



Jeong and the Interrelationality of Self and Other in Korean Buddhist Cinema

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

Movies, according to feminist theorist and cultural critic bell hooks are “the perfect cultural texts” that, on the one hand, teach us things about the unfamiliar and, on the other hand, “give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real” (Hooks 2009: 1). Francisca Cho observes, “Film instantiates the Buddhist lesson that life itself is an illusory projection of our own minds, and it provides the means for exploring the features of this projection” (Cho 2009: 163). By reimagining the world and our place in it, film can alter our understandings of self and other, push us to question our epistemological assumptions, and reacquaint us with our present moment experience. In this way, film also functions as a spiritual technology that, like a Buddhist *sūtra*, hones a refined vision of the relationship of self and other (Suh 2015).

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Korean Buddhist cinema has largely addressed the ever-present dilemma of an individual's responsibility to the other to promote a decidedly this-worldly affirmation that echoes the Mahayana proposition that ultimate freedom (*nirvāṇa*) is not found in an escape from the world of suffering (*samsāra*), but rather in its embrace. This chapter concerns one such Korean Buddhist film—Im Kwon-taek (임권택) — *Aje Aje Bara Aje* (아제 아제 바라 아제, “Come, Come, Come Upward”; 1989) whose title is a direct translation of the final verse or *gatha* of the beloved Mahayana *Heart Sūtra*, which conveys the Buddhist teaching of emptiness (*śūnyāta*) as the ontological basis of reality. *Mandala* (1981), Im's first Buddhist film, features the religious lives of two monks struggling with desire and in *Aje Aje Bara Aje*, the director once again focuses on modern Buddhism to consider how a religious tradition that explicitly exhorts its monastic practitioners toward non-attachment can adequately respond to the suffering of others. The tension between monastic life and social responsibility is certainly no stranger to Buddhism and I suggest that an examination of *jeong/qing* (정 情; affection) as the adhesive that attaches people together in relationship may prove fruitful for understanding how this dilemma gets resolved.

It makes good sense then to query the interrelationality at the heart of *jeong* that mutually constitutes beings, for the *jeong* between the protagonist, a Buddhist nun, and her superior facilitates the disciple's spiritual awakening and draws her back down the mountain to immerse herself in the world of suffering. Because I have written extensively about this film with respect to gender and enlightenment in an earlier work (Suh 2015), I take a different approach here by focusing on the dynamics of *jeong* that bind *Seon* Buddhist masters and disciples in spiritual kinship.

As we shall see, the *jeong* between wise masters and their fledgling disciples propels students along the path, but even these relationships must be abandoned to recognize the truth of emptiness and the ultimate commensurability of *nirvāṇa* (liberation) and engagement in the world of *samsāra* (suffering).

11.2 THE EXPRESSION OF JEONG IN KOREAN BUDDHIST FILMS

Wonhee Anne Joh's theorization of *jeong* as the “stickiness” between individuals that “saturates daily living and all forms of relationships,” proves useful to understanding *Aje Aje Bara Aje*'s presentation of an ethical

Buddhist life that embraces the abject as the self (Joh 2007: 145). In what follows, I provide a synopsis and thematic overview of *Aje Aje Bara Aje* to show how the film's protagonist Sun Nyeo (순녀) learns to embrace the abject and dissolve the fault line between self and other through the relational pull of *jeong*. Although I do not make the claim that *jeong* is necessarily a Buddhist term, the separation between Buddhist and Confucian ideologies is far less porous than it may seem from an outside perspective.

While the explicit language of *jeong* may not appear literally in this film, we witness its relational force as it draws teacher and student together into a spiritual bond. Affection and monastic kinship emerge between master and disciple to create a familial intimacy that renders students the charges of their respective mentors. Several Korean Buddhist films such as Bae Yong-kyun's *Why has Bodhidharma Left for the East* (*Dalmaga dongjj-okeuro gan ggadalkeun?*; 1989), Ju Kyung-jung's *A Little Monk* (*Dong-seung* 2003), and Kim Ki-duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (봄 여름 가을 겨울 그리고 봄 ...; 2004) feature orphaned boys adopted into the order and raised by senior monks as their own spiritual children. The fatherly monks attend to their religious training as well as their more secular needs such as feeding, dressing, and even pulling their loose baby teeth. In his study of Korean monastic life, Robert Buswell notes, "There is a deep affinity among monks from the same monastery," who share a common family lineage (Buswell 1992: 77). Ordination into temple life thus symbolizes the adoption of a new monastery family. Buswell explains, "One of the euphemisms Buddhists have always used for ordination is 'to leave home'" (出家 *chulga*; *pravrajita*). For the majority of monks, most of the functions of their secular families are effectively served by the new "*dharma* family" (Buswell 1992: 91).

