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**Representing Buddhism through Mise-en-scène,
Diegesis, and Mimesis:
Kim Ki-duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring***

Ronald S. GREEN

Chanju MUN

Ronald S. GREEN received his Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has a M.A. Degree in South Asian Religions from the UW-Madison, a M.A. in Japanese Literature from the University of Oregon, and a M.S. in Sociology from Virginia Tech. He is the author of *Buddhism Goes to the Movies*. He teaches Asian Religions and Buddhism in literature and film at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina.
E-mail: rgreen@coastal.edu

Chanju MUN (Ordination Name: Seongwon) studied philosophy and Buddhism as an undergraduate student at Dongguk University. He received a M.A. degree in philosophy from Seoul National University and a Ph.D. degree in Buddhist Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He taught World Religions and Buddhism at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina, until the time of his death in 2017.

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Abstract

This paper examines elements identified as “Buddhist” in the Korean film Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring (K. Pom yörüm kaül kyöul kürigo pom) written and directed by Kim Ki-duk (b. 1960) and released in 2003. It draws on research on this topic by numerous notable researchers of Korean film. For the sake of our investigation, we have arranged various points made by these scholars into three sections reflecting categories philosophers have long used to analyze drama. These are (1) mise-en-scène: the visual design of the film, (2) diegesis: the fictive narrative space of the film, and (3) mimesis: symbolic or ritual action in the film. This arrangement is based on a study of Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring by Pak Chongchön. This paper reorganizes Pak’s analysis and expands it to include the ideas of other Korean critics along with our own. Specifically, the paper looks at how the director uses mimicry, seasonal allegory, and various elements of visual design to create a multifaceted religious narrative. We analyze his assorted usages of Buddhist iconographical images and temple sounds including chanting of the Heart Sūtra, but argue that Kim additionally builds the storyline with cinematic symbolism and metaphor taken from Yin/Yang philosophy, Five Elements theory, Christianity, Jainism, and Korean folklore. We also offer a theory of Buddhist adoptive society in terms of the island and orphan metaphor found in the film. The paper considers whether Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring falls short of the requirements necessary for designating it as a “Buddhist film” as argued by a number of researchers, particularly if it lacks a soteriological solution to the inherent problem of human suffering at the forefront of the movie.

Key words: Buddhist Movies, Cinematic Symbolism, Seasonal Allegory, Religious Narratives, Visual Design

This paper examines elements identified as “Buddhist” in the Korean film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (K. *Pom yŏrŭm kaül kyŏul kŭrigo pom*) written and directed by Kim Ki-duk (b. 1960). While the film was released in 2003, analysis of it remains important as attested by its continuing popularity in a variety of classroom settings across disciplines, as well as being widely shown at film festivals including, the 2015 Ann Arbor Korean Independent Film Festival at the University of Michigan, the 2017 Korean Film Festival at Missouri Southern State University, the 2019 “Devotional Cinema film series” at Carthage College, and the 2019 International Film Festival at the University of Pennsylvania.¹ A special fifteenth anniversary commemorative screening and talk was given at Yale Film Study Center and elsewhere in 2018.

Parallel to this popularity, there are numerous articles on *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* in Korean but relatively few in English.² Among the latter writings, authors have focused on broad representations of basic Buddhist ideas and how these fit into a seasonal narrative. This paper draws on research on this topic by numerous notable academics on Korean film who point to other Buddhist elements in the film not yet considered by English language scholarship. Often using filmic categories of investigation, the Korean critics also indicate that the film is additionally replete with references to religions other than Buddhism. For the sake of our investigation, we have arranged various points made by these critics into three sections reflecting categories philosophers have long used to analyze drama. These are (1) *mise-en-scène*: the visual design of the film, (2) *diegesis*: the fictive narrative space of the film, and (3) *mimesis*: symbolic or ritual action in the film. This arrangement is based on a study of *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* by Pak Chongch’ŏn (Pak 2006, 291–316). This paper reorganizes Pak’s analysis and expands it to include the ideas of other Korean critics along with our own.

Mise-en-scène: The Visual Design of the Film

The elements of visual design in the film including the sets, costumes, color palate, and types of camera shots are its *mise-en-scène*. In this section we examine these aesthetic elements in order to understand what they contribute to the story. Following the suggestions of several critics, we analyze its *mise-en-scène* in terms of what this film visually implies about the Buddhist Four

Noble Truths and Dependent Origination theory, particularly as these relate to attachment and karma. We also consider the colors and animals in the film from the perspective of Yin/Yang and the Five Elements theory.

Four Noble Truths

Pak Chongch'ön and Yi Hyoin match the four seasons of the film to the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.³ Accordingly, spring corresponds to childhood and suffering, summer to adolescence and desire. Fall is the time of young adulthood when the monk, the main character, realizes his desires have caused suffering, and winter is that of adulthood when he pursues the path of liberation. While Pak does not suggest doing so, it might also be possible to match the actions of the adult monk to the Eightfold Path. Based on Pak's further analysis, we can also see how Buddhist notions are represented in the *mise-en-scène* of each seasonal segment.

Ch'oe Wönsöp criticizes the film because he believes it only treats the first two of the Four Noble Truths without referencing the latter two (Ch'oe 2013, 349-50). That is, when the film depicts the human condition, it does so through the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering. In contrast, Pak and Yi find all of the Four Noble Truths represented in the film. They analyze these by using the Buddhist concepts of Dependent Origination, which explains the cycles of birth and death, and Buddhist ideas of how to escape from the cycles of birth and death. To the contrary, Ch'oe argues that in the same way that original sin of Christianity might be represented, Kim's film depicts only the human dominion of the six realms of the Wheel of Life without attempting to guide people toward escape from the cycles (Ch'oe 2013, 350-51).

