On the General Characteristics of Korean Buddhism
—Is Korean Buddhism Syncretic?—

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1. The Travesty of Korean Buddhist Scholarship: Opening Remarks

"Korean Buddhism is syncretic." By extension the Korean mind is harmonious and peaceful. This sort of general statement has been repeated so often that it has gained the status of an unquestionable truth among some Korean Buddhists as well as Confucian scholars. The travesty of Korean Buddhist scholarship has reached such a height that I cannot help but question the validity of such a statement.

In order to do this, I will give a brief sketch of the origin and development of the "syncretic" issue. I will also show how current Korean scholars have treated the issue. I will then proceed to show that the characteristic description of Korean Buddhism as syncretic is excessively vague and moreover inadequate to characterize the complex nature of Korean Buddhism.

It is my hope that, by doing this critical examination of the hackneyed characterization of Korean Buddhism, the previous stereotyped descriptions of Korean Buddhism which have through continuous usage become fixed notions can be dispelled.

Upon inspection, I believe that we will find that such a broad and com-

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prehensive characterization has little or no factual support and has led to an un scholarly approach to the study of Korean Buddhism.

2. Faults with previous research done in Korean Studies

In the past, scholarship concerning traditional Korean thought has been dominated by certain stereotypes. Korean thought, being a part of Asian thought in general, has been denounced as “pre-modern” or “superstitious”, moreover, it has been called “mysterious” or “illogical”. These blanket characterizations do not have any objective support, and in themselves have only been proved to reflect the biases of those who see and emphasize what they want to see and emphasize in Korean thought and culture.

In addition to such general and broad stereotypes with regard to Korean thought as a whole, modern scholarship has taken an excessively critical view of Korean Buddhism and Confucianism in particular.

Korean Confucianism, particularly that of the Chosŏn dynasty, is said to have wasted all of its energies on “empty speculation” which led to a low industrial capacity, and as a result, to domination by a materially superior West. Now that Korea has been industrialized to the extent that Korea is counted as one of the Four Asian “dragons”, scholars euphemize Confucianism as the spiritual backbone for such rapid industrialization–cum–modernization comparable to the case of Protestant ethics which brought about the rise of capitalism and industrialization in the modern West. The travesty of some Korean studies thus far is evident from the above contrasting and even contradictory evaluations of the one and the same phenomenon “Confucianism”.

Korean Buddhism, on the other hand, which was able to unite the country during the Silla dynasty because of its syncretic and harmonizing tendency, is said to have been excessively involved in ceremonies etc. and to have been overly involved with politicking during the Koryŏ dynasty. This argument goes on to say that during the Chosŏn dynasty, Korean Buddhism was expelled from the center of social life and moved to the deep mountains where it served only the needs of drop-outs, women and ignorant people. Confucian prejudices against Buddhism, coupled with the above mentioned Western biasness toward Asian thought in general as illogical and/or mysterious, have prevented an objective approach to Buddhist studies in Korea. Instead of an objective and critical study of Buddhism, some of the recent Korean Buddhist scholars have, therefore, been involved with defensive apologetics. The overly emphasized statement that Korean Buddhism is syncretic is, I believe, derived from that defensive mechanism.
of Buddhist scholars during the last fifty years or so

These may be good starting points for our critical examination of articles dealing with the general characteristic of Korean Buddhism. In this paper, let us, however, dismiss the excessive biases which have characterized so much of the recent scholarship on Korean thought in general or on Korean Confucianism and Buddhism in particular. Instead, we will focus on the specific issue of "syncretism" in Korean Buddhism.

How, then, shall we approach the "syncretic" issue in a balanced and objective manner? I feel that the historical approach is the most adequate. After all, every idea has its first proponent, followed by those who develop and form the idea into a philosophical system or an unsupported hypothesis. Ideas do not appear out of nowhere, they all arise and gain meaning within human history.

We will trace the genetic origin and development of the idea "syncretic Korean Buddhism" in the recent Korean Buddhist scholarship and will critically examine its validity.

3. The history of the "syncretic issue" in Korean Buddhism

During the last fifty years, the ludicrous notion of "syncretism" has not only been used to characterize Korean Buddhism, but has even been used to describe Korean culture in general, and by extension, the amorphous "Korean mind." We might ask, at this point, what particular features of Korean Buddhism have led to its being described as syncretic.

