

## Articles



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Article

# Hwarangs and Yueguang Tongzi: A New Analysis of the Relationship, With the Help of Textual Philology

Marco CAMPA



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## Introduction

*Hwarangs* 花郎 are, by far, one of the most characteristic groups in the kingdom of Silla 新羅 (traditionally 57BCE–935CE). Popularly, they are known to be fierce warriors and tenant of Silla's religion and culture. They are also known to be tied with the Silla monarchy. Despite the last assertion is true, the first must be redimensioned, with an active role in the military when needed, but only framed within the regular army and without any special training. In any case, their primary goal was the education of the youth and primarily nobility (Tikhonov 1998, 318–38). But on that, it will be discussed in detail later.

When the Buddhism and Chinese-type of state centralization came to Silla, *hwarangs* were coopted into it, becoming the ambassador of the official Maitreya cult and the new social order. But what they worshipped was really Maitreya? According to the scholar Mohan Pankaj (2001), *hwarangs* did not directly worshipped Maitreya, but a minor figure derived from it. How plausible it is? As far as we currently know, *hwarang* Buddhism was an amalgamation of native cults, Daoism, and then Buddhism. So, although the claim that a minor bodhisattva whose cult is blended with Daoism could have been worshipped in that cultural environment is plausible, the case must be studied more in detail. Therefore, this article will proceed analyzing what were the beliefs of this group according to the state-of-the-art research, then it will go into details of what are the claims of Prof. Mohan Pankaj about them, re-analyzing every part of them with the aim of proving or disproving such theory and eventually obtaining a newer, better formulation to the question.

## Hwarangs and their Organization

The original, primitive role of *hwarang* institution was educational. In fact, there is a wide consensus that the group was meant to teach the native traditions—such as ethics, religion, morality etc.—to the adolescents, especially that of the local nobility. As the Silla tribal and clannish institutions will eventually centralize around to and into a monarchical state of Sinitic model, the *hwarang* groups will then serve as a training center for state cadres, usually high-ranking ones. Along with this, *hwarang* also served as a chain of transmission from the Center to the Peripheries, from the upper élites to the commoners,

implementing for the state's sake the bone-rank system's education and state-sponsored Buddhism into its paradigm,<sup>1</sup> usually pairing this effort with the dissemination of the new Continental cultural and social trends.

As for its structure and functions in detail, the following points can be deduced from the surviving historical sources in our possession:

Each *hwarang* band was composed by a leader, known as *hwarang*, being part of true-bone aristocracy; a Buddhist monk as attendant or follower, known as *seungnyeo nangdo* 僧侶郎徒, whose role was to be the teacher, advisor, and spiritual mentor of the group; attendants (*nangdo* 郎徒) part of local, lesser nobility and commoners, underneath the first two ranks.

From the ages of fifteen to eighteen, every *hwarang* received a special training involving music and wandering in the mountains. This education was labelled with the broad term of *pungnyu* (grace or elegance 風流), which also indicated the sophisticated character of the group, in a manner not dissimilar from how the Japanese term *miyabi* (courtly 雅) was intended in its sense of urbanity-rurality dichotomy. More generally, the *hwarang* education likely included Confucian ethics, Buddhist mysticism, and local and Daoist cults.<sup>2</sup> Using a later term, these teaching can be collectively called the “three doctrines” (*sanjiao* 三教). There are traces suggesting the primitive training was less sophisticated, as the story of Kim Sadaham 斯多含 points out.

Between members of each *hwarang* band, blood oaths were made. The names of each band member were transcribed into a yellow register 黃卷/風流黃卷 and then struck off as soon as one leaves the group.

The entire institution of *hwarang* were associated with the cult of Maitreya since the official adoption of Buddhism as state religion, or maybe even before. The *hwarang*'s Maitreya devotion was likely an amalgamation with the previous native religion and Daoism, and the members of the group presented themselves as an earthly form of the bodhisattva, at least in the propaganda for the commoners. The cult, as in Baekje but unlike many Chinese popular counterparts, was intended as a non-revolutionary tool of statecraft.

1 The bone-rank system did not become fixed until the sixth century (McBride 2008, 20; 2010, 54–55; Mohan 2001, 160–62).

2 The distinction between the two forms of religion was very porous and almost non-existent in ancient times, as the same could be said about the distinction between Buddhism and Daoism.

## The Hwarang Beliefs as Reported in the *Samguk yusa*

These claims about the group found their basis in some famous account of the *Samguk yusa*: the correlation with Baekje Buddhism is deductible from the foundation myth of the group, which is also reported in the *Samguk sagi*, the tie with the state is portrayed in the legend of *hwarang* Jukji, while some details of *hwarang*'s spirituality can be abstracted from the legendary monography of the *hwarang* Kim Yusin 金庾信 (596–673).

Surely, there are other accounts in the *Samguk yusa* as in other sources, but these are the most direct ones. The following is a short summary of these primary sources' content.

### *The Story of the Monk Jinja and the Hwarang Mil*

The first account is the foundation myth of the group, told both in the *Samguk sagi* and the *yusa*.<sup>3</sup> The account starts with the story of the *wonhwa* (original flowers 原花) lady Nammo 南毛娘 and lady Gyojeong 姣貞娘, or Jujeong 俊貞, under the aegis of king Jinheung 眞興王 (r. 540–567).

