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Korean Buddhist Studies in Mainland China (1992–2025): A Perspective from Comparative Religious History

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Abstract

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, research on Korean Buddhism in mainland China has undergone more than three decades of accumulation and has developed a relatively comprehensive research framework; its methodological characteristics, however, have not yet been subjected to systematic examination. This article offers a historiographical and methodological evaluation of that field rather than a systematic bibliometric review. Drawing principally on Chinese-language literature from the CNKI database, supplemented by Korean-language publications from the RISS and KCI databases, it examines journal articles, theses, monographs, and edited conference volumes published between 1992 and 2025, selecting individual works for detailed discussion according to their scholarly influence, thematic coverage, and methodological significance. Using contemporaneous scholarship from the Korean academic community as an external point of reference, it conducts a cross-linguistic evaluation of the developmental trajectory of the field. The findings indicate that this field has made distinctive contributions in the excavation of Chinese-language historical sources, the construction of the history of bilateral exchanges, and the study of state–monastic relations. At the same time, the long-standing absence of substantive dialogue with Korean academia, the overall lack of research on material religion, and the systematic neglect of gender perspectives constitute major bottlenecks constraining its further development. Through methodological refinement and the institutional construction of Sino–Korean academic reciprocity, this field may transcend a purely bilateral framework and offer original contributions to the study of comparative religious history in East Asia, as well as to a broader comparative programme encompassing other scholarly traditions.

Keywords: Korean Buddhist studies; cross-cultural Buddhist historiography; Sino–Korean Buddhist exchanges; comparative religious history in East Asia; methodological reflection



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1. Introduction and Background Framework

The history of Buddhist transmission between China and Korea constitutes one of the most enduring and complex historical processes of religious exchange in East Asia. In the fourth century CE, Mahāyāna scriptures were successively transmitted along the political corridors of Northeast Asia to Goguryeo 高句麗, Baekje 百濟, and Silla 新羅. Over the subsequent centuries, Korean monks travelled to Tang China in large numbers to seek the Dharma, bringing back Chinese Buddhist scriptures and commentaries to the peninsula, thereby promoting the systematic formation of indigenous Buddhism. The extant edition of the *Tripitaka Koreana* 高麗大藏經 is renowned for its textual accuracy and, during the

medieval period, was reintroduced into China, thereby contributing in turn to the transmission of Chinese Buddhist textual traditions. During the Joseon dynasty 朝鮮王朝, ritual interactions and textual exchanges continued this historical connection in a different form. In terms of research resources, both the volume and quality of historical materials provide a solid foundation for systematic scholarly inquiry.

However, systematic academic research on Korean Buddhism in mainland China did not commence until after the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992. In the preceding four decades, political barriers prevented Chinese scholars from accessing Korean archival institutions and from establishing substantive connections with the Korean academic community. Within less than a decade after normalization, three foundational monographs were published in succession: *A History of Sino–Korean Buddhist Cultural Exchange* (1993) by Huang Youfu and Chen Jingfu (Huang and Chen 1993); *One Thousand Years of Sino–Korean Buddhist Relations* (1994) by Chen Jingfu; and *A History of Korean Buddhism* (1997) by He Jinsong (He 1997). These three works established historical transmission and bilateral cultural exchange as the central concerns of the field, and for nearly two subsequent decades they continued to shape its problematics and narrative framework in mainland scholarship on Korean Buddhism. Alongside these synthetic histories, X. Huang's (2007) survey of source materials on contemporary Korean Buddhism preserved in Republican-era Chinese Buddhist periodicals opened a distinct line of inquiry into the modern period, demonstrating that the documentary basis for the study of twentieth-century Korean Buddhism extends well beyond canonical and dynastic sources (X. Huang 2007, pp. 21–30). With the continued advancement of research, nevertheless, the inherent limitations of the transmission framework have become increasingly apparent. The macro-framework constructed around the basic premise of “Chinese transmission and peninsular reception” has obscured several historical complexities that merit closer examination; moreover, non-China-centred transmission pathways have long remained marginal, and the agency of Buddhism on the Korean peninsula has only begun to receive more serious scholarly attention in recent years (J. Chen 1994, pp. 15–42). Although this corrective trend has begun to emerge, its scope and systematicity remain limited.

In terms of overall scale, according to Ao (2015), the number of relevant journal articles and theses in mainland China increased to approximately 150–160 between normalization and 2015, with more than two-thirds produced after 2000, exhibiting a marked “explosive” growth (Ao 2015, p. 115). This quantitative expansion has not, however, concealed structural deficiencies at the level of research quality. Ao Ying's central assessment is that mainland scholars have paid insufficient attention to prior research on related topics, particularly demonstrating a systematic neglect of relevant overseas scholarship (Ao 2015, pp. 118–19). The Korean RISS database provides quantifiable evidence for this deficiency. For example, *Bulgyohak Yeongu* 불교학연구 (*Buddhist Studies Review*) has published more than 400 peer-reviewed articles since its inception in 2000, while *Bojo Sasang* 보조사상 (*Bojo Thought*) has been continuously published for over three decades. In contrast, among the Chinese-language studies examined in this article, direct citations of these two core Korean-language Buddhist journals are virtually nonexistent; this verifiable empirical fact constitutes a crucial evidential basis for the critical analysis undertaken here.

Based on the foregoing observations, this article advances its argument around three interrelated core claims. First, the field has generated substantively meaningful contributions in tracing the history of bilateral textual transmission, systematically examining the phenomenon of the “feedback” of Korean Buddhist thought to China, and elucidating the political sociology of state–monastic relations. Second, the “civilizational exchange” paradigm has profoundly shaped the theoretical discourse of the field; although its inherent limitations have been increasingly questioned, a genuine paradigmatic shift has yet to

occur. Third, the severe lack of substantive dialogue with the Korean academic community represents the most significant unrealized potential in the field, for which concrete documentary evidence can be provided.

