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Ecology, Dharma and Direct Action: A Brief Survey of Contemporary Eco-Buddhist Activism in Korea

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Abstract

Over the last few decades there has emerged a small, yet influential eco-Buddhism movement in South Korea which, since the turn of the millennium, has seen several Sŏn (J. Zen) Buddhist clerics engage in high-profile protests and activism campaigns opposing massive development projects which threatened widespread ecological destruction. This article will survey the issues and events surrounding three such protests; the 2003 *samboilbae*, or 'three-steps-one-bow', march led by Venerable Sukyŏng against the Saemangeum Reclamation Project, Venerable Jiyul's Anti-Mt. Chŏnsŏng tunnel hunger-strike campaign between 2002 and 2006, and lastly Venerable Munsu's self-immolation protesting the Four Rivers Project in 2010. This article will additionally analyze the attempts by these clerics to deploy innovative and distinctively Buddhist forms of protest, the effects of these protests, and how these protests have altered public perceptions of the role of Buddhist clergy in Korean society. This study will additionally highlight issues relevant to the broader discourse regarding the intersection of Buddhism and social activism, such as the appropriation of traditional Buddhist practices as protest tactics and the potential for conflict between social engagement and the pursuit of Buddhist soteriological goals.

Keywords

Korean Buddhism, eco-Buddhism, engaged Buddhism, *samboilbae*, Sukyŏng, Jiyul

Introduction

On 31 March 2010, the Buddhist monk, Venerable Munsu, seated himself in meditation beside the banks of Wichŏn stream in South Korea's Kyŏngsang Province and burned himself to death in protest against the government's controversial Four Rivers Project: a massive development project which critics claimed would result in widespread ecological destruction (Cho, Jae-eun 2010).[1] Munsu's self-immolation was the latest in a series of actions involving Korean Buddhist clergy protesting against large-scale development projects that threatened ecosystems vital to the survival of endangered species. Yet, despite the extensive coverage of these protests in South Korean media, there has been little mention of these events, and the Korean eco-Buddhist movement as a whole, within broader global academic discourse concerning the intersection of Buddhism and ecology (hereafter 'eco-Buddhism').[2]

In the decades following the publication of Lynn White's seminal article 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' (1967), there has been much discussion regarding eco-Buddhism in the west. However, perhaps reflecting latent 'Protestant' tendencies within the western Buddhist Studies discipline, academic discourse regarding eco-Buddhism has focused primarily on the potential for utilizing Buddhist texts and doctrines to formulate ecological ethics (Lancaster 1997, 8; Swearer 2005, 3–4).[3] However, some scholars, deemed the 'eco-contextualists' by Donald Swearer, have instead chosen to examine the ways in which contemporary Buddhist communities are formulating ecological ethics and practices in response to local circumstances (Swearer 2005).[4] Based on Susan Darlington's research concerning the 'environmentalist monks' of Thailand, Seth Devere Clippard has argued for a reorientation of the investigative methodology within eco-Buddhist studies towards the examination of situations wherein local 'Buddhist discourse and practice influence and intersect with the "discourse of environmental concern"' (Clippard 2011, 215–216).

This article will examine the issues and events surrounding three such intersections wherein, as with the 'environmentalist monks' of Thailand, Korean Buddhist clergy have engaged in direct action to preserve ecosystems and endangered species threatened by developers (Clippard 2011, 216–217).[5] Specifically

1. McCuneReischauer Korean transliteration will be used herein, with the exception of names commonly transliterated otherwise.
2. Anthologies, such as *Buddhism and Ecology* (ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryūken Williams, 1997), and more recent books, including Simon P. James's *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (2004), lack any significant discussion concerning Korean Buddhism.
3. Stephen Prothero (1995) identifies within Colonel Henry Steel Olcott's 'Protestant Buddhism' the tendency to seek the 'normative and essential' aspects of Buddhism within the religion's texts rather than its popular practice. Within Swearer's five-fold taxonomy of contemporary approaches to the field of eco-Buddhist studies, the first four – the eco-apologists, eco-critics, eco-constructivists and eco-ethicists – primarily focus on the interpretation of Buddhist texts and doctrine.
4. For more on Darlington's research, see Darlington 1998 and 2003.
5. Clippard distinguishes broadly between 'textual' and 'practical' strategies within local eco-Buddhist discourse. While both are utilized within the Korean eco-Buddhism movement, this article will focus on 'practical' strategies, which Clippard defines as 'activist and ritual responses to environmental crises'.

this article will survey three events: the 2003 *samboilbae*, or 'three-steps-one-bow', march led by Venerable Sukyŏng protesting the Saemangeum Reclamation Project, Venerable Jiyul's Anti-Mt. Chŏnsŏng tunnel hunger-strike campaign between 2002 and 2006, and lastly Venerable Munsu's self-immolation protesting the Four Rivers Project in 2010. This investigation will examine the attempts of these clerics to deploy innovative and distinctively Buddhist responses to their circumstances which, in turn, have altered public perceptions regarding the roles of Buddhist clergy in Korean society. This study will additionally highlight issues relevant to the wider global discourse regarding Buddhism and social activism, such as the utilization of traditional Buddhist practices as protest tactics as well as potential conflict between activism and Buddhist soteriological goals. Furthermore, it is hoped that this article will provide a challenge to the claims of some of Swearer's 'eco-critics' that eco-Buddhism is not authentically Buddhist but is rather a 'modern American initiative' driven by the 'American environmental movement' and the 'liberal elite' (Clippard 2011, 215; Swearer 2005, 10; Harris 1995, 173).[6]

