

Illusion and Imagination



In Lee Yearley's side-by-side study of the philosophies of Mencius and Aquinas,¹ the author closes with a plea for the necessity of what he calls the "analogical imagination" in all comparative endeavors. He offers this formula as an antidote to the two extremisms of "univocal" and "equivocal" analyses, which form the outer limits of academic approaches to the study of other cultures. The first tendency affirms almost exclusively the similarities between cultures, whereas the latter emphasizes difference and uniqueness to the point of asserting the incommensurability of cultures. In Yearley's assessment, the very real differences between cultural orientations are what necessitates the scholar's use of his or her imagination in the construction of analogies. The emphasis here is on constructiveness, for "if we use the analogical imagination, the locus of comparison must exist in the scholar's mind and not in the objects studied."²

If comparisons are a product of our own imagination, this is not to say, as Yearley quickly notes, that this activity is not rule-governed nor subject to the criteria of proof and demonstration. But the observation that comparisons inhere in our own minds makes the salient point that the act of imaginatively juxtaposing diverse traditions is often a way of framing our own individual questions—ones that may never have occurred to the societies under examination. This raises more than the obvious point that, in Yearley's case, Mencius and Aquinas never met and therefore cannot be made to speak to Yearley's task of reconciling their conceptions of virtue. The more significant

implication is that the comparative enterprise is really a method for reconceptualizing the self—both individually and collectively defined. Yearley directly refers to this process in his assertion that, “Moreover, these inventions [comparisons] have the power to give a new form to our experiences. The imaginative re-description produced challenges our normal experience of the contemporary world in which we live and the often distant worlds we study.”³

I choose to begin my own study of a seventeenth-century Korean novel with this short meditation on imagination because my enterprise is no different from the one Yearley describes. I too place my efforts under the rubric of the comparative philosophy of religions, with some notable variations. I will not compare the substantive thought of two discrete thinkers; instead I constitute the Western academic community (within which I operate) and its reigning conceptions of philosophical discourse as the context against which I offer the novel as a form of philosophy. The variation of my approach lies in the fact that I foreground my own questions to the point of placing my cultural milieu at one end of the comparative equation. This kind of comparison is perhaps more implicit than the kind Yearley engages in (others might prefer to call it an “encounter”), but its virtue is that it also highlights the extent to which imagination plays a role in the constitution of cultural knowledge.

The role of the imagination in my study is twofold, and thus supplies a double punch. In applying my own queries about the nature of philosophical discourse and the various forms it can take to the study of fiction, I make *The Dream of the Nine Clouds* answer questions it never explicitly encountered. Thus I supply an imagined arena in which the novel can talk back to our present time and space. To bend a premodern Korean work of literature to modern Western intellectual concerns, however, also forces me to use my imagination in the historical depiction of the novel’s genesis. In other words, my questions heavily influence my interpretation of the society and religious history which made the writing of the novel possible.

Despite the fact of this influence, I will strive to demonstrate that my interpretation is justified rather than purely convenient. This will entail bringing to bear the insights of two well-established disciplines—Asian literary studies and the history of Buddhism in East Asia—on the present case. Although my engagement with these disciplines more often than not challenges some prevailing theories, my aim is to make my arguments satisfy the rules that govern scholarly debate within these fields. Finally, I will go beyond these disciplinary engagements to offer a more constructive thesis about the development of Buddhist philosophy in East Asia which is more properly in the realm of the philosophy of religions. This move will also entail an extensive discussion of what I feel is at stake in the constitution (or more properly, reconstitution) of this last discipline, particularly as it impinges on the existing field of the history of religions.

The Novel as Philosophy

Let us begin with a brief introduction of my main text and the major theses that will be argued in regard to it.

The Korean classic known variously as *The Cloud Dream of the Nine*, and *A Nine Cloud Dream*, is a translation of the Korean title *Kuunmong*, which I simply render as *The Dream of the Nine Clouds*,⁴ or *KUM* for short. The novel was written by Kim Manjung (1637–92), a high official in the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) court, and a member of the dominant political clan known as the “Westerners.” Given this pedigree, Kim Manjung was, strictly speaking, a neo-Confucian. The dominance of neo-Confucian ideology in the political life of Chosŏn Korea was sufficient in and of itself to assure this sympathy. Kim’s membership in the politically entrenched faction also gave him impetus to champion neo-Confucian orthodoxy in order to assure the survival of his clan’s power. It is in this context that the unsubtle Buddhist vestments of *KUM* have proved a puzzle to many Korean interpreters.

