

Article

Glorifying the Order and Creating Great Monks: A Critical Survey of Oral History Within the Field of Modern Korean Buddhist Historical Studies

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Abstract

With the growth of academic interest in Korean Buddhism's modern history over the 1990s, newly introduced oral history methodologies showed great potential. In contrast with oral history trends in Western Buddhist studies, oral history in Korean Buddhist studies emerged from the need to supplement the lack of surviving documentation and to record testimony regarding key historical events before witnesses pass away. While the first decades of Korean Buddhist oral history have produced an invaluable increase in primary sources available for current and future resources, the field has nevertheless suffered from methodological issues and limitations often resulting from the Korean Buddhist community's conflation of oral history with its own pre-established oral traditions. This article examines how oral history methodologies have been mobilized to reconstruct Korea's modern Buddhist past within South Korean academia. It also critically evaluates the methodological limitations and institutional biases embedded within these studies, before surveying more recent efforts to overcome these issues through greater critical rigor, methodological refinement, and the inclusion of more diverse perspectives.

Keywords: oral tradition; oral history; Jogye Order; Korean Buddhism; purification movement

1. Introduction

Oral tradition has remained central to Buddhism since the religion's 5th-century BCE founding, just as it is today within Korea's Buddhist temples and monasteries. Not only are sutras chanted daily, but anecdotes concerning prominent *Zen* (K. *Seon*) monastics are regularly shared in Dharma lectures, meditation instruction and private student–teacher discussions. Throughout Korean Buddhism's turbulent modern history, such anecdotes have been critical in maintaining monastic values and identity while also preserving accounts of lived experience throughout Korea's Japanese Annexation (1910–1945) and the cataclysmic violence of the Korean War (1950–1953). Oral tradition regarding the Dharma “transmission” (K. *inga*) between *Seon* masters and their Dharma heirs, has further served to legitimize often-competing monastic lineages during the contentious “Purification Movement” of the 1950s and 60s, which ultimately resulted in the schism between the Jogye and the Taego Orders, as well as the Jogye Order's own intra-sectarian conflicts of the 1990s (see below for further discussion).

With the growth of domestic academic interest in Korean Buddhism's modern history over the 1990s, Korean Buddhist Studies scholars saw potential in newly introduced oral



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history methodologies. In contrast with oral history trends in Western Buddhist studies, which tend to utilize oral history within anthropological studies of Buddhist communities and practice “on the ground” (see Section 5.1 below), oral history in Korean Buddhist studies emerged from the need to supplement the lack of surviving documentation and to record testimony regarding historical events before key witnesses pass away. While the first decades of Korean Buddhist oral history have produced a valuable increase in primary sources available for current and future researchers, the field has nevertheless suffered from methodological issues and limitations often resulting from the Korean Buddhist community’s conflation of oral history with its own pre-established oral traditions.

Focusing on the pioneering publication *Modern Buddhist History Seen through the Testimony of 22 People* (2002) and the extensive research of Buddhist oral historian Kwang-sik Kim, this article will examine Korean academia’s utilization of oral history to reconstruct the nation’s modern Buddhist past. It will also critically evaluate the methodological limitations and institutional biases embedded within these studies before comparing them with the predominantly ethnographic utilization of oral history within Western Buddhist Studies. It will conclude by surveying more recent efforts within Korean Buddhist oral history to overcome these biases and limitations through education, greater critical rigor, methodological refinement, and the inclusion of more diverse perspectives. However, in order to provide sufficient background to these discussions, this article will first review the roles of oral tradition in Buddhism along with the religion’s tumultuous modern history in South Korea and the introduction of oral history to Korean academia.

2. Background

2.1. Oral Tradition in Buddhism

Orality and oral tradition have held a central place in Buddhism since the life of Gautama Buddha in the 5th Century BCE. Not only were the Buddha’s teachings transmitted orally during his lifetime, but tradition holds that following his death, 500 of his awakened disciples convened for the First Council, wherein these teachings were systematically organized and communally recited. Hence, the canonical phrase “Thus have I heard” (Pali. *Evaṃ me sutaṃ*; Sanskrit *Evaṃ mayā śrutam*) became the conventional opening of Buddhist scriptures, marking the oral texts as containing the authentic “word of the Buddha” (P. *buddhavacana*), and attributing their contents to direct oral transmission. Responsibility for preserving specific portions of this canon was assigned to specialized groups of monastics who memorized and transmitted specific sutras (P. *suttas*) within established lineages. These trained reciters, or *Bhāṇakas*, preserved these oral texts for centuries before they were committed to writing. Even with the emergence of written canons, sutra recitation remained a core Buddhist practice throughout Asia, as it does today within nearly every Buddhist sect (Adikaram 1953, p. 24; for more details on oral tradition in early Buddhism, see Allon 1997; Wynne 2004).

