FROM ASCETIC TO ACTIVIST: JIYUL SUNIM’S KOREAN BUDDHIST ECO-MOVEMENT

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Abstract

This paper considers the ecological activism of the Korean Buddhist nun Jiyul Sunim, an undertaking necessitated by the widespread, rapid industrialisation and development of modern South Korea. Jiyul Sunim was a Buddhist nun of Naewon-sa, a monastery located in Mt. Cheonseong in southeast Korea, where a controversial 13-kilometer express-train tunnel was to be constructed. If constructed, the tunnel would have linked Korea’s two major cities, Seoul and Busan, via a two-hour high-speed rail line. However, it would have also caused irreparable damage to the environment and ecosystems of Mt. Cheonseong, threatening the health of numerous species of plant and animal life. Over the next few years, Jiyul engaged in a variety of demonstration activities, conducting numerous sit-ins, pilgrimages, filing a ‘non-human’ class action suit on behalf of clawed salamanders, and hunger strikes, including a 99 day fast-unto-death protest in 2005, demanding the government suspend the tunnel project. Even though the tunnel was ultimately completed in 2010 and the express train service has begun, no other figure in Modern Korean history has elicited more acute debate and controversy surrounding economic development, environmental damage, and its consequences. At the same time, due to her efforts, consideration for the environmental impact of Korean development is no longer a foreign concept. Indeed, her influence in raising environmental awareness in Korean society has been so great that one may clearly demarcate pre- and post-Jiyul periods. Through her Green Resonance Movement she maintained the belief that all things in life are inter-connected and that if one part of nature is broken, then all parts of nature are broken. The movement has also become a spiritual inspiration to Korean eco-feminist movements, as it embraces the maternal powers of the earth as a way to bring peace and balance to our planet. Her activism offers an exceptional case study of the practical application of Buddhist concepts of nature and environmentalism, while also demonstrating a unique interpretation of eco-feminism drawn from Buddhist concepts.

1. Introduction

This paper introduces and explores the efforts of the Korean Buddhist nun, Jiyul Sunim (born 1957; Sunim is an honorific title for Korean Buddhist
monks and nuns), beginning in 2001 and still continuing, to protect the natural environment of Korea, an enterprise necessitated by the widespread rapid industrialisation and growth of modern Korea. Her efforts were preceded by environmental conservation battles between environmental activist organisations and the government, in such developments as the Saemangeum Tidal Flat Filling project (Saemangeum gancheok saeop), a large-scale government-led development project. However, it was Jiyul Sunim in particular who has brought the ‘environment’ to the public as a national issue—not only to the Buddhist community but also to Korean society at large. Her protest against the development of Mt. Cheonseong in southeast Korea brought to bear a profound awareness of the importance of the preservation of the ecosystem and the sacredness of life.

It was predictable, following the unprecedented industrialisation and the rapid growth of South Korea over the past 50 years, what kind of damage such development would wreak on the environment. In addition to the process of westernisation and its transition to a capitalist economy in modern times, Korean society has adopted development and growth as national ideologies. In particular, a string of national development plans such as mudflat land reclamations, the creation of high-speed rail lines, and the recent damming of rivers have brought about severe environmental devastation. Environmental activist organisations were founded in critique of these national ideologies of development. While the majority of those participating in such efforts brought a secular viewpoint to their political activism, there were those such as Jiyul Sunim who arrived at this point from a more spiritual trajectory.

This study will analyse her writings and her series of actions to illustrate her eco-feminist and Buddhist foundations—Buddhist ecological thought and women’s perceptiveness are indeed the key words for understanding her activism. Her activism is an application of Buddhist ideas about nature and environmentalism that simultaneously shapes and is shaped

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1 Saemangeum is a tidal flat estuary on the west coast of South Korea. The project of filling the flat by building a seawall 33 kilometres long began in 1991, commissioned by the Korean government. After much delay due to a long fight between the government and environmental activists through a series of court actions, the seawall construction was completed in 2006, and the development project in 2010. However, contrary to the original announcement that the land was to be converted into agricultural and industrial land, the economic value of the added land was not as high as was expected. The majority of the land turned out to be useless and is now being used for tours and leisure, standing empty for the most part.