On this basis, the study primarily utilizes Chinese-language literature from the CNKI database, supplemented by Korean-language materials from the RISS (RISS n.d.) and KCI (KCI n.d.) databases [CNKI: <https://www.cnki.net/>; RISS: <https://www.riss.kr/>; KCI: <https://www.kci.go.kr/>]. The corpus examined here comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, master's and doctoral theses, scholarly monographs, and edited conference volumes published between 1992 and 2025 that address the history of Korean Buddhism, its doctrinal traditions, and Sino–Korean Buddhist exchanges. Within this body of literature, individual works have been selected for detailed discussion according to three principles: scholarly influence, as indicated by citation, disciplinary reception, and the extent to which a study has shaped subsequent research questions; thematic coverage, so that the major periods, regions, figures, and problem-areas of the field are each represented; and methodological significance, that is, the degree to which a work exemplifies, consolidates, or departs from the prevailing analytical conventions of the field. Korean-language scholarship has been selected on the same principles and is employed throughout as an external point of comparison rather than as an object of survey in its own right.

It should be emphasized that the present article is a historiographical and methodological evaluation of a research field, not a systematic bibliometric review. Its purpose is to reconstruct the intellectual development of Chinese-language scholarship on Korean Buddhism and to assess the analytical frameworks that have governed it. The article accordingly does not employ exhaustive retrieval procedures, predefined Boolean search strings, or PRISMA-style screening protocols, which properly belong to systematic reviews and meta-analyses whose objective is comprehensive literature retrieval. Where quantitative claims about the overall scale of the field are advanced, they rest on the published survey of Ao (2015) rather than on an independent count conducted here. On this basis, the article reconstructs the developmental trajectory of the field, with particular emphasis on evaluating its scholarly contributions and methodological limitations, and proposes a forward-looking research agenda.

2. Institutional Conditions and the Foundations of Knowledge Production

The academic effects of the 1992 normalization of diplomatic relations extend far beyond the conventional domain of intergovernmental diplomacy. Within the Chinese higher education system, diplomatic normalization directly triggered the rapid expansion of “Korean Studies” as an independent disciplinary formation, within which Buddhist studies occupied a notably important position. Founded a few years after normalization, the journal *Contemporary Korea* 當代韓國 quickly became one of the principal platforms for disseminating Chinese scholarship on Korean religion and Buddhism; *Fayin* 法音 simultaneously assumed the dual function of reporting developments in bilateral Buddhist exchanges and publishing analytical studies of Korean Buddhist institutions. Normalization enabled Chinese scholars to gain direct access to Korean archival institutions and to establish substantive academic connections with institutions such as the Institute of Buddhist Studies at Dongguk University 東國大學校 and the Academy of Korean Studies 韓國學中央研究院. J. Wang (2017) review article systematically surveys relevant research institutions and digital databases in Korea, providing important practical guidance for Chinese scholars seeking to utilize Korean academic resources (J. Wang 2017, pp. 109–13).

The institutional and geographical distribution of Korean Buddhist studies in China exhibits a highly concentrated pattern. Yanbian University 延邊大學, benefiting from

the largest Korean Studies programme in China, a faculty body of ethnic Korean scholars with proficiency in the Korean language, and a multi-generational research tradition represented by scholars such as Fang Haofan and Jin Zhesu, accounts for the largest share of graduate-level research on Korean Buddhism. In addition, universities such as Zhejiang University, Nanjing University, Shandong University, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Southwest University, and Shanghai International Studies University have produced significant scholarship in recent years, reflecting a trend in which the field is gradually expanding beyond Northeast China to a nationwide scope. Journal publications are highly concentrated in five outlets: *Buddhist Studies* 佛學研究, *Studies in World Religions* 世界宗教研究, *World Religious Cultures* 世界宗教文化, *Contemporary Korea* 當代韓國, and *Fayin* 法音; the emergence of *Chinese Buddhist Studies Review* 漢語佛學評論 and *East Asian Buddhist Review* 東亞佛學評論 has begun to provide publication venues for more theoretically ambitious cross-regional comparative research, representing one of the most promising institutional developments in the field.

The high degree of interlocking between academic production and institutionalized bilateral Buddhist diplomacy constitutes a distinctive feature of mainland Chinese scholarship on Korean Buddhism and is crucial for assessing the academic character of this body of literature. Initiated in 1993 and hosted in rotation by China, Korea, and Japan, the Buddhist Friendly Exchange Conference generated a substantial number of conference proceedings and established a stable institutional linkage between the Buddhist Association of China 中國佛教協會 and the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism 韓國曹溪宗. Since its formal articulation in 1993, the concept of the “Golden Bond” has functioned both as a discourse of religious diplomacy and as an organizing framework for academic research (Shuai and Li 2019, pp. 103–6; Yang 2025, pp. 19–22). This institutional embeddedness has provided Chinese scholars with stable organizational support and access to fieldwork, but it has also produced a degree of epistemic obscuration: existing literature tends to emphasize harmonious transmission and mutually beneficial outcomes in Sino–Korean Buddhist exchanges, while downplaying competition, divergence, and even structural asymmetries in their relationship. Aspects of transmission that were omitted, rejected, or transformed—constituting a perspective requiring critical distance—remain notably scarce in the existing literature.