Oral tradition continued to play a significant role in the formation and transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Eastern Asia. Even as written sutras became increasingly important following various large-scale translation projects, oral elements remained embedded in East-Asian Buddhist ritual and liturgical practices. Furthermore, oral tradition occupied a central and distinctive role in the development of *Chan* (K. *Seon*, J. *Zen*) Buddhism, which came to associate oral tradition with the ideals of direct, experiential transmission outside written texts. Emerging in China around the 6th and 7th centuries CE, Chan positioned itself as a “separate transmission outside the scriptures” (C. *jiaowai biechuan*), emphasizing face-to-face instruction between master and disciple as the primary vehicle of awakening. Early Chan masters drew upon prior Buddhist oral practices reframed through dialogical and performative encounters—such as Dharma lectures,

spontaneous exchanges, and paradoxical anecdotes—that were later recorded in *yulu* (recorded sayings) and *gong'an* (J. *koan*) collections.¹ Thus, across various Chan schools, including those of Korea, oral tradition has remained integral to the preservation of teachings as well as the shaping of religious authority, pedagogy, and experiential knowledge (see Faure 1993; McRae 2003 for further discussion). Oral narratives regarding past and present *Chan* masters also placed these figures within the reputedly unbroken lineage of direct “mind-to-mind” Dharma transmission (K. *inga*) dating back to Shakyamuni Buddha, himself, establishing the legitimacy of their monastic lineages. Such oral traditions would become especially important in Korean Buddhist monasticism over the latter half of the 20th Century due to the cataclysmic disruption of the Korean War and subsequent Buddhist sectarian conflicts, which saw competing monastic clans challenging the legitimacy of their rivals by doubting the authenticity of their transmission lineages.

2.2. Modern Korean Buddhism

As with the nation as a whole, Korea’s Buddhist community has endured significant turmoil and change throughout its modern history, including Japanese Annexation (1910–1945), the Korean War (1950–1953) and the subsequent sectarian strife of the Purification Movement. Introduced to the peninsula in the 4th century CE, Buddhism thrived in Korea for a millennium as a state-sponsored religion before enduring 500 years of legal suppression under Korea’s Neo-Confucian Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). With the lifting of government restrictions in 1895, efforts to revive and modernize Korean Buddhism coincided with the growing Japanese influence on the peninsula, which culminated in Japan’s formal annexation of Korea in 1910. While many turn-of-the-century Korean Buddhist progressives looked to Japanese Buddhism for inspiration, Japanese support for these reformers “was far from benign” as the colonial authorities sought to appropriate Korea’s indigenous Buddhist institutions for their own purposes (Buswell 1992, p. 24). During the Japanese Annexation, many Korean monastics began disregarding their traditional precepts by marrying, eating meat, and drinking alcohol; practices already widely adopted by Japanese Buddhist clerics following the Meiji Restoration in 1868. With the support of the Japanese authorities and prominent Korean reformers, the prohibition against Buddhist ecclesiastical marriage was formally lifted in 1926, bringing “profound changes to Korean monastic life”, marking “the end of an era for traditional Korean Buddhism” (Buswell 1992, p. 29).

These “profound changes” laid the groundwork for an acrimonious schism within Korea’s monastic community decades later, as, during the final years of the Japanese Annexation (1910–1945), the remaining minority of celibate monastics began organizing in opposition. In 1954, in the aftermath of the Korean War, the celibate faction launched the “Purification Movement” (K. *Jeonghwaundong*) to expel the married clerics from Korea’s temples. Portraying themselves as the “true representatives... of orthodox Korean Buddhist practice” (Buswell 1992, p. 31), the celibate faction painted the married clergy as Japanese “collaborators” (Park 1998, p. 131), thus winning the support of South Korean President Syngman Rhee (in office 1948–1960), who demanded the resignation of all “Japanized” monks. However, the married clergy refused to vacate and the struggle between the two factions became increasingly bitter. Both sides launched legal challenges as well as sit-ins, protests, and marches, occasionally resulting in physical confrontations and violence. Finally, in 1961, intervention by the newly established regime of President Chung-hee Park (in office 1962–1979) granted control of nearly all of the nation’s Buddhist Properties to the celibate faction, then incorporated as the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism (K. *Jogyejong*, hereafter JO or “the order”). (For more on South Korea’s Buddhist Purification Movement, see Park 1998).

Overcoming lingering sectarian infighting and geographical isolation in the 1970s, the JO has since grown to become the largest of Korea's Buddhist orders. Claiming to represent the historical mainstream of the nation's Buddhist traditions, the order maintains more than 3000 temples, organized within 25 districts and overseen by a central administration in Seoul. JO temples are staffed by approximately 12,000 ordained monastics (K. *bigu*), almost half of whom are female (K. *biguni*). Beginning with various reform movements in the 1980s and 90s, the JO has increased its social activism, media presence, and engagement with secular society. While currently claiming around seven million registered lay members, the JO still defines itself as a monastic-oriented order, placing primacy on monastic discipline and celibacy, temple rituals, and meditation practice (Park and Kim 2019).

Officially formed in 1970 by Buddhist clerics, married and celibate, excluded from the Jogye Order, the Taego Order remains Korea's second-largest Buddhist sect. Claiming 3000 ordained clergy managed from Bongwonsa Temple in Seoul, the order maintains a dual emphasis on *Seon* meditation and the ritual performance, including esoteric rites, Dharma assemblies, and the preservation of traditional liturgical music and dance. Religious life and practice within Taego Order temples remains largely indistinguishable from those of the Jogye Order, with the key exception that male Taego clergy are permitted to marry and live as householders with the order's facilities.

