common example is Yi Jaechang’s work on temple economy wherein he outlines the condition of Joseon Buddhism as “Buddhism under oppression and in dire circumstances…” He continues, “... the dharma has suffered destruction and the monks suffer persecution and are treated with contempt…” From such a premise, Yi explains that he aims to examine how the temples were able to survive economically through such miserable conditions (Yi Jaechang 1993, 144–147).
\item[4.] Nam Huisuk argues that during the time of “upholding Confucianism and oppressing Buddhism” (sungyu eokbul 崇儒抑佛), the oppression of Buddhism had drastically reduced the political and societal influence of Joseon Buddhism. Under such harsh oppressive measures, Joseon Buddhism could not help but turn to popular religious practice mostly for the masses—rituals and cultic practices—for its survival. This is to argue that it was through such a popularizing process that Buddhism came to flourish. Nam bases her argument on the flurry of publication of ritual texts between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Nam 2004).
\end{itemize}
fraternities for various purposes, among which two of the most prevalent were for religious aims and economic needs.5

Through these two exemplary pioneering approaches, we were able to witness the continuation, if not the strengthening, of the religious functions of Buddhism. However, the evident problems of these two approaches is that, in Nam’s case, this scholar still worked within the model of popularization of Buddhism which perpetuated the idea of the degeneration of Buddhism and which concurred with the notion of the confinement of its practices to the lowly class. In a more unique example, Han focuses on the continued religious function of Buddhism and also the economic sustainability of many Joseon temples. The merit of Han’s work is that in addition to the religious function of Buddhism, he examines the essential economic workings of temples. Thus, unlike previous authors, he was able to bring to light the agency and active independence of temples in resolving its economic needs. Nevertheless, Han’s arguments are premised on the discourse of the degeneration and isolationism of Buddhism; the fraternities are interpreted as a response by destitute temples with few alternatives and nowhere to turn to but to other temples in a similar situation. Moreover, another noticeable aspect of the two authors is the importance placed on the religious function of Buddhism. As we all know, temple activities comprised more than just the religious.

While catering to the religious needs of the people, it goes without saying that Buddhist activities also encompassed a broad range of activities with socio-cultural, and even political, significance.6 The point is that the cultural role of temples and Buddhist activities seems to have been forgotten not only in the polemical discourse of orthodoxy/heterodoxy but in the newer approaches that were meant to go beyond traditional discourses on Joseon Buddhism. In this sense, this paper aims to bring attention to the cultural activities that were a significant aspect of Joseon Buddhism, and which may have been as important as the religious activities in characterizing Joseon Buddhism.

5. Han Sanggil (2006, 2012) was one of the first scholars to shift our focus from the Confucian and limited Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty (Joseon wangjo sillok) and the collected works of eminent monks to an examination of records regarding temple fraternities (sachalgye 寺刹契). There have been others who have introduced the use of the temple fraternities, such as Yi Jaechang (1993), but Han has highlighted the significance of the temple fraternity to our understanding of Joseon Buddhism.

6. An example of the involvement of Buddhism in the establishment of political power is the rule by the queen dowager Munjeong (1501–1565), the mother of King Myeongjong (r. 1545–1567). For more on this, see Yi Ihwa (2003, 295–299). At the popular level, Buddhist millenarian movements have often been connected to peasant risings where the leader was a monk or self-identified Maitreya reincarnate. For example, see Peter H. Lee et al. (2000, 174–177).
For example, the sangha was deeply entrenched in the literary tradition and maintained close liaisons with Confucian scholar-officials. Thus, the close association between Buddhism and Confucianism and their cultural exchanges present a challenge to the prevailing narrative of Confucian domination and the isolationism and deterioration of Buddhism. The overlaps and the cross-interactions afford us the opportunity to explore in closer detail what took place in the everyday lives of the people, notably the Confucian scholar-officials.

By focusing on the literary activities of monks, especially their exchanges with Confucian scholar-officials, I argue that Buddhism was in fact not isolated from the greater cultural developments of the Joseon society, not the least of which was the culture of literature. Indeed, when we consider the cultural sphere of scholar-officials, the active exchanges between the Confucian literati and Buddhist monks sketch a picture of cultural solidarity where the Buddhist monks were active companions in the development of a newly burgeoning literary culture in the mid-Joseon period. By extension, other cultural activities at temples and of monks paint a more complex picture than a simple deterioration and confinement of Buddhism to the lowly class.

With regard to the cultural value of Buddhism, this is similar to the case of Buddhism during the late Ming dynasty that was heavily patronized by the gentry, not for private religious aims but as part of their social and cultural activities. This was aptly described by Brook (1993), wherein the gentry of that time participated in Buddhist activities at temples and sponsored the construction of temples in order to create symbolic capital aimed to bolster their social status and establish their elite identity. This is an example of how the cultural value and activities of Buddhism, beyond its religious sphere, were integral in the establishment of a newly formed gentry class.