When aspirants enter the monastic order, they enter into *jeong*-infused relationships with their fellow practitioners and the mentors who guide them. Buddhist teachers ferry their students along the path, but senior monastics also know that overreliance on their guidance and the ties of *jeong* can become obstacles if their students fail to recognize that enlightenment is something that they already have within them. *Jeong* binds students to their Buddhist masters, but as I show in this chapter, these bonds of affection seem to function like the 'skillful means' or *upaya* of the Buddha who taught through whichever methods were most conducive to his disciples.

Buddhist tradition maintains that if the teachings were to remain relevant beyond their original birthplace in India, they would naturally need to adapt “according to the needs of his hearers” (Williams 1989: 143). The Mahayana method of *upaya* proved beneficial in the transmission of Buddhism to new locales precisely because it acknowledged that different methods based on the needs of the student were legitimate methods to deliver students along the path to liberation. For Sun Nyeo, the affective dimensions of *jeong* become the very push that she needs in order to let go of her misperception of *nirvāṇa* as separate from *samsāra*. But just as one cannot cling too tightly to the doctrine (*dharmā*) lest it become a hindrance, neither can the student grasp too tightly to her teacher lest she risk obscuring her own ability to awaken to their own Buddha nature.

Comparing his teachings to a raft to cross over river, the Buddha admonished his disciples: “O’ *bhikkhus*, even this view, which is so pure and so clear, if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of” (Rahula 1974: 11). The student ought therefore to depend on the teacher and doctrine as provisional guides pointing to enlightenment. That is to say, the point of practice is to wake up to the Buddha within oneself and remove the mental hindrances that obscure one’s recognition of emptiness.

11.3 A BUDDHISM FOR THE PEOPLE: *AJE AJE BARA AJE*

In the introduction of *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, Jin Y. Park writes,

Korean Buddhist efforts to bring Buddhism to the milieu of people’s daily lives by actively engaging themselves in the social and political situations of the time re-emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of *Minjung* Buddhism. Buddhist reformists adapted the term *minjung* (민중; the multitude) during the first half of the twentieth century to emphasize the importance of the religion’s rapport with society and the people. *Minjung* Buddhism during the second half of the twentieth century takes visibly political stances, directly responding to the military dictatorship in Korea. By its founding principles, *Minjung* Buddhism is Buddhism for the politically oppressed, economically exploited, and socio-culturally alienated. Philosophically, *Minjung* Buddhists appeal to the *bodhisattva* ideal and compassion. Adherents of *Minjung* Buddhism emphasize the liberation from all forms of oppression including social and political constraints. (Park 2010b: 5)

Im's film subscribes to a vision of Buddhism that aligns closely with the modern reform efforts studied by Park (2010a) and with the reformist monk Manhae's contention that "social salvation" was deeply connected to traditional Buddhism (Park 2010b: 43). Manhae insisted that "Buddhists neither abandon human society nor deny close, loving relationships with people. They instead attain enlightenment through defilement and achieve in the midst of the stream of life and death. Being aware of this truth and getting involved in action are the practices" of Buddhist monastics (48). Pori Park explains, "By juxtaposing the principle of saving the world with the principle of absolute equality, Manhae was able to demonstrate social salvation as a fundamental principle of Buddhism not as its contingent aspect" (50). Accordingly, *Aje Aje Bara Aje* is in many ways a filmic version of Manhae's vision that identified the absolute with the relative.