2.3. Oral History Methodologies and Contemporary Korean Academia

In contrast with roles which oral traditions and narratives continue to play within Korean Buddhism (see Section 2.1 above), oral history as an academic discipline involves the systematic collection and analysis of firsthand testimonies regarding past events through recorded interviews, often emphasizing perspectives under-represented in written sources. Although oral testimony had long been used to supplement written documentation, oral history emerged as a formal research methodology in the mid-twentieth century with the establishment of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office following World War II. The field expanded rapidly during the 1960s and 70s alongside broader developments in social history and "history from below," as scholars increasingly utilized interviews to recover the experiences of marginalized groups such as workers, women, and minority communities. Institutions such as the Oral History Association further professionalized the field by establishing standards of practice and ethical guidelines for researchers, including the careful selection of narrators, rigorous background research, and the use of semi-structured interviews to elicit reflective life narratives. These are then analyzed to recover under-documented experiences and reinterpret historical processes within broader contexts (For further discussion, see Thompson 2000, pp. 1–8, 25–27; Ritchie 2015, pp. 1–6, 63–86).

Although oral history developed within South Korean academia later than in the West, by the turn of the millennium, its methods had been actively adopted within a variety of disciplines. The publication of the landmark work *Deep-Rooted Tree* (뿌리깊은 나무), exploring the lives of ordinary individuals from their autobiographical perspective, first drew popular attention to the field in Korea in the early 1980s. As an academic tool, however, oral history methodologies were introduced via anthropological research in the middle of the decade. Yet, the field struggled to overcome initial skepticism from Korean scholars, particularly historians, who questioned both the reliability and objectivity of oral accounts. It was not until the following decade that oral history theory and methodologies were more widely incorporated within various academic disciplines, including sociology, history, and women's studies (Y. Lee 2009, pp. 291–92; Hahm 2010, pp. 8–17).

Oral history gained further popular recognition in South Korea in the 1990s with the publication of testimonies from Japanese military “comfort women.” The Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (한국정신대문제대책협의회) systematically collected testimonies from former “comfort women,” resulting in the 1993 publication of the multi-volume *Rewriting History through Memory: Korean Comfort Women Forced into Military Sexual Slavery* (강제로 끌려간 조선인 군위안부들 증언집), which illuminated the experiences of the victims while advancing research on Japanese wartime atrocities (K. Kim 2018; J. Lee 2021). Similar initiatives were undertaken by the Korean History Research Association (한국역사연구회), which established the Modern History Testimony Group (현대사 증언 자료집) to recover other marginalized narratives in 20th-century Korean history. Their research produced such works as *The Unfinished Journey* (1996, 끝나지 않은 여정), documenting the experiences of the country’s long-term political prisoners during and after the Japanese Annexation. The Academy of Korean Studies (한국학중앙연구원) similarly published *Liberation and Division: My Experience* (2001, 내가 겪은 해방과 분단), highlighting the perspectives of individuals active during the liberation period who had been previously overlooked in South Korean historiography. Additional institutional efforts include projects by the Seoul Institute, which connected individual life histories with urban history in *20th-Century Seoul Modern History through the Life Histories of Residents* (2000, 서울 20세기 생활/문화변천사), while individual historians, such as Chan-seung Park (History and Reality Vol. 38, 2000) and Yong-gi Lee (History Problems Research, Vol. 6, 2001), have applied oral history to the study of local experiences and personal micro-histories during the Korean War (K. Kim 2018; J. Lee 2021).

3. Modern Buddhist History Seen Through the Testimony of 22 People

3.1. The Academic Study of Modern Korean Buddhist History

Early efforts to incorporate oral testimony into the field of Korean Buddhist studies can be traced to the Sambo Society’s (삼보학회) compilation of the unpublished *Recent Centennial History of Korean Buddhism* (한국근세불교백년사) in which scholars, including Gwang-ho Jeong, Gyeong-su Seo, Seong-bae Park, and Jin-o Ahn, summarize the oral testimonies of Korean monastics collected between 1965 and 1969.² Similarly, *Centennial History of Modern Buddhism (1865–1965)* (근현대불교사) was developed by scholar Gyeong-hun Park from serialized interviews with *Seon* Master and JO Patriarch Ven. Seok-ju (1909–2004), an instrumental figure in the modernization of Korean Buddhism, synthesized documentary sources to reconstruct Korean Buddhism’s modern history in the form of a personal memoir. While these works lacked a “scholarly in-depth examination” of their oral testimony, according to Kwang-sik Kim, these efforts nevertheless laid the foundation for the systematic use of oral history later within the field (K. Kim 2018; J. Lee 2021).

As with the growing interest in oral history, academic attention to Korean Buddhism’s modern history also expanded over the 1990s. The Seonwoo Doryang (선우도량), and its subsidiary, the Society for the Study of Modern and Contemporary Korean Buddhism (한국불교근현대사연구회), served as key institutional catalysts behind this burgeoning trend. Founded in November 1990, the Seonwoo Doryang was tasked by the JO with “comprehensively organiz(ing) the modern history of Buddhism” (K. Kim 2018) and supported the collection and publication of historical materials on modern Korean Buddhist history while encouraging new scholarly debates, such as a reevaluation of Korean Buddhism’s relations with Japan during the colonial occupation.³ Seonwoo Doryang researchers produced numerous source collections over the subsequent decade, such as the *Study of Modern Korean Buddhism* (1995, 2 volumes, 신문으로 본 한국불교 근현대사), and large-scale documentary compilations. Within this context, oral testimony emerged

as a crucial supplementary source due to the scarcity of surviving records following the widespread destruction of Buddhist temples and monasteries during the Korean War (See [Park and Kim 2025](#) for further discussion), and the subsequent neglect of archival preservation in its aftermath. Furthermore, by the 1990s, many of the individuals who had experienced key historical events in the mid-20th Century were at risk of passing away, adding urgency to the field's growth. In response, scholars began interviewing such witnesses and publishing the results, opening new frontiers for research ([J. Lee 2021](#); [G. Lee 2008](#)).