Dependent Origination and the snake

As snakes repeatedly shed their skin, the main character transforms through the seasons. Snakes have long been used as religious symbols across cultures to represent resurrection. Film critics Oh Hyönhwa and Chöng Chaerim analyze the appearance of the snake in each of the four seasons in Kim's film and connect it to the karma and salvation of the main character (Oh and Chöng 2011, 225-26; 231-32). In the spring sequence, the snake vomits blood and dies because the child monk ties a stone to it as part of a cruel game. In summer,

the adolescent watches with curiosity as snakes twist in intercourse, which is connected to the monk's sexual desire. Therefore, the movements of the snake in the first two seasons of the film, spring and summer, indicate striving for survival and abandonment of sexual desire.

The snake's movement in the next two seasons, fall and winter, indicates rebirth and resurrection leading to enlightenment and salvation from suffering. In fall it crawls out of the boat where the master has undertaken self-immolation. Here the snake acts as a manifestation of the master. The boat is the symbolic vehicle of travel from mundane to supra-mundane reality, from defilement to purity, and from ignorance to enlightenment. Likewise, in winter there are only two movements in the frozen temple ground: that of the water seen through a hole in the ice and the snake crawling out of the master's robes.

The snake can also be seen moving in the residence where the now-adult monk practices. When he goes to the main hall to check the face of the woman, the snake moves around in the monastic room. In a sense, a snake can self-create in its repetitious changing of skin, symbolizing birth and restoration. Kim uses this to represent the young monk's shedding of mistakes and continuous restoration of wellbeing after experiences of defilement and suffering. Shedding skin also represents transmigration through the evil realms. Therefore, the snake can be identified with the life changes of the main character. Rebirth and resurrection are also represented by the flexible movement of its body.

Expanding this idea, the symbolism of the snake can be applied not only to the main character but also to the lives of the old master, the woman wearing the muffler, and the boy she leaves behind. Looked at from Yin/Yang and the Five Elements theory, the snake's fire-like tongue can symbolize the two poles of water and fire. The ice in the winter is, in a sense, melted by the tongue of the snake in spring. So, the ascetic practice of the main character starts in the second spring and the temple floats on the lake again.

Yin/Yang and the Five Elements Theory

The Five Element Theory is an ancient Chinese system that conceptualizes the relationships among various phenomena as occurring in accordance to the interactions of five basic elements: earth, fire, wood, metal, and water. Each one of these elements feeds another, e.g., wood feeds fire, and each overcomes

another, e.g., water puts out fire. According to the theory, maintaining a balance among these essential elements is necessary for the health of the environment, the cosmos, and the individual.

As we have seen, the snake and other animals in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* can be analyzed according to the Buddhist doctrines of Dependent Origination and salvation from suffering. But Yin/Yang and the Five Elements theory can also be used to explain these as well as the rhythm of the seasons and the development of the characters (Pak 2006, 300). In fact, the appearance of the elements along with their associated seasons, colors, and animals in the film correspond so well with the plot to imply that Kim Ki-duk intended for viewers to make this connection in some way.

In the systems of Yin/Yang and the Five Elements theory, spring is represented by the element of wood. There is an associated image of a tree that sprouts with life, which is seen as yang energy. In the film, this is tied to the beginning of the karmic cycle, beginning with the act of killing as a careless misdeed of childhood. Summer is represented by the element of fire. During that season, the flames of the monk's desire are fanned by attachment to sexuality. In fall, the main character begins to move from suffering to enlightenment. In the Five Element Theory, metal is the element of fall. Fall is a time when trees are frosted in the silvery color of metal. According to the theory, frost is said to convert the tree's yang energy into the yin energy associated with fruit. Thus it is a time of transformation. In the fall, the master uses the metallic white tail of the cat to write the *Heart Sūtra*, symbolizing the potential transformation of the main character. This is done so that the young monk's despair will turn to enlightenment just as the frost turns the yang energy of the tree to yin energy of the fruit. In the Five Element Theory, winter is represented by the element of water. By becoming empty of desires through practice, the monk moves toward the attainment of freedom from suffering and may find peace. In the same way, winter preserves the energy of yin that transforms a tree's seed into a sprout, also associated with yang energy and the tree's next life. Thereby the cycle of birth and death is renewed.

Likewise, in Yin/Yang Theory there is a different animal that represents each season and that animal can be seen in the film in the corresponding season as shown in Table 1 below. A puppy in the spring sequence and a small turtle in the second spring sequence represent the child-monk's immaturity and foolish actions early in life. The rooster in the film represents the adolescent monk

and symbolizes his sexual desire. This is indicated by the rooster's red color, which further signifies the element of fire. The rooster also conveys feelings of competitiveness and aggression. When the rooster continuously pecks at the food, this symbolizes the intensity of the monk's sexual desire. When he and the girl sleep in the boat after having sex, the master uses the rooster to draw them back to the temple. Afterwards, the girl leaves the temple, followed by the boy, who steals the rooster and the stone Buddha as he goes. After the rooster and the boy leave, the emblems of sexuality, the temple is once again transformed into a sacred space. However, because the stone Buddha is no longer there, the temple does not recover fully. It only does so when the stone Buddha is returned in the fall. Because we see the rooster outside the temple, we can assume that the boy only took the stone Buddha with him to the secular world. This means that he does not completely break his connections with the temple but maintains the possibility of returning.

In the fall sequence, the old master goes out to beg for food in the city and brings back a cat. The cat is identified with the young adult monk in the fall. As stated above, fall is the season of transition from the yang to yin energy, which reflects the transition from suffering to enlightenment. Writing the *Heart Sūtra* with the tail of the white cat, identified with metal, can indicate transformation from despair to the hope of enlightenment. We should note that this is not the message of the *Heart Sūtra* but instead corresponds to other traditional tales of Korea.

A possibility is that Kim is referencing the legendary white tiger in Korean folklore, a protector of the east according to Chinese four directions geomancy and Five Elements Theory. As a guardian, the white tiger has the ability to devour evil influences, an important attribute at this point in the film.⁴ There are also legends that say a cat saved King Sejo (r. 1455–68), who was a dedicated Buddhist, from assassination and there is a uniquely painted white tiger outside Samsōnggak hall at Kyemyōng'am Buddhist temple in Pusan.⁵ Such legends and images regard cats as symbolically indicating protection and salvation. In the film, the cat roams around the main hall of the temple where the Buddha image is enshrined. This implies that the young monk is being protected against further violations of the precepts.