While *Aje Aje Bara Aje* valorizes the spiritual trajectory of a non-celibate former nun, it also introduces viewers to another Seon Buddhist nun named Jin Seong (진성) who represents a strict ascetic monasticism far removed from the struggles of the laity. In Im's narrative of the Buddhist path to *nirvāṇa*, Jin Seong's asceticism is rendered impotent because of her dogged refusal to engage in the suffering of humanity. Instead, she clings rigidly to a code of discipline that cuts her off from the world. In an effort to draw the nun away from her exclusive attachment to asceticism, purity, and orthodoxy, her abbess then requires the young nun to enroll in university. In the secular world, she is confronted by a pro-democracy student activist named Jong Nam (종남) who continually pushes her to confront Buddhism's lack of participation in the world of suffering. Im's camera provides footage of tear-gas cannisters exploding amidst student pro-democracy protests as Jong Nam confronts her narrow vision of liberation:

You said that all beings serve different purposes. Then, what is your purpose? Is it to ignore the poor, hide deep in the mountains, and discipline yourself? For Buddhism to build a stronghold today, you have to get together with the poor farmers and city laborers to lead their spiritual ways. That's the only road to salvation.

Unmoved by the protests around her and the challenges to her belief that only reliance on Buddhist doctrine and ascetism can liberate her, Jin Seong ignores his critique and returns to her temple even more committed to her

pursuit of enlightenment. In her sole reliance on the Buddhist *sūtras* and *Seon* practice, she eventually burns all of her university books as distractions from her religious dedication to focus on the *hwadu* (화두, 話頭, a short phrase for meditation) given to her by the abbess, “Why has Bodhidharma been painted without a beard?”

Jin Seong’s story reflects Im’s view that Korean Buddhism must come down from the mountains in order to remain relevant to society. Im explains, “If reality is painful for most people, then it is necessary to share ordinary people’s pain and struggle by following Mahayana Buddhism. I made *Come, Come, Come Upward* to ask how the monks could separate themselves from ordinary life and follow Hinayana ways” (James 2007:152). Im’s vision of a socially engaged Buddhism thus concurs with the reformist monk Manhae’s belief that “monks and nuns would have to abandon their cherished abodes in the remote mountains, and enter the cities in order to perform their religious duty to the general public” (Sorensen 1999: 121). Jin Seong clings to a dualistic and erroneous vision of reality that posits a distinction between the ‘impure’ world of *samsāra* and its suffering people and the purity of *nirvāna*. Her refusal to relinquish her ascetic fervor is clearly noted in her exchange with Sun Nyeo over carvings of the Buddha made to resemble the humble visages of farmers and peasants. Jin Seong dismisses the folk features of the statues as ugly and therefore incapable of reflecting the purity of the Buddha. When challenged by Sun Nyeo to see the humanity of the images reflected and the Buddha nature in all beings, the ascetic nun simply replies, “You must not desecrate the holiness of our religion.”

Despite her best efforts, Jin Seong’s pursuit of enlightenment and solution to her *hwadu* come to an impasse in the monastery. With her abbess’s consent, she resolves to leave the mountain top and embark on a pilgrimage seeking out meditation caves even further away from worldly entanglement. It is in one such cave that she literally meets face to face with the impotence of her asceticism as she prepares for her intensive meditation. As she lights a candle to brighten the dank space, she immediately is preyed upon by a degenerate monk who, in a symbolic act of sexual aggression, whips down his pants and forces her to gaze upon his self-castrated genitals as an object lesson in the shortcomings of monastic purity. In an effort to teach the young nun about the relentless nature of desire despite his fervent meditations, he shouts, “Look carefully! Tens, even hundreds of times a day, a great pillar that used to be here rose up uncontrollably! Now

look at what happened to that place! Look with your own eyes! Look! Look! Look! I said look at it!” The monk’s admonishment to look acts as a cautionary tale safeguarding against the follies of over ascetism which ironically highlights the very thing that one tries to avoid. Thus, the monk’s embodied lesson reflects the Buddha’s exhortation to his disciples to come and see into the nature of reality as it truly is rather than as one’s mental projections. Here, Jin Seong is forced to reckon with her own ravenous desire not for sex but for purity, both of which prove to be flip sides of the same coin. Unwilling to engage with this depraved monk, Jin Seong stoically responds, “You should’ve cut the root of your heart... not that. What pointless act is that?” Much like the monk struggled with his attachment to the world of sensual desire to no avail, Jin Seong’s path to enlightenment will also be plagued by attachment to an unattainable purity that will take her further and further from the world of compassionate engagement with others who, in the *Mahayana* vision of reality, are none other than a part of oneself. She is obsessed with the quest for a purified self that can experience enlightenment only after cutting off attachments to the world, yet it is precisely this obsession that keeps her from resolving her *hwadu*.

