

Articles

# Joseon Kings' Personal Belief in Buddhism and its Political Significance

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## Introduction

The state ideology of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) was Confucianism. Yet many Joseon kings, particularly in the early Joseon period, who supported Confucian values as a state ideology also followed Buddhism as a personal belief. Their Buddhist beliefs were strongly criticized by Confucian scholar-officials as an undesirable behavior for a leader of a Confucian state. Why did Joseon kings support Buddhism? Was it simply because of a personal need for religion? I argue that certainly the Joseon kings' belief in Buddhism was partly due to personal religious need, but it was equally due to the political challenges they faced at the time.

In this paper, I will explain both the Joseon kings' justification and theoretical defense of their personal belief in Buddhism. After that, I will discuss the political significance of the kings' belief in Buddhism. The existing research on the Joseon kings' Buddhist beliefs has focused too much on the description of the kings' Buddhist behaviors and the Confucian scholar-officials' ensuing criticism and thus has failed to notice the political implications. Another problem is the researchers' failure to recognize the prejudice behind the Confucian scholars' negative perception of the Buddhist religion. They regarded the kings' belief in Buddhism merely as a political mistake. I do not intend to look at the Confucian-state kings' Buddhist beliefs from an ideological point of view; instead, I will present their politics as a statecraft exercised by kings who had ultimate responsibility for the survival and prosperity of a state and who, as political actors, were naturally keen on consolidating their power. Through this discussion, I will try to reveal the pragmatic and realistic minds of the Joseon kings, especially with regard to how they approached some controversial religious and ideological issues. In particular, I will focus on the Joseon kings' political authority and its relation to Buddhism.

Until this point, Confucianism had been regarded as the only source of the Joseon kings' political authority. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the

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majority of ordinary people in the Joseon period believed in Buddhism. There were many Buddhist monasteries and monks. In such circumstances even if the government introduced a sudden change in its policies towards religion, it would not easily destroy the existing pattern of people's beliefs. In spite of the Confucian scholar-officials' criticism and the somewhat oppressive policies of the government toward religion, Buddhism continued to prosper in people's daily life.

I argue that the Joseon kings acted practically on the issue of Confucianism and Buddhism for the purpose of consolidating their political authority. They even supported shamanism when they thought that doing so would help to fulfill their political purposes. When Confucian scholars urged the kings to adopt their plea to build a strong Confucian state, the kings followed them with little resistance. But as Buddhist believers, the kings also behaved as ordinary Buddhists normally would. This paper is about such flexible and realistic approaches to Buddhism displayed by the Joseon kings.

## **Joseon Kings' Theoretical Defense of Buddhism**

### *Absence of Theoretical Contradictions between Confucian Politics and Buddhist Beliefs*

Is Confucianism a religion? This is a controversial issue.<sup>1</sup> I must start this discussion with the premise that Confucianism is not a religion in the proper sense of the term, but a social ethic and a political theory. In the famous article, *Bulssi japbyeon* (佛氏雜辯 The Miscellaneous Excuse of Buddhism), Jeong Do-Jeon (鄭道傳, ?-1398) explored theoretical differences between Confucianism and Buddhism, and subsequently rejected the latter on the grounds of its being an other-worldly religion. He criticized that a Buddhist believed in the illusionary

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1. In the 1910s and 1920s, there was a movement for reforming and reviving Confucianism as a religion. Yi Byeong-heon (李炳憲) was one of the central figures of that campaign. However, his efforts were unsuccessful. On the 8th of December 1995, the Seonggyungwan Confucian Union (成均館 儒道會) declared that Confucianism has a religious dimension. Such a declaration was not likely to make the Seonggyungwan more prosperous. For the religious status of Confucianism, see Geum 2003:1-17.

ideas of heaven and hell that never existed (Jeong 1961:264). From the Confucian perspective, there is no life after death. In the same context, the Confucian scholars of later periods, who put Christianity on a par with Buddhism, accused Christian missionaries of propagating an illusionary vision of a heavenly state (Yi n.d.:164).<sup>2</sup> They did not believe in life after death. They instead enjoined people to do their best on this side of life, by such acts as demonstrating loyalty to the king and the state as well as filial piety to their parents.

Yet for Buddhists, the goal of life is to reach the ultimate state of enlightenment. Even in theory, Confucianism did not satisfy the metaphysical need of presumed innate human religiosity whereas Buddhism and Christianity easily did so. Insisting on the ideological monopoly of Confucianism throughout Joseon, some Confucian scholars pursued their lives without religion. They believed that a life without religion was not only possible but even more desirable. They thought that if people practiced the Confucian principle of Li (理 principle/pattern), everything would go well with them, including self-cultivation, family ethics, and the relationship between kings and subjects.