Through the cat, the master attempts to save the younger monk who is obsessed with defilement and suffering. Because of this, the cat may be seen as a substitute for the stone Buddha. The young monk reenters the Buddhist path through the cat and the teachings of the master, rather than the Buddha.

Unlike when the master wrote the Buddhist scripture with water during the summer, this time he uses the cat's tail to write the *Heart Sūtra* with ink. He instructs the young monk to carve those inked characters into the wooden veranda to rid himself of anger. In this way, carving is the means to cure his anger and the way to salvation from suffering.

In the Five Elements Theory, winter is represented by the element of water, the color of which is black. As we have seen, the adult monk is identified with the snake in winter. The dark color of the snake symbolizes the potential for transferring wisdom from master to disciple.

Non-duality

Kim Ki-duk provides the viewer with a montage of scenes that juxtaposes bondage and liberation. For example, in the winter sequence, the now-grown monk trains his body through martial arts. He also climbs a mountain while carrying an image of Pensive Maitreya Bodhisattva and dragging a grinding stone. The asceticism exemplified in physical training contrasts with the elevation of spirituality symbolized in climbing the mountain. This is because the hardship he experiences in climbing the mountain is prerequisite to the attainment of the higher state, a vantage point from where he can observe the lower realm in which he formerly existed. That is to say, the repetitious exercise and the bondage to ascetic practice elevate him to the higher position. We should also notice that these scenes are filled with freeze frame images that serve to maximize the paradoxes in the montage. After dragging the grinding stone to the top of the mountain, the adult monk, significantly portrayed by Kim Ki-duk himself, forms a prayer gesture mudra. This is an example of the use of *mimesis* in the film in that it mirrors the attitude of the statue of Maitreya.

The following six examples are provided to show how Kim Ki-duk expresses non-duality through the film's *mise-en-scène*.

1. When the child monk of spring tortures the animals, the old master looks over from above.
2. When the adolescent monk of summer is awakened to sexual desire and expresses this with the girl, the master gives food to the rooster, which symbolizes the adolescents and their sexual desires.
3. When the young man of fall suffers in desperation, the master writes the

Heart Sūtra with the tail of the white cat, symbolizing youth.

4. The temple on the lake symbolizes nature, just as the lotus flower of enlightenment is said to have bloomed in the mundane world. The change of the seasons and the movement of the temple based on the wind and time, reflects diversity of the spatial *mise-en-scène*.
5. The film uses the scenery of the lake which naturally changes over time and the flow of the water to indicate changes in the monk
6. The knife also serves in various seemingly contradictory ways in the film. It is used to kill, and after, to work toward enlightenment. In the fall, the young monk, after leaving monastic life, uses the knife to kill his former wife, and then to shave his head upon returning to the temple, and finally to carve the *Heart Sūtra*. The minds of sentient beings that are defiled by cravings and killing are non-dual with the enlightened mind of the Buddha. This representation is the climax of non-dual *mise-en-scène* in the film.

Because the master dies in the winter, there is no paradoxical *mise-en-scène* represented in that season.

Table 1] adopted from Pak Chongch'ŏn, rearranged and expanded⁶

<i>Mise-en-scène</i>					Philosophical Content				
Season	Age	Animal	Color	Symbolic use of the snake	Theme	Noble Truth	Dependent Origination	Yin/Yang	Five Elements
Spring	Childhood	Puppy	(Blue)	Bound by a rock, bleeding	Playing/killing: beginning of karma	First: Suffering	Entering the cycle of birth and death	Yang	Wood
Summer	Adolescence	Rooster	Red	Intertwined in intercourse	Desire, attachment, paradox of sexual desire	Second: Cause of suffering: attachment	Continuing the cycle of birth and death	Yang	Fire
Fall	Young adulthood	Cat	White	Crawling from the boat	Desperate suffering, transformation of the knife	Third: Cessation of suffering	Removing the cycle of birth and death	Yin	Metal
Winter	Adulthood	Snake	Black	In the master's robes	Emptying, peace, practice, liberation	Fourth: (Eight) Paths to remove suffering	Countering the cycle of birth and death	Yin	Water
Spring	Childhood	Turtle (longevity)	(Blue)		Restarting life	First: Suffering	Reincarnation	Yang	Wood

Diegesis: The Narrative World of the Film

The rules of space in the film including the temple, characteristics of the location, and the places where the events occur or develop are its *diegesis* (Pak 2006, 305–7). *Diegesis* is a theatrical term contrasted with *mimesis* by Socrates in the third book of the *Republic* (c. 373 BCE) and later applied to film theory by numerous modern critics. It is the narrative forming the artificial and fictive world of the story. *Mise-en-scène* appears in the same frames as these elements, for example, in the lighting, clothing, movement, angles of the cameras and, as we have seen, the colors and animals. In contrast, the lake, the floating temple, and its gate serve as the central elements of *diegesis* in the film.

The Lake, Floating Temple, and Gate

In thinking about *diegesis*, it is important to note that Kim Ki-duk had the temple built for the film along with the gate. These serve as the psychological and imaginary space for the film. Kim also had the Buddhist images painted on the gates, the boat, and the temple. None of these were preexisting Buddhist structures that happen to appear as part of a scene, but were intentionally designed for certain effects. These elements, including the lake, remain today as tourist attractions for the area where it was filmed.⁷

In the first scene that introduces each season, the main gate opens. From the gate-framed opening, the mountains, lake, and temple are used as *diegesis*. When the gate is opened, Kim uses a long shot. The shot moves closer to the lake and closer again to the temple. This sequence of shots represents the change of seasons and changes in the life of the main character. The film is holistic or non-dualistic in connecting the changes in nature and the changes in life. It goes from the universal (nature) to the particular (the life of the monk), and connects these as one organic unit. Similar sequences also connect the seasons and explain the causes and results of existential suffering, as well as how it can be overcome.

