

# **Buddhism and Confucianism in King Sejong's State Administration: Tension and Unity between Religion and Politics**

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This article examines how Sejong, who pursued Confucian politics, recognized and embraced the need for Buddhism at a religious level. In general, Confucianism and Buddhism can be seen as theoretically conflicting. However, Sejong thought that he could govern with Confucianism while maintaining his Buddhist beliefs at the same time. Therefore, though he aspired for Confucian politics, he kept his belief in Buddhism. However, he made a strict distinction between his belief and the purpose of national policy, which led him to restructure secularized Buddhism in a political way. The goal of his reform in Buddhism was not to eradicate Buddhism but to maintain it as a religion. At the same time, he drew attention to the fact that Buddhism as a religion was still functioning nationally and socially under his reign. It was still a religion of the many. Some scholars who had studied Neo-Confucianism also maintained their belief in Buddhism. Under such circumstances, Sejong recognized and tolerated activities of the Buddhist order despite criticism from the strong opponents of Buddhism, and he controlled the content and speed of Buddhist reform. When seen from the Confucian scholars' perspective, his measures may have seemed ideologically confused. However, for a king who is responsible for state administration, Sejong seems to have taken an appropriate policy that corresponded to the reality of his time.

*Keywords: Buddhism and Confucianism, religion and politics, knowledge and religion, King Sejong, criticism on Buddhism*

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## Introduction

Can a Confucian scholar have Buddhist beliefs? Confucius said that it is “harmful to specialize in heresy” and Mencius prided himself with the responsibility to ban wrong theories. It may then be assumed that it must have been problematic for a Confucian scholar to have had Buddhist faith, especially when we consider that the criticism on heresy was reinforced in the Neo-Confucian era. However, part of the intelligentsia with Confucian education held Buddhist beliefs in the late Goryeo to early Joseon periods and I have studied Kwon Geun (權近) as such an example. As a Confucian scholar who wrote *Iphak doseol* (入學圖說), a theoretical book on Neo-Confucianism, Kwon Geun was a colleague of Jeong Do-jeon (鄭道傳), who wrote *Bulssi japbyeon* (佛氏雜辨, Array of Critiques of Buddhism). However, he did not shun Buddhism in his daily life. In the early Joseon period, he participated in Buddhist events as a high government official under royal order. He criticized Buddhism in theory but his behavior was unlike his criticisms (Pu 1999: 201-206). The problem is, however, that the case of Kwon Geun was not unique at the time. Some of the scholars who had received Confucian education during the time of change from Buddhism to Confucianism in early Joseon showed such tendencies, and King Sejong (世宗, 1418-1450) appears to have had these tendencies too. Theoretically, Sejong had clear knowledge and conviction in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. In terms of religion, however, he depended on Buddhism. In other words, while he continued to push forward a policy to promote Confucianism at the national level as a monarch, he turned to Buddhism when he needed it. He could thus be accused of being inconsistent in theory and practice.

However, I came to focus on King Sejong’s idea that Confucian and Neo-Confucian knowledge should not clash with Buddhist belief. Sejong ignored the Confucian presupposition that a Confucian scholar could not have Buddhist belief or that Confucian and Neo-Confucian knowledge clashed with Buddhist belief. Instead, he chose both Confucianism and Buddhism according to his political needs, which I believe presents an interesting case. Moreover, given that he was not a simple Confucian scholar but a monarch, the final decision-maker in national policy, his policy and stance concerning politics and religion proves to be an interesting theme for study.

## Sejong's Awareness of Confucianism and Buddhism: An Issue of Knowledge and Religion

Was Sejong a Buddhist? To answer this question, it would be helpful to examine the stance Taejo (太祖) and Taejong (太宗), his ancestors, took on Buddhism. Taejo attributed the foundation of Joseon to his belief in Buddhism. He made Monk Jacho (自超), the king's mentor, *wangsa* (王師) (Taejo 1/09/10, *jeongsa*), and Monk Jogu (祖丘), mentor of the state, *guksa* (國師) (Taejo 3/9/8, *eulsa*). He allowed the *Lotus Sutra* (法華經) to be lectured in court (Taejo 3/09/15, *imja*), and was candid with his belief in Buddhism. On the other hand, it is difficult to say that his successor, Taejong, had Buddhist faith. Although he put up tents next to Deoksugung palace and held a Buddhist event with 100 monks (Taejong 8/01/28, *jeongchuk*), repaired Sarijeon (舍利殿, a place preserving Buddha's relics) at Heungcheon Temple (興天寺), and dedicated his clothing to the Medicine Buddha (Bhaisajyaguru), all that was done for Taejo. When the Queen was ill, he gathered monks to recite the *sutras* and was happy when she was better after prayers. His actions were not, however, out of faith. At every Buddhist event, he claimed that it was done for Taejo. Sometimes he said that it was "because his wife believed in it" (Taejong 13/05/06, *gapsin*). There are many other cases when he sought out Buddhism not for religious reasons but for practical needs. In fact, his close officials were well aware that Taejong, who had received Confucian education, did not have Buddhist belief. As such, for Taejo Buddhism was a religion whereas for Taejong it was a pragmatic need.