But there were also other Confucian scholars who did not share the typical Confucian perspective on religion. Some scholars accepted that people, including themselves, acutely need religion in their daily life. But this group failed to prove how Confucianism and religion can coexist peacefully. They just kept Buddhist beliefs without paying much attention to possible contradictions between the two.

Confucianism as a political ideology and Buddhism as a religion coexisted without any problem during the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392). Moreover, at the time of the founding of the new dynasty, Buddhism was the most popular religion. Then only a few educated scholars or students had studied Confucianism, and only a small number of academically enthusiastic Confucian scholars were interested in the newly imported Neo-Confucianism. Even though the Joseon government declared Confucianism the only recognized state ideology, many officials still adhered to the Buddho-Confucian view of the older Goryeo while most ordinary people remained loyal to their Buddhist beliefs. At the beginning of the Joseon period, some Neo-Confucian scholar-officials accused Buddhism of being a heresy. Yet, on the other hand, they needed Buddhism. During the early years of the dynasty, ritual ceremonies for national events could

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2. Yi Hang-Ro (李恒老, 1792-1868).

not be performed without incorporating some Buddhist elements in them.<sup>3</sup> Here Buddhism played a role that Confucianism could not. Confucianism was not ready to take over all the roles that Buddhism as a religion had played.

Because of the views of many officials who continued to believe in Buddhism or at least recognized its value,<sup>4</sup> Buddhism could not be ignored. The most important thing, however, was that ordinary people needed a religion in their daily life. Also, for those Confucian scholars who still believed in Buddhism as their predecessors had before them, the theoretical contradiction involved in a Confucian scholar praying to Buddha did not cause any trouble. They never regarded possible theoretical contradictions as a serious problem.<sup>5</sup> When a Confucian scholar-official advised King Taejo (太祖, r.1392-98)<sup>6</sup> to abandon his Buddhist beliefs, King Taejo scolded him as follows, put rather literally to convey the original mood of the conversation.

“What kind of Confucianism have you studied so that you know so little? Even a leading Confucian Scholar in Goryeo, Yi Saek (李穡, 1328-96), believed in Buddhism” (*Taejo sillok* 1392:6/12/1).<sup>7</sup>

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3. King Taejo [*Taejo Sillok* 1394:8/5/3], King Taejong [*Taejong Sillok* 1413:2/7/13], King Sejong [*Sejong Sillok* 1436:6/6/18], King Danjong [*Danjong Sillok* 1454:27/7/2], King Sejo [*Sejo Sillok* 1457:27/5/3], King Seongjong [*Seongjong Sillok* 1474:21/6/5], and other Kings of the early Joseon dynasty asked Buddhist monks to take part in the ritual for rain (祈雨祭). Buddhist monks performed the Buddhist ritual, Water-Land ritual (水陸齋), to comfort the victims of dynastic changes [*Taejo Sillok* 1395:24/2/4], to honor the memory of royal forefathers [*Jeongjong Sillok* 1399:19/10/1], to pray for safety from natural disasters [*Taejong Sillok* 1401:2/10/1], and to wish the royal family good health [*Taejong Sillok* 1408:28/1/8].
  4. Gweon Geun (權近, 1352-1409) was one of the leading advocates of Neo-Confucianism, but his brother was a high-ranking monk. See Kalton 1985:90-120.
  5. A famous Confucian scholar Kim Su-on (金守溫, 1409-1481) argued in the 1430s, following his Goryeo predecessors, that there was no fundamental difference between Buddhism and Confucianism. In a number of writings he mentioned that kings sponsored the construction of Buddhist monasteries. He argued that Buddhism would be a form of the highest political virtue for kings. See his *Sig-u Jip* (Book 2, Vol. 9:75). He supported King Sejong and his princes' Buddhist beliefs (Kim 2010:255-56).
  6. King Taejo (太祖: the posthumous temple name of Yi Seong-gye 李成桂) was an interesting case. Even though, as the founder of the Joseon dynasty, he followed Confucian scholar-officials about adopting Confucianism as the state ideology, he was personally a devout Buddhist.
  7. Of course, Yi Saek's Buddhist faith was well known. But as a Confucian scholar-official, he had to point out that Buddhism was a heresy. Sometimes he commented on the positive sides of Buddhism, e.g., that Buddhism enlightened people's souls (Koh 2006:385-86). He was a Confucian scholar and a Buddhist at the same time, but he had no solid theory about how Buddhism as a religion and Confucianism as a social ethic and political theory could coexist.