Even if we exclude those people who regard Buddhism as an object of faith and only speak of those who approach Buddhism on the purely scholastic level, we still find many scholars who speak of "Korean Buddhism" as "hogyek pulgyo" (National Protection Buddhism) or "hokt'ong pulgyo" (Syncretic Buddhism) apparently unaware of history's constantly changing and fluid nature.

The first scholar to describe the nature of Korean Buddhism as "syncretic" is probably Ch'oei Nam-sŏn (pen name Yugdang 1890–1957) in his article "Korean Buddhism–its place in Eastern thought."

Written in 1930 during the Japanese occupation of Korea, at a time when Korea's cultural pride was at a low ebb, Yugdang was going to deliver this paper at the Pan-Pacific Buddhist Conference which was to be held at Honolulu. He sought to retrieve the rightful place of Korean Buddhism in.

1 See his article "Chosŏn pulgyo–tongbang munhwasang ae ǔnün ki churi," Ch'oei Nam-sŏn chŏngyp vol 2, pp 546–572. Originally appeared in the Pulgyo (Vol 74) pp 1–51.
East Asian civilization in order to inform the world at large that Korea, though under the yoke of Japanese colonization, is yet a culturally advanced country

It seems worth while to read some portions of that original paper to find out what he meant by the "syncretic nature" of Korean Buddhism. He wrote, in his usual idiosyncratic verbose and ornamental style, about Wŏnhyo in Chapter 4 of that article under the title of Wŏnhyo, the builder of "t'ong pulgyo" (Syncretic Buddhism)

Buddhists in the peninsula (= Korean Buddhists) went to China, the center of Asian Buddhism at that time, and bestowed an enormous amount of contributions to help develop Buddhist doctrines sometimes explicity or sometimes implicitly collaborating with Chinese. But the pride and special status of Korean Buddhism lie in her independent creativity. In other words, Korean Buddhists have constructed a special type of 'Korean Buddhism' blending theory and practice harmoniously by thoroughly developing a true Buddhist life pattern and thus sufficiently fulfilling the concrete function of Buddhism. Buddhism in India or Central Asia was only an introductory preface, while that of China was only compared to each disparate chapter. But Buddhism in Korea is a conclusive chapter of Buddhism.

Now who is the one who built such a conclusive chapter of Buddhism in Korea? He is no other than Wŏnhyo, who earned a title of Great Saint in his life time by expressing that proud function of building a uniquely Korean definitive, conclusive, final Buddhism.

When I say that Wŏnhyo is the one who completed Buddhism in its final form, I mean that Wŏnhyo has much to contribute not only to the practice and wide propagation of Buddhism in Korea, but also to a much greater creation of true Buddhist worldview. That is to say, we must not neglect the fact that Saint Wŏnhyo's Buddhism was not only a true realization of Buddhist salvation, but also a completion of t'ong pulgyo (syncretic Buddhism), chŏn pulgyo (wholesome Buddhism), chonghap t'ongil pulgyo (synthesized and unified Buddhism). Wŏnhyo achieved a unification of Buddhism out of divisive Buddhism. Wŏnhyo brought a reconciliation where there was only a sectarian strife. Wŏnhyo

2 We do not know whether Yugdang personally wanted to participate in the conference or not. Anyhow, Yugdang was not able to attend this meeting, but an English summary of that paper remains. At the end of his original article Yugdang added that this draft is a kind of working paper intended to be delivered for "foreigners" participating in the Pŏm T'aeop yŏngyang pulgyo taehoe (Pan-Pacific Buddhist Conference) that would be held in Hawaii, July 1930. A representative by the name of Honorable(上人) Kim Kwan-ho must have participated in that conference and evidently delivered that paper in English.

3 The peninsula here stands for Korea. Japanese scholars at that time emphasize the peninsula character of Korean culture being backward-looking, melancholic, etc. Yugdang did not, however, seem to buy the Japanese association of that "peninsula mentality" of Korean people.
created a new living organization and forceful expression of Buddhism that the atrophic and divisive Buddhism at that time needed most.

Wŏnhyo was well aware of the long history of Buddhism from its inception through division and final completion. The true realization of complete Buddhism is to be found in his work *Sepnum hwajaengnon* (A Treatise Harmoniously Reconciling Ten Kinds [of Contradictory Theories in Buddhism]) in two volumes.

