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The History of the Myeongjin School (1906–1910): A Critical Examination of Korean Buddhism's First Modern Educational Institution within the Pre-Colonial Context

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Abstract: During the operation of the Myeongjin School, it not only employed many leading Buddhist progressives, but graduated key Buddhist reformers. Overcoming conservative opposition within the Korean Buddhist community, during its brief operation the Myeongjin School would open dozens of branches at temples throughout Korea, prompting a proliferating modern education throughout its Buddhist community. Over the century, the institute founded as the Myeongjin School suffered repeated closures during Korea's Japanese Annexation only to emerge from the Korean War as Dongguk University Seoul. As Korea's oldest and largest Buddhist university, Dongguk has produced over 350,000 graduates and, despite transitioning to a more secular approach to education, it remains a leading center for monastic education, Buddhist studies, and intellectual culture. This article examines, in detail, the origins, founding, and operation of the Myeongjin School within the dynamic political and religious context of Korea's early modern period, in addition to the school's impact, subsequent history, and legacy.

Keywords: Myeongjin School; Korean Buddhism; Buddhist Study Society; Weonheung Temple; Dongguk University

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1. Introduction

Founded in 1906 as Korea's first modern Buddhist educational institution, the Myeongjin School (hereafter "MJS") played a pivotal role in pioneering modern pedagogy and the study of a general knowledge curriculum among Korea's monastic community. During the school's five years of operation, it not only employed many leading Buddhist progressives, but graduated key Buddhist reformers like Yongun Han, better known by his pen name Manhae (1879–1944; hereafter Manhae). Overcoming conservative opposition within the Korean *sangha*, during its brief operation the MJS would open dozens of branches at temples throughout Korea, prompting a proliferating modern education throughout its Buddhist community. Over the century, the institute founded as the MJS suffered repeated closures during Korea's Japanese Annexation (1910–1945) only to emerge from the Korean War (1953) as Seoul's Dongguk University. As Korea's oldest and largest Buddhist university, Dongguk has produced over 350,000 graduates and, despite transitioning to a more secular approach to education, it remains a leading center for monastic education, Buddhist studies, and intellectual culture (For more detail discussion on the monastic and postulant education, see Park and Kim 2023).

Despite its impact, the MJS faced numerous challenges upon its founding while the school, itself, was a product of the issues facing Korean Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century. With the lifting of nearly five centuries of Joseon legal suppression in 1895, scholar H.I. Kim observes that Korea's Buddhist community was struggling to "shake off their pariah-like identity… and reassert their relevance." (H. I. Kim 2018, p. 4). Yet, this agenda was complicated by the growing presence of Western Protestant missionaries, Japanese Buddhist sects, and the Meiji Empire (1868–1912), who many Koreans associated

with modern technology, knowledge, and material prosperity. As noted by scholar Jin Y. Park, Korea's "unique" colonization by a Buddhist nation produced "conflicting and sometimes contradictory responses" among Korean Buddhists, who often looked at Japanese Buddhism not only as a model of religious modernity, but as a provider of institutional protection and financial support. While this support came at a cost, it nevertheless enabled the growth of native Buddhist nationalism, which sought to assert an independent cultural identity and self-agency within the colonial context.

It was within this complex milieu at the dawn of the twentieth century that Korean progressives and reformers of the Buddhist Study Society (*Bulgyo Yeonguhue*, hereafter "BSS" or "the society") came to see the introduction of modern education as critical to their religion's survival. In partnership with Japan's Jōdoshū Sect, in the spring of 1906 the BSS thus launched the Myeongjin School at Seoul's Weonheung Temple. This article examines, in detail, the origins, founding, and operation of the MJS within the dynamic political and religious context of Korea's early modern period, in addition to the school's impact, subsequent history, and legacy. This paper closes with a discussion of the MJS's activities as complex, and occasionally conflicting expressions of cultural religious nationalism within the Japanese colonial milieu.

2. Background

Introduced to the peninsula in the fourth century C.E., Korean Buddhism thrived for over a thousand years as a state-sponsored religion patronized by a succession of dynasties. With the advent of Korea's Neo-Confucian Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), the nation's Buddhist establishment was progressively stripped of its material wealth, political power, and social privilege. Hundreds of prominent temples were disbanded, their properties confiscated, and their clergy either banned from Korea's cities or forcibly returned to the laity. At that time ranking among the lowest of the country's feudal castes, the surviving monastics retreated to remote mountain temples where they remained "virtually quarantined" for the next 500 years, supported by subsistence farming and the patronage of the illiterate peasantry. This "pitiable plight" did not improve until the tumultuous final decades of Joseon rule when these legal restrictions were finally lifted. Yet this transition brought new challenges for Korean Buddhism (Buswell 1992, pp. 23–24).