The floating temple is, of course, unlike a general Korean Buddhist temple found on land. Both the arising and the destruction of karmic deeds, as well as the accompanying cycles of rebirth are indicated by the movement of the temple in the water throughout the seasons. Only after the old master dies in the fall does the temple become frozen and fixed in the winter. At that

time, the adult monk practices martial arts and cultivates his mind in order to achieve complete salvation from suffering. The attempts of the monk to melt the temple from the ice can also be interpreted as a part of the *diegesis*. First, the monk breaks the ice of the boat, takes out the old master's relics and puts them into the ice Buddha image, wrapping them in red paper. In Buddhist iconography, the Buddha has a mark on his forehead called the *ūrṇā*. The *ūrṇā* indicates wisdom and the third eye that sees beyond the mundane world. The relic of the old master becomes a substitute for the third eye of the Buddha. This indicates self-reflection and the opening of one's own mind, not salvation through a belief in a transcendental being such as God.

In these ways, the *diegesis* of the film, its location and physical structures indicate the mind and the world. The temple, mountains, and the lake depicted in the film signify the internal lives of human beings in terms of the world, the mind, and the nation. The natural events of each season can be seen as occurrences among characters and also can be viewed as the internal world of each character. The lake in the film is the mind. It reflects the surrounding mountains and the temple floating in it. The continual changes of the seasons symbolize the mind's reaction to external objects, sometimes turbulent and sometimes serene. The temple floating in the lake of the mind symbolizes the possibilities of enlightenment therein. The image of the Buddha enshrined in the temple reveals the exact characteristics of this possibility for enlightenment.

The young monk's guilt from committing misdeeds begins outside of the borderline of the lake, represented by the front gate. This guilt moves into the lake (his mind). When the child kills the animals as part of a game he is playing in spring, and when in young adulthood he engages in sexual relations in the summer, these acts take place outside of the lake and outside the gate. These are depicted as occurring outside the border of the lake because they happen due to lack of control of the mind. For the same reason, the young man, after departing monastic life, kills his wife outside the boundaries of the lake, although this is not shown in the film. The guilt from all of these misdeeds arose from the desire to be oriented outwardly as opposed to inwardly. One of the most important themes in the film is represented by the old master who symbolizes the nature of enlightenment and who is living alone without being distracted by the affairs of the outer world. The monk as a child in the spring, an adolescent in the summer, and a young man in the fall commits misdeeds in all of these seasons of his life because he is living outside of the way of his master.

To remove the feeling of guilt and the defilement accrued by his misconduct, the monk returns to the protection and guidance of the old master in fall, because when he was a child of spring, he did not have these problems under the master. His effort to become enlightened is also indicated by wearing the robes left behind by his master in winter.

The mountain too serves as a part of this *diegesis*. Climbing the mountain, beginning from the temple in the lake, indicates that we should elevate our minds to the transcendent realm, rather than directing it toward the movement of defilement. The practice of martial arts by the adult in the winter should be understood as preparation to elevate himself to the top of the mountain. When he arrives at the top of the mountain, he looks out over the world including the lake and the area surrounding the lake. From the time he completes his practice, he has the same view of the world as the Maitreya Buddha image he carried to the top, which symbolizes enlightenment. The change from long shot to close-up may symbolize the internal concentration and transcendent completion of the mind. The gate, serving as the borderline between the mundane and sanctified realms of the world, is also the border between the inside and the outside mind. As found in general Korean temples, the Vajra warrior drawn on the surface of the gate is seen from the outside of the lake. The warriors guard against external influences and keep those influences from moving into the mind. Images of a beautiful heavenly maiden are drawn on the other side of the gate and can be seen from the inside of the lake. Traditional Korean temples have several gates that visitors pass through: the main gate, the Vajra warrior gate, the gate of the four heavenly kings, the courtyard, and the main hall. The contrast between the Vajra warriors and the soft heavenly maidens expresses the non-dual world of inside and outside, like the two sides of a coin and the two wings of a bird.

The *mise-en-scène* of the lotus flower appears as part of the *diegesis* of the film. The bottom portion of the floating temple is decorated with lotus flowers that go down beneath the water as if growing from the bottom like a real lotus flower. This means that the temple is floating on lotus flowers, that it is a lotus flower, or that it is born from a lotus flower like Padmasambhava, the legendary lotus-born teacher of Tibetan Buddhism. The boat that commutes between the internal and external worlds over the lake is also painted with lotus flowers. On one side of the boat, a child is drawn on top of a lotus flower that is blooming from the palm of the bodhisattva Padmapāṇi (literally, Holder

of the Lotus), also like Padmasaṃbhava. In Buddhist iconography, generally the lotus is a symbol of purity and compassion. Along with the Vajra, it represents one of the two most important concepts in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Vajra is wisdom and the lotus is compassion. In the film, these symbols of the lotus indicate everything happened between the inside and outside of the lake or mind. Compassion is an apt feeling we should have toward the secular world. This is because according to Buddhism, the feeling of guilt and performance of evil deeds, obsession with defilement and delusion in the mind of sentient beings should not be separated from the world of the enlightenment of the Buddha. Looked at in this way, the prominent references to the *Heart Sūtra* in the film are also appropriate since its main theme is non-duality and its main speaker is the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara.

Lake, Island, and Orphan as Metaphor for Buddhist Adoptive Society

We would like to offer a theory about Buddhist adoptive society in relationship to *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*. Japanese Buddhist scholar Sasaki Shizuka is an expert on the *vinaya*, the Buddhist monastic regulatory framework.⁸ We can apply his explanation of the relationship between monastics and lay society to Kim's film. This is especially helpful for interpreting the lake and temple, the relationship between the older and younger monk, and the relationship between the young monk and secular society. According to Sasaki, Buddhist monasticism is like an island that is not fixed in one place but moves about, like the temple on the lake in the film (Sasaki 1999). Sasaki symbolizes laypersons as an ocean that is not separate from the monastic island that floats in it. Therefore, in his model there is no need for a boat to connect the two groups unlike how this is represented in Kim Ki-duk's film, in which a boat is needed for this. Because monastics cannot produce their own members, they must rely on a continuous influx from lay society. He argues that because monastics are not economically self-sufficient, they should rely on lay society's conventions and build a reputation accordingly in order to gain support. Throughout Buddhist history, the monastery is supported by secular society from which it receives new members, mostly orphaned children, as in this movie. Sasaki also argues that it is monastics' objective to educate lay society and that society is the reservoir from which monk candidates are drawn. Thus, although the monastery and lay society look separate, they are interconnected.