So, how about Sejong? Sejong once called Huang Yan, envoy from the Chinese Ming dynasty, to the inner shrine (Naebuldang, 內佛堂) and gave him Buddha's relics (Sejong 1/09/07, *giyu*). He also had the *Lotus Sutra* (法華經) written with ink made of gold at the inner shrine (Sejong 2/08/11, *jeongmi*). He held the Water-Land ritual (水陸齋, *suryukaje*; a service to console the souls of water and land) for Taejong, had Heungcheon Temple repaired, and sent out the newly printed *Daejanggyeong* (大藏經, Great Collection of Buddhist Scriptures) there so that the common people could read it (Sejong 22/09/12, *sinhae*). If Sejong's stance toward Buddhism were only to this level, he would be valued as a monarch who used Buddhism for practical needs just as Taejong did. However, when he held a celebratory event after repairing Heungcheon Temple (興天寺), criticisms that emerged regarding his measures were different from the previously. The bureaucrats were directly pointing out that whereas before Sejong said that he held Buddhist events "not because he revered Buddhism but

because he could not bear to see his ancestors' relics collapse, now he was saying that he must respect and hold rituals for Buddha" (Sejong 23/11/10, *gyeyu*). To such criticism, Sejong refuted, "it is said that the harm of Buddhism is so great that calamity is imminent and it is difficult to be saved. However, I do not think that I have reached that stage." However, it is from here that the debate on Buddhist events began between Sejong and some of the officials. Despite their censure, Sejong allowed a five-day celebratory feast at Heungcheon Temple (Sejong 24/03/23, *eulyu*). The officials followed Sejong's order in proceeding with the event and Sejong pressed on with the event ordering that "no monk should be stopped within Seoul, even those without their identity certificates." In his 26<sup>th</sup> year (1446), he held the memorial ritual for Queen Soheon (昭憲王后) at a number of temples (Sejong 28/04/15, *injja*). At this time, too, the bureaucrats pointed out that Sejong had a *sutra* written in gold and silver and had many more temples built, criticizing overtly that "His Majesty venerated and believed in heresy" (Sejong 28/10/4). To this, Sejong responded openly that he was "already a king who was fond of Buddhism." As the tension between Sejong and the bureaucrats continued, he established a shrine in the royal court despite their concerns (Sejong 30/12/05, *jeongsa*).

Apart from these Buddhist events, Sejong is well known for allowing the publication of a number of *sutras*. A special attention should be given to the fact that he ordered Prince Suyang (首陽大君) who later became King Sejo (世祖) to translate *sutra* into Korean. Considering that several Korean translations of *sutras*, including *Neungeomgyeong eonhae* (楞嚴經諺解, The Korean Translation of Shurangama) published in the eighth year of Sejo (1462), were initiated under Sejong's order, it seems evident that his interest in Buddhism was more than a political need in reality but rather a clear effect of his belief. Also, it needs to be noted that although the Korean translation of the four Chinese Confucian Classics (四書) was attempted under Sejong's orders, it was only actualized in the 1590s during Seonjo's reign. A practical need is to respond passively within the limit of its need, which was the case of Taejong. However, several publications of *sutras* and translation works were the results of his religious belief as well as academic purpose. Sejong even composed *Worin cheongang jigok* (月印千江之曲, Songs of the Moon's Reflection on a Thousand Rivers) for the memory of Queen Soheon. According to recent research, he also participated in composing the Buddhist music *Sari yeongeunggi* (舍利靈應記, Records of Divine Response to Sarira) (Bak 1999: 5-8). It certainly seems that his faith was behind his proceedings with Buddhist works as he pushed on despite opposing

public opinion. Although he did not openly display Buddhist beliefs, he himself held fundamental belief in Buddhism. Likewise, although he put forward Confucian moral duties such as loyalty and filial piety as well as his duty to carry out last injunctions and the traditions of his forefathers as his pretext for holding Buddhist ceremonies, it is evident that he was a believer in Buddhism.

At the same time, he was also a monarch who had firm convictions in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. He participated more enthusiastically in *gyeongyeon* (經筵), or discussions with scholars on the Confucian and other Chinese classics, than any other kings before him. He was also interested in collecting, printing, and distributing Confucian and Neo-Confucian academic books till his last years. He sent *Xingli daquan* (性理大全, Great Compendium on Human Nature and Principle), *Yijing* (易經, Book of Changes), *Shujing* (書經, Book of Documents), *Chunqiu* (春秋, Spring and Autumn Annals), and *Shijing* (詩經, Book of Odes) to the governors of Gyeongsang (慶尙), Jeolla (全羅), and Chuncheon (忠清) provinces, and had them carved on wooden plates. Each region then published these books and submitted them to Sejong.<sup>1</sup> Sejong read and discussed these books with his officials. He then sent them to other officials and to local *hyanggos* (鄕校, county schools).<sup>2</sup> Amongst these works, the case that proves Sejong's profound interest in the education of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism was his order to add Hangeul suffixes (吐) to the Chinese Confucian Classics. Kwon Geun had added suffixes to *Book of Odes*, *Book of Documents*, and *Book of Changes* under orders from Taejong. Well aware of