Background

The Korean environmental movement

As the protests surveyed in this article were conducted within the context of Korea's contemporary eco-Buddhism movement, which itself represents an intersection between socially-engaged Buddhism and the environmental movement in Korea, this article will begin with a review of the recent history of these movements in order to provide a foundation for subsequent discussion. Originating in the 1960s and 1970s with collective demands for restitution by victims of industrial pollution, the South Korean environmental movement first arose as a cohesive national anti-pollution movement in the early 1980s, operating in conjunction with the wider pro-democracy movement. However, following the resignation of dictator Chun Doo-hwan (in office 1980–1987) after the 'June Uprising' (*Yuwŏl minjuhangjaeng*) and the nation's subsequent transition to democracy, the Korean environmental movement's ideology shifted from leftist anti-capitalism towards a 'realist' environmentalism. Endeavoring to 'green the state' from the top down through the newly democratized government, the early 1990s saw the formation of environmental NGOs, such as the Korea Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM) and Green Korea United (GKU), which work to improve the quality of life and to ensure the environmental sustainability of economic growth. Wielding national power, these NGOs have become the mainstay of the Korean environmental movement and have played critical roles in the environmental preservation campaigns surveyed herein (Cho, Myung-Rae 2004, 148–153; Ku 2009, 5; Ku 2011, 208–209).

6. As summarized by Swearer, Ian Harris views 'Buddhist environmentalism as an expression of a type of globalization that promotes an erosion of culture-specific boundaries and a homogenization or uniformity of attitude that overrides significant differences in doctrine and practice'. However, it is the authors' opinion that such a view risks disregarding specific local issues surrounding the involvement of Buddhist practitioners in ecological activism, such as those surveyed herein.

However, the efficacy of the environmental movement's top-down orientation was challenged by both the financial crisis of the late 1990s and the election of the neo-liberal conservative President Lee Myung-bak in 2007. These challenges prompted the emergence of an 'ecological alternative' sub-movement seeking to create small-scale, bottom-up changes within local communities and to establish environmentally sustainable livelihoods and lifestyles. Involving grass-roots organizations, such as agricultural cooperatives and intentional communities, this sub-movement includes the activities of several socially-engaged Buddhist organizations, such as the Jungto Society and the Indra's Net Community (Ku 2009, 3–8, 13–16; Park, Pori 2010, 34).

The *minjung pulgyo* movement

Contemporary Korean Buddhist social engagement originated, in part, with the radical *minjung pulgyo*, or 'Buddhism for the masses', movement of the late 1970s and 1980s (Park, Jin Y. 2008, 237–138 n10). Beginning in the mid-1970s, Venerable Pŏpchŏng (1932–2010) and other dissident Buddhist monks began to challenge the nationalist ideology of dictator Park Chung-hee (r. 1962–1979) and his government's interference in Buddhist affairs, often facing government harassment or imprisonment in response (Park, Pori 2006, 211; Sørensen 1999, 138–139).[7] The Chun Doohwan (r. 1980–1988) regime's violent anti-Buddhist repression in 1980 and 1981 subsequently radicalized a younger generation of *minjung pulgyo* activists (Jorgensen 2010, 275–279).[8] Drawing inspiration from a variety of Buddhist traditions, these activists advocated for progressive reform within the Korean *Saṅgha* while also participating in the broader *minjung* pro-democracy movement of the 1980s (Jorgensen 2010, 277; Park, Jin Y. 2008, 128).[9] However, the *minjung pulgyo* movement's socialist biases and political involvements alienated many mainstream Buddhists and the movement dissolved following the country's transition to democracy (Jorgensen 2010, 297; Park, Pori 2010, 31). While the *minjung pulgyo* movement played but a minor role in the broader pro-democracy movement, it set a precedent and established doctrinal support for the involvement of Korean Buddhist clergy in social activism. Moreover, numerous participants in the *minjung pulgyo* movement would later become activists and leaders within socially-engaged Buddhist organizations and, over the following decades, they would attempt to articulate new and 'uniquely Buddhist' forms of social engagement (Park, Pori 2010).[10]

7. Enacted in 1961, the controversial *Pulgyo chaesan kwali pŏp* ('Law for the Control of Buddhist Properties') granted the government the authority to make administrative appointments within the *Saṅgha*, manage Buddhist assets and properties, and maintain police agents within Buddhist temples. The regime also required Buddhist leaders to publicly swear allegiance to President Park; those that refused were harassed or expelled from the *Saṅgha*.

8. On 27 October 1980 government troops forcefully entered 3,000 Buddhist temples, harassed, beat and arrested resident clergy and confiscated temple treasuries. Of the almost 200 Buddhist clergy and laity detained during this action, many were tortured, resulting in several deaths, and subsequently sent for 're-education'. In December 1981, the Chun regime suppressed the *Sawŏnhwa* Buddhism movement, which sought to utilize Buddhist monasteries as centers of pro-democracy activity. Over 130 members of this movement were arrested and convicted of promoting socialism under South Korea's National Security Law.

9. *Minjung pulgyo* writers cite early Buddhism and anti-authoritarian elements of the Korean Sŏn tradition as a few of their inspirations.

