

The Jogye Temple Complex: Where the ‘Mundane’ and ‘Spiritual’ is inextricably intertwined

Professor Hwansoo Kim discusses the complex relationship between Korean Buddhism and the state through the history of the Jogye Temple in Seoul.

By Cynthia Yoo

Professor Hwansoo Kim from the University of Arizona began his talk with the dramatic set of events in 1994 that engulfed Korean Buddhism. Jogye Temple, located in central Seoul, became the centre of a violent political power struggle within the religious hierarchy.



In 1994, Jogye temple saw nearly 800 monks and nuns protesting for the removal of Seo Uihyeon, the head of the order. They denounced his ties to the mafia and support for past authoritarian regimes. The reformist monks had taken over the temple calling for a new head and urged purification of the order.

Media captured fights between the monks and Mafia hoodlums and between government police. It was a pivotal moment that expressed a complex century-long relationship between Korean Buddhism and the state.

“This showed,” Professor Kim said, “the intersection of Korean Buddhism and state collusion.” To explain his thesis, Professor Kim described how Buddhism was shunned by the new Chosŏn dynasty in the 15th century. Buddhist monks were considered to be the lowest of the castes, even below that of butchers. Buddhist temples were banned within the gates of Seoul, Chosŏn’s capital.

Thus, when the Japanese government made overtures to Korean Buddhists in the early 1900’s, the religious leaders were eager to accept Japanese colonial rule and re-enter mainstream Korean society. Buddhists became pro-Japanese, and were re-instated as part of the colonial system. By the late 1930’s the head temple was built in central Seoul and the religious order became a heavily centralized bureaucracy, as the Japanese colonial government believed that would help mobilize the Koreans for their war effort.



This relationship of ‘collusion’ between the state and Korean Buddhism continued as Korea won its freedom from

Japan. The new South Korean government under President Rhee Seung Man stepped into to mediate a growing conflict between two major factions: the celibate monks (비구) and the married monks (대처). President Rhee sided with the smaller celibate monks (비구) group and enlarged their forces through the Korean mafia who became monks to take over various temples across South Korea. Suffice to say that such activities deeply tarnished the image of monks and Korean Buddhism.

This relationship of “co-optation” continued into the 1970’s and 80’s. By the 1970’s, the celibate monks faction had won control over the Jogye order and Seo Uihyeon became its head. Seo commanded the order like a dictator, selling abbotships, bribing politicians and using mafia thugs. The excesses of his rule led to the 1994 purification movement.

Although Seo was taken down during the 1994 ‘revolt,’ Professor Kim argued that state-authorities have continued to mediate and intervene in factional politics that plague Korean Buddhism. But even as the state stepped in to mediate Buddhist factionalism, it has also contributed sources of conflict.

In describing the past century of chronic in-fighting and state-collusion, Professor Kim wanted to show that there was no separation between religion and politics in Korean Buddhism. In the minds of Korean monastics, Professor Kim claimed, the ‘mundane’ and ‘spiritual’ is inextricably intertwined.