Sun Nyeo’s story runs parallel to Jin Seong to provide an alternative view of the Mahayana pathway that validates the mundane world of *samsāra* as the most appropriate training ground for monks and nuns to uproot the suffering that comprises human existence. According to Ronald Green and Chanju Mun, *Aje Aje Bara Aje* addresses themes critical of the previous military regime of Chun Doo-Hwan which ended in 1988 (Green and Mun 2016). Im’s film takes up significant political issues such as the Vietnam War, the Gwanju Democratization Movement, and government discrimination against Communist sympathizers and family members (233). Sun Nyeo’s own ministry, which I have referred to elsewhere as a “radical act of somatic compassion” (Suh 2015: 96), focuses on the lives of several *dukkha*-filled men who embody *han* (한 恨; resentment).

Her own estranged father is a veteran of the Vietnam War who returned to Korea and entered the monastic order to escape his own war-related *han* and trauma. Although he sought to escape the world of *samsāra* through ordination, he explains to his daughter that, similar to Jin Seong, he erroneously sought out the monastic life as a way to cleanse himself (presumably from war-related trauma):

Your father failed in his mission. He wanted to go live in the mountain, to learn from Buddha. He wanted only to make himself clean and receive a revelation. That was his mistake. He failed to see that, in living among the poor and the suffering, and in sharing their pain, there is something to be gained. When he realized that this something is the most valuable his illness had already affected his body deeply.

The ailing monk as an emblem of *han* (which is an example of *dukkha*) parts ways with his daughter as he imparts this lesson that foreshadows her own *bodhisattva* career.

Prior to her arrival at the Buddhist nunnery, Sun Nyeo develops a schoolgirl crush on her high school history teacher who participated in the Gwanju uprising and lost his wife and unborn child during the military crackdown and massacre. Like her father's regret and suffering, the teacher's deep loss and remorse also shapes Sun Nyeo's decision to enter the nunnery, albeit for less spiritual reasons. Compelled to follow him on his annual visit to Daejeon during holiday, they share a room together and are subsequently accused of having an illicit affair which leads to her expulsion from school. Sun Nyeo thus arrives at the temple influenced by her father's own failings as a monk isolated on a mountain top and deeply pulled toward the suffering of her former teacher, and perhaps even chastened by this crush gone awry.

It is not, however, until she meets the third man in her life that she becomes an earthly *bodhisattva* engaging in acts of embodied compassion by becoming a wife and salvific figure to this *han*-filled man. After her tonsure ceremony, Sun Nyeo saves a man named Hyun Woo from committing suicide off the mountainside near her temple. Green and Mun note that the desperate man "had been a student activist for democracy and that his father was a Communist during the Korean War. Because he could not get a good job because of his father's affiliation, he became destitute and suicidal" (Green and Mun 2016: 235). The nun saves this drunken man and she is unwittingly expelled from the monastery due to his relentless pursuit of her. In his despair, he cries for her to help straighten out his life as a petty criminal. He beseeches her, "I have no strength or confidence to find my own way!" Hyun Woo's parents were killed during a Communist round up and because of his parent's affiliations, he could not find decent work and turned to crime and gang activity. "But," he explains to Sun Nyeo, "I have been saved by your hands." Sun Nyeo does pull him from his death, but the hands are also a reference to the salvific

qualities of Kuan Yin *bodhisattva* who is also referred to as a mother and envisioned with a thousand hands to reach out compassionately to all beings (Yü 2001). Later, as he is arrested a second time for harassing the nun, he shouts, “You allowed me to be born again! You must become my mother! My friend! My wife!” Thus, he becomes one of the many beings suffering in *samsāra* who cry out and inspire the *bodhisattva*’s vow to save all sentient beings.

While shaving the head signifies her cutting ties with the ordinary world, it seems that the world is not ready to let go of her. Sun Nyeo is duly dismissed from the temple by the abbess due to the temple nuns’ constant complaints about her impurity, but on the eve of her departure, Eunseon urges her to “kill the immature Buddha” inside her and gives Sun Nyeo her *hwadu*, “Between your spirit that stays here and your body rambling around the world, which one is real?” Although she is expelled from the temple, the abbess wisely acknowledges that there is more than one way to become enlightened and implies that, unlike Jin Seong Sun Nyeo’s enlightenment will come only through her compassionate interactions with the suffering people below.