10. For a survey of socially-engaged Buddhist organizations in Korea, see Tedesco 2003.

The Korean eco-Buddhism movement

The Korean eco-Buddhist movement originated in the late 1980s and, during the 1990s, grew in parallel with both the wider environmental and socially-engaged Buddhist movements. Founded in 1988 by former *minjung pulgyo* activist, Venerable Pŏmnyun (b. 1953), the Jungto Society (*Chŏngto hoe*), or 'Society for the Pure Land' (hereafter 'JTS'), espouses a form of 'Buddhist-inspired eco-idealism'. The JTS has led numerous successful ecological campaigns since its inception, and additionally provided support for Jiyul during and after her hunger-strike campaign (Park, Pori 2010, 32–34; Tedesco 2003, 166–169).[11] In 1994, the *minjung pulgyo* leader Pŏpchŏng established the Buddhist volunteer organization *Malgo Hyanggiropge*, or 'Clean and Fragrant Movement for Living', based in Seoul's Gilsangsa Temple.[12] Then, in 1996, the Jogye Order, Korea's largest Buddhist sect,[13] established their 'Committee for the Protection of the Environment of Buddhist Monasteries', signaling official acknowledgement of the importance of Korea's environmental movement (Yoon 2011, 200–201). Inspired by the teachings of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Hwaŏm Kyŏng*) in 1999 the progressive Buddhist cleric, Venerable Tobŏp (b. 1949), founded the 'Indra's Net Life Community' (*Indramang saengmyong godongch'e,* hereafter 'Indra's Net'; Park, Pori 2010, 37; Tedesco 2003, 174).[14] Based at Silsangsa Temple in the Jiri Mountains, Indra's Net has been involved in organic farming and farming education, cooperative living and alternative schooling among other projects (Yoon 2011).[15]

In 2000, government plans to construct a dam in the Jiri Mountains prompted Tobŏp and Venerable Sukyŏng (b. 1949), a Sŏn Master residing at Silsangsa Temple, to join the successful anti-Jirisan Dam campaign. Ordained at Sudeoksa Temple in 1967, Sukyŏng had spent his prior three-decade monastic career focused on the practice of *Kanhwa Sŏn* (C. *Kanhua Chan*) meditation. However, after entering the Anti-Jiri Dam Campaign, Sukyŏng was elected president of the 'Buddhist Movement for the Nullification of the Dam Construction' (*Pŏppulgyoyŏndaewa Chirisansalligi Gungminhaengdong*) and, following his involvement in additional environmental preservation campaigns, he founded 'Buddhist Environmental Solidarity' (Pulgyo Hwan'gyŏng Yŏnhap, hereafter 'BES') in 2001.

11. Pŏmnyun was expelled from the Sŏrim Sŏnwon Buddhist meditation center in 1984 due to his *minjung pulgyo* involvements and was later imprisoned for his political activities. For more on the history and activities of the JTS see Park, Pori 2010 or visit www.jungto.org/english/ (28 March 2014).

12. For more information on Pŏpchŏng and *Malgo Hyanggiropge*, visit www.gilsangsa.or.kr/aaa_eng/home/default_in.asp (28 March 2014)

13. Currently possessing 13,000 monastics, half the number in Korea, and the majority of nation's temples, the Jogye Order (Taehan bulgyo jogyejong) regards itself as both a continuation of the 'Patriarchal' Sŏn (J. Zen) tradition and the mainstream of Korean Buddhism.

14. Tobŏp was once voted the most revered living monk in Korea and has frequently advocated for progessive reforms within the Jogye Order.

15. For more information on Indra's Net, see Park, Pori 2010.

The *Samboilbae* march of the anti-Saemangeum Reclamation Project campaign

During his participation in the successful Anti-Donggang Dam Campaign in 2001 Sukyŏng introduced the practice of *samboilbae*, or 'three-steps-and-one-bow', as a new means of protest. While prostration practices, such as the *baekpalbae suhaeng*, or '108 prostrations of repentance', have long been part of Korean Buddhist tradition, the *samboilbae* practice of walking three steps followed by a full body prostration originates with the Tibetan Buddhist practice of *yan lag lnglng'ai phyag.* Commonly undertaken by pilgrims to Mt. Kailash seeking to expunge their bad karma, this practice typically involves taking one step followed by a single bow but occasionally includes three steps as repentance for the Three Poisons or as homage to the Three Jewels. *Samboilbae* was first introduced to Korea during monastic training sessions at Tongdosa Temple in 1992 and was practiced during lay retreats later in the decade. Thus, while *samboilbae* was a recent import from Tibetan Buddhism, Sukyŏng appropriated this traditional Buddhist practice to invent a new, non-violent, and recognizably Buddhist protest tactic (Ch'oe, Sŏnggak 2004, 274; Yu, Gippŭm 2005, 294).

Ultimately costing over 2.5 billion U.S. dollars, the Saemangeum Reclamation Project (hereafter 'SRP') was the world's largest land reclamation project at its time. Originally intended to reclaim 400 square kilometers of tidal flats for rice farming, construction of the SRP's 33 kilometer-long sea wall began 1991. However, opposition to the SRP arose in 1996 following severe environmental degradation at a similar land reclamation site. As opposition grew, environmentalists charged that the SRP would destroy 40,000-hectares of vital coastal wetlands habitat for over 370 species of marine life and dozens of species of migratory waterfowl.[16] Moreover, critics alleged that the project would cost numerous local residents their livelihoods and, as the government had since terminated its policy promoting rice production, the SRP no longer served a clear purpose (Catholic Priests' Association for Justice 2003; Ku 2011, 216–218; Min 2003; Moores 2003).