In the closing part of Kim's film, a baby is brought to the temple and left behind by a woman with a veiled face. The adult monk might consider this orphaned infant, who is later dressed as a monk, to be his own son in his adopted society. If the new relationship between the child monk and the adult monk can be viewed as the relationship between a son and father, the deceased senior monk can be interpreted as the grandfather. Throughout the four seasons the three figures can be seemed as a continuation of the monastic lineage, just as a grandson, father, and grandfather make up the East Asian family lineage according to Confucianism.

In the final spring sequence of the film, after the grandfather figure has passed away, the father takes in a new member from lay society and makes him his figurative and practical adoptive son. This means that Confucianism can be added to the list of religious and philosophical traditions touched upon in this movie. As well documented in major Chinese Chan/Zen monastic regulation texts, Chinese and Chinese-derived monasteries are traditionally organized according to Confucian conventions.⁹ Although Gregory Schopen has shown that Indian monastic Buddhists maintained family relationships and also accepted its members from lay society, Chinese Buddhism became much more hierarchical, patriarchal, and family oriented than Indian Buddhist monasteries.¹⁰

In the context of the adoptive monastic family, Oh and Chōng suggest that the reason the adult monk so desperately wants to see the face of the mother of the newly orphaned monk in winter, may be that he suspects her of being a past lover (Oh and Chōng 2011, 230). However, the implication that the child is his is implausible since we know he returned to the temple in anguish shortly after killing his wife. Likewise, the number of years that seem to have passed does not match the age of the child. We should notice instead that the scene depicting the adult monk's attempt to look at the sleeping woman's concealed face directly parallels the scene in which the adolescent monk touches the sleeping girl's breast in summer. As we have explored above, the film is replete with such parallel scenes that present opposite but interrelated scenarios based on ignorance and enlightenment. The key to understanding the opposites in this case might be the door without walls inside the temple, which likely puzzles most viewers. The adolescent monk does not use the door when the girl is in the monastery in summer. In fact, he actually crawls over the master to get to her, an easily understood metaphor. Later, when the monk is an adult in winter and the woman brings the new child to the monastery, he uses the door

when he wants to look at her face. What is different is that the adult monk has learned propriety. There is no hint of lust in his desire to see her face as there was in the parallel scene. Instead, the adult monk's interest is likely related to the adoptive society of the monastery. Since he is to become the Confucian father, it is natural that he wants to know about the mother.

Mimesis: Symbolic or Ritual Action in the Film

Although *mimesis* is an elusive term with a wide range of uses, for the purposes of our analysis it refers to the symbolic actions of the main character that are artistic presentations or imitations of important processes in his personal development toward enlightenment. Pak analyzes some of these in each of the four seasons, referring to them as “charades” because they act out concepts such as karma. He also says that these are repetitious ritualistic gestures. The following is a list of examples he gives where this type of *mimesis* appears in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (Pak 2006, 309–12).

1. In the spring sequence, the repetitious actions of the child monk holding animals and tying stones to their bodies imitate the bondage of karma and the heavy weight of guilt that clings to his own body. This is repeated and confirmed when the old monk likewise ties a rock to the young monk's back.
2. In the summer sequence, the young adult's desires and acts of sex, as particularly illustrated by the young monk carrying the girl on his back, serve like the rock on his back in the spring as symbolic imitations of attachment and resulting suffering.
3. In the fall sequence, we see the young man shaving his head using the knife and carving the *Heart Sūtra* with the same knife, which symbolizes his evil deed of killing with that knife and the resulting guilt and defilement.
4. In the winter sequence, the adult binds himself with the grinding stone like his master had done to him when he was a child. With this, he undertakes austerities toward becoming enlightened. Dragging the stone is a ritual gesture indicating working to overcome obstructions and suffering to attain peace.

Perhaps the most important set of ritualistic gestures occurs during the winter

sequence when the main character is portrayed by the director himself. This includes climbing the mountain while dragging the grinding stone as he holds a Buddha image to his chest. The burden of karma is tied to his waist represented by the grinding stone. Its weight is endured in the mountain climb toward enlightenment. *Mimetically*, he touches the ground of the mundane world with his steps and looks up to the ideal world of the sky. The possibility of enlightenment is indicated in that he holds the Maitreya image to his chest. In Buddhist iconography, Maitreya is the future Buddha, the one who will next attain enlightenment and, out of compassion for all beings, teaches the people of the world how to overcome their own suffering. Likely, Kim chooses this Buddhist image because it symbolizes both the adult monk's future enlightenment and his return to the temple to help the next generation. The particular representation in the statue he carries depicts Maitreya in the thinking pose. Maitreya is contemplating the best way to save all sentient beings from suffering and the best time to do so. Known as "Pensive Maitreya," this form of the future Buddha is deeply imbedded in Korean art history.

Collectively, here as elsewhere in the film, these examples of *mimesis* indicate the non-duality that exists between enlightenment (Buddha) and defilement (sentient beings including the monk). According to this idea, even the monk's act of committing a crime can be interpreted as containing the possibility of being elevated to enlightenment. In the film, this is illustrated through *mimesis* when, for example, in the summer the young monk departs from the lake (mind), he takes with him from the realm of enlightenment to the mundane world the red rooster, symbolizing desire. But he also takes the stone Buddha from the temple, symbolizing that he carries the essence of enlightenment to be realized in the future. While this combination, the rooster and Maitreya Buddha, appears paradoxical and is likely to puzzle the audience, the key to understanding it lies in Kim's use of *mimesis* and non-duality. Again, in the winter sequence the monk's action of returning to the temple for enlightenment contrasts with that of the summer sequence. These contradictory scenes represent the interconnection and non-duality of Buddha and sentient beings. The montage of scenes that show such contrasts through ritualistic gestures indicates the main character's attempt to recover the realization of his own Buddha Nature by working off his karmic debt. Similarly, the *mimetic* scene of the young man's failed attempt at suicide contrasts with that of the master's self-immolation, representing ignorance and

enlightenment respectively.