As the *Samguk yusa* and the *Samguk sagi* report, because Gyojeong killed Nammo, the *wonhwa* group was lately dismantled and many years later the institution was rebuilt under the name of *hwarang*. Though this part is not directly relevant for the subsequent part of the story, it is worth noticing as it testifies the fact the *hwarang* bands existed before the formation of the state and kingdom centralization, as well as the original shamanic nature of them (Lee 2004, 50–54). The story goes on with the successive reign of king Jinji 眞智王 (r. 576–579), who in this story may be a placeholder, as he was a particularly unfortunate and short-term king. Under the reign of Jinji, the monk Jinja 眞慈, or Jeongja 貞慈, of the royal temple Heungryun 興輪寺 had a dream of an old man after he prayed for many days in front of the statue of Maitreya for the appearance into the kingdom of the Buddha in the form of *hwarang*. Monk Jinja was told that “Maitreya Seonhwa” 彌勒 仙花 will be in the temple Suwon of Ungcheon 熊川水源. When Jinja arrived in the place, he found a good-looking boy, who said he too came from the Silla's capital, but shortly after they

met, the boy went away. Puzzled, Jinja asked for help from the temple monks, and they suggest him to search for answers to the spirit (or spirits) of the nearby mountain Cheon 千山. When the god in the form of an old man told Jinja that the boy he already met was in fact Maitreya Seonhwa itself, the monk hurried up again to the monastery, but the boy magically disappeared, and Jinja walked back to the capital. In the capital, Jinja was advised by the king himself to search in the city. So, the monk of this story starts the expedition, discovering him playing under a tree of what would later become the temple Yeongmyo 靈妙寺. Jinja asked the boy about his name and his parent, discovering that he was an orphan named Mil 未尸. Then, Jinja ordered the boy be escorted by palanquin to the royal palace, where he gained the favours of king Jinji, becoming a *hwarang* leader (*gukseon* 國仙),<sup>4</sup> vanishing away after a brilliant career.

This story does not just give many clues about the centralization of the group, but about the model upon that the centralization was based too. First, even if we do not have any other source about the monk of this story, it can be assumed he was part either of the “true bones” or the “sacred bones” rank, if not even a member of some smaller branch in the royal lineage, as it said he served in a temple built under the orders of King Beopheung 法興王 (r. 514–540) and could summon a palanquin. In fact, the *Samguk yusa* stresses in many ways how Buddhism was popular amongst minor, local aristocracy before it became the state-sponsored cult.

The second point is the clear relationship with official Maitreya cult: the Suwon temple was situated, at the time of the story, in the Baekje 百濟 (18BCE–660CE) territory, near the capital Ungjin 熊津, or Gomanaru 固麻那羅, there mentioned as Ungcheon.

This brings many considerations: though probably the concept might have spread initially from Goguryeo, there was a common ground among Silla's and Baekje's Buddhist devotees in the belief that their respective lands were a land of Buddha (*buddhaksetra*), where the bodhisattva Maitreya could live for a period of time, such a second Tūṣita heaven. While the Silla kingdom will take at least two other generations to make this belief official, Baekje made it the *de facto* state-sponsored propaganda under King Mu 武王 (r. 600–641), who made build the complex of Mireuksa temple 彌勒寺 in the shape of Tūṣita heaven

3 三國遺事, 卷第三, 塔像第四, 彌勒仙花未尸郎眞慈師 (*Samguk yusa*, Book 3: Images of the Stūpa, No. 4: The History of Mil, Incarnation of Maitreya Seonhwa, and the Monk Jinja).

4 The term was likely coined by Iryeon, author of the *Samguk yusa* (McBride 2008, 38–40; 2010, 56–59).

and assembly under the Nāgapuṣpa tree as described in the *Mile xiasheng jing* 彌勒下生經 and the *Mile xiasheng chengfo jing* 彌勒下生成佛經.<sup>5</sup>

In the Jinja and Mil story, the tree under which the boy was discovered is a clear allusion to it, amalgamate with the shamanic, native-Korean cult of trees. It is noteworthy that during that Silla and Baekje were forging ties in the same period when the former had started consolidating its internal power, both events caused by the fact that the war winds were blowing from the north, i.e.: from 424 to 553CE circa (Noh 2004, 107–09). This point will be exposed in detail later, however as an anticipation it can be said that junction point could have probably been the forementioned doctrine of homeland as a *buddhakṣetra*, with which both kingdoms came into contact at some point and later were systematized by the Tiantai patriarch Nanyue Huisi (Namwol Hyesa 南越慧思) (515–577) (McBride 2008, 36–40; 2010, 56–59; Choe 2015, 16–22).

### *The Story of Hwarang Jukji*

The second account concerns the conquest of the central part of the Peninsula by Silla, and it is the myth of *hwarang* Jukji 竹旨郎, as reported in the *Samguk yusa*.<sup>6</sup>

The duke Suljong 述宗公 (fl. 600 circa) was on his way to Sakju (modern Gangwon 朔州), where he is assuming the post of governor. He was escorted by soldier, as the place is home of rebels. The group stopped at the pass Jukji, where they met a young man, a Buddhist devotee, repairing the road. The duke and the boy took a liking to each other, forming a karmic connection. After Suljong took his post, his wife had a dream when the young man of the pass entered in their room. They eventually discover the boy dead the same night of the dream, and the duke made a tomb with a Maitreya statue over it to the young devotee, thinking he would revive as his son. In fact, the wife discovered she had also become pregnant the same night of that dream. The duke's son, named Jukji after the pass, became a famous *hwarang*, and would serve as a high military official and as a governor (McBride 2008, 60–61).

In this story, some terms are misleading, as at the time of Duke Suljong

the territory of Sakju was a newly conquered territory, contested by Goguryeo. In fact, from 512 until 552, there was a war of conquer of Silla up to the north, and the territories around modern Gangwon were taken by King Jinheung 眞興王 (r. 540–576) just few years before. Therefore, we can assume in this case “governor” stands for “aristocratic warlord,” likely of true-bone rank, and “rebels” is likely an allusion to some Goguryeo troops and their ally tribes: the Yemaek 濊貊.<sup>7</sup> The escort the duke came with, if so, must be intended as troops from Silla mainland, sent to pacify the contested area as the warlord was taking his seat. The image of Maitreya reiterates the concept already seen in the story of the *hwarang* Mil of *hwarangs* as an incarnation of the bodhisattva. At the same time, it represents the Silla's interpretation of Buddhism backed by the *hwarangs*, who in their turn back the aristocratic kingdom (McBride 2008, 40–41; 2010, 60–61; Noh 2004, 113–16).