3.2. Publication of *Modern Buddhist History Seen Through the Testimony of 22 People*

As noted by Buddhist studies scholar Jaesoo Lee, the initial planning for what would become *Modern Buddhist History Seen through the Testimony of 22 People* began following the Jogye Order's intra-sectarian conflict and subsequent reforms of 1994.⁴ In order to better clarify the order's modern history, the project sought to record the testimony of eye witnesses to the order's formation in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s ([J. Lee 2021](#)). After three years of preparation, the interview process began in 1997. At the time, however, the Korean academic community largely viewed personal interviews as factually unreliable. Thus, the interviews and the subsequent editorial processes were conducted with the assumption that all historical sources are inherently subjective and shaped by actors' various intentions. While initially focusing on the Purification Movement, the scope of the interviews was expanded to cover the interviewees' personal lives as well as their experiences during Japanese Annexation and subsequent Liberation Period (1945–1950). Dozens of individuals were selected for interviews based on their diverse perspectives and direct involvement in key historical episodes.⁵ However, several declined to participate, while others were unavailable, resulting in the inclusion of just 22 interviewees.

Once an interviewee was selected, researchers collected relevant materials to prepare an interview guide for both the interviewer and interviewee. Supplemented with additional questions as needed, the interview primarily addressed the interviewee's personal life and their experience of major historical events, drawing on sources such as newspapers, magazines, and memoirs as prompts. However, as most interviews were conducted within a single session by Seonwoo Doryang-affiliated researchers, the possibility for in-depth engagement was limited. The interviews were nevertheless recorded on audio or videotape and preserved with minimal modification, while edited transcripts were presented in *Modern Buddhist History*.... Directed, in part, by Duksung Women's University professor Gyeongsun Lee, the project's editors sought to retain the interviewees' tone and context as much as possible. However, some editorial revisions were deemed necessary for length or when the interviews contained direct criticism of living individuals.

Finally published in 2002, *Modern Buddhist History*... is 496 pages long and organized into three parts. The first section contains interviews with figures active in the Buddhist community since Japanese Annexation, including Venerables Seokju, Yongmyeong, and Seolsan, who played significant roles in Korea's modern Buddhist history. The second section presents interviews with Buddhist figures active before and after liberation, and includes testimony of lay Buddhists who participated in the Buddhist Purification Movement, and Buddhist communities on Jeju Island, while the third consists of interviews with individuals directly involved in the Purification Movement in its early stages. Preceded by a brief biographical profile and an editorial introduction, each interview is presented within the book as a simple question-and-answer format.

3.3. Response and Criticisms

Scholar Jaesoo Lee describes the 2002 publication of the *Modern Buddhist History...* as nothing less than the “starting point for Buddhist oral history” in Korea. In Lee’s assessment, the text was not “simply a collection of testimonies” but rather a “systematic undertaking, achieved through the participation of professional Buddhist historians.” (2021) Lee further praises the work as a “comprehensive collection of oral sources” covering “key issues in modern and contemporary Buddhist history,” while “granting Buddhist oral history its originality” and “revealing previously undiscovered insights” within the previous materials published by the Seonwoo Doryang (J. Lee 2021).

Despite such praise, *Modern Buddhist History...* nevertheless, possesses methodological and analytical limitations. According to project participant Kwang-sik Kim, the work lacks a critical framework for linking individual micro-histories to broader historical processes. Furthermore, Kim notes that the project relies on a narrow, largely JO-centered selection of interviewees, resulting in a partial and unbalanced portrayal of events (B. Kim 2002; K. Kim 2003). Project co-director Gyeongsun Lee has likewise noted significant biases in the project’s aim of justifying and “publicizing the achievements” of the Purification Movement, leading her to question whether the resulting publication would be permitted to criticize either the Purification Movement or the JO leadership, and whether the interviewees thus engaged in self-censorship, “consciously or unconsciously” (G. Lee 2008). Speaking in a 2004 symposium on “Modern and Contemporary Buddhist History and Oral History,” anthropology professor Dr. Taek-rim Yoon echoed Lee and Kim’s criticisms, noting that many of the interview questions within *Modern Buddhist History...* “demand confirmation” of the JO’s preestablished interpretation of events. Seoul National University graduate researcher Seon-hyeong Lee likewise observed that, within *Modern Buddhist History...*, interviewees were reduced to the limited role of merely providing information (Gwon 2004).

Kwang-sik Kim has identified additional issues in the project’s interview process, noting that interviews remained relatively formal, limiting their capacity to uncover deeper life histories or generate new interpretive themes. Kim has also noted deficits in subject selection, editorial practice, and supporting documentation, which further constrain the work’s scholarly value. Nevertheless, in Kim’s assessment, *Modern Buddhist History...* represents one of the first substantial scholarly attempts to preserve Buddhist oral testimony in Korea, thus demonstrating the field’s potential by assembling a diversity of primary material. Kim thus characterizes the volume as a foundational but preliminary contribution to Korean Buddhist oral history, emphasizing that the work’s true significance lies in establishing a basis for more critically engaged and methodologically rigorous oral research in the future (K. Kim 2018).

