

“The Mystery of the Century:” Lay Buddhist Monk Villages (*Chaegasŭngch’ŏn*) Near Korea’s Northernmost Border, 1600s–1960s*

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This article examines the history of the villages of lay monks (*chaegasŭng*) near North Korea’s northernmost border. These communities had been ignored for centuries until they suddenly became the object of scholarly and public attention when Korea fell under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). The men of the villages were called “lay monks.” They shaved their heads, had wives and children, and had more than one ethnic identity. Despite the sizable number of lay monk villages in this region, their long history and, more importantly, their monastic identity and Buddhist lifestyle, narratives about these communities are almost absent in the historiography of Korean Buddhism. The absence of a written history is ascribed to that historiography’s privileged focus on the influential figures, doctrines, texts, and schools that contributed to the protection of the state. Colonial experiences and national divisions have reinforced these elite- and nation-centered narratives about Korean Buddhism to the exclusion of its more pluralistic, local dimensions on the periphery. If the history of these lay monk communities is understood within the context of Chosŏn Buddhism (1392–1910) placed under the Neo-Confucian hegemony of the Chosŏn dynasty, then clearly the existence of these communities is not an anomaly developed independently, but instead is an integral part of Korean Buddhism.

Keywords: Lay monks (*chaegasŭng*), Jurchen, Chosŏn Buddhism, monastic identity, colonialism

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Introduction

An article from the 1930s appearing in a Japanese-language newspaper in colonial Korea describes the isolated villages of married monks found in the remote, mountainous, northeastern corner of the Korean Peninsula, where North Korea, China, and Russia intersect, as “the mystery of the century” (*seiki no nazo*) (*Hokusen nippō*, 9 April 1933; *Keijō nippō*, 12 September 1937). These villages are the only non-celibate Buddhist communities known to have existed in pre-modern Korea. Married monks, or monks with secret wives and children, have been documented in Indian Buddhism (Clarke 2006; Tuladhar-Douglas 2006)¹ and throughout the history of East Asian Buddhism, but a village based on such a lifestyle is extremely rare. Villages of married monks in southern China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907)—the *huozhaiseng* (burning-house monks)—almost disappeared during the Song Dynasty (960–1279).² In Japan, married monks are associated with the well-known Jōdoshū and Jōdoshinshū sects,³ and with the lesser-known itinerant semi-Buddhist tradition of Hijiri.⁴ However, the lay monk communities in the northernmost part of Korea⁵ stand out from the mainstream of Korean Buddhism because of their married lifestyle and their ethnically heterogeneous origins.

These villages were scattered across six counties in North Hamgyōng province in far northeastern Korea, near the border with China (see Figure 1).⁶ The inhabitants were collectively termed *chaegasūng* (Jp. *zaikesō*), or lay monks. The men shaved their heads as monks did, but they also ate fish and raised families. Their households ranged in number from the thousands⁷ to the

1. For example, in modern Newari Buddhism all Buddhist priests are married (Tuladhar-Douglas 2006, 9).

2. Li Quan, *Shi wu yi ming lu* 6 (1776). A late-Chosŏn literatus Yi Kyugyōng (1788–?), in his encyclopedia *Oju yŏnmun changjŏn san’go*, also comments on the existence of married monks (*huozhaiseng*) in China.

3. For married monks in Japan, see Richard Jaffe (2001) and Stephen Covell (2005).

4. For more detail on Hijiri, see Kim Sŏngsun (2012).

5. The Confucian scholar Yi Kyugyōng claims that there were also *chaegasūng* in the northeast border area (in *Oju yŏnmun changjŏn san’go*). They must not have established villages as visible as the lay monks in the six counties.

6. These counties being Chongsŏng, Onsŏng, Hoeryōng, Kyōngwŏn, Kyōnghŭng, Puryōng. Puryōng was later redesignated Musan.

7. According to research data from 1933, they included 545 families numbering 3,332 people (*Kyōngwŏn kunji*, 90).



Figure 1. Location of the Lay Monk Villages.

tens of thousands at their peak.⁸ They were largely self-sufficient, tilled the land, and produced and sold yellow paper and cloth for use by the central and local governments. However, they were located deep in the mountains and had little contact with outsiders, and so they developed a distinctive culture. They were also discriminated against as one of the lowest social castes, stigmatized even more severely than northerners in general (Kim 2010, 563–585), but just as harshly as monks everywhere in Korea.

In 1914, the Japanese historian and archeologist Imanishi Ryū (1875–1932) found what he termed “hermit villages” (Song 1936, 76) while conducting an archeological survey in Hamgyōng province. He collected preliminary data on them and published his findings the following year (Imanishi 1974 [1915], 240–247), arousing the curiosity of Japanese and Korean scholars. Since then, scholars have tried to understand these communities by inquiring into their history and their “monkhood.”

Scholars agree that the villagers were descendants of the Jurchen, a federation of Tungusic-speaking tribes inhabiting Manchuria and northern Korea, later joined by Koreans, some of whom intermarried with the Jurchen (Imanishi 1974 [1921], 256; Yi 1935, 3; Hwang 1960, 123, 152; Yi 1995, 356;

8. The Korean Buddhist Chang Yongsang writes that the number was allegedly 30,000 (Chang 1931, 57).

Bohnet 2008). The relationship between the Jurchen and Korea in East Asian history has been extensively studied by scholars writing in Korean and Western languages, but insufficient attention has been given to the question of how the Jurchen of the six counties came to be “lay monks.” These communities are estimated to have been established between the pre-Koryŏ era through the seventeenth century, and scholars differ on whether the monks’ quasi-monastic character was an imposition by the state for political/military reasons or a conscious choice by the villagers in order to survive in a hostile environment.

Moreover, while Hwang Ch’ölsan (1960), Yi Kangyöl (1995), and Johannes Reckel (2000 and 2002) have provided detailed analyses of the multiethnic and monastic nature of these communities, scholars have generally regarded them as anomalies with little relationship to Korean Buddhism.

In this paper, relying on untapped primary and secondary sources, I will examine theories of the origin of these communities and their history within Chosŏn Buddhism. I will then look at their rediscovery in the early twentieth century and the resulting scholarship. Even though the lay monk communities are absent in historiography of post-colonial Korean Buddhism due in large part to its nationalistic and celibate-centered understanding of Korean Buddhist history, I argue that these communities cannot be thought of in isolation from Chosŏn-era Buddhism. In other words, the monastic origin of the villagers was deeply influenced by Korean monks and they therefore had much in common with the Chosŏn-era monastics in terms of their social status and the roles they performed for the state, making the existence and the development of the communities a manifestation of Chosŏn Buddhism and thus an integral part of Korean Buddhism.

General History: Korea and the Jurchen

Northern Korea was part of Koguryŏ (attrib. 37 BCE–668 CE), one of the Three Kingdoms of ancient Korea. However, when Silla (attrib. 57 BCE–935 CE) founded the first unified Korean state in the late seventh century, this area was not included. It was home to nomadic tribes such as the Jurchen. Rulers of the later Korean polities, the Koryŏ (918–1392) and Chosŏn (1392–1910) kingdoms, fought to reincorporate the north of the peninsula. From 1104 to 1107, the Koryŏ general Yun Kwan (1040–1111) waged war against the Jurchen and built nine fortresses whose precise locations are now unknown,⁹ all

9. Regarding scholarly conjecture on their locations, see footnote 19.

of which fell to the Jurchen within sixteen months. Finally, Chosŏn’s King Sejong (r. 1418–1450) took advantage of tribal disputes among the Jurchen to expand his territory to the Yalu and Tumen and appointed General Kim Chongsŏ (1383–1453) the governor of Hamgil (Hamgyŏng) province. Kim forced most of the Jurchen back beyond the Yalu and Tumen rivers and instituted the Six Garrisons (*yukchin*), which became the nuclei of the counties with the lay monk villages.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Jurchen that were not under Korean rule, having formed the Jin Empire (1115–1234), were reorganized by Nurhaci (1559–1626) and renamed Manchu; his heirs conquered China and ruled there as the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). Thus the Jurchen had a massive political and cultural impact on Chinese history (Tillman and West 1995) and were a constant threat to Koryŏ and then Chosŏn Korea.