In order to bring to light the diverse spheres of activities of Joseon Buddhism outside of the religious, I have chosen to discuss the richly complex relationship between scholar-officials and Buddhism. Some who in public castigated Buddhism as a heresy and deluded tradition, in private visited temples and associated closely with monks. Moreover, some scholar-officials maintained close contacts with monks through correspondence, illustrating how the primary narrative of “uphold Confucianism and oppress Buddhism” (sungyu eokbul) may have been the official policy of the Joseon state but did not reflect the actual everyday functioning of Buddhism. In the private realm, Buddhism, in addition to having a strong religious function, had a cultural significance in

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7. I adopt the notion of public here to mean matters related to affairs of state. This concept is elucidated well by Brook in the section, “Gentry Society and the Public Sphere” (1993, 23–28).
A Shared Cultural Realm

Furthermore, this cultural association between Buddhist monks and Confucian scholar-officials can especially be demonstrated through their exchanges of poetry. The abundant exchanges of poetry reveal a literary world that formed an important cultural foundation for their interaction. Before we turn to the literary culture of poetry exchanges, the ambivalent attitudes of two prominent scholar-officials towards Buddhism will be discussed to exemplify the inaccuracy of state polemics in understanding the everyday lives of the people, even scholar-officials.

The Ambiguity of Scholar-officials’ Relationship with Buddhism: The Case of Pak Sedang and Jeong Yagyong

For discussion purposes I have chosen two scholar-officials, Pak Sedang 朴世堂 (1629–1703) and Jeong Yagyong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836) due not only to their positions in Joseon history as prominent scholar-officials but also because they maintained a close personal association with Buddhism into their late years. These two figures are insightful examples of officials who held various high-ranking state posts throughout their official lives yet are well known for their openness toward Buddhism in their private lives. They represent the complexity of the relationship between Confucian scholar-officials and Buddhism that goes beyond the one-sided discourse of “uphold Confucianism and oppress Buddhism.” Jeong (often referred to by his penname Dasan 茶山) and Pak lived about one generation apart and their worlds were heavily steeped in the Neo-Confucian tradition, as we will see. In the case of Pak, he lived during a time when Neo-Confucianism was a mature political and a cultural ideology. Dasan on the other hand lived during a time when the influence of Confucianism had reached its peak and was at a start of a reflective period on the value and the

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8. Buddhism’s religio-cultural significance in the public realm can be seen in the role of Buddhism in public rituals for sending off the spirits of the dead. This role is also prominent in the ritualistic services that monks performed at the votive temples of the royal family. On this, see Sung-Eun Thomas Kim (2014).

9. Yi Jongchan (1993) examines the exchange of poetry between aristocrats (sadaebu) and monks and provides an extensive translation of poems written by the eminent poet-monks.

10. Kallander (2013, 3–10) argues that the state did not go to the extent of enforcing such orthodox thought in people’s private lives. We can gain insight into the male yangban patronage of Buddhism by comparing the pattern of patronage of mudang by yangban men. According to Walraven (1999, 168–169), it was mostly those whose public association with shamans would have jeopardized their social stature and position who argued adamantly against the use of such practices.
effect of Confucianism on society. However, as will be noted through their contact with Buddhism, a complex but also a common story of how Buddhism was adopted culturally and as a life philosophy will be revealed. In addition, the examination of these two instances will bring to light monks, their relationship with scholar-officials, and the position of these monks in the literary world as part of the cultural elite where such association, or possibly even a literary community, provided for a loosely formed solidarity (Guksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe 1998, 136–137).

It is known that in public records these two figures maintained an anti-Buddhist rhetoric, as may have been expected for officials of their social standing, but in their private lives had a close relationship with Buddhist monks and an affinity towards the life of a recluse monk. For example, Pak Sedang’s records associated with his public life show that he castigated Buddhism no differently from any other Neo-Confucian polemicist. Yet, in his personal contact and his exchanges with monks, the story was the contrary.

To discuss this more concretely, Pak, in his composition, “On the Criticism of Buddhism by Han Yu 韓愈 [768–824] and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 [1007–1072]” (“Non Han-Gu bae Budu”論韓歐排浮屠), makes his anti-Buddhist position clear by accepting the polemical argument against Buddhism, i.e., that there were no profound thoughts in Buddhism worthy of examination. Pak, by quoting Mencius, argues that the thoughts of Buddhism being heretical were proof enough to cast out any need for further examination of Buddhism. Pak argues as follows:

People say that Han Yu 韓愈 and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 have harshly criticized Buddhism and therefore have only discussed what is aberrant and have not fully investigated what is profound. People say, their understanding is lacking and they have not fully examined it [its profoundness]. I, myself, don’t think that is the case... The heresies under heaven, they are also rather foul. Among them, Buddhism is the worst. If a person is inclined to Buddhism then he is of the kind that pursues what is foul. Is it not clear that there is nothing further to discuss? It is like Mencius who [also felt no need to argue in detail when he] criticized Yang Zhu and Mozi.11 Surely, he did not argue further than to say Yang Zhu and Mozi did not respect their fathers and their emperors.12

11. Yang Zhu 杨朱 (440–360 BCE?) was a philosopher during the Warring States period. He was an early ethical egoist who argued against Mohist and Confucian thought, putting the individual before anything else. Mo Di 墨翟 (470–391 BCE?), was a Chinese philosopher of the early Warring States period who is known for his doctrine of universal love. See Wing-Tsit Chan 1963, 309–310, 211–213.