This account carries a testable implication. If the shape of mainland scholarship follows primarily from its institutional matrix rather than from its linguistic inheritance, then Sinophone scholarship produced under different institutional conditions should differ from it appreciably. Taiwan and Hong Kong hold the linguistic variable roughly constant: scholars there command literary Chinese to a comparable degree and therefore enjoy comparable access to the *hanmun* 漢文 archive on which the field depends. What differs is the institutional environment. Neither jurisdiction was reshaped by the 1992 normalization that generated the disciplinary expansion described above; neither participates in the trilateral Buddhist exchange circuit institutionalized through the “Golden Bond”; and neither hosts a bilingual ethnic-Korean research cohort of the kind concentrated at Yanbian University. The prediction that follows is that Taiwanese and Hong Kong scholarship on Korean Buddhism should be substantially smaller in volume and, more consequentially, should not be organized around a narrative of civilizational exchange. This article does not undertake that comparison, which would require an independent bibliometric and institutional analysis of two further jurisdictions—publication counts, dissertation supervision networks, journal editorial composition, and conference circuits—and would constitute a separate study. It is registered here as a falsifiable prediction generated by the present argument, and as the first instalment of the broader comparative programme set out in the conclusion.

3. A Systematic Examination of Research Themes

From the perspective of historical periodization, studies on the Unified Silla and Goryeo periods account for more than 70% of the total body of Chinese-language research (Ao 2015, p. 115). This distribution largely reflects the historical reality that Sino–Korean Buddhist interactions were most active during these periods, but it also indicates the relative weakness of research on the Joseon period and modern Buddhism.

The largest cluster of Chinese-language scholarship encompasses the initial transmission of Buddhism to the Korean peninsula, the formation of sectarian traditions, and Goryeo Buddhism. W. Huang (2020) doctoral dissertation at Tsinghua University employs archeological, architectural, and textual evidence to argue that the introduction of Buddhism was driven by the needs of political alliances in Northeast Asia and followed multiple routes. His reconstruction of the architectural lineage of Silla—from the brick-mimicking stone pagoda of Bunhwangsa 芬皇寺 to the twin-pagoda monastery complexes of Unified Silla—represents a methodological benchmark in Chinese-language studies of East Asian Buddhist material culture.

Tong (2013) systematically elucidates the logic of state legitimacy underlying Silla “state-protecting Buddhism,” while C. Li (2012) provides a prosopographical analysis of Silla monks who travelled to Tang China. Together, these studies delineate both the institutional and human dimensions of Sino–Korean Buddhist interaction during the initial transmission period. Notably, among Silla monks who sought the Dharma, Kim Gyo-gak 金喬覺 (Jin Qiaojue, A.D. 696–794), regarded as an incarnation of Kṣitigarbha 地藏菩薩 Bodhisattva, had already entered the scholarly horizon prior to diplomatic normalization. Research on him, concentrated in the 1990s, covers his biography, his journey to China, and his religious activities at Mount Jiuhua (Ao 2015, p. 116).

Research output on the Goryeo period is similarly concentrated. Chi (2013) offers the most systematic Chinese-language analysis to date of the selective appropriation of Hongzhou Chan 洪州禪 by the Nine Mountain Seon schools and its Korean adaptations; Yang (1997) provides a detailed examination of Uicheon’s 義天 (A.D. 1055–1101) journey to Song China in search of the Dharma (Yang 1997, pp. 331–51); and Wei (2009) further argues that the Huayan texts brought back by Uicheon directly contributed to the revival of Huayan studies 華嚴學 in the Song dynasty, thereby demonstrating that Sino–Korean Buddhist exchange was not unidirectional and providing a crucial historical basis for subsequent arguments concerning “cultural feedback” (Wei 2009, pp. 72–76).

In Korean scholarship, Kang (2015) analyzes the political functions of Buddhist rituals within state ceremonies during the Goryeo period and the symbiotic relationship between the monarchy and Buddhism (Kang 2015, pp. 35–74), while Cho (2018) systematically reassesses the Suseonsa 修禪社 community movement and its intellectual status in late Goryeo, revealing the internal mechanisms and ideological tensions of aristocratic Buddhism in its later transformation. These studies provide an essential external reference point for evaluating Chinese-language scholarship (Cho 2018, pp. 175–200).

Among the many research subjects of the Goryeo period, Jinul 知訥 (A.D. 1158–1210) has received the most sustained attention in Chinese scholarship. The Chinese and Korean academic communities have each developed relatively complete yet largely non-intersecting interpretive frameworks, a situation that itself provides a revealing entry point for examining the state of Sino–Korean scholarly exchange in Buddhist studies.

Within Chinese scholarship, H. Li (2009) doctoral dissertation at Yanbian University, along with his subsequent publications, represents the most systematic body of research to date. Focusing on Jinul’s doctrines of “true mind” 真心 and “sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation” 頓悟漸修, Li argues that Jinul’s engagement with the thought of Heze Zongmi 荷澤宗密 was not mere inheritance but rather a return to and

radicalization of the Heze notion of “numinous awareness” (H. Li 2009, 2014b). In a companion study, H. Li (2014a) situates Jinul within the wider reception of Huineng’s 慧能 Chan in Korea, arguing through a close reading of Jinul’s interpretation of the *Platform Sūtra* 壇經 that Korean Seon appropriated the Southern School selectively rather than wholesale (H. Li 2014a, pp. 112–22). Together, these studies have established the basic problem framework for Chinese research on Jinul, and Li’s earlier review (2011) further clarifies the relevant scholarly trajectories.

By contrast, Korean scholarship exhibits a deeper accumulation in this area. Shim’s (2004) foundational study on Jinul’s Seon meditation and theory of practice and realization established the core categories of the Korean interpretive tradition and remains an essential point of entry into this body of scholarship (Shim 2004). B. Kim (2018) systematically reviews three decades of Korean research on Jinul (1987–2017), clearly demonstrating the ongoing evolution of this tradition in terms of research questions and methodology (B. Kim 2018, pp. 81–114).