In order to prevent possible incursions by the Jurchen over the Korean border, the Chosŏn court adopted a carrot-and-stick approach¹¹ by regularly inviting tribal leaders to the capital and conferring on them (at least nominal) governmental and military posts and status (Robinson 2010, 25; 1992, 98) and allowing them to trade in the capital city. But whenever the Jurchen were dissatisfied and caused a disturbance, the court suppressed them by military force (Han 2010, 174). The Jurchen attacked Chosŏn 131 times between 1392 and 1627 (Yi 2001, 22). After establishing the Qing Dynasty, the Jurchen/ Manchus suddenly were no longer barbarian vassals to be tamed by Chosŏn. They forced Korea to accept a suzerain-vassal relationship (Hatada 1969, 80), but at the same time recognized Chosŏn authority up to the Yalu-Tumen line. They did demand the repatriation of their “delinquent subjects” who were still inside Korea, whom the Chosŏn state found useful as spies, but this demand was later withdrawn. Most of these did, in fact, end up emigrating to Qing China, but the minority that opposed the rule of Nurhaci and his heirs remained in the six counties and gradually intermarried with Koreans who had been relocated there by the Chosŏn state.

While it is generally agreed that the lay monk communities descended from these Jurchen, scholars differ greatly on the question of when and how these communities assumed monastic identity and became known as lay monk villages.

10. These are the same as the six counties.

11. For Chosŏn’s policy towards the Jurchen within the Korean borders, see Han Sŏngju (2010) and Kim Sunnam (2009).

Theories of the Communities' History and Monastic Identity

After their discovery by Imanishi in 1914, these obscure communities became an object of scholarly inquiry with the encouragement of the colonial government. Even before Japan colonized Korea in 1910, the Japanese government conducted ethnographic and anthropological research and demographic surveys in Korea to gather knowledge and data to legitimize its plans for colonization. A plethora of reports by colonial scholars,¹² officials, and Buddhist missionaries were added to the growing collection of knowledge about Korea's customs, history, and religion.

A Japanese folklorist and ethnographer, Akiba Takashi (1888–1954), professor at Seoul Imperial University during the Japanese Occupation, visited Puryŏng and Hoeryŏng,¹³ two of the lay monk villages, and described them in his book *Chōsen minzoku shi* (Korean ethnography) published in 1954 and translated into English in 1957. He found that the “*chaegasŏng*” (lay monks) were also called *sansaram*, “mountain people,” with a connotation of “sacred people” (Akiba 1957, 15). He treated the lay monks as an indigenous Korean phenomenon, similar to the Korean traditional shamans who flourished in northern Korea as half-monastic and half-laity; he maintained that the lay monks, like the shamans, were entertainers (*kwangdae*), traveling performers (*sadangp'ae*), acrobatic tumblers (*chaein*), and professional ritualists (Akiba 1954, 292).

Some of the more bizarre findings of these studies fascinated Japanese and Korean scholars. The women of the communities were known for their beauty and were the objects of sexual desire and ideal marriage (see Figure 2). Women would expose their breasts to enlarge them and to entice men (“*Kanhoku no zaikesō*” 1925, 44). The Japanese were known to fetishize and exoticize the bodies of “primitive” colonized women (Kent 2004). Nevertheless, it was not unusual to see bare-breasted women during the Chosŏn era, particularly of the non-*yangban* class (Chŏn 2008); but what fascinated Japanese and Korean scholars was that these women were the wives of Buddhist priests.

In 1932, the colonial government even dispatched an official in charge of hygiene in Hamgyŏng province, Nagawa Chikai (dates unknown), to conduct scientific research on some of the lay monk villages. He spent a significant

12. To name a few, Yanagi Sōetsu or Muneyoshi (1889–1961); Imanishi Ryū (1875–1932); Akamatsu Chijō (1886–1960); Murayama Chijūn (1891–1968); and Akiba Takashi (1888–1954).

13. See Chŏn (2005).

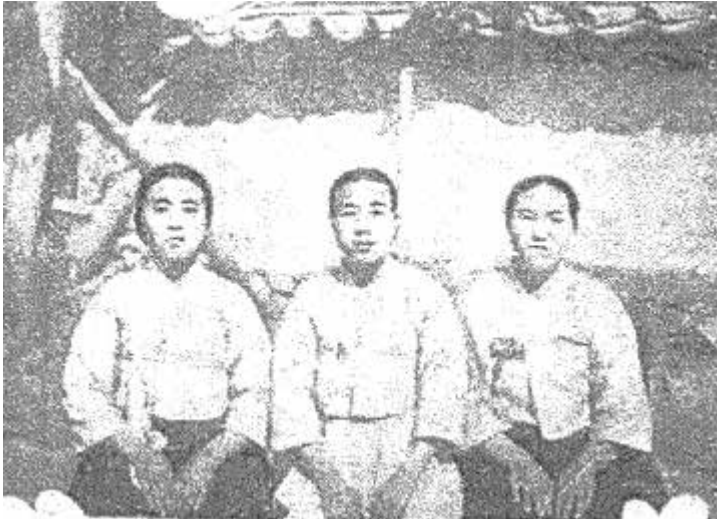


Figure 2. *Chaegasing* wives in the 1930s (*Ōsaka mainichi Chōsen han*, 28 July 1932).

amount of time there and, along with other physicians, drew blood from the people to trace their ethnic origin and determine their level of assimilation (Song 1936, 77). He was reportedly pleasantly surprised at the extent to which these people resembled the Japanese in cleanliness and clothing (*Hokusen nippō*, 6 July 1932; 4 May 1933; 3 July 1943). He wrote that it was common for the Jurchen to select the most scenic spots, build temples and shrines, and place beautiful women there to entertain their elites, which then later became “people’s amusement parks” (*Hokusen nippō*, 25 June 1932). “However, due to stormy invasions [of the Jurchen-dominated areas] by Koreans, the group of beautiful women [living there] was left behind and married with lay monks from the south. These are the current lay monks and thus all mysteries are unraveled as a result...” (*Hokusen nippō*, 9 April 1933). In other words, lay monks from the south moved to the northern region where they married the beautiful Jurchen women.

Another origin story, apparently based on oral history, was told to Imanishi by Pak Pyŏngjo, councilor of Puryŏng, and it was reported in a slightly different version by Yi Nūnghwa (1869–1945) in his 1915 article, “History of the lay monks in northern Hamgyŏng province” (Yi 1915, 26). When the Qing Empire imposed a treaty on Korea in 1637, it demanded 3,000 horses (or soldier-monks) and 3,000 big-breasted women (*taeyunyŏ*)¹⁴ to be delivered to Ningguta

14. Imanishi gives the smaller number of 330 (Imanishi 1974 [1915], 244).

in Jilin province, where the Qing Empire originated. The Chosŏn government, loath to dispatch Korean women, decided to send the descendants of the Jurchen near the border. In fact, the Jurchen women had bigger breasts than Korean women (*Puryŏng kunji*, 98). Yi continues, “They were named ‘*chaegasim*’ [by the government] since, by having them pass along their blood and monastic line together to their offspring, [the government] can distinguish between monks [lay monks and their families] and laity [outsiders], preventing them from living mixed together” (Yi 1915, 26). And further, “It is believed that in their custom, women wore their clothes so that they would bind right below the chest in order to protect [enlarge] the breasts” (Ibid.). Yi himself did not give much credence to this theory since it stemmed from unofficial sources. It is true that in 1795 the official Sin Yakch’u (1733–?) wrote that older scholars had told him that the Qing emperor, in the event of the collapse of his empire, desired to go back to Ningguta, his birthplace (*Sŏngjŏngwŏn ilgi* [SJWI] 1795, Yŏngjo 22 1795/10/08). The story of the 3,000 women may reflect this historical background, although it is unclear why the Qing emperor would have needed these women in order to restore his fortunes.

1. Koryŏ Theories

Less fantastic theories associate the origin of the lay monk villages with Koryŏ or Chosŏn. One theory alleges that General Yun Kwan settled the Jurchen under Koryŏ rule in these villages and forced them to construct Buddhist temples and become monks. The Korean scholar Yi Nŭnghwa claims that Yun Kwan’s Buddhist sympathies support this theory. At the peak of his battles with Jurchen armies, Yun Kwan vowed that if he won the war he would build temples in the territory. In fact, after completing the subjugation of the Jurchen, Yun Kwan named the newly acquired territory Yŏngju, erected statues of Buddhist protective deities, and built two temples (Yi 1915, 26–27).

Although Yi did not mention it in his article, another reason for the construction of the temples is that Yun Kwan’s troops included “monastic dependents” (*suwŏn simdo*) who needed housing. These dependents worked for monastics as servants. They did not belong to the monastic class but rather to “the commoner class or even lower status groups” (Vermeersch 2008, 175–177). Often accused of evading taxes and military obligations (Ibid.), the *suwŏn simdo* were viewed by state officials like Yun Kwan as criminals. Prior to his military expeditions, Yun Kwan had submitted a proposal for military reform in 1104, in which he demanded forcing these monastic dependents into the military. As a result, a new military division called the “Demon-Subduing

Army” (*Hangmagun*) was created (Ibid., 175). This special division was dispatched along with other forces to conquer the Jurchen. After a successful campaign, Yun Kwan constructed temples in the new fortresses where he then stationed the militarized temple dependents and the subjugated Jurchen. He ordered that all of them shave their heads. Based on this background and other sources, Yi Nūnghwa may have concluded that Yun Kwan envisioned creating a Buddhist community.

