

A Buddhist Christmas: The Buddha's Birthday Festival in Colonial Korea (1928–1945)

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamic aspects of the Buddha's Birthday festival as it was celebrated from 1928 to 1945 in colonial Korea. A joint Japanese and Korean Buddhist event sponsored by the state, it became the signature religious and state festival. Although much politicized, the festival was also a culmination of Buddhist efforts in Asia to respond to modernity, nationalism, colonialism, and Christian missions. Paralleling the reinvention of Christmas in the modern period, Buddhists reconfigured the Buddha's birthday as a symbol of their religious identity and power. The Buddha's Birthday festival should be understood in the context of increasing contact and exchange among Buddhists in the East and the West. The festival's prominence was the result of complex negotiation and collaboration between Korean and Japanese Buddhists who both hoped the festival would advance their overlapping visions of Buddhism. The festival was not so much an imposition of the colonizer on a native culture as it was a dynamic, creative feature of modern Korean Buddhism in the colonial context.

Keywords: colonial Korea, Buddha's Birthday festival, Hana Matsuri, modern Korean Buddhism, Christianity.

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At eight o'clock on the morning of May 26, 1928 five rounds of salutary fireworks from nearby Namsan 南山 Mountain interrupted the work of three hundred thousand residents of Seoul. It was the day of the Buddha's birth. Two hours later, a celebratory airplane flew over the city, showering it with a million blue and red flower petals and thirty thousand propagation flyers. Three different locations in central Seoul had an altar with a baby Buddha. At eleven that morning Japanese Buddhist groups presided over an elaborate public ceremony at the first location, followed by Korean Buddhists who officiated at the second location in the afternoon. By three o'clock, Japanese and Korean Buddhists had gathered together at the third location. Colonial government officials, including the governor-general, the mayor of Seoul, and other dignitaries, joined them. Between these three consecutive events were mass processions with lanterns of different shapes, colorful flowers, and elaborately ornamented floats including a white elephant symbolizing the Buddha. Tens of thousands of people, including children, filled the streets. The city government dispatched additional buses and streetcars to accommodate the inflow of people from the suburbs and all the public transportation crews pinned a carnation to their jackets. It was "a rare spectacle, [not seen] in recent years" (*Maeil sinbo* 26-27 May 1928).

The Buddha's birthday festival (K. *hwaje* 花祭, Jp. *Hana Matsuri*, and Eng. *Flower Festival*, hereafter Hana Matsuri), as a joint Japanese-Korean Buddhist and government-sponsored event in Korea, commenced in 1928 and continued to the end of Japan's colonial rule in 1945. During most of this period, it was the signature festival of the year. Yet, in the scholarship of modern Buddhism this festival has not been granted in-depth attention. Japanese and Korean folklore scholar P'yŏn Muyŏng argues in his recent articles¹ that Hana Matsuri celebrations in imperial Japan and colonial Korea were primarily political and thus dovetailed with Japan's nationalist and imperialist objectives providing them with a legitimating, cultural symbol (P'yŏn 2006, 169). P'yŏn declares that colonial Korea's Hana Matsuri was nothing more than a copy of the Japanese version "as it was" (P'yŏn 2003, 62). Though P'yŏn mentions that a non-political motivation for this festival was as a response to Christianity (P'yŏn 2003, 60), he largely fails to locate

the festival in the context of modern, global Buddhism. His interpretation of the festival falls short of illuminating the Buddhist discourse, shared by both Japanese and Korean Buddhists, on the benefits of reinventing and popularizing the Buddha's birthday festival. Thus, he overlooks the forces and ideas that compelled these two communities to reach, as Pierre Bourdieu wrote of social agents, "a practical mutual understanding (*collusio*)," even "despite the antagonism," for holding the joint festival (Bourdieu 2000, 154). Without this understanding, both Japanese and Korean Buddhists appear to be mere puppets in the colonial government's show, displaying little or no agency.

Judith Snodgrass, a scholar of modern Japanese Buddhism, partly fills this gap in her recent article "Performing Buddhist Modernity: The Lumbini Festival, Tokyo 1925" (Snodgrass 2009). While fully acknowledging the national and imperial motives in this festival in creating "imagined communities" and "invented traditions," she construes the version of Hana Matsuri in the Japanese homeland in the mid-1920s as a clear example of the modernization of Japanese Buddhism. She argues that the popularity of Hana Matsuri went hand in hand with the emerging consciousness of pan-Asian and global Buddhism. She characterizes this festival as "an indigenous modernity based in Japanese cultural tradition, a confidently Asian modernity, and one that positioned Japan as leader of Asia" (Ibid., 136). By examining the performative aspect of this festival, Snodgrass highlights the possibility of Japanese Buddhists' assertion of their own modern identity and their unique contribution to a Japanese modernity. Since her work is focused on the event in Japan, she does not take up the ways in which Hana Matsuri was performed in Japan's colonies.

In 2008, the Chogye order, the largest Buddhist denomination in Korea, published *Ch'op'ail haengsa 100-nyŏn: yŏndŭng ch'ukche riŭl chungsim ūro* 초파일행사 100년-연등축제를 중심으로 (A Century of the April Eighth Ceremony: A Focus on the Lantern Festival) to provide "the identity of the Lantern Festival" (Chogyejong 2008, 12). This book is a collection of news articles and pictures of lantern festivals over the past hundred years. In the preface the editors pose a question: does the Lantern Festival of today have any connection to the Hana Matsuri of the colonial period? The editors trace

the current form of the Lantern Festival back to 1955, thereby excluding its origination in the colonial period. In addition, while introducing the festival historically, the book skips Hana Matsuri in colonial Korea and moves quickly to the postcolonial Lantern Festival (Ibid., 13, 14, and 24). This politicized genealogical approach, as Eunsu Cho points out with regards to Korean scholars' binary interpretation of modern Korean Buddhism, abridges the creativity and subjectivity of colonial Korean Buddhists and perpetuates the image that the colonizer had full control over the colonized (Cho 2003, 89).

Based on the above works and taking up what is left unanswered, this article seeks to examine how global and local forces brought about a unique discourse for the Buddha's birthday festival in colonial Korea. On the one hand, the very nature of this festival as cultural, ideological, and religious capital that was both universal and local, both old and new, increased Korean Buddhism's usefulness to government. As such, the colonial government granted significant support to ensure the continuity and popularity of the festival throughout the colonial period. Japanese Buddhists saw the festival as a way to prove their leadership as Buddhist modernists and to actualize their vision of establishing their Buddhism in a colonial land. As for Korean Buddhists, this festival and the state's sponsorship of it gave them the opportunity to reclaim their place in Korean society after centuries of marginalization during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910). Following independence, Korean Buddhists made the festival their own, further reinventing its symbols and meanings. In this article, I argue that Hana Matsuri in colonial Korea should be considered not simply as an imposition of the colonizer on the native culture, but as a complex, creative feature of modern Korean Buddhism in the colonial context.

The development of Korea's Hana Matsuri cannot be understood without taking into consideration the pan-Asian and global Buddhist discourse of the period. Especially for Korean Buddhism, the global context of Buddhist modernization is indispensable to comprehending why, despite the power differential, the Korean and Japanese Buddhists willingly collaborated with each other and, more importantly, presented this festival as part of a common cultural and religious identity of both countries. In turn, the mobilization

of Buddhists to promote the festival convinced the colonial government in Korea that the festival would be effective religious, cultural, and political capital in furthering colonial rule. Historiography says that the government enacted Hana Matsuri in a top-down fashion but in fact the government was responding to an opportunity presented by Korean and Japanese Buddhists. Thus, it is important to look back to the late nineteenth century to make sense of how Buddhists (and sympathizers) in Asian and Western countries joined together to create a modern Buddhism to counter Christian missionaries and European imperialism, which in turn generated a new form of the Buddha's birthday festival. The movement began in colonial Sri Lanka.