For King Taejo, a king of a Confucian state himself, belief in Buddhism did not create any contradiction. He accepted the Confucian criticism of Buddhism, but merely as a political and rhetorical device designed to demolish the legacy and legitimacy of the Goryeo Dynasty and for the justification of the newly founded dynasty. In the end King Taejo followed the advice given by the abovementioned subject, but he appointed a Buddhist monk as his royal preceptor, following the old Goryeo practice (*Taejo sillok* 1392:9/10/1).<sup>8</sup> Also, he maintained the office of the state preceptor (*Taejo sillok* 1394:8/9/3).<sup>9</sup> For him, the Confucian scholars' objection to Buddhism could be tolerated insofar as it remained as an academic matter, but their demand for the abolition of Buddhism in real life or as a policy tool could not be accepted. He himself visited a Buddhist monastery to hear his mentor monks' sermons and let monks hold a celebration party for the construction of a five-story pagoda at Yeonbok monastery (演福寺) (*Taejo sillok* 1393:28/3/2). Also for the celebration of his birthday, he pardoned prisoners who committed slight crimes and provided food to 1,500 monks (*Taejo sillok* 1393:11/10/2). He also held his ancestors' memorial celebration at the Seogwang Monastery (釋王寺) where he had once dreamed of becoming a king of a new dynasty (*Taejo sillok* 1398:19/8/7). As for Buddhism, King Taejo tried to maintain the same policy as before.<sup>10</sup> King Sejong (世宗, r.1418-50)<sup>11</sup> also had a similar view: that Confucianism as a political ideology and Buddhism as a religion do not contradict each other. He thought that Confucianism and Buddhism could coexist peacefully since they were supposed to play a different

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Such theories were developed by Buddhist monks in later periods.

8. King Taejo appointed Jacho who is also known as Muhakdaesa (自超, 無學大師, 1327-1405), who was a famous monk and King Taejo's political advisor, as a royal preceptor (王師).
9. King Taejo appointed Jogu (祖丘) as a state preceptor (國師).
10. Although King Taejong (太宗, r.1400-18) was widely known for his anti-Buddhist policies, such as abolishing monasteries and seizing their lands and slaves, he appointed a Buddhist monk to tutor his crown prince. See Yi Sang-baek 1984:104-82.
11. King Sejong, who invented the Korean alphabet (*Hunmin jeongeum*), was a famous Buddhist. But he also promoted Confucianism. The majority of his Confucian scholar-officials respected him as a Confucian king, but they were very critical of his Buddhist beliefs. Also the refutation for what he had done for Buddhism was not good. "King Sejong, despite his own private respect for Buddhism, contributed to the rapid decline in Buddhist institutional fortunes. In 1423, the seven schools of T'aejong's time were amalgamated into two: the Sŏnjong, or Meditational School (combining the Chogye, Ch'ŏnt'ae, and Ch'ongnam schools), and the Kyojong, or Doctrinal School (amalgamating the Hwaŏm, Chan, Chungsin, and Sihŏng schools)" (Buswell 1999:139).

role. Because Confucianism entailed no religious theory, Buddhism could compensate for this crucial deficiency. For this reason, King Sejong insisted that Confucianism did not clash with Buddhist beliefs (Pu 2005:27-32).

### *Buddhism as a Tradition*

Joseon kings were very reticent about changing the existing practices and institutions. They cherished them as their own traditions inherited from their predecessors. They thought that changing the institutions would be regarded as a challenge to earlier kings' authority. Also, they knew that frequent changes of institutions and policies would result in the weakening of their kingly authority. King Mungjong (文宗, r.1450-52), who succeeded the famous Buddhist King Sejong, explained his view on Buddhism as follows.

“Even though Buddhism is contrary to the ethics of Confucianism, ordinary people have had Buddhist faith for a long time. So I will not suddenly change the policy on Buddhism” (*Munjong sillok* 1451:17/4/1).

Often such conservative tendencies led to conflicts between the kings and their ideologically radical Confucian scholar-officials. Active in introducing Confucian ideals of politics to justify his palace revolution (中宗反正), King Jungjong (中宗, r.1506-44) was responsive to the demands of the Confucian scholar-officials for punishing or removing corrupt conservative officials. But sometimes there were exceptions, as they were exemplified in his resistance to the demolition of the Daoist Office Sogyekseo (昭格署 National Taoist Temple) in the Palace. A high official asked King Jungjong to endorse the abolition of the office.

“Although Sogyekseo was established a long time ago, it is heretical and wasteful ... so it should be abolished.” To this King Jungjong replied, “I agree that the number of officers should be reduced. But Sogyekseo is listed in the *Gyeonguk daejeon* (經國大典 National Legal Code). Old laws and institutions of government should not be changed lightly” (*Jungjong sillok* 1511:15/5/6).<sup>12</sup>

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12. In response to the repeated requests from the Confucian scholar-officials, King Jungjong abolished Sogyekseo (昭格署) temporarily (*Jungjong sillok* 1518:3/9/13). But he ordered its restoration later (*Jungjong sillok* 1522:14/12/17).