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1. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> (*muja*) day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month in the 9<sup>th</sup> year of Sejong, and on the 28<sup>th</sup> (*imo*) day of the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar month in the 9<sup>th</sup> year of Sejong, he ordered the governors of the Gyeongsang and Jeolla provinces respectively to carve the books on wooden plates. The governor of Gangwon province reported that they had carved *Great Compendium on Human Nature and Principle* and built a pavilion to keep the finished publication; On the first (*imo*) day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of Sejong, the governor of Gyeongsang province printed 50 copies of *Great Compendium on Human Nature and Principle*, which were distributed to officials; On Sejong, the 20<sup>th</sup> (*gyeongsin*) day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of Sejong, the governor of Chungcheong province printed 30 copies of *Shangshu* and 20 copies of *Book of Rites*.
  2. On the 21<sup>st</sup> (*gichuk*) day of the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar month, the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Sejong's reign, Sejong sent two copies each of *Daxue*, *Zhongyong*, *Lunyu*, *Mengzi*, *Shijing*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Rites*, *Book of Changes*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and ten copies of *Elementary Learning* to the county schools in Jeju; On the 14<sup>th</sup> (*gyeongsin*) day of the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month in the 26<sup>th</sup> year of Sejong's reign, he sent *Jinsilu* (Reflections on Things at Hand), *Tongjian gangmu* (Abridged View of the Comprehensive Mirror), and *Jicheng xiaoxue* (Compendium of Elementary Learning) to the county schools in Cheongju.

this, Sejong was concerned of the fact that suffixes to *Liji* (禮記, Book of Rites) and the four Confucian Classics did not yet exist. Adding Hangeul suffixes to the original Chinese text was to provide the basis for interpretation. Sejong was apprehensive of “future scholars teaching their disciples without understanding their original meaning.” He said, “if they could teach with these, will it not be of their benefit,” and alluded to the need to add Hangeul suffixes to the Confucian Classics (Sejong 10/04/18, *gihae*). Sejong thus had such in-depth knowledge of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism that he was able to understand the issue of education and was convinced about the need for its distribution.

Scholars who have studied Neo-Confucianism may emphasize the importance of certain books but when seen from the order of study, *Xiaoxue* (小學, Elementary Learning) would be first on the list. In Joseon, *Elementary Learning* was considered as an introduction to the world of Confucianism among scholars. Whenever suggestions concerning *Elementary Learning* arose, such as including it as a subject of examination for *saengwon* (生員, successful candidates for the minor civil service examination) (Sejong 8/01/27, *imsul*), increasing its printing and distribution, and reinforcing the education of Elementary Learning, Sejong allowed them without hesitation. As for rituals, *Zhuzi jiali* (朱子家禮, Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals) was also important and Sejong promptly accepted a suggestion to apply *Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals* to rites at court. Hence a man who was devoted to the learning of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism and the related works also had enough religious faith to write *sutras* in gold under the directive of Sejong. Sejong once asked the following question to his officials:

His Majesty asked his left and right, “Yun Bong said to Choe Seup, “this country adheres to the theory of Confucianism but does not like Buddhist rites. In China, Buddhist rites are liked by all since Emperor Taizu 太祖, especially by Emperor Hongxi 洪熙 who held the Water-Land ritual 水陸齋 (*suryukaje*; *shuiluzhai* in Chinese), himself. It has been a long time since Buddhism has reached China. It is not because there were no Confucian scholars that they did not know people liked Buddhism in China” (Sejong 12/11/12, *giyu*).

Sejong was talking about the possibility of combining the knowledge of Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism and Buddhist belief. He was also questioning why Confucian scholars were so strongly against Buddhism in Joseon. To his question, his subordinates answered that “the reason the country’s [China’s]

fate did not last long in China was because they liked Buddhism,” but this was not the fundamental answer to his question. Sejong was raising an issue on the thought that equated studying Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism to rejecting Buddhism. This was not an objection that was raised abruptly by Sejong alone. Taejo had also made a similar comment in his time. He took the example of Yi Saek (李穡), a competent Confucian scholar of his time, who was also interested in Buddhism, and remarked that Confucian or Neo-Confucian knowledge and Buddhist belief did not clash. Rather, he reproached that it was wrong to understand the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism as antagonistic.<sup>3</sup> His successor Jeongjong (定宗) also said, “a Buddhist seeks *dao* (道) in compassion and non-killing while a Confucian seeks *dao* (道) in the justice of sparing lives and non-killing. The two are therefore similar to each other,” emphasizing the similarities between Confucianism and Buddhism, which initiated a debate between him and his officials who were against this idea (Han 2001: 56). Concerning this theme, some of the scholars who had studied Neo-Confucianism asserted that Confucianism and Buddhism were ultimately the same in their fundamental spirit. As explained above, Sejong was devoted to the learning and promotion of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, he was a scholar as well as a believer in Buddhism. Therefore, for him to raise such a question shows that he was aware of the coexistence between the knowledge of Neo-Confucianism and Buddhist belief.

During the Goryeo dynasty, Confucianism as political education and Buddhism as religion coexisted naturally in daily life. Even after Neo-Confucianism was introduced, scholars such as Yi Je-hyeon (李齊賢) claimed conformity between Confucianism and Buddhism (Han 2001: 8). At the same time, monks such as Gihwa (己和) who were active during Sejong's era asserted that Buddhism and Confucianism alike helped in politics and everyday life. Despite these arguments that Confucianism and Buddhism could coexist in peace, from a Neo-Confucian perspective, Buddhism was a heresy that needed to be rejected. Why then did Sejong, who must have been well aware of this the-

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3. Taejo Yi Seong-gye, who was a Buddhist, heard in the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month of the first year of his reign that Jo Bak, governor of Yanggwang province, and Sim Hyo-saeng, governor of Gyeongsang province, forbade men in mourning garments to pray at temples. He exclaimed, “Yi Saek has become a great scholar of his time yet he continues to revere Buddha. What books has this group read to make them like Buddhism so much?” (12<sup>th</sup> lunar month of the first year of Taejo, recorded by Im Ja-jo; quoted from Han 2001, 49).

ory, think that Neo-Confucian knowledge and Buddhist belief should not clash?