Yet a comparison of the two academic communities reveals that their research agendas and citation practices have developed along almost entirely parallel tracks: although H. Li (2011) review and B. Kim (2018) study address the same object of inquiry, Li’s subsequent work does not incorporate ongoing discussions within Korean scholarship as a reference framework. This “misalignment of dialogue” is particularly evident in a detail highlighted by Ao (2015): almost all mainland studies of Jinul fail to address the authenticity of *Direct Explanation of the True Mind* 真心直說, a question already raised by the Korean scholar Choi Jeon-sik as early as 2002 (Ao 2015, p. 119). Textual authentication constitutes a fundamental task in philological research; the more than decade-long neglect of this issue in mainland scholarship indicates that the lack of engagement between the two academic communities is not incidental but reflects a systematic structural pattern. By this we mean the long-standing separation of the Chinese- and Korean-language scholarly communities in three respects: citation practices, in that the bibliography of each community is drawn overwhelmingly from its own language; research agendas, in that questions treated as open in one community have frequently been settled or abandoned in the other; and cross-linguistic engagement, in that neither community possesses institutional mechanisms—translation series, joint editorial boards, bilingual review essays—that would oblige it to register the findings of the other. The Jinul case is thus not an isolated instance of scholarly oversight but one visible symptom of this configuration, which recurs across the periods and topics examined below.

Extending the scope from Goryeo to the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), the interpretive challenge is posed by the “reverence for Confucianism and suppression of Buddhism” 崇儒抑佛 framework—the conventional historiographical model through which the Buddhism of this period has long been read in both Chinese and Korean scholarship, and which construes the dynasty as a five-century episode of state-sponsored decline. Existing decline narratives accordingly characterize the period as one of passive endurance for Buddhism. The framework is not simply mistaken: the anti-Buddhist orientation of Joseon state policy is amply documented. What it obscures is a more consequential historical question, which the studies discussed below have begun to pose: how did marginalized monastic communities actively manage their institutional survival?

H. Li (2016) demonstrates that mountain monastic Seon 山門禪 was not passively dormant but actively responded to Neo-Confucian ideological challenges by producing syncretic Confucian–Buddhist texts, thereby transforming intellectual strategies into practical means of religious survival (H. Li 2016, pp. 130–37). Zheng (2025), drawing on the Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty, conducts a systematic historical-sociological analysis of the social composition of the sangha and the economic operations of monasteries. His

central argument of “survival through service” resonates strongly with Y. Kim’s (2011) detailed reconstruction based on institutional archives, which highlights structural variations in the local implementation of anti-Buddhist policies, particularly the adaptive changes in ritual systems and temple economies during the reign of King Taejong. This work fills the microhistorical gaps often left unaddressed in Chinese macro-level narratives (Y. Kim 2011, pp. 5–33).

A comparative perspective suggests that substantive academic dialogue between China and Korea would unlock intellectual potential far beyond mutual citation, fundamentally transforming the depth of analysis in this field.

Beyond historical and institutional studies, Chinese-language scholarship has also developed sustained and concentrated research clusters in intellectual history centred on several canonical figures, forming another significant body of knowledge in the field. Wonhyo 元曉 (A.D. 617–686) and Uisang 義湘 (A.D. 625–702) have received sustained and systematic attention in Chinese scholarship. This is due both to the intrinsic significance of their thought and to clear textual advantages: the deep interweaving of their writings with Chinese Buddhist texts and debates makes them more accessible to scholars trained in the Chinese intellectual tradition.

Ao Ying has nonetheless pointed out that Chinese scholarship on Wonhyo remains insufficient relative to his importance in East Asian Buddhist history, leaving considerable room for further development (Ao 2015, pp. 119–20). This assessment largely remains valid a decade later: existing studies display a clear thematic imbalance, with the majority focusing on Wonhyo’s “hwajaeng” 和論 thought, while other aspects remain comparatively underexplored.

Wonhyo’s concept of “hwajaeng” has attracted particularly concentrated scholarly attention due to its synthetic ambition and contemporary relevance. Yang (2015) reconstructs the textual basis and logical structure of this concept, tracing its intellectual genealogy to the synthesis of tathāgatagarbha thought in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* 大涅槃經 and Yogācāra philosophy in the *Awakening of Faith* 起信論, and argues for the integrative value of its dialectical method of “neither identical nor different” in interreligious dialogue.

Park (2013a), however, has demonstrated that the construction of “hwajaeng thought” as the core marker of Wonhyo’s philosophy has its own academic and political history, shaped by nationalist projects of defining Korean Buddhist distinctiveness in the 1920s–1930s and later by post-liberation efforts to link the concept to discourses of national unification. This implies that Chinese scholarship, when invoking “Wonhyo’s hwajaeng thought,” is employing a concept already filtered through specific interpretive frameworks. Furthermore, from a hermeneutic perspective, Park Tae-won systematically analyzes the internal logical structure of hwajaeng and its distinctive role within Mahāyāna methodologies of reconciliation, arguing that it is not mere eclecticism but a dialectical method governed by its own internal principles (Park 2013a, pp. 125–70; Park 2013b, pp. 147–93). This body of research constitutes an indispensable Korean-language reference for Chinese scholars engaging with these issues.

In addition, F. Wang (2007), in her master’s thesis, situates the “perfect interfusion” 圓融思想 thought of Wonhyo and Uicheon within the broader East Asian tradition of philosophical reconciliation, thereby further expanding the scope of comparative inquiry (F. Wang 2007, pp. 35–68).