The Buddha's Birthday Festival, Sri Lanka

Scholars have often characterized modern Sinhalese Buddhism as “Protestant Buddhism” because, first, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century Sinhalese Buddhists questioned the monastic-centered sangha and its superstitious practices. Buddhism was recast as philosophical, rational, and scientific. Second, they responded to attacks from Christianity by emulating and adapting missionary practices such as establishing Sunday schools and social welfare programs, performing wedding ceremonies, and propagating through print capitalism. In this regard, not only Sri Lankan Buddhism but also other Buddhisms in Asia in the modern period took on the “Protestant Buddhist” form (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Prothero 1995). The rising interest among Buddhist reformers in reinventing the Buddha's birthday festival is an integral part of this Protestant Buddhist movement.

The emergence of the festival as a Buddhist discourse is inextricably tied with the movement to get the different Buddhisms to find common ground by centralizing the figure of Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha. In the course of trying to rediscover the historical Buddha, Buddhist reformers sought to take control of the site of the Buddha's enlightenment in Bodhi Gaya, northern India. This site had been controlled by Hindu groups since the twelfth century. These three intertwined efforts—the Buddha's birthday festival, the

resuscitation of Śākyamuni, and the grab for Bodh Gaya—together were aimed at reasserting Buddhism’s prominence. The efforts were spearheaded by a range of actors from the West and the East, including Western Orientalists, Buddhist sympathizers, and Asian Buddhist reformers from Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, China and Japan. Of them Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) had the greatest impact.

A lay Buddhist reformer born in Sri Lanka, Dharmapala worked closely with Buddhist sympathizers such as Olcott, one of the founders of the Theosophist Society and the first European-American to publicly convert to Buddhism (Prothero 1995, 284). Despite their ultimate differences, Dharmapala and Olcott had two objectives in common, namely to keep Christianity at bay and to revive an enervated Buddhism. Influenced by European Orientalist scholarship, both of them envisioned a Buddhism that could be united and energized by the centrality of the historical Buddha (Jaffe 2004 and 2006; Snodgrass 2007; Penner 2009, 123–142). In 1881, Olcott began working with Sinhalese Buddhist monks to petition the British government to restore the Buddha’s birthday (known as *Vesak*² or *Wesak*) as a public holiday: he called it “the Buddhist Christmas” (Olcott 1904, 73). The British colonial authorities had discontinued Vesak in 1815 in an effort to constrain native culture in colonial Ceylon. Christian missionaries had pushed for this policy, as well. Throughout the late nineteenth century, Christian missionaries demanded that colonial authorities dissociate themselves from Buddhism; the authorities responded willingly. The colonial government also gave privileges to the Christians through financial support for churches, schools, and social welfare programs. They gradually realized that marginalizing Buddhism was mistaken, however, and that it would be politically advantageous to integrate Ceylon’s native religion into the colonial apparatus. Seizing on this change in disposition to push his petition forward, Olcott took the leading monastic reformer of the day, Hikkaduve Sumangala (1827–1911), to meet with the governor of Ceylon, Arthur Charles Hamilton-Gordon (r. 1883–1890), to discuss Vesak in more detail (Olcott 1904, 73).

Cognizant of this momentum, the governor accepted Olcott’s petition on behalf of a number of reformers. Six decades after its abolition, Vesak was

reinstated and officially designated a national holiday. The Sinhalese Buddhist community began planning a large-scale celebration, modernizing the event and fundamentally changing its nature and structure with symbols and rituals that emulated those of Christianity.³ On April 28, 1885, Vesak was celebrated in the presence of Sinhalese and Western Buddhists with a Buddhist flag designed by Olcott “like a cross in Christianity” (Olcott 1904, 351), Buddhist carols by Dharmapala (*The Maha Bodhi* 98, 99 [1891], 44), cards, parades, gifts, and other elements (Somaratna 1996). Olcott characterized the flag as “a universal symbol of the Buddhist religion” (*The Theosophist* 12 1891, vi) and “a powerful reinforcement” of his Buddhist Catechism (Olcott 1904, 351). Both Olcott and Dharmapala viewed Vesak not only as a Sri Lankan Buddhist festival but also as an event for Buddhists around the world. On their first visit to Japan in 1889, they introduced the flag, carols, cards, and other elements; these soon became incorporated into the forerunners of Hana Matsuri.

Dharmapala was influenced by other Orientalists who contributed to his growing interest in the historical Buddha. Through his relationship with Olcott, he met Edwin Arnold (1832–1904) who in 1879 had published an influential, lengthy poem on the life of Śākyamuni titled *The Light of Asia*. Deeply inspired by Arnold, Dharmapala made a pilgrimage to India in 1891. Shocked to see that the Bodhi Gaya temple had become a Hindu temple, Dharmapala established the Maha Bodhi Society and began publication of its journal. Then, he enthusiastically launched a decades-long international effort to reclaim the site as a Mecca or Jerusalem for Buddhists. In collaboration with other like-minded Buddhists, Dharmapala convened the First International Buddhist Conference on October 31, 1891 (*The Maha Bodhi* 98, 99 [1891], 194). Two years later, he was invited to the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which established him as an international Buddhist figure. In 1896, Dharmapala also presided over the first Buddha’s birthday ceremony in Calcutta where excerpts from Arnold’s *Light of Asia* were read in the presence of British and Indian dignitaries (*The Academy* 50 [1896], 50). On his third trip to the United States in 1897, Dharmapala presided over San Francisco’s first Vesak, which drew some four hundred people (Seager 1995, 157). With his broad connections, cosmopolitan disposition, and zeal for Buddhist and

nationalist causes, Dharmapala, in collaboration with Olcott, succeeded in making the Buddha's birthday festival part of the pan-Buddhist discourse and indispensable to the rise of Buddhism in the global competition of salvation.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Vesak had become a widely celebrated national holiday in Sri Lanka, a symbol of Buddhism's newfound dominance. The journals of missionaries reveal what they thought of all this. Walter D. Hankinson (1867–1944) of the Baptist Missionary Society said that this “revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka,” is part of “a long list of imitations” and in “a strong spirit of opposition to Christianity.” Hankinson goes on to say that this revival demands from Christian missionaries “a very high standard of missionary life and work and teaching, as well as a revision of methods” (*The Sunday at Home* 42 [1895], 340). Some missionaries were alarmed by Buddhism's resurgence and began changing their missionary methods in response.

The effort to restore the Bodh Gaya temple was stalled by resistance from Hindu followers and by the colonial situation; Buddhists did not gain control over the site until 1944. In contrast, the modernized Buddha's birthday festival was a portable symbol that spread rapidly across Asia. Dharmapala, Olcott, Sri Lankan monks, and Western Buddhist sympathizers worked together to generate a new Buddhist identity, pride, and power. The revitalization of the Buddha's birthday festival along with the effort to reclaim the Bodh Gaya temple complex brought Buddhists from across Asian countries together, thereby generating a sense of global Buddhist community. The Japanese were especially dedicated to promoting the Buddha's birthday festival.

A Symbol of Buddhist Modernity: *Hana Matsuri* in Tokyo

Although Japan was not under colonial rule, late nineteenth-century Japanese Buddhists feared Western imperialism and Christianity. At first, the Meiji government did not see Buddhism as useful to creating a militarily strong and economically affluent modern nation. Buddhism was viewed as a feudal and superstitious religion antithetical to modernization and Westernization.

As such, the Meiji government adopted a policy that sought to eradicate Buddhism (*haibutsu kishaku*), elevate Shintō as the state religion, and modernize what remained of Buddhism by decriminalizing the practice of clerical marriage and eating meat (*nikujiki saitai*) (Ketelaar 1993; Jaffe 2001; Hardacre 1989). In the face of these challenges, Japanese Buddhist reformers and intellectuals strove to find a way to turn their tradition into a modern religion compatible with science, reason, and modern nation building. Although the West and Christianity became dominant frames of reference, Japanese Buddhists' close contact and collaboration with other Asian Buddhists and Western Buddhist sympathizers were essential to creating modern Japanese Buddhism (Jaffe 2004 and 2006). These new relationships also gave Japanese Buddhists a pan-Asian or global Buddhist identity.