Don Baker's explanation may be a good reference regarding this question. He argues that before the introduction of Western Christianity in the 1780s, the Western sense of "religion" did not exist in Korea. In other words, religion is a phenomenon that occurred after the introduction of Christianity. As the Western sense of theo-centric religion did not exist in Joseon, there were no serious conflicts between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism at a doctrinal level. A religion could only exist in the system as long as it recognized and respected the existing Confucian order (Baker 2004: 2-5). In this vein, it can be interpreted that Sejong thought that Neo-Confucian knowledge and Buddhist belief were not antagonistic.

On the other hand, if the introduction of Neo-Confucianism reinforced the tendency to prescribe and criticize Buddhism as heresy, Duncan's explanation is also useful. Duncan analyzed that from late Goryeo to early Joseon, the difference or change between traditional Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism was not very clear. It is therefore difficult to find a distinct condition of change from traditional Confucianism to Neo-Confucianism at the beginning of Joseon as they gradually changed over a long period of time (Duncan 1999: 238-262). If we apply Duncan's observation to Sejong's case, it can be interpreted that in a situation where the tendencies of late Goryeo when Confucianism and Buddhism coexisted were carried on, Sejong must have followed the trend of the time. As the religious conflict between Confucianism and Buddhism were weak and as the tendencies of traditional Confucianism remained intact at the time, there is room for interpretation that Neo-Confucianism may have been less rigorous with the rejection of heresy. Sejong's stance on Confucianism and Buddhism can thus be translated as reflecting the trends of the time. However, he reformed Buddhism from a Confucian political perspective and kept his belief as a person in charge for state administration.

### **Criticism on Buddhism by Confucian Scholars and Sejong's Restructuring of the Buddhist Order**

The theoretical aspects of criticism on Buddhism during Sejong's reign are similar to those raised in *Array of Critiques of Buddhism*, to which other actual cases at the time were added. The first point to note concerning the criticism on Buddhism that appear in *Sejong sillok* (世宗實錄, Veritable Records of King



Sejong) is an emotional critique on Buddhism. This is found in the sentence at the beginning of an appeal sent by the Office of the Censor-General (Saganwon) saying, "Buddha in reality is a Western barbarian who has deceived and tempted good people by suggesting a wizardry of karma between sin and blessing" (Sejong 22/09/13, *imja*). It is a contemptuous remark criticizing that as Buddhism came from the West, a barbaric region, it was thus worthless. To those who expected Joseon to rule the eastern region, a religion from the West was meaningless.

Next was the otherworldly tendency of Buddhism. It was criticized as "something that has forgotten the affairs of the world and the state" (Sejong 3/07/02, *imsul*, appeal from the Office of the Censor-General) and "a way to turn away from the world and cut ties from mundane life" (Sejong 21/04/22, *gihae*, joint appeal from the Office of the Censor-General). Buddhism was considered as a religion that renounced or shunned family and the state, which weakened people's duty and interest in political society. This was reflected in earlier criticism that Buddhism was a religion of no father and no monarch. Such tendencies of Buddhism kept people away from labor, induced them to abandon their family instead of creating one, and ultimately led people to betray the orders of the state and the monarch.

Confucian scholars then criticized the way Buddhism encouraged good deeds in order to receive blessings. They contended that it was wrong to lead people to do good by threatening them about the existence of heaven and hell. This is also related to the difference in perspectives on life and death between Confucianism and Buddhism. Since Confucians believed that a person's spirit disappeared from this world upon death, they could not accept the Buddhist view of heaven and hell. They saw that life only existed once, and so they criticized that the theory of heaven and hell was only a lie to deceive innocent people. As such, most Confucian scholars did not recognize Buddhist teachings in general. At the same time, they thought that Buddhism was dangerous due to its similarities with Confucianism. Buddhism emphasized the discipline of the mind and this seemed similar to the Confucian logic that emphasized the cultivation of mind. In this regard, Confucian scholars severely criticized Buddhism as being adversary to the development of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. The officials and scholars who criticized Buddhism at the time presented as the basis of their criticism such theoretical and historical examples as the critiques on Buddhism written by scholars such as Han Yu and Zhu Xi, the collapse of many Chinese dynasties that adopted Buddhism, and the corruption of

Buddhism during the Goryeo dynasty. Based on this theoretical recognition of heresy, actual issues of criticism on Buddhism can be elicited as follows.

First of all, the concern on the monks' increasing political influence should be noted. Even in Goryeo, which was considered as a Buddhist country, there was criticism on the monks' involvement in political issues. There was widespread dissatisfaction with the situation where monks exercised their political power based on their intimacy with the monarch and his family. When Seol Sun, second-rank associate academician (*bujehak*, 副提學) at the Hall of Worthies (Jiphyeonjeon, 集賢殿), said to Sejong "an evil monk disturbed the political affairs causing the collapse of the dynasty" (Sejong 14/03/05, *imja*), he had in mind an example from late Goryeo. The officials in Sejong's time were also aware of this possibility but such concern was not so serious after the foundation of Joseon as it was in Goryeo. With the *guksa* (國師, mentor of the state) and the *wangsa* (王師, king's mentor) system, there was naturally some room for the monks to exercise influence through official contacts with the king under Taejo's reign. However, as Taejong got rid of these titles and no longer appointed *guksa*, political influence from Buddhism lessened. It was only that Sejong and his family showed interest in Buddhism and directly participated in Buddhist activities, which sometimes gave opportunities for a few monks to boast the king's confidence to local bureaucrats and magistrates (Han 2001: 4). However, already in Sejong's time, Buddhist influence had dwindled much from the time of Goryeo. Even those who criticized Buddhism were not so concerned about this issue.