12. “世病 韓歐 力排佛氏 然只論其粗 而未盡其深 謂其識之未至而不足以辨之 余獨以爲不然… 異端之在天下 其亦猶夫臭也 而佛其甚者也 其好之者 亦逐臭之類也 不足與爲究論也 明矣 孟子闢楊墨 亦不過曰無父曰無君。”
In contrast to his polemical position, Pak, in his private life, was drawn to Buddhism. In his correspondence with monks, Pak exchanged poems with at least 27 individual monks. They consisted of the monks that he met on his trips to numerous temples and monks that he met on his trip to Geumgang Mountain, one of the most favored mountains to visit among the social elites. The fact that Pak came to correspond and exchange poems with the monks that he met on his trips was not anything surprising or previously unheard of. Contacts with monks through visits to temples and mountains were a common occurrence among the Confucian elites at the time (Yi Huijae 2006, 19, 26). For Pak, his interest in Buddhism can be distinctly observed in his poems, where he clearly states that he was drawn to the tranquility and aesthetics of mountain temples. Through his writings, Pak portrays the ideals of being removed from the mundane world and living a life of a recluse, as exemplified in the life of Seon 禪 monks.13 In one of his poems, Pak’s disdain for the mundane world is obvious and his high valuation and longing for the Buddhist life of a hermit comes through quite explicitly:

久離塵俗萬緣虛 For long, I have left the mundane world whose innumerable conditions are empty;
只愛游方不戀居 I have but travelled here and there, finding no enjoyment in settled life.
明日又浮滄海去 Tomorrow once again I leave for Changhae;
沃州寥落舊精廬 The old, pure and simple hut of Okju province looks lonely.

Pak continues with another stanza and carries on his esteemed views on the life of a virtuous hermit. His desire to leave the defilements of the mundane world is evident and he finds such ideals in the principles and thoughts that underlie the life at temples that are removed and distant from the centers of society.

浮世為皆妄 The ephemeral world is all but in vain;
空門事亦眞 The way of emptiness is surely true.
爾能離 艸 You were able to leave and discard worldly fame;
吾欲斷根塵 I desire to cut off the aggregates of perception.14
纏縛違天性 Worldly defilements go against heavenly nature;

13. As noted by Yi Huijae, Pak does not show interest in the ritual side of Buddhism that involved praying for fortune or the supernatural help of the Buddhist gods (2006, 26–27).
14. Here, “根塵” is defined as the object of the senses or sensation (Soothill and Hodous 1987, 327).
In the case of Dasan, he responds with a standard Neo-Confucian argument towards Buddhism in response to King Jeongjo’s (r. 1776–1800) question. He argues that Buddhism, being a heresy, needs to be eradicated in order that the ways of the world do not become corrupted. His argument is a basic Neo-Confucian narrative that contends that Buddhism is a tradition that deludes and misguides the people and is the source of disorder and decay in society. Dasan argues,

Regarding those who belong to the monkhood, it is has come down from antiquity that they have used charms and prayers and have misled the people. Corrupt and disorderly practices have arisen from this tradition.18

Dasan continues and urges the king that the policy of restricting shamans, monks, and nuns from the capital was the virtuous thing to do for the good of the country and a paragon for future generations to follow. He says,

Respectfully, my thoughts are these. When [you] the king first ascended the throne, you have ordered the shamans to be driven out and have rejected the monks and nuns [from the capital]. Up to now the law does not allow their entrance into the capital. This has brought about the fulfillment of your virtues and has become the radiant light in the historical records. If you can maintain this orderly rule up to the end, as in the beginning [of your reign], it will be fortuitous for the country.19

Of course, we know from Dasan’s life that he was drawn to the secluded life of monks in the mountains. His private life shows a very different side, one that maintained close connections with Buddhist monks and Buddhist temples. It is

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15. Soyo 逍遙 (1562–1649) was a monk of the mid-Joseon period from Southern Jeolla province.
16. The “Buddha body” is also known as buddhakāya 佛身, one of the three manifestations of the Buddha or trika¯ya. Here it signifies becoming a Buddha or an enlightened person.
also quite well known that he travelled to many temples and befriended many monks (Daeyeol Kim 2012). Dasan maintained correspondences with the monks that he came across on this travels. With some of them he developed close friendships that lasted throughout their lives. One of the monks Dasan came to be fond of, and with whom he developed a lifetime friendship, was A-am Hyejang 內庵 惠藏 (1772–1811). Their correspondence of poetry continued up to the time of Hyejang’s death, whereupon Dasan compiled their poetry exchanges into a collection titled Gyeonwolcheop 見月帖. Dasan is also known to have written an epitaph for Hyejang’s stele 內庵藏公塔銘 (Daeyeol Kim 2012, 229–232).