4. The Subsequent Research of Kwang-sik Kim

4.1. Publications

Following the publication of *Modern Buddhist History...*, Kwang-sik Kim entered an extended and prolific period of oral history research, in the process becoming a leading authority in the field of Korean Buddhist oral history. Employing established oral history methodologies (see Section 2.3), Kim conducted extensive investigations into the lives of influential monastics who played central roles in shaping modern Korean Buddhism. Through interviews with individuals with direct connections to these figures, Kim collected and published firsthand testimony as a series of books which together represent a major quantitative contribution to the field of Korean Buddhist Studies. Based on interviews with 36 individuals connected with the influential Seon Master Ven. Cheongdam (1902–1981), Kim’s book *Ah! Cheongdam* (2004) marked the first Korean

Buddhist oral history work produced by a single individual scholar. Compiled from interviews with 25 people conducted over a year and a half, Kim's subsequent work, *The Dearly Missed Master: Venerable Hanam* (2006), revealed previously unknown aspects of the personality, lifestyle and meditation practice of *Seon* Master Hanam Jungwon (1876–1951), the Jogye Order's first patriarch. As noted by Jaesoo Lee, by 2018, around 80% of Kim's interviewees for this project had passed away, thus "highlight(ing) the urgent need" for additional oral history research.

In the course of Kim's next project covering the life of Master Dongsan (1890–1965), a leader during the Purification Movement and subsequent Supreme Patriarch of the JO, Kim encountered difficulties due to conflicting accounts from interviewees as well as objections from the project's financial sponsors. The resulting book, *A Living Buddha in My Heart: Venerable Dongsan and the Buddhist Purification Movement* (2007), effectively demonstrates the value of oral testimony in reconstructing the lives, ideas, and practices of key figures responsible for shaping modern Korean Buddhism. However, as Kim acknowledges in the introduction to the text (pp. 18–22), the project was explicitly commissioned to rebut criticism leveled against Master Dongsan in the 2006 publication *History of the Taego Order*. Thus, as Kim's *A Living Buddha in My Heart...* cannot be considered free from institutional biases and the agendas of its financial sponsors (K. Kim 2018, pp. 12–18; G. Lee 2008; J. Lee 2021).

Kim continued his extensive oral history studies over the following decade, researching the lives of both prominent and lesser-known monastics whose contributions to Korean Buddhism had been previously underrepresented. Through such works as *The Bodhisattva's Practice Manifested Everywhere: The Cultivation and Teachings of Venerable Seokam* (2011, 처처에 나툰 보살행: 석암 스님의 수행과 가르침), *Pillar of Mt. Odaesan: The Practice and Teachings of Seon Master Manhwa Heechan* (2011, 오대산의 버팀목: 만화희찬 선사의 수행과 가르침), and *Seon Master Bomoon: The Seon Master Who Disappeared into Myth* (2012, 보문선사: 신화 속으로 사라진 선승), Kim reconstructed the lives of his subjects by combining oral testimonies from their disciples and peers with documentary materials including letters, photographs, and newspaper records. Many of these projects required interviews with dozens of informants, both lay and monastic, conducted over extended periods across multiple locations (J. Lee 2021). Kim's later projects demonstrate the increasing scale and institutional significance of his oral history research. For example, *The Shadowless Tree of Bangsan-gul Cave* (2013, 탄허: 방산굴의 무영수), based on interviews with 65 individuals, presents a comprehensive portrait of Venerable Tanheo (1913–1983) and his wide-ranging roles as *Seon* master, Buddhist scholar, translator, and educator. Similarly, subsequent works such as *The Precepts Master Jaoon* (2017, 자운대율사), *The Daily Records of Hwangak: The Life and Teachings of Master Kwaneung* (2018, 관음 대종사 황악일지록), and *The Scent of Dharma: Reminiscences of Master Kyunbong* (2020, 삼소굴 법향) documented influential figures in modern Korean Buddhism through oral testimony.

In total, Kwang-sik Kim published a total of 13 books following his involvement with *Modern Buddhist History...*, in addition to numerous academic articles, illuminating the lives of notable monastic figures within the JO. In the course of his research, Kim interviewed over 500 individuals, lay and monastic, traveling thousands of kilometers to collect firsthand testimonies concerning figures whose legacies were largely preserved through personal memories, thus greatly expanding the primary sources available on modern Korean Buddhist history. As noted by Gyeongsun Lee, Kim's accomplishments are even more remarkable for having conducted all the interviewing, writing, editing and publication with almost no assistance (G. Lee 2008). Collectively, Kim's body of work provides a substantial corpus that not only enriches the study of modern Korean Buddhism

but also demonstrates how oral history can recover personal experiences, institutional developments, and intellectual traditions that might otherwise be lost.

4.2. Responses and Criticism

Jaesoo Lee has lauded Kim's efforts to collect testimonies regarding the lives of eminent Korean monastics as a "landmark" in the development of Korean Buddhist oral history, observing that Kim critically analyzes the relationship between historical events and individual experiences while organizing these narratives within a broader historical framework. According to Lee, Kim's work is particularly notable for its exploration of the inner thoughts and perspectives of its monastic subjects within their historical context. Furthermore, according to Lee, Kim's careful evaluation of oral testimony enhances the scholarly value of these materials, making his work an important resource for subsequent research (J. Lee 2021). Gyeongsun Lee has likewise praised Kim's work for providing "microscopic events" and anecdotes absent from written sources, noting how these "vividly portray the lives" of their subjects, providing readers with a more "three-dimensional understanding" of their personalities (G. Lee 2008).