The protagonist of the story is a Buddhist monk who lives on the sacred Lotus Peak of prehistorical China. The monk transmigrates in a frame tale into the mortal world of ninth-century China, where he experiences success in life and love and lives the idealized Confucian career, only to realize the brevity and emptiness of it all. He then wakes up back on Lotus Peak to realize that his life of glory had only been a dream, and spiritually awakens to the Buddhist equation of life with illusion.

If the philosophical thrust of the tale constituted a puzzle, and potential scandal, at the time of its creation, scholars of this century have chosen to explain it as an act of filial piety. Common scholarly lore has it that Kim Manjung wrote the novel to console his mother on the occasion of his political exile from the court. One can easily imagine as well Kim's own distress at the instability and frequent reversals of his political fortunes, and how this led to an observation of the vanity of life—particularly the life set on the Confucian model of government service. Daniel Bouchez's examination of Kim Manjung's surviving collection of private writings, known as the *Random Essays* (*Söp'o manp'il*), makes a convincing case for Kim's Buddhist sympathies.⁵

My interpretation of *KUM* builds on the assumption of Kim's underlying Buddhist sentiments but claims much more than the formulaic summary of the novel as the lesson that the glories and fortunes of life are nothing more than a spring dream. This may or may not adequately sketch Kim's sentiments as he composed the tale, but the text itself gives evidence of a larger historical process of development in the expression of Buddhist philosophy. The literary trope of "life as a dream" has a long history in East Asia which reached its fullest expression through the novel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Concomitant with this development is a maturation of Buddhist philosophical discourse which develops from and builds on prior intellectual practices. I refer mainly to early exegetical efforts on the part of East Asian Buddhists who attempted to digest Indian sūtras which were bewildering both in their array and style.⁶ These efforts culminated in the scholastic tradition of Zhi Yi (538–597) and Fa Zang (643–712) who founded

the Tiantai and Huayan schools, respectively, in China; and Ŭisang (625–702) who founded the Hwaŏm school in Korea (equivalent to the Chinese Huayan). I also refer to the early praxis-oriented efforts of Chan/Sŏn Buddhism which held to the futility of all speech and discourse in the realization of truth as dictated by the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) teaching of the Mādhyamika school.

To be sure, a mandatory task which lies before me is to articulate what constitutes criteria for being “philosophical”—a quality that I predicate of *KUM*. Indeed, my thesis about *KUM* is intended to probe some conventions regarding the nature of philosophy, both within the discipline of Western philosophy and within the history of Buddhism in China and Korea. To begin with the first, I have made no secret of the fact that the creation of my comparative study—as of all academic studies—has something at stake for the community that engages in such efforts. What is currently at stake in my enterprise is the reconstitution of the comparative philosophy of religions through the attempt to discover different ways in which cultures constitute philosophical discourse. My assertion that fiction is a form of philosophizing offers just such an instance.

My use of the terms “philosophy” and “philosophical” encompass a range of meanings which should be explicitly defined. In its most common meaning, philosophy can refer to a form of speculation that centers on ultimate concerns such as the nature and meaning of life as we know it. *KUM*'s lesson that life is nothing but a dream hence qualifies most generally as a philosophical statement. This usage is inexact, however, and insufficient for describing my thesis regarding *KUM*. Although a great part of my task involves demonstrating that the message of this novel derives from specific Buddhist metaphysical traditions that speculate on the true nature of the world, my use of the term “philosophical” extends beyond references to worldviews and also conveys something about how those worldviews are expressed.

This distinction is perhaps best expressed by the phrase “philosophical discourse.” Most philosophical traditions evolve

regularized and rule-governed forms of expression which are deemed normative. In the two communities that I am concerned with—the Western academic and Eastern Buddhist—systematic, exegetical, and textual expressions have been the norm. The term “discourse” can refer generally to a broad range of literary practices. I use the phrase “philosophical discourse,” however, to mean those textual practices whose articulation of a worldview is compelling as much for the rigor and rhetorical prowess with which it is argued as for the argument itself. “Philosophy” as I most consistently use it refers not only to a view of reality; that is, metaphysical and particularly ontological speculation, but a system of articulation with internal criteria of satisfaction.