The period spanning from 1877 to 1910 was further marked by intensive cultural exchanges with Western civilization, both through direct contact with Western missionaries and Japan's Meiji Empire (1868–1912), whose growing political involvement on the peninsula culminated in Japan's formal annexation of Korea in 1910. The presence of Protestant missionaries of all denominations in Korean cities catalyzed this integration of Western cultural practices and values into Korean society, as evidenced by the establishment of Christian-run schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations, which produced a notable growth in native converts. During the same period however, Korean Buddhism embarked on a modern renaissance, fueled both by local Buddhist actors and stimulus from various Japanese sects, and later the Japanese government itself, who saw Buddhism as a tool in winning over the Korean populace to their cause (Sorensen 1993, p. 51).

In contrast to the low status accorded to Korean Buddhist monastics under Joseon rule, the Japanese Buddhist missionaries who began arriving after the signing of the Treaty of Ganghwa Island in 1876 were granted much greater respect and permission to enter Korean cities to establish propagation (*pogyo*) centers. The Joseon government soon signed similar treaties with Western nations, including the United States and Germany in 1882, England and Russia in 1884, and France 1886, which guaranteed foreign nationals the freedom to practice their religions in Korean. Viewed by the Joseon court as valued bearers of Western knowledge and technology, Western Protestants were granted tacit permission to proselytize as part of their medical and educational missions. By the century's end, the Joseon government's continued suppression of native Buddhism grew increasingly out of step with its growing religious tolerance. Following the Tonghak Peasant Uprising (*Donghak nongmin undong*) of 1894, the pro-Japanese politicians Younghyo Park (1861–1939)

and Hongjip Kim (1842–1896) petitioned the Joseon government to lift its long-held restrictions on Korean Buddhism. Yet it was pressure from the Japanese Nichiren Buddhist Sano Jenrei (1864–1917) the following year that finally ended nearly five centuries of legal suppression, an event that for many marks the dawn of modern Korean Buddhism (Sorensen 1993, p. 53).

Widely celebrated by Korea's Buddhist community, the event sparked a Buddhist revival fueled both by Korean Buddhists and support from Japanese missionaries. Buddhist temples across the nation launched reconstruction projects and the number of ordainees rose sharply, while monastic leaders conducted nation-wide lecture tours renewing interest in Buddhism among the wider populace. Unable to discern the intentions of Sano Jenrei and other Japanese missionaries, who hoped to assimilate Korean temples into their various sects, Korea's Buddhist community was initially filled with gratitude towards Japanese Buddhism. Such sentiments were expressed in a letter sent by Venerable Sangsoon in 1895 thanking Sano for releasing Korean Buddhism "from 500 years of resentment and humiliation." (Sorensen 1993, pp. 51–53).

Despite this renaissance however, Korean Buddhism's post-1895 recovery was slowed by competition from Western missionaries and increasing Japanese involvement. According to scholar Henrik Sorensen, the success of these foreign missionaries, both Western and Japanese, depended on several factors, including the Joseon Dynasty's corrupt and "moribund" government and the missionaries' association with modern culture and Western technological advancements. In addition, widespread disenchantment among the Korean intelligentsia with Confucianism, the Joseon Dynasty's official ideology, prompted them to seek inspiration from abroad, fostering sympathetic attitudes towards foreigners even among the staunchest Korean patriots. Xenophobia remained largely confined to conservative factions within the nation's declining aristocratic *yangban* class and traditional Buddhists, who nonetheless failed to present viable solutions to the nation's challenges (Sorensen 1993, pp. 51–52).

Nevertheless, the activities of these foreign missionaries provided Korean Buddhists with models for modernization and propagation that they could adapt as needed. Key among these were the modern foreign-run missionary schools rapidly spreading throughout Korea. The Joseon Emperor Gojong (1852–1919) had welcomed the introduction of Western education and culture, if not religion, and Korea's first mission school, Baejae Hakdang, had been founded by Methodist missionaries in 1886. Over the next two and half decades, nearly a thousand Protestant mission schools would open throughout the peninsula, promoting Western pedagogy along with the study of English and Korean *hangeul*. Such schools proved effective in propagating Christianity and, following the Great Revival of 1907, over 150,000 Koreans had converted to Protestantism (Ryu 2012, p. 182). Despite the growing involvement of converts in early Korean nationalism following Japanese Annexation in 1910, the Japanese Colonial Government generally tolerated these Western missionary schools, at least until the *Samil undong* (The March 1st Movement), the Korean Independence Movement of 1919 (T. Park 2013, pp. 54–62).