Like other Buddhists in Asia, Japanese Buddhism prioritized making the historical figure of Śākyamuni central. Commencing in the 1870s, a dozen or more Japanese Buddhist priests embarked on pilgrimages to India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand⁴ to find the authentic, original teachings of Śākyamuni. Kitabatake Tōryū 北島 道竜 (1820–1907) and Kurosaki Yūji 裕二黒崎 visited Bodh Gaya in 1883 on their way back to Japan from Europe. Kitabatake later gave talks about his experiences in India, inspiring Shaku Kōzen 釈興然 (1849–1924) and Shaku Sōen 釈宗演 (1859–1919) to travel to Sri Lanka in 1886 and 1887, respectively. Both of them befriended key Buddhist reformers including Dharmapala and Olcott. Four years later, Kōzen ordained as a Theravada monk with a new dharma name, Gunaratna Thera. Kōzen accompanied Dharmapala on Dharmapala's first trip to India and, along with the priest Tokuzawa Chiezō 徳澤知恵藏 (1871–1908) who had been collaborating with Olcott in India, cofounded the Maha Bodhi Society and its journal. Kōzen returned to Japan after seven years in Ceylon and India. There, he assiduously championed the prioritization of Śākyamuni over other Buddhist deities and the popularization of the Vesak (Jaffe 2004, 89).

Japanese Buddhists also invited Western and Asian Buddhist reformers to visit Japan in order to bring about a paradigm shift for Japanese Buddhism. On February 9, 1889, with an invitation from Japanese Buddhist youth groups, Olcott and Dharmapala landed in Japan and for the next four months (107 days

altogether) they gave seventy-five public talks to 187,500 people (Murphet 1988, 149). Olcott's talks largely revolved around the danger of Christianity, Buddhists' duty to propagate their religion, and the unity, under Śākyamuni, of all Buddhists regardless of sectarian difference. He met with many key Japanese politicians, including the prime minister and other departmental ministers of the Japanese government, all of whom received him with respect (Snodgrass 2003, 169–170). At each event, Olcott and Dharmapala displayed the Buddhist flag they had designed, and it was soon adopted in Japan, as well. They also introduced Arnold's book *The Light of Asia*. Inspired in part by them, Japanese Buddhists established YWBAs and YMBAs in emulation of the Christian organizations. These two groups later became key in organizing Japan's Buddha's birthday festival in the early 1890s (Murphet, 146–7).

In premodern times, the Buddha's birthday in Japan had been celebrated at temples annually, as it had been in Sri Lanka, China, and Korea. But in the early Meiji, the custom underwent a transformation. Due to Japan's adoption of the Gregorian (solar) calendar in 1872, the old lunar calendar date of April 8 was replaced. One of the first modern forms of the Buddha's Birthday festival was organized by the Young Men's Buddhist Associations (*Shin Bukkyō seinenkai* 新仏新青年会 or YMBA) in 1892, three years after Olcott's first visit to Japan. During these early years, Buddhist groups did not unify their efforts to hold one large festival; different university campuses and private institutes held their own events, with some celebrations taking place simultaneously in different locations in Tokyo. Although some Buddhist priests did participate, these events were largely organized by youth groups without the institutional backing of sectarian Buddhism (P'yōn 2006, 147–149).

In an effort to make the holiday more trans-sectarian and international, in 1902 the Japanese Buddhist youth groups invited Dharmapala to the festival. Also present were Indian students studying in Japan, who augmented the festivities with Indian music. Dharmapala gave a congratulatory speech (*Yomiuri shinbun* 24 May 1902). This version of the Buddha's birthday, run by youth groups and with no official recognition from the sects, ceased in 1903, after eleven years of development.

In 1915, the Buddha's birthday festival resumed and the Buddhist groups

tried to secure the government's financial and administrative support, but the government declined participation (*Chūgai nippō* 8 April 1916). Because of the government's cold reception of the 1915 festival, the organizers of the 1916 celebration proceeded more assertively (Ibid). This time, Buddhist priests from different sects, such as Andō Reigan 安藤嶺丸 (1870–1943), Kitano Kenpō 北野元峰 (1842–1933), and Shaku Sōen, joined together with various youth groups and drew in the traditional Buddhist sects to establish the Association of *Hana Matsuri* of the Tokyo Alliances. Andō was especially active. As one of the co-founders of the Buddhist youth groups, he introduced some elements from the Sri Lankan version of the Buddha's birthday to the Japanese version, *Hana Matsuri*.⁵ Andō, Shaku Sōen and Kōzen all worked together to unify Japanese Buddhists under the historical Buddha and to promote *Hana Matsuri*.

The term *Hana Matsuri*, which Andō and others popularized as referring to the Buddha's birthday festival, has its origins in 1901 in Berlin, Germany. There, Japanese residents led by Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949) and Chikatsumi Jōkan 近角常観 (1870–1941) organized a Buddha's birthday event. Anesaki had previously been involved in the Buddha's birthday festival in Japan and had worked closely with Buddhist youth groups. Chikatsumi writes in his memoir that in 1901 the April 8 Buddha's birthday coincided closely with the Western date for Easter (Ostern), which fell on April 7 that year, and that in Germany Easter was also called *Blumenfest* (Flower Festival). Chikatsumi wrote, "The celebration dates for the two great religions of West and East happened to meet each other" (Iwaya 1903, 176). Chikatsumi and eighteen other Japanese, comprised of scholars, diplomats, and army officials, organized a special Buddhist birthday festival and named it *Blumenfest*. *Blumenfest* translated into Japanese is "Hana Matsuri." This term was introduced by Anesaki and others when they returned to Japan, where it spread quickly among Buddhists (Iwaya 1903, 179).

The 1916 *Hana Matsuri* was the first Buddha's birthday celebration to be a collaboration between trans-sectarian and a lay-monastic elements (*Chūgai nippō* 14 April 1916). In addition, like the 1885 Vesak in Sri Lanka, the 1916 *Hana Matsuri* also ushered in many modern traits of Buddhist festivals

in Japan. The most conspicuous was an air show in the morning: aviator Art Smith (1890–1926) flew an American plane on behalf of the event. A Sri Lankan-style altar for bathing a baby Buddha, which was designed by Sri Lankan students in Japan and Shaku Kōzen, was installed at the site. The event was notably international with Buddhist clergy from India, Mongolia, and other Asian countries participating. The trans-sectarian presentation of this event led the government to take interest and become involved. All participants stuck a carnation in their coats, military and children's bands played Buddhist music, and the celebration ended with calling the name of the emperor three times (*Chūgai nippō* 14 April 1916). It was one of the largest public festivals in modern Tokyo and, rejoicing in their success, all Buddhist sects agreed that it should be held in the same format annually. Later, a newspaper reported: "It [the festival] appears to encompass all Buddhist customs of the East." The popularity of this festival caught Christian missionaries' attention. Lampooning Japanese Buddhists as imitators of Christianity, *Woman's Work*, the Woman's Foreign Missionary journal, remarked of the 1916 Hana Matsuri: "They even had a Buddhist Christmas!" (*Woman's Work* 31, 118).

In 1919, colonial Taiwan held its own Hana Matsuri in Taipei in a style similar to the one in Tokyo (*Taiwan nichinichi shinpō* 6 April 1919).

Over time, Hana Matsuri in Japan became bigger, increasingly elaborate, and more entertaining. By 1924 the event had become large enough that it required more space than Tokyo's Hibiya Park provided. Instead, the event was structured around a long parade that began in Asakusa 浅草 and ended in Hibiya 日比谷 Park. The parade had ornamental floats, dancing, and singing. Tens of thousands of people lined the path of the parade. Fireworks went off and flower petals were scattered along the way. This Hana Matsuri also saw commercial initiatives, with shops and department stores offering bargains and sales. The following year, the first airplane owned by Japan "scattered innumerable petals of colored paper lotus flowers." Hana Matsuri became Tokyo's signature festival; soon other major cities put on their own Hana Matsuri, making the Buddha's birthday a national festival. Each year more Buddhists and foreign dignitaries attended, giving Hana Matsuri international stature. It was, as Judith Snodgrass terms it, "performing Buddhist modernity"

(Snodgrass 2009).