President Roh Moo-hyun's (in office 2003–2008) retraction of a campaign promise to cancel the SRP prompted the *samboilbae* protest in March of 2003. Beginning on March 28, Sukyŏng led an inter-faith group of four religious leaders, including Catholic clergyman Paul Moon Kyu-hyun, Protestant Reverend Lee Hee-won and the Won Buddhist cleric Kyomu Kim Kyung-il, on a silent *samboilbae* march over a distance of 300 kilometers from the Saemangeum tidal flats to Seoul. In their press-release at the start, the group of four called for President Roh to end the decade of 'destruction and death' at the Saemangum tidal flats. They also declared their march to be an act of personal 'prayer and penance', confessing that:

> We, too, are accomplices to this situation. The criminals of this endless violence and destruction are our egoism and avarice, our indifference and composure [sic] to any problems other than our own, and our everyday life of becoming slaves to capitalism and materialism. (Green Korea United 2003a)

The *samboilbae* march finally reached Seoul's City Hall Plaza after 65 days on 31 May 2003. The march had been extremely physically challenging for the four,

16. Many of these species are classified as threatened or endangered. For further discussion, see Moores 2003.

who made approximately 2,000 prostrations daily, resulting in Sukyŏng's brief hospitalization during the march (Catholic Priests' Association for Justice 2003). However, as Sukyŏng recalled in a speech the following January:

> It was of course painful, but it was also joyful. It was genuine happiness through repentance. As a disciplinant [sic] I think I just followed the simple truth, 'Your pain is my own'. I came to realize on a deeper level that 'You are my own root, and I am your own root'. (Sukyŏng 2004)

The marchers' determination and physical suffering garnered the anti-SRP *samboilbae* march widespread media coverage and sympathy among the general public. As the march entered Seoul, the number of marchers swelled to almost 500 and were greeted by 7,000 supporters upon their arrival at Seoul's City Hall. The march succeeded in swaying public opinion against the SRP and, in July, the Seoul Administrative Court approved a petition to suspend construction on the SRP. However, after a decade of construction, costing the government several billion U.S. dollars, the project was nearly finished. In 2006, the Supreme Court ruled for the continuation of the project, which was completed in just over a month (Catholic Priests' Association for Justice 2003; Ku 2011, 218; Min 2003).

Despite the anti-SRP campaign's ultimate failure, the success of the anti-SRP *samboilbae* march in shifting public opinion prompted the diffusion of this new tactic throughout Korean protest culture. The humility, painful self-sacrifice and personal repentance embodied by *samboilbae* march radically distinguished the marchers from the antagonism and physical violence common at South Korean protests, thus attracting the sympathy of the general public and bolstering the protest's perceived legitimacy. As an original and effective 'tactic of persuasion' (Biggs 2013, 408),[17] the practice of *samboilbae* quickly spread beyond the environmental movement and soon was adopted by a wide variety of causes, joining the broader repertoire of protest tactics in South Korea (Jo, Sŏngyun 2009, 1054–1055).[18] However, owing to a lack of international media coverage, there has yet to be a diffusion of the use of *samboilbae* as a protest tactic outside Korea.

Domestically, widespread media images depicting Protestant and Catholic clergy following a Buddhist monk in prostrations to the sound of a *moktok* presented Korean Buddhism in a new light. As previously noted by co-author Young-Hae Yoon (2011), over the preceding decades Buddhist social activists had largely followed Christian leadership in protest movements and had imitated Christian forms of social engagement. However, the anti-SRP *samboilbae* march was the first instance in contemporary history wherein Buddhist clerics had assumed leadership within high-profile social movements. By leading Christian social activists in a protest tactic that was recognizably Buddhist, the anti-SRP *samboilbae* march altered popular views regarding the role of Buddhist clergy and Buddhism within Korean society (Jo, Sŏngyun 2009, 1054–1055; Yoon 2011, 203–204).

17. Biggs describes 'tactics of persuasion' as serving several functions: gaining the attention of distant audiences, conveying the seriousness of the cause, and inspiring fellow activists to strive harder.

18. Jo discusses subsequent *sambolilbae* marches conducted by an Ulsan construction union in 2005, anti-KORUS FTA activists and a Wonju Teachers' Union in 2006, and the Movement for the Protection of Nakdong River in 2009, among numerous others.

Venerable Jiyul's hunger-strike campaign against the Mt. Chŏnsŏng high-speed train tunnel

The government first announced its plan to drill a 13 kilometer-long tunnel through Mt. Chŏnsŏng in 1990 as part of a national high-speed rail network. Intended to reduce the travel time between Daegu and Busan by nearly an hour, the government conducted its Environmental Impact Assessment (hereafter EIA) of the tunnel in 1994 (Green Korea United 2005; Lee, Sun-yong, 2005). However, it wasn't until April 2001 that the Buddhist nun Venerable Jiyul (b. 1957), a decade-long resident of Mt. Chŏnsŏng's Naewonsa Temple, first learned of the tunnel. Ordained in 1992, Jiyul had never intended to become an activist; rather her monastic life had centered on meditation and religious activities at Naewonsa. Yet, during one of her frequent hikes as temple 'forest ranger', she encountered a forklift driving up the mountain, which she followed. Upon arriving upon the tunnel's construction site, the environmental destruction she witnessed brought her to tears (Jo, Ŭnsu 2011, 130). Jiyul herself recalls her experience in a poem:

> I cannot forget the moment when the mountain called upon me, a lazy monastic. A faint cry seeped through the noise of the fork lift hushed under the noise of rocks being drilled, 'Is anyone there? Please save me.' This pitiful cry was more terrifying than the sound of God ... (Jiyul 2004, 30–31)

Unable to forget this dramatic encounter, Jiyul began her anti-tunnel campaign by researching and documenting Mt. Chŏnsŏng's unusual wildlife, which includes 30 endangered species of flora and fauna residing in patches of unique swampland habitat on the mountain's slopes. She was soon joined by other environmental groups in her opposition to the tunnel's construction. Protesting that the project's EIA had been conducted too rapidly, they feared the tunnel would adversely affect the mountain's water table and drain the swamplands, killing off the endangered species in residence (Green Korea United, 2003b).