Wŏnhyo's grand design of reconciling all the sectarian divisions and theoretical bickerings cannot be fulfilled in such a short time of his period. But his spirit of reconciliation since then is alive forever in Korean Buddhists' hearts. Through ups and downs of Korean Buddhist history, his ideal was gradually implemented step by step toward its final realization. Later a Koryŏ king bestowed a posthumous title upon Wŏnhyo Hwa-jaeng Kuksa (National Master Harmonizing Conflicts) in honor of his attempt to reconcile all the divisive factors in Buddhism. Also during the Chosŏn dynasty Buddhism offered a new idea of synthesizing doctrinal and practical Buddhism in one basket of *sonkyo yanggong* (Two Sects of Doctrinal Study and Meditative Practice), this is nothing other than an expression of Wŏnhyo's spirit of reconciliation.

Here we mark the beginning of the whole issue of syncretism in Korean Buddhism. And we pinpoint Yugdang as the scholar who began promoting the syncretism of Korean Buddhism. The year was 1930.

Before that year there were two authors dealing with the whole range of Korean Buddhism in chronological order. One was Yi Nŭng-hwa (1869–1945), who wrote a general history of Korean Buddhism *Chosŏn pulgyo t'ongsa* in Chinese characters during 1916. The other was Kwŏn Sang-no (1879–1965), who wrote a brief history of Korean Buddhism *Chosŏn pulgyo yaksa* in 1917.

Neither of the two authors ever mentioned the syncretic nature of Korean Buddhism, perhaps because their intention in writing those books was not a general characterization of Korean Buddhism per se and more likely because they were not motivated to characterize Korean Buddhism in a blanket manner. The former scurrilously catalogued and compiled all the extant materials related to the history of Korean Buddhism, while the latter briefly jotted down the main events in the Korean history of Buddhism.

In 1928 a Japanese scholar Takahashi Toru, however, published a voluminous book entitled *Richo Bukkyo* (Buddhism during the Yi Chosŏn Period). Here we note that Toru was a professor in the Kejo (now Seoul) Imperial University, an official scholar sponsored by the Imperial Japanese government. He characterized Korean Buddhism as a mere transplantation of Chinese Buddhism. Hence, according to Toru,
In Korean Buddhism there is no development of thought but only a tenacious adherence to the original Chinese Buddhism. Hence its general characteristic is none other than non-independence. It lacks originality and creative thought.

Another Japanese scholar Nukariya Kwainen authored A History of Korean Zen Buddhism Chosen Zenkyoshi in 1930, the same year that Yugdang wrote the above mentioned article. But Nukariya never mentioned the syncretic nature of Korean Buddhism like Yugdang nor the non-independent nature of Korean Buddhism like Toru Nukariya only described the intimate relationship of Zen and doctrinal studies in the whole history of Korean Buddhism.

Now it seems obvious why Yugdang created the myth of Wŏnhyo being the Great Saint who created and developed a true form of living Buddhism which consummated the whole development of Asian Buddhism in theory and practice by harmonizing all the divisive tendencies in Buddhism at Wŏnhyo's time. He may have even been inspired by the title of Wŏnhyo's treatise With a learned eloquence, he described Indian Buddhism as a mere "introductory Buddhism," Chinese Buddhism as "the Buddhism of many divided chapters," while he elevated Korean Buddhism as "the Buddhism that embraces all of the chapters in a conclusive manner." He also elevated Wŏnhyo to the status of the holy saint of the Korean race and heaped praise on Wŏnhyo's treatise and his creative theory of syncretic harmonization. (Wŏnhyo's Sipmun hwajaengnon would probably be included in this category.)

This blanket characterization of Korean Buddhism as syncretic and conclusive is in fact but a pure rhetorical euphemism to counterbalance Toru's blanket characterization of Korean Buddhism as a mere copy of Chinese Buddhism lacking any sign of creativity. Toru's characterization of Korean Buddhism seemed to reflect the same Western criticism of the Japanese race. Toru, a Japanese official scholar, seems to hurl back upon the Korean race the same criticism that the Japanese got from the West.

