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Beginning, Middle & Zen:  
Tales from Canada to Korea  
and Back Again

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Glen Shakwon Choi, *Beginning, Middle & Zen: Tales from Canada to Korea and Back Again*. Nepean, Ontario: The Sumeru Press Inc., 2018. 193 pp. CAN \$29.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-896559-37-7

Glen Shakwon Choi's *Beginning, Middle & Zen* skillfully uses one of the best narrative strategies from the life writing genre—a first person voice that is as complex as it is sincere—to provide an endearing portrayal of his life's challenges while reflecting on Buddhist practices. Except for flashbacks to his childhood, Choi's memoir is written in mostly chronological fashion, beginning with the discovery of his dual Korean Canadian citizenship at the age of 29 and ending more than a decade later with his established career as a professor at Toronto's Seneca College. As Choi's title suggests, much occurs in the "middle," including his move to Korea where he studied the Korean language as well as opera and lived at a Buddhist monastery. While the word "middle" has its own significance in Buddhist practices, most notably as the path to be pursued, Choi's "middle," taken in the narrative sense, is comprised of challenges—both personal and professional—that shape his worldview. This combination of life writing with religious reflections poses interesting questions about genre and modern depictions of Buddhist practices: What role does a literary constructed self play in documentations of Buddhism? How can literary elements, such as narration and setting, shape modern understandings of Buddhism?

Despite being an academic, Choi's text is predominantly a collection of stories about experiencing the quotidian, from finding the right career path to balancing cultural backgrounds to managing parental relationships. This everyday approach not only provides a cozy, comforting read, but it also makes *Beginning, Middle & Zen* very accessible to non-academic audiences, even those who are curious about Buddhism but may not have formally practiced it. Additionally, the text does not include

overly theoretical investigations into Buddhist philosophy or practices, nor does it take on a pedagogical voice of instructing others' practices. In fact, Choi's narration only includes direct references to Buddhism as it relates to particular moments of the lived experience, such as memories of his mother telling the story of Shim-Chung who sacrificed herself to heal her father's blindness or describing his routine at a Korean monastery, providing a pragmatic, realistic approach to writing about Buddhist practice. True to the life writing genre, Choi focuses in on the self and how it is transformed through both life milestones, such as earning one's PhD, and everyday sensations, including spending time with one's pet. To this end, *Beginning, Middle & Zen* may also appeal to those working in the intersections of life writing and religious studies, as it is a suitable text for exploring the intersections of selfhood, narrativity, and religious encounters.

In light of how autobiographical elements have often served as the basis for religious writing, Choi's choice of the life writing genre is not revolutionary. However, what is innovative about *Beginning, Middle & Zen*'s approach to documenting life progression is its incorporation of fantasy. As Choi's narrator retells pivotal events, he also incorporates fantasies of potential futures in a daydream-like manner. For example, at the beginning of the text when he is contemplating his Korean Canadian identity and memories of visiting Korean Buddhist temples, he begins to daydream of studying at Seoul National University and becoming a widely recognized Oriental philosophy scholar. Similarly, the narrative voice also jumps into these dream states when he imagines himself living as a devoted recluse and becoming a Pansori singer who dazzles audiences.

These dreams are often accompanied by language indicating a romanticized version of the self, such as "I then envisioned an epic journey about to unfold in my life" or "I started to piece together my life story and its epic ending in my head" (24; 56). The repetition of "epic" to describe

these fantasies portrays them as self-indulgent dreams, as if he is imagining himself as a hero in a historical legend. This mix of reality and dreams is rather interesting from a generic perspective: in the genre of life writing, one is asked to center on their selfhood, perhaps even to idealized it in narrative, which sparks questions about how such a constructed self can contribute to religious discourse. It's also interesting to note that Choi's dreamlike approach does not come to an end. In fact, his Epilogue contains a new vision for his future, except this one is more integrated with his reality and includes emphasis on genuine connections with others, his community, and the environment.

Alternatively, Choi's authentic approach to describing his self—even his previous desires to be recognized by society—is refreshingly honest and relatable. Sincerity and relatability are indeed two qualities that mark *Beginning, Middle & End*. Ultimately, Choi does not shy away from sharing his feelings of failures, confusion, and frustration, creating a selfhood that is deeply rooted in the human experience, and therefore, relatable. This sincerity also extends to his discussion of his practice, one in which Buddhist concepts become clearer after his revisiting of them at an older age. In these explorations of Buddhism, specifically Zen principles, fantasy in the form of imagination also plays a role. One example is when Choi imagines himself in a conversation with Chongwol Sumin about the impermanency of an idealized self. This play-like approach to writing about Buddhist philosophy is part of what makes this text highly accessible for a general audience. Another aspect that makes this text relatable is Choi's thoughtful accounts of growing up Korean Canadian, including his love of hockey versus his parents' desire for him to learn martial arts. In the context of Zen writings, this Canadian perspective also opens new avenues for exploring multicultural approaches to Buddhism.

**Notes on the Contributor(s)**

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