With this stipulative understanding of philosophy in mind, my goal of demonstrating that the novel *KUM* constitutes a form of philosophical discourse is faced with obvious challenges. Fiction, as generally understood within the two communities I am concerned with, does not fulfill the criteria of philosophical discourse. To be sure, fiction can concern itself with serious topics, even metaphysics to the degree that it explores questions of ultimate meaning and reality. But its *form* of expression—its discourse—follows a separate set of criteria and aims than that of philosophy. Admittedly, the aesthetic rigor of a novel can have an impact on the reader’s metaphysical and moral perspectives, but this effect is distinguishable from the aim of philosophical discourse to make incontrovertible truth claims about reality. Inversely, given the temper of Kim Manjung’s society—one which frowned upon fictive discourse as inferior and potentially decadent, the author’s choice to philosophize through the vehicle of fiction is in need of some explanation.

My attempts to argue for the philosophical capacity of fictive narratives are immeasurably aided by similar thrusts within the current Western philosophical scene. The efforts of Martha Nussbaum in particular have clearly articulated just what is at stake in the act of reading fiction as philosophy.⁷ Her suggestions are directly relevant to my reading of *KUM*. To begin, Nussbaum makes the readily observable point that the rich, engaging details of the novel, which are constitutive of its telling of specific and particular lives, reaches us far more inti-

mately than the formal discourses of standard philosophy. This observation is much more profound than the obvious point that it is a lot more fun to read novels than abstract treatises. Our ability to be engaged by the novel is a direct reflection of the fact that narratives correspond most closely to the way we construct the meaning of our own lives. Philip Quinn, another philosopher who engages in the philosophical study of literature, makes the succinct observation that, "A life is a process with a narrative structure. The extent to which an ethical theory made in the image of the theories of science can generate a blueprint or model of life is problematic."⁸

The narrative structure of our lives suggests an evolutionary process within which our whole being is engaged. In defiance of rational models of knowledge, the truths conveyed by the novel affirm the necessity of going beyond pure reason and of engaging the emotions. In her own work, Nussbaum repeatedly invokes the "ancient quarrel between the philosophers and the poets" in Plato's *Republic* as an index to these two competing views of knowledge. In one aspect, the argument concerns the way knowledge is to be attained. Plato's ideal intellect aspires to the standpoint of the "real above" in which it is freed of physical appetites, emotions, and desires. Only the separated intellect is capable of attaining perspicacity, according to this view. On the other hand, the alternative that poetic engagement offers is an embodied form of knowledge that materializes in the particular *event*; a knowledge that only comes in the experience of living. Nussbaum relates this process to the knowledge of love:

Here we would see the knowing of love, for example, as very different from a grasping of some independent fact about the world; as something that is in part constituted by the experience of responding to a loss with need and pain. Love is grasped *in* the experience of loving and suffering. That pain is not some separate thing that instrumentally gives us access to the love; it is constitutive of loving itself.⁹

These two models of knowledge—the one attained through separation from the world and its emotional entanglements, and

the other through embrace of the very same—present competing and fundamentally opposed epistemologies. The question of how one obtains knowledge, furthermore, is tied to the basic question of what counts as knowledge, which in turn implicates a specific view of reality. The ideal of precision held out by abstract, disembodied discourse assumes a world of certainty that has been obscured by sloppy thinking. The world that is revealed by poetry and narrative, however, rejects the ideal of precision in favor of uncertainty. Thus the old quarrel between the poets and philosophers was “. . . not just a quarrel about ornamentation, but a quarrel about who we are and what we aspire to become.”¹⁰

What counts as knowledge in a world where by definition certainty is not possible? To begin, this view of the world in and of itself asserts something profound about ourselves—a profundity which is revealed most virtuously by narratives. Nussbaum, with her own poetic virtuosity, states:

The novel's procedures do not bring everything about the soul into a perspicuous ordering; but this is part and parcel of its view that not everything about the human soul *is* perspicuous, that the deepest depths are dark and shifting and illusive. A form of representation that implied otherwise would be artificial and untruthful. Nor, in our own assessment or criticism of the view, should we claim to make everything perspicuous. If we did, we should be playing false the human mysteries to which it is our business to respond. The picture of the internal person cannot be paraphrased in the neutral language of the critic, dissected, explained. It must be responded to in all of its painful violent mystery.¹¹

My reading of the premodern Korean novel *KUM* may be seen as a cross-cultural testing of Nussbaum's philosophical reading of literature. In the way of similarities, my reading of *KUM* also emphasizes the necessary relationship between philosophical form and content. The reason why fictive narrative comprises the most judicious form of philosophizing has much to do with what Buddhism has to say about the nature of reality. Does this imply that even cross-culturally, to philosophize

through narrative entails a shared view of reality? My answer is most emphatically yes.

