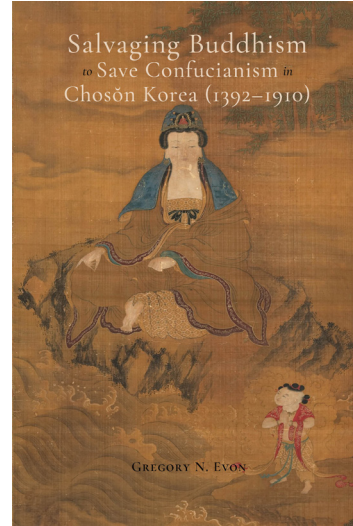


Book Review

Gregory Evon. *Salvaging Buddhism to Save Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910)*. Cambria Sinophone World Series. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2023. 209 pp.



In recent years, scholars of Korean Buddhism in Korea and the West have been revisiting the history of the religion in the Chosŏn period (1392–1910). Although several English-language studies have been published in journals on both seminal and provocative topics, hitherto, no monograph length studies have been published aside from annotated translations of primary sources. In Korea, however, over the course of at least the last two decades, numerous monographs have reevaluated the history of Buddhism in the Chosŏn period. Most have focused on the somewhat ambiguous but generally positive view of the religion espoused by members of the royal Yi family in their personal lives (e.g. King T'aejo 太祖 [r. 1392–1398], King Sejong 世宗 [r. 1418–1450], King Sejo 世祖 [r. 1455–1468], etc.), and the persistence and evolution of religious faith and practice, the monastic order, and the religion's administrative structure, despite the wholesale persecution of the Buddhist church by the Chosŏn state.

Gregory Evon's *Salvaging Buddhism to Save Confucianism in Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910)*, while being the first monograph to be published in English on the topic of Buddhism under the Chosŏn,

approaches the place of Buddhism in Chosŏn society from a more nuanced perspective. Evon is primarily a scholar of Korean literature from the Chosŏn period, and he crafts his engaging historical narrative as background to explain why a respected Confucian official and politician of the late seventeenth-century, Kim Manjung 金萬重 (1637–1692), would compose an unabashedly pro-Buddhist novel, *Lady Sa's Journey to the South* (Kor. *Sassi namjŏng ki* 謝氏南征記). This novel was initially written in the Korean script during the final three years of his life in exile and translated into literary Sinitic by his grandnephew Kim Ch'unt'aek 金春澤 (1670–1717). Kim Manjung is more usually remembered for composing *A Dream of Nine Clouds* (*Kuunmong* 九雲夢), which he wrote to comfort his mother while he was in exile. Evon makes a strong case that *Lady Sa's Journey to the South* was written to convince Confucians that a Buddhist-Confucian symbiosis in Korean society is wholesome and actually necessary to save the Confucian social order from falling into chaos. In addition, it promoted worship of a version of the White-Robed Guanyin 白衣觀音 that had circulated in the late Ming period (1368–1644).

The book is divided into two parts: Part 1, 'Confucian-Buddhist Conflict in Chosŏn Korea', comprising three chapters; and Part 2, 'A Confucian Defense of Buddhism'. The first chapter, 'Buddhism under Siege' (21–48), is an accessible narrative covering the deconstruction of the Koryŏ-period (918–1392) Buddhist establishment during the early Chosŏn period through to the state's uncomfortable recognition that Buddhism must be granted a place in Chosŏn society due to the monastic order's patriotic service and incorporation into the military structure during and after the Second Greater East Asian War (Imjin War 壬辰倭亂, 1592–1598). Although he certainly recognizes the evidence demonstrating the relatively pro-Buddhist positions adopted by certain Chosŏn kings, he substantiates the traditional view that the Korean Buddhist church suffered and endured a significant attack upon its very existence by Confucian scholars, who in many instances outmaneuvered Korean kings. Using primarily the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Kingdom* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄), Evon well demonstrates that the Chosŏn's Confucian-oriented officialdom was single-mindedly intent on absolutely eradicating the Buddhist church in Chosŏn during the

first two hundred years of the dynasty. The Korean Buddhist church endured because the eminent monk Hyujöng 休靜 (1520–1604) led monks to join the war effort against the Japanese and allowed for the total subjugation of the Buddhist church to the state (40). The second chapter, 'Ritual Authority' (49–74), summarizes three seminal essays written by Confucian scholars that were used to attack traditional Buddhist beliefs and label devotional practices as immoral and heterodox conduct from the standpoint of 'appropriate' Confucian ritual behavior: Kim Sisüp's 金時習 (1435–1498) 'On Spirits' ('Kwisin söl' 鬼神說), Nam Hyoön's 南孝溫 (1454–1492) 'A Discourse on Spirits' ('Kwisin non' 鬼神論), and Yulgok's 栗谷 (Yi I 李珥, 1536–1584) 'On Death, Life, and Spirits' ('Sasaeng kwisin ch'aek' 死生鬼神策). The third chapter, 'Restless Spirits' (75–102), delves into the crisis of identity suffered by Chosön elites during the seventeenth century, when Chosön was humiliated and the Ming dynasty fell to the barbarian Manchus. It treats Chosön scholars' moralizing on philosophical reasons for the Ming demise, in particular due to the popularity of Confucian thought different from the orthodox Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200): the more syncretic approaches of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1192) and Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 (1472–1529). More importantly, Evon shows how, despite the absolute victory of Confucianism in Chosön society, what we might term as the anticipated 'Confucian social paradise' did not materialize. Rather, elite Confucian society broke into factions that persecuted each other mercilessly performing the same kinds of immoral behaviour (black magic, curses, and so on) they hypocritically imputed to Buddhists (92).