Seon Buddhist masters regularly present their students with a *hwadu* (known as *koan* in Japanese Zen; meditational question) as an object of intensive inquiry that will, if correctly understood, convey to the meditator what lies beyond form. Buswell explains, “The [*hwadu*] is a question, particular to the Seon school, that promotes spiritual inquiry” (Buswell 1992: 150) and plays a critical role in our disciple’s training. Sun Nyeo is expected to focus on this meditation riddle to rid herself of the distracting thoughts and delusions that have mired her progress and, when solved, will enable her to exchange her own limited understanding for what the Buddha saw (Cho 2017). She does not, however, progress swiftly in solving her *hwadu* while living as an ascetic nun engaged in meditative contemplation day and night; instead, it is only when she is sent down the mountain and engages in emotional and physical relationships with others that she begins to recognize that ultimately self and other are one. As we shall see, the culmination of her spiritual journey will not be finished until she visits with her abbess one last time and the bonds between them are loosened when her teacher passes away.

The abbess predicts that she will see Sun Nyeo again and indicates that her disciple will succeed in understanding her *hwadu*. The young nun has no choice but heed the decision of the abbess and is greeted by her future husband as she descends the mountain. Sun Nyeo’s earthly ministry

unfortunately begins when he rapes her immediately after she vows to transform him over a few drinks, “Mark my words. I’m going to make a human being out of you.” Hyun Woo drags the inebriated Sun Nyeo to an inn where he proceeds to undress her and then restrains her arms by pinning her limbs under her outer garment that he has wrapped around her body as a bind. His deft maneuvers indicate that he has some skill in restraining and raping women and as Sun Nyeo regains consciousness, she tries in vain to escape and fight back. Hyun Woo then strikes and rapes her as she struggles to cover her tonsured head with her knit beanie as if shrinking away in shame and anguish. Sun Nyeo is forcibly laicized and no longer a Buddhist nun.

We next encounter Sun Nyeo and Hyun Woo as a happily married couple living in a tin-roofed shack outside the coal mine where the soon-to-be father has found work. He arrives home after a full day’s work in the mines exhausted but with a renewed sense of purpose and fulfillment. Sun Nyeo appears as a devoted housewife who breaks the joyful news that they will soon have a baby. Thus, her mission is accomplished in that she has cleansed Hyun Woo of his negative *karma* and made this *han*-filled man whole again. Unfortunately, as he had predicted, Hyun Woo eventually meets his death in a mining accident and Sun Nyeo miscarries their child. We only learn of these tragic events as she recounts them years later to Jin Seong whom she briefly encounters on her way to Bigeum island to work as a nurse’s assistant. Her long hair wrapped in a scarf and her ordinary clothing indicating her complete transition to lay Buddhist life strikes a sharp contrast to Jin Seong’s gray robes and shaved head. Sun Nyeo shares that after her first husband’s death, she married a double amputee who subsequently died, and that now she is on her way to a new location for work. We get a glimpse into her earthly ministry and acts of embodied compassion for the *han*-filled men she makes whole when she explains, “I don’t regret my life in which I gave my heart and my body to such people. Living, happiness, and unhappiness are all the same in essence ... I never gave up ... Whenever I met a new man I did my best as if I was a virgin. I hope that it might be asceticism.” Sun Nyeo’s acknowledgment that happiness and unhappiness are of the same essence indicates that she has already come to recognize that there is no difference between the self living up on the mountain and the self wandering in the world for they are of the same essence—empty. In contrast, Jin Seong remains staunchly in pursuit of enlightenment and struggles to answer her *hwadu* throughout the remainder of film to little success.

Sun Nyeo's third husband is a widowed ambulance driver with a young son whom she meets while working on the island. Much like she does with the other men in her life, she becomes his wife and sexual partner, but he too meets an untimely death during a particularly graphic love-making scene. In her extensive study of the feminine forms of *Kuan Yin*, Chün-fang Yü points out because the *bodhisattva* realizes nonduality, she can appear in a variety of forms without worrying about "evil" activities such as sexual activity: "She would use sexual desire as a skillful means, a teaching device to help people reach goodness" (Yü 2001:421). Similarly, the *bodhisattva* appears in the form of the prostitute Vasumitra in the *Gandhavyuha Sūtra* and "tells the young pilgrim Sudhana that she teaches all men who come to her full of passion in such a way that they become free from passion. Without discrimination, she will offer whatever they want and in doing so, enable them to become dispassionate" (Yü 2001: 424). The Mahayana texts certainly allow us a Buddhist spin on Sun Nyeo's sexual relationships with *han*-filled men and perhaps their early deaths are an indication of their liberation from the world of suffering. According to David E. James, her sexual companionship is also "metonymic for her general ministry, and is the source of her own spiritual development. This allows the film to assert a redemptive humanism founded in female sexuality" (James 2001: 28).

