Duke/Korea University Conference

Bordering the Borderless
Faces of Modern Buddhism in East Asia

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Sponsors: Duke’s Asian Pacific Studies Institute (APSI) and Religion and Asian & Middle Eastern Studies departments; Research Institute for Korean Studies at Korea University (RIKS); The Anguk Seon Center Foundation; Young Do Cultural Center Foundation; Duke's Office of Global Strategy and Programs; Duke’s Arts and Sciences; Triangle Center for Japanese Studies; Carolina Asia Center; Duke Korea Forum

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Conference Statement

For the past several decades, scholarship on East Asian colonialism, modernity, and imperialism has abounded. In particular, English-language works on these subjects have extensively examined the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of these forces. Recent writings have further unraveled the complex realities and the multifaceted experience of East Asian societies thrown into colonial, semi-colonial, and imperial structures. One area that has not yet found its proper place in this scholarly enterprise is the role of religion (in general) and Buddhism (in particular), despite the broad acknowledgment of their importance.

In the case of Buddhism, a growing number of scholars of modern East Asian Buddhism have delved into the dynamic relationships between (colonial) modernity and Buddhism, modern nation-state and Buddhist reforms, nationalist and Buddhist identity, material (and intellectual) culture and Buddhism, and ethnocentric Buddhism and transnational Buddhism. In so doing, they have also pointed out that to better understand the complexity of these relationships, binary interpretations, such as nationalism versus collaboration, tradition versus modernity, and East versus West, should be overcome. They have further suggested that there were a far greater number of relationships among different communities than originally believed, not only between Buddhists and Westerners but also among Buddhists themselves, in and beyond East Asian borders. These realizations among scholars are partly attributed to the fact that primary archives in East Asian and English languages have been made more available to those working in this field. Nevertheless, there has not yet been a full and comprehensive analysis of East Asian Buddhism and its interplay with modern forces based on these sources and new perspectives.

This conference is intended to redress this problem and to present a strong case that Buddhism, as with other religions, mattered in the unfolding events of modern East Asian history. Scholars will discuss how Buddhism acted as a powerful symbol of authority and meaning in the building of modern, colonial, and imperial states, as well as how Buddhism shaped individual, group, national, and cultural identities, space, and power. The conference seeks to examine multiple aspects of Buddhism by bringing together scholars of different
countries. Scholars who are working on diverse traditions of East Asian Buddhism and who are from a range of fields and theoretical perspectives will be invited to join in this interdisciplinary conversation.

The conference will pay special attention to the following two approaches: First, the conference will look at Buddhism from a transnational perspective to move beyond ethnocentric boundaries. Second, the presentations will illuminate how local concerns were at the same time national, transnational, and global—and vice versa. Taken together, the two approaches will complicate the historiographies of conventional scholarship on East Asian colonialism and modernity, which has tended to confine itself to one nation and to the nationalistic paradigm. The goal of employing such approaches is to effectively bring to light the dynamics of the Buddhist traditions at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, identity formation and transformation, and particularism and universalism.