As such, Yi Nūnghwa agreed that the villages and their monastic designation dated back to the Koryŏ era, but he did not believe that Yun Kwan had anything to do with their creation (Yi 1915, 27). Instead, he relied on a travelogue by Sŏ Kūng (Xu Jing, 1091–1153), an envoy from the Chinese Song Dynasty in the early twelfth century. Sŏ Kūng spent over a month in Koryŏ in 1123 and wrote his *Koryŏ to’gyŏng* (Illustrated Record of a Mission to Koryŏ) the following year. In this work, he writes of the lay monks (*chaega hwasang*):

The lay monks (*chaega hwasang*) did neither don robes nor abide by precepts [...] [They] built their own houses and had wives and raised children. They were engaged in transporting government equipment, cleaning the streets, digging ditches, and constructing and mending fortresses and buildings. If there is any urgent situation at the borders, they organize themselves and advance [as a military force]. Although not fast runners, they are quite brave and courageous. When they are dispatched to the battlefield, they supply their own food. Thus, the state can fight a war without wasting its coffers. It is said that it was with the power of these groups that Koryŏ defeated the Khitan forces. In fact, they are criminals serving their sentences or barbarians, and they were called monks simply because they shaved their heads and beards. (Yi 1915, 26–27)¹⁵

Korean folklorist Yi Kangyŏl pointed out that it was indeed customary until the fifteenth century to shave the heads of war captives and criminals, and their chief was called the head of the monks (*Sejong sillok chiriji*; quoted from Yi Kangyŏl, 357). However, he was not persuaded by Yi Nūnghwa’s argument that the origin of the monastic identity of the villagers was connected to punitive and slavery systems (Yi Kangyŏl, 357). In fact, one of Imanishi’s lay monk informants in 1914 said that, although Yun Kwan was responsible for establishing the Jurchen communities, it was not during the Koryŏ but the Chosŏn era that these communities took on a monastic identity (Imanishi 1974 [1915], 246). Besides, as will be discussed later, Yun Kwan’s occupation of the Jurchen area was short-lived.

15. See also Sem Vermeersch’s translation of this paragraph and other details (2008, 176–179).

2. *Chosŏn Theories*

The earliest Chosŏn date proposed refers to the conquest of the North under King Sejong. The Jurchen who surrendered, it is suggested, were forced to relocate to Kim Chongsŏ's garrisons and thus served as a buffer or a fence (*pŏnho*) for Chosŏn Korea.

The councilor of Pūnyŏng County, Pak Pyŏngjo, explained to Imanishi how Kim set up the Jurchen lay monk villages:

When Kim Chongsŏ expelled the Jurchen, those who were left behind and surrendered were forced to shave their heads to make the distinction between the shaved and the longhaired. Once this was done, they were ordered to affiliate themselves with the temples [in the areas], thereby being called *chaegasŏng*. In time of war, they were assigned to transport military supplies and in time of peace, they were assigned to produce yellow paper for the authorities. (Imanishi 1974 [1915], 240)

A Korean scholar, Kim Sŏngdŏk, born in North Hamgyŏng, makes a similar point (*Pūryŏng kunji*, 98). If he and Pak are correct, the communities acquired their monastic identity in the mid-fifteenth century. Just like the attribution to Yun Kwan's expeditions, this theory holds that monastic identity was simply imposed on the barbarian captives.

There is not, however, any direct evidence that the villages had a lay monk character so early. Moreover, the region remained unstable even after the completion of the Six Garrisons and the relocation of Koreans from the south (Nagai 1925, 178–197).¹⁶ The Japanese invasions (Imjin War) in the late sixteenth century and the Qing invasions in the early seventeenth century exacerbated the situation. Especially during the Imjin War, pillaging by the Jurchen near the border was rampant and two Chosŏn princes, Imhaegun (1574–1609) and Sunhwagun (1580–1607), who had fled to the north, were kidnapped by the Jurchen and later released by Japanese military forces under the leadership of General Katō Kiyomasa (1562–1611) (Hamgyŏngpuk-do 1935, 182–195). When the Qing Dynasty was established, the majority of the Jurchen in the six counties departed to seek a better life in China (Nagai, 199). Simply put, the regions were not stable enough for the establishment of enduring communities, much less for their sustainment.

16. Nagai records frequent attacks by Jurchen on the Six Garrisons until 1587; also see Yi Sanghyŏp (2001, 22).

In his series of newspaper articles titled “Chaegasŭng mango” (A study of the lay monks), the Korean scholar Yi Chaeuk proposed an additional theory by citing the Confucian literatus U Hayŏng’s (1741–1812) “Petition on the Monks in the Six Garrisons” (*Yukchin sŭngdo ũi*), a chapter of U’s book *Ch’ŏnillok* (A Thousand-Day Record), which was published in the early nineteenth century. Yi quotes U as writing,

The Qing Chinese who frequent the border markets can speak our language fluently and they can be discerned only because their costume appears different. If they are clad in monk’s robes and cross the border and mingle with our [Korean] monks, it will be impossible to distinguish them [from Korean monks]. If there are unrighteous monks on our side, they may bring the Chinese into their temples and help them cross the state border. Even if they [the Chinese] roam around the country, who would know they are Qing Chinese?¹⁷

U’s worried comment convinced Yi Chaeuk that the Qing Chinese who were interested in profiting from trade with the Koreans must have colluded with the Korean monks and snuck into Korea en masse dressed as monks. Thus, Yi concludes that these commercially motivated Qing Chinese, in collusion with Korean monks, established these special communities that naturally came to carry a monastic identity.

3. Hwang Ch’ŏlsan’s Theory

When the colonial period came to an end in 1945, Korea was divided into two separate countries, and the villages fell under the control of Communist North Korea. In 1960, a North Korean scholar, Hwang Ch’ŏlsan, published the most detailed book to date on the history of the lay monk communities (Hwang 1960).¹⁸

Hwang critiqued a number of the origin theories. He disputed Akiba’s account, arguing that, although the lay monks did play a shamanic role, they did not have as much interaction with outsiders as did shamans and other peripatetic entertainers in the south, and that they were “never invited to the occasions of other non-lay monk villages” (Hwang, 126). Kim Yŏlgyu agrees with Hwang that while professional entertainers traveled nationwide, the lay monks remained “confined to the special region in Northern Hamgyŏng

17. U Hayŏng, “Yukchin sŭngdo ũi,” quoted from Yi Chaeuk’s “Chaegasŭng mango” (*Maeil sinbo*, 4 December 1935).

18. See also Kawakami Shinnichi’s elaboration on Hwang’s work (2011).

Province” (Kim, 242).

Hwang also pointed out, in a rebuttal to both the Yun Kwan and captive/criminal theories, that the Jurchen in Korea were strategically essential to both the Koryŏ and Chosŏn governments and therefore received relatively good treatment. Moreover, the nine fortresses that Yun Kwan established were probably not located in the area of the lay monk villages.¹⁹ Johannes Reckel supports this with the observation that Yun Kwan’s occupation of the North was transient, as Hamgyŏng remained “pure Jurchen country” (Reckel 2002, 95) until centuries later and the *chaegasŭng* villages were “far outside the Korean borders at the time of Xu Jing [Sŏ Kŭng]” (Ibid.).

In addition, Hwang dismissed the story about the 3,000 women on the grounds that such demands are nowhere to be found in the eleven clauses of the treaty reached between Qing and Chosŏn (Hwang 1960, 123).²⁰ However, there was the precedent of Shizu of Yuan (or Kublai Khan, reigned 1277–1295), who demanded 140 women from Koryŏ as tribute (*Chŏsen Bukkyŏ*, 11 March 1925). As to the Qing merchants’ infiltration, Hwang pointed out quite reasonably that people interested in trade opportunities would hardly choose to station themselves in remote mountains (Hwang, 127).