Following the ambulance driver's death, Sun Nyeo returns to the nunnery to visit with her abbess one last time before her master passes away. The abbess's prediction that the two would meet again rings true as does her prediction that Sun Nyeo will understand the true nature of herself by immersing herself in the world of suffering. On her deathbed, the abbess advises the resident nuns to allow a small space for Sun Nyeo to live on the temple property and to eventually re-ordain her.

The abbess dies after her student returns and preparations are quickly made for her cremation. She is soon set ablaze on a funeral pyre as her disciples circumambulate their master while chanting *sūtras*. Sun Nyeo must observe the cremation from afar, for the nuns still revile her as a "disgusting creature" for her dalliances with men, which reflects monasticism's failure to wet its feet in the world of the abject by clinging to puritanical views that only heighten their isolation. Undeterred, Sun Nyeo returns later to sift through the smoldering ashes to collect her teacher's relics. In this heightened moment of grief and loss, Sun Nyeo suddenly reveals the answer to her *hwadu*: "Seunim [master] between my soul left with you and the body out in the world, neither is my substance. I knew

too late that I finally have the real self when and only when the two are in the same boundary.” That is, Sun Nyeo has understood the *Heart Sūtra*’s most famous teaching that form is emptiness and emptiness is form (색즉시공 공즉시색; 色卽是空空卽是色). It is emptiness that fuses the purported gap between *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* and self and other into a network of interdependence. Recognizing that “Something that is in the rough may be more pure as the lotus blooms in the mud,” Sun Nyeo makes a vow to “grind these bones into a thousand pieces. And at every place I stay, I’ll put a piece in a stone pillar. To every heart in this world, [t]hese will be a source of light. I’ll build a thousand such pillars.” The film concludes with Sun Nyeo fading into the distance as she follows the pathway back down the mountain to continue her *bodhisattva* activity with her master’s relics to serve as a beacon of hope and compassion for all beings. Jin Seong remains behind still grappling with her own *hwadu* and clinging to her purity.

Aje Aje Bara Aje fits squarely into a Mahayana philosophical vision that rejects the absolute distinction between *samsāra* and the ultimate goal of *nirvāṇa*. Rather than claiming that *nirvāṇa* can only be attained through monastic pursuits high in the mountains above the realm of *samsāra*, Mahayana valorizes *samsāra* as something to be embraced rather than rejected, for both are “absent of inherent existence” anyway (Williams 1989: 69). And yet it is not just the filmic portrayal of the Buddhist path that conveys this ontological message, it is film itself that also imparts this wisdom onto its viewers. In her study of the Buddhist semiotics operative in film, Francisca Cho remarks that “the weight of Buddhist tradition rejects the distinction between signifiers and signified, sanctioning the conclusion that cinematic illusion is ontologically no different from life itself” (Cho 2009: 163). Thus, viewers receive the lesson of emptiness from the main characters’ trajectories as well as through the simple act of seeing. In this way, they see what and how the Buddha saw reality (Cho 2017). Im’s film engages viewers in “the dialectics of liberation” that casts a Mahayana interpretive lens on monasticism and its perceived limitations (Cho 2009: 167). If, as the famed Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna proclaims, “Between the two [*nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*] there is not the slightest bit of difference,” then they are not ontologically distinct. It then follows that monasteries and the worldly life cannot be so far apart either and that the muddy world of *samsāra* can be just as potent a source for enlightenment (Williams, 1989: 69).