Japanese Buddhist missionaries were likewise involved in the establishment of temples, hospitals, and schools on the peninsula, in direct competition with Western Christians. Although most Japanese mission schools offered free tuition for Koreans, they failed to attain the same success as Christian schools and were predominantly attended by Japanese expatriates (Sorensen 1993, p. 53; Tikhonov 2010, p. 264). Nevertheless, these schools, and the activities of the Japanese missionaries in general, served as direct inspiration for native Buddhist reformers. By the end of the Joseon Era, Korean Buddhism already possessed nearly 50 "traditional" monastic seminaries, known as *kangdang*. However, as discussed by Uri Kaplan, the curriculum at these seminaries was highly variable and studies typically consisted of hand copying select Buddhist texts in an attempt to memorize them, often with little success (Kaplan 2020, pp. 44–45). As noted by scholar Jin Y. Park, education was thus a central issue for Buddhist reformers during Korea's early modern period (2010, p. 3) with progressive monastics like Manhae (1879–1944) lamenting the poor quality of educa-

tion within the Korean *sangha*. In his 1913 "classic," *On the Reformation of Korean Buddhism (Joseon Bulgyo yusillon)*, Manhae advocated for a new monastic curriculum introducing a wide base of general knowledge, the utilization of modern teaching methodologies, and the training of educators in modern pedagogy (Kaplan 2020, p. 43). Manhae's positions were undoubtedly informed by his personal experience as both a graduate and instructor at the Myeongjin School between 1906 and 1910. (For more on Manhae's "reformist thought" see J. Y. Park 2010).

3. The Myeongjin School

3.1. Political Context

The reformation of Korean Buddhist education was not the only pressing issue for the nation's Buddhist revivalists. The introduction of modern pedagogy to Korean Buddhism during the short-lived Korean Empire (1897–1910, K. *Daehan Jeguk*) was closely tied to attempts within Korea's monastic community to organize itself along modern lines, and the history of the MJS at Weonheung Temple, in particular, was intimately bound to these efforts. In contrast with the highly bureaucratic, state-run Buddhism of Korea's Unified Silla (668–935 CE) and Goryeo (918–1392) Dynasties, Buddhist temples under the Joseon Dynasty had devolved into an informal association of monastic lineages. With the lifting of legal restrictions in 1895, the nation's Buddhist leaders aspired to restructure Korean Buddhism after the organizational frameworks of Japan's Buddhist sects. Yet, as Korea's temples fought to recover from centuries of poverty and marginalization, the religion remained disorganized. In 1899, the Korean government intervened directly to centralize temple administration and protect Korean temples from "attempted power grabs" by various Japanese Buddhist sects (H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 4, 188). The government designated sixteen major temples around Korea as focal points for reorganization to be overseen by the Office for the Management of the Association of Temples (*Sasa Gwalli So*) at Kakhwang Temple, marking the first time in modern history wherein a Korean Buddhist temple functioned as an administrative arm of the government.

In early 1902, the Office for the Management of the Association of Temples moved to Weonheung Temple, a purpose-built temple just outside Seoul's East Gate and, on January 4th, over eight hundred Buddhists from around Seoul attended the opening ceremony. (K. Kim 2006, p. 334). In the same year, the Korean government enacted the Ordinance for National Temple Operation (*Guknae sachal hyunhaeng sechik*) emulating Buddhism's organizational structure under Japan's Meiji Regime (1868–1912). The ordinance united all Korean temples within a single sect, the Joined Order of Seon ("Meditation") and Gyo ("Doctrinal Study") (*Seongyo yangjong*) to be administered at Weonheungsa. However, this forced reorganization gained little support among the Korean *sangha*, as the sect's administrative powers were held by government-appointed officials, instead of monastics. This government-mandated attempt to centralize Korean temples was largely abandoned with the start of the Russo–Japanese War of 1904 and Japan's assumption of Korea as a protectorate the following year, leaving Korea's Buddhist community to again "fend for itself" (K. Kim 2006, p. 335; H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 188–89; Sorensen 1993, p. 53).

In the winter of 1906, a collection of younger, progressive Korean clergy from the wealthier monasteries around Seoul launched the Buddhist Study Society at Weonheung Temple. Led by Wolcho Hong (1858–1934), "one of the principal Buddhist activists of the period" (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265), alongside Bodam Lee and Wolhae, the BSS identified Japanese Pure Land Buddhism as the closest in practice to Korea's indigenous Buddhist traditions. Active in Korea since 1897, missionaries from Japan's Pure Land Jōdoshū Sect (hereafter JDS) had established nearly 200 propagation centers and amassed tens of thousands of Korean followers, prompting the BSS to seek an alliance with the JDS. In the spring of 1906, the BSS launched the nation's first modern educational institution for Buddhist clergy, the Myeongjin School, at Weonheung Temple under JDS auspices, with the Jōdo priest Inoue Kenshin serving as advisor (K. Kim 2006, p. 334; Tikhonov 2010, pp. 264–65); see Section 3.2 below for further details).