While the volume of collected oral materials related to Korean Buddhist studies has grown substantially through Kim's efforts, Gyeongsun Lee nevertheless notes that such an expansion has largely failed to produce corresponding qualitative advancements. In Lee's assessment, there remains a limited methodological understanding of oral history among project planners, particularly within the Buddhist institutions funding such research. Lee further argues that many of Kim's projects have been shaped by overt commemorative and institutional agendas, which potentially compromise their academic neutrality and encourage self-censorship among interviewees. Thus, while the financial sponsorship provided by specific temples and disciple associations was essential to Kim's rapid accumulation of testimony, the resulting publications remain limited in their analytical scope. According to Lee, such projects fail to significantly deepen the field, as oral history is too often treated as a vehicle for praise rather than critical inquiry. Lee notes that, no matter how skilled the interviewer, Kim's interviewees unilaterally describe the research subjects favorably, fondly recalling their deeds before mourning their passing (G. Lee 2008, p. 79). It would appear that the sponsors and participants in Kim's research have conflated the purposes of Kim's oral history research with those of prior *Seon* oral traditions, which crafted hagiographies around "great monks," in part, to bring glory to one's monastic clan while reinforcing their legitimacy and religious authority.

Lee also finds methodological limitations in Kim's editing, data collection, and analysis. According to Lee, Kim's standardization of interview transcripts—such as the removal of dialect and colloquial expression—diminishes the authenticity and contextual richness of oral testimony. Thus, while such revision may improve grammatical accuracy and coherence, Lee claims this standardization effectively converts spoken language into a literary form, diminishing the immediacy of the testimony and obscuring the distinctive characteristics of regional dialects, accents and idioms (G. Lee 2008, p. 83). Lee further observes that, when relying on private financial sponsorship, researchers often face pressure to produce results rapidly, noting that, for *A Living Buddha in My Heart: Ven. Dongsan and the Buddhist Purification Movement*, Kim interviewed 33 individuals and completed the transcriptions within just five months. Although Kim, himself, had cautioned against superficial interview practices in 2003, Lee questions whether Kim was able to devote sufficient time to this project and if the resulting publication truly establishes oral history as a form of "hidden history" in any substantive sense (G. Lee 2008, pp. 84–85).

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Oral History in Western Buddhist Studies

Just as oral history research in modern Korean Buddhist studies has been shaped by the need to “fill the vacancies” in documentation regarding modern Korean Buddhist history (K. Kim 2018), so too has oral history in Western Buddhist Studies evolved to fill specific gaps; notably Western culture’s lack of familiarity with traditional Buddhist temples, monasteries, communities and cultures. As such, oral history in western Buddhist studies has emerged within broader ethnographic and historical approaches rather than as a distinct methodological subfield, frequently employed in anthropological studies of Buddhist communities “on the ground.” Early foundational works within this trend include Charles F. Keyes’s *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (1977) as well as Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere’s *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (1988), which helped establish the methodological importance of engaging Buddhist actors as narrators of their own traditions. This trajectory continued within works such as Robert Buswell’s *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea* (1992, see below) and anthropologist Juliane Schober’s *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (2011), which reconstruct lived Buddhist worldviews and praxis, in part, to counter Western stereotypes and misconceptions. Such anthropological approaches to oral history were soon applied to studies of transnational and diasporic Buddhism, as seen in Janet McLellan’s *Many Petals of the Lotus: Five Asian Buddhist Communities in Toronto* (1999) and anthropologist James William Coleman’s *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (2002), which rely on practitioners’ narratives to interrogate Buddhist identity formation and institutional adaptation. These approaches were similarly utilized in examinations of gendered experiences within Buddhist communities, such as Kim Gutschow’s *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas* (2009), which employs life-history interviews with Tibetan nuns to reconstruct female monastic experience in exile in Kashmir. More recent examples of this overall trend include Brian Nichols’s *Lotus Blossoms and Purple Clouds: Monastic Buddhism in Post-Mao China* (2022), which employs interviews, among other methodological tools, to engage in a “granular” examination of religious life within a single Buddhist temple in China.

Across this body of Western Buddhist Studies scholarship, oral history emerges less as a formally theorized methodology than as a set of practices embedded within ethnography, which foreground narrative, life histories and lived experience as indispensable sources for the study of modern and contemporary Buddhism. However, this line of scholarship has also consciously worked to overcome biases resulting from cultural distance, the lingering legacy of European colonialism, and the predominance of historical–textual studies with Western Religious Studies through much of the last century. Citing Harvard Religious Studies Professor Diana Eck, Brian Nichols thus insists that “scholars of Asian religions must take a dialogic approach to overcome the Orientalist bias that silences the self-representation of the other” (Nichols 2022, p. 6). Expanding on Eck’s point, Nichols further claims that this “(d)ialogue requires not only listening and (phenomenological) observation, but also clarity about researcher positionality and voice” which, according to Nichols, shifts according to “our audience, interests, or questions” (Nichols 2022, p. 6). However important Eck and Nichols’ points may be, they must also be understood within the context of their own positionality and voices, as they are specifically addressing Western scholars of Asian religions. It is highly debatable whether Asian scholars of Asian religions share the same struggle to overcome “Orientalist biases” that “silence the self-representation of the other” (Nichols 2022, p. 6).