### *The Legends of Kim Yusin*

The last series of accounts in the *Samguk yusa* concern the famous *hwarang* Kim Yusin 金庾信 (596–673). Kim Yusin was a Silla's true-bone aristocrat, friend, and brother-in-law of the future king Taejong Muyeol 太宗 武烈 (r. 654–661) and famous due to being one protagonist of the unification of the Korean Peninsula under Silla. Despite being the general who unified Korea, the *Samguk yusa* and the *Samguk sagi* stress less his military abilities and more his mystical side, with the only exception being a line in the biography of *Samguk sagi* when it is said he is a “skilled in fencing” 修劍得術, which is worth mentioning because it testifies it is not the rule among the *hwarangs* cadres, despite their gradual militarization. The fame of mystic and magician the general won was probably due to the help he received from the esoteric Buddhist monk Milbon 密本, and it was likely a political strategy aim to untie himself from his origins, the Gaya aristocracy.

Before exposing the legends about Kim Yusin, it is worth mentioning some examples about his fame of mystic, to better frame that stories: Yusin became

5 Both are translation of the *Maitreyavyākaraṇa*.

6 三國遺事, 卷第二, 紀異第二, 孝昭王代竹旨郎 (*Samguk yusa*, Book 2, Monographs, No. 2: *Hwarang Jukji* of King Hyoso's Era).

7 The *Samguk sagi* reports the name of the tribes involved in this period as Malgal 靺鞨, except in one case, though this is an anachronistic naming. This has raised a problem about the so-called “false Malgal.” More likely, the term is just a conflation made retrospectively by later historiography of the at-the-time existing Ye and Maek tribes with the later, actual, Malgal (Noh 2004, 113–14).

a *hwarang* at the age of fifteen years old and developed Yonghwa hyangdo (Dragon Flower Aspirants 龍華香徒), a clear reference to the Nāgapuṣpa tree here mentioned before. More specifically, the name of the group implies a devotee vow for rebirth in the Heaven of the bodhisattva Maitreya. The *Samguk yusa* also reported that the general Yusin venerated all Silla's pantheon, such as mountain spirits, stars, and heavenly gods, along with a clearly popular belief stating that in a previous life he was “a man from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven” 三十天之一人降於新羅爲庾信, i.e., a *deva*.<sup>8</sup> This clear syncretism is shown in the legends reported in the *Samguk yusa* and has many elements in common with the foundation myth of the group as we have seen before, and so it is a relevant element of this analysis.

Chronologically, the first legend reported is set in the year 611, when Kim Yusin was seventeen years old, during the siege of the Bukhansan fort 北漢山城<sup>9</sup> by Baekje, Goguryeo, and Yemaek armies.<sup>10</sup> Yusin traveled alone toward the Jung'ak (Central Peak 中岳), one of Silla's sacred mountains, where he prayed for a divine protection of his Country, fasting, and making purifications. Then, an old man appeared, saying he had not a particular dwelling, as he came and stop according to the karmic causes and effects (*yeon* 緣). The old man also said his name was Nanseung (“difficult to conquer” 難勝). Yusin requested the man to teach him a way to protect and rectify the land, so the old man taught him a secret technique (*bibeop* 秘法)—presumably, *dhāraṇī*—and disappeared into colorful lights short after.

There are other versions of this story, thereby reaching into the Joseon 朝鮮 period (1392–1910), where the mountain is identified with mt. Danseok 斷石山, west of Gyeongju, or with mt. Yeolbak 咽薄山, south of Gyeongju. In the first variation, Yusin obtained a sacred sword (*sin'geom* 神劍), and he would have trained cutting boulders with it; in the second variation, Kim Yusin carried a jeweled sword (*bogeom* 寶劍) in a cave, where he burned incense praying to the Heaven, obtaining so a secret military technique (*byeongbeop* 兵法).

The genesis of those variants is easily deductible, as the initial, likely magical, “secret technique” changed into a no-longer-metaphorical “sacred

sword” and then into a “jeweled sword,” while the “secret technique” was retrieved as a less metaphysical “military technique.” Noteworthy too, here, is the anachronism of *Samguk sagi*'s sources, as the “Central Peak” was so designed only later: the identification was maybe a tentative to supply to an unspecified detail in the original narrative, the fact supported also by the variations.

On the nature of the old character there are many hypotheses: the simplest is that he could be Maitreya, as it is suggested by the mention of a karmic tie to the kingdom, though, as we seen before, Maitreya was portrayed as a young man and so it is easier hypothesize that he is a minor attendant of the future's bodhisattva. Another hypothesis is that he could be a local deity or a shaman. All these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, as we have already seen such syncretism in the story of Mil and Jinja. Going into detail, we can notice that the name of the old man is a Chinese translation of Sudurjayābhūmi, or simpler Sudurjayā 難勝地: one of the ten bodhisattva stage in the *Avataṃsakasūtra* 華嚴經, as well as a bodhisattva's paradise and the name of the bodhisattva dwelling in it. In any case, the story makes a clear allusion to the *hwarang* vow for rebirth in Maitreya's heaven.

The second account is reported in the *Samguk yusa*<sup>11</sup>: the story takes place during an intelligence-gathering mission against the neighboring Goguryeo and Baekje, in the Kim Yusin's *hwarang* period. There was, at that time, a follower of our character, named Baekseok 白石. Kim Yusin's group did not know the origins of him. Was Baekseok the one who had the idea of attacking Goguryeo and Baekje?: the plan was accepted by Kim Yusin, who made up a stratagem to gather information on the rival kingdoms. During the journey, Kim Yusin met three beautiful girls, and they talked lovely and shared some good food. After the talking, the three strangers invited the *hwarang* into a wood, where they showed him their true, divine form. In fact, the three girls were “the three state-protector deities” 三護國之神 of the mountains Naerim 奈林, Hyeollye 穴禮, and Gorhwa 骨火. They warned him that he was lured in hostile lands by an enemy, and they wanted to put him on guard. Following the advice, Yusin told Baekseok to follow him to the fort Gorhwa 骨火館, since he forgot some important papers. Here, he made Baekseok tied and interrogated him. Baekseok confessed he was a Goguryeo spy, sent to kill him, as the king of his land said

8 三國遺事, 卷第一, 紀異第一, 太宗春秋公 (*Samguk yusa*, Book 1, Monographies, No. 1: King Taejong Muyeol-Duke Chunchu).