We should also mention that the scene of the tied and hanging monk that occurs after he returns to the temple after having killed his wife, is an example of *mimesis*. This is a striking scene depicting the monk as tied by ropes, hanging from the ceiling, beaten by the master, and held over a candle that is burning through the rope. We could not find a reviewer in any language that touched on this scene, although it is perhaps the most graphic in the film and one likely to stick in the minds of the viewers. It is our opinion that this image depicts the human condition from a Jain perspective. A Buddhist view of defilement and suffering would allow for salvation in this lifetime or beyond. In contrast, Jainism has various depictions of the human condition with no escape from suffering. One such depiction shows a man who has fallen in a well, holding on to life by a small vine that is being eaten away by a white and a black mouse, symbolizing his days and nights. Below him is a brood of poisonous snakes and above is an angry elephant that slams into a tree, causing a hive of bees to fall on the man in the well and is continually stinging him. This story appears in both Buddhism and Jainism. From the Buddhist perspective, one can attain salvation from suffering by following the Eightfold Path. If Kim's view of the human condition is that there is no way to escape suffering, as it appears to be in the film, then indeed we should say that at least up to this point, he deals only with the first two of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and not the last two, that there is a way to overcome suffering and what that method is.

Mimetic Indicators of the Three Vehicles and Their Three Types of Renunciation

Kwōn Sōnghun analyzes *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* from the perspective of salvation and renunciation (2015, 48–61). He categorizes renunciation into three types: physical renunciation, five aggregates renunciation, and Dharma Realm renunciation. Accordingly, each of these respectively indicates a path of renunciation of one of the Three Vehicles or three kinds of teachings in Buddhism as found in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Physical renunciation symbolizes the way of the *śrāvaka* (hearers), the early disciples of the Buddha who heard his words directly. Five aggregates renunciation symbolizes the path of the pratyekabuddha or solitary realizers, those who seek enlightenment on their own, without the help of a teacher. Dharma Realm

renunciation symbolizes the path of the bodhisattvas.¹¹

According to this analysis, the main character in the film goes through each of these types of renunciation as stages in his development toward salvation. That is to say, the film depicts an increasingly greater levels of Buddhist practice and attainment as the director sees it. This is based on a Mahāyāna perspective as found in the *Lotus Sūtra* and elsewhere, that the Buddha taught an incomplete message at first to the hearers, later adding more for the solitary realizers, and delivering his final and complete message to bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna vehicle of salvation from suffering. This complete message is allegedly recorded in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, and perhaps the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the latter of which is the source for the *Heart Sūtra*, which appears in the film.

In this scheme, the child monk in the film represents physical renunciation. It is reasonable to assume that the child is an orphan abandoned by his parents. This is supported by the fact that it is the main reason young children become monks in Korea historically, although Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism no longer allows child ordination. Because there were no orphanages in Korea traditionally, monasteries acted in this capacity. We also know that the other young monk who appears in the final spring sequence is an orphan and that this sequence mirrors that of the first spring sequence. Spring generally symbolizes the beginning of life. Likewise, spring in this film indicates this but also is the season when karma from evil actions begins. The snake that died is a symbol of creating karma. In addition, the sexual intertwining of the snakes in the first scene of the summer symbolizes the development of the young monk and his desires that will grow as he reaches adulthood.

In terms of the second type of renunciation, related to the solitary realizers, in the fall, the main character kills his wife who committed adultery. His return to the temple corresponds to the second type of renunciation. Afterward, his master asks him to carve the *Heart Sūtra*, which he has written with the tail of a white cat. In this analysis, the white cat indicates the realm of animals in the Buddhist Wheel of Life. According to Buddhism, beings are destined to transmigrate among the six realms. This is sometimes interpreted as places of karmic retribution visited after death and sometimes interpreted as psychological states experienced during life, also due to karmic retribution. The iconography of the Wheel of Life depicts those in the animal realm as experiencing much suffering and few pleasures, as concentrating more

on appetites and sexual desires and less on ethics toward family members and others. Those in the animal realm are in constant competition, fighting among one another, and living in a state of perpetual fear. Because the young monk committed misdeeds, he lives as if in the animal realm. So, the master asks him to subdue his anger by carving out the words that were written using the tail of the cat. The master also educates the wrongdoer by having him carve the *Heart Sūtra*, which says, “Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deep Perfection of Wisdom, realized the five aggregates are empty, and thereby passed beyond suffering.” According to Buddhism, all people are made up of a combination of five psycho-physical elements and nothing else. These five aggregates are material form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness. The *Heart Sūtra* encourages us to realize that all of these are empty of independent existence and only exist in relationship with one another. For example, a person’s state of mind or idea of individual selfhood is not an ultimate condition but is ever-changing depending on other factors. Reflecting this view, the *Heart Sūtra* says, “There is no ignorance and no annihilation of ignorance.” Therefore, the depiction of this stage in the monk’s life when he is shown carving the *Heart Sūtra* on the deck of the temple is *mimesis* symbolizing his renunciation of the five aggregates.

In addition and also to indicate that the sense organs are equally empty, the *Heart Sūtra* says, “No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind; and no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, or object of the mind.” This aspect of renunciation of the five aggregates is reflected in the *mimetic* act of the master after the main character is arrested and taken away. The master piles wood on the boat, closes his nose, eyes, ears, and mouth with paper which has the sinograph for “shut” written on it, and immolates himself. Previously the younger monk attempted suicide in what appears to be a similar way, but failed. Although the young man closed his eyes, nose, and mouth with paper that bore the graph for “shut,” he did not cover his ears with the paper as the master later did. The master’s paper shows that he had closed relations with the mundane world and transcended to enlightenment. However, the younger man did not close his ears because he still had attachment to and desires in the mundane world. The young man also needed to receive the final teachings of his master through his ears. The young man could not block his ears because he could not eliminate his karma by killing himself. That being the case, he needed to pay attention to the sound of enlightenment and then make an effort to attain it through purification, which

would require his final renunciation.