The point of contention in the criticism on Buddhism concerned economic and financial issues. In their appeal, officials defined monks as those who never had to work to be fed (Sejong 3/07/02, *imsul*, appeal from the Office of the Censor-General). They assessed that the number of farmers would decrease if monks increased in number. Thus they were enraged at monks who "took people's food" when the state finance was facing difficulties. As mentioned earlier, the critique of Buddhism did not believe in the effects of Buddhist events that prayed for blessings, and so they deemed the cost put into Buddhist events as a futile element that wasted state finance. Therefore, they urged that all the Buddhist events be completely banned, or if impossible, be economized as much as possible. At the same time, they could not bear the fact that monks ate good food and wore good clothing. They could not accept the monks in light clothing, eating pastry made of oil and honey, and riding horses. They were also furious that monks drank alcohol. They emphasized at the beginning of their critique on

Buddhism that it should be a religion clear of greed and that Buddhist practice should be like an ascetic in the snowy mountains, criticizing the monks' extravagance and lamenting that Buddhism had lost its true spirit.

The focus of criticism from the economic aspect was the management of land and slaves owned by temples. These lands and slaves were related to the problem of decreases in labor responsible for military service and corvée labor. As previous research pointed out, "the expansion of the temple economy at the end of Goryeo" was one of the reasons for disorder in land laws and subsequent intensification of issues concerning land reform. Thus, the reform of the Buddhist order was an urgent issue demanded by state finance, and land was at the core of this reform. In this context, there were continuous demands for reform of the land owned by temples during the reigns of Taejo and Taejong, and Taejong successively limited temple-owned land and slaves. Also, by enacting institutions such as *docheopje* (度牒制, certification of monkhood), he made it more difficult to become a monk in order to maintain a substantial number of citizens and a strong army. Even Taejo, who was in favor of Buddhism, consented to such measures. From Taejo to Taejong, the general trend was the restructuring of the Buddhist order through measures such as reorganizing the size of lands owned by temples and imposing tax on them. As a result of such process, the status of Buddhism was weakened. Restructuring continued on an extensive scale under Sejong's reign. The proposition submitted by the Office of Protocol concerning Buddhist reform on April 5, 1424, the sixth year of King Sejong's reign, suggested reorganizing seven sects to two denominations of Zen (禪) and non-Zen Buddhism, and banning the Seungnoksa (僧錄司, office responsible for Buddhism-related affairs). Heungcheon Temple and Heungdeok Temple (興德寺) were to be responsible for the execution of these measures, with their names being changed to Seonjong Dohoeso (禪宗都會所) and Gyojong Dohoeso (教宗都會所), respectively, which were to take charge of managing matters related to monks. These measures entrusted the management of monks to the organization of monks, which decreased the importance of the task. If we look into the specifics of the unification of two denominations, previous sects Jogye (曹溪), Cheontae (天台), and Chongnam (總南) were put into Seonjong (禪宗) while Hwaem (華嚴), Jaemun (慈恩), Jungsin (中神), and Siheung (始興) were put together as Gyojong (教宗). At the same time, it was suggested that 36 temples should be selected and subordinated to denominations in Seoul and other regions. Subsequently, 4,250 *gyeol* (結, a unit of measure for land) were allocated to 18 temples under Seonjong (禪宗) and 3,700 *gyeol* were given to 18 tem-

ples under Gyojong (教宗), thus reducing the size of land and the number of monks that were to be allocated to each temple.<sup>4</sup>

Sejong took measures to reorganize the Buddhist order following the criticism and public opinion on Buddhism raised by officials and Confucian scholars. He also allowed criticism on heresy and accepted parts of their argument, depending on the circumstances. Examples of such measures include the closing of the shrine in Munsojeon, moving the Buddha of Great Benevolence and sarira to Heungcheon Temple in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of his reign (1433), and stopping accepting felicitations from the monks, who belonged to five sects from both denominations. Sejong agreed to the suggestions made by officials and the contents of appeals on rejecting Buddhism submitted by Confucian scholars. Responding to their opinions, he managed the Hall of Worthies and participated in discussions with scholars on the Confucian and other Chinese classics more enthusiastically than any other kings before him. The way he collected, printed, and distributed academic books to other regions were all measures that reflected the direction of his policy. Along with these academic works, he continuously promoted enlightenment policy to lead the people toward the world of Confucian ethics. Publications such as *Samgang haengsil* (三綱行實, The Three Bonds and Actual Examples of their Practice) are the reflections of such a will. At the same time, he assented to restructuring the Buddhist order so as to improve state finance. Unlike his kind measures that protected the monks and ordered no imposition of severe control over them, against the officials' request to punish monks when they committed petty crimes, he was very clear about policies related to economic issues. And as his forefathers had done, he maintained *docheopje* (度牒制) that limited the ways to become a monk, restricted the construction of new temples, and had parts of temple-owned land and slaves returned to the public. As such, Sejong restructured the Buddhist order.

When we look at the contents of restructuring, however, it was not a policy that denied the existence of Buddhism itself. The oppression of Buddhism under Sejong's reign was to reduce the external size of Buddhism and limit its secular power or influence so that it could remain as a religion, which was its original

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4. A question of ethics was also one of the main issues in the criticism of Buddhism. The opponents of Buddhism saw women visiting temples or meeting monks who were spreading Buddhist teachings as immoral. Therefore, they strongly argued for either the complete destruction of temples or the ban on women's visit to temples.

role. In spite of doing this, Buddhism was still allowed to remain and function as a religion in the world of Confucian politics. And, it was also because he had noted its value and necessity in everyday life from the perspective of state administration.