Hwang’s answer to the question of the communities’ origin is as follows. While the Jurchen communities existed for a long time, communities with a monastic identity did not come into existence until the mid-seventeenth century. This point had already been made by a Japanese colonial archeologist, Katō Kankaku, who, according to a 1937 newspaper reporting the results of his research, calculated the length of the history of the lay monk communities as being 300 years, coinciding with the dynastic change in China (*Keijō nippō*, 12 September 1937). The key event was the emergence of Nurhaci as the uncontested leader of the Jurchen. After defeating his rivals, he rapidly absorbed the Jurchen communities within the six counties and beyond, thus dismantling the Chosŏn’s national fence system, mobilized the Jurchen tribes into a combat machine to subjugate other territories, and established the Later Jin Dynasty in 1616. Jurchen dissidents fled deep into the mountains. In 1632, the Later Jin

19. The locations of the nine fortresses have not yet been clearly established, and two approximate locations have been proposed by two camps of scholars. South Hamgyŏng province was suggested as the location of the nine fortresses by Han Paekkyŏm (1552–1615), Chŏng Yag’yong (1762–1836), and Japanese colonial scholars, including Ikeuchi Hiroshi (1878–1952). In the 1970s, scholars such as Pang Tongin and Kim Kujin countered this theory and proposed Manchuria as the true location. For more details, see Kim Kujin (1977, 205–230); Pang Tongin (1976, 117–176); and, most recently, Song Yongdŏk (2011, 77–107). The prominent Korean historian Lee Ki-baik (Yi Kibaek) subscribed to the South Hamgyŏng theory (Lee 1984, 217–218).

20. A similar point is made in *Puryŏng kunji* (98).

(1616–1636) made a special request to the Chosŏn government to repatriate fifty Jurchen leaders who were deemed to be criminals. Fearful of the consequences of repatriation, a substantial number of Jurchen moved south, including to the capital, with the permission of the Chosŏn government and dispersed across Korea, settling in various provinces (Hwang, 139). They soon assumed Korean names and assimilated into Korean society.

However, those who had decided to remain in the six counties had to hide: like those fifty leaders, they feared being sent back to the Later Jin, or later to Qing China, which would mean facing state punishment, and they desired to present themselves as posing no threat to Koreans. Here, Hwang theorizes that they opted for the monastic identity as the best available option. Since they were already Buddhist,²¹ Hwang argues, it was natural for them to take on a monastic identity. From the perspective of the Chosŏn government, it was convenient to disempower the Jurchen by having them change into monks (Hwang, 142). Thus, Hwang’s assertion signals that the Jurchen’s monastic identity was not imposed from the top down but voluntarily adopted.

Documentation on Lay Monks

Based on these debates, it seems reasonable that, while Jurchen communities had existed in the region for centuries, the lay monk communities must have been established not during the Koryŏ era but in the Chosŏn, in the mid-seventeenth century. While the possibility of a group of married monks settling in the region prior to the Chosŏn cannot be excluded, the establishment of lasting monk communities probably had to wait until the Qing and Chosŏn states agreed on the border that legitimated the latter’s sovereignty in the six garrison counties. Only then did Korean monks begin to take residence in the area and the communities began to take on the names *chaegasŭng* and *chaegasŭngch’ŏn*.

Indeed, the first textual reference to the lay monk villages in the Six Garrisons can be found in *Sinamjip* (the collected writings of Yu Kye) written by the literatus Yu Kye (1607–1664) while exiled in Hamgyŏng province. He wrote his book in the late seventeenth century after the Qing had concluded their treaty with Chosŏn. Yu Kye writes about his excursion to a temple in

21. There was a theory that the Jin dynasty, a Jurchen kingdom, was founded by a descendant of a Korean monk (Kim 2001, 105).

Onsŏng, one of the Six Garrisons.²² There he met two monks, whom he described as dirty and beastly. He despised them for failing to recognize the Lotus Sutra and for being illiterate. When he asked why they lived in a house separate from the nearby temple, one of the monks replied that it was because they had wives and raised cows and horses. Looking at a young novice, Yu Kye asked who he was. An old monk answered that the novice was a son of the other monk or of one of his friends (Kim Yŏlgyu, 244). Although Yu Kye did not use the term *chaegasŭng*, it is apparent that the people he met must have been lay monks in the villages.

In the eighteenth century, references to the lay monk communities in the region appear more frequently. For example, the Confucian literatus Hong Yangho (1724–1802), in his book *Puksae kiryak* (Record of the Northern Pass), makes a point similar to Yu Kye's: "Many mountain monks live in lay houses and have wives and it is common that they eat meat. Their descendants inherit their monastic identity, thus becoming monks."²³ A Confucian scholar, Pak Chega (1750–1805), who was exiled in Kyŏngsŏng, one of the Six Garrisons, until 1804 (Yi 2004, 354–357), and another literatus, Cho Susam (1762–1849), who traveled around northern Korea for 200 days in the early nineteenth century, wrote of the *chaegasŭng* in a similar vein.²⁴ The *Pungno kiryak* (Record of the Northern Passage) written in the late 1830s also follows suit (*Pungno kiryak* 1830, 406). Thus, within the confines of extant sources, the monastic nature of the communities was most clearly identified following Qing's recognition of the Chosŏn's prerogatives over the Six Garrisons from the mid-seventeenth century.

A distinct issue is the general consensus among scholars that the monastic identity of these villagers was spurious and unauthentic. Imanishi mentioned the Koryŏ monks at Kwibŏpsa Temple who frequently threatened the Koryŏ government by staging public protests; he likened them to the warrior priests on Mount Hiei, who made similar demands of the Japanese imperial court.²⁵ "Because not a few of them were thugs clad in monastic robes," he wrote, "there must have been those who, practicing meat-eating and taking wives, were worse than lay people" (Imanishi 1974 [1921], 248–249). Yi Nŭnghwa, as

22. According to the *Pukkwanji* published in the late seventeenth century, there were two temples in Onsŏng—Yongsusa and Muryangsa. Yu Kye must have visited one of these. See Han'guk immun kwahagwŏn (1990, 438) and Reckel (2002, 152).

23. Hong Yangho, *Puksae kiryak* (1911), quoted from Kim Kich'ŏl (1911, 243). Also see Kim Yŏlgyu (1985, 8).

24. For more details, see Sin Changsŏp (2000).

25. For more details on warrior monks, see Mikael Adolphson (2007).

we have seen, accepted Sŏ Kŭng’s account of monks in name only, and Yi Chaeuk thought the monks originated as conniving merchants. Yu Kye’s seventeenth-century account of meeting two monks who were totally ignorant of their own religion has been used to reinforce this notion of the shallowness of the communities’ monastic identity.

Lay Monks within Chosŏn Buddhism

Was this monastic identity of the communities so superficial that it did not have any actual Buddhist meaning for the villagers? On the contrary, a level of Buddhist lifestyle extended beyond that which lay Buddhists normally led. Each village, also called a “monk’s valley” (*chung ŭi kol*) (Kyŏngwŏn kunminhoe, 81), had a small Buddhist shrine or temple with a Śakyamuni Buddha statue (*Maeil sinbo*, 15 March 1920) (see Figure 3). The temple was run by the community. The head of the village and the temple was called the meditation master (*pangjang*) (Hwang, 96), and the entrance to the villages was called the mountain gate (*sanmun*), denoting the entrance to a temple complex. Villagers read the *Kwanŭmyŏng* (Avalokiteśvara Sutra) (*Maeil sinbo*, 17 March 1920) and the Lotus Sutra, chanted the name of Amitābha Buddha, celebrated the Buddha’s birthday, and observed other Buddhist rituals and traditions throughout the year. The lay monks cremated their dead in the same manner as



Figure 3. *Chaegasŏng* Temple (Hwang 1960, 110).

traditional Korean monastics,²⁶ and in contrast with mainstream Korean burial customs (Hoeryōng kunji p'yōnch'an wiwōnhoe, 202). They also regularly performed the monk dance (*sŏngmu*) (Yi 1995, 370) and wore monks' hats when they went out. Even their wives wore a style of pants that took a form similar to a nun's robes (Hwang, 75–76).

These monastic features of the Buddhist villages compel us to examine the nature of the communities in the larger context of Chosŏn Buddhism. Without a strong influence of Korean Buddhist monks on the communities, some of these monastic features would not have developed. It is natural to believe that there was an inflow of Korean monks into the Jurchen communities, or at least close interactions occurred between the two. According to the *Kyōnghŭng kunji*, there is a record that some of the ancestors of the lay monks in Kyōnghŭng were monks from the Pohyōn Temple and that these ancestors were believed to have built a temple with an identical name in the county (Kyōnghŭng kunji p'yōnch'an wiwōnhoe, 90). Imanishi reports an interview with a lay monk who said,

When Yun Kwan subjugated this area, he placed the Jurchen who surrendered into the deep mountains and had them place a stone mark at the entrance to their villages and also had them stay mingled with Korean villages. During the Chosŏn Dynasty, the Chosŏn government persecuted Buddhism, thus Korean monks ran away from southern Korea and joined the lay monk villages [more precisely, the Jurchen villages] by becoming sons-in-law. They converted them [the villagers] to Buddhism. Here is the emergence of the lay monks. (Imanishi 1974 [1915], 246)

The first part of the lay monk's account about Yun Kwan's connection to the establishment of the communities seems incorrect, for the reasons pointed out earlier. What is intriguing is the second part of his comment, which makes the connection between the marginalization of Chosŏn Buddhism and the monastic transformation of the communities. Imanishi, though reporting this conversation, failed to acknowledge its bearing on the history of the communities, and instead analyzed its customs.