The documentary evidence amassed by Evon is well ordered and persuasive. There is only one assertion made in the first chapter that this reader struggles to understand. This deals with the reason for Prince Suyang's 首陽大君 (=King Sejo) usurpation of the throne and the regicide of the boy king Tanjong 端宗 (1441–1457, r. 1452–1455). Although the evidence is overwhelming that King Sejo was a firm patron of Buddhism, to assert that 'Sejo usurped the throne because he was a devoted Buddhist and saw the vehement anti-Buddhist officials as an ignorant rabble' (31) seems excessive. If Sejo usurped the throne primarily to protect Buddhism, and if the officialdom knew

this, why did the famous minister Kim Sisŭp become a Buddhist monk in protest (57)? In other words, the Confucian-oriented officialdom, including Kim Sisŭp, the most famous of the ‘six loyal subjects’ (*saenggyuksin* 生六臣) who refused to serve in Sejo’s court, does not seem to have connected Sejo’s usurpation to the promotion and protection of the Buddhist church. In addition, although many scholar-officials were fervently anti-Buddhist, not all of them were. Kim Sisŭp obviously had a more complex and nuanced relationship with Buddhist doctrines and beliefs than is presented in this monograph because, as the monk Sŏlcham, he collected and wrote *New Tales of Mt. Kŭmo* (*Kŭmo sinhwa* 金鰲神話), which comprises five fantasy novellas propounding Buddhist themes in 1465, as well as other Buddhist works such as a commentary on the Silla monk Ŭisang’s 義湘 (625–702) famous ‘Gāthā on the Dharma Nature’ (‘Pŏpsŏng ke’ 法性偈) called a *Commentary on the Seal-diagram Symbolizing the Dharma Realm of the One Vehicle of the Great Avataṃsaka Sūtra, with Preface* (*Tae hwaŏm ilsŭng pŏpkye to chu pyŏng* 大華嚴一乘法界圖註并序) in 1476.

Part 2, ‘A Confucian Defense of Buddhism’, comprises two chapters. The fourth chapter, ‘Unseen Influences in *Lady Sa’s Journey to the South*’ (105–32), presents the historical and literary context for Kim Manjung’s novel. Political machinations among the disputing Confucian factions and the problem of royal succession led to attacks on Yulgok and his successor Song Siyŏl (1607–1689) because Yulgok had dabbled with Buddhism in his youth after his mother died. Despite the fact that Zhu Xi had studied Buddhism as well, this was used as a moral pretext to demolish the influence of Song’s Old Doctrine (Noron 老論) faction at court. Kim Manjung was a victim of this purge and was exiled to Namhae on the south coast of Korea. Evon shows influences on Kim Manjung’s story and its emphasis on ‘White-Robed Guanyin’ from a collection of faith-promoting tales called ‘An Outline of the Effectiveness Borne by Kwanseŭm [i.e. Guanyin]’ (*Kwanseŭm chihŏm ki* 觀世音持驗紀) (112), which I would translate as *Record of Grasping the Efficacy of Avalokiteśvara*. This text was among the cache of Buddhist books that washed up on the shore of Korea in 1681 and was eventually published by the monk Sŏngch’ong 性聰 (1631–1700) in 1686.

Because Evon is not as familiar with scholarship on the history of Korean Buddhism, he is unaware that these have been identified as belonging to the then recently published Chinese *Jiaxing Canon* 嘉興藏 (1589–1676), which had a profound, rejuvenating influence on Korean Buddhism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The fifth chapter, ‘The Buddhist-Confucian Symbiosis in *Lady Sa’s Journey to the South*’ (133–62) is an engaging summary and analysis of the novel. *Lady Sa’s Journey to the South* tells the story of a Confucian woman, Lady Sa, who through her sufferings realizes that the Buddhist faith to endure and seek justice is better than the sometimes-lauded approach of the ancient Confucian exemplar Qu Yuan 屈原 (340–278 BCE) who committed suicide. It takes place in Ming China during the late sixteenth century. It emphasizes the importance of the devotion toward White-Robed Guanyin and that the Bodhisattva of Compassion will help devotees to withstand evil and hardship and support with the moral strength to survive. Another theme explored in the novel is ‘The Dangers of Confucian Exclusivism’ (141–42). Most importantly, the novel advances the idea that the Confucian family can only be maintained and protected by means of the compassion of the White-Robed Guanyin and that the Confucian order can be restored to its proper place by making room for Buddhism. Considering that the authors of most Korean novels are anonymous and that the writing of novels was seen as frivolous in refined Korean society during the Chosŏn period, it is very curious and telling indeed that this novel that so unabashedly promotes a Buddhist-Confucian symbiosis was composed by a Confucian scholar-official. Evon demonstrates well how the author Kim Manjung was brought to see why Buddhism was needed to save Confucianism.

On the whole, the book is well written and accessible to general readers as well as an undergraduate audience. It could be used in courses on East Asian history and culture or premodern Korean history and culture. It could also be used in survey courses on East Asian Buddhism and Korean Buddhism, primarily to show how the Buddhist church in Korea struggled and suffered under Confucian domination during the Chosŏn period and how some Confucians

came to realize the need for the religion to provide a proper and much-needed balance against the hypocrisy unleashed by unbridled Confucian dominance. Bringing a novel into classroom discussions on Buddhist beliefs and practices and East Asian ways of viewing the vicissitudes of life is an exciting prospect. Although the hardcover edition of the book is expensive, the publisher offers several levels of e-book options to either own or rent, with one option as low as USD 9.99 for 30 days. These could be accessible for engaged students.

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