## Reasoning and Justification behind Sejong's Approval of Buddhism

There were diverse opinions concerning the issue of Buddhist reform in Sejong's era. An appeal submitted by *jehak* (提學, first-rank associate academician), Yun Hoe (尹淮), and others at the Hall of Worthies reflected opinion that strongly asserted the rejection of Buddhism. Based on general theoretical criticism on Buddhism at the time, they defined Buddhism as the "law of barbarians" and urged the destruction of pagodas, burning of *sutras*, and laicization of monks. They also demanded the editing of *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* into a simpler form so that it could be easily distributed to the public and practiced. Following this appeal, Sin Cheo-jung (申處中) and 101 other scholars at the National Confucian Academy (Sungkyunkwan, 成均館) also submitted an appeal on March 12, 1424 (the sixth year of Sejong), which maintained a similar tone. They also criticized staunchly the Buddhist theory and teachings on life and death and listed historical examples of harmful Buddhist influences, all the while demanding a strong response from the king. Their demands included forcing the monks to return to their hometowns and allocating them to the regional military, turning their residences into ordinary housing, burning the *sutras*, assigning land at temples to the military in order to increase provision, distributing temple-owned slaves to government offices, turning the vessels used at temples over to official use, printing carved wooden plates on paper, and subordinating temples in Seoul to government offices and those in the country to post houses in districts and counties or to village schools. While they were adamant in the eradication of Buddhism, they proposed Zhu Xi's family rituals as an alternative to Buddhist rites. Sejong said that he accepted their outspoken advice but by claiming that "it was difficult to reform everything at once" (Sejong 6/03/08, *gapsin*), he did not follow their suggestions.

On the other hand, there were those who approached the issue from a realistic point of view, in a more flexible way. They suggested a scheme to control Buddhism by decreasing the vice of Buddhism. They were aware that although

Buddhism was defined as heresy and its abuses were talked about, it could not be eradicated all of a sudden. On May 9, 1423 (fifth year of Sejong), *daesaheon* (minister) Ha Yeon (河演) and others at the Office of the Inspector-General (Saheonbu) appealed that in order to decrease the harm from Buddhism rather than eliminating it entirely, a measure should be devised to render Buddhism to devote itself to its religious role of practicing the *dao*, of purity. In other words, they wanted Buddhism to return to its original place of religion, to which Sejong answered that “it was not something to be reformed abruptly,” thus accepting their opinion. This in fact was the basis of Buddhist policy during Sejong’s era. With more officials agreeing to the gradual reform of the Buddhist order, Sejong was able to control the speed and content of the reform. As he implemented slower reform than suggestions of complete rejection raised by scholars and officials, he could be evaluated as being passive in his response to Buddhism, although there were also times when he even defended it. What then was the reason behind his attachment to Buddhism, which was being ousted by public opinion?

- 1) There still was a demand on Buddhism during Sejong’s reign. Monks were summoned for various national events at the time, and in *Veritable Records of King Sejong*, a number of records state that monks and shamans took part in the ritual for rain, something that continued before and after Sejong’s reign. As one drought continued, it was the officials who proposed gathering the monks to offer a ritual for rain. If it did rain after the ritual, the monks would ask for recompense. *Suryukjae* (水陸齋), a full-scale Buddhist event, took place for the first time at Jingwansa and was held annually from the fourth year of Taejo (1395) until the tenth year of Jungjong (1515). Sejong also held a grand Water-Land ritual (*suryukaje*) to honor the memory of his forefathers; the ritual commemorating the first anniversary of Taejong’s death was also held at Jingwansa (津寬寺) (Sejong 5/05/09, *mija*). Several temples were officially constructed to pray for the welfare of the royal family and they were also supported by the royal family. This situation was not so much different for ordinary people. Buddhism persisted in everyday life and big part of Buddhist propagation to the people also persisted under political silence. As Buddhism had a certain role in politics and everyday life as a religion, it could not be banned all at once. Confucian scholars and officials were undoubtedly complaining that the “monks are of no benefit to the state and only cause trouble to the world” and that they must be eradicated but it was

impossible to ban Buddhism so abruptly (Sejong 6/02/07, *gyechuk*). Buddhism could be banned but there was no alternative. The alternative, naturally, were Confucian and Neo-Confucian rituals but the spread of Zhu Xi's family rituals was still at its initial stage.<sup>5</sup> Even if rituals such as Zhu Xi's family rituals were disseminated throughout society, they could not entirely replace Buddhist rituals or activities. The leading trend may have changed but to completely replace Buddhism was very difficult in the real world. Therefore, to enforce the eradication of Buddhism as a way of realizing the ideology while disregarding actual condition was also unreasonable.