Dasan’s proclivity towards Buddhism is revealed in his personal writings. In the second stanza of his poem “Songpungnu japsi” 松風樓雜詩, Dasan discloses his idealization of living in the mountains, and even ends the poem with a thought that the Buddha speaks the truth:

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山居無事不淸貧  Life in the mountains, there is nothing that is not virtuous;
物累消除只一身  Constrain of life are all gone and it is but this one body.
未信他鄉非我土  Not believing that the other place [of Buddhism] cannot be my own;
好從平地作仙人  I have chased the precepts\(^{20}\) to become a renunciate\(^{21}\).
頻舂藥臼無蘚  If plants are ground often the medicine mortar does not form moss;
稀煮茶 鑪靜有塵  And if tea is rarely boiled, the fire pit stays clean but dust settles.
法喜為妻洵可樂  The bliss of the dharma\(^{22}\) as my wife, it will indeed be joyful;
佛言皆妄此言真  The Buddha said all is delusion; these words are true.\(^{23}\)
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In the above poems, Pak’s and Dasan’s disposition towards Buddhism is clearly ambivalent and almost paradoxical. In a similar way, such ambivalence was also exhibited by the Joseon kings. Their ambivalent actions take on the pattern of promulgating oppressive policies against Buddhism in line with the “uphold Confucianism and oppress Buddhism” state policy, but in private allowing

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20. The term \textit{pyeongji} 平地 literally means “ground” but is used as a metaphor for Buddhist precepts referring to a place of stability (Muller, Digital Dictionary).

21. The term \textit{seonin} 仙人 is referred to as a sage or a thaumaturge as in a Daoist immortal. I have translated this term as “renunciate” given that the term describes a person who leaves the world of people and enter the mountains and live a life of cultivation. Such people are often associated with having special powers such as being free from sickness and ageing (Muller, Digital Dictionary).

22. The term \textit{beophui} 法喜 is defined as “joy in the Law,” “the joy of hearing or tasting dharma” (Soothill and Hodous 1987, 268).

Buddhist rituals to be performed at court and maintaining their own prayer halls throughout the Joseon period. A good example of the ambivalent stance of a Joseon king is of King Taejong (r. 1400–1418), who severely curtailed the number of temples, amount of temple fields, and number of temple slaves. He nevertheless allowed state Buddhist rituals to be performed at court (Choi 2009, 201). The relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism cannot simply be depicted with confined state ideological notions.

As in the above discussions, when we consider the diverse areas of Buddhist activities, there were also active exchanges in broader literary culture. One active area of exchange, and upon which this paper will focus, was in the realm of poetry (Yi Jongsu 2009).

Among the overlapping cultural activities, poetry composition and exchanges of poetry between monks and scholar-officials have been a commonly shared and enduring tradition. We now move to the shared literary culture in which monks and scholar-officials were deeply embedded.

**A Shared Literary Realm: a Cultural Framework**

Shared literary culture in essence formed the cultural framework or tradition within which the Buddhist-Confucian interaction took place. Such exchanges were a channel through which monks and Confucian literati were able to engage in a dialogue on aesthetics, worldviews, and ideals, among other things. For instance, poetry exchanges through correspondences or the give-and-take poetry recitations at gatherings of poets, including poet-monks, had been popular practices among the literary elites (Kim Yongjo 1983, 51).

This tells of the significance of the exchanges of poetry between monks and scholar-officials as a commonly shared literary culture. The appreciation of Seon poems, for example, was shared by monks and scholar-officials and furthermore, the appreciation of this literary form was clearly manifest in their exchanges. There are references in the early period of Joseon to a tradition of “poet-monks” (*siseung* 詩僧) who were referred to in connection to officials’ literary retreats to temples. This highlights a long-standing literary tradition that was enjoyed, in particular, by scholar-officials.24

Moreover, exchanging poems was not the only aspect of the interaction

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24. Seong Hyeon (1439-1504) writes in the *Yongjae chonghua* 憩齋叢話 (1525) that King Sejong picked officials and sent them to the temples of Jangui-sa 藏義寺 and Silleuk-sa 神勒寺. He also mentions that the poet-monks and officials drank wine and recited poetry and that such events were numerous (Yi Neunghwa 2010, 119).
between Buddhist monks and Confucian literati. This custom was part of larger cultural practices of the elites that included the appreciation of Buddhist temples and their surroundings, an essential part of leisure travels, as alluded to above. Being physically present at a temple was a core part of the enjoyment of leisure travel while temples also provided a meeting place where these literary exchanges and friendships took place.

We may take as an example the case of Yi Jeonggu 李廷龜 (1564–1635), an illustrious scholar-official who was known during his time as one of the “four great masters of classical literature” (hanmun sadae 漢文四大). Yi, during his career, held several government posts including the highest level, “rank one,” Right State Councilor (u-uijeong 右議政), and Left State Councilor (jwa-uijeong 左議政). Nevertheless, despite his high posts he was also drawn to Buddhism and has left records of numerous exchanges of poems with closely associated monks. It is interesting how his poems give us a sketch of the shared literary culture and the aesthetics that enamored the scholar-officials. Yi is especially significant since he represents the highest cultural and political elite of mid-Joseon society. Yet, his works, especially his collected works (munjip 文集) of poetry, undoubtedly evince the influences of and his attraction towards Buddhism. Such poems speak of the intertwined culture, at least in the literary world, between two traditions that we generally perceive as having little in common and in conflict throughout most of the Joseon period.