In the field of Huayan studies, Gan (2020), in an article published in *East Asian Buddhist Review*, conducts a detailed comparative textual analysis of interpretations of the “Ten Buddhas” 十佛 doctrine across China, Korea, and Japan, arguing that the Uisang lineage developed two distinct versions differing significantly from both Chinese and Japanese traditions (Gan 2020, pp. 91–104). Gao and Gan (2018) jointly provide a system-

atic overview of research on the Awakening of Faith tradition in premodern Korea (Gao and Gan 2018, pp. 188–203). These studies move beyond parallel narratives by conducting direct textual comparisons across traditions, and their analytical value lies precisely in transcending a purely Sino–Korean framework to achieve trilateral comparison.

These studies of canonical figures, however—whether focused on doctrinal interpretation, sectarian formation, or textual exchange—implicitly presuppose a relatively stable Buddhist intellectual ecology characteristic of the premodern institutional context. After 1895, the comprehensive intervention of colonial processes disrupted this premise at the institutional level: issues such as religious authority, temple property rights, and monastic identity were forcibly restructured under direct intervention by the Japanese colonial administration, generating a new set of historical problems fundamentally different from premodern scholastic debates. Correspondingly, the conceptual tools and analytical frameworks required by researchers must undergo fundamental revision.

As a result, research on modern Korean Buddhism (c. 1895–1945) has steadily increased in Chinese scholarship, producing several methodologically significant contributions. Y. Wang (2017) traces the complex historical genealogy of clerical marriage 帶妻僧, rejecting both triumphalist narratives of monastic purification movements and monocausal explanations based on Japanese cultural imperialism, instead highlighting the internal contradictions and contingencies of colonial-era transformations (Y. Wang 2017, pp. 72–79). Such systematic resistance to teleological retrospective narratives represents one of the rarest and most valuable qualities in this field.

In Korean scholarship, G.-S. Kim (2007) presents the institutional background and internal tensions of modern Korean Buddhist reform movements from a historical-sociological perspective, particularly highlighting structural conflicts between reformist and conservative monastic groups over religious authority and temple property, thereby offering a useful methodological complement to the predominantly intellectual-historical approach of Chinese studies.

At the level of case studies, Qiu’s (2024) research on the influence of the Jinling Scriptural Press 金陵刻經處 on Korean Buddhism is particularly valuable. Through detailed microhistorical analysis, the study argues that Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911) played a significant role in the modernization of Korean Buddhism by supplying printed scriptures to Korean monasteries and establishing connections with reformist monks, thereby revising narratives that privilege Meiji Japanese Buddhism as the primary external influence (Qiu 2024, pp. 74–75).

In studies of Han Yongun 韓龍雲 (1879–1944), H. Li (2023) interprets *Treatise on the Reform of Korean Buddhism* 朝鮮佛教維新論 as an intellectual work embodying modern consciousness (H. Li 2023, pp. 39–45), while Kim and Liu (2024), focusing on his conception of nianfo 念佛 (Buddha-recitation), examine the distinctive form of Pure Land belief in Korea’s modernization process (Kim and Liu 2024, pp. 234–45), and Hu (2017) further analyzes how Master Yongseong 龍城 integrated the preservation of traditional ritual with a nationalist consciousness resisting religious colonialism in his practice (Hu 2017, pp. 71–76).

Regarding contemporary Korean Buddhism, Yang (2016, 2020) analyzes figures such as Seon Master Kusan 九山 and Seung Sahn 崇山, representing some of the few specialized Chinese-language studies on the global dissemination of Korean Seon 禪 and indicating a relatively serious level of scholarly engagement with this topic. Overall, however, this line of research remains dominated by descriptive surveys, with analytical and theoretical studies relatively lacking, indicating considerable room for further development.

4. Evaluation of Theoretical Frameworks and Methodological Reflections

This article characterizes the dominant research orientation outlined above as the “civilizational exchange paradigm.” The term is a heuristic label, introduced here to describe the characteristic interpretive tendency observed within the particular body of mainland Chinese scholarship examined in this article. It is neither an established term in the field nor a competing theoretical concept, and it is not proposed as a replacement for existing critiques of Sinocentrism. Those critiques identify an asymmetry of attribution—the disposition to treat China as origin and Korea as recipient—and the present article shares their concern. The label offered here is narrower and more descriptive: it names the specific configuration of assumptions, questions, and narrative forms through which that asymmetry has been reproduced in Chinese-language scholarship since 1992. Its core assumption is that a continuous channel of Buddhist cultural transmission exists between China and Korea, and that the primary task of research is to trace the movement of texts, figures, and ideas along this channel while affirming their positive significance for the cultural identities of both societies. The dominant theoretical framework in Chinese scholarship on Korean Buddhism can accordingly be summarized as a “philological-historical narrative,” which combines meticulous analysis of primary texts and historical sources with historical narratives centred on transmission, reception, and cultural exchange.

The limitation of this paradigm is not adequately captured by the observation that it emphasizes transmission from China. Its more consequential effect is to privilege narratives of continuity and civilizational inheritance, and thereby to leave comparatively little analytical space for Korean religious agency, for the local adaptation of imported doctrines and institutions, for the institutional transformations that Buddhism underwent on the peninsula, and for historical trajectories that a continuity narrative cannot readily accommodate—ruptures, rejections, and developments without Chinese antecedent. What the paradigm renders difficult to formulate, in short, is not the fact of Korean initiative but the question of it.