The third type of renunciation is that of the Dharma Realm which symbolizes the Bodhisattva vehicle. However, unlike Im Kwon-taek's (b. 1936) characters in *Mandala* (1981) and *Ajeaje paraaje* (1989), who seek enlightenment while helping others, according to Kwōn, Kim Ki-duk does not include the third type in his film or the type of renunciation associated with it. Instead, Kim's main character only seeks his own enlightenment.¹² In Kim's movie the main character carves the image of Buddha from ice, practices martial arts, and climbs the mountain while holding the Maitreya image, all indicating the second type of renunciation.

While we generally agree with Kwōn, one possibility he did not consider is that the monk might finally engage in bodhisattva practice by committing to raising the new child monk in the final spring sequence. If so, the audience does not see this acted out in the film, except by the old monk earlier in the film. However, Yi Hyoin criticizes the last scene that introduces the new child monk, seeing it instead as indicating nihilistic tones that are contrary to Mahāyāna Buddhism. In addition, Yi feels that the beautiful *mise-en-scène* and unrealistic settings in Kim's film is like that of a western fable (Yi 2008, 427–28). He critiques this presentation as a simplistic black and white kind of logic that is not an accurate picture of the human condition.

[Table 2] Examples of *mimesis* and its interpretations

Time period		Mimetic Gesture		Buddhist idea indicated	
Season	Age	Ritual action related to the knife	Ritual action related to the stone	Type of Renunciation	Buddhist Vehicle
Spring	Childhood	Karma from violence and sexual desire, feelings of guilt	Stone tied to snake; stone tied to boy: bondage of karma	Physical elements	Hearers
Summer	Adolescence	Kills wife	Monk carries girl on his back: sexual bondage	Five aggregates	Solitary Realizers
Fall	Young adulthood	Tonsure; Carves <i>Heart Sūtra</i>	Return to temple carrying Buddha image	Transformation to next stage	Transformation to next stage
Winter	Adulthood	Carves Buddha in ice	Climbs mountain dragging grinding stone, carrying Maitreya Buddha statue: austerities toward enlightenment	(Dharma Realm)	(Bodhisattvas)
Spring	Childhood				(possibly Bodhisattvas)

Conclusions

If *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* is to be considered a film portraying Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas, Kim Ki-duk should have depicted in it the main character as going through stages from that of the hearers to the solitary realizers and the bodhisattvas, as Kwŏn suggests. Because Kim introduces only the first and second types of renunciation, the message of his film contrast with those of Im Kwon-taek that portray all of the three kinds of renunciation. Also, unlike Im, Kim seems to rely on his own feelings and sensibilities, for example, in portraying what he sees as the human condition. In contrast, Im takes the storyline of both *Mandala* and *Ajeaje paraaje* from famous Buddhist novels, the former by the ex-monk Kim Sŏngtong (b. 1947) and the latter by the famous novelist Han Sŏngwŏn (b. 1939). Likewise, these films by Im suggest ways to overcome *saṃsāra*, the cycles of rebirth implied in the title of Kim's film.

But some critics, including Yi Tongchin and Hwang Yŏngmi, suggest that Kim's conceptual model has more in kin with Christian original sin than Buddhist enlightenment.¹³ For this and other reasons, they argue that while Kim adopts the Buddhist concept of reincarnation along with images representing that model, thematically it cannot be called a Buddhist film.¹⁴ It can generally be said that what qualifies as part of the recognized genre of a "Buddhist film" in Korea are those that display predominately Buddhist images and/or themes that can be directly identified as representing Buddhist doctrine. We have shown above how such doctrine can be seen as present in the film's mise-en-scène, diegesis, and mimesis. However, we do not feel that Buddhism is the only philosophy present in the film, but a number of other traditions are there as well. We have already mentioned Yin/Yang philosophy and Confucianism, and possibly Jainism. We will conclude with a summary of some other traditions pointed to by researchers about *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*.

If Yi and Hwang's views are accepted, the recurrence of defilement that interests Kim in the film corresponds to the Christian concept of original sin rather than Buddhist *kleśa*, afflictions that generally can be overcome by one's own efforts. According to this view, we can see differences between the Buddhist images in the film and its underlying themes. This occurs, for example, when the novice monk is tying a stone to the frog and the *Heart*

Sūtra is being chanted in the background in the film. While Kim uses the chanting for the effect the sound has on the audience, the message of the *Heart Sūtra*, contrary to the film's storyline, negates suffering in *saṃsāra* (the cycles of rebirth) for the non-dual view that there is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Kim seems to use the *Heart Sūtra* in his film for calming the main character, not to lead him to escape from the cycles of rebirth. Accordingly, the reoccurring stone in the film is seen as representing original sin. While the master also ties a stone to the boy's back to teach him a lesson, its reappearance suggests that it is permanent. Seen from this perspective, it is even shocking to propose that some elements in the film are Buddhist, such as the master's suggestion that sex was the right medicine for healing the girl.

In an interview, Kim said, "I have always been religious and so have my films, even from my very first one, *Crocodile* (K. *Agō*, released in 1996)." He went on to say, "Although I don't believe in a lot of practices of traditional Christian doctrine, I sometimes read and recite Christian credos." Citing the abovementioned sentences, the film critic Chōng Sōngil mentions that Kim's ambiguous religious identity is strongly present in his films and Kim's films are best interpreted from the perspective of religion in general rather than Buddhism specifically.¹⁵ Similarly, Pak Chongch'ōn argues that Kim's film might represent both Christianity and Buddhism simultaneously but also neither Christianity nor Buddhism (Pak 2006, 296). All of these perspectives have been applied to the analysis of *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* by various film critics.