9 Modern Seoul.

10 三國史記, 列傳 第一, 金庾信 上 (*Samguk sagi*, Biographies, No 1: Kim Yusin, First Part).

11 三國遺事, 卷第一, 紀異第一, 金庾信 (*Samguk yusa*, Book 1, Monographies, No 1: Kim Yusin).



Kim Yusin was the rebirth form of Chunam 楸南, a diviner and a shaman calumniated and punished by death by the Goguryeo ruler.

The action here seems conducted solitarily, an exception to the rule, as we know in the *Samguk yusa* that *hwarangs* always go into mission with a band of followers, if not in charge as general or similar command positions within the army. The mountain gods is a recurrent theme in these narrations, so we can only add to that how probably the fort Gohwa was likely a temple dedicated to native mountain spirits. On the other hand, what we can add to the Chunam backstory is that the text explicitly mentions the *eum-yanglyin-yang* 陰陽 doctrines, another proof of the general syncretism of *hwarang* Buddhism and Silla's in general: it is worth of a mention again how Kim Yusin was believed to be in a previous life a *deva* of the Trāyastriṃśa heaven and he was a devotee of the entire Silla's pantheon.

## The Baekje's Connections

As it was mentioned before, the *hwarang* Buddhist doctrines may have been influenced by Baekje, even if not derived from Baekje. In fact, Baekje predates Silla in asserting its territory is a "Buddha-field," though it is likely that this belief was spreading through the Peninsula for unknown time even before. If we want to take an example for this tie, it can be remembered the case of King Mu of Baekje 武王 (600–641), who commissioned the huge site of the temple Mireuk 彌勒寺. This temple follows the model given by the descriptions of the Nāgapaṣpa tree and the three assemblies in Maitreya's heaven, giving the visible sight on the tie between it and the Korean kingdom.

The idea that one earthly kingdom is the secondary dwelling of Maitreya was systematized by the Tiantai patriarch Nanyue Huisi and was likely (re-)brought to Korea by his disciple, Hyeon'gwang 玄光 (fl. 6<sup>th</sup> century). The influence of Nanyue Huisi in Baekje can be seen in the burial of a copy of the *Diamond Sūtra on Gold Paper* (*Geumji Geumgang paya gyeong* 金紙金剛波若經) in the same period of the temple Mireuk's construction, a practice followed by the patriarch, author of a version in golden characters of the *Mahāprajñāparamitāsūtra* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經 and a promoter of the burial of the Buddhist scriptures in order to preserve them from the "End-of-the Dharma" period (Saddharmavipralopa 末法). The main difference here is that, even if the

practice was adopted, the millenarianism preached by the patriarch was neither in Baekje nor in Silla, as they both promoted Buddhism as a method to seek legitimacy, following the model of the aforementioned Sui dynasty (Choe 2015, 16–22; cf. McBride 2008, 36–38).

Nanyue Huisi was not the only figure associated with the *hwarangs*: Professor Pankaj Mohan argued that what was venerated by the group was not just the bodhisattva of the future, but a more popular, syncretic version of it: Candraprabhākumāra i.e. "Prince Moonlight" or, as his name was translated to and spread as Yueguang Tongzi 月光童子 amongst Chinese heterodox sects. Curiously we know by his *Nanyuesi da chansi lishi yuanwen* (*Written Vows* 南嶽思大禪師立誓願文) that Nanyue Huisi too knew some doctrines about this bodhisattva and he likely had a good consideration of them, to the point he quoted a version of one of its primary texts, but this point will be discussed later.

## The Question of Prince Moonlight's Cult

This figure and its genesis were extensively studied by Erich Zürcher (1982) as well by other scholars in a wider perspective (Seiwert 2003). Synthetizing these studies, this bodhisattva was originally a minor figure of some apologetic sūtra-s. He later become associated with Maitreya at the point it would share many, if not all, of the characteristics and prerogatives of the latter. At some point in history, Candraprabhākumāra was so popular it was adopted sometimes by Sons-of-the-Heavens, who proclaimed to be one of his rebirth versions, as in almost all versions of the story one of the main leitmotifs is the return of Yueguang Tongzi in China at the end of times as a peace-bringing savior. The clearest examples of it are the emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty 隋文帝 (541–604) and the empress Wu Zetian 武則天, née Wu Zhao 武曌 (ca 660–705). But, more often, Yueguang Tongzi was adopted by heterodox, heavily Daoism-syncretizing sects, tied to popular millenarianism and subsequently to violent revolts.

Until relatively recent times, we had only indirect mentions of the popular cult texts concerning Yueguang Tongzi. Things changed when the libraries of Dunhuang grottoes were discovered. At the current times, we can count on three primary texts about Yueguang Tongzi: the *Shouluo biqiu jing* (*Sūtra of the Monk*

*Shouluo* 首羅比丘經),<sup>12</sup> the *Famiejin jing* (*Sūtra of the Destruction of the Dharma* 佛說法滅盡經), and the *Puxianpusa shuo zhengming jing* (*Sūtra of the Realization of Comprehension Explained by Samantabhadra* 普賢菩薩說證明經). The *Shouluo biqiu jing* is the only one of the three texts having Candraprabhākumāra as the main subject and protagonist of the script, while the *Famiejin jing* mentions him as a supporting actor of Maitreya; and the last also shares with the *Famiejin jing* Maitreya as the main subject and Yueguang Tongzi as supporting actor. Generally, the *Shouluo jing* shares many leitmotifs with the other two, but it is not always true that the *Famiejin jing* has a clear parallel in the *Zhengming jing* and vice versa.