Despite the BSS's efforts, however, this alliance between the JDS and Weonheung Temple did not last. In 1907, Hoegwang Yi (1862–1933), another "leading reformist" and then widely respected for his doctrinal expertise (H. Kim 2010, p. 288), assumed the directorship of the MJS. The following year, a gathering of monastic leaders from 52 major temples around Korea formed Weonjong, or "Unified Order", to advance a "progressive agenda" within the Korean *sangha*, reunite the nation's temples, and protect their interests. Absorbing the BSS, the newly formed order selected Weonheung Temple for its administrative offices and elected Yi as its head. Yet the order lacked social or political influence, much to Yi's frustration. In an act earning Yi the lasting enmity of later generations of Korean nationalists, in 1910 he secretly negotiated a partnership between the Weonjong and Japan's Sōtō Zen Sect (J. Sōtōshū) in hopes of securing stronger legal protection for Korea's Buddhist temples. Adding to his infamy, Yi chose as advisor the Sōtō missionary Takeda Hanshi (1863–1911) (see H. Kim 2010 for further discussion), a former Japanese intelligence operative notorious for his involvement in the assassination of Joseon Queen Min (aka Empress Myeongseong) in 1895. However, Yi's attempted Weon–Sōtō alliance sparked protests among the younger progressive monastics at Weonheung Temple. Led by Yi's colleague Manhae, then an MJS instructor, the dissidents broke from Yi's Weonjong on "doctrinal grounds" and launched the rival Imjaejong, or "Linchi Order," which achieved some success in organizing itself as a pan-national organization. With the split, the MJS was dissolved (H. Kim 2010, p. 289; H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 190–91; Tikhonov 2010, pp. 268–69).

Both the Weonjong and Imjaejong Orders were again short-lived. Following Japan's formal annexation of Korea with the signing of the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1910 on August 22nd, the newly appointed Japanese Governor-General Terauchi Masatake (in office 1910–1916) became concerned over the growing schism within Korean Buddhism. In 1911, the colonial government passed the infamous Temple Ordinance (*Sachalryeong*, J. *Jisetsu Rei*), which remained in effect through the length of the Japanese Occupation, reconstituting the Joined Order of Seon and Gyo to be headquartered again at Gakhwang Temple. Sidelining the involvement of any Japanese Buddhist sects, the ordinance granted the Japanese Governor-General exclusive authority over the order, the temple properties, and the appointment of their abbots. Consequently, only monastics with pro-Japanese affiliations were granted appointments, leading to widespread discontent among the Korean *sangha*. Power struggles ensued between pro- and anti- Japanese monastics, leading to the latter's expulsion from prominent monasteries (H. I. Kim 2018, pp. 190–91; Sorensen 1993, p. 53). Despite its assumption of direct control, the Japanese colonial administration adopted a firm yet benevolent approach in their governance of Korean Buddhism, coupled with the provision of economic incentives to secure compliance. While the Korean *sangha* generally opposed these stringent government controls, it lacked the fervor and cohesion necessary to offer effective resistance (Sorensen 1993, pp. 55–56). It also set the stage for Korean Buddhism's post-war "Purification Movement" (*Jeonghwa undong*), in which the nation's celibate monastics struggled to expel fellow clergy who had adopted the Japanese practice of clerical marriage, denouncing the latter as Japanese "collaborators" (P. Park 1998, p. 131).

3.2. *Operation of the Myeongjin School 1906–1910*

It was in the midst of this political turbulence and organizational instability that the BSS launched the Myeongjin School at Weonheung Temple in 1906. In addition to their affinity with Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, the BSS sought a partnership with the JDS due to the importance the sect placed on education in their proselytization efforts. Along with sponsoring scholarships for Korean monastics to study in Japan, in 1901 the JDS began opening modern, Japanese-style schools for Koreans in various cities including Gaeseong, Hannam, and Haeju. Speaking at Weonheung Temple's opening ceremony in 1902, the JDS leader Hiroya Sansi had declared "Buddhism develops when knowledge is developed, not when temples are built… Buddhist schools must be established in (Seoul) to educate

monks". As such, the JDS was amiable to the partnership. Thus, with JDS support, the BSS applied to the Korean government's Interior Ministry (*Naemubu*) upon its founding, to open a modern Buddhist educational institute, the first of its kind in the nation. Permission was granted on 19 February 1906 (S. Kim 2003, pp. 137–38).

On 10 April, the BSS dispatched an announcement of the school's opening to all major temples throughout the nation. The message begins by lamenting that, over the course of Buddhism's millennium-long history in Korea, the Korean *sangha* has remained steadfast in its adherence to the Buddhist precepts, yet never before has it faced such difficulties. "There is not a single monk who isn't despondent", it continues, "(O)ther religions are rising up everywhere these days… destroying Buddhism, taking away Buddhist properties, and using it to run their schools". The announcement goes on to blame these "deplorable" circumstances on the Korean Buddhism's "ignorance" of worldly studies and the modern global developments, before quoting the BSS's JDS advisor Genshin Inoue that, "if you want to save Buddhism", "(t)he best way" is to engage in modern education. Seeing this as an opportunity for "Korean Buddhism to now reemerge", the message announces the school's starting date and a curriculum including "Buddhist doctrines and new modern studies, texts of other religions, and Western traditions, mathematics, and foreign language." The message then requests that recipients inform their subsidiary temples of the news before inviting them to send two students to enroll at the school at the end of the month, along with sufficient clothes and food. It closes by declaring that "(i)t will be a great boost to Korean Buddhism" for their monastics to engage in "new modern studies."

