From Liberal Feminist to Buddhist Nun

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Jin Y. Park. *Women and Buddhist Philosophy: Engaging Zen Master Kim Iryŏp*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017, pp. 274.

In her Women and Buddhist Philosophy *(2017), Jin Y. Park examines the life and philosophy of the Korean Zen Buddhist nun Kim Iryŏp. By retracing the evolution of Iryŏp's philosophy, the book not only explores a distinct way of doing philosophy—narrative philosophy—but also demonstrates a Buddhist nun's full agency in her conversion as well as her dedicated Buddhist practice.*

Key words: Iryŏp; Zen Buddhism; feminism; religious women; agency

Jin Y. Park explores the fascinating life and philosophy of the Korean Zen Buddhist nun Kim Iryŏp (1896-1971) in *Women and Buddhist Philosophy: Engaging Zen Master Kim Iryŏp*. Living through an era of utter political turmoil in Korea that spans the twentieth century, Iryŏp went through an extraordinary life transition from a trail-blazing liberal feminist ("New Woman") to a Buddhist nun. The book is divided into two parts: the first focuses on Iryŏp's life and philosophy before she encounters Buddhism, and the second chronicles her life and philosophy after she embraces Buddhism. Although this book could have been a straightforward biography that examines the life of an exceptional individual, Park's approach aspires to be more than that: its goal is to differentiate a distinct way of doing philosophy—what Park calls "narrative philosophy"—from mainstream western philosophy involving theories and abstraction. By examining how her life events affected the evolution of Iryŏp's thinking, Park aims to illustrate narrative philosophy, a kind of philosophy that "deeply engages [...] with the narrative discourse of [one's] daily experiences" (6). According to Park, this approach to philosophy is congenial to "women's way of doing philosophy" (6) as well as to Buddhist philosophy, which also emphasizes "lived experience" (184). Unsurprisingly, both have been marginalized in mainstream western philosophy. As a woman who embraced Buddhism, Iryŏp's philosophy would be in "a double-minority position" (14).

In addition to validating the narrative philosophy of a Korean Zen Buddhist nun, this book's value can also be found in its contribution to the decolonial and/or postcolonial feminist literature questioning the liberal assumptions of mainstream western feminism. Western feminism, especially liberal feminism, has replicated the liberal perspective in assessing religious women's agency and actions in "third world" contexts; the liberal perspective has invariably considered third world religious women who dedicate themselves to their religious authority—whether they be Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist—as either victims or puppets of their patriarchal religion and, therefore, as compromised in agency. Decolonial and/or postcolonial feminists who have ties to the third world have attempted to expose the problematic assumptions of liberal feminism by reclaiming agency for third world religious women.[1] The late Saba Mahmood's meticulous ethnography of the female Mosque Movement participants in Egypt (2005) provides an excellent example. Some notable work has also been produced to dislodge liberal feminist assumptions with respect to female Buddhist "renunciants." Nirmala Salgado (2013), for example, argues against the western feminist tendency to turn religious lives of religious practitioners into a problem to be resolved according to the liberal

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framework (4). These projects to reclaim agency for religious women in third world contexts are consistent with the aim of feminism broadly understood, which is to empower women in specific cultural contexts.

Iryŏp's life and philosophy serve as evidence that a Buddhist nun is a full agent in not only her conversion but also her continuous dedicated Buddhist practice. Earlier in life, Iryŏp was not only a foremost Korean first-generation feminist, but she was also raised a Christian by her Christian minister father. Iryŏp was one of the first generation of Korean women who had been exposed to western-style education and endorsed western feminism—dubbed the New Women. She even studied in Japan for a few years; upon returning to Korea, she published the first magazine for women, entitled "New Women," and advocated social "reformation" and women's "emancipation" (30). Among three groups of New Women (liberal, socialist, and nationalist), Iryŏp belonged to the liberal group (32), which is known not only for its advocacy of gender equality but also for its members' liberal approach to sexual relationships, which the Korean public at the time considered licentious. Consequently, representative liberal New Women were judged harshly by Korean society and met their tragic and untimely death.

One aspect of Iryŏp's philosophy that was less known at the time is her idea of "new individualism," which emphasized the individual's awareness uncontaminated by social influence that would provide an anchor for her identity (73). Her relentless pursuit of one's pure awareness eventually led her to Korean Zen Buddhism after listening to Zen Master Mangong's dharma talk (84). One of the most fundamental Zen Buddhist claims is that "sentient beings are already buddhas, just as they are" (95). A buddha is "the awakened being" (95), and the awakening involves the realization that nothing in the world is self-sufficient, unchanging, or permanent. The only difference between a buddha and a mere sentient being is the awakening. In Korean Zen Buddhism, *hwadu* meditation, which is "a practice of focusing one's mind on a single thought" (94), is considered the best way to awaken practitioners. Through this practice, one discovers the buddha within oneself, and the goal of Buddhism, the elimination or avoidance of suffering, can be thereby attained (96). Through almost thirty years of her Buddhist practice, Iryŏp realized that her ultimate goal in life, which unified her younger days as a New Woman and her mature days as a Buddhist nun, was to find the answer to the question, "What is the value of human existence?" The quest to find the real "I" or the self is what initially prompted her to endorse western feminism and later led her to embrace Buddhism (122).

So, what is the real "I?" In life, most people identify with a self that is conditioned and determined by external circumstances—"the small-I." Yet such an I is not in control of one's actions, as external circumstances are in principle beyond one's control. Consequently, there is constant unhappiness or discontent, or "suffering." The small-I, however, is not the only I; in contrast to it is the "great-I," which is "free to act on its own." If the small-I is a ripple in the ocean, then the great-I is the ocean itself. Although they are different, they are not entirely separate. Most people focus on the small-I, its activities and its consequences—waves—and lament the suffering caused by them. When "the structure of our existence" is examined, these activities and consequences are not fragmentary and separate but rather encompassed by a larger and deeper substratum of causes and conditions—the ocean. Once this broader perspective is taken, then we can be liberated from the suffering caused by mere waves. The real I is the great-I, and only when we identify with the great-I can we find in ourselves the buddha, which is "the unity of phenomena in the universe" (123).

On the whole, Park's book is a wonderful contribution to the literature at the intersection of feminism (understood broadly) and Buddhist philosophy. It is effective in exemplifying the

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intersection in its sympathetic focus on one remarkable woman who wholeheartedly embraced Buddhism as the answer to her life's quest. Its relatively plain narrative devoid of philosophical jargon makes this book accessible to a wide audience. It should prove a helpful resource for teachers and for researchers who work in this field.

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1 For a detailed discussion on this, please see: Ranjoo S. Herr, "Islamist Women's Agency and Relational Autonomy," *Hypatia* 33, no. 2, (2018): 195-215.

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