Although Yi Tongchin and Hwang Yōngmi interpret religion in Kim's films from Christian perspectives (Hwang 2003, 263–7), Kim Hoyōng and Cho Chōnglāe regard them to be Buddhist films.¹⁶ If *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* is analyzed from a Buddhist perspective, it is likely to be connected with the doctrines of *saṃsāra* and the Four Noble Truths. But, if it is viewed from a Christian perspective it might be found that the doctrine of original sin is represented as repeating throughout a single lifetime through feelings of guilt. Christians seek salvation from the problem of evil and guilt through Jesus Christ, transcendently. Generally, in Buddhism one seeks salvation from suffering by his or her own efforts. Some suggest that the plot of the film revolves around the notion of predestination from a Christian perspective rather than karma and rebirth from a Buddhist point of view.

Oh Hyōnhwa and Chōng Chaerim write, "Kim Ki-duk seems to develop

his theme through the narrative of symbolic *mise-en-scène*, not based on sophisticated story development” (Oh and Chŏng 2011, 221). According to their analysis, his film can be interpreted both from the perspective of Christian consciousness of original sin and from a Buddhist view of reincarnation, because the film discusses the concept of sin and salvation from a universal viewpoint. However, Yi Tongchin and Hwang Yŏngmi connect the misdeeds of the child, who is not fully responsible, to a Christian worldview of original sin.

Ch'oe Wŏnsŏp analyzes the two areas in Kim's film, this shore and the other shore, between which the boat is the medium of transportation (Ch'oe 2013, 345–51). He points out that the people living in the temple, which presumably symbolizes the other shore of enlightenment, have defilements and are living in the cycles of rebirth. According to Buddhism, the people living on the other shore should represent idealism, enlightenment, and be free of transgressions. Because Kim's film outlines the transmigration of sentient beings in the cycles of birth and death, Ch'oe believes we can categorize it as a “Buddhist film.” Even so, he argues that because it does not have a clear Buddhist objective and is incomplete doctrinally, it might be problematic to categorize it in this way.

Kim also said in an interview about this film, “People commit sins in their minds during their childhood and youth. In that, they are feeling guilty as human beings, not in connection to social crimes. I made this film to say that any person can be seen as having committed these sins. I attempted to show that having feelings of guilt is not simply feeling guilty, but it is to be human. I wanted to describe human lives, more than to explain the Buddhist doctrine of birth and death, through the metaphor of the four seasons. This is universal to humans, not particular to the life of me, Kim Ki-duk, only.”¹⁷ According to this, Kim's films are unique in that they may represent his own understanding of Christian ideas through Buddhist sources and images. This could be why *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* does not explain or include Buddhist soteriology. From a Buddhist perspective, this makes Kim's film incomplete.

Notes

- 1 A few of the many examples of the use of this film can be found in online syllabi including those for Classic Buddhist Texts taught by Joshua Schapiro in Theology at Fordham University, https://www.academia.edu/1737522/Classic_Buddhist_Texts_Syllabus_and_Exercises; World Religions and Cultures in Cinema taught by Maria Jaoudi of Humanities and Religious Studies at California State University, Sacramento, <https://www.csus.edu/hum/program%20syllabi/Fall%202017%20Syllabi/jaoudi-hrs183-fa17.pdf>; an honors course in Buddhism and Film co-taught by Mario Poceski (Religion) and Ying Xiao (Languages, Literature, and Culture) at the University of Florida, <https://religion.ufl.edu/files/Buddhism-and-Film-Syllabus.pdf>; and Film and Culture in Asia taught by Steven Parish in Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego, <https://quote.ucsd.edu/southasia/files/2018/09/ANSC-166-Film-and-Culture-in-Asia-Syllabus-2018.pdf>.
- 2 These include Cho (2015, 22–40); Sofair (2005); King (2016); and Suh (2015).
- 3 See Pak (2006, 299) and Yi (2008, 425–26).
- 4 This image appears in Korean arts over the ages. See https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/rgIC_exZf_u-JA.
- 5 See Ch'oe (1996, 391–94), cited in footnote # 19 in Oh and Ch'ong (2011, 228).
- 6 Bak, 301.
- 7 The artificial Buddhist hall built by Kim Ki-duk is in the Chusan Reservoir, which was constructed between 1720 and 1721 on Mt. Chuwang in Ch'öngsong, North Kyöngsang Province.
- 8 See Sasaki Shizuka (1999).
- 9 See Yifa's *The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Chanyuan qinggui* for the English translation of Zongze's (d. 1107?) *Chanyuan qinggui* and Shohei Ichimura's *The Baizhang Zen Monastic Regulations* and the English translation of Dehui's (d.u.) *Chixiu Baizhang qinggui*, both of which have served as the two major Chan regulation texts in East Asian Buddhism.
- 10 See "Chapter III, Filial Piety and the Monk in the Practice of Indian Buddhism: A Question of "Sinicization" Viewed from the Other Side" in Schopen (1997, 56–71).
- 11 Historically, there were two major interpretations of the number of vehicles in this parable in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The Four Vehicle Theory was advocated by Guangzhai Fayun (467–529) who claimed that in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha ultimately provides a fourth vehicle that subsumes and surpasses the other three vehicles. This theory was opposed by Three Vehicles theorists in China, who claimed that the vehicle the Buddha ultimately provided was indeed the third vehicle, that corresponded to the Bodhisattva Path, which was Mahāyāna Buddhism in contrast to the first two vehicles. For a full discussion of this, see Matsumoto (1996, 388–406).
- 12 Kwön, 60–61.

- 13 See footnote # 12 in Pak (2003, 297) and footnotes # 14 and # 15 in Oh and Chŏng (2011, 222).
- 14 The idea of a “Buddhist film” has been examined in some depth by Whalen-Bridge (2014), Chŏng (2015, 9–39), and Sin (2015, 97–119). Our use of the term here refers to the established genre widely recognized by Korean film critics and Korean Buddhist scholars.
- 15 Chŏng (2003, 396) as cited in Pak (2006, 296).
- 16 See Pak (2006, 297, n. 12) and Oh and Chŏng (2011, 222, n. 14–15).
- 17 See the August 27, 2003 issue of Kino, cited in Pak (2006, 297, n. 14).

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