If this informant's story bears any truth, the best way to understand the encounter between Korean monks and the Jurchen is by correlating the origin of these lay monastic communities with the marginalization of Buddhism during the Neo-Confucian Chosŏn Dynasty (Nagai, 196). This is substantiated by the fact that the lay monks of the villages and Korean monks had much in common during the Chosŏn era in terms of their social status and the roles they

26. Cremation was also a Jurchen custom influenced by Buddhism.

played within the state.

Buddhism lost its status under Neo-Confucian hegemony and the Chosŏn government gradually and systematically divested Buddhism of much of its economic, political, and cultural prerogatives. As a result, many Buddhist monks deserted their temples and some even defected to Ming China. For example, thirty Korean monks in 1419 and nine in 1412 fled to Ming China to plead to the Ming emperor to revitalize Korean Buddhism, causing diplomatic tensions between the two countries (Jorgensen, 102 and Yi 1993, 156–157).²⁷

However, as the Chosŏn state continued to struggle financially as a result of wars and famine, out of desperation it reincorporated Buddhist monastics into the state system by pressing them into the military and labor force. For instance, as the Ming-Chosŏn allied forces were mounting their efforts to wipe out the Jianzhou Jurchen, the military official Ku Ch’igon (dates unknown) filed a petition to the king in 1479 and argued that the lazy monks in P’yŏngan should be conscripted into the military to fortify the northern borders. Although the king rejected the suggestion, one Korean scholar, An Kyehyŏn, assumes that the local authorities might have done so anyway (An 1972, 29–30). In 1499, when a group of Jurchen attacked a Korean village near the border, it is reported that monks were dispatched there as defense forces (Ibid., 30). The organized use of monks in such roles intensified, especially after the Imjin War in the late sixteenth century when the Chosŏn government recognized the effectiveness of monks as military forces against the Japanese.²⁸ The government rotated thousands of monks, mobilizing them to construct fortresses and then stationing them there. In each fortress, temples were built to function as a residence as well as a place of worship. The lay monk villages might have been similarly established, since they were a buffer zone against invaders. At the peak of the border conflicts with the Jurchen, the Chosŏn government moved not only commoners and criminals to the remote, mountainous regions,²⁹ but also monks and lay temple workers from the south who had been accused of illegally becoming monks (Ibid., 76–77). It is not unreasonable to assume that these monks, along with those who fled their temples to avoid harassment, forced labor, or simply military duties, mingled with and married into the Jurchen (Imanishi 1974 [1915], 246).

Throughout the Chosŏn era, Korean monks were also the chief producers of

27. Even Ming monks were prohibited from entering Chosŏn. See Yi (2011, 111–138).

28. For a systematic usage of monks as labor forces, see An (1972, 34) and Yun (2011).

29. For more details on the relocation of people to the northern Korean implemented during the early Chosŏn, please see Yi (2001).

paper and other taxable goods. Manufacturing paper and serving in the military were two of the most important assignments imposed on Chosŏn-era monks. Interestingly, and I argue not coincidentally, the lay monks were also categorized as an army, albeit not on active duty (Imanishi 1974 [1921], 255), and their main product was also paper, indicating that the lay monks took on the same roles assigned to regular Korean monks during the Chosŏn period.³⁰

Once these roles were allocated to the lay monks, the Chosŏn state considered them no different from other Korean monks. For example, in 1719, during the reign of King Sukchong (1674–1720), the Confucian literatus Yu Pongmyŏng (1685–1760) sent a petition to the king that included an entreaty from the *chaegasŏng* in the Six Garrisons.

The monks in the Six Garrisons, numbering several hundreds or thousands, were originally all commoners and those who became monks did so simply to avoid military service. From what I saw of the way they live, they do not possess a temple but have shaved heads, and each has wives and children. Just taking on the name of monk, they have become beyond the control of Your Highness. How lamentable this is! The river of the six counties borders the Qing Chinese. If the Chinese trespass the border dressed in monk's robes and mix with Korean monks, and spy the border, is it not imperative to prohibit it? I would like to say that the *chaegasŏng* in all the counties from Puryŏng to Kyŏnghŭng should be interrogated and assigned to the military. If this is not possible, they should be disrobed and returned to society. (SJWI 515, Sukchong 45 [1719/04/02])

Under King Yŏngjo (1724–1776), the state official Sin Ch'igŭn (1664–1738), submitted a similar petition in 1728:

There were no monks in the Six Garrisons before. But these days, those called *hwat'aeksŏng* [burning-house monks] exist in each village and far more can be found near the riverside, reaching almost one [or several] hundred[s]. These groups take wives and have children [...] No different from lay people except for their shaved heads and monks' robes. The reason why they took a monastic form was to avoid military duties. If they are not controlled, how terrible it would be! They have inhabited the area long enough to have a command of the barbarian language. Wearing the barbarian [Qing Chinese] clothes at will, they flatter the barbarians. When it's peaceful at the border, it is not a big concern. But if anything happens there, these lay monks will sneak to the other side of the border and

30. This was also the case during the Koryŏ dynasty. However, as Vermeersch points out, the Koryŏ “monks” assigned to corvée labor and military duties were not actually ordained monks but “had the status of postulant or were personal servants to monks” (Vermeersch, 177). In the following Chosŏn era, these duties were also assigned to ordained monks, as well as postulants and/or monastic servants.

collude with the barbarians. (SJWI 674, Yǒngjo 4 [1728/10/27])³¹

The petition recommends that the state officials thoroughly investigate these lay monks in the Six Garrisons and that if the monks wanted to stay in the area, they had to let their hair grow and join the army. If not, they were to be forced to move below the range of the Mach’öllyǒng, located in southern Hamgyǒng province.³² In 1730, the Korean official Cho Munmyǒng (1680–1732) submitted a more detailed complaint:

A person from the northern border informed me of the evils the lay monks commit in Kyǒnghŭng. Since what he said appears coherent, I dare to share this with you, Your Highness. As opposed to other areas, Kyǒnghŭng is located on the border. The groups of lay monks have their hermitages built on the mountains but their living quarters near the riverside. They often group together in tens and provide accommodations to those from the other side [Qing China] who crossed the border carrying martens and ginseng with them. Then, they [the lay monks] make a living by bringing these items to the capital, selling them, and gaining benefit from it. The maladies that the lay monks cause by mixing themselves with the barbarians are not a small matter to ignore. How about having the Interior Ministry send an official document and strictly banning the activities? (SJWI 714, Yǒngjo 6 [1730/11/24])³³

The king agreed and ordered as such, declaring, “It is lamentable that the monks and barbarians are not clearly discerned” (Ibid). However, in 1731, King Yǒngjo reconsidered his order out of fear of potential disturbances by the lay monk communities. The king first reiterated his earlier order: “I hear that there are many temples near the riverside of the border and those barbarians [Qing Chinese] who cross the border live with [Korean] monks. Those monks living near the six counties should be moved to the south...” But a military official, Han Pǒmsǒk (1672–?), warned the king that if the monks were forced to relocate, they would certainly riot. Han added that even interrogating them would be difficult because “they live in deep valleys,” and besides that “the appearance, demeanor, and language of our monks and the barbarians are analogous and not easily distinguishable.” The king agreed, replying, “It is very worrisome that one cannot distinguish between [Korean] monks and barbarians... [yet], it is not a viable plan to enforce an order which will incur

31. I would like to express my gratitude to Kyujanggak scholar Kwǒn Kisǒk for translating parts of Yǒngjo’s diaries from the *Simgjǒngwǒn ilgi* (SJWI).

32. In the previous year, another petition with a similar message was reported by the military official Chang T’aeso from P’yǒngan (SJWI, Yǒngjo 5 [1729/08/27]).

33. The *Pibyǒnsa* records the same petition (26 November 1730).

disturbances [there]" (SJWI 731, Yǒngjo 7 [1731/09/21]).

In 1736, another petition explained why relocating the lay monks would be both difficult and futile, "because their contributions of labor and delivery of supplies to the authorities are incalculable" (SJWI 816, Yǒngjo 12 [1736/01/06]). Thus, although the authorities vilified them for becoming monks in order to avoid taxes and military service, the monks' economic contribution outweighed the costs of eradicating the lay monk communities. This was the identical attitude taken by the Chosŏn authorities towards Chosŏn monks in general! In fact, local magistrates (*suryŏng*) deliberately and notoriously exploited the lay monks by forcing them to produce yellow paper and cloth (SJWI, Yǒngjo 4 [1728/10/27]). As if agreeing with the argument about the usefulness of the lay monks, the king left the matter of enforcement entirely to the local magistrates (Ibid.).