The Western philosophical desire for transcendence has often been expressed as an attempt to deny the very lives we live by insisting on our invulnerability to the usual hazards of being human. Much of this attempt to transcend our particularity as humans entails the desire to overcome our debilitating emotions in favor of a god-like self-sufficiency and completeness.¹² Buddhism is often and superficially characterized as just such a philosophy, wherein the emotions are rendered the primary human failing. The dominant Buddhist practice of meditation aims to overcome emotional attachments through mental discipline in order to create a completely autonomous being, untouched by the events of life. The repeated refrain from the *Mahāsatipatthānasutta*—a prominent meditation text from the Pāli canon—sums up the monastic ideal: “Independent he dwells, clinging to nothing in the world.” This representation of the Buddhist spiritual path is in fact the view of the protagonist—the young novice monk—in *KUM*, which is ultimately surrendered after reflection upon his dream journey.

The legacy of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is given voice in *KUM*, asserts the misguided nature of the human desire for transcendence. Straining against the monastic pursuit of disengagement, East Asian Buddhism has been particularly vocal in pointing out the metaphysical speciousness of distinctions between pure and impure, the worldly and the spiritual, and between illusion and reality. When the novice monk comes to full realization at the end of the novel, we are not told about the contents of his awakening—but we do not need to be, for the lesson is embodied in the contents of the novel itself. This lesson may be summarized as the novel’s revocation of spiritual stasis; of the deluded view that one can achieve perfection or rest that is predicated on rejecting the world as we know it. The lesson entails, in fact, the revocation of spiritual certainty. The negation of certainty is one way of portraying a dominant strategy that has been used by Buddhists to convey the teaching of emptiness.

One must raise, however, an immediate concern regarding a significant difference between a reading of *KUM* and the reading of modern novels. As a premodern literary work, *KUM* does not exhibit the qualities of narrative that we have come to expect from novels. Some scholars have placed *KUM* within the classification of "romance," a genre prior to the development of the novel in the West.¹³ Romances paint the world in an idealistic rather than realistic mode, where fantasy and improbable occurrences abound. Characters are cast in the image of universal types rather than as unique personalities; there is no character development nor psychological insights into the protagonist's conflicts or motivations. The immediate problem that is posed by the romantic qualities of *KUM* is obvious: Nussbaum and Quinn predicate the philosophical properties of the novel on those very qualities that distinguish it from the romance. In his reading of Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, for example, Quinn is able to overcome the cultural distance of this Japanese novel because of its narrative quality: ". . . by providing thick, rich and realistic descriptions of some of the possibilities for Christian life, they add to our resources for constructing in the imagination models of what it can be like to lead a Christian life."¹⁴ On the contrary, a reading of *KUM* throws up the immediate barriers of embedded cultural archetypes rather than conveying our common humanity.

Much of these archetypes and cultural meanings can be explained. This is the function of some of the chapters to follow. The larger question raised, of course, is how one might proceed to define the narrative of *KUM* as philosophical. This task involves being more specific about how the metaphysical content of *KUM* is related to its narrative form. In fleshing out this answer, my primary strategy will be to sketch a structural rather than properly literary analysis of my text. Although the rhetorical and stylistic qualities of *KUM* will be referenced, I believe that these are insufficient for exposing the novel's self-reflexive, philosophical properties. It is the structural layout of *KUM*—particularly in its use of the frame tale—which, in relation to Buddhist views about the illusory nature of reality, makes the philosophical import of *KUM*'s narrative clear.

The interpretation of *KUM* to follow, then, begins with the concession that this particular novel lacks the rich, particularistic, and realistic details which invite empathy and vicarious learning. What is offered instead is a different strategy of reading which is no less self-implicating for the reader, and which provokes the same kind of self-reflection on the question of certainty. As I hope to demonstrate, the strategy that *KUM* utilizes stands within a long tradition of systematic speculation within the Taoist and Buddhist traditions about the nature and utility of words. Therefore, to appreciate fully the philosophical nature of *KUM* requires a consideration of the history of the religious use of literature in Buddhism. By placing *KUM* within this historical context, this study will hopefully add a cross-cultural perspective on current Western speculations on the philosophical significance of literature.