Japanese Buddhists had the opportunity to export Hana Matsuri to other Asian Buddhist countries at the second Eastern Asian Buddhist Conference,⁶ which took place in Tokyo in November 1925. Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Western Buddhists attended. The delegates created a manifesto for pan-Asian and global Buddhist cooperation to achieve “the Buddha-ization of the world.” They declared that, “At the day of the birthday of the great saint Śākyamuni, all Buddhists shall hold the Buddha’s birthday festival in unison and make it a custom of the world” (*The Young East* 1 [June 1925]). With the great success of the Hana Matsuri, Japanese Buddhists lobbied to have other Asian countries adopt their version of it. While most of the representatives at the conference agreed with this idea in principle, there was disagreement as to which date to hold the event. Japanese Buddhists suggested April 8, determined by the solar calendar. However, the prominent Chinese Buddhist reformer Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) advocated the lunar date traditionally followed by Chinese and Korean Buddhists, a date roughly a month later than April 8. Eventually Taixu suggested that both dates be recognized and that each country follow its own custom, which undermined the Japanese Buddhists’ hopes to establish a single date among all Buddhist countries. This discord notwithstanding, the delegates’ promotion of the Buddha’s birthday as a pan-Asian holiday is a defining element of Buddhist modernity (*Pulgyo* 18 [1925], 20). In emulation of the Tokyo Hana Matsuri, Taixu also promoted a public festival, the first of its kind in China, albeit in accordance with the lunar calendar (*Chūgai nippō* 30 May 1926).

In the same year, seeking to emulate Sri Lankan Buddhists’ success in securing national holiday status for Vesak, Japanese Buddhist modernizers with the support of Buddhist sects lobbied to make April 8 a public holiday in Japan (*Chūgai nippō* 26 December 1926). Although this effort was unsuccessful, it attests to the momentum Japanese Buddhists felt at the time. Government authorities also recognized that Buddhism mattered in imperial Japan. Japan’s central and municipal governments fully embraced Hana Matsuri as furthering the image of Japan as the leader of the East and as a key player in the global arena, both politically and religiously (Snodgrass

2009). Meanwhile, a similar but more complicated discourse about modern Buddhism was taking form around the festival in colonial Korea.

Hana Matsuri in Colonial Seoul

Korea's Indigenous Version of the Buddha's Birthday

In Korea the Buddha's birthday traditionally was, in Robert Buswell's words, "the highlight of the Buddhist ceremonial year" (Buswell 1992, 43). It was celebrated with rituals such as lighting lanterns, reading sutras, and inviting monks for meals. These ritual events included a lantern festival (*yöndünghoe* 燃燈會), which was one among many Buddhist festivals (including the major Eight Prohibitions Festival [p'algwanhoe 八關會]). These festivals evolved during the Koryŏ dynasty and were state-sponsored occasions aimed at unifying the country and praying for the welfare of the king and his family (Kim J. 2001; P'yŏn 2002; Vermeersch 2008). It is said that there were three different kinds of lantern festivals that occurred at different times of the year. As state festivals, the court determined the dates for these festivals. The festival specifically for Buddha's birth, which was set for April 8, emerged toward the end of Koryŏ and was settled during the Chosŏn (Kim J., 129; P'yŏn 1990, 50). Despite the anti-Buddhist policies of Chosŏn, the April 8 Lantern Assembly survived, while the assemblies on other dates all but disappeared by the middle of the Chosŏn period (P'yŏn 1990, 37). Nevertheless, the marginalization of Buddhism during the Chosŏn era took its toll even on the April 8 Lantern Assembly. The April 8 Lantern Festival lost its original intention to celebrate the Buddha's birthday and became more or less a holiday for children. Families attended a public festival in Seoul and Kaesŏng to light lanterns, pray for the welfare of their family, and entertain themselves in major commercial districts.

P'yŏn explains the discontinuities between the Buddha's birthday festival of the Chosŏn period and that of the colonial period. He points out that, during the colonial period, the April 8 Lantern Festival, called Hana Matsuri, was

conducted in a highly choreographed, disciplined manner he describes as “the culture of ceremonial procession.” Three or four rows of people held lanterns and processed to music. In previous eras, the processions had been disorderly and did not have events before and after the parade. Due to the incorporation of new, modern elements into this old custom, P’yŏn points out that there also emerged several new terms including “celebration” (K. pongch’uk 奉祝), “Buddha’s Birthday Festival” (K. Pult’anjŏl 佛誕節), and “Flower Festival” (hwaje) (P’yŏn 2002, 74; 2006, 58).

Prior to the introduction of the Japanese style of Hana Matsuri to Korea in the mid-1920s, Korean Buddhism through its increased contact with the global community had been undergoing its own modernization, which included the revitalization of its indigenous Buddha’s birthday celebration. From the late 1800s on, a significant number of Korean Buddhist monks studied in Japan and China, absorbing ideas about modernity and reform. When they returned home, they established preaching halls in cities and initiated reforms for Buddhism.

Like the leading Buddhist reformers of Japan and Sri Lanka, the Korean monks Han Yong’un 韓龍雲 (1879–1944), Kim T’ae-hŭp 金泰洽 (1889–1989), Paek Sŏng’uk 白性郁 (1897–1981), Kim Pomnin 金法麟 (1899–1964), and Yi Yŏngjae 李英宰 (1900–1927), among others, emphasized the centrality of Śākyamuni and reconfigured the institutional, doctrinal, and ritual aspects of Korean Buddhism to make it compatible with modern society. Han traveled to Manchuria and subsequently to Japan in 1908. Kim T’ae-hŭp graduated from Tōyō 東洋 University in 1921 and from Nihon 日本 University in 1923. Paek went to France in 1920 to study at the University of Paris and in 1925 earned a degree in Western philosophy at the University of Würzburg in Germany. Kim Pomnin went to France and received a degree in philosophy from the University of Paris in 1926. Both Paek and Kim Pomnin later became lecturers at the Buddhist seminary in Seoul. Yi first studied at the Imperial University in Japan, followed by a scholarly trip in 1925 to Sri Lanka and India to learn about what he thought would be a more authentic version of Buddhism. During his study, he contributed to a Buddhist journal a series of travelogues introducing the custom, culture, and religion of Sri Lanka. In

1926, he attended the Vesak ceremony held in Kandy, the capital city of Sri Lanka, and wrote an article detailing the festival for a Buddhist journal in Korea (*Pulgyo* 29 [June 1926], 36-41).⁷ Unfortunately, his studies were cut short when he died suddenly from a disease in Sri Lanka.

These monks and others wrote extensively on the changes in Buddhism in other Asian countries, Oriental scholarship on Buddhism, and the Bodh Gaya reclamation. These writings were read widely by other Korean Buddhists, creating a broad knowledge of global trends among the monastic community. Concomitantly with Korean Buddhism's increased contact with Buddhism in other countries, the Buddha's birthday ceremony began modernizing and becoming more popular, though not to the same extent as the Hana Matsuri in Japan.

Korean Buddhists also had contact with Dharmapala. He visited Seoul in August 1913 as part of a longer trip to Manchuria from Japan. Korean Buddhists who had heard about his fame reached out to him. As a result, he gave several talks to Korean monks and Buddhists, sharing with them the activities of the Maha Bodhi society and some pressing issues for Buddhism (such as the Bodh Gaya site). At a welcoming party, Dharmapala was quoted as saying that he had found a stash of Śākyamuni's *sarira* (relics) in India and had been waiting to entrust one of the pieces to the right group. Wishing for the prosperity of Korean Buddhism, Dharmapala gave Korea one of the sarira. The monks later erected a stupa at Kakhwangsa 覺皇寺, the center of Korean Buddhism, and enshrined the sarira in it. The ceremony was followed by three days of public exhibition (*Maeil sinbo* 23 August and 8 October 1913; Yi Nūnghwa 1918, 1016), something repeated in 1923 (*Chosŏn ilbo* 19 October 1923).

Other than the sarira, Dharmapala made another long-term contribution to Korean Buddhism. Dharmapala's programs, such as the Maha Bodhi Society, its journal, and the effort to recover the Maha Bodhi temple, influenced the prominent monk Paek Yongsŏng 白龍城 (1864–1940).⁸ Paek later established Taegakkyo 大覺教 (the Korean translation of the Maha Bodhi Society) in 1921 to bring about a new form of Buddhism in Korea and also published a number of journals (Masŏng 2010). Thus, Dharmapala's global Buddhist vision also

began to find local expression in colonial Korea.