11.4 BUDDHISM, *HAN*, AND *JEONG*

Because it problematizes the separation of spiritual pursuits in distant monasteries and direct social engagement in the world, *Aje Aje Bara Aje* also addresses Korean Buddhism's responsiveness to *han*, a particularly Korean embodiment of suffering (*dukkha*). David E. James notes that *Aje Aje Bara Aje* addresses Buddhism's ability to adequately respond to the embodied suffering of *han* to ask, "How can traditional culture be used to confront the *han* of present-day Korea and what part can Buddhism play in that confrontation?" (James 2001: 26). *Aje Aje Bara Aje* is notably replete with men who are emblematic of *han*, a kind of trauma they embody through their spiritual angst, illness, disability, and premature deaths. James writes:

Taken by Koreans to be the essential national experience, *han* is constituted from the sentiments of loss and rage at the severance of wholeness and continuity between self and history. The accumulated emotions of sufferers ..., *han* may be projected onto any political ordeal, but in this century it has been primarily experienced as the response to devastating colonization and political division. (19)

The *han*-filled men in Im's film are hungry for the salve and tonic of the *bodhisattvic* compassion of Sun Nyeo who becomes a wife, mother, and sexual partner to each of them. In so doing, she reflects the emanations of *Kuan Yin bodhisattva*, "a compassionate universal savior who responds to another's cry for help regardless of class, gender, or even moral qualifications" (Yü 2001: 5).

In her work, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*, Joh writes, "As a concept, *jeong* encompasses but is not limited to compassion, affection, solidarity, relationality, vulnerability, and forgiveness" (Joh 2006: xiii). Connecting Korean *jeong* to the Chinese character 情 (*qing*) that expresses "heart" and "arising," Joh further notes that "*Jeong* makes relationships "sticky." (xiv). In her approach to *jeong* as an adhesive bond that gives rise to hopefulness in the midst of *han*, Joh argues that the "profound sense of collective interconnectedness and the relational power of *jeong*...promote communal healing and sustaining and make way for the presence of a deep, life-affirming power" (Joh 2006: xvi). Joh's theological approach to *jeong* bears a striking resemblance to the Mahayana *bodhisattva* vow to save all sentient beings that inspires the protagonist of *Aje*

Aje Bara Aje; in both instances, suffering is to be transformed through the intrapersonal bonds with and among the people.

Although writing from a Christian perspective, Joh's analysis of *jeong* and *han* proves instructive for locating similar instances of *jeong* and *han* within a Korean Buddhist framework of emptiness, compassion, and suffering. Similarly, if, as Andrew Sung Park contends, "*han* can be defined as the critical wound of the heart generated by unjust psychological repression, as well as by social, political, economic, and cultural expression," then the suffering that *han* entails can also be approached as a culturally specific instance of *dukkha* or suffering from Buddhist perspectives (Park 1993: 10). If *han* is deep trauma and suffering on an individual and collective level, it is *jeong* that gives hope through relational attachments and love that "transforms relationships, thereby transforming systems of oppression" (Joh 2006: 121). Despite her critique of a biologically oriented meaning of *han* Sandra So Hee Chi Kim argues, "The word *han* carries with it a history of unmitigated collective traumas in Korea, which have created a very specific social and national imaginary in Korea and Korean diasporas" (Chi Kim 2017: 274). For Chi Kim, *han* signifies a sorrow and woundedness that is both individually manifest and "at the same time creating horizontal connections of empathy and identification" (Chi Kim 2017: 274). It is these horizontal connections and ties that stem from the historical trauma of *han* that concerns this study.

Complementing Joh's study of the theological implications of *jeong*, Angela Son examines the psychological dynamics behind *jeong*, which she sees as "the outward manifestation of the self-selfobject relationships that facilitate the development of the self and can be seen as developing from an immature to a mature state" (Son 2014: 745). Both the theological and psychodynamic interpretation of *jeong* prove invaluable to this present study of *jeong* as the relational ties that can mature fledgling monastics who seek to escape the very world of *samsāra*. One does not need to leave the world in order to become enlightened; rather, one enters into the *han*-filled realm to help transform it.

Sun Nyeo's compassion reflects an ideal Buddhism that has resolved the tension between a socially responsible Buddhism infused with ideals of *jeong*, and a detached ascetic and formal religion that does little for society. *Jeong* as the bonds of affection and emotion that adheres between people certainly plays a significant role in Sun Nyeo's story, for it is through *jeong* that Sun Nyeo transcends the false dichotomy between *samsāra* and *nirvāna* and enters the world of *han*-filled men in order to liberate them.