Interpreting the Asian Novel

The argument that *KUM* is capable of expressing philosophical concepts in a profound way must be grounded in a broader consideration of how East Asian narratives convey meaning. My discussion of *KUM* on this plane is greatly informed by the work of Chinese literary scholars. The applicability of this field of research to the Korean case needs little defense. Here I conform to Robert Buswell's observation in regard to East Asian Buddhism that an insistence on separating "Chinese," "Korean," and "Japanese" varieties inadequately represents the historical and intellectual contiguity of these Buddhist traditions, which warrants speaking of a pan-Asian religion. Buswell claims, "... in Buddhist studies we must look at Buddhism as the organic whole it has always been, rather than in the splendid isolation of our artificial academic categorizations."¹⁵ In the case of literary traditions, Korea's conscious and eager imitation of Chinese forms, and the near exclusive use of classical Chinese as the language of the literati, makes Buswell's point even more apropos.

KUM is perhaps Korea's best-known example of Chinese literature. Up until the middle of this century, however, Korean

scholars have perpetuated the cherished belief that Kim Manjung composed *KUM* in Korean for the explicit purpose of demonstrating the literary merits of his native tongue. One need not doubt the existence of such sentiments on Kim's part; his other known work of fiction, *Sassi Namjǒnggi* (*NJG*), or *The Southern Expedition of Madame Sa*, was composed in Korean and later translated into Chinese by his grandnephew Kim Ch'unt'aek (1670–1717).¹⁶ Ironically, the Chinese translation of *NJG* aided the novel's survival through its mistaken attribution to Kim Ch'unt'aek, whereas nineteenth-century Korean translations of *KUM*, which ensured it a broad reading public, were essential to its eventual preservation as a Korean classic. The discovery of early Chinese-language manuscripts of *KUM*, in any case, has cleared up the debate concerning its original language of composition.¹⁷ In addition, my analysis of the novel will stress its thematic unity with Chinese sources, both before and after its own composition.

The insights of modern Chinese literary studies have much to suggest for the interpretation of *KUM*. The views of Andrew Plaks, in particular, have informed much of my own work. Plaks' general theory of Chinese narrative, which contends that the patterns of Yin/Yang and Five Phases cycles comprise the most cogent "structure of intelligibility" within Chinese narrative,¹⁸ offers much to be appreciated and also much that can be challenged.

I am indebted to Plaks for his persistent characterization of the Chinese universe of meaning, which is often sketched in opposition to the cosmological assumptions behind Western allegory.¹⁹ Defining Western allegory most broadly as the dualism between surface meaning (of the text) and its more significant implied meaning (which is beyond the text), Plaks places Chinese cosmology in an anti-dualistic realm which does not distinguish between greater and lesser meanings, but rather constitutes meaning through the totality of the cosmos' constituent parts. The patterns of alternation and periodicity form the contours of these smaller cosmic events, whose meaning become intelligible only from the overarching, bird's-eye view. In his

own words, "... the perception of intelligibility in this rather bewildering view of the phenomenal world comes in not at any given point in the system, but only in the *totality* of the system as a whole."²⁰

A significant aspect of this system is its inclusive attitude towards oppositions. Given its emphasis on totality, rather than separation, all opposites are complementary possibilities, many of which (in accordance to the Yin/Yang system) exist in both temporal and spatial alternation. Plaks filters his interpretation of the dream theme, which dominates *KUM* and the Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, through this perspective. The ambiguity between truth and illusion which is played out to maximum strength by the trope of the dream is resolved again by the larger perspective:

That is, the spatial totality of the allegorical vision of the novel is of an order that includes both being and non-being within its scope, so that the apparent opposition of being and non-being emerges as an example of the sort of interpenetration of reality and illusion for which the dream is the nearest analogue in human experience.²¹

Admittedly, there is nothing in this view that truth and illusion form complementary aspects of experience that contradicts the thesis of this study. The cosmological picture of co-dependent, holistic structures in fact conforms affably well with the Buddhist ontology of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which is based on the broader doctrine of the co-dependent arising of all phenomena (*pratītya-samutpāda*). The Buddhist perspectives present in *KUM* agree with Plaks' version of the Chinese cosmos in seeing the causal linkage between all its constituent parts. Where my approach departs from Plaks', however, is on the question of the presence of religious meaning, particularly Buddhist, in East Asian fiction. Plaks' overriding emphasis on total *pattern* over and against discrete units of cosmic and literary meaning, reduces his structure of intelligibility to an aesthetic principle which does not allow for the integrity of religious/philosophical systems. He states,