This approach is rooted in the Chinese historiographical tradition, and its greatest strength lies in the depth of archival investigation: Chinese scholars often provide the most detailed primary-source analyses available in any language, offering finely grained reconstructions of the historical processes of Sino-Korean Buddhist transmission. This constitutes an irreplaceable scholarly contribution that any paradigmatic critique must take into account. However, this approach also entails certain epistemic limitations. It tends to treat religious ideas and practices as discrete cultural carriers capable of “traveling” across contexts, thereby underestimating the transformative processes that occur as these ideas and practices are adapted to new settings. Within this framework, research frequently relies on conceptual categories such as “influence,” “inheritance,” and “reception,” which implicitly presuppose a relatively passive role for Korea in the process of receiving Chinese Buddhism.

A clarification concerning the relation between method and framework is required at this point. The argument advanced here is not that philological and archival methods themselves produce a civilizational-exchange perspective; no such entailment holds. Textual collation, source criticism, and archival reconstruction are neutral with respect to the interpretive questions they are made to answer, and the same techniques are equally capable of supporting analyses that foreground Korean agency, religious adaptation, and institutional transformation. The contention is narrower and historical: within mainland Chinese scholarship, these methods have most frequently been deployed inside an interpretive framework that takes textual transmission, lineage, and historical influence to be the questions worth asking. The framework selects the questions; the methods answer them. It is the former, not the latter, that stands in need of revision.

Korean scholarship offers a direct demonstration of this point, since it has employed comparable historical methods while arriving at markedly different interpretive conclusions. Representative of this trend, [Son \(2015\)](#) systematically reexamines historiographical paradigms in Korean Buddhist history, critically exposing the limitations of traditional “dynastic periodization frameworks” (such as decline narratives and early/late period dichotomies), and proposes a more explanatory scheme based on shifts in Buddhist policy and actual developments within the Buddhist community ([Son 2015](#), pp. 267–300). His procedure is philological and archival throughout; what differs is the question put to the sources. This study accordingly provides an important reflexive reference from within the Korean scholarly tradition for Chinese scholars seeking to move beyond philological-historical narratives.

The concept of “cultural feedback,” which appears in some Chinese studies to describe the reverse flow of Korean Buddhist developments to China, partially addresses the limitations of the passive reception model but has yet to be developed into a systematic theoretical framework. [Wei’s \(2009\)](#) argument regarding the influence of Uicheon’s Huayan texts on Song-dynasty Huayan studies provides a concrete historical basis for the “feedback” thesis, but further research is needed to develop this insight from a case study into a broader analytical framework ([Wei 2009](#), pp. 72–76).

Against the backdrop of the increasingly evident limitations of the dominant paradigm, a number of recent studies have begun to move Chinese scholarship beyond philological-historical narratives toward more explanatory theoretical frameworks. The social-historical approach, represented by the work of Wang Yuanzhou and Zheng Weitao, treats Buddhist institutions as social formations embedded within specific political and economic structures, fundamentally shifting the nature of inquiry from “which texts were transmitted” to “who entered monastic life under what economic conditions, and with what social consequences.” [H. Li \(2016\)](#) study of mountain monastic Seon introduces a political-sociological dimension, focusing on the agency through which marginalized religious communities negotiate strategies of survival under conditions of state hostility ([H. Li 2016](#), pp. 129–38). [W. Huang’s \(2020\)](#) dissertation incorporates architectural history and material culture analysis into the study of Buddhist transmission, demonstrating the evidentiary value of built environments for reconstructing doctrinal influence.

Postcolonial frameworks have been invoked to varying degrees in the growing body of studies on the colonial period; however, these works have not fully incorporated the analytical apparatus of postcolonial theory, including concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, and the ambivalence of colonial cultural relations. Both [Y. Wang \(2017\)](#) and [Che \(2018\)](#) examine the complex relationship between Japanese imperial Buddhism and Korean Buddhist institutions from a broadly postcolonial perspective. The incorporation of more explicit postcolonial theoretical tools would significantly enhance the analytical depth of this line of research ([Y. Wang 2017](#), pp. 72–80; [Che 2018](#), pp. 20–23).

These partial advances have not, however, fundamentally altered the overall landscape of the field, and several structural blind spots remain prominent. The long-standing absence of material religion studies constitutes one of the most significant gaps in the theoretical development of Chinese scholarship. Studies such as [Zheng et al. \(2012\)](#) on the spatial organization of Korean temples, [Yin \(2014\)](#) on the iconography of Kṣitigarbha in Korea, [Zhou \(2009\)](#) on Buseoksa 浮石寺, and [M. Chen \(2009\)](#) survey of Korean Buddhist art represent important exceptions, as does [Wu \(2025\)](#) recent analysis of the “coin-making ritual” 造錢法 in Korean Buddhist liturgy, which treats ritual implements and the procedures of their manufacture as evidence in their own right rather than as adjuncts to doctrine ([M. Chen 2009](#); [Wu 2025](#), pp. 106–12). The broader literature has nevertheless been slow to respond to the “material turn” in religious studies. Images, ruins, temple complexes,

and ritual objects are more often treated as illustrative supports for doctrinal interpretation in Chinese scholarship than as independent objects of analysis. This habitual mode of treatment constitutes a major obstacle to engaging in deeper dialogue with mainstream international scholarship in religious studies.

Equally prominent is the systematic neglect of gender as an analytical dimension. The complex history and institutional debates surrounding Korean bhikṣuṇī lineages, the gendered dimensions of lay Buddhist practice (with women historically constituting the majority of adherents), and the gender-specific aspects of ritual practice have not received systematic scholarly attention (H. Li 2020, pp. 150–54). Liu (2005) master’s thesis at Minzu University of China, which comparatively examines Buddhist ritual dance in China and Korea, is a rare example of approaching Korean Buddhism from the perspectives of embodiment and ritual, but remains an isolated case (Liu 2005, pp. 22–65). The long-term absence of a gender perspective represents not merely a thematic gap but a structural neglect of power relations and everyday experience within religious practice.