The first text is dated by Erich Zürcher in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, between 518 and 589, with strong ties with religious revolts, while according to Seiwert the text circulated from the 6<sup>th</sup> century until the end of Tang rule, predominantly among lay devotee sects centered on charismatic yet marginal(ized) monks prone to revolts but then tamed by state suppressions, Pankaj Mohan argues instead it was written in Silla in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries; the *Sūtra of the Destruction of the Dharma* is likely dated before 514, first date of mention. It was also the only one of the three having the luck of being considered canonical from some time until the 6<sup>th</sup> century, at the point that Sengyou 僧祐 (445–518) included it extensively in his *Shijia pu* 釋迦譜 and Nanyue Huisi mentioned it in his *Written Vows*, as we mentioned before, plus adding a detail we don't have in the current version: the explicit mention of Candraprabhākumāra birth in “China” 真丹國; the last text is likely of the 6<sup>th</sup> century too, between ca 499–589 and was mentioned in every major Buddhist catalogue from the Sui monk Fajing's 法經 *Zhongjing mulu* 衆經目錄 onwards.

The primary concern of this paper will be the *Shouluo jing*, but the other texts will be taken into the account for philological and historical reasons.

## The Shouluo Jing and Its Content

The story narrated in the *Shouluo jing* can be summarized as follows: in the Junziguo/Gunja-guk (“Land of Gentlemen” or “Superior People” 君子國)

there was a monk named Shouluo/Sura (sanskrit Śūra? 首羅). He lived in the Taining/Taenyeong monastery 太寧寺, near a mountain of the same name and apparently close to the capital. The monk met Daxian/Daeseon (“Great Immortal” 大仙) and his followers of five hundred “immortals” 仙人, as they were on their way to the abode where Candraprabhākumāra dwells. Shouluo invites Daxian to take a rest into the monastery, and so it starts a long dialogue about the disasters that will happen at the end of the *kalpa* and how to avoid them. They talk about Yueguang Tongzi appearances too, calling him “King of Light” 明王, “Lord of Light” 明君, and “Lord of Peace” 平君, and they enumerate the virtues of people who will manage to save themselves at the end of times. Daxian reveals then the numbers of the sages 賢 who will help Yueguang Tongzi at the right time, but who, in the current period, lives hiding amongst the humans.

Then, appears on the scene the king of Junziguo along with his court, and when Daxian tells him where he is heading to, the king too joins the fellowship. The group, then, goes to the mountain Penglai 蓬萊/蓬萊, here described as an island, where Candraprabhākumāra lives in this mythical place with three thousand saints inside a grotto.

The king of Junziguo, there, asks Yueguang Tongzi in person about the events to come, but the bodhisattva does not answer him instantly. The king then clarifies he does not know what will happen during the End-of-the-Dharma era, so Yueguang, convinced, decides to describe to him the coming disasters and how to avoid them.

The scene changes again, and this time the king Junziguo is in his land, probably inside the monastery of the first part, and he tries to convert as many people as possible, describing the techniques of “visualization” of Candraprabhākumāra, purification rites, and reciting a pseudo-sanskrit *dhāraṇī*.

At this point, the sūtra becomes more cryptic and chaotic than before: many omens and miraculous signs and prophecies were enumerated, as well as *mudrā* by which Yueguang's followers will recognize each other. The last part is about Vimalakīrti 維摩 and Dīpaṅkara 定光: the text gives details only about the first, described as a sage and a saint who will live under a non-specified emperor. He will pretend to live lasciviously, in a curious parallel with Vasumitrā 婆須蜜多女 of *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* 入法界品 i.e., the *Avataṃsakasūtra*. As Vasumitrā, in fact, Vimalakīrti too will convert people in an esoteric way. The text ends there, incomplete.

12 It was also known as *Shouluo biqiu jian Yuanguang Tongzi jing* (*Sūtra of the Monk Shouluo Meeting with Yueguang Tongzi* 首羅比丘見月光童子經), as it was probably mentioned so in the Sui catalogues.



Generally, it can be said that the *Shouluo biqu jing* does not seem to follow a coherent narrative, and being focused more on prophecies, religious practices, and cosmic events. This characteristic led many scholars to different interpretation, even if all starts from the consideration of Erich Zürcher.

## Hypotheses on the Text

As it was said before, Zürcher estimated the text to have been written between 518 and 589 among a heterodox, popular “Buddho-Daoist” milieu in the Yangtze regions, then expanding to the northern China. The scholar identified the “Long River” 長河/黃河 mentioned in the text with the Yellow River and the “Weak Waters” 弱水 with the far north or north-west of China, as well as the Junziguo with the north-east. These three places are said to be the place where Candraprabhākumāra will appear again in the world.

The text is to be attributed to the Miaoguang 妙光 sect in Yangzhou and the Faquan cult 法權 in Yanling. The first was a monk who led a revolt in the year 510; the second built a sect venerating an eight-year-old boy known as Liu Jinghui 劉景暉 with the title “the Yueguang Tongzi.” Zürcher also sees in the text some Lingbao influence, particularly in the mention of Liucheng (“willow city” 柳城). Seiwert follows the previous datation but adds that the sūtra circulated until the end of Tang dynasty, he speculated that the origin of this text is to be attributed to the Faqing revolt in 499, after which the various split sects adopted a low profile. The cult itself likely began with Hou Ziguang 侯子光 revolt in Gansu in 337. The milieu is better described by this scholar, as it reconstructs the hierarchy of the “Buddho-Daoist” sects as centered on a marginal or marginalized monk who built his charisma on strict ascetism whose followers were lay devotees and generally part of the oppressed groups of medieval Chinese society, i.e., women, the poor, farmers, novices, and low-grade monks. The sects were also widely diffused in the modern Hebei regions and were tied in some way with what the historical sources name as “vegetarian societies” of “fasting societies” 齋會.

Pankaj Mohan, on the other hand, dated the text to be written in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century, in Silla kingdom, strictly following the datation derived from the story of Mil and Jinja. He, in fact, identifies the “Land of Gentlemen” with the Peninsula, and more specifically with Silla, while the land between the “Long

River” and the “Weak Waters” should have been identified with Goguryeo: as in the case of the duke Suljong mentioned before, Yueguang Tongzi/Maitreya would have act in the text as a pacifier of newly conquered Silla territory, unofficially his paradise on Earth. Plus, the scholar notes how among the lands mentioned in the sūtra there is Xuantu 玄兔/玄兔/玄菟, an historic Han commandery conquered by Goguryeo and part of his main core and how the monk’s name could be an allusion to Silla itself.