Planning for the school continued and, after briefly considering naming it after Weonheung Temple, on April 10th the BSS formally christened their new institute the *Myeongjin Hakgyo*, or "School of Advancement in Enlightenment," combining the Chinese Characters *myeong* (明), from *myeongdeok*, or "reveling virtue," and *jin* (進) from *jeongjin*, or "devotion." (Dongguk University 1976, pp. 12–13). Yet, Tikhonov notes the possible political expediency in the name's association with Japan's then-ruling Meiji Regime, whose title also means "enlightened rule" (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

On 10 April, the BSS additionally ratified the MJS's charter, establishing the school's purpose to be that of educating monastics through modern teaching methodologies in order to cultivate clergy with a wide base of general knowledge who will be able to lead Korean Buddhism in the modern era (MJS Charter Article 1, (Dongguk University 1976, p. 277). The MJS's initial charter further outlined key guidelines governing MJS admissions, curriculum, evaluation, and conduct. These provisions included the establishment of a student quota of 35 per grade with additional spaces for auxiliary departments (Article 1), a two-year study term (Article 2), and a five-hour daily class schedule, in addition to mandatory gymnastics and meditation practice (Article 3). It further stipulated that only monastics aged 13 to 30 who had completed professional monastic training at their temples would be eligible for enrollment, while the academic year would comprise two semesters, with specific dates outlined for each (Article 4). The school's evaluation procedures would encompass monthly, semester, and graduation tests, with grading thresholds set for passing and achieving honors (Article 9). The charter also addressed disciplinary measures, incentives for academic excellence, and a mandatory monastic dress code (Article 9). Moreover, it obligated all MJS graduates to teach in Buddhist schools or temples for a minimum of six years following graduation, functionally establishing the school as a Buddhist teacher-training facility (Article 9, Dongguk University 1976, pp. 277–79).

With Bodam Lee serving as the MJS's first director, the school's starting faculty included Lee himself, as professor of Buddhist Doctrine, Wolcho Hong as instructor of History of Religions and Propagation Methodology, along with Dongjin Park as instructor of Religious Studies, Buddhist Studies, Philosophy, and Propagation. Non-Buddhist courses were taught by Myungchil Lee, instructor of Mathematics, Sciences, and Metrology, and Haeyoung Shin, instructor of Law and Economics. The renowned scholar Neunghwa Yi (1869–1943), a pioneer in the field of modern Korean religious studies, additionally served as professor of Language and Religious History (Dongguk University 1976, p. 14). Guest

lecturers also made frequent appearances at the MJS, including Hyojeong Yun, a prominent pro-Japanese progressive Korean Buddhist activist (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

Initially established as an "Ordinary School" (*Botong hakgyo*), corresponding to the high-school-level educational institution, in 1907, the MJS transitioned into a college-level institution (*godeung jeonmun hakgyo*) following government approval as the level of student enrollment increased (Nam 1983, pp. 102–3). MJS classes followed a standard modern format resembling Japanese educational models, and offered a comprehensive curriculum encompassing "general knowledge" courses alongside its Buddhist studies, including four semesters each of Japanese language, sports, mathematics, and historical geography, in addition to two semesters of law, land surveying, and philosophy (Kaplan 2020, pp. 49–50; Tikhonov 2010, p. 265). In spite of their demanding daily schedule, which included two hours of Seon (J. *Zen*) meditation, the new students were nevertheless reportedly eager and enthusiastic (Dongguk University 1976, p. 14).

Despite the Pure Land focus of the JDS, the MJS Buddhist studies curriculum covered a diversity of texts valued within East-Asian Mahayana Buddhism. The MJS's first semester included classes on the *Brahma's Net Sutra*, alongside Dushun's (557–640) commentary on the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (C. *Huayan fajie guanmen)*, as well as the three Pure Land Sutras, namely the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra (aka the* Infinite Life Sutra/The Larger Amitabha Sutra), *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* (aka the Contemplation Sutra), and the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* (also known as the Amitabha Sutra), while the second semester covered the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (C. *léngqié ābáduōluó bǎojīng*), alongside the *Outline of the Tian-Tai Four Teachings* or *Cheontae sagyoui* composed by the tenth-century Korean monastic Jegwan (?–970). The third semester's curriculum included *The Enlightened Verses* and *The Nirvana Sutra* (C. *Dàbānnièpán-jīng*), and the fourth included the *Transmission of the Lamp* (C. *Ching-te Ch'uan teng lu*) and Yongmin Yanshou's (904–975) *Records of the Source-Mirror* (C. *Zongjing lu*). The lengthy *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Daebang gwangbul hwaeomgyeong)* was studied over two semesters in the final year (Kaplan 2020, p. 50). While the Pure Land Sutras valued by the Jōdoshū were addressed in the first semester, the remaining texts were central to a variety of Buddhist schools, including Yogacara (*Yusik*), Madhyamika (*Samnon*), Tendai (*Cheontae*), Huayen (*Hwaeom*), and Chan (*Seon*), each of which has exerted a lasting influence over Korean Buddhism's historical development. The inclusion of courses on these texts was not only directly inspired by the curricula then offered within Korea's traditional Buddhist seminaries (see Kaplan 2020, pp. 12–39 for further discussion), but additionally reflected Korean Buddhism's overall syncretic tendencies.