We would be remiss if we viewed Im's film without recourse to a discussion of *han* as the woundedness and abjection that *jeong* can transform. *Jeongful* people are those who are able to experience others' suffering and pain as if it is their own because, ultimately it is. Joh notes, "Experience of *jeong* between the self and the other opens a space in which we begin our journey of awakening to the other and to the self" (Joh 2011: 169). She further notes that "When we realize that who we are is always constituted through and in relation to the other, and when we begin to really "see" and "hear" the other, we cannot help but become aware that the other's well being is my well being, the other's pain becomes my pain" (Joh 2011:178). *Jeong* thus awakens in the self the realization of the other as a deep part of the self and, in so doing, it becomes the catalyst for deep compassion and co-experience between beings.

Im's film critiques the monastic impetus to remain isolated on mountaintops as a rejection of humanity precisely because it does not engage in taking on the pain of the other as the self. Mahayana Buddhism promotes interdependence as the existential relationship between all phenomena; thus, we are mutually constituted. Jin Seong fails in her spiritual quest because she aligns herself with a form of asceticism considered ineffectual because it only focuses on the meditator herself and not on the object. Im's Buddhism embraces the Mahayana image of "the Jewel Net of Indra (Lord of the *deva* realm)" that appears in the *Avatamska Sūtra* where each node of Indra's net contains a multi-faceted jewel that reflects each and every other jewel to convey that all beings are deeply intertwined, entangled, and co-related.

Jeong can be understood as empathy, affection, and emotion between relational beings. The affection that Sun Nyeo has for her abbess is a form of love and relational attachment whose bonds are severed upon the teacher's death and cremation. Buddhists do not talk much of the love between teachers and their disciples, yet, as Joh reminds us, *jeong* saturates relationships. Despite the Buddha's teachings about non-attachment and no self, it would be unwise to imagine that the relationality and mutuality of *jeong* have somehow been bypassed or entirely separated from everyday social life in the monastery. The monks and nuns of their respective monastic complexes function like a family, albeit a *sangha* family whose shared experiences of daily living, sleeping, and eating depend on the other. Thus, the *sangha* family has the stereotypical father and mother figures in the abbot and abbess and their students are akin to their spiritual children.

Much like the Buddhist discourses of *karuna* or compassion, *jeong* also connotes compassion which Joh notes “has a way of making difficult our desire for easy boundary-making” (Joh 2011: 178) There is much consonance between Sun Nyeo’s *bodhisattvic* compassion and *jeong* which recognizes the indebtedness to the other as none other than the self and, like compassion, it is a practice in unboundedness and relational flow between beings.

Although not writing specifically about Buddhism, Joh’s theorization of *jeong* bears striking similarities and resonance with Buddhist emptiness and the *bodhisattva* vow of compassion. It is precisely this disposition of the subject toward the other that makes it possible to see Sun Nyeo’s embodied compassion as an enactment and embodiment of *jeong*. Joh’s deciphering of *jeong* forged at the contact zone between self and other enables us to see that Sun Nyeo’s somatic compassion is compelled also by the interrelationality of *jeong*. She descends the mountain and practices her Buddhist compassion immersed in the world of suffering individuals precisely because that is what *jeong* entails. It is a care and regard for the other and it is the antagonistic relationships that perhaps require the most care and regard. While Sun Nyeo’s fellow nuns cling to purity and reject Hyun Woo’s suffering, she herself reaches out to him because, as a *jeongful* person, she understands its healing power. Much like Buddhism’s nondualism and deep recognition that we are mutually constituted, *jeong* becomes a force that ties the two together and renders the fabricated relation of verticality into a horizontal relationship.

11.5 CONCLUSION

Approaching *jeong* as an ethical response to the other is nearly interchangeable with Buddhist understandings of no self and interdependence that comprise the *bodhisattva* path. Buddhist ethics and *jeong* go hand and hand in their valorization and cultivation of the impulse toward the other as if their deep needs and cries become our own. It is this relational flow that comprises *jeong* and allows for the fluidity of its conceptualization. *Jeong* is thus a relationality that has the power to transform relationships and finds striking resonance with the Buddhist concepts of emptiness and interdependence introduced in *Aje Aje Bara Aje*. *Jeong* fosters bonds of love, heartfulness, and relationality between beings and delivers them to a deeper vision of the phenomenal world as ontologically co-created, co-related, and interdependent. Thus, *jeong* and Buddhist compassion go

hand in hand as the ethical pull to the other. Although Confucian in origin, *jeong* is not a discrete emotion that runs parallel to the Buddhist ethic of compassion; on the contrary, the two intertwine in the lived experiences of Buddhist monastics to fulfill the Mahayana vision of the interdependence of all phenomena.

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