## A Problematic Document

All these hypotheses have a good base despite being contradictory to one other, especially the first two contradicting the last. This is evident by merely analyzing the text<sup>13</sup>: all three analyses are focused on the columns 110–120, though they overlook on some details like those mentioned in the columns 60–70, and all three agree on the importance of columns 10–15, 120–125 and 210–225, the “Han territory,” identified with the north-east of China: approximately from Hebei to the Manchurian lands. This was inevitable since the narration is sometimes chaotic and tends to repeat itself with some differences of various degrees. The easiest assumption it could be done, stating these repetitions and non-perfectly linear narrative even in the story in which the prophecies are put, is that, in fact, the *Shouluo biqu jing* is a composite text.

For example, the title the Sui catalogues gives to us is “Sūtra of the Monk Shouluo Meeting with Yueguang Tongzi,” but in the text the said monk never sees in person the bodhisattva, as he is not mentioned when the meeting at the mountain Penglai is shown. Other examples are the fact that there are two versions of flood prophecies (columns 10–113) and at least three versions of the prophecies of the “golden city” where Maitreya himself or he in the form of Yueguang Tongzi will preach the Dharma (columns 10–89, 233–244, and by allusions in columns 185–200<sup>14</sup>). Even the “Han territory” prophecy has a

13 The column number is based primarily on the work of Erich Zürcher, while eventual minor variations are those mentioned in the work of Bai Huawen.

14 In this section is mentioned a “great dragon king” saving the believers, which reminds the “city of the golden dragon” of the columns 233–244. Confer with the *Zhengming jing*, where a golden-feathered garuḍa will take believers to the Tuṣita heaven (Zürcher 1982, 42).

variation: one mention is the “Long Rivers” (columns 13–14 and 114–122), while the other is explicitly “Yellow River” (columns 219–233).

On the narrative framework side, some sort of coherence can be seen at least from column 10 to column 70, though they could have been originally two separated texts. When the stage changes to the mountain Penglai (columns 179–234), it arises a suspicion that the text is now an autonomous sūtra, since the presentation of the assemblies has all the characteristics of an incipit, moreover, the monk Shouluo is nowhere mentioned, and the general narrative follows the lines of the *Famiejing jing*. The last part (columns 234–240) is more coherent with the first two, while it does not match well with the central part: it is set in the Taining monastery, and it alludes to some relationship between Daxian and the king of Junzigu. Maybe in the archetype they either were originally the same character, or they had a student-teacher relation.

It can be deduced, therefore, that the text we have now is a harmonized collation (more or less) of at least two different texts, where the central part of the first was, for unknown reasons, substituted with the latter: while the archetype focused on the monk Shouluo was the main core, variations were added by the time, particularly, adding prophecies and changing the theme more on the mysticism and less on the millenarianism, as Seiwert (2003, 135–41; 145) already noticed it was the tendency among the sects focusing on this text. Moreover, analyzing the dialogues excluding the suspicious central section, we can assume that maybe the archetype had a progress in the character of Daxian, maybe revealing his nature of bodhisattva or soon-to-be bodhisattva, while the monk would have become a Buddha or a bodhisattva level and the king would have the role of transmitting the text itself. If we assume the datations of Zürcher and Seiwert are valid, we can say the archetype was written between the year 518 and 589, while central section and other, less important parts were added probably between the sixth and seventh centuries, since the period millenarianism faded away in favor of pure mysticism (Seiwert 2003, 124–41; 145). Moreover, this text may have some Lingbao Daoism’s influence, as Zürcher noticed, but there are allusions to some well-known Buddhist schools too: in fact, the *Shouluo jing* mentions explicitly the mountain Tiantai (columns 44–45), to the patriarch Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597), and to disciple of Nanyue Huisi, and plus there are more other possible allusions to this school or to the

Huayan’s in columns 274–285 and 294–306.<sup>15</sup>

The text was probably written in China, but the mentions to the Xuantu commandery, as well as to another place in the northeast Gudu 固都 (columns 115–120),<sup>16</sup> suggest a large range of diffusion, making Pankaj Mohan’s hypothesis more plausible than it could seem. Without additional data, it can be inferred that the text travelled at least up to regions, designating all the north-east of China as a sacred place, maybe including Korea.

There are other places in this sūtra where the Peninsula is alluded: in the columns 55–60 is said that the devotee will have to cross the “East Sea” and the “Rushing River,” going so in the “Holy Region” to follow Candraprabhākumāra 信都土地海東流乘船汎川置神州. But if we assume the place where the text is set insofar (from Nanjing to Hebei), there is no need to cross a sea, besides the fact the term “Holy Region” identifies the China itself as per the *Tiandi yundu jing* 天地運度經<sup>17</sup> (Zürcher 1982, 33), so maybe the sūtra here is alluding at least to a region comprehending the Peninsula too, identifying it as the mountain Penglai. This makes more probable that the text may have been modified by some Korean at some point of its history but obviously does not prove for sure it was written by them.

## Shouluo Jing and the Hwarangs: New Questions

So how could this text have been ended in Silla? How? And what could be its relationship with the *hwarangs*? If we believe in the influences on Silla Buddhism and the *hwarang* Buddhism, the simplest hypothesis is that the *Shouluo jing* arrived in the Peninsula at least through Baekje, and by Baekje to Silla. As it was shown before, Nanyue Huisi was aware of this cult and it had ties with Baekje by his disciple, Hyeon’gwang, so it is a good candidate. Both could have been

15 In these sections is said a figure that is a clear allusion to Yuanguang Tongzi will meet with Yueguang Tongzi, in a case of doubling that reminds the Huayan doctrine about Gautama Buddha and Mahāvairocana.

16 According to *Wei shu*, a city in the Liaoning: 魏書, 卷一百六上, 志二上第五, 地形志, 營州 (*Weishu*, Book 106, First Part, Treaties 2: First Part, Geography: Yingzhou). In the same region there are also mentioned two cities named Liucheng 柳城 and 大柳城, maybe mentioned in the text, if not a mythical city of Lingbao Daoism.