Because of the conservative tendency in regard to legacies and traditions, Joseon kings were also conservative with policies about Buddhism. They accepted the Confucian scholar-officials' accusations about the moral corruption of Buddhists and the problem of expensive monastery construction. The kings agreed that such cases duly required correction. But they did not deny the essential value that Buddhist ideas and practices possessed as a religion. For Joseon kings, Buddhism was the very tradition that their ancestors upheld and hence it should be preserved at all costs.

### **Joseon Kings' Political Authority and Buddhism: Buddhism as a Source of Legitimacy**

At the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, Buddhism was treated as a symbol of the Goryeo dynasty. The criticism of Buddhism was intensified by various political ulterior motives as well as by the theoretical refutation of religion by Confucianism. Confucian scholar-officials carried out these criticisms. But the first King of Joseon, King Taejo, was not so enthusiastic in criticizing the Goryeo dynasty and Buddhism. According to Confucian political ethics, he had been clearly a subject of Goryeo kings, so he was just acting like an ordinary and humble figure in this regard. Of course his goal was to take over the kingship of the Goryeo dynasty, but at least in appearance he tried to obey the sacred Heavenly Ordinance (天命). When he became the founder of a new dynasty, he tried to coordinate the positions of all political, social, and religious groups in the emerging new order. But a minority of Confucian scholars, who formed the most active part of the intellectual force, tried to change the society into a Confucian kingdom. They provided a theory of political authority for the kings of Joseon. In the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty (朝鮮王朝實錄), the legitimacy of dynastic change is described in Confucian terms and perspectives (*Taejo sillok* 1392:17/7/1). The key concept was the command of the Mandate of Heaven. In Confucianism, this concept means that the support of ordinary people is mandatory for the new king. But if we put too much weight on the Confucian terms and perspectives in the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty, we may fail to notice the ideological diversity in the politics of the Joseon dynasty. The kings of the Joseon dynasty and their supporters tried to justify the dynastic change and the



new political authority of the kings in many ways.<sup>13</sup> We can find one in the record of the first day of *Taejo sillok* (17<sup>th</sup> of July, 1392 in the lunar calendar). There are many mysterious stories and predictions propagated along the line of geomancy that foretold the future kingship of Yi Seong-gye.<sup>14</sup>

Until now there has been a fair amount of research done on the theories of Confucianism and its role in justifying the Joseon kingship. But the fact that Joseon kings used Buddhism politically has not gotten much attention. There was heavily prejudiced Confucian criticism of Buddhism, and Buddhism was also the state-sponsored religion of the Goryeo dynasty. This has led current scholars to believe that Buddhism was irrelevant to the justification of kingship in the Confucian state. Here we take a revisionist position: Buddhism was an important element in constituting the basis of Joseon kings' political authority. However, nowhere in the Annals of the Joseon Dynasty is found the description of Joseon kings as Chakravartin (wheel-turning) kings or Maitreyas (彌勒) as a way of legitimizing their political power. The Chakravartin king is the symbol of the Buddhist politics of virtue and law. That a Chakravartin king rules by righteousness rather than by force is a very useful and powerful notion in consolidating the legitimacy of political power. Maitreya is regarded as a kind of future savior, so an incumbent leader tends to claim that he is a Maitreya. But these kinds of Buddhist expressions to justify political authority or political changes were not terms used in the Joseon Dynasty. The fact that Confucian political theory constituted an important rationale for the political authority of Joseon kings was evident. At the same time many tales relating to Joseon monarchs, simple and yet convincing, were created alongside the continuation of Buddhism and circulated among people. Let us look at some of such stories.

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13. Confucian scholars, who were involved in the dynastic revolutionary, were more practical and realistic than Confucian scholars who were resistant to the new dynasty.

14. The stories include: ① "The stories appeared in Yi Seong-gye's dream. He gave Yi Seong-gye a gold scale and said, "With this, you rule the country right"; ② "A prophecy book (書雲觀 所藏 秘記) that told that Yi Seong-gye would become a king was found"; ③ "When Yi Seong-gye became a king, a dead tree was regenerated. People thought this was the sign of the rise of a new dynasty"; ④ "A fortune teller predicted that Yi Seong-Gye was going to be a future king" (*Taejo sillok* 1392:17/71).

### *A Buddhist Monk's Prediction: King Taejo would become King*

A mysterious story that Yi Seong-gye would become the first king of a new dynasty is recorded in *Taejo sillok*.