Here, we examine the exchange of poems that took place between Yi and a monk at a temple. The first is a poem titled, “Presenting [a poem] to monk Ilhyeon 一玄 at Jijok 知足 Hermitage”:

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丈室危巖上
攀躋石逕斜
層臺經浩劫
老樹入天河
佛塔生孫竹
禪窓長女蘿
少留看落日
滄海漾紅波

“Presenting [a poem] to monk Ilhyeon at Jijok Hermitage”

丈室危巖上 The elder monk’s room, perched on a steep bolder;
攀躋石逕斜 I pull myself up to the rocky narrow path.
層臺經浩劫 High on the peak, it feels baleful;
老樹入天河 The old trees enter the milky way.
佛塔生孫竹 From the Buddha’s stupa springs a baby bamboo shoot;
禪窓長女蘿 On the Seon window the moss is growing long.
少留看落日 While resting briefly I watch the setting sun;
滄海漾紅波 In the great ocean the red waves churn and swirl.25
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In this poem, Yi Jeonggu is recreating the ambience of the surrounding steep and high mountains on which the temple was located and where the elder monk resides. The monk living there is described with high esteem evoked by

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the high location of hermitage, to which the author is making his way. It is perhaps the isolation of the temple and the ascetic way of life and practice there that the author admired and cherished. That the author was deeply moved emotionally by the austere beauty of the rough terrain and the calmness of the setting sun manifests itself strongly in the passages of the poem.

The next poem is, as indicated by the title, written in response to a poem received from the monk Sukpyeong and dedicated to the many monks, perhaps those who lived at the temple where the author liked to visit.

和叔平贈諸老釋  “In dedication to all the monks, a response to monk Sukpyeong ”
遠客今朝為撥忙 As a guest from afar, this morning I put aside my business;
暫回征箋問禪房 While the retinue flags was shortly returning, I visited a Seon temple.
捎雲古塔三天近 The old stupa that touches the clouds is close to the three heavens;
蔽日長松五月涼 Covering the sun, the tall pine tree provides coolness in May.
茶夢乍圓仙晝靜 Drinking tea, I dream of brief but perfect mysterious days that are quiescent;
風鍾初定佛燈香 The wind chime from the start makes me calm like the scent of a burning candle.
高僧一笑如相識 The aged monk shines with one smile like a close familiar friend;
却恨登臨是異鄉 It is sad that the place I am visiting is a far away land.26

Again, the poem conveys an affinity towards life at the temple, which Yi describes as serene and quiescent. In this poem there is a sense of comfort at being at the temple and sadness at the fact that the temple was so distant from his home as described in the last line. Moreover, another impression is of the friendship with the monks, described as close and familiar like old friends.

In another poem below, Yi has written to monk Buun of Un-geo Temple. Once again the poem portrays the serenity and calmness of temple life. As in the previous poem, this piece seems to be a departing poem since Yi asks when Buun will return and the reply is “when the flowers bloom and the leaves turn color.” Here we witness a close personal relationship between Yi and the monk, Buun. It seems only natural that such personal relationships formed between people with the same appreciation for the life ethos of asceticism closely identified with monks and temples, as well as other traditions such as Daoism.27

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27. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this point. The ethos and tradition of asceticism and of body-mind cultivation is obviously not limited to Buddhism. In fact, such practices are commonly shared among all major religious traditions in Korea including Daoism, Confucianism, shamanism, and new religions such as Donghak. Donald Baker explains this well by referring to this tradition within the religions of Korea as “anthropocentric” practices.
What appealed to the scholar-officials was most likely the simplicity and tranquility of life at the mountain temples, as the words of the poems convey. These poems represent an idealization of Buddhism by the scholar-officials but as well the appreciation of Seon, the purity of its aim and the virtuous spirit of its practice and life style. As noted, Buddhist temples, located in mountains far from villages, represented an ideal setting for Confucian scholar-officials. Poems that express these ethos and aims provide insight into the worldview of Confucian scholar-officials. But such a sense of serenity and comfort were not the only attraction of temples and Buddhism for scholar-officials. As will be noted later, scholar-officials were also drawn to the temple due to the philosophical and intellectual affinity they felt there through their exchanges with literary monks.

**Chimnyudae haksa: Cultural Manifestation of Confucian-Buddhist Engagement**

Further to Yi Jeonggu’s significance as a representative of mid-Joseon society’s highest cultural and political elite, Yi represents a new progressive literary, and possibly even social, movement of the mid-Joseon period. Poetry exchanges were part of an enduring tradition that provided the foundation for a new literary movement that came to be formed from the late sixteenth century through an association of progressive-minded scholar-officials. While Yi Jeonggu was one of the four most eminent scholars of classical literature of mid-Joseon, these four scholar-officials were also part of the new literary movement, as noted earlier. The other three scholar-officials were Jang Yu 張維 (1587–1638), Yi Sik 李植 (1584–1647), and Sin Heum 申欽 (1566–1628). Despite the

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poems composed by Yi Jeonggu with Buddhist elements, what may be all the more interesting is that along with Yi, these other three scholar-officials all belonged to a poet society called Chimnyudae haksa 枕流臺學士. As members, the four figures were part of a growing movement among the Confucian literati to move away from orthodox Neo-Confucianism and to openly adopt Buddhist and Taoist thoughts, which had heretofore been chastised as heterodox (Go 1994, 144–145).