Notably, two such anthropologically oriented studies utilizing oral history have been published by the former JO Buddhist monastics and Western Buddhist Studies scholars, Robert Buswell and Martine Batchelor. Described by Brian Nichols's as "best available study of a living East Asian monastic community" (Nichols 2022, p. 5), Buswell's book *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea* (1992) presents both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives in Buswell's detailed accounts of Korean Buddhist monasticism based on his own observations and "the personal testimony of contemporary monks" (Buswell 1992, p. xi) while ordained at Songgwangsa Temple in the 1970s and 80s. Batchelor's *Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices* (2006, Syracuse University Press) similarly provides dual emic and etic perspectives derived from her own decade spent as an ordained *biguni* at Naewonsa Temple in the 1970s and 80s, along with the inclusion of the oral autobiography of her *Seon* meditation instructor, Ven. Seongyong (1904–1996).

While broadly sharing related subject matter with the Korean Buddhist oral history projects discussed above in Sections 3 and 4, both Buswell's and Batchelor's books differ significantly in their positionality and voice as they are Westerner scholars writing for a western audience largely unfamiliar with Buddhist monasticism "on the ground" in hopes of rectifying Western misconceptions and stereotypes concerning Zen Buddhism (see Buswell 1992, pp. 4–17 for further discussion). Within these works, Buswell and Batchelor utilize oral history to supplement their own experiences as fully participating members of their respective Korean monastic communities, which are generally presented within an anthropological framework. Thus, despite their importance in introducing the living practices of Korean Buddhist monasticism to international audiences, neither Buswell's nor Batchelor's publications appears to have made any notable impact on the field of Buddhist oral history within Korea itself, as neither addresses the needs and concerns of Korean academics involved in modern Buddhist historical studies in the 1990s and 2000s (see Section 3.1 above). Nevertheless, comparisons between Buswell and Batchelor's works with *Modern Buddhist History...* and Kwang-sik Kim's publications are useful in bringing into sharper focus their respective differences in purpose, methodology, positionality and voice.

5.2. Discussion

In contrast with the prevalence of ethnographic approaches to oral history within Western Buddhist Studies, *Modern Buddhist History...* and the subsequent work of Kwang-sik Kim represent the predominance of what might be termed "salvage" oral history⁶ within the field of modern Korean Buddhist history. Due to the paucity of surviving records, oral history in Korean Buddhist studies has focused extensively on recording testimony from witnesses to major events in Korea's recent Buddhist history or from those who had direct contact with important 20th-Century Buddhist figures. Prompted by the JO's desire to clarify and legitimize its own history within the context of sectarian conflicts between rival orders and monastic lineages, such "salvage" oral history projects were further driven by the need to record the testimony of increasingly elderly witnesses before they passed away. In this respect, *Modern Buddhist History...* and Kim's subsequent publications have proven immensely valuable in preserving an extensive body of interviews as primary sources for current and future researchers.

The influence of *Modern Buddhist History...* and Kim's subsequent body of work have further impacted Korean Buddhist historiography by inspiring additional "salvage" oral history projects since the turn of the millennium. Beginning in 2004, the Jogye Order's Institute of Buddhist Studies (불학연구소) initiated a systematic program of collecting and archiving interviews with senior monastics to document the order's historical lineage, leading to the publication of volumes such as *Interview: Reflections, the Field and History of*

Practice (2006, ed. Kwang-sik Kim, 인터뷰: 회고, 수행의 현장과 역사). In 2009, Dongguk University's Institute for Korean Buddhist History (한국불교사연구소), in collaboration with the Academy of Korean Studies (한국학중앙연구원), launched the "Democratization and Religion (민주화와 종교)", oral history archive, which integrated Buddhist experiences into narratives of South Korea's late 20th-Century industrialization and democratization movement. Described by Jaesoo Lee as a "model" for future oral history archives, this project effectively synthesizes personal narratives with the nation's wider socio-political transformations (J. Lee 2021).

Despite the invaluable contributions of *Modern Buddhist History...* and Kwang-sik Kim's research, neither is unproblematic, as already noted by Kwang-sik Kim and Gyeongsun Lee themselves (see Sections 3.3 and 4.2 above). Lee and Kim have identified significant methodological and ethical limitations within these projects, observing that interviews were often narrowly structured, time-constrained, and insufficiently developed. They further argue that reliance on private funding pressures researchers to produce rapid results, thereby limiting deeper analysis and the exploration of emergent themes. Most critically, both scholars highlight conflicts of interest in privately commissioned research, which introduce systemic biases and compromise academic integrity. These issues are evident in projects such as *Modern Buddhist History...* and Kim's temple-funded studies, where selective interviewing, self-censorship, and uniformly positive portrayals reflect commemorative agendas rather than critical scholarship (J. Lee 2021).