“Taejo had a dream while sleeping. That dream was the sign of his becoming a new king. He asked the monk Muhak who had been self-cultivating in a nearby crypt, about the meaning of his dream. After becoming the founding king of the new dynasty Joseon, King Taejo built a monastery and named it Seogwang Monastery (釋王寺). He planted a pine tree and a pear tree there. King Sukjong (肅宗, r.1674-1720) and King Yeongjo (英祖, r.1724-76) set stone monuments inscribed by themselves at that site. Jeongjo (正祖, r.1776-1800)<sup>15</sup> also set another stone monument and engraved his letters into the monument” (*Jeonjo sillok* 1791:17/4/15).

“Jeongjo mentioned that Seogwang Monastery was the sacred place where the Joseon dynasty started, and so it was more precious than any other place” (*Jeonjo sillok* 1791:6/5/15).

Joseon kings repeatedly cited the sentence written on the stone monument in Seogwang Monastery: “King Taejo will become the first king of a new dynasty” (*Yeongjo sillok* 1758:17/4/34). And they emphasized the need to keep such records and preserve the temple as a sacred site.

### *King Taejo's 100 Days of Prayer and Becoming the Founder of a New Dynasty*

At County Namhae (South Gyeongsang Province 慶南 南海) on the southern coast of Korea, there was a specific site-related legend that told how King Taejo became a king after 100 days of prayer and with the help of Buddha.

“The high monk Wonhyo (元曉, 671-686) built Bogwang Monastery

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15. King Jeongjo who had firm conviction in a civilized world by Confucianism and Confucian politics prided himself as a Confucian scholar-king. But interestingly, sometimes he took a favorable stance toward Buddhism. He built a Buddhist monastery to commemorate his father, who was tragically killed by his father King Yeongjo.

and named the mountain Bogwang Mountain (普光山). Then Yi Seong-gye, after spending 100 days there praying for success in establishing a new dynasty, changed its name to Geumsan (錦山 Geum Mountain). He promised to cover it in silk if he succeeded. ... the Cloister of Hermitage Bori (one of the three Buddhist sacred grounds for praying) on the summit of Geum Mountain [is] one of the three most revered places in Korea... (Culture/tourism)<sup>16</sup>

Since Buddhism was popular largely as a religion whereas Confucian elites studied and practiced Confucianism as a political theory, we can say that only a small number of educated people had a sound knowledge of Confucianism and its ethics. The majority of the population, and even many officials, adopted Buddhism as a religion. They just repeated what the ancestors had done. Also at that time the influence of Neo-Confucianism was creeping into the circle of Confucian scholars. But many scholars who were working in the vein of Neo-Confucianism maintained the traditional Confucian standpoint towards Buddhism.

Acutely aware of this complex ideological landscape, Joseon kings tried to make a compromise between all the divergent religious and academic tendencies. In the case of more radical Confucian intellectuals, the kings followed their advice regarding the matter of justifying the building of a new dynasty and the legitimacy of Confucian kings' political authority. On the other hand, in order to secure support from Buddhists, the kings acted like Buddhists. They had no urgent need to reject the existing religious force in the society. In politics, they respected the Confucian scholars who urged the construction of a strong bureaucratic government based on Confucian political values. In the religious realm, the kings were considerate to Buddhists. In other words, towards the Confucian scholars, they acted as a Confucian king, and towards Buddhists they acted as a Buddhist king.

The kings tried to balance between conflicting interests in order to strengthen their political authority. In the mind of Confucian scholars, the crucial evidence of a Confucian king was to be manifested by whether he had the will to build a strong Confucian bureaucracy. But for Buddhists, a true sign

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16. Also see Heo Mok:128.

of a Buddhist king was his personal Buddhist beliefs, attendance at Buddhist ceremonies, and support for the publication of Buddhist scriptures (Nam 2002:78).<sup>17</sup> The Confucian scholars were jealous of the kings' cordial attention to Buddhists. But the kings maintained the policy of standing in the center, or more precisely speaking, standing above, as a skillful political coordinator would do.

### **Joseon Kings' Personal Buddhist Beliefs and the Efficiency of Kingship: A Political Use of Buddhism**

This author thinks that the kings' Buddhist beliefs had a positive effect on securing political stability in the newly established dynasty. If the kings had oppressed Buddhism as a heretical belief, there would have been strong resistance from the people. The kings wished to minimize political resistance at any cost. They just wanted a successful transition of kingship from the Goryeo Dynasty to their own lineage. But some of the politically active Neo-Confucian scholar-officials, in the early Joseon period, wanted changes in all aspects- political, social, and ideological. They tried to build an ideal kingdom. Clearly there was a difference between the kings, who were state leaders, and the Confucian scholar-officials, who were fundamentally idealists. The kings' Buddhist beliefs, kept in low profile, helped to forge a strong alliance between the kings and Buddhists, who constantly worried about the radical changes brought about under the government led by Confucian scholar-officials.