During his 2002 election campaign, Roh Moo-hyun had pledged to conduct a new EIA and reevaluate the tunnel's construction. However, as with the SRP, the Roh administration reneged on its promise and, in early 2003, construction proceeded as planned. This announcement prompted Jiyul's first hunger-strike; which ended after 38 days with the government's promise to halt construction and reevaluate the project. That summer Jiyul continued her protest with a 43 day-long sit-in, during which she made 3,000 prostrations daily in front of the Busan City Hall, followed by an eight-day *sambolilbae* march from Naewonsa Temple to Busan in late September.

In October of 2003 the Review Commission ruled the tunnel's construction would continue, motivating Jiyul's second hunger-strike. That month Jiyul additionally filed a class action lawsuit against the government on behalf of the endangered Long-tailed Clawed Salamander (*Onychodactylus fischeri*), a resident of Mt. Chŏnsŏng's swampland habitat. Popularly known as the 'salamander class-action suit', this controversial and unprecedented litigation demanded that the government halt construction and re-conduct the EIA. Furthermore, the suit established the Clawed Salamander as a symbol for Jiyul's campaign and, after 170,000 signatures had been collected in support, Jiyul ended her 45-day fast (Lee, Sun-yong 2005; Green Korea United 2005; Ser 2009). In her 2004 book *Jiyul Comes*

out of the Forest [*Chiyul Supesŏ Naoda*], which contains her diary of this hunger-strike along with essays, letters from supporters and photos, Jiyul wrote:

> Since the groans of pain of the life in the ground won't stop, I gladly go out to the streets and give my life away, if this meaningless body can be thrown away to save the many lives in nature. (Jiyul 2004, 36)

Following her third, 58 day-long hunger strike in front of Seoul's Presidential Palace in the summer of 2004, the government took legal action against Jiyul and, in October, indicted her on charges of obstructing state business. Later that month, the government again revoked its promise to halt construction, leading Jiyul to begin her fourth hunger strike. By that winter both the lawsuit and her hunger strikes had made Jiyul and the Mt. Chŏnsŏng Tunnel subjects of national controversy. However, after three months of fasting, Jiyul's health began to fail. Individual lawmakers began calling for a reevaluation of the Chŏnsŏng Tunnel project while citizens groups and public figures, including Pŏmnyun of the JTS, launched a 'Save Jiyul' campaign; holding demonstrations and candlelight vigils in her support (Kang, Erica 2005; Digital Chosun 2005; Green Korea United 2005; Kang, Kap-saeng 2005a; Ser 2009).

On 4 February 2005 Jiyul ended her hunger strike after its 100th day following the government's agreement to re-conduct of the EIA with a joint committee of environmentalists and representatives of the Korea Rail Network Authority (hereafter 'KRNA'). However, almost immediately after convening that April, the committee fell into conflict. Then, a month prior to the publication of the official EIA report in December, a KRNA official told the press that the EIA demonstrated that there would be little environmental impact from the tunnel. Angered by what they charged was the leaking of false information, the environmentalists on the committee threatened a boycott, in turn prompting the KRNA to announce that it would complete the tunnel regardless of the committee's findings. Meanwhile, Jiyul had launched her fifth and final hunger strike 'until death', which ended in late January 2006 when, after 120 days, Jiyul was hospitalized after falling into a coma. Later that year, the Supreme Court ruled against the plaintiffs in the 'salamander' lawsuit, ending almost three years of litigation, and, after being tried in absentia, the Ulsan District Court later found Jiyul guilty of charges of obstructing state business.[19] The tunnel was finally completed in 2010 (Kang, Kap-saeng 2005a, 2005b, 2005c and 2005d; JoongAng Daily 2006; Ser 2009).

As with the anti-SRP *samboilbae* march, Jiyul's campaign succeeded in making her cause a national issue yet ultimately failed to achieve its primary objective. However, unlike the largely sympathetic public response to the anti-SRP *samboilbae* march, the media and public were sharply divided over Jiyul's hunger-strikes. Many supported Jiyul in principle, yet were critical of her protest tactics which they felt were extreme and unnecessary. Jiyul's strength and willingness to sacrifice her life were admired by those on both sides of the debate, however some critics simply saw Jiyul as obstinate and local residents were angered by the delayed opening of the rail line (Yu Gippŭm 2005, 290). The opinion of the Korean Buddhist community was similarly divided, as noted by the national Buddhist publication, the *Buddhist Review* [*Pulgyop'yŏngnon*], and the responses of both the

19. The South Korean Supreme Court upheld this verdict in 2009, but delivered a suspended sentence noting that Jiyul's protests had been nonviolent and had adversely affected her health.

Korean eco-Buddhist movement and the Jogye Order were indecisive and ineffective (Lee Jŏngho 2006; Modern Buddhism [*Hyŏndaebulgyo*] 2005).[20] In his survey of the support and criticism of Jiyul following the controversy's end, Sungtaek Cho notes that the two most common complaints against Jiyul were that her protests had cost the government over two billion U.S. dollars and that her hunger-strikes were too extreme and not befitting of Buddhist clergy (Cho, Sungtaek 2005).