The increasing contact of Korean monks with Buddhists from the outside also contributed to changing the government's attitude toward Buddhism. In the precolonial period, the late Chosŏn government adopted the policy of being "favorable to this cult [Buddhism]" and the Buddha's birthday "was observed with considerable show" (*The Korea Review* [1902], 217). The neo-Confucian Chosŏn dynasty's new attitude toward Buddhism was likely the result of the increased presence of Japanese Buddhist missionaries along with Japan's deepening involvement in Korean affairs in the early 1900s. Although the ceremony that the *Korea Review* refers to was confined to a temple complex (that of Wŏnhŭngsa 元興寺 [later Kakhwangsa]) in central Seoul that the government had recently installed in 1902 in an effort to control Korean temples, it was a sign of Korea's participation in the broader discourse of Śākyamuni's centrality and the significance of his birth. By 1913, the increasingly elaborate event at Kakhwangsa had become so popular that the temple had to issue tickets to limit attendance (*Maeil sinbo* 13 May 1913).

Temples outside of Seoul held their own ceremonies. A Christian missionary reports in 1907 that many more than eight thousand Buddhists were coming to the temples on Mt. Kūmgang 金剛山 to celebrate the birth of Śākyamuni (*The Missionary Review of the World* 30 [1907], 647). The scholar Frederick Starr (1858–1940) wrote in his essay that in 1918 tens of thousands of Koreans, mostly Buddhists but including many non-Buddhists, made pilgrimages to one of Korea's major head temples, T'ongdosa 通度寺, to participate in the celebration of the Buddha's birth and to light lanterns for the health of their families and the welfare of the deceased. Even though the temple was located ten miles from the railway station, an estimated fifteen thousand people packed themselves into the temple complex and ten thousand people slept on the temple grounds. Starr observed that the pilgrims enjoyed a moving-picture show about the life of the Buddha and circumambulated in and around the temple carrying lanterns (Starr 1918, 62–63).

During the precolonial period, major cities such as Kaesŏng 開城 and P'yŏngyang 平壤 (former capitals of previous dynasties) as well as Seoul held celebrations.⁹ Throngs of people, figuratively described in newspapers as

“people-mountains and people-sea” (*insan inhae* 人山人海), filled the streets to participate in the Lantern Assembly (*yōndŭnghoe*), at that time only loosely associated by the general public with the Buddha’s birth. The holiday was also a major shopping day and people flooded commercial districts to buy toys for kids and lanterns to decorate their homes. Thus, even though the neo-Confucian government was unfavorable to Buddhism, the Lantern festivals in these cities continued to be celebrated as a quasi-Buddhist custom.

Korean Buddhists, temples, and cities continued to expand upon this holiday after Japan’s annexation in 1910. New roads and mass transportation made pilgrimage to remote temples easier, thus contributing to the rising popularity of the event. The colonial government itself increased transportation for this holiday by dispatching special trains with discounted tickets (*Tonga ilbo* 5 May 1926). Modernity changed the nature and structure of the celebration of the Buddha’s birthday in Korea. Influences came from multiple locations and parties, including Japanese Buddhism and Korean Christianity. Even remote mountain temples incorporated new elements, as in Sri Lanka and Japan: Buddhist hymns (versus chanting), musical and theatrical performances on the life of the Buddha, and public lectures (versus talks for Buddhists within the confines of a temple). In the 1920s, some Buddhist monks took to the streets to preach Buddhism publicly. They distributed pamphlets and translations of *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse (1877–1962). A 1925 movie based on Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* was also shown at Korean temples. As modern Chinese Buddhists fully “embraced the technologies of mass-mediated modernity” to “make their teachings accessible to larger audiences,” so Korean monks also made full use of modern material culture for the spread of their religion (Tarocco 2007, 15).

Thus, Korea’s native version of the Buddha’s birthday was in place, celebrated nationally, and already undergoing modernization during the early part of the colonial era, before Japanese Buddhists turned their attention to introducing their own version, Hana Matsuri, to colonial Korea. Because of this, Japanese Buddhists had to find ways to entice Korean Buddhists to join Hana Matsuri.

Japanese Buddhists' Efforts in Korea

Japan's initial confidence that it would be easy to integrate Korea as a colony was shattered in 1919. After a decade of strict military rule (1910–1919), over two million Koreans rose up against Japan demanding immediate independence. Embarrassed by what Western powers would think of this, Japan changed its repressive colonial policy to a more moderate and culturally sensitive one (*bunka seiji* 文化政治). This policy allowed indigenous voices to be expressed, albeit within the confines of colonial rule (Caprio 2009, 111). Throughout the 1920s, the colonial regime intensified its efforts toward cultural assimilation, but little progress was made.

In the mid-1920s, Japanese Buddhists capitalized upon the political impasse by proposing to the colonial government the introduction of Hana Matsuri, which would have the added benefit of reasserting Japanese Buddhism's significance both to the Japanese colonial government and to Korean culture. Japanese lay Buddhists believed that a jointly sponsored Buddha's birthday festival was a promising avenue for unifying the two cultures. The festival could reduce antagonism between the Koreans and Japanese, reducing the risk of future nationalist uprisings. At the same time, enlarging the festival would help Buddhists regain their pride and challenge Christianity. It was a win-win idea for both Japanese Buddhists and the colonial authorities.

Despite this bold vision, holding a jointly sponsored Hana Matsuri in colonial Korea was not simple. Japanese lay Buddhists found themselves negotiating with multiple religious and non-religious groups from both the Korean and Japanese communities. Debate about the celebration's date further complicated negotiations. While Korean Buddhists followed the lunar calendar's date in early or mid May, Japanese Buddhists used the solar calendar date of April 8. Thus, there was roughly a month separating the two dates.

One of the first initiators of this effort was the Japanese lay Buddhist Moriwaki Takayuki 森脇孝之. At a meeting in 1924 Moriwaki expressed his intention to make Hana Matsuri a festival for all people in Seoul, both Japanese and Korean (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 121 [1936], 15), since holding the

festival solely among Japanese Buddhists, another Jōdo Buddhist Isei Hakuchū 伊政博中 said, is “lonesome” (*sabishii* 寂しい) (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 25 [1926], 75). Later, Nakamura Kentarō 中村 健太郎 (1883–?) took over Moriwaki’s leadership, emerging as the central figure in this effort. He was also key in the most influential lay Buddhist movement in colonial Korea, the Association of Korean Buddhism (*Chōsen Bukkyō dan* 朝鮮佛教團), established in 1920. He convened a meeting in 1926 with Japanese Buddhists from different sects to build momentum and to garner support. All applauded the idea but then the topic turned to the issue of which date, solar or lunar, should be used for Hana Matsuri. The debate mirrored the one between the Chinese monk Taixu and Japanese Buddhist leaders at the Second East Asian Buddhist Conference. Nakamura presented three reasons to persuade Japanese Buddhists at the meeting to opt for the lunar date. First, flowers begin to bloom in Japan by April 8, but in Korea it is still cold and the flowers have not yet come out. As one said, “One cannot enjoy the feeling of a real flower festival [in April in Korea]” (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 49 [1928], 3). Second, and more importantly, imposing a Japanese custom on Korea would not be an ideal approach. Thus, Nakamura insisted, “The Korean custom should be respected” (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 49 [1928], 3).

A third reason to follow the lunar calendar was given. Just as Hana Matsuri boosted business in Japan through department store bargains, which unquestionably made the festival more attractive in Japan, so too could the event benefit Korean and Japanese businesses in Korea. Some of the Japanese Buddhists attending the meeting suggested inviting the Association of Commerce and Industry (*Sanggong-hoe* 商工會), comprised of Korean merchants, to participate. When Nakamura approached this association he was told that unless the lunar date was observed, they would not participate (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 121 [1935], 16). The Korean merchants would not be able to profit if the festival did not get Koreans to come out into the streets.