Here we also need to consider the intellectual diversity among the Confucian scholars.<sup>18</sup> During the late Goryeo-early Joseon period, some Confucian scholars joined the forces which built the new dynasty and attacked Buddhism as the main source of political, economical, and social corruption in the previous era. The Confucian scholars who joined the new dynasty tried to legitimize the dynastic change. They exploited Confucianism as a good

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17. In order to pray for the longevity of kings and princes, the royal family supported the publication of Buddhist Scriptures.

18. There is evidence to suggest that the intellectual landscape of the Koryŏ-Chosŏn transition, too, was quite complex. The majority of the early Chosŏn officials, as Deuchler has pointed out, were not committed to Ch'eng-Chuo Learning vision of society and politics" (Duncan 1999:240).

ideological weapon to attack the corruption of the Goryeo dynasty which they attributed to excessive spending by the Buddhists and political instability brought about by exploitive tax policies. In addition, they criticized many forms of Buddhist influence on politics, as seen typically in the case of Sin Don (辛旽, ?-1371).

At the end of the Goryeo dynasty, Confucian scholars were divided into two groups. Jeong Mong-ju (鄭夢周, 1337-92), a towering figure in the Neo-Confucian circle of the late Goryeo period, was against the political change. Ironically, his resistance rested upon one of the Confucian teachings that a good Confucian subject should be loyal to the existing kingship alone. The conservative group, led by Jeong Mong-ju, criticized the Confucian officials who supported the coup d'état from the standpoint of Confucian ethics. They accused the latter group of having seriously violated the Confucian morality on the desirable relationship between a king and a subject. Yet, on the other hand, Confucianism also offered itself as an ideological platform on which the Joseon Dynasty was justified. This means that even Confucian scholars who participated in the building of the new dynasty were not motivated purely by philosophical-ethical motives. For them, Confucianism was a lofty system of ethics, but also a convenient means to justify their actions.

In this fluid situation, the kings had no need to create enemies by pursuing rigid ideologically-oriented policies. With Confucian scholars, the kings followed their idealist Confucian vision, and let them freely create a new Confucian government as it was envisaged in the *Zhouli* (周禮). With Buddhists, the kings shared their Buddhist beliefs and let them enjoy a sense of political security and a perceived emotional unity with the head of state. Although a number of Confucian scholar-officials attacked the king's dubious attitude, he knew that he needed to balance the conflicting interests of all parties to secure political stability and boost his political authority.

Theoretically, at least from a Neo-Confucian perspective, a Buddhism-believing Confucian scholar was a contradiction of terms. Yet many Confucian scholars believed in Buddhism, and they did not regard this as a problem. The kings were in a similar situation. They did not explain why they held their Buddhist beliefs, nor did they need to respond actively to the criticisms raised by radical Confucian scholars. In short, they took the policy of no-comment towards the scholars. Clearly the kings thought that Confucian scholars who held firm convictions in Confucianism would not be persuaded about the value

of Buddhist ideas and practices. There would be no possibility of compromise with the Confucian scholars, so the kings preferred the policy of passive response, while keeping their Buddhist beliefs and practices in a private sphere.

The early Joseon kings, as political coordinators between competing ideological groups, tried to reflect all ideological and religious elements in society. These attempts were aimed at strengthening their political authority. This approach not only helped to establish the legitimacy of the new regime, as we have seen so far, but enhanced the efficiency of their governance. In maintaining amicable attitudes toward Buddhists, Joseon kings facilitated the cooperation of the Buddhist leaders with the government. For example, Seosan (西山, 1520-1604), who was an eminent monk and a commander general of the Buddhist military forces during Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592, enjoined Buddhist monks to understand "not only their own tradition but also its intersections with the dominant ideology of their time, Confucianism" (Buswell 1999:147). He provided the theoretical justification for the Buddhists' cooperation with the government. Consequently, a number of Buddhist monks organized monk-armies to wage guerrilla wars against Japanese soldiers during Hideyoshi's invasion. They constructed mountain castles to defend militarily important areas. They also manufactured and supplied a large amount of war material to the government. We should think about whether the early Joseon kings' amicable policy towards Buddhists also helped to prevent possible resistance to the government from this sector. While denying scholar-officials' requests to oppress Buddhism, King Mungjong explained why a moderate response was the answer.