After recovering from her coma, Jiyul spent several years quietly residing at the Jungto Society's central temple in Seoul at Pŏmnyun's invitation. While she has forsworn any further hunger-strikes or direct action, Jiyul did work in support of the Anti-Four Rivers Project Campaign and, in 2011, published her third book *Emptiness for Right Living* [*Piwŏya sanda*] containing memoirs and notes regarding numerous topics, including ecology and her personal meditation practice. Despite the controversy, the tunnel has yet to make a noticeable impact on Mt. Chŏnsŏng's swamplands or the endangered species in residence (Kang, Kapsaeng 2005c and 2005d; JoongAng Daily 2006; Ser 2009).

Venerable Munsu's self-immolation in protest of the Four-Rivers Project

The Four Rivers Project (hereafter 'FRP') shares several characteristics with the Saemangeum Reclamation Project; both were large-scale government-sponsored development projects widely criticized for lacking a clear purpose, causing mass environmental destruction, and benefiting solely the interests of the construction coalitions. Originally proposed as the 'Grand Korea Waterway' in 2007 by the newly-elected President Lee Myung-bak (in office 2008–2013), former CEO of Hyundai Engineering and Construction, the government announced its revised plan for the FRP in January 2009.[21] Intended to control flooding, create jobs and promote tourism, the FRP would cost over 22 billion U.S. dollars, making it the most expensive public works project in Korean history. However, environmentalists again charged that the project's EIS, completed in less than four months, was significantly flawed and that the FRP would have devastating consequences for the wetlands and aquatic ecosystems targeted by the project. The FRP generated a significant opposition campaign and, in November 2009, a joint suit was filed by more than 400 civic and environmental groups to block the project. However, construction continued and, as the anti-FRP movement grew, the project became a subject of national debate (Lee, Ji-yoon 2010; Choe, Sang-hun 2009; Birds Korea 2010).

Around 3pm on March 31, 2010, the body of the Venerable Munsu (1963–2010) was discovered seated in a posture of meditation, burned beyond recognition, beside a tributary of the Nakdong River, one of the 'Four Rivers' targeted by the project. Among his nearby clothes, police discovered a signed note demanding that the Lee Myung-bak administration 'immediately cease the Four Rivers Project', 'eradicate corruption' and 'do its best, not for corporations (*chaebols*) and the rich,

20. Lee notes that Korea's intellectual community was likewise split, as demonstrated by Jiyul's difficulty in finding academics willing to testify in her lawsuit or participate in the tunnel's new EIA.

21. This revised plan for the FRP called for restructuring of the nation's four largest rivers and their tributaries through the construction of 21 new dams, the dredging of 428 miles of river and the reinforcing of 360 miles of riverbank.

but the working-class, the poor and the neglected' (Munsu 2010). Munsu was 47 years old at the time and had been a Buddhist monk for 25 years. Ordained in 1986, Munsu entered Joong-Ang Saṅgha College in 1994 where he was elected student body president and became involved in anti-corruption protests within the Jogye Order.[22] However, his political involvements ceased following graduation as he focused on meditation for the remainder of his monastic career. After briefly serving as abbot of Daesansa Temple, in 2007, Munsu began a three-year 'sealed confinement' (*p'yegwan*) Sŏn meditation retreat at Jibosa Temple, in one of the temple's *munmugwan* ('sealed room without a door'; Buswell 1992, 199).[23] During his retreat Munsu had received newspapers daily and, following the retreat's completion, he had expressed criticism of FRP and discussed committing self-immolation in hopes of halting the project (Kim Donggeon, 2010, Cho, Jae-eun, 2010).

Self-immolation has not been rare in South Korea's modern history, as suicide protest has become a well-established tactic within the national protest repertoire since the 1980s. Kim Sun-Chul has found news reports of 233 cases of self-immolation, both political and apolitical, in Korea between 1990 and 2010, in addition to the 133 cases of suicide protest committed between 1959 and 2008 as listed by Council for the Commemoration of National Democratic Martyrs (*Minjok minju yolsa huisaengja ch'umo danch'ae yondae hoiui*; Kim Sun-Chul 2012, 3–4). The progenitor of self-immolation protest in Korea was Chun Tae Il, a textile worker whose suicide-by-fire in 1970 in opposition to poor labor conditions is widely regarded as instigating South Korea's pro-Democracy movement.[24] Becoming regular events in the 1980s, self-immolation and suicide protest occurred most frequently at the height of the pro-democracy movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and are still committed occasionally, primarily within the labor rights movement (Biggs 2005, 21; Kim, Sun-Chul 2012, 6).[25]

However, Kyeongjun Park argues that the Buddhist context of Munsu's self-immolation distinguishes it from the suicide protests of the Korean pro-democracy and labor rights movements. Rather Park interprets Munsu's act as a continuation of the 1,500 year old East-Asian Buddhist practice of committing self-immolation as a 'living sacrifice' to the Buddha, known as *punsin* or *sosin* in Korean (Sanskrit *ātmapariyāga*; Pak, Kyŏngchun 2010, 282; Queen 1996, 2; Benn 2007, 4–8).[26] While the Buddhist practice of *punsin* has been extremely rare in modern Korean history (Buswell 1992, 195–198),[27] Venerable Jigwan of BES similarly asserts that Munsu's self-immolation was not suicide 'but an offering to Buddha to stop the (FRP) through his death' (Shaheen 2010). The Buddhist con-

22. For more on the Jogye Order's corruption crisis of 1994, which involved physical confrontations between various factions of monks in the streets of Seoul, see Sørensen 1999, 142–143.

23. During a 'sealed confinement', meditators lock themselves in private chambers for periods of up to three or six years, devoting themselves entirely to meditation.

24. Chun Tae Il's biography is depicted in the 1995 film *Single Spark* (K. *Chun Tae-il*, Dr. Park, Kwang Su, Daewoo Cinema Network).