While the majority at the meeting agreed with these points, several representatives from Japanese Buddhist sects disagreed and decided to leave the alliance (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 49 [1928], 4 and 121 [1935], 16). There was nevertheless sufficient momentum for the Japanese Buddhists to receive

the support of five major associations: the Korean Buddhist Institution, the Association of Korean Commerce and Industry, the Association of Korean Buddhism, the Association of Japanese Commerce and Industry, and the Association of Japanese Buddhist Sects. Together they formed the Association of the Celebration of Hana Matsuri (*Hwaje pongch'an hoe* 花祭奉讚會 or *Kasai hōsankai*).

There is no available record of the ways in which Korean Buddhists participated in this discussion. The Korean Buddhist institution decided to “place a permanent office,” however, and nominated a number of Korean monks, including Kim T'aehŭp, to work with the Association (*Pulgyo* 49 [1928], 91). This shows that Korean monastic leaders welcomed a joint Hana Matsuri and must have participated in the decision-making process.

Several lines from the Association's prospectus point to how the Buddha's birthday festival was interwoven with pan-Asian Buddhism. It notes that the East had been celebrating the birth of Buddha since ancient times and that with “the social awakening of Buddhists in recent years” the event had become more festive and elaborate. The prospectus suggested that people in Korea should bolster “this good custom” to “contribute to the spiritual cultivation of all of Korea” (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 6 [1928], 4).

As soon as this Association was instituted, Nakamura and others began to lobby the colonial government to support the event administratively and financially. Impressed by the level of cooperation that the Japanese Buddhists had mustered, the colonial government promised full support. On May 26, 1928, the first Hana Matsuri sponsored by the government, Japanese Buddhists, Korean Buddhists, and business associations was held in the massive and festive way described at the beginning of this article.

Thus, it would be an overstatement to say that the introduction of this joint Hana Matsuri to colonial Korea was merely an imposition of the Japanese for the purpose of colonial rule. Rather, it was the result of negotiations among various individuals and parties. These negotiations reflect Japanese Buddhists' efforts to create a sense of Buddhist community through the festival, a community that could undoubtedly be an example of assimilation between the colonizer and the colonized and, at the same time, a community imagined by

Buddhist reformers that could be vibrant enough to counter Christianity. Thus, this festival in colonial Korea should be understood as part of an on-going Buddhist effort to transform the religion into one that would be popular, modern, social, national, and international.

Creating a Popular, People-Oriented, and Buddhist-Centered Hana Matsuri

As mentioned, Koreans had largely forgotten that the secular, seasonal May festival was originally a celebration of the Buddha's birthday. Korean Buddhists believed that this first joint Hana Matsuri would be instrumental in returning the figure of the Buddha to the celebration, thereby restoring Korean Buddhism's centrality to Korean cultural identity. As such, Korean Buddhist reformers did not want to limit Hana Matsuri to Buddhists but envisioned it as extended, or re-secularized, such that it was seen as social, popular, family-centered, and national. Through the format and rhetoric of the festival, the event was intended to be both Buddhist and extra-Buddhist. Like Japanese Buddhists, Korean Buddhists created banners and literature with the words "popularization," "family-ization," "socialization," "massification," and "spiritualization," referring to Buddhism in general and to Hana Matsuri in particular. Quixotic as these slogans might sound to us today, they expressed the level of earnestness of Japanese and Korean Buddhists to manufacture a modern Buddhism and to reconfigure their identity, which they believed had been hijacked by modern forces and aggressive Christian missionaries.

The version of Hana Matsuri that took place in Seoul in 1928 was different from the one in Tokyo; while Tokyo's took place in Hibiya Park alone, Seoul's had three different locations.¹⁰ It involved three separate occasions held at different times in the day. The first public event took place at the square in front of the Bank of Chosŏn at 11:00am, with Japanese Buddhist organizations officiating. Fireworks and an airplane flight followed this event. The Korean Buddhist Central Administrative Institution took charge of the 1:00pm event, located in front of the Tonga Daily Newspaper building. The final event at 3:00pm in Changch'ungdan 獎忠壇 Park was presided over by the Association

of the Celebration of Hana Matsuri. Each location had a platform at which people could ladle water over a statue of the baby Buddha. Five hundred dignitaries including the governor-general and mayor of Seoul participated. For the Japanese, the day symbolized the fullest extent to which Korea had been assimilated by Japan, and this was accomplished through the shared medium of Buddhist rituals.

In fact, this structure of Hana Matsuri reflects the colonial reality of the way Seoul was inhabited by the colonized and colonizer. Generally speaking, central Seoul was latitudinally divided. Koreans lived in the northern half and Japanese in the southern. The southern half was so Japanese that one Korean cynically called the Japanese the “new owners” of the southern part of Seoul (*Kaebiyōk* 48 [June 1926], 67). The central office of Korean Buddhism was located in the northern half while the temples of the Japanese Buddhist sects were nestled in the southern half. Shops and other businesses exhibited a similar division: Chongno 鍾路 Street in the north had mainly Korean shops while Main Street in the south had Japanese businesses. Thus, the organizers of the festival had chosen their locations strategically and symbolically. The *Tonga Daily* newspaper was in the Korean dominated area while the Bank of Chosŏn was in the Japanese. Between these two areas was the third, suggesting that this location would ceremonially and symbolically reconcile the division.

Despite the colonial government's efforts to assimilate Korea into Japan throughout the colonial period, the two peoples existed largely in separation. The economic disparity between the two communities in Seoul widened as the years passed. Many of the Korean shops on Chongno Street lost their businesses to Japanese entrepreneurs (Chŏn 2001). Chongno Street had been where the old lantern festivals had taken place and where shops had sold lanterns and toys on festival day. In some ways, organizers hoped that Hana Matsuri would, as Nakamura indicated, mitigate the financial hardships of these Korean businesses by returning shoppers to the area, while also benefitting Japanese shops. During the first Hana Matsuri, each shop on Chongno Street lavishly decorated its display windows and offered discounts, and as a result the sales that day were “very good” (*Maeil sinbo* 26 May

1928). According to one newspaper report, in 1929 the Association of the Central Prosperity (*Chung'ang pŏn'yŏnghoe* 中央繁邏會) encouraged people to purchase watermelon lanterns for the parade and for home decoration (*Chosŏn ilbo* 15 May 1929). The organizers of Hana Matsuri deliberately planned the route of the lantern parades during these three ceremonies to pass through shopping areas like Chongno. Commercialism was a big part of this event as it was in the case of Hana Matsuri in Japan.

To paraphrase David McMahan's similar point about Buddhist modernism in the West, Korean Buddhists saw in this event an opportunity simultaneously to "re-traditionalize" an element of Korean Buddhism—that is, to make it explicitly Buddhist—while at the same time "de-traditionalizing" it, creating a modernized, popular version of it (McMahan 2008, 246–247). With this dual aim, the Korean Buddhist administrative institution "made two or three times the preparation" needed in order to ensure a fantastically successful event in 1928 (*Pulgyo* 60 [1929], 2). The Korean Buddhist contribution began with traditional rituals at the Kakhwangsa in the morning. As soon as the rituals were over, a parade commenced from the temple complex. A palanquin with a sculpture of a white elephant was led by thousands of Korean and Japanese students and accompanied by Buddhists with lanterns and dozens of monks riding in five or six cars. The procession then turned onto Chongno Street, drawing a large turnout. As soon as the event at the square was over, the procession went on to Changch'ungdan Park to join the Japanese Buddhists and government officials. There, a state ceremony was held to commemorate the birth of the Buddha. The titles of news articles reflected Seoulites' reception of this event: "The April 8 lantern festival revived after forty years," "Celebrating the lantern festivals city-wide," and "Flower world above and below heaven! Festival mood overflows the entire city" (*Maeil sinbo* 19, 20, and 26 May 1928).

Regarding Hana Matsuri the following year, one Korean monk stated, "People in Seoul who had unconsciously lit lanterns according to the yearly custom were thoroughly showered by the Buddha's sacred virtues and the streets boomed like those during the Three Kingdoms" (*Pulgyo* 60 [1929], 75). Another monk echoed him, saying that this event was "an expression

of the revitalization of the peak of Buddhism” and “the reappearance of Three Kingdoms’ Buddhism” (*Pulgyo* 60 [1929], 2). Still another exclaimed, “Korean Buddhism finally seems to have become People’s Buddhism and Social Buddhism” (*Pulgyo* 60 [1929], 75). Pleased with the success of the festival, the Korean Buddhist institution affirmed that it would continue to participate in the annual festival (*Pulgyo* 49 [1928], 91).