"If we expel monks with a sudden show of force, this will cause a lot of disturbance" (*Munjong sillok* 1451:17/4/1).<sup>19</sup>

There were many kings who were considerate to monks.<sup>20</sup> Whenever Confucian

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19. During the Joseon dynasty, civil rebellion broke out several times, including the Hong Gyeong-rea Rebellion (1811-12) and the Civil Uprising of Jinju (1862). But rebellions by Buddhist monks were almost nonexistent. There was only one case, but it happened on a small scale. In 1688 a monk named Yeohwan (呂還) and his followers, saying that the Maitreya world was coming, organized a group rebellion (*Sukjong sillok* 1688:1/8/14).

20. In the Joseon dynasty, there were many kings who were oppressive toward Buddhists. King Taejong (r.1400-1418), King Seongjong (r.1468-1494), and the despot Yeonsan-gun (r.1494-1506) were such cases. King Taejong prohibited Buddhist rituals at court, reduced the

officials urged for oppressive policies towards monks, the king always took the opposite stance. Typically, the kings' response would be, "You are right, but..."<sup>21</sup> The kings did not oppose the Confucian scholar-officials' claims, but they did not accept all their demands. Actually, the kings neither accepted nor rejected the scholar-officials' demands. Rather than putting the question in the ideological framework of Confucianism, the kings tried to find a solution that was best for their kingly authority and for the state. And always, the kings were trying to protect the monks. So, sometimes the kings' personal Buddhist beliefs and the amicable relationship with the monks helped to enhance the efficiency of government policies during the Joseon period.

Joseon kings took a very practical approach to statecraft. They handled the problem of Buddhism with great political prowess. Buddhist monks were also their subjects and needed as much care and protection as all other non-Buddhist subjects did within their kingdom. But Confucian scholars approached the same issue ethically and ideologically. In their view, Buddhist monks were merely useless beings who succumbed to a heretical belief. Such Confucian prejudice toward Buddhism was persistent among Confucian scholar-officials. Even during the Japanese invasion, some Confucian scholar-officials did not positively receive the mobilization of voluntary armies among Buddhist monks.<sup>22</sup> But King Seonjo (r.1567-1608) acknowledged the voluntary Buddhist armies as a proper national

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number of monasteries and monks, and expropriated the lands and slaves of monasteries (Buswell 1999:138-39). King Seongjong "prohibited the founding of new monasteries or ordination of monks" (Buswell 1999:140). Yeonsan-gun "disestablished the two remaining monasteries in the capital, the headquarters of the Sŏn and Kyo schools, and abolished the ecclesiastical examination system" (Buswell 1999:140). So my hypothesis that Joseon kings were considerate to Buddhist monks would be controversial. I think that the Joseon kings were more conservative and considerate than Confucian scholar-officials. They were reluctant to change existing institutions and rituals. King Jungjong, who was an ideological supporter to the fundamentalist Confucian scholar-officials, did not agree to policy of the abolition of the Daoist temple Sogukseo at court. King Taejong was also ideologically conservative. He expressed his sincere sympathy to the Buddhist monks who were mobilized to the national work. (*Taejong Sillok* 1401:1/11/17). Even though Taejong maintained an oppressive policy toward Buddhists, he tried in other ways to be considerate to them.

21. *Sejong sillok* 1442:3/4/24. "汝等之言雖是...然"等

22. At that time, Confucian scholar-officials' evaluation of the military power of Buddhist monk armies were varied. Yu Seong-ryeong (柳成龍, 1542-1697) advised King Seonjo (r.1552-1608) to appoint Gkwak Je-u (郭再祐, 1552-1617) as the director of the province and let him organize the monk-army (Yu n.d.:90). People including Gkwak Je-u, a Confucian scholar and a volunteer army general, and others were cooperative with Buddhist monk-armies.

army. The Buddhist monks rushed to help the government in a time of crisis since the kings previously had adopted a policy of active accommodation. On the part of the Buddhists, their support during the war was an attempt to save Joseon, even if its official ideology defined their state as a “Confucian” polity.

This author thinks that the leading Buddhist monks were aware that the kings kept Buddhism close to their heart, and so the kings were not their enemies. In giving much needed support to the government, the Buddhists expected a favorable policy towards Buddhism in return, or at least hoped for less oppressive policies. Indeed, through various supportive actions, the Buddhist monks provided Joseon kings with a rationale for endorsing favorable policies to the religion. The kings were keenly aware of the political use of Buddhism as well as its value as a personal religion.

At the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, ideological conflicts between Buddhist kings and Confucian scholar-officials were not serious enough to cause any damage to their kingly authority. Furthermore as Buddhism was losing its political, economic, and social influence following the inauguration of the new dynasty, the Confucian scholar-officials became more tolerant of Buddhism. Under their tacit acknowledgement of the Buddhist role, Buddhists kept playing their religious role quietly.