. . . it may be said that the presence in Chinese narrative of patterns of order and balance, reward and retribution, the general conviction of an inherent moral order in the workings of the universe, function more often as formal aesthetic features than as thematic points of doctrine.²²

In my view, the reduction of meaning to pattern regrettably trivializes the impact of discursive thought on culture. Thus although I have fully utilized Plaks' theory, with its focus on patterns of alternation and periodicity, in interpreting the cosmology of the Chinese classic the *Shijing* (*The Book of Poetry*),²³ I give fuller weight to the religious and ritual meaning of these patterns.

In the investigation of fiction, which greatly antedates the *Shijing* in historical time, the majority of literary studies ignore the massive penetration and influence of Buddhist thought in the intervening years. This disciplinary convention shows partial signs of wear in articles such as Anthony C. Yu's "The Quest of Brother Amor: Buddhist Intimations in the *Story of the Stone*."²⁴ Plaks, however, maintains the dominance of Yin/Yang and Five Phases patterning in Chinese fiction, and to the extent that philosophical thought is given any presence at all, the system of choice is the syncretic musings of Ming neo-Confucianism.²⁵

As an alternative view, I have already sought to demonstrate the coherence of Buddhist structures of meaning in the Chinese novel. In a previous analysis of the sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West*, I have differed with Plaks' thesis that the inclusive structure of Chinese meaning, wherein all opposites are united, disallows the notion of spiritual journey or progress, which is considered more the province of dualistic Western allegories.²⁶ If the subtleties of Buddhist soteriology within the novel are allowed to speak, then the primacy of spiritual progress, which is allegorized in the tale of the five pilgrims' journey to India in search of Buddhist scriptures, is plainly heard without doing violence to Plaks' characterization of Chinese cosmology.

Needless to say, given my belief in the substantiveness of religious meaning in certain works of Chinese fiction, my interpretation of the dream metaphor in *KUM* goes beyond Plaks'

strategy of using it to exemplify one sector of his cosmic design theory. This move is necessary also to go beyond the "life is but a dream" cliché I iterated earlier. To argue for the presence of religious meaning in *KUM* establishes a necessary prerequisite for proving the *capacity* of fiction to express philosophical ideas. Once such capacity is established, however, the burden of demonstration lies in the mating of *KUM* to a specific philosophical system which is able to bend narrative to the disclosure of its beliefs about reality. The specific system that *KUM* illuminates can perhaps be identified as the teaching of emptiness expressed in culturally seminal texts of the *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) school, such as the *Heart* and *Diamond* sūtras. We will see later that the *Diamond Sūtra*, in particular, serves as *KUM*'s dominant historical and philosophical subtext.

An attempt to identify *KUM* with one particular school of East Asian Buddhist thought, however, is not necessarily the most illuminating approach to the novel and is hardly representative of Buddhist habits of the age. Similar to its counterpart in China, Chosŏn dynasty Buddhism subsisted in a neo-Confucian political environment which was overtly hostile to Buddhism. Suffering a dramatic decline in state support, Chosŏn Buddhism emulated the Chinese tack of propounding the unity of Buddhism with Confucianism and Taoism.²⁷ This syncretistic outlook is echoed in Kim Manjung's own thoughts, as revealed through his *Sŏp'ŏ manp'il*. As a member of the neo-Confucian literati, however, Kim Manjung did not speak on behalf of the Buddhist community per se. Thus the extent to which Kim Manjung is representative of the Buddhist voice must be explicitly considered.

Interpreting the Buddhist Tradition

It is at this point that the discipline of Asian literary studies intersects with the field of Buddhist scholarship. We may further draw out the supposed antinomy between fiction and philosophy by attending to the realm of Buddhist studies in East Asia, particularly of the period in which *KUM* was composed. It is commonly proposed that East Asian Buddhism's