It is understandable that Yugdang felt repulsed against such a bias from a Japanese scholar to the degree that he lost his scholarly objectivity. The fault with Yugdang was not, however, limited only to his emotional repulse against Japanese scholar's prejudice against the Korean race, but also to his over-extended application of such syncretic character to the whole range of Korean Buddhist history. Run by rhetoric, Yugdang did not only

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4 See his book page 12 ff.

5 The lack of creativity was a Western biasness towards the Japanese race even in the present century.
characterize Wŏnhyo’s philosophy only in this blanket manner (although this was hinted at negatively by Toru’s nasty characterization of Korean Buddhism in general), but also extended this description of Korean Buddhism as a syncretic tradition to the whole of Korean Buddhism after Wŏnhyo.

To this reviewer the whole issue involved, for one thing, with the emotional tendencies of both Korean and Japanese race. And for another, the issue is spurious precisely because there is not a single specific reference to which “syncretism” refers. I would say that the syncretic nature of Korean Buddhism was virtually invented by the pen of Yugdang either out of his ignorance lacking scholarly justification or for the sake of the emotional appeal he was going to utilize to uplift the deadly laden heart of Korean people at that time of Japanese colonization.

This misconception proliferated in the work of later Korean as well as non-Korean scholars dealing with Korean Buddhism. Some scholars of the previous 50 years had no sense of the acculturation process that Korean Buddhism has undergone in Korea. They therefore came to their conclusions with an almost complete disregard of historical factors.

During the Japanese colonial period and after the liberation of Korea right up to this time of contemporary ideological warfare, everyone felt the need to stick together as one nation and one people. After such a long period of war and hardship, there has been naturally a disdain for societal discord. During such times, the vague characterization of Korean Buddhism as “syncretic” and/or harmonious/conciliatory was bound to have an enormous emotional appeal.

However, it is precisely in the vagueness of such a characterization that the problem lies. What does the term hoss’ong(syncretic) actually refer to? Some people think that it refers to the Avatamsaka’s teachings which characterize absolute truth as “mutually penetrating without obstructions”, others understand it as the guiding ideology for the realization of North and South Korean unification, others see it as a random collection of everything—an eclectic tendency.

After Yugdang’s original article appeared in 1930, neither Buddhist nor Confucian scholars in Korea paid attention to his peculiar characterization of Korean Buddhism. From the 30’s through 40’s and 50’s it was the dark age for Korean studies, since the whole Korean race was then struggling for its own survival. But suddenly during the last two decades from the 70’s to the 80’s after Korea’s economic development and modernization there was a surge of interest in traditional Korean culture and scholarship. Yugdang’s
paper naturally invited scholars’ interest. The rise of neo-nationalism in Korea strongly supported the pseudo-ideology of “syncretism” promulgated by Yugdang in the 30’s against the Japanese abject denouncement of the Korean mentality.

In the meantime, the meaning of the term *hooit’ong* has been received a number of interpretations in various articles written during the 70’s and 80’s by Korean Buddhist academics. In order to show the polysemy of “*hooit’ong* (syncretism)” we will list those articles in chronological order by writing, and classify them according to the degree that the authors attached various meanings to the term.

"Wonhyo’s View on the Complete Interpenetration between the Noumenal and Phenomenal World”

(2) 1977 Pak Ch’aeg-ch’ul, MA Thesis at the Tongguk University
“A Study of Tsungmi’s Theory of Corresponding Harmony between Zen meditation and Scriptural study (Chan–chiao–i-chi)”

(3) 1978 Host of scholars, *Pulgyo hagbo* (vol. 15)
"Wŏnhyo’s Thought of Hwaajaeng” by Kim Un-hak
"Sŏngnang’s Thought of Harmony” by Kim Hang-bae
"Wŏnh’ŏk’s Thought of Harmony” by O Hyŏng-kun
"Ŭich’ŏn’s Thought of Ch’ŏnt’ae Syncretism” by Yi Yŏng-ja
"Pojo’s Thought of Harmony” by Song Sŏk-ku
"Sŏsan’s Thought of Harmony” by Kwŏn Ki-chong
"Manhae’s Thought of Peace” by Mok Chŏng-bae

(4) 1979 Kim Sŏng-dong *Pusantae hagbo* (vol. 18)
“A Study of Sŏsan’s Synthetic Thought”

(5) 1980 Yi Ki-yŏng (Paper presented at the Korean Studies Conference at the University of Hawai, Honolulu, Hawaii)
“A Tradition of Korean Way of Thinking”