- 2) It needs to be noted that monks could have been regarded as a labor force in reserve for emergencies. When the officials advised Taejo to rule wisely, they also advised that "public service need to be stopped."<sup>6</sup> The king and his officials proclaimed such people-centered politics found it burdensome to mobilize people for various construction works. In circumstances where it was difficult to mobilize farmers during the farming season, monks, though they may not have been an alternative, could have been regarded as a complementary labor force. It was naturally the monks of low rank who were mobilized. There was, however, a case in the second year of Taejo's reign (1393) when the king demanded participation from

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5. In their criticism on Buddhist rituals, Sin Cheo-jung and another 101 scholars at the National Confucian Academy proposed that "mourning and funerals should all conform to *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* and those who violate this should be punished severely in order to set an example to others" (Sejong 6/3/12, *muja*). On the 25<sup>th</sup> day of the first lunar month, in the seventh year of Sejong, Yu Gye-mun, *jwasagan* (left historiographer) at the Office of the Censor-General, and others submitted an appeal that said, "People's funeral rites should strictly follow *Wengong jiali* (another name for *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals*) and those who violate it should be severely punished." However, when we read the appeal written by Yun Hoe, an academician at the Hall of Worthies, it pointed out that as only few gentry were familiar with *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals*, it was difficult to force people to follow *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals*. What was more, the circumstances were that those who followed *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* were considered as "behaving differently" from others. There was a time when the royal court was also adapting to *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* such as when Yejo suggested that when conducting a ritual at Jongmyo, "the curtains in each chamber should be lifted" following *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* (Sejong 6/05/25, *gihae*), and again Yejo's proposal that warm alcohol should be served at special rituals at Munsojeon, also followed *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* (Sejong 17/01/17, *gichuk*). Hence, despite assertions on the practice of *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals*, Buddhist rituals were widespread in reality.

6. In a memorial that urged him to end public works in construction work as soon as possible (Taejo 7/05/11, *byeongsul*).

monks in the construction of the new capital to Jo Saeng (祖生), who was the head monk at the Naewondang (內願堂, private shrine for prayers and meditations in the royal court). Considering also the remaining records that state the mobilization of monks to the construction and repairs of palaces during the Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592, Sejong must have also considered monks along similar lines.

- 3) There is some research that suggests monks were in charge of special tributary payments. They were mobilized for paper manufacturing and printing in particular and even delivered local specialties. Sejong had special interest in the distribution of Confucian and Neo-Confucian books and he sometimes ordered local governments to produce these books and also sent them the books. During this process, according to the record written on January 26 (*giyu*), 1428 (tenth year of Sejong's reign), which concerns the report from the governor of Gangweon (江原), in publishing and preserving *Sishu daquan* (四書大全, Great Compendium of the Four Books), "monks who volunteered were put to work building the Court Book Depository (Jangseogak), and they were paid when their service was done." As temples were involved in the publication of books until late Joseon, the role of monks must have been taken into consideration.
- 4) Although more research is needed, there is a possibility that monks were put to military purposes during Sejong's reign. It has already been pointed out above that monks were mobilized in the constructions of palaces, and existing records state that they were also responsible for defending the citadel. More clearly, when we consider that monk soldiers such as Hyujeong (休靜) were active during the Japanese Invasion of Korea in 1592, Joseon likely also used monks for military purposes.
- 5) The relationship between foreign affairs and Buddhism needs to be taken into consideration. In *Veritable Records of King Sejong*, it is recorded in detail how often Japan requested books such as the *Lotus Sutra* (法華經). In *Taejong sillok* (太宗實錄, Veritable Records of King Taejong), it is recorded that "when a messenger sent by So Sadashige (宗貞茂, who was the de facto ruler of 15th century Tsushima province) asked for the *Lotus Sutra*" (Sejong 12/05/28, *sinhae*), Hwang Hui (黃喜), minister of the Office of Protocol, said that even though it was rare in Joseon, he made efforts to find it as So Sadashige wanted it earnestly. Afterwards, Japan kept requesting for the Heart Sutra, and Joseon sent it when they could find it (Sejong 11/03/28, *gapsul*), and if they could not, they sent some-



thing else as a gift. The fact that Emperor Ming also had favorable tendencies to Buddhism cannot be ignored. The envoy from Ming during Sejong's reign requested goods related to Buddhism, and the Emperor protected monks from Joseon who had taken exile to China. Such an external environment may not have been the main aspect that encouraged Sejong to actively protect Buddhism at the time. However, it must have acted as a positive environment to protect the Buddhist order.

Among these aspects, Sejong appears to have taken the first aspect, that is, Buddhism's function as a religion as a particularly important factor. It must have been difficult to simply prohibit Buddhism when there was a clear demand for it.

Considering these circumstances and tendencies, it is understandable that Sejong held on to Buddhism with a controlled level of intensity, despite opposition from officials and scholars. Under such circumstances, what logic did Sejong present as he protected Buddhism while appeasing the oppositions from officials and scholars? Also, how did he solve the conflicts between the consolidation of Buddhist religion and Confucian politics, and how did he succeed in combining the two?

- 1) Sejong emphasized his justification in that he was respecting the decisions of his forefathers. Even Taejong, who did not hold positive belief in Buddhism, thought that he had to maintain the Buddhist tendencies in his time as it was his father Taejo's faith. Therefore, he built a temple at Geonwolleung (健元陵), forged and hung a bell at Gaegyeong Temple (開慶寺), and repaired the Buddha's relics(sarira) shrine at the Heungcheon Temple (興天寺), (Taejong 11/03/30, *gyeongin*). Sejong also established that he was "following the will of the forefathers" and justified Buddhist events. At the same time, he also used Confucian ethics and logic such as loyalty and filial piety in his justification for Buddhism, as follows:

In ancient times a man asked Zhu Xi "if the father liked Buddha and his son did not, when the father dies, should the son hold the ritual for his father or not?" Zhu Xi answered, "it is appropriate that the son talked of Buddha's harm to his father in order to abandon misguided beliefs when he was alive. If the father did not follow, it is then proper to hold the ritual for the father." Heungcheon Temple was established by Taejo and was entrusted to Taejong. Although Taejong did not believe in heresy, he con-

tinued the works of Buddha rather than banning them because it was Taejo's will (Sejong 18/06/09, *gapjin*).