It is obvious from the relationship and the forays of the Confucian scholar-officials into the Buddhist world that Buddhism of this period was not simply a heretical tradition of popular religious practices. Rather, Chimnyudae haksa is an example of the adoption of Buddhist ideals, a movement not limited to an isolated group of progressive-minded scholar-officials but one that took on a cultural manifestation among scholar-officialdom more generally.

To place this in social and historical context, Chimnyudae haksa was known to be active mostly around the time of the Japanese invasions of Korea (1592, 1598), invasions that resulted in demoralizing destruction.29 Through this experience there emerged a reflective period regarding the effectiveness of Neo-Confucianism and, in effect, its societal value. The Neo-Confucian system of thought that was brought into question included the renowned Neo-Confucian schools of Yi I 李珥 (1536–1584) and Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570), two prominent scholars and thinkers of that time. This led many intellectuals and even prominent scholar-officials to more openly explore the thought of other traditions, even those that were labeled heretical. They explored alternative approaches that ranged from economic reform to the combination of the three traditions, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Yi Huijeong 2002, 3).

Starting from the early seventeenth century, there arose varying trends of thought and even regional variations of these trends. Seoul at that time was unique in that its position as the national capital made it more open to and accepting of new and emerging ideas from foreign lands, and it was in Seoul that the poetical society Chimnyudae haksa was located (Yi Taejin 1994). The Chimnyudae haksa seemed to have been representational of the social situation at that time. It is an example of scholar-officials’ continued engagement of Buddhism in the realm of literary culture and social movement of the time, which is reflective of the societal role of Buddhism outside of the religious.

Chimnyudae haksa, as will be explained further, may be one representation of the Confucian “cultural” adoption of Buddhism. We can further glean the nature of this interaction—the adoption of the ethos, social ideals, and the

29. Go traces the poet society that Yu founded to as early as 1585 (1994, 142–143).
spontaneity of exchanges—from the collected writings of members of this poet society. For example, from the works of Yu Huigyeong 刘希慶 (1545–1636), the founder of Chimnyudae haksa, we can gain a deeper understanding of the literary pleasures that comprised the core of their gatherings.

Yu Huigyeong (penname Choneun 村隐) was a Confucian scholar active during the time of King Seonjo (r. 1552–1608). From the content of his poems, we are able to reconstruct the dynamics and flavor of the Chimnyudae haksa’s gatherings and exchanges. In Yu’s collected works (Choneun jip, Vol. 3 村隐集卷之三), there is a chapter titled “Chimnyudae nok 枕流〘録〙,” or the “Records of Chimnyudae,” within which there is a section of collected poems titled “Poetic Exchanges” (suchangsi 酬唱詩). We can discern from the recorded poems that at their gatherings, a unique custom of poetry exchange took place where a person would first recite a poem and another would answer by spontaneously composing a response. From the sub-chapter “Poem Collections” we can gather that the first poem, titled “Reciting a poem to the owner of Chimnyudae,” was recited by Soam 蹉菴, who based on his name (“distant hermitage”) would seem to have been a monk. This further highlights the participation of monks within this literary movement. Soam starts off the poetic give-and-take by reciting a poem as follows:

贈枕流主人[蹉菴]  “Reciting a poem to the owner of Chimnyudae [Soam]”

步入桃源裏  Upon entering the Peach Spring30;
春風無限花  The spring breeze and endless peach flowers.
親朋一尊酒  As my friend offers me a bowl of wine;
忘卻夕陽斜  I forget the sun fading in the western sky.31

Here one can immediately sense the mystical aura of the meeting through Soam’s allusion to a mythical, paradise-like Peach Village. The drinking that is referred to in the third line, which seems to be a common enjoyment in such gatherings,32 would have aided in creating such an ambiance at these meetings. In response to this initial poem, the owner of Chimnyudae himself responds with the following poem:

30. This is an allusion to the paradise-like village described in the “Story of Peach Flower Spring.” Taohuayuan ji 桃花源記 written by the fifth-century writer Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 of the Jin dynasty. See Bokenkamp (1986, 65–77).
32. The drinking of wine at such gatherings was also mentioned by Seong Hyeon in his Yongjae chonghwu 懶齋叢話 (1525), as noted above in footnote 24.
次 五山
方朔三偷王母桃
詼諧却恨齒枚阜
歲星下作金門隱

"Reply by Osan"
Dongfang Shuo\(^{34}\) has three times stolen Xi Wangmu’s\(^{35}\) peaches;
His humor destroyed the sadness of the Chimei Hills.
Jupiter\(^{36}\) has dropped from the sky and composed the riddle of the golden gate\(^{37}\);

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33. Wu-ling is referring to the site where the story takes place. An illustration dated to the Ming period was titled “The Immortals’ Realm of Wu-ling” (Nelson, 1986, 35).

34. Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 was a scholar-official of the Han period and known as a Taoist immortal.

35. Xi Wangmu 西王母, here abbreviated Wangmu 王母, is commonly known as the “Queen Mother of the West” and is a goddess in Daoist and popular religious traditions. She is known as the ruler of the Western Heaven and the arbiter of time, space, and death. A popular story in Chinese literature describes how she hosts a banquet once every three thousand years when the peaches of immortality come to fruition, and to which all the immortals are invited. (Stevens, 2001, 53–55).