These records, though limited to the reigns of Kings Sukchong and Yǒngjo, shed new light on the scholarly debates over the monastic identity of these communities. It shows that by the eighteenth century, there were not a small number of Korean monks living in the communities and interacting with Qing Chinese. The records on the Six Garrisons list between 16 and 19 temples.³⁴ However, the true number must have been much higher because the records did not include many small hermitages built by the lay monks and Korean monks who were scattered along the border. Even if some of these monks might have been ethnically Jurchen or their descendants, from the perspective of the state, they were not barbarians or Jurchen but full-fledged Koreans and, more precisely, *monks*. There is no mention of them being the descendants of Jurchen and, more importantly, a clear distinction was drawn between barbarians and Korean monks. This shows that the naturalization of the Jurchen villagers in Korea was largely the result of the integration of Korean monks who had settled in the region. Therefore, the state authority did not view this community as non-Korean.

In addition, the lay monks were not as isolated as previously thought, which contradicts Hwang's earlier rebuttal to the merchant theory. The monks had their own residences on the riverside, separate from their temples, and traveled extensively, like the *sadangp'ae* in Korea and *hijiri* in Japan; this also

34. The number of temples in the six counties.

	Hoeryŏng	Chongsŏng	Puryŏng	Kyŏngwŏn	Onsŏng	Kyŏnghŭng
<i>Pukkwanji</i> (1694)	3	3	7	2	2	1
<i>Kwanbuk ūpji</i> (1868)	5	N/A	2	6	2	1
<i>Pukkwan ūpji</i> (1872)	5	4	4	6	2	1

* Puryŏng was later renamed Musan.

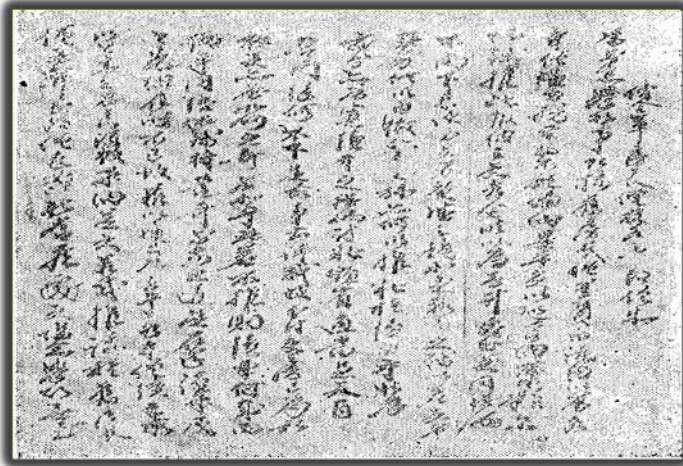


Figure 4. An example of yellow paper (Hwang 1960, 41).

undermines Hwang’s and Kim’s refutations of the shaman theory. They might have had some close relationships with other similar itinerant, quasi-Buddhist groups. For example, Imanishi writes that the *chaegasŭng* were considered the bosses of itinerant beggar monks (*sogojja* 小鼓者). These beggar monks often had to pay their shares to the *chaegasŭng*, which led the beggar monks to fear and avoid them (Imanishi 1974 [1921], 255). Although the way in which they interacted is not clear, this point substantiates the belief, as suggested by these petitions I have mentioned, that the *chaegasŭng* were not as isolated as scholars have thought.

Finally, the lay monks were multiethnic and multilingual, and, using their linguistic and multicultural skills, they were active in border trade as business brokers.³⁵ As further evidence of their mercantile practices, in addition to their staple product of yellow papers (Figure 4), their wives produced what came to be called lay monk cloth (*chaegasŭngp’o*) (SJWI, Yŏngjo 5 [1729/07/22]) or monk bowl cloth (*pallaep’o*) (“Sawŏn sugongŏp” in *Simp’yŏn Han’guksa* 16, 1996). They sold their products in villages and cities. For example, an eighteenth-century biography narrates two incidents where a strange man from the border region killed several evil monks whom the author, Pak Sŭnggŏm, vilifies for monopolizing the silk trade and overcharging buyers at the border

35. Monks were not the only ones engaged in trade. Despite the tight controls on both sides of the border, people frequently crossed to seek commercial profit. See Kim Sŏnmin (2009, 151–187).

market in Pukkwan (northern Hamgyŏng border) (Jung 2010, 105–106). Given that the market was located near the border, it is probable that these evil monks were married monks. These aspects, taken together, indicate that the lay monks, while socially confined, maximized their chances of survival by complying with, but at other times resisting, the state impositions and regulations, as did many Korean monks during the Chosŏn era.

The extent of contact between the lay monks and outsiders, including the Chinese, makes it more plausible that there must have been similarly close contact between Korean monks and the Jurchen, and that in time the Jurchen, influenced by these Korean monks, began to assume a monastic identity to the point that eventually the two groups became one. In addition to the aforementioned two cases of monks from the Kwiju temple who joined the communities, there are also records of visiting monks from the south being welcomed and respected by the lay monks. In fact, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prominent Korean monks such as Kyŏnghŏ (1849–1912) and his disciples Suwŏl (1855–1928) and Mangong (1871–1946) were believed to have spent time in the vicinity of lay monk villages. Kyŏnghŏ, in particular, is known to have removed his priestly clothes and worn regular clothes, mingled with people, and died in Kapsan, a county between Musan and Hoeryŏng, in which lay monk villages were located (*Pulgyo* [1937], 48). In addition, the Buddhist reformer and founder of the *Taegakkyo* (“Great Enlightenment”), Paek Yongsŏng (1864–1940), was associated with the Taehŭngsa temple in Hoeryŏng built by a female lay Buddhist, Kim Taegaksim, a native of the county, to promote Buddhism in the northernmost region and visited the temple in 1926 where he lectured on dharma to the congregation (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 30 [October 1926], 60 and Han 2011, 66). In the colonial period, some of the lay monk temples in the six counties became branches of Kwiju Temple and several additional temples and preaching halls were established in the area.³⁶

In light of the theories and records, one can conclude that these special Buddhist monastic groups were the descendants of the Jurchen who later mixed with Koreans, including Korean monks who moved to the six counties in the wake of Chosŏn’s anti-Buddhist policies along with other geographical and political circumstances. Influenced by monks from the south, they assumed a monastic identity from the seventeenth century, when the political status of the area became established.

36. *Pulgyo sibo* 1 June 1936; 1 September 1937; 1 October 1937; 1 March 1938; 1 June 1938; 1 July 1938; 1 December 1938; and 1 January 1939.

Scholarship in Context

As we have seen, the Japanese colonial government supported much of the research into the lay monk communities. What value did it have for the colonial authorities? Three goals come to mind. First, after Japan colonized Korea in 1910, it turned to Manchuria, again using colonial scholarship in the border region as a source of knowledge for future incursions into Manchuria. For example, two prominent scholars working for the colonial government, Imanishi and Akiba, became instrumental in writing academic studies on the history of Manchuria (*mansenshi*) and on Manchurian religion and folklore and the close relationship between the culture of Manchuria and Korea (Pai 2000, 26; Duara 2003, 184). Given that the lay monk villages were located right on the border between Manchuria and Korea, and given that the villagers were ethnically heterogeneous, it was not strange that the villages garnered the attention of the colonial government and scholars.

More significantly, the colonial policy of the 1920s and 1930s in Korea was based on the policy of “assimilation” (K. *tonghwa*, Jp. *tōka*) after the 1919 March First independence movement revealed the failure of Japan’s colonial policy (Caprio 2009). On the one hand, the Jurchen villages were a good case study for showing how a non-Korean ethnic group could adopt Korean customs and religion. Undoubtedly, Japanese scholars were not interested in acknowledging Korea’s capability of integrating different ethnic groups. As such, the logic of Korea’s assimilation of the Jurchen was to serve the goal of the colonial policy that the small-scale assimilation that Korea had accomplished had to be superseded by a trans-continental assimilation by Imperial Japan.