The successful commencement of a modern Buddha’s birthday festival in Seoul made Buddhists happy, but they soon began to worry. After attending Seoul’s Hana Matsuri for just the two years, the Sōtō 曹洞 missionary Kawamura Tōki 川村道器, while pleased in many regards, complained that it “was too elaborate” and “became popular too quickly.” He was concerned that the event had not developed “substantial experience”; whereas the organizers of the Tokyo Hana Matsuri had built up experience since 1916, the ones in Seoul had not (*Kongō* 6/5 [1929], 12–13). Some Buddhists in Korea complained that it was not successful enough and that the Hana Matsuri celebrated in Seoul was far from being on a par with Christmas. In order to make it equal to Christmas, Hana Matsuri should become “family-centered,” said editorials (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 72 [1930], 53). Kawamura argued that the organizers of Hana Matsuri could learn much from the Christian Christmas, and suggested that broad dissemination of Buddhism could be accomplished by giving free Buddha statues to all Koreans (*Kongō* 7/4 [1930], 16–17). The Association of Korean Buddhism duly began casting twenty million Buddha statues for distribution (*Chōsen Bukkyō* 57 [1929], 30). Although this project did not come to fruition, it is an example of how Japanese and Korean Buddhists interacted around their shared vision of Hana Matsuri’s role in propagating Buddhism.

Just as the Tokyo Hana Matsuri spread to other cities in Japan, the elaborate Seoul Hana Matsuri soon spread to other Korean cities. Within just a few years, Hana Matsuri became widespread throughout colonial Korea, just as it had in imperial Japan.

The Politics of Hana Matsuri in Colonial Korea

In the late 1930s, Hana Matsuri was downsized due to Japan's expansion into Manchuria, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and Japan's total war effort. But the future of a joint Hana Matsuri also faced an internal challenge: Japanese Buddhists were becoming aggrieved that they had to follow the later Korean lunar date rather than the earlier Japanese solar date. For instance, a Sōtō priest expressed his brewing frustration when in 1933 he remarked, "Do we really have to use the lunar calendar (for Hana Matsuri)? The country [the colonial government] is spending a huge amount of money. Next year, we should hold it according to the solar calendar" (*Kongō* 10 [1933], 19).

In 1937, the colonial government responded to Japanese Buddhists' complaints about holding Hana Matsuri on the lunar date. As Japan's second war against China loomed large, the colonial government in Korea intensified efforts to fully integrate Korea into Japan. In this situation, any element at odds with this direction came under scrutiny from the colonial authorities. New religions were charged with being superstitious and insidious and were ordered to disband or be merged into the major religions approved by the state. Eradicating old, premodern customs was another measure taken. As part of this policy, the colonial authorities decided that Buddhists should follow the solar calendar. This decision directly affected the celebration of the Buddha's birthday at most Korean temples, and especially the Hana Matsuri taking place in cities. The colonial regime announced that 1937 would be the last year that the Buddha's birthday celebration would be observed in accordance with the lunar calendar (*Chosŏn ilbo* 17 May 1937).

Accordingly, the thirty-one head temples and the central office of Korean Buddhism in Seoul, which were under the direct jurisdiction of the colonial regime, had to follow the new date. The central office of Korean Buddhism continued to participate in the joint Hana Matsuri on the solar date until the end of the colonial era. The colonial government did not fully enforce the adoption of the solar calendar, however. Despite the colonial government's decision, some Korean temples in rural areas continued to observe the lunar calendar, attesting to the inherent limitations of Japan's control over Korean

Buddhism and reflecting resistance on the part of Korean Buddhists.

While Japanese Buddhists were relieved to return to the solar calendar date for Hana Matsuri, Koreans lost their enthusiasm for the event once the date officially changed. While this matter may seem trivial to us today, Koreans considered the lunar calendar as part of their cultural, national identity and many other aspects of Korean culture revolved around lunar dates. Yun Ch'ihō 尹致昊 (1864–1945) wrote in his diary in 1930, “The Korean population has come to ignore the fact that the solar calendar is the calendar of the country. The people almost unconsciously do this as a form of silent protest against Japanese domination” (*Yun Ch'ihō ilgi* 9 [Jan., 1930], 263). Thus, it was inevitable that having Hana Matsuri on the solar date would discourage Koreans from turning out. Moreover, it was simply a cold time of year when the flowers had not yet bloomed.

The event was beset by financial disagreements, as well. The city government had been giving 2,500 yen annually to businesses involved in Hana Matsuri, but all this money, which later increased to 7,000 yen, was given to the Association of Japanese Businesses. The Association of Korean Businesses complained that not “a single *yen* [was given] to the Korean Association” (*Tonga ilbo* 13 January 1935).

Despite these problems, the 1937 Hana Matsuri, which was the last year held on the lunar date, was largely successful, this time with all the locations for major events seeing a high turnout. Hana Matsuri continued to act as a distinctively Buddhist festival in Korea in the years following. In 1941, the year Japan became fully immersed in World War II, the colonial regime changed the structure of Hana Matsuri. In an effort to bring unity and uniformity to this event, the colonial government and the Association decided to hold the festival at one single location. By 1943, Japan was in a state of complete war and resources were limited. The sixteenth Hana Matsuri that year was scaled down, regimented, and held indoors in a major city building, further dampening the festive atmosphere.

Nevertheless, Korean Buddhists made the most of Hana Matsuri by capitalizing on its publicity. Media coverage, including radio, provided a prime way for Korean Buddhists to reassert their relevance to Korean culture.

They also harnessed the public space made available through the colonial authorities to increase the visibility of Korean Buddhism. Of course, this would have not been possible without their skillful engagement with Japanese Buddhists. Hana Matsuri is one example, among many others, of how Korean Buddhists co-opted the work of Japanese Buddhists. Moreover, Korean Buddhists gained significant experience and knowledge through working with Japanese Buddhists and the government on Hana Matsuri, and thus became prepared to make this modern festival their own when the right time came. That time arrived at the end of the colonial era.

Conclusion

As soon as Korea gained independence in 1945, Korean Buddhists annulled the colonial government's rules and regulations for Buddhism and established their own institutional structure and bylaws. They also reverted to the lunar date for celebrating the birth of the Buddha, designated Korean Buddhists to plan the festival, and replaced the term Hana Matsuri with the title Lantern Festival (*yŏnkkot ch'ukche* 연꽃축제).¹¹ The format and structure of Hana Matsuri were carried over, however: an organized procession, pre- and post-parade events, carnations, floats, and Japanese-style lanterns continued to be elements of the new Lantern Festival. At the same time, Korean Buddhists continued to draw on the rhetoric that Buddhists in Asia had deployed since the late nineteenth century: popularization, socialization, and internationalization. Postcolonial Korean Buddhists also continued to present the festival as a broad-based and national event embodying Korea's cultural heritage. In the present day, city governments work in partnership with Buddhists to present the festival in cultural, national, and cosmopolitan terms, providing generous financial support and designating it as an official cultural event. While state involvement in the festival is far less visible than during the colonial period,¹² it is apparent that Koreans consider the festival as an expression of national pride.

In addition, Korean Buddhists continue to see the Lantern Festival as the Buddhist analog to Christmas. When US occupation forces took over post-

colonial Korea, the government shifted from a pro-Buddhist to a pro-Christian one (Sørensen 1993 and 1999, 132; Park 2009; Hong 2009, 207). US military government officials designated Christmas as a national holiday in 1945, which later was adopted by the pro-American Korean government. Many Buddhists deemed this pro-Christian policy unfair and mobilized to elevate the day of the Buddha's birth to a national holiday as well. In 1975, after more than a decade of legal battles, the government declared the Buddha's birthday a national holiday.