25. For further discussion of self-immolation as protest in South Korea, see Kim, Sun-Chul 2012.

26. Rooted in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, in which Bhaiṣajyaguru commits self-immolation as a sacrifice to the Buddha, Chinese historical sources record hundreds of acts of Buddhist self-immolation, often staged as public spectacles.

27. During his time as a Korean Buddhist monk in the 1970s, Buswell recalls hearing of only one modern case of *punsin*, committed by a senior nun who had developed stomach cancer.

text of Munsu's immolation is shared with that of the Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức's (1897–1963), whose self-immolation protesting against anti-Buddhist persecution under South Vietnamese dictator Ngô Đình Diệm initiated a wave of protests resulting in a U.S.-backed coup several months later (Biggs 2005, 47–48; Biggs 2013, 415–416). Noting the Buddhist origins of Quảng Đức's act, Michael Biggs has identified him as the progenitor of the modern practice of self-immolation as a protest tactic (Biggs 2005, 3; Biggs 2013, 415–419). Thus Munsu's self-immolation, along with Thai 'tree ordination ceremonies' and Sukyŏng's *samboilbae* march, represent the appropriation and adaptation of traditional Buddhist practices as environmental preservation protest tactics.

Michael Biggs has described self-immolation as a 'tactic of persuasion' requiring a mass audience and media coverage for success (Biggs 2013, 408, 412). Unlike Quảng Đức, Chun Tae Il and most other suicide protests of the Korean pro-democracy movement (Kim Sun-Chul 2012, 4, 12, 18),[28] Munsu's self-immolation was not conducted in a public location before witnesses, but instead relied on the media to convey his message following his action. However, possibly because Munsu had no prior connections to the anti-FRP movement, or due to concerns that coverage might inspire emulators, the mainstream Korean media largely failed to cover Munsu's self-immolation, thus depriving his protest the wider audience it required to be effective (Pak, Kyŏngchun 2010).[29] Yet, Munsu's immolation did affect the anti-FRP campaign, though not in the manner intended.

In a speech at Munsu's memorial service at the Jogye Order's central temple in Seoul on June 5, 2010, Ven. Sukyŏng, of the aforementioned anti-SRP *samboilbae* march, read Munsu's 'Last Will and Testament' aloud and encouraged the 2,000 attendees to emulate Munsu's dedication to the anti-FRP campaign, though not his action (Sukyŏng 2010a). However, several days later, Sukyŏng resigned as head of the BES and as abbot of Hwagyesa Temple in Seoul.[30] Disappearing completely from public life, Sukyŏng left only a note, titled 'As I Set Off Again'. In his note, Sukyŏng regretted his hypocrisy as a spiritual and environmental leader, explaining that, while serving the community and standing against political authority, he soon realized that he had become 'simply another authority' who 'unwittingly fell' into believing he was doing something important (Sukyŏng 2010b). After expressing the desire to dedicate himself again to the 'one thought' of *Ganhwa Sŏn* (C. *Kanhua Chan*) meditation, Sukyŏng continues:

> Seeing Munsu's sacrifice, my problems became even clearer ... I fear death. I have yet to resolve the matter of life and death. And how can I continue to live like this? If I continue my life will only be pitiful. I do not want to live a hypocritical life ... (Sukyŏng 2010b)

28. Kim notes these protest suicides have included jumping from tall buildings, public disembowelment and hanging from construction cranes.

29. Major media outlets, such as the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Joongang Ilbo*, and *Dong-A Ilbo*, did not report on Munsu's self-immolation; nor was it addressed in the national *Buddhist Review*. Only the progressive newspaper *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (2010) carried an editorial addressing Munsu's immolation.

30. With 120 branches worldwide, Hwagyesa Temple is also home to the International Zen Center. Sukyŏng had been appointed abbot in 2006.

Accepting any 'criticism, blame, disappointment and resentment' his resignation might cause, Sukyŏng states 'I am putting everything behind me' and concludes with the poem:

> It has been arduous. Now I am on my way again.
> On a warm winter's day, I would like to doze off and die. (Sukyŏng 2010b)

Sukyŏng's resignation and disappearance raise important questions for proponents of eco-Buddhist activism. Munsu's self-immolation apparently shocked Sukyŏng into realizing that, as he still feared death, he had yet to attain ultimate 'realization awakening' (*chŭngo*), prompting his return to the intensive practice of *Ganhwa Sŏn* meditation (Buswell 2012, 56–57; Park Seung-Bae 1983, 105–106).[31] Furthermore, while Korean monastics vow daily to save all sentient beings, the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*Kŭmgang-kyŏng*) warns that, while working for the liberation of all beings, 'no bodhisattva who is a true bodhisattva entertains such concepts as a self, a person, a being or a living soul' (Mu Soeng 2000, 80).[32] Sukyŏng's contrition for his pride and hypocrisy in becoming 'another authority' who 'thought he was doing something tremendous' raises the question of whether social engagement might produce attachments which hinder the pursuit of Buddhist soteriological goals, at least within the framework of Korean's Sŏn tradition. Thus, while not condemning Buddhist social activism, Sukyŏng's resignation note does reinforce the primacy of Sŏn praxis and its soteriological aim of 'ultimate awakening' (*ku'gyŏnggak*) as espoused by the Jogye Order.