(6) 1981 Yi Chong-ik
"Chosŏn’s Policy of Anti-Buddhism and Buddhist Syncretism”

(7) 1981 Kim Tu-chun
“Kunyŏ’s Thought of Sŏng-sang yunghoe” (A Synthesis of Hwayen and Idcation–Only School)

(8) 1982 Yi Chong-hu & Yun Myŏng-no (Academy of Korean Studies Report)
“The Spirit of Harmony in Traditional Thought”

(9) 1983 Chŏng Sun-il
“A Study of Tsung-mi’s Hoit’ong”
(10) 1985 Só Kyông-su (Paper presented at the 3rd International Conference sponsored by the Academy of Korean Studies)  
"The Concept of huæ (harmony) in Korean Buddhist Thought"
(11) 1985 Ryu Sung-guk (Keynote Speech at the 3rd International Conference at the Academy of Korean Studies)  
"Characteristics of Korean Thought"
(12) 1986 Ko Ik-chun (Paper presentation at the Spring Meeting of Korean Association for the History of Religions)  
"Korean Culture and Buddhism"
(13) 1987 Saint Wŏnhyo Symposium sponsored by the Ministry of National Unification  
"Collected Papers on Wŏnhyo – His Philosophy and His Life"

We can generally ascertain three steps of conceptual proliferation in the above development of Korean scholarship with regard to the Buddhist as well as traditional thought.

First, a genuine academic pursuit as to the philosophical foundation of Wŏnhyo's theory of "syncretic harmonization" in (1). To this category would belong the following articles dealing with seven major Buddhist thinkers in the history of Korean Buddhism (3).

But in (5) we find a second major turn in the development of syncretic issue Prof. Yi characterized Korean Buddhism with one stroke as syncretic a la Yulgang at the same place in Honolulu that the original Yulgang's article was delivered 6 But "syncretism" was still applied to Korean Buddhism only up until this time.

The acme of travesty is found in the third step, in (8), (11), and (13), where we find the spirit of "syncretic harmony" being declared as the spiritual backbone of Korean culture and traditional Korean thought including the animistic shamanism and the Korean brand of Confucianism. Everything Korean is painted with the rosy color of "syncretism" standing for harmony, peace, political unification, and whatever else one might have in mind as a praise the golden age of glorious traditional Korean culture.

From time to time, there were articles criticizing this Blake tendency of non-academic blemishing in (10) and some other academic articles dealing with the origin of this syncretic variation in Chinese Buddhism (2) and (9).

6 In fact the reviewer translated the Korean version of Yi's paper into English and had witnessed heated discussion among scholars of Korean studies then participating at the conference about the general characteristic of Korean Buddhism. Unfortunately the paper was not published in English for unknown reasons.
4. Conclusion

If we understand syncretism to mean the general openminded nature of religious people, there would be no reason to say that it is a peculiar feature of Korean Buddhism.

On the other hand, if we wish to define “syncretism(볼통)” to be the understanding and flexibility that is required to import, ingest and assimilate a set of religious ideas from one place to another, we should limit its usage to apply only to the T'ang dynasty period when Korean Buddhism was in the process of receiving Buddhism from abroad. Even if we wish to understand “syncretism” as the longing for peace and unification of a particular era, we should limit its usage, as we did in the above, to the particular historical era where it properly applies.

If we want, we can have syncretism refer to that aspect of Korean Buddhism that is devoted to the teachings of the Avatamsaka Sutra and those concomitant with the Hwayen philosophy of the total interpenetration of all things in the world.

However, the term “syncretism” should not be used to characterize Korean Buddhism in its entirety, much less the Korean mentality in general.
GLOSSARY

Ch’or Nam-sôn (Yugdang)  |  崔南善
Chôn pulgyo                |  全佛教
Chonghap tongil pulgyo     |  綜合統一佛教
hoguk pulgyo               |  護國佛教
hori’ong pulgyo            |  會通佛教
Hwayaeng kusia             |  和諧國師
Kwôn Sang-no               |  叔相老
Richo pulkyo               |  李朝佛教

Pulgyo                     |  十門和論
Sipmun hwaengnon           |  禪敎兩宗
Sônyo yangyong             |  通佛教
tong pulgyo                |  元曉
Wônhyo                     |  李能和
Yi Nûng-hwa                |