With this Sejong ordered the construction of a pagoda at Heungcheon Temple. Afterwards when Heungcheon Temple was repaired and the *Tripitaka* assigned there for preservation, he refuted the resistance from the officials saying that Heungcheon Temple was built by the previous king.

- 2) Next is the logic in the same vein as above. Sejong used to state that "it can not be changed suddenly as it is a tradition" (Sejong 6/02/07, *gyechuk*). However, it was not simply because it was a tradition that it could not be changed abruptly, rather Sejong was concerned with the consequences that could occur when things that had been rooted deeply in everyday life were changed suddenly. Confucian scholars were criticizing that Buddhism was heretical but Sejong understood that it was not easy to convince people of the issue of heresy. It was not that he wanted to maintain it simply because it was tradition. Rather, it was impossible not to consider the subsequent issues of such measures. Officials who asserted the eradication of Buddhism also agreed with Sejong on this point, which is why they suggested controlling and tuning Buddhism so that its perceived negative influence of engaging in politics and concerns with money would not be excessive, rather than taking measures to oust Buddhism overnight (Sejong 3/07/02, *imsul*).

Due to his Buddhist beliefs, Sejong tended to defend Buddhism. However, as seen above, he understood that Buddhism was needed in reality at a national level. He accepted this and used Buddhism in state administration. There were anti-Buddhists who viewed the relationship between Confucian politics and Buddhist beliefs in terms of confrontation, but Sejong admitted and embraced the value of Buddhism at a political level. To him, Confucian politics and Buddhist beliefs were theoretically in a conflict relationship but they could also be combined according to the needs in reality.

## Conclusion

As seen so far, Sejong was a monarch with Buddhist beliefs. He was also a king

who had studied the classics diligently, participated in *gyeongyeon* (經筵) devotedly, and concentrated on the works of Confucian and Neo-Confucian education. Seen within a Confucian framework of expulsion of heresy, he may not appear to have been consistent. However, considering that Taejo and Taejong had also held similar thoughts and that there were many officials who agreed with his thoughts, his case was not so peculiar at the time. His reign was caught in the time of change from Buddhism to Confucianism, and when it came to Buddhism, various tendencies coexisted, such as adamant anti-Buddhist to moderate ones, and to those who even talked about the coexistence of Buddhism and Confucianism.

In such an era, despite his belief in Buddhism, Sejong agreed on the political and economic abuses of Buddhism, and accepted suggestions that Buddhism needed to be restructured in order to solve the issues in state finance. In his later years, he established his personal shrine and showed his interest on the religious level. However, he distinguished his belief from the purpose and need of state policy. This is why he was able to make decisive changes to the Buddhist order so as to facilitate political needs. At the same time, though the advice from officials criticizing the abuse in Buddhism may have been aggressive and given in critical manner, he did not punish these officials. He kept open the communication route that was related to heresy. And following their advice, he limited civilians from becoming monks as much as possible, reorganized the number of temples, and moved part of temple-owned land and slaves to public offices. The reason Sejong restructured the Buddhist order was to overcome the problems subsequent to the secularization of Buddhism, not to deny Buddhism itself. It was in this point that he differed in opinion from the officials who argued for the expulsion of Buddhism concerning the reform of the Buddhist order.

The reason Sejong established such Buddhist reform was because he believed that Confucian or Neo-Confucian knowledge and Buddhist beliefs were not confrontational. Sejong's personal belief, recognition of possible coexistence between knowledge and religion, and a comprehensive awareness of the religious needs that existed at the national and social levels all appeared in his mixed response and attitude toward Buddhism.

Trying to bring Buddhism back to its own place on the basis of recognizing Buddhism at the core of his policy on Buddhism, he was able to accept the religious role of Buddhism that had long since been practiced. He was not willing to ban Buddhism, the religion that he himself and a number of people depended on, simply because of some Neo-Confucian scholars' criticism. The basis of his

policy on Buddhism was to recognize the religion. In addition to the religious role of Buddhism, there were other more realistic and concomitant reasons Sejong held on to Buddhism, such as the possibility to mobilize monks as laborers in an. National and social rituals or events that Buddhism was responsible for were reduced as Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism spread throughout the society. However, Sejong recognized the value of Buddhism at the religious level. Meanwhile, he promoted Confucian or Neo-Confucian learning and ethics education. He reinforced academic functions such as those of the Hall of Worthies and the *gyeongyeon*, and based on this, he published and spread various Confucian and Neo-Confucian books and aimed for a Confucian state while agonizing over the details of education.

In the time of ideological change when Confucianism and Buddhism coexisted and when diverse opinions and conflicts could be expressed, Sejong, rather than openly expressing his belief in Buddhism, maintained a conviction that Confucian and Neo-Confucian knowledge could coexist with Buddhist belief. And while listening to diverse voices concerning the ideological issue, he controlled the speed and content of Buddhist reform. As he possessed Confucian and Neo-Confucian knowledge, he was able to balance his thoughts in policy making that concerned the Buddhist issue. By responding to the issue of Buddhist belief in a flexible and realistic way with clear knowledge and conviction, Sejong was able to minimize confusion at the beginning of state foundation, and was later appraised as the king who laid the foundation for Confucian and Neo-Confucian politics and culture to develop in Joseon.

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