Finally, Japanese scholars emphasized that these poor lay monk groups, once treated as the lowest of social outcasts under the oppressive Chosŏn dynasty, were now liberated from stigma thanks to the modernity brought by Imperial Japan. In a sense, the implication was that Jurchen assimilation into Korea was incomplete until Japan’s benevolent intervention. For example, as late as 1903, the Chosŏn government continued to impose the heavy labor that it had promised to abolish back in 1894. Frustrated, several lay monks, including Myoun and Haech’ŏn in Hoeryŏng and Puryŏng, respectively, unsuccessfully petitioned the Chosŏn authorities to rescind the labor requirement of producing 500 books of yellow paper (Kūndae chŏngbu kironnyu, “Hamgyŏng nampukto kakkun sojang,” December 1903). Only when Japan was tightening its control over Korea was the labor requirement



Figure 5. *Chaegasŭng* during the colonial period (Hwang 1960, 83).

abolished (*Chosŏn ilbo*, 18 March 1920). It was no wonder that, during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905, the lay monks in these communities willingly joined the Advancement Society (Ilchinhoe), a pro-Japanese society that promoted social equality (*Maeil sinbo*, 18 March 1920). The lay monks believed that joining the society was a way toward social advancement and the protection of their human rights and they assisted the Japanese troops by transporting war supplies, although most of their temples were destroyed during the war (Reckel 2002, 96). Interestingly, many Korean monks during this period joined the Ilchinhoe for the same reasons. When Koreans were forced to cut their topknots, a symbol of the *yangban*, the lay monks deliberately grew their hair to give the impression of being *yangban* (Hwang, 2) (Figure 5). In addition, as the Chosŏn Dynasty disintegrated, many lay monks fled to cities in Korea and Manchuria (*Tong'a ilbo*, 1 January 1936). By the mid-1930s, all the six counties were connected by rail lines from Seoul and Manchuria, transforming the region into an industrial area. Japanese scholars and folklorists, while lamenting the decline of lay monk village culture, viewed these changes as an inevitable and even desirable part of the cost of full assimilation into modern imperial Japan.

In this way, these semi-isolated villages were seamlessly incorporated into the assimilation discourse of the colonial authorities to make a case for Japan's

control over Korea and ultimately Manchuria, a process that later developed the slogan of “Korea/Manchuria as One Body” (*Sen/Man ittai*) (Park 2005, 47). This idea culminated in the ideology of Manchukuo, Japan’s puppet state, in 1931, of the ideal of five races living harmoniously: Manchurians (the former Jurchen), Koreans, Japanese, Han Chinese, and Mongolians (Tamanoi 2000, 250).

However, the colonial government did not dictate the entire course of scholarship on the lay monk villages. Colonial scholars such as Imanishi and Akiba, while engaging in research as colonial agents, also took great interest in discovering, as E. Taylor Atkins explains of some Japanese ethnographers and folklorists, “anti-modern ambivalence, offering concrete images of pre-modern ‘others’ with whom the modern ‘self’ could be readily contrasted” (Atkins 2010, 59). Likewise, rather than privileging major religious traditions, Imanishi and Akiba also turned to folklore, myths, and superstitious beliefs that remained untouched by modernity (Pai, 262; Chōn 2005). Thus, Akiba’s characterization of lay monks as “sacred people” and Imanishi’s fascination with “hermit villages” parallel nostalgia for pre-modern Japan among other Japanese ethnographers, such as Yanagi Muneyoshi (*mingei*) and Yanagida Kunio (folklore) (Atkins, 59; Brandt 2007). This is one reason that, despite serving colonial objectives, Imanishi and Akiba could still work closely with Korean scholars such as Yi Nūnghwa and Song Sōhka, who were similarly ambivalent on modernity. For this reason, no matter how politically and ideologically tainted their scholarship might have been, their ethnographic, anthropological, and historical works continue to be a reference point for post-colonial Korean scholarship (Ch’oe 2003, 183).

Another possible reason for scholars’ interest in the lay monk villages could be the married lifestyle of the lay monks, which was analogous to that of Japanese Buddhist priests in Japan and colonial Korea. Although a growing number of Korean monks in the 1910s, partly influenced by Japanese priests, also took wives, clerical marriage was still somewhat controversial in Korea. In 1926, heated debates among Korean and Japanese Buddhists and intellectuals erupted, reflecting animosity between married and celibate clergy. However, the debates among Korean monastics were not purely doctrinal but often centered upon who should take over leadership of major head temples. For instance, when a prominent Korean monk, Paek Yongsōng (1864–1940), along with 127 monks, submitted two petitions to the colonial government to prohibit clerical marriage, what he actually demanded was not an outright rejection of the practice but government measures that would guarantee that celibate monks would occupy several head temples (Kim 1941, 28). The ensuing debates were

facilitated not by Korean monks but by Japanese Buddhists (Auerback 2007). These public debates notwithstanding, the trend towards monks having families was unavoidable. At the end of the colonial era, more than ninety percent of six thousand Korean monks were married (Kim 2007, 400). Yet, the persuasiveness of clerical marriage among Korean monks did not translate into public acceptance of the practice. During the colonial period, the perception that monastics should be celibate dominated Korean society, thus forcing Korean monks to keep the issues private. In this context, it was not difficult to assume that scholars such as Imanishi, much of whose work pertained to Buddhism, might have found the lay monks intriguing due to their public, collective representation as married monks.

Japanese Buddhists in Korea also took an interest in the lay monk communities. A Japanese Buddhist association, *Chōsen Bukkyō* (Korean Buddhism), featured several articles on the communities and a Sōtō monk, Sōma Shōei (1904–1971),³⁷ who was sponsored by the Association, planned to pay a visit to the villages, although he had to cancel it due to a cholera outbreak in the region (*Chōsen Bukkyō* [March 1936], 49).

There is no further evidence in extant sources on the clear connection between the increased fascination about the villages among scholars, the debates on clerical marriage, and Japanese Buddhists, in colonial Korea. At least, one can assume that the collective image of the villagers as married monks was considered unique in the eyes of Japanese scholars and Buddhists and thus worthy of investigation.

Conflicted Attitude of Korean Buddhists

Whereas the lay monk communities drew a great deal of attention from ethnographers, folklorists, and other colonial scholars in the colonial period, Korean Buddhists of the time showed little interest in them. Only three articles were published in the Korean Buddhist journals of the colonial era. One was just a brief research report by a Korean official working for the colonial government; the other two, Yi Nūnghwa's 1915 paper and one in 1932 by the Korean monk Kang Yumun, are the only written responses by Korean Buddhists to the monastic identity of the communities.

As discussed, Yi Nūnghwa set the tone for the perception of the “lay monk” community as marginal. Interestingly, he called the communities “Korea’s

37. Chōng (2011).

Jōdoshinshū sect,” which was a tacit recognition that they were a Buddhist tradition that allows clerical marriage. Even if Yi’s identification of the lay monk communities with a Japanese Buddhist sect was mentioned prior to the 1920s debates on clerical marriage, this association indicates his reluctance to accept the reality in Korean Buddhism on the ground that a sizable number of Korean monks had already abandoned celibacy. To him, the lay monk communities were still a deviation from mainstream Korean Buddhism.

As such, he regarded them as less than real monks, and worse, originally as criminals. His monumental *Chosŏn Pulgyo t’ongsa* (Comprehensive history of Korean Buddhism), published in 1918, ironically includes a section almost identical to his 1915 essay, as part of the history of Korean Buddhism. However, Yi’s terse dismissal of the communities as comprised of barbarian war captives and Korean criminals precluded the possibility of any alternative understanding of the lay monk communities during and after the colonial era.

Likewise, Kang Yumun expressed mixed feelings about the communities. In his article “Chaegasŭng kwa Hambuk Pulgyo” (Lay monks and Buddhism of northern Hamgyŏng province), which he wrote in 1932 when clerical marriage became the norm in colonial Korea, Kang does not find the term “lay monks” strange. He reasons, “These days, it is not that unusual for monks to have wives and children, and all the monks today may be called lay monks...” (Kang 1932, 79–80). But he quickly differentiates the two groups by adding, “...but these lay monks in question are a group with uncommon characteristics...thus, of course, they should not be mentioned in tandem with today’s Korean monks who have families...” (Ibid., 80). Rather, he turned to the theories of barbarian war captives, Korean criminals, and Kim Chongsŏ’s Six Garrisons, and, like Yi, trivialized the monastic identity of the communities as being “just in name only” (Ibid., 79). Kang took pains to detail the anomalous characteristics of their identity that were in contrast with those of mainstream Korean monks (Ibid., 80). Nevertheless, Kang paradoxically added an emotional response to the discrimination that these lay monks endured during the Chosŏn period:

Then, what was the social status of the lay monks? Without doubt, since they lived in the Chosŏn era when the suppression of Buddhism was a normative policy, indeed, even true monks were subject to horrifically disdainful discrimination [*pogakhan ch’ŏndae* 暴惡한 賤待], as if there were never a time, even in a dream, that the Silla and Koryŏ monks had received courteous treatment. Then, how much more these people, as the survivors of a different ethnic group who were lacking culture, must have suffered. (Ibid.)