36. An allusion to Dongfang Shuo.

37. “金門” refers to the gate of the Han palace, Jinmamen 金馬門.
A Shared Cultural Realm

Perhaps it is the hermit Baihao\(^{38}\) of Huainanzi 淮南子.\(^ {39}\)

次 村隐

一樹垂楊五樹桃 There is a weeping willow and five peach trees;

掩門終日卧東皋 [Let us] Close the gates and lie all day on the east hill.

客來步出門前路 The guests come and walk out the gate in front of the path;

盡是長安詩酒豪 All of them are the drunken poet masters of Chang’an.\(^ {40}\)

Again we can see that the stanza and its meter were repeated by the two responding poets, Osan and Choneun. Furthermore, the ending character of the first line, “peach” 桃, the second line, “hill” 皋, and the fourth line, “master” 豪, were continued in all three poems. Nevertheless, the literary taste in these poems is obviously in the poetic expression of mood, perception, emotions, and allusions to the ancient and famous mythological Chinese figures, including references to Daoist legends and figures. This is an illustration of the depth of familiarity with Daoist figures and themes and the enjoyment of Daoist thought by these literati. However, the unique aspect of these poem exchanges are the responses that carried over the same mood and intuitive sense.

The uniqueness of these exchanges further lies in their spontaneity. The spontaneous give-and-take poetic composition and recitation, as noted in the above series “Recitation Exchange,” resembles Seon dharma exchanges (Seon mundap 禪問答) between a Seon master and his disciples. The poem exchanges appear to share with Seon exchanges a play with intuitive knowledge and spontaneity. By responding with a spontaneously composed poem, it is as if an enlightened student were communicating their perceptions of the ineffable and affirming their intuitive insight into the gongan 公案 initially provided by their masters. The basis of Ganhwa Seon is that the master-disciple exchanges are unscripted and intuitive knowledge must be gained without the “figuring out” associated with conceptualizing thought processes. The answer must arise intuitively, which demonstrates innate understanding.\(^ {41}\) It appears that the Confucian literati appreciated the ethos and aesthetic senses that were closely

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38. Baihao 白豪 is a legendary hermit who lived during the Han period. He appears in the famous poem, “Baihaozi ge” 白豪子歌 by the poet, Li Bai 李白 (701–762).

39. “Huainanzi” was a composition by Prince Liu An 劉安, a figure of the Han dynasty.


41. Keel’s classical work discusses the benefits of Ganhwa Seon as outlined by the 12th century Korean monk Chinul (1158-1210). Chinul explains that the Ganhwa Seon methods was effective in having the mind transcend beyond the level of conceptual thought, and cutting directly to “realization-enlightenment” without going through the process of “understanding enlightenment” and “gradual cultivation.” (Keel 1984, 146-155)
associated with Buddhist thought and mountain temples while also sharing the unique play with intuitive knowledge and spontaneity.

In this way the culture of poetic exchanges that intermixed Buddhist elements was part of the larger leisurely and literary culture of the literati. Poet-monks, the temple setting, the aesthetically pleasing surroundings, Buddhist ideals, and Buddhist ethos came to make up an integral part of Confucian literary culture. They were part of the idealized image of a recluse, perhaps similar to the image of a Daoist immortal, painted in the last set of poem exchanges discussed in the above. They found this at secluded Buddhist temples. That such literary exchanges took place, and furthermore at temples, demonstrates the cultural power that Buddhism possessed as a source of literary production, as an active companion in cultural production, and as the place of idealized images.

**Literary and Social Significance of Buddhism**

The associations between the scholar-officials and monks through literary culture appear to be quite extensive and not limited to the practice of poetry exchanges. Further inspection reveals that the Confucian-Buddhist relationship spread broadly to adjoining areas of literary culture. For instance, scholar-officials or high-ranking officials were the favored composers of introductions to the collected works of eminent literati monks as well as the memoirs for the steles for high-ranking eminent monks. In this way, the literati’s integration with Buddhism through literary culture had a long heritage that continued back through the Goryeo and Silla periods. Similarly, it is well known that historically, Buddhism had close associations with the literary world. For instance, temples were traditionally steeped in the culture of preserving and disseminating knowledge, as evidenced by their close association with printing and publishing activities. The most obvious example is the Goryeo Tripitaka, which consists of more than 80,000 printing blocks completed in the thirteenth century.

However, in the Joseon period, starting from the seventeenth century, the printing activities of temples increased dramatically. Between the reigns of King Sukjong (r. 1674–1720) and King Cheongjo (r. 1776–1800), Buddhist ritual texts were printed extensively (Nam 2012, 15). Moreover, it was during this period that the collected works of eminent monks began to be printed, with the earliest known being the *Chongheodang jip* 淸虛堂集, the collected works of Hyujeong, the most renowned monk of the Joseon period. In the course of the seventeenth century the total number of collected works to be published
numbered twenty-one, with another twenty-one collected works published during the eighteenth century, while during the nineteenth century this number dropped to thirteen works. What is intriguing is that the works of eminent monks had not been compiled into collected works prior to that time. Through these numbers, one gains a sense of the increased activity of Buddhist temples related to the printing and publishing Buddhist materials (Yi Jino 1990, 29–30).