Even with the clear influence of Korean Buddhist tradition, however, the MJS was not without its critics within the monastic community. Opposing the school's modern educational style and connections to the Japanese, a conservative faction of monastic actively protested the MJS's opening and a month later attempted to take control of Weonheungsa with the express purpose of closing the school. However, their efforts failed and the conservative monastics were expelled from the temple, with one unsuccessfully attempting to launch a rival educational institute at Bongeun Temple (Kaplan 2020, p. 49; Dongguk University 1976, p. 14).

With the removal of opposition from within Weonheung Temple, approximately 50 MJS entrants began their first year of studies, to be joined by 55 additional students in 1907. Yet, despite the zeal of these pioneering students, many of whom reportedly stayed up all night studying (Dongguk University 1976, p. 14), they appear to have faced difficulties. According to the surviving records, the school produced only 11 graduates in 1908 and 7 in 1909, a cumulative graduation rate of less than 20%. According to Korean scholar Doyoung Nam, it has been suggested that many dropped out due to the school's strict rules and associations with Japanese Buddhism, yet there is presently no evidence supporting such assertions. Nam instead proposes the MJS's early students interrupted their studies to serve as teachers at branch schools being established by the BSS around the country, returning later to complete their diploma (Nam 1983, pp. 118–19). However, Nam's claim is also not supported by MJS graduation records, as the reopened school only

produced four graduates in 1912, nine in 1913, and five in 1914 (Dongguk University Graduation Records). Due to the paucity of surviving records, it is unlikely scholars will know the exact reasons behind this high rate of student attrition at the MJS. Yet, given the novelty of the modern education system being piloted by the school within the Korean Buddhist context, the loss of such a high percentage of its early students is not unexpected.

Graduating from the MJS in 1908, the famed reformer Manhae returned in 1909 after a year in Japan to found the MJS-affiliated Metrology Research Institute (*Myeongjin Cheuklyang-gangseupso*). Manhae was additionally appointed as the school's land surveying instructor and, as Tikhonov notes, "was known of his enthusiasm for this rather mundane pursuit" (2010, p. 265). The inclusion of courses on land surveying and law within the MJS curriculum speaks directly to the one of the primary concerns of MJS students, and Korea's Buddhist monastic community, at the time, namely safeguarding monastic landholdings from theft by what Tikhonov describes as "greedy officials and local worthies watching for an opportunity to enrich themselves" (Kaplan 2020, p. 76; Tikhonov 2010, p. 265). Manhae's own "enthusiasm" for land surveying was likely bolstered by his 1908 success in defending his temple's land holdings in court against those fraudulently seeking to claim ownership (Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

3.3. Impact, Influence, and Subsequent History

Despite the school's initial high attrition rate, the students who did successfully graduate from the MJS in 1908 and 1909 would go on to have an outsized impact on Korean Buddhism in the colonial period. In addition to the influential Manhae, MJS's 1908's graduating class included the translator Jinho An (1880–1965), who published translations of nearly 40 Buddhist scriptures along with materials for Korean monastic seminaries that are still in use today, the Buddhist modernist Sangro Gweon (1879–1965), and Korean independence activist Jonguk Yi (Kaplan 2020, p. 49; Nathan 2018, pp. 67–68; Tikhonov 2010, p. 265).

The initial opposition of conservative monastics within Weonheung Temple notwithstanding, the opening of the MJS appears to have been met with enthusiasm within the wider Korean *sangha*. Tikhonov notes that, after the MJS's launch, "modern Buddhist school mushroomed in all corners of the country," refuting criticisms from Christian Nationalists that Buddhism was incompatible with modern civilization (2010, p. 266). The BSS opened approximately 30 MJS branches at temples throughout Korea over the next five years. In 1906, eight MJS branch schools were established at major monasteries around Korea, namely Yongjoo, Gunbong, Tongdo, Haein, Seokwang, Beomeo, Seonam, and Daeheung Temples. In 1907, twelve more were launched, including at Wibong, Daeseung, Gimryong, Namjang, Yongmun Myeongbong, Gwangheung, Yoojeom, and Shingye Temples. In 1908, three additional subsidiaries were founded at Jikji, Haein, and Eunhae Temples, while 1909 saw the founding of branches at Hwaeom, Cheoneun, Taean, Gwaneum, Bomyeong, Songgwang, Daewon, Namjang, Seongbul, Obong, Bohyun, and Gaewon Temples. Four additional subsidiaries were established: Ssanggye, Gimryong, Hwajang, and Boseok Temples. According to Tikhonov, by 1910 nearly all of Korea's provincial temples had founded their own "new learning" academies, whose most motivated graduates continued their academic careers, eventually forming the "new intellectual core" of Korean Buddhism in the Colonial Era (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267).