17 The *Tiandi yundu jing* is another millenarist text, but strictly Daoist. It contains some nuclei of the beliefs of the millenarist sect centered around Yueguang Tongzi.

in possession at least of one of the sources of this text, the above mentioned *Famiejin jing*. This is obviously difficult to prove for sure but nonetheless gives us a good timespan where the cult could have been systematized in Silla (Choe 2015, 16–22; cf. McBride 2008, 36–38).

For some reason, a direct comparison between the *hwarang* foundation myth and the Shouluo jing lacks in the work of Mohan Pankaj, despite it may have served as a definitive proof.

In the Jinja and Mil story, the monk prayers in front of a Maitreya statue for the coming of the bodhisattva in the kingdom and the subsequent dream where he is told the coming of Maitreya to Baekje has a clear parallel in the incipit of the *Shouluo jing*, where the monk Shouluo knows the time and whereabouts of Yueguang Tongzi coming by a visit of Daxian and his court of saints. Similarly, the scene, where Jinja effectively met the bodhisattva not recognizing him and being then told to go to a mountain in search for answers, is maybe a parallel in the prophecy of the mountain Ziyan 紫巖山 (or Ciyan 此巖山) in the columns 270–280 of the current version: in this section is told that a monk with numinous vests, clearly Yueguang, will appear in the mountain where monks were hiding for over seven hundred years. More evident is the next part where the mountain spirit tells Jinja that he has already met Maitreya, which has a clearer parallel in the assembly in the mountain Penglai as well as many other prophecies concerning mountains in the *Shouluo jing*, such as the holy mountains where believers need to hide to save themselves from the deluge.

Assuming this part is not a coincidence due to common Daoist substratum. This part may have also a parallel in the final part of the story, when Jinja finds Mil under a tree near a monastery and may be even more similar in the archetype suggested before, where Yueguang Tongzi appears in the monastery of the mountain Taining before appearing again in vision to the king of Junziguo at the very end, as per the version we have now (columns 230–235). This image, about Yueguang Tongzi and/or Maitreya being under a tree, has a clear, common origin in the well-known theme of *Maitreyavyākaraṇa*. Lastly, the final part of story of Mil and Jinja, where the bodhisattva becomes a *hwarang* and brings peace to the land, has a parallel in the prophecy of the *Shouluo jing* (columns 40–45), where it is said Yueguang Tongzi will reign for fifty-two years.<sup>18</sup>

The overall parallels are clearly not one-to-one, but nonetheless existent. This is inevitable due to the chaotic nature of the *Shouluo jing*. Nonetheless, these parallels could be summarized in the general plot and some main characters: in both story we have, in fact, a monk is a divine figure and an authority figure. The shared plot for both narratives can be summarized as follows: there is a high-ranking monk, searching for a divine entity; one day the monk has a supernatural revelation concerning this entity; after a great search and, at some point, a dialogue with an authority, the monk manages to meet the divine entity; and finally, the narrative concludes with an uplifting ending guaranteed by the godly figure. Moreover, both stories show some dependency from the same sources such as the Daoist mountains cult and Buddhist texts like the *Maitreyavyākaraṇa*.

This comparison becomes even more evident if we take in mind the *Shouluo jing* archetype detailed in just few lines before: in the archetype, likely, the monk Shouluo meets with Yueguang Tongzi in person. Afterwards, since the last part mentioned only the king of Junziguo, he likely ascends to a bodhisattva level, and he is no longer seen in this world. The same fate of Monk Jinja is accounted in the ending of his story.

It can therefore be speculated that the similarities are due to a stratification of the story, or one of its archetypes, caused by different periods of transmission and the subordination of the Chinese version to the localized narration of Maitreya. So, the transmission may have been indirect, and without the same impact it had in China. It can be also deduced, if we hold these premises, the sūtra may have been transmitted only partially to the Peninsula, maybe in the form of short excerpts or commentary, or even just orally. In any case, the simplest assumption is that, if even the *Shouluo biqu jing* ever arrived at Silla, this was probably due to Baekje influence, by the medium of the Tiantai patriarch Nanuye Huisi's doctrines. Therefore, if any direct or indirect mention to the Peninsula in the text is real, this is more likely because of manipulation, composition, or re-adaptation of the sūtra in one and/or two of these Korean kingdoms, while the hypothesis of the writing of it from zero by the direct commands of a Silla king is way more difficult, if not impossible, to prove.

Beside Baekje, there are other reasons why this cult may have had an appeal in the Silla society: the most striking is the general similarity between the *hwarang* institution and that of heterodox lay devotee in China: both are instructed by a monk, though in the case of *hwarang* this figure may have been

18 The same amount of time is also found in the *Famiejin jing*, known to Nanyue Huisi.

originally a shaman and, with the introduction of Buddhism, the popular cult of Maitreya, which is the basis of Candraprabhākumāra cult. The fact that the *hwarang* institution did not become neither subversive nor revolutionary lays in the fact that it was tied with preexisting local traditions and nobility, plus the fact that Nanyue Huisi doctrines were used as a tool of statecraft. Unfortunately, we do not have at the current time enough material to support or disprove any hypothesis about fasting among the *hwarangs*, and the case of followers of Kim Yusin is highly debated.

However, if the hypothesis is correct, the fact that Yueguang Tongzi was presented in the *Samguk yusa* as a form of Maitreya suggests a form of “domestication” with the more orthodox state-sponsored Buddhism, leaving the doubt that the cult of this bodhisattva may have been practiced exclusively inside the *hwarang* circles, maybe as a form of esoterism, while exoterically presented as a national version of Maitreya. Therefore, the transmission from Baekje may have been limited to the (re)creation and (re)purposing of the *hwarang* group and not as an explicit doctrinal framework, which was already built over the centralized Goguryeo model: the kingdom(s) had to maintain at least a façade of defender of orthodoxy, officially.