most philosophically creative efforts were the doctrinal syntheses of the Tiantai and Huayan schools, which brought order out of the chaos of competing Indian Buddhist traditions through the principle of “dividing the teachings” (*panjiao*). The Chinese scholastics’ strategy for hierarchicalizing Buddhist doctrines into greater and lesser revelations required them first to work out their own philosophical and soteriological perspectives. The dominant influence of such apocryphal texts as *The Awakening of Faith* in this task demonstrates that Chinese and Korean exegetical efforts were not only creative and prolific, but pointed and unified in their direction.²⁸ The ensuing development of Chan/Sŏn Buddhism, although explicitly anti-textual in stance, also produced a wealth of literature which was eventually proclaimed as canonical in status. The *Platform Sūtra*, attributed to the sixth patriarch Hui Neng, is an example of Chan exegesis, as are the poetic and homiletic devices known as *gongans* (“public cases”). To be sure, the growth of Chan literature was eventually objected to as antithetical to the original spirit of Chan, which proclaimed the ineffability of truth. The eventual overgrowth of commentarial and discursive Chan writings sometimes led to the reassertion of hostility towards philosophical discourse and the emphasis on religious practice.

Most studies of Korean Buddhism tend to focus on the pre-Chosŏn context and on the Sŏn school. Institutional and ideological changes wrought by the founders of the Chosŏn dynasty permanently altered the face of Buddhism from its prior forms, ostensibly giving scholars much less to look at. The demotion of Buddhism from official state religion to a practice banished to the remote mountains had a discernible impact on its organization and visibility. Under the reign of Sejong (1418–1450), the existing schools of Buddhism were stripped of their lineage affiliations and reduced into two generic organizations—the scholastic (*kyo*) and the meditative (*sŏn*). Court recognition of even these remaining schools vacillated with the personal policies of each monarch. The organization of Korean Buddhism in this era is best described by abandoning attempts to identify schools and doctrines and instead referring to an amalgamated

and syncretic tradition known generally as “mountain” Buddhism.²⁹

My reading of *KUM* leads to suggestive reassessments of certain truisms within scholarly circles, particularly the wisdom that the cultural presence of Buddhism plummeted in stature and significance after the golden age of the Tang dynasty (618–907) in China, and the Silla (668–918) and Koryŏ (918–1392) dynasties in Korea. Stephen Teiser has already pointed out that this broadly accepted conclusion stems from a scholarly prejudice for institutional and doctrinal presence as evidence of cultural flourishing. He counters this habit in his own assessment of Buddhism in China by stating that “. . . the more pervasive influence of Buddhism on Chinese society is to be seen in domains that are not distinctively Buddhist.”³⁰ I would elaborate on Teiser’s point to argue that a penchant for limited forms of cultural discourse easily blinds the scholar to the dynamism of traditions; to the depth of variation and transformations that a system of thought can display over time. In the present case, the dispersion of Buddhist perspectives from historically and institutionally discrete settings into popular and even secular frameworks hardly diminishes their impact.

My point is not to challenge the assumption that classic exegetical traditions were a measure of the vitality of Buddhism in East Asia. Instead, I challenge the assumption that the parameters of Buddhist philosophical discourse were exhausted in the medieval period. This requires accepting the proposition that the practice of philosophy is influenced by history. From the sixth to tenth centuries, Chinese and Korean Buddhists rejected their prior attempts to emulate Indian scholasticism in favor of indigenous movements. The primary thrust of these efforts, which were guided by the *panjiao* system of doctrinal classification, was hermeneutical. The principle of “dividing the teachings” was a methodological tool for overcoming the challenge to understanding posed by the assertion that widely differing and opposing ideas were all part of one religious system.

The driving concerns of Buddhism in Kim Manjung’s time differed significantly. The process of internal and doctrinal

systematization had already been completed, and subsequently convulsed by the debate on the utility of language to convey truth. Both of these phases of Buddhist history find voice in *KUM*. The novel's primary impetus, however, stems not from events internal to the Buddhist community, but from broader intellectual currents. These currents have largely to do with the interaction between Confucian and Buddhist philosophical views—not in abstract textual discourse but in the minds of men like Kim Manjung who utilized both traditions to shape their own lives. In order to understand this phenomenon, we must begin with a reconsideration of the viability of Buddhist views in mid-Chosŏn Korea.