Hana Matsuri in Japan experienced a different fate. Despite Japanese Buddhist efforts in the late 1920s to make the Buddha's birthday a national holiday, it never came to pass. Once a driving force in disseminating Buddhism to the East and the West, Hana Matsuri is now a ceremony confined to individual temples. The specter Isei feared in 1926—that of a “lonesome” festival celebrated by a few—is echoed in a comment by folklorist Endō Shigeru 遠藤 滋: “Compared to everyone’s celebration of the birth of Jesus, it [Hana Matsuri] seems a little bit lonesome (*sabishii*)” (Endō 1989, 24). The decline of Hana Matsuri in postwar Japan, though it may have multiple causes, might indicate that the excitement to create a pan-Asian Buddhist identity through Hana Matsuri, felt so keenly by Japanese Buddhists during the prewar period, was to a large extent fueled by Japan’s rise as a colonial, imperial power.

Japanese Buddhism in this colonial period can also be thought of as a social institution adapting itself to a new situation in order to retain its social and political influence. Modern Buddhists, from the late nineteenth century on, felt an urgent call to reenergize the apathetic, traditional Buddhism of the premodern era, to confront Christianity, and to maximize their chance of survival at a time of massive social upheaval. This call was enacted through the strategic return of the historical Buddha to a central position and the promotion of the Buddha's birthday festival, generally termed the Lantern Festival in Korea, Hana Matsuri in Japan, and Vesak in Sri Lanka. Thus, the Buddha's birthday festivals in these countries had commonalities. First, the Buddha's birthday festival was seen as a response to and emulation of Christianity. Buddhist leaders did not intend to simply imitate Christian holidays but hoped

to supersede them by displaying Buddhism's modernity through the highly performative festival. Second, Buddhists in all three countries presented this event both as core to their national identity and as international and universal. Sri Lankan Buddhists deemed their own Buddhism as superior to all others and touted Vesak as representative of it, while Japanese Buddhists believed that Hana Matsuri was reflective of the eminence of Japanese Buddhism. Even while under Japan's rule, Korean Buddhists did not abandon the belief that they carried the true identity of the Korean culture and nation and that Korean Buddhism was the mother of Japanese Buddhism. Third, despite this nationalist undertone for a supposedly transnational event, the Sri Lankan and Korean festivals garnered the support of their foreign, colonial governments. The joint Hana Matsuri in Korea was, for almost eighteen years, the defining national festival supported by the colonial government. That political support was possible in part because Hana Matsuri represented a common heritage in Asia, and Buddhists fully used this connection to their own benefit.

Likewise, contemporary Korean Buddhists, partly inspired by the "Korean wave" (*hallyu* 韓流) of Korea as an exporter of pop culture to other Asian countries, are re-presenting the festival as potent cultural capital to be internationalized. This idea is consonant with the discourse of Japanese and other Buddhist modernisms over the prior century. Now it appears that Korean Buddhism is emerging as the prime disseminator of an updated version of the festival. Sixty Asian Buddhist monks were guests at the 2010 Lantern Festival in Seoul. Among them were thirty Japanese Buddhist representatives, joining Korean Buddhist leaders for the purpose of "Asian Buddhist networking and solidarity" (*Pulgyo sinmun* 16 May 2010).

How then can the dynamics of this festival be understood in the context of modernity? The world seems to have reinvented itself in the nineteenth century. With the rise of nation-states, industrialization, modernity, and colonialism, people in the East and the West experienced unprecedented economic, political, and cultural creativity. Even the term creativity is an invention of the period (Weiner 2000, 8). This creativity was also felt in the world of religions, including the very definition of *religion* and the reshaping of practices, institutions, and rituals. Religious festivals were not

only reinvigorated but sometimes even entirely constructed. Although most people today think of Christmas as an ancient holiday, much of Christmas as we know it was an invention of the Victorian era (1837–1901) (Stringer 2001, 148; in a similar vein, Pimlott 1978, 85–110)

The Christmas festival, like other “reinvented traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm’s term, became an integral part of the nationalistic discourse of modern nation-states as a way of fostering social cohesion, political legitimation, and collective identities (Hobsbawm 1983, 6–7). Abetted by Western colonialism and imperialism, and by Christian global missions, the new cultural symbols of Christmas quickly spread as a part of religious and political ideology. Then multiple versions of Christmas became localized, while Christmas continued to stand as an international symbol of pan-Christian identity.

In emulation of and in response to Christmas, the Buddha’s birthday festival, often called a Buddhist Christmas, was reinvented in the late nineteenth century (Somaratna 1996). Like the Christmas festival, Hana Matsuri in Japan and Korea played a religious and political role. As Michel Foucault writes, religious and political discourses are inseparable in the governance of individuals, groups, and society. The intersection of religion and politics manifests in ritual forms, and religious leaders are active codifiers of these two realms, configuring them in their own best interests (Carrette 2000, 7).

Thus the Buddhists who promoted Hana Matsuri were not doing so entirely as an extension of the state’s imperial ideology. They willingly constructed and promulgated their own versions, as Christopher Ives shows was the case with Zen’s imperial ideology in Japan (Ives 2009, 45). In other words, religious experts can easily transform “religious capital” into “forms of political capital” and vice versa to optimize their position (Rey 2007, 97). Buddhists in Japan and colonial Korea, along with those in Sri Lanka, used this festival to promote their form of (cultural) nationalism, to consolidate a pan-Asian (global) Buddhist solidarity, and at the same time to increase their own social and institutional prestige in society. Although the colonizer, namely Japanese Buddhists, dominated the implementation of Hana Matsuri in colonial Korea, and despite a sizeable power differential, Korean Buddhists

engaged in the same “game,” as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, celebrating Hana Matsuri for the same purposes.

In addition, Korean Buddhists kept their institutional independence and traditional lineage intact. Korean monks’ strategic networking can be understood as a form of “locative pluralism,” a term created by Anne Blackburn to characterize the Sinhalese monastic reformer Sumangala’s tactical social affiliations with multiple parties, including the British colonial government. Blackburn describes locative pluralism as “acting simultaneously in relation to plural and shifting collectives of belonging to which one feels a sense of responsibility and emotional investment” (Blackburn 2010, 210). Just as the campaign for the Buddha’s birthday festival in Sri Lanka was characterized by locative pluralism, locative pluralism was also practiced by Korean Buddhists as they worked to both keep their traditional identity and to renovate their tradition. The Hana Matsuri of colonial Korea embodied a unique, Korean Buddhist colonial modernity, and thus was an integral part of modern Korean Buddhism.

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Notes

- 1 P’yŏn also wrote two well-researched works on the relationship between the Buddha’s Birthday festival (*Ch’op’ail* 初八日 or April Eighth) and the folklore of Korea (P’yŏn 1998 and 2002).
- 2 Vesak is also a celebration of the Buddha’s enlightenment and his death. However, in the context of the modern revitalization of Vesak in Sri Lanka, Vesak as the celebration of the Buddha’s birth was a dominant discourse among Sinhalese Buddhists.
- 3 For more detail on the new elements in Vesak attributable to the influence of Christianity, see Somaratna’s “Christian Impact on the Wesak Celebrations in Sri Lanka” (1996).
- 4 As well as to Korea, China, Burma, and Tibet.

- 5 In 1941, he published a book titled *Hana Matsuri shi* 花祭り史 (The History of Flower Festivals) which is no longer extant.
- 6 The first was held in China the previous year (1924).
- 7 He also sent a Vesak postcard that was featured in the same journal (*Pulgyo* 27 [1926]).
- 8 During his study trip in Sri Lanka, Yi Yŏngjae also had contact with the Maha Bodhi Society. During his trip to Kandy to observe Vesak he stayed at the Society's branch office for several days.
- 9 These celebrations were held separately from those of the Kakhwangsa complex.
- 10 In 1934, the number of locations was increased to four.
- 11 North Korea discontinued holding the Buddha's birthday festival in 1948. However, since 1988 some North Korean temples have held ceremonies commemorating the Buddha's birth, rather than the street festivals as seen in South Korea, as a way of forming relationships with Buddhist institutions from other countries (*Yŏnhap news* 22 May 2007).
- 12 Nonetheless, politicians understand that they are expected to attend the event (P'yŏn 2000).

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