In addition, there were attempts to instate Buddhist officials in the central government. The dowager queen Mungjeong (文定王后, 1501-65), the widow of King Jungjong and the regent for the juvenile King Myeongjong (r.1545-67), had strong Buddhist beliefs. She supported the reinstatement of the system of official Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> However her death brought the planned policy to a sudden demise (Kim 2010:25-52). One might argue that such a pro-Buddhist policy was an isolated event which would not have received any consideration if there were no personal involvement by devout Buddhists such as the dowager queen Munjeong. However, this incident can also be interpreted as evidence of the continuing influence of Buddhism throughout the first half of the Joseon period.

The intended change of policy toward Buddhism by Queen Munjeong was in fact a significant concession on the part of Confucian scholar-officials.

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23. “In 1552 the monastic examinations were reinstated, for what turned out to be the last time during the Chosŏn dynasty, as a means of recruiting new monks in to the order” (Buswell 1999:140).



Although they still denied the basic value of Buddhism, now to a certain degree they acknowledged its value as a popular religion and the contributions made by Buddhists to the general welfare of the kingdom. After the period of Queen Munjeong, the kings' Buddhist beliefs were no longer a political issue. A king also needed a kind of solace on the weary journey of his soul. As a result, the kings and the royal family freely supported the publication of Buddhist scriptures hoping that this would bring good fortune and a long life.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The early Joseon kings were loyal to the ideals of Confucian politics and yet were devout Buddhists. The coexistence of the two spheres was unacceptable to orthodox Neo-Confucian scholars who believed in the ideological supremacy of Confucianism while rejecting all other forms of thoughts and beliefs as heterodoxy. Naturally there arose conflicts between the kings' pragmatic approach to policy and the Confucian scholars' ideological fundamentalism. But any aggravation of conflict was avoided by the kings' moderate or non-existent policy towards the Confucian scholars' critical stance. Meanwhile, Joseon kings were able to maintain their Buddhist beliefs in the private realm.

To sum up the argument, early Joseon kings tried to be a Confucian king vis-a-vis Confucian scholars, and a Buddhist king vis-a-vis the Buddhist population. In this sense, the kings were most sensitive practitioners of *real politik*. They put the priority on how to consolidate political power and secure the survival of the state. To achieve this goal, they tried to find a compromise between the conflicting interests of various sectors of the society. The kings acted as coordinators between competing political and religious groups in the society. They approached Confucianism instrumentally by standing above the moral framework of Confucianism while using it as a political theory to boost their political authority and run the state effectively. In addition, their Buddhist beliefs were a political representation of the Buddhist interests of the society as well as a genuine expression of personal religious sentiment. Such a pragmatic approach

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24. The tradition of the royal family supporting the publication of Korean scriptures continued until the end of the Joseon Dynasty.

to Buddhism led Buddhist adherents, whether commoner or elite, to follow government policies without strong resistance and to respect the kingly authority.

This is not to say that Buddhism or the personal Buddhist beliefs of the kings played as important a role as Confucianism did in the formation of the political authority of the kings. The point here is that early Joseon kings' Buddhist beliefs were instrumental to consolidating their political authority. The kings undoubtedly owed much of their political realism and their role as an ideological coordinator to the Confucian theory of good politics elaborated by the scholar-officials, but it is also evident that the kings incorporated Buddhism as an important factor in the political process just as they held it as a path to personal salvation.

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## Abstract

The official state ideology of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) was Confucianism. But many Joseon kings who held convictions about Confucian values as precepts for state management also held personal Buddhist beliefs. The Joseon kings' Buddhist beliefs and practices were strongly criticized by the Confucian scholar-officials as undesirable behaviors for leaders of a Confucian state. Despite of these criticisms, the Joseon kings did not give up their Buddhist beliefs. My paper consists of three parts. First, I explain the Joseon kings' theoretical defense of Buddhism and the cases of Joseon kings' personal Buddhist beliefs and practices. Second, I focus on the sources of the Joseon kings' political authority and Buddhism as a source of legitimacy. Third, I explain the flexible and realistic policies on Buddhism, the Kings' amicable response to Buddhism, and the efficiency of kingship through the political use of Buddhism. Confucianism was regarded as the only source of a king's political authority in a Confucian state. But the fact that many Joseon people believed in Buddhism could not be ignored. Buddhism also could be a useful element to increase the people's religious and political ties to kings who believed in Buddhism. I think that the Joseon kings knew this fact and used it politically. Confucianism was the dominant element of the kings' political authority and the sources of the legitimacy of Joseon Dynasty. But the kings' Buddhist beliefs and amicable policies to Buddhism have political significance in that they contributed to the formation of people's friendly feelings toward the kings and the integration of national unity.

**Keywords:** Joseon Kings' Buddhist Belief, Joseon Kings' Political authority, Joseon Kings' Political legitimacy, Political stability