Such conflicts of interest have prompted Lee to question whether the financial sponsors and planners of these projects possessed a "proper understanding" of oral history, or simply viewed it as a "tool" for bringing "glory" to their monastic lineages and the order (G. Lee 2008). Given the relatively recent introduction of oral history methodologies to Buddhist Studies in Korea, the JO-affiliated research sponsors have apparently conflated oral history with established oral traditions which help perpetuate the hagiographies of "great monks," legitimize monastic lineages and reinforce institutional values (see Section 2.1 above). While Western Buddhist studies researchers have worked to overcome "Orientalist biases" and the "othering" of their subjects due to their cultural distance, the Korean Buddhist studies oral history researchers discussed above have instead struggled to differentiate their positionality and voices from the oral traditions and the institutional agendas of their financial sponsors. The remedy, according to Lee, is to promote a deeper understanding of the purpose and methodologies of oral history among Korea's Buddhist community while also expanding oral history research into disenfranchised and minority members of said community (G. Lee 2008). While the authors agree, given the JO's schismatic post-war origins, it is questionable whether the order and its affiliated temples can reasonably be expected to publish research that casts doubt on their own legitimacy or criticizes prominent monastics. Rather, the onus lies on oral history researchers to articulate their own positionality and more clearly distance their own voices from those of their financial sponsors.

6. Conclusions

From daily sutra recitation in Buddhist monasteries to *Seon*'s emphasis on direct interpersonal encounters between masters and disciples, oral tradition has remained central to Korean Buddhism since its 4th-century CE introduction to the peninsula. As surveyed above, the contemporary adoption of oral history methodologies within the academic field of Korean Buddhist studies represents a distinct, yet related, development shaped by local historiographical necessity. Projects such as *Modern Buddhist History Seen through the Testimony of 22 People* and Kwang-sik Kim's extensive body of research have played a foundational role in introducing oral history to the field of Korean Buddhist

studies while preserving invaluable firsthand accounts of the nation's modern Buddhist history. However, these efforts also reveal significant methodological limitations and institutional challenges, including issues of bias, limited critical analysis, and the influence of sectarian and commemorative agendas. Consequently, while such "salvage" oral history has substantially expanded the body of primary sources filling in critical gaps in documentation left by the Korean War and its aftermath, the field's future scholarly value depends upon more rigorous methodological application, greater critical engagement, and a broader inclusion of diverse voices (see Section 5.2 above, J. Lee 2021). The field's future academic integrity likewise depends on Korean Buddhist oral history researchers more clearly differentiating their own voices from those of their interviewees, subjects or financial sponsors.

Over the last decade and a half, the field of Korean Buddhist oral history has begun expanding in these directions, as surveyed by scholar J. Lee (2021). In 2013, scholar Seung-mi Cho examined the status of female clergy in Korean Buddhism through in-depth interviews, focusing on the marginalized gender experiences of women from the Taego, Cheontae, and Jingak Orders. Her research is particularly significant for historicizing the lived experiences of Buddhist women, lay and monastic, through their oral testimonies. Subsequent research has also applied oral history methodologies to new themes, such as Sang-jun Hwang's exploration of Guanyin devotional practices within the experiences of Korea's female Buddhist monastics. Such research is a clear step beyond the misperception among Korea's Buddhist community of oral history serving merely as a tool for glorifying one's monastic lineage and crafting hagiographies of "great monks." It also represents a much-needed "shift from 'asking' to 'listening'" (SNU researcher Seon-hyeong Lee quoted in Gwon 2004). To help advance the field's development in these directions, Professor Jaesoo Lee has proposed the establishment of a digital "Buddhist Oral History Archive" to not only preserve recorded oral histories as public documents heritage but also enable collaborative, methodologically grounded research between scholars and institutions (J. Lee 2021).

While these projects are all positive developments in the field, Korean Buddhist oral historians might additionally benefit from further interrogating and clarifying their own positionality in relation to their research subjects, as found in the more ethnographic approaches of their Western counterparts. The crucial role played by oral tradition in maintaining the identity and legitimacy of Korea's various *Seon* lineages throughout the nation's tumultuous modern history is also a topic well deserving of further investigation. However, due to ongoing sectarian rivalries, such research would need to clearly establish its positionality as independent and sufficiently distanced from that of its subjects and institutional sponsors. Otherwise, such research risks simply serving as another tool for glorifying specific monastic orders by crafting hagiographies around great monks.

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Notes

- ¹ As examined by scholars such as John McRae and Bernard Faure, this apparent rejection of textual authority in fact depended upon a dynamic interplay between oral performance and retrospective textualization, with lineage narratives serving to legitimate transmission.
- ² Commissioned by the JO, in part, to legitimize the recent Purification Movement, this work was never published. However, photocopies of unpublished drafts have been circulated as informal source materials among Korean Buddhist studies scholars since the 1970s. The resulting four volumes document institutional structures, practices, educational activities, temple and financial records, and external relations, but are often difficult to interpret due to their fragmentary, diary-like, and dialogical format.
- ³ This debate was sparked by Seonwoo Doryeang's publication of scholar Hye-bong Im's *Pro-Japanese Buddhist Theory* (친일불교론) in 1993.
- ⁴ The 1994 conflict within the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism was a major reform movement and power struggle, often termed the 1994 Jogye Order Reform, which erupted over corruption, political collusion, and democratic control of the largest Buddhist order in South Korea. see Yoon (2012).
- ⁵ In addition to JO monastics and laity, the project additionally sought interviews with both monastics and laity outside the order, as well as participants from regions like Jeju Island and Jeolla Provinces.
- ⁶ The authors have borrowed this term from the fields of archeology, ethnography and anthropology, wherein it broadly denotes efforts to preserve artifacts or document cultural practices at risk of being lost.

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