Over the following half-a-century, the institute first launched as the MJS would undergo numerous structural alterations and closures in parallel with Korea's tumultuous modern history. In 1907, MJS administration was assumed by the controversial Hoegwang Yi, who made significant changes to the school during his tenure, including expanding the duration of the MJS's program to four years, mirroring higher education in Europe and Japan. In April 1910, Yi renamed the school the Buddhist Pedagogical Institute (*Bulgyosabeomhakgyo*), reflecting the school's intended purpose as a Buddhist teacher-training facility. However, the school officially closed later that year owing to financial difficulties and internal discord over Yi's attempts to ally Korean Buddhism with Japan's Soto Zen Sect

(see Section 3.1). In fact, as both Yi and Manhae were employed as MJS faculty in 1910, it is likely that the MJS stood at the center of the schism between Yi's Weonjong Order and Manhae's rival Imjae Order, although no surviving records have been found elaborating on the role that the school may have played in this conflict.

With Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 and the passing of the Korean Education Ordinance (*Joseon Gyoyooklyeng*) in August 1911, severely restricting the activities of private schools, the institute remained closed. Reopening in 1914 as the Buddhist Academy of Higher Education (*Bulgyo godeung gansuk)* with 26 students, the academy closed yet again in 1915 only to be revived in 1918 as the Central Seminary (*Joongang hakrim*) with added classes covering Japanese content. Despite this further Japanization, the school again faced closure from 1922 to 1928, only to reopen as the Buddhist Specialized School (*Bulgyo jeonsoo hakgyo*) in 1928 with 31 students. In 1930, the institution was rebranded as The Central Buddhist Specialized School (*Joonang Bulgyo jeonmun hakgyo*) and finally accorded university status by the colonial government, granting the school much-needed legitimacy and stability. Now open to lay students as well as monastics, the school produced over 200 graduates over the following decade. In June 1940, the institute's name was changed again to Hyehwa Professional School (*Hyehwa jeonmun hakgyo*), after the neighborhood around its campus and the Buddhist ideology of "gracefully edifying the world." Yet, for more than the first half of the 1940s, the school's activities were increasingly subordinated to the Japanese war effort, before the school closed again in 1944 (Hwang 2011).

Following liberation from Japan, the school reopened in September 1946, expanding its scope and scale to become Dongguk University. Upon its re-establishment, the institution underwent a notable transformation, transitioning away from its origins within the monastic education towards a more secular framework, rendering it less exclusively Buddhist in nature. While maintaining a Buddhist Studies Department, the university diversified its academic offerings to include departments in Korean Literature, English, and Sociology. Subsequently, in 1953, it opened a Law School and a Department of Agriculture, initiated a graduate program, and began conferring internationally recognized secular degrees—B.A, M.A, and Ph.D.—to its graduates. Over the remainder of the 20th century, Dongguk continued to augment its secular departments, attracting a growing number of lay students, including non-Buddhists. Presently, even within Buddhist Studies, Chan Studies, Indian Philosophy, and Cultural Heritage departments, only approximately a quarter of the student body is comprised of monastics. Yet, regardless of the degree to which Dongguk University has remained a purely Buddhist educational institution, its impact is undeniable, as it has produced approximately 350,000 graduates since its founding. Routinely ranking among the nation's top ten universities, Dongguk University presently has an enrolment of around 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students at its various campuses (https://www.dongguk.edu/eng/, accessed on 8 April 2024; Kaplan 2020, pp. 52–54).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

As noted by H.I. Kim, much of South Korea's post-liberation nationalist historiography has framed Japanese involvement on the peninsula between 1877 and 1945 in "exclusively political and binary terms," with historians classifying historical figures during this period as "colonialist or nationalist, anti-Japanese or pro-Japanese, and traitor or hero." (H. Kim 2010, p. 287). Such "binary" rhetoric became further entrenched in post-war Buddhist discourse with the contentious and occasionally violent Purification Movement (*Jeonghwa undong*) of the 1950s, resulting in the schism between the married Taego and celibate Jogye Orders in 1962, with the latter winning control of most of the nation's temples (for more on South Korea's Buddhist Purification Movement, see P. Park 1998). While such nationalist interpretations of the colonial period reflected popular sentiment following liberation, such a reductive dichotomy oversimplifies the many complexities of the Japanese Empire's involvement on Korean Peninsula. This is especially true concerning the encounter between Japanese and Korean Buddhism during this period, which produced "conflicting and sometimes contradictory responses" among the Korean Buddhist community (J. Y.

Park 2010, p. 2). This binary has also resulted in contradictions in the appraisals of Korean historians, who often praise Korean Buddhism's efforts to modernize during the Colonial Era while condemning Japanese involvement in the process (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267).