In Ming China, the cooptation of Buddhist views into neo-Confucian discourse allowed for the expression of Buddhism in controlled and altered forms. This compromised existence resulted in the near cessation of traditional scholastic Buddhist tracts, which were normally tied to doctrinal lineage schools. Scholars of Korea have tended to reach similar conclusions about the fate of Buddhism in the Chosŏn dynasty:

The fortunes of Buddhism had so dramatically changed that the religion had lost its ability to influence the nation socially or culturally, and had lost its ability to produce scholarly monks. These facts were the result of the various policies pursued by the Confucian monarchy over a century and a half. Buddhist Korea was a thing of the past.³¹

The formal if intermittent policy of state repression announced the depth of Buddhism's fall from favor as a protector of the nation. More recent scrutinies of the transition between the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties, however, suggest that the supposed break between the two ruling houses has been somewhat overstated. Recent studies suggest a continuity in the social and political lineages that made up the courts of both dynasties.³² Consistent with this continuity, the official repression of Buddhism was often interrupted by the personal piety of Chosŏn monarchs (King Sejo [1455–1468] and Queen Munjŏng [1545–1567] being notable examples), which led to renewals in temple building and the performance of Buddhist rituals.

To be sure, the loss of Buddhism's political status in the Chosŏn period should not be minimized. This dynasty was founded upon a self-conscious embrace of neo-Confucianism in its pursuit of social and political reform. This conversion entailed sharp but familiar criticisms of Buddhism on both institutional and doctrinal grounds.³³ The critical issue for this study, however, concerns the nature of Buddhism's altered form of existence itself. Within the monastic context, one can note the persistence of Sŏn Buddhism and the practice of scholastic study, which included the continued production of scholarly texts. *KUM*'s literary expression of Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, is completely separate from traditional forms of Buddhist exegesis and represents a new mode of discourse altogether. An explanation of this new form of philosophical expression—which was produced separately and apart from the labors of professional monks—must be explicitly tied to an historical analysis of Kim Manjung's situation.

The Buddhism of Kim Manjung

The life of the neo-Confucian literati was paralleled by the supposedly non-intersecting lives of mountain-top Buddhists. It is not the case, however, that these separate callings were embraced by members of opposing social strata. The biographies of prominent Chosŏn dynasty monks reveal that they commonly came from aristocratic—or Yangban—backgrounds. In the process of attaining literacy, these Buddhist monks gained a proficiency in the Confucian classics, as well as engaging in the protracted study of Buddhist texts that was common to monastic training.³⁴ The ability to obtain an education was perhaps the most important factor in accessing both the Confucian and Buddhist worlds with some degree of skill. Hence, as the case of Kim Manjung himself demonstrates, it was also true that familiarity with Buddhist texts and ideas was well within the purview of Confucian scholar-bureaucrats.

Kim Manjung's collection of *Random Essays* (*Sŏp'ŏ manp'il*) gives an account of his visits to Buddhist temples and conversa-

tions with monks. These visits took place during a period of political exile to Sŏnch'ŏn, near the Chinese border, from 1687 to 1688. These poetic reflections evince a philosophical interest in the Buddhist account of the nature and creation of the universe. The *Random Essays* are sprinkled with quotations from and references to Buddhist texts, such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the *Platform Sūtra*. One reference to the *Śūrangama Sūtra* is contained in the line, "The mind is without emerging or entering. Thus the meaning of the *Śūrangama* is that the mind is not inside, nor is it outside."³⁵ The *Śūrangama Sūtra* is an apocryphal Chinese Buddhist text that was popular in Chan/Sŏn circles at the end of the seventh century. It is perhaps most known for expounding the theory of *tathāgatagarbha*, or the view that all sentient beings are fundamentally identical with the Buddha. In this particular passage, however, Kim Manjung's concern is with the Buddhist belief that all phenomenal experience is based on the mind. Kim Manjung's consideration of Buddhist theory here is passing and brief. It is not until the composition of *KUM*, with its frame tale of dream experience and reincarnation, that we get Kim's full elaboration of the view that all events are mental "travels," or realities constituted by the mind.³⁶ Kim's translation of Buddhist theory into narrative format is perhaps the most interesting aspect of his embrace of Buddhism.

The collected musings of the *Random Essays* is neither an exclusive nor systematic exegesis on Buddhist thought. In addition to religious reflections, there are essays whose contents are political and literary in nature. As for Kim Manjung's understanding of Buddhism, he generalizes it to the doctrine of emptiness, which he saw as the linchpin of the religion.³⁷ Many of the essays are devoted to defending Buddhism against the standard attacks of neo-Confucianism, particularly those that had been articulated by the philosopher Zhuxi (1130–1200). Kim demonstrates his capacity for critical thinking by exposing the inconsistencies, oversimplifications, and lack of philological rigor behind the Confucian attacks. In the course of this process, Kim displays a thorough knowledge of Buddhist, as well as Confu-