Carried away by his emotions, Kang went so far as to broach the theory that

Imanishi's interviewee had identified two decades before, that Korean monks could be responsible for the villagers' Buddhist faith: "It is assumed that Buddhism must have spread by the teachings of the Korean monks from the south, as probably the number of these who entered these villages and became sons-in-law increased" (Ibid., 81). However, he stopped at this point and said he would work on the connection in more detail at another time, which he never did. This is understandable in that his key point was the severity of and consequences of the marginalization of Buddhism in the Neo-Confucian Chosŏn era. Even though the communities were not *truly* monastic, he was at least able to sympathize with their stigmatization by the Neo-Confucian Chosŏn government and conscription as soldiers and as forced laborers. In a sense, to Kang, these communities were a stark reminder of the low social status that *real* monks suffered during the Neo-Confucian regime.

Based on this understanding of the communities, Kang combines three points: the suppression of Buddhism, the pitiful social status of the lay monks, and the stagnant Buddhism of northern Hamgyŏng province. Because there was not a leading monastery in the province, he maintains, it was the most barren area in all of Korean Buddhism. He cites one source as saying that the lay monk villages reflected the deplorable situation of Buddhism in northern Hamgyŏng province. He attributes this to the anti-Buddhist policy of Chosŏn, which then spilled over with greater severity onto the Buddhism of the Jurchen. He argues, "The lay monks were almost intuitively associated with Buddhism, and Buddhism with the lay monks." He continues to blame Chosŏn's Neo-Confucianism for this situation and denounces Neo-Confucianism, the Chosŏn state religion, as typical toadyism (Ibid., 81).

Kang then reaffirmed his earlier point that the lay monks "originally have no meaningful significance whatsoever to Buddhism." He went on to claim that they "had a lack of relations with Korean Buddhism institutionally and doctrinally," undermining his own theory. He opined that they could not be thought of as part of the *sangha* and that "calling them monks in the sense of 'monastic' (*sŏng*) is wrong" (Ibid.). The lay monks, he concludes, were nothing more than special or unusual communities that used the Buddhist faith as a source of consolation (Ibid.).

What is striking about Kang's attitude toward the lay monks is that he failed to reference clerical marriage as a basis for his argument. At the time of his writing, in 1932, as he admitted, clerical marriage was widespread among Korean monks, especially after the colonial government endorsed it in 1926. Kang fully embraced the practice (*Pulgyo* 100 [1932], 60), and besides, it is most likely that he himself was married. Yet, to him the clerical marriage

practice of the lay monk villages was fundamentally different from the analogous practice of colonial Korean monks. In his mind, whereas the former was a corrupt practice, resulting from the suppression of Buddhism, the latter was part of the modern reform of Korean Buddhism.

At any rate, the resemblance between the two groups in terms of their roles and social status, and the difference in terms of ethnicity and the nature of clerical marriage, led Kang and Yi to vacillate between accepting and rejecting the lay monks. For this reason, Kang largely embraced the interpretations elucidated by Japanese scholars without carefully reflecting on the communities from a religious rather than cultural perspective and uncritically accepted the assimilation and modernity ideologies by claiming that "with annexation they came to gain equal status as commoners" (Ibid., 79–80). By consciously othering them, Kang, like Yi, was reluctant to include the history of these unique monastic communities as a legitimate part of Korean Buddhism.

More recently, Hwang Ch'ölsan applied a still more "modern" ideology to his study of the communities. While fully cognizant that the lay monks had been treated as outcasts during the Chosön period (Hwang, 95), he also focused on the treatment they received during the colonial period. He emphasized that Japanese colonizers had continued to oppress these poor lay monks, but that, thanks to the benevolence of Dear Leader Kim Il Sung they were finally emancipated from discrimination and exploitation. Of course, he continued, these monks were happy to relinquish their "parasitic" identity (Hwang, 2–3). Be that as it may, the lay monk communities have by now ceased to exist.

Even today, as if Yi's and Kang's interpretations were the norm, these lay monk communities are not part of the historiography of Korean Buddhism, as John Jorgensen points out, due to its nation-, elite-centered interpretation of the tradition that does not allow for the relevance of plural and local developments (Jorgensen 2004).

Conclusion

In a 1914 interview with a 66-year-old lay monk, Kang Chaehun, Imanishi asks, "What's going to happen after your death?" Without hesitation, Kang answers, "We all are going to join the Buddha." Unconvinced by this declaration of universal salvation, Imanishi rephrases his question, "Where do those spirits that have committed evil acts go?" In a calm voice, Kang responds, "We are not committing evil acts." Imanishi's repeated questions was met "with the same answers," moving Imanishi to acknowledge that "no matter how

noble a [Buddhist] master there might be, one would not have the level of peace of mind that this old, illiterate, and disdained man accomplished” (Imanishi 1974 [1915], 245). Imanishi’s exchange with the lay monk reveals an interesting point about the nature of the lay monks. Imanishi’s response epitomizes scholars’ and even Korean Buddhists’ perceptions of the lay monks as illiterate and less civilized, and as monks in name only. Imanishi, like many others, fails to notice that although the lay monks, with few exceptions, could not read classical Chinese, and thus lived outside of written literature, they nevertheless enjoyed a rich oral tradition, to include the recitation of Buddhist scriptures and chanting from memory at cremation and memorial rituals, and village festival songs, plays, and dance performances (Hwang, 111–123). At least, Imanishi ironically acknowledges the qualities of this seemingly inauthentic monk by contrasting him with other highly spiritual “true” monks. In so doing, he inadvertently places the lay monks in the same category of Buddhist realization as other Korean monks.

What then can be drawn from the history of this old lay monk’s monastic communities and the politics around them? These lay monk villages illustrate the ways in which Buddhist monastic identity, symbols, and meanings can be blurred, politicized, and internalized, in this case in Chosŏn Korea. These communities also show how the consolidation of this process can have a lasting effect on the perceptions of monastic identity in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Korea. Seen from this perspective, the communities were not an anomaly or a mystery as the Japanese language newspaper characterized, but a byproduct of Chosŏn Buddhism.

Nevertheless, the power struggles between the married and celibate monastics in colonial and post-colonial Korean Buddhism up until 1970, and the ensuing triumph of the celibate order, have since led scholars of Korean Buddhism to concentrate on Buddhism to the exclusion of its diverse dimensions on the periphery. More importantly, celibate-centered post-colonial Korean Buddhism reinforced the ascription of all the evils brought by clerical marriage to colonial rule, thus ignoring the evidence to the contrary in the lay monk communities.

The lay villages were found at Korea’s far northeastern border, where the state’s jurisdictional control could not firmly extend (Robinson 2010, 21). The northern frontier regions, including the Six Garrisons, are where Chinese, Korean, and Jurchen history overlap (Kim 2009, 3). These contact zones were also a breeding ground for some Korean monks who in the face of marginalization imagined an alternative life. These villages are not the only example, however. There is also Cheju Island in the southern frontier between

Japan and Korea. In the fifteenth century, the majority of monks in the island were married, thus called *taech'ōsŏng*, meaning “married clergy.” Monks from the Korean peninsula, upon hearing this practice, were eager to follow suit (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, Sejong 9 [1427/6/10]). The island became a haven for monks who desired a family life. This practice was also prevalent among monks who were mobilized to build fortresses and serve as guards, prompting officials frequently to call for them to be laicized and conscripted (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, Sŏngjong 23 [1492/9/24]). Along with that of the lay monk villages, these cases force us to believe that married monks abounded in the periphery of Chosŏn far more than previously thought. Once integrated into the narratives of Korean Buddhist history, these cases will push the issues surrounding clerical marriage further back into pre-colonial times, certainly problematizing the belief that Japanese colonialism was responsible for the clerical marriage that plagued modern Korean Buddhism.

The case of the lay monk communities also reveals how state governments made use of these marginalized Buddhist communities to further their political objectives. The Chosŏn government used the communities' association with monkhood to disempower the Jurchen, just as they mobilized Korean monks to take on various tasks to blur their religious identity. The colonial government used the obscurity of the lay monk villages to highlight the suppression of Buddhism during the Chosŏn Dynasty and also to legitimize its colonial policy. More recently, the North Korean government emphasized the feudal and colonial suppression of the lay monks and rejected the monastic identity of the group as antisocialist. These lay monk villages have been pawns in colonial and post-colonial discourses.

Thus, their history paradoxically offers a familiar look at the manifestation of Korean Buddhism during the Chosŏn period and the politicization of the monastic identity, forcing us to consider their history as an integral part of East Asian Buddhist history in general and of Korean Buddhism in particular.

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