On a more popular level, we know the character of Prince Moonlight may have some appeal in Silla due to the importance the moon had in his culture: not only it is well known Silla had a moon temple (Wolseong 月城) among its ancestral sacred sites, but we also know its insignia portrait “a crescent” or “a half moon” 羅人徽織, 以青赤等色爲別者, 其形象半月.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, a folk legend reported in the *Samguk yusa* about the fall of Baekje describes the kingdom as “the new moon” 百濟同月輪, 新羅如月新.<sup>20</sup> Despite the genericity of this proofs, it must be remembered how the birth and rising of Yueguang Tongzi in China may have been influenced by similar facts, such as the widespread metaphor of Buddhahood as the moon reflecting its light in the rivers or the leitmotiv of the “Old Moon” 古月 (i.e., a deconstruction of the character “barbarians” 胡) in the Daoist millenarist scriptures.

Turning back on the datation of the text, the timing Pankaj Mohan suggested is, in any case, plausible and could be counted as one possible term

when the text arrived more or less intact in Silla, i.e., during the conquest of Han River in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. But, if we refuse even that, the last term could have been at least during the conquest of Baekje in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lastly, the possibility of *hwarangs* knowing about Yueguang Tongzi exists, but it is not clear on what extent the group could have been really devoted to this figure: it is likely that Candraprabhākumāra was considered as an aspect of Maitreya, or that Candraprabhākumāra was presented to the general population as Maitreya. This hypothesis has also some backing in the Chinese context, where the two figures were not clearly differentiated and often one overlaps the other, as Zürcher and Seiwert noticed.

## Conclusion

*Hwarang* was an institution whose aim is religious and moral education of Silla's youth, especially that of nobility. Its religious affiliation changed over time, starting probably initially from a blend of Daoism and native cults, and then included Buddhism in a general syncretism. *Hwarangs* were devotee of Maitreya, the figure they incarnated in the state narrative. Such a cult is likely derived from Baekje.

The hypothesis *hwarangs* venerated a particular form of Maitreya, Candraprabhākumāra is possible, but the formulation proposed by Pankaj Mohan on this matter must be reviewed: the text adducted as a proof, the *Shouluo biqu jing*, does not carry any proof to have been written in Silla, but likely in China in different stages. In fact, the *Shouluo biqu jing* is likely a composite text, and any mention to the Korean Peninsula must be seen as a stratification. If the sūtra even arrived in Silla, that was thanks to mediation of at least Baekje, due to its relationship to Nanyue Huisi, a Tiantai patriarch who is known to have some connection to the cult of Candraprabhākumāra. Therefore, if we do not include any unspecified previous time when the cult may have been known in the Peninsula but of which we have any solid proof, we could speculate the *Shouluo biqu jing* would arrive to Silla either in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> or in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, and any mention to the Peninsula situation of the time is easier to be taken as a later manipulation, fruit of composition, recompositing, or re-adaptation during this period.

Analyzing both the *Shouluo biqu jing* and the *hwarang* creation myth,

19 三國史記, 卷第四十, 雜志第九, 武官 (*Samguk sagi*, Book 40, Miscellany, No. 9: Military Officers).

20 三國遺事, 卷第一, 紀異第一, 太宗春秋公 (*Samguk yusa*, Book 1, Monographies, No. 1: King Taejong Muyeol-Duke Chunchu).



an overall parallel becomes evident: both narratives share a similar plot and characters, even if the original form of the sūtra could be reconstructed only tentatively. This makes the association between the group and the cult at least possible. Besides the Baekje's influence, a good reason for a possible spread of this cult among the *hwarang* institution is likely due to some indigenous cultural trait matching with the character of Prince Moonlight, like the structure of the group resembling that of Buddhist lay devotee societies and the general significance the moon has in the Silla culture. In any case, if the *hwarangs* ever had any notion about Candraprabhākumāra, they more likely considered it as a form of Maitreya, not unlikely that of their Chinese counterparts.

It must be specified, however, that the *hwarang* cult may not coincide entirely with the state-sponsored Buddhism of the kingdom, as it does not exclude that the Silla's Buddhism may have been transmitted from Goguryeo and only later this particular Baekje's form of Maitreya cult may have been added as a new stratum for a very specific purpose, i.e., propaganda and education of nobility's youth, or even as an esoteric cult exclusive to the *hwarangs*.

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**Marco CAMPA** ([marco.campa@unior.it](mailto:marco.campa@unior.it)), born 1994, is a PhD student of Orientale University of Naples. He obtained a master’s degree in 2021 at Sapienza University, Rome. In March 2022 he made five months formative stage in Seoul, South Korea, with Prof. Choe Yeon-shik of Dongguk University, Kim Il-Gwon of the Academy of Korean Studies and to further his studies. His academic interests are history, philology, philosophy, religions, and mythology.

## Abstract

In this article I will address the question of religion the *hwarang* group professed and its relationship with Chinese heterodox sects. Particularly, those sects were built around the cult of Candraprabhākumāra, a minor character becoming the center of devotion not unlike that of Maitreya during the post-Han era, specifically during Sui-Tang dynasties. The major concerns of this paper are if Silla and *hwarangs* may have known about this heterodox figure, and if so, how and when. There will be a tentative of verification of Prof. Pankaj Mohan’s thesis in the light of other scholars, in particular Hubert Michael Seiwert, and most importantly Erich Zürcher, who tried first to study the Candraprabhākumāra’s cults. There will be an assessment of what we know about the *hwarangs* and what we know about Candraprabhākumāra that could be more related to them. More specifically, the *Shouluo biqiu jing*, a text examined by all these three scholars, will be analyzed in philological terms. On this basis and on the historical accounts known to us, new hypotheses will be formulated. The conclusions are that the *Shouluo jing* and the Candraprabhākumāra’s cults were known in Silla though the text was likely written in China as opposed to Pankaj Mohan’s hypothesis of its origin in the southern Korean kingdom. The *hwarangs* likely also knew that, by mediation of Baekje: the neighbor kingdom likely acted as a mediator for this particular form of Maitreya’s cult.

**Keywords:** *hwarang*, Maitreya, Candraprabhakumara, Yueguang Tongzi, philology