These two blind spots, combined with broader limitations in comparative perspective, jointly constrain the theoretical depth of the field. Chinese-language scholarship remains highly confined within a Sino–Korean bilateral framework, with systematic comparisons between Korean Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, or Theravāda traditions being exceedingly rare. Gan’s (2020) study of East Asian Huayan thought is one of the few notable exceptions, and its analytical value lies precisely in transcending the bilateral framework (Gan 2020, pp. 89–107).

At the same time, academic dialogue between Chinese and Anglophone scholarship remains limited, despite the substantial body of work in international academia on topics such as the local production of Buddhist traditions, the material and embodied dimensions of Buddhist practice, and critical analyses of gender and class within Buddhist communities. Chinese scholarship possesses distinctive strengths in archival research, and more effective integration with international scholarship on these issues could potentially foster theoretically innovative developments. At present, however, such integration remains largely absent.

5. Future Research Agenda

At the methodological level, the most pressing task for Chinese scholarship on Korean Buddhism is to expand the integrated use of multilingual sources on the basis of its existing strengths in Chinese-language materials. It should be noted that key historical sources such as the *Tripitaka Koreana* and the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty 朝鮮王朝實錄 are themselves written in Chinese characters, a fact that affords Chinese scholars a natural advantage in textual interpretation and has long underpinned the field’s reliance on Chinese-language materials. However, with the continued expansion of digital platforms such as the RISS database and the Institute of Buddhist Studies at Dongguk University, a large body of premodern Korean Buddhist materials—including documents, annotations, and modern research resources recorded in *ŏnmun* 諺文 (vernacular Korean script)—is being increasingly integrated and made accessible. This development implies that research confined to traditional Chinese-language texts will find its interpretive frameworks and research questions insufficient to engage fully with the broader evidentiary landscape. Taking the Korean RISS database as an example, its full-text search function for the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty not only significantly enhances the efficiency of utilizing Chinese-language historical sources but also provides technical conditions for scaling up and deepening existing social-historical approaches to the study of the *sangha* 僧伽. At the same time, the digitization project of the Tripitaka Koreana led by Dongguk University provides a ready-made technical foundation for systematic collation studies that have long remained

underdeveloped in Chinese scholarship. The principal constraint on further development is not a lack of sources but a disciplinary habit of treating the canon as a monumental historical artefact rather than as a corpus for close reading and comparative analysis. Overcoming this conceptual limitation may constitute one of the most promising methodological transformations in the field.

Beyond the expansion of linguistic and digital resources, digital humanities methods further broaden research prospects, including computational analysis of textual patterns, digital mapping of pilgrimage routes and monastic networks, the construction of prosopographical databases of Korean monks who travelled to China, and the digital reconstruction of lost temple complexes through architectural historical analysis. These approaches are not only technically feasible but also hold significant scholarly value. W. Huang's (2020) research in architectural history at Tsinghua University demonstrates that the analysis of built environments can function as an independent epistemological tool rather than merely as an illustrative supplement to textual narratives. This example suggests that the integration of digital methods and spatial analysis deserves broader adoption, opening new dimensions for the study of Korean Buddhism.

Methodological refinement must be accompanied by a parallel expansion of research perspectives at both social and geographical levels in order to achieve substantive structural progress in the field. Existing Chinese-language scholarship is highly concentrated on elite Buddhism, institutional Buddhism, and documented religious activities. The practices of ordinary believers—including lay practitioners, female religious actors, local and rural temple communities, and heterodox or syncretic religious movements—are largely absent from current research. H. Li (2020) article "Belief in Mountain God. Exotic Space in Buddhist Temples of Korea" examines the appropriation and integration of indigenous shamanistic elements within Korean Buddhist traditions. It represents one of the few Chinese-language studies addressing the issue of folk-religious syncretism and provides a compelling model for expanding research perspectives.

At the geographical level, research remains overly concentrated on major centres such as Gyeongju 慶州, Kaesong 開城, and Hanyang 漢陽 (Seoul), as well as prominent temples such as Tongdosa 通度寺, Haeinsa 海印寺, and Songgwangsa 松廣寺. The regional diversity of Korean Buddhist history—including differences between northern and southern regions, Jeju Island 濟州島, and border areas in terms of practices and institutional trajectories—has yet to receive systematic attention. Regional comparative analysis can not only test center-based historical generalizations but also provide counterexamples, variants, and corrective evidence, all of which are crucial for refining historical interpretation. As the number of Chinese scholars proficient in Korean continues to grow, this line of research is becoming increasingly feasible in practical terms.

Neither methodological refinement nor the expansion of research perspectives can be sustained, however, without substantive engagement with Korean and international scholarship. For Chinese scholarship on Korean Buddhism to achieve structural advancement, it is essential to establish substantive reciprocal relationships with Korean and international academic communities. Such "reciprocity" should not be confined to formal mutual citation but should involve the co-construction of research questions, evidentiary standards, and interpretive frameworks, allowing external scholarship to enter and reshape existing analytical paradigms. The previously noted "misalignment of dialogue" between H. Li (2011) work on B. Kim (2018) Korean-language review is not an isolated case but reflects a broader structural limitation in cross-linguistic scholarly engagement.