The Korean eco-Buddhist movement responded to Sukyŏng's sudden departure with shock and disappointment and, given his numerous achievements and personal sacrifices, Sukyŏng's supporters have struggled to understand his disappearance. However it is possible that additional issues influenced Sukyŏng's resignation. Sukyŏng's *samboilbae* marches had negatively affected his life-long health, leaving him with a permanent limp and the loss of his eyesight. From the frustration expressed in his speech at Munsu's memorial service, it is also possible that Sukyŏng had become disillusioned with the Korean environmental movement's limited progress (Sukyŏng 2010a). While Sukyŏng's whereabouts remain unknown, occasional news reaches Tobŏp that he remains on retreat somewhere in Korea's mountains (Chŏngmuk 2014).[33] The Korean eco-Buddhist movement meanwhile has yet to recover from the loss of Sukyŏng's leadership, as evidenced by the lack of significant Buddhist involvement in national ecological campaigns since his resignation (Lee, Tohŭm 2011, 116).

31. The majority of the Jogye Order's Sŏn meditators follow the 'sudden enlightenment/gradual cultivation' (*tono-chŏmsu*) methodology of Pojo Jinul (1158–1210 CE), which distinguishes between an initial 'understanding awakening' (*haeo*) and ultimate 'realization awakening' (*chŭngo*). The Korean Sŏn tradition has numerous stories of meditators who experienced 'awakening' (*kkaech'im*) only to discover much later, either through personal experience or the testing of a master, that they had merely experienced an initial 'understanding-awakening', with this discovery causing their return to dedicated Sŏn practice.

32. Mu Soeng trans. The 'Four Great Vows' (*Palsalhong Sŏwon*) are chanted daily in Jogye Order temples while the *Kŭmgang-kyŏng* is highly valued within the Korean Sŏn tradition and is studied at traditional monastic seminaries (*Kangwon*) along with numerous commentaries.

33. Venerable Chŏngmuk is a resident of Silsangsa Temple, home of Indra's Net, where Tobŏp is abbot (see p.297 above).

As for the FRP, in spite of strong opposition, the project was completed in the fall of 2011. However, the aftermath of the FRP appears to vindicate Munsu and the Anti-FRP movement as the project is now popularly regarded as a disaster. Not only have the FRP's dams failed to manage floods and droughts effectively, they have resulted in widespread water contamination due to algae blooms which, along with the bulldozing of hundreds of kilometers of river beds and banks, has led to a significant loss of bio-diversity within the 'Four Rivers'. While continuing to spend hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars annually on maintenance and recovery, the government is now demolishing numerous FRP dams and discussing the possibility of returning the 'Four Rivers' to their natural states (Kim, Jeong-su 2013; Jun, Ji-hye 2013).

Conclusion

The protests of Sukyŏng, Jiyul and Munsu share several key characteristics; all three opposed large-scale government-sponsored land development projects which they believed would cause the wide-scale destruction of habitat vital to numerous endangered species. Furthermore Sukyŏng, Jiyul and Munsu were each originally 'meditation monks' within Korea's Jogye Order of Sŏn Buddhism who, inspired by personal experience and religious conviction, engaged in painful and life-threatening, if not fatal, acts of protest. Sukyŏng and Jiyul, in particular, played high-profile leadership roles within their respective ecological preservation campaigns, while Sukyŏng and Munsu deployed protest tactics recognizably derived from traditional Buddhist practices.

In spite of their sacrifices, the protests of Sukyŏng, Jiyul and Munsu ultimately failed to meet their objectives. Yet, by presenting Buddhist clergy as leaders within the environmental movement, in addition to dramatic media depictions of Buddhist monastics engaged in radical acts of protest, Sukyŏng and Jiyul, in particular, have altered public perceptions of Buddhist clergy and their roles within Korean society. While not yet mainstream, environmental awareness has been popularized within the Korean Buddhist community through the activism of Sukyŏng and Jiyul, as well as organizations such as the Jungto Society and Indra's Net; especially among the Buddhist literati and intelligentsia. As this article has focused on the practical strategies deployed by Sukyŏng, Jiyul and Munsu, the personal and religious motivations of all three deserve further examination in future articles, as do the various 'textual strategies' deployed by the Korean eco-Buddhist movement as a whole (Clippard 2011, 216-217).[34]

As for the wider global discourse regarding eco-Buddhism, proponents of eco-Buddhist activism[35] might find inspiration in the protests of Sukyŏng, Jiyul and Munsu. In particular, Sukyŏng's utilization of *samboilbae* as a protest tactic provides an effective model for the appropriation and adaptation of traditional Buddhist practices as new non-violent forms of protest. However, given the serious risk to personal health involved in the protests of Sukyŏng, Jiyul and Munsu, as well as their ultimate failure, they also raise important questions regarding limits of Buddhist social activism and the forms such activism should

34. Clippard defines 'textual strategies' as discursive, theoretical and rooted in Buddhist texts and doctrine.

35. Such as Swearer's aforementioned 'eco-apologists' and 'eco-constructivists': see note 3.

take. Sukyŏng's resignation additionally highlights the potential for engagement in social activism to become a hindrance to the pursuit of Buddhist soteriological goals. It is hoped that future western academic discourse regarding the intersections of Buddhism, ecology and social activism will include a deeper discussion both of the activities of the Korean eco-Buddhism movement and the complex issues briefly examined here.

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Abbreviations

BES	Buddhist Environmental Solidarity (*Pulgyo Hwan'gyŏng Yŏnhap*)
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
FRP	Four Rivers Project
GKU	Green Korea United
JTS	Jungto Society (*Chŏngto hoe*), or 'Society for the Pure Land'
KFEM	Korea Federation for Environmental Movement
KRNA	Korea Rail Network Authority
SRP	Saemangeum Reclamation Project

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