Since the turn of the millennium, however, a growing number of scholars have sought to transcend such strict interpretive binaries and instead "emphasize the complexities of the power relationships between the Japanese and Korean Buddhists" in order to "bring to light the subjectivity of the colonized" (H. Kim 2010, p. 287). Prompting debates in the Korean media, this more recent scholarship reveals a "rich retelling" of the period characterized by varied, and often divergent, interests and strategies among Japanese missionaries, native Korean Buddhists, and state authorities. This more nuanced "retelling" further underscores the agency exercised by Korean Buddhists amidst the complex dynamics of colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism, which, according to Kim, discloses "the formation of a Buddhist-centered nationalism" within Korea marked by efforts towards self-governmentality and self-motivated propagation (H. I. Kim 2018, p. 28; H. Kim 2010, p. 287).

As the modern conception of nationalism was only introduced to Korea in the 1890s, this early religious nationalism arose among Korean Buddhists independent of the overtly political, anti-Japanese nationalism promoted by Korea's Protestant Christians, who condemned Buddhism as anti-modern superstition (Tikhonov 2010, p. 261). Instead, according to scholar Pori Park, Korean Buddhists regarded "their religion as the epitome of Korean history. " Embracing a more gradualist form of cultural nationalism, they sought to modernize their religion while maintaining and promoting a traditional, distinctly Korean Buddhist identity (P. Park 1998, p. 24). Yet according to Jin Y. Park, in its early decades, Korean Buddhist nationalists thus "considered Japanese Buddhism a model to follow for the revival of Korean Buddhism" (J. Y. Park 2010, p. 2) and, according to Tikhonov, were inspired by Japanese Buddhism to "pursue their own agenda of modernization … with visible success" (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267). Echoing the Silla and Goryeo Dynasty practices of "national-protection Buddhism (K. *hoguk bulgyo*)," many Korean monastics staunchly believed that Japan had become a "rich nation" with a "strong army" precisely because it "made Buddhism a state religion and respected priests," and desired the same for Korea. However, many others aligned their temples with Japanese sects as they simply saw no other means of defending their property (Tikhonov 2010, p. 267).

The establishment and operation of the MJS as surveyed within Section 3 of this article were very much products of this emergent Korean Buddhist nationalism and the needs of the nation's Buddhist community at this time. In fact, when viewed through this more nuanced historiographic framework, many of the activities of the school, its students, and staff can be seen as expressions of various, if contested, strategies in support of this Buddhist nationalism, regardless of the degree to which the actors collaborated with Japanese sects and colonial authorities. According to the scholar Neunghwa Yi, who served as the MJS's second director, the BSS saw the introduction of modern education to the Korean *sangha* as critical to saving Korean Buddhism from destruction by other religions, which directly motivated their decision to partner with the JDS. Despite JDS involvement, however, MJS's Buddhist studies curriculum covered Buddhist texts valued within Korea's Joseon-era monastic seminaries, demonstrating a clear desire to preserve Korean Buddhism's doctrinal identity, even within the implementation of a modern, Japanese-influenced educational model. Furthermore, the MJS's inclusion of courses on law and land surveying, such as those taught by Manhae, addressed the urgent need within the Korean Buddhist community to protect their properties from theft by corrupt officials and rival religions. Manhae's much-lauded opposition to Hoegwang Yi's attempted alliance with the Japanese Sōtō Zen Sect and the former's leadership of the rival Imjae Order likewise reflected a desire to preserve Korean Buddhism's doctrinal identity and "traditional legitimacy" from foreign encroachment. Yet, even the highly controversial attempt by Yi to align with the Sōtō Sect reflected the Korean community's desire to secure legal protections for their temples, properties, and clergy (Tikhonov 2010, p. 270).

Despite being what Uri Kaplan describes as Korean Buddhism's "rather humble first attempt" at modern education (Kaplan 2020, p. 51), the MJS would have a significant impact on the development of Korean Buddhism over the twentieth century. The 18 graduates of the MJS included progressive figures like Master Manhae, Jinho An, Sangro Gweon, and Jonguk Yi, who would have a major influence on Korean Buddhism's modernization during the Colonial and Post-Liberation Periods. Furthermore, the MJS and its branches inspired a "mushroom(ing)" of modern Buddhist educational institutions around the country and, by 1910, nearly every major temple had opened its own institution of "new learning", which trained Korean Buddhism's "new intellectual core" (Tikhonov 2010, pp. 266–67 and 270).

The educational institute formed as the MJS survived the turbulence and repeated closures of Japanese colonial rule to emerge from the chaos of the Korean War as Dongguk University. Currently the largest and oldest Buddhist university in Korea, Dongguk has produced hundreds of thousands of graduates since its founding. In 2006, the university commemorated its centennial with a ceremony held in the school's Manhae Plaza attended by an inter-faith gathering of prominent monastics, national religious leaders, and politicians, including two future presidents, celebrating the MJS's legacy and positive impact on the nation (https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2006/05/08/socialAffairs/Poets-actors-and-monks-help-Dongguk-University-turn-100/2720885.html, accessed on 8 April 2024).

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