Further, it is also well known that temples played the role of places of study and education. During the Joseon period, temples were secluded and quiet locales far from distractions and to which the sons of societal elites—the sadaebu 士大夫—went to study and prepare for the state examinations. Temples were also known as places for a “rest cure” (jeongyang 靜養) from illness or fatigue and to enjoy the tranquil environment of the mountains. This is well attested to by the fact that temples were one of the favored leisure destinations of scholar-officials. According to historical records, from King Sejo’s reign in 1440 the custom began for state ministers to take their sabbaticals or “study retreats” (saga dokseo 賜暇讀書) at temples, whereas previously it had been to their hometowns.42

It should also be noted that the Buddhist monks who corresponded with the scholar-officials were themselves scholars and literati. As the counterpart to the elite scholar-officials and social ideologues, eminent monks were well steeped in Confucian traditions.43 For instance, from his work, Samga gwigam 禪家龜鑑, we can gather that the monk Hyujeong was well versed in Confucianism and Taoism. In fact, in that work Hyujeong discusses the three traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism and argues that there is a fundamental commonness among them.44

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42. It was during Sejo’s reign in 1440 that the first record appears of a group of ministers who went to a temple named Jinggwan-sa to study Confucian texts. Such “study leave” to temples afterwards became a custom (Kim Yongjo 1996, 4–5).

43. The educational backgrounds of elite monks and Confucian literati may be closely interrelated, which would have implications on social class similarities that would bring to question their separate “religious” identities, and I would imagine that this would apply to many of the literati monks. For example, if we consider Hyujeong, an elite monk of the Joseon period, his biographical record indicates he was first reared in the Confucian tradition. It was during a period of despair following his failure to pass the state literary examinations that he turned to Buddhism. This may lead us to assert that such a common denominator may be another basis of the shared cultural foundation of Buddhist monks and Confucian literati. Though this is worth further examination, lack of space here leaves me to pursue this in a later paper.

44. Hyujeong (1977) argues that the common element of the three teachings is the “Way” 道, which can be identified as the mind 心. By making this argument, the objective is to assert that Buddhism is the most fundamental system of thought and is therefore able to include both Confucianism and Taoism.
Such a close relationship between the larger literary culture and Buddhism shows that Buddhism had a traditional role that was closely related to its role as a religious institution. This phenomenon can be viewed through the notion of cultural interconnectedness, in which the role of Buddhism, as represented for instance by the activities of poet-monks, filled a cultural space that scholar-officials appreciated and valued. Part of this tradition would surely have been a continuation of the traditional role of Buddhism as a source of cultural power.

From what we have discussed thus far, it can be noted that some monks and scholar-officials were quite closely interconnected and had much to share. Together they formed part of the literati elite and as such were also part of the cultural elite of society. The literary activities of the Buddhist monks reflect the cultural wealth of Buddhism that allowed the saṃgha to maintain its social significance throughout the Joseon period, which indeed is an indication of the continuation of its role as a cultural foundation of society.

Conclusion

The cultural significance of Joseon Buddhism has been silenced or forgotten in the Confucian-dominated discourse of the Joseon period. The close association of Buddhist monks with Confucian literati is evident even within the then burgeoning literary culture. The abundant examples of interaction and overlap between Buddhist monks and Confucian literati in the literary world point to a realm that tells a different story from the usual narrative of Confucian domination and Buddhist decline and isolation. We have overlooked or simplified the diverse spheres and the complex dynamics of inter-traditional relationships that have been the cultural power and foundation of Joseon Buddhism.

From an examination of literary interactions between Buddhist monks and Confucian literati, we come to realize that the inter-traditional relationship extended beyond the exchange of poems. Poetry exchanges were part of a complex relationship between Buddhism and Confucian literati that serve as a window into the societal elites’ aesthetic tastes and leisure activities. Such exchanges were revealed to be part of an enduring tradition that provided the foundation for a sixteenth-century literary movement identified with a group of progressive minded scholar-officials known as the Chimnyudaee haksa.

However, when we consider temples as centers for the publication of literary materials, as places deeply associated with scholarship, and the close association of monks with traditional Confucian literature, there were clearly cultural spheres where the saṃgha commanded a strong presence. At times, the spheres
of inter-mixing and inter-activities challenge the categorical divisions of “Buddhism” or “Confucianism” associated with the traditional discourses of “religion.” The great degree of overlap between Buddhism and Confucianism eschews the compartmentalized basis of our understanding of the lives of Joseon-period monks and scholar-officials. The active inter-traditional relationship and the overlap of Buddhist elements with the lives and culture of scholar-officials, sketch a picture of a culturally based community where the traditional model of polemical conflict is shown to be an overly skewed and even a naïve depiction. Instead, Buddhism in the everyday points to an interwoven socio-cultural fabric within which Buddhism and Confucianism interlaced the whole of Joseon society. Some Buddhist threads were removed or weakened but many others remained and were the underlying and connecting threads that formed Joseon society.

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