A qualification concerning the direction of influence is in order here. The discussion above has examined the failure of Chinese scholarship to engage Korean scholarship; the converse question—whether, and to what extent, Korean scholarship on Korean Buddhism

has drawn upon Chinese scholarship—is its necessary counterpart, and the available evidence suggests that the relationship has been asymmetrical. That asymmetry should not, however, be read as evidence of an unwillingness on the part of Korean scholars to engage perspectives developed outside their own tradition. It is better understood as an institutional and epistemic outcome: Korean scholarship has possessed a longer, larger, and more internally differentiated research tradition on its own Buddhist history, whereas Chinese scholarship has contributed most visibly in precisely those areas where Chinese-language sources, Sino–Korean textual transmission, and mainland archival expertise are directly pertinent. A full assessment of Chinese influence on Korean scholarship would require a separate citation-based and institutional study of Korean-language journals, dissertations, and conference networks, which the present article does not attempt. What can be asserted here is that cross-linguistic reciprocity must be studied in both directions, and that the uneven pattern of influence is itself a significant object of inquiry rather than a settled fact.

Promoting such a shift first requires the systematic translation of Korean Buddhist scholarship into Chinese, enabling key studies to enter the Chinese academic discourse. Second, core Korean-language journals such as *Bojo Sasang* 보조사상 (*Bojo Thought*) and *Bulgyohak Yeongu* 불교학연구 (*Buddhist Studies Review*) should be incorporated into standard reference systems, serving as essential points of reference for the formulation of research questions and the development of arguments. In addition, collaborative research between Chinese and Korean universities on specific topics should be strengthened to establish sustained mechanisms of knowledge production. Chinese scholars should also be encouraged to participate in relevant international conferences as active contributors, thereby shifting academic engagement from observation to substantive participation.

In recent years, *East Asian Buddhist Review* 東亞佛學評論 and *Chinese Buddhist Studies Review* 漢語佛學評論 have begun to provide institutional platforms for cross-linguistic academic exchange (Kim and Liu 2024, p. 234), yet a more fundamental issue lies in the long-standing neglect of cross-linguistic source training within graduate education. Only by strengthening such training at the institutional level can cross-linguistic scholarly interaction evolve from isolated practice into a normalized mechanism. As for the so-called “Golden Bond,” its scholarly value must be grounded in institutionalized systems of knowledge production and evaluation, and can only be substantively sustained through reciprocal and equitable interaction.

6. Conclusions and Prospects

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, the study of Korean Buddhism in mainland China has undergone a thirty-year trajectory from nonexistence to emergence, and from marginality to relative consolidation. This trajectory has been deeply embedded in the rhythms of political diplomacy and the logic of institutional expansion, producing both an irreplicable body of scholarship in archival excavation, institutional historical reconstruction, and bilateral textual analysis, as well as structural limitations characterized by a “civilizational exchange” premise that constrains critical distance. The long-standing absence of material religion studies and the systematic neglect of gender analysis have further widened the gap between this field and mainstream international scholarship in religious studies. These assessments constitute an unavoidable starting point for any future research.

The critical review presented in this article itself reflects a methodological stance: namely, conducting a cross-linguistic evaluation of Chinese-language scholarship by taking contemporaneous developments in Korean academia as an external reference, rather than relying on internal assessment within the Chinese scholarly context. This perspective reveals a central problem: the two academic communities have long operated in paral-

lel around the same object of inquiry, with substantive dialogue remaining nearly absent. This is not a peculiarity of Sino–Korean relations but a broader structural condition of academic production across East Asia. When academic communities in different countries construct narratives of shared historical subjects primarily through their respective national languages, the resulting knowledge formations systematically obscure the mutually constitutive relationships among these traditions and inadvertently reproduce, at the epistemological level, the very “centre–periphery” 中心—邊緣 structures they seek to critique.

In this regard, the case analysis presented here points to a theoretical proposition of broader significance for the comparative religious history of East Asia: cross-linguistic scholarly reciprocity should not be treated as an optional enhancement of research quality but as a fundamental condition for knowledge production in this field. The ongoing digitization of Korean-language primary sources, the gradual expansion of a cohort of researchers with cross-linguistic competence, and the emergence of transregional journals such as *East Asian Buddhist Review* and *Chinese Buddhist Studies Review* have objectively improved the institutional conditions for deeper scholarly dialogue. The improvement of such conditions does not, however, automatically translate into a transformation of research paradigms; the latter depends on a conscious reconfiguration of research questions, shifting from tracing transmission to interrogating transformation, from documenting exchanges to analyzing structures, and from bilateral narratives to comparative theory.

Precisely because this article approaches mainland Chinese scholarship comparatively rather than descriptively, the analytical framework developed here is not confined to it. Mainland China is one component of a larger comparative research agenda, and the same framework may in principle be brought to bear on Japanese, Vietnamese, Anglophone, Korean, and other scholarly traditions that have taken Korean Buddhism as an object of study. Such comparisons would examine not only differences in research output, but also the institutional settings in which scholarship is produced and rewarded, the citation practices that determine what counts as relevant prior work, the linguistic competencies that govern which archives are reachable, and the historiographical assumptions that decide which questions appear worth posing. This article stops short of undertaking those comparisons: a responsible treatment of each tradition would require independent bibliometric, institutional, and historiographical analysis, and would substantially exceed the scope of a single historiographical review. Rather than offering necessarily brief and incomplete comparisons, we identify them as the next stage of the research programme that the present study generates. The article therefore concludes not by claiming methodological universality for its findings, but by proposing a comparative agenda through which the framework developed here may be tested and refined.

Only by institutionalizing cross-linguistic reciprocity within systems of academic evaluation and graduate training can “the comparative religious history of East Asia” move beyond a mere geographical label to become a discipline grounded in coherent internal logic. This intellectual legacy is sufficiently rich; whether it can be transformed into original theoretical contributions ultimately depends on the kinds of questions scholars are willing to pose to it.

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