

Yi Seong-gye and the Fate of the Goryeo Buddhist System

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Abstract

The story of how Neo-Confucian ideologues swept away Buddhism from the corridors of power after the establishment of the Joseon dynasty in 1392 is well known. Yet this dominant framework of interpretation has such an air of inevitability that it obscures many of the continuities that can be seen in the new dynasty's attitudes to Buddhism. In his pronouncements on Buddhism and his deployment of Buddhist ritual, Yi Seong-gye, founder of the Joseon dynasty, displays some remarkable similarities with the founder of Goryeo, Wang Geon. Therefore, this article aims to reconsider Yi's personal and official relation to Buddhism in order to explain the persistence of Buddhism in Joseon public life. Assuming that Yi's attitudes were shaped by the Goryeo Buddhist worldview, his deployment of Buddhist rituals and monks, and his reference to Buddhist norms, can be seen essentially as a continuation of the Goryeo system. But Yi's adherence to the Goryeo system was not only because of the sheer force of habit; when he realized that the Goryeo tradition of state-sponsored Buddhism could not be maintained, he tried to salvage as much as possible by identifying the body of the founding ruler with the religion. Although this intention was not fully recognized by later generations, it made it impossible to completely eradicate Buddhism in Joseon.

Keywords: Yi Seong-gye, state and religion, early Joseon, Goryeo, Buddhism

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Introduction

The fact that Yi Seong-gye (1335-1408), the founder of the most ardently Confucian dynasty in history, was a devout Buddhist must count as one of the great ironies of history. As far as scholarly attention has been paid to this contradiction, it is usually by explaining that idealist Neo-Confucian scholar-officials such as Jeong Do-jeon needed a strongman to help them realize their reform plans; though ignorant of all but the basics of Confucianism, Yi was still more informed than any other military strongman (D. Kim 1992, 19). Others have argued that in the foundation of a new political order, ideological motivations were subordinate to the simple mechanics of power politics (D. Kim 1998). But to my knowledge, nobody has really questioned whether there was any tacit understanding between the Confucian scholars and the military leader on what to do with Buddhism.¹ Perhaps these scholars assumed or knew that his son Yi Bang-won, who took the throne in 1400 and was later styled Taejong, would eventually brush aside his father's Buddhist sympathies, turn up the heat on Buddhism, and start to implement the reforms that would transform Joseon into a Confucian society. Yi Bang-won had of course been schooled in Confucianism, taking the state examinations in 1382 (*Taejong sillok* [Annals of King Taejong] 1.1a),² which may have assured the Neo-Confucian scholars that their reform program would not be threatened by the aging Taejo, who was already 57 when he ascended the throne.

Yet, in the dynastic system, the founder's governing actions usually serve as a model for later generations, and the precedents he established could not be easily renegotiated later. Yi Seong-gye's Buddhist sympathies and acts of devotion, not to mention his political decisions regarding Bud-

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1. Yi Bong-chun (1990, 119) suggests that before taking the throne Yi Seong-gye was politically on the same line as the reformist Confucians who supported him, but within days of becoming king, he showed strong differences on how to handle Buddhism. Yet Yi does not pursue the causes for this rift nor its consequences.
 2. However, in 1382 he was only 15 years old (born in 1367); moreover, there is no record of his passing the examination in the *Goryeosa* (History of Goryeo), therefore this must be regarded as a statement of his interest in Confucian study rather than as a fact.

dhism, have been well studied, but it has always been taken for granted that the process of disestablishing Buddhism was already inexorably underway. Of course, the momentum against Buddhism had started to gather in the late Goryeo period, and Yi was fully aware of the need to curtail Buddhist privileges. But he cannot simply be explained as an old man attached to his faith, blind to the flow of the times. All his actions regarding Buddhism show a remarkable continuity from the Goryeo period, indicating that he fully expected to follow the Goryeo precedent of basing royal legitimacy on Buddhism.

The aim of this article is therefore twofold. First, it wants to reassess the place of Buddhism in Yi Seong-gye's personal and public life. Although there are numerous articles in Korean on his Buddhist proclivities, none of them attempts a comprehensive overview of the significance of his Buddhist sympathies;³ furthermore, virtually nothing is available in English. Second, most of the Buddhist acts by Yi have to be seen as part of his public persona as *de facto* leader and later dynastic founder, and therefore tell us what place he envisaged for Buddhism in Joseon; it seems that the dominant view that his belief in Buddhism was merely personal and that the dissolution of Buddhism was irreversible is in need of revision.

The article is structured chronologically, and divided into two parts. The first retraces his relation to Buddhism across the main stages of his career, i.e. before he took the throne, as founding monarch from 1392 to 1398, and as a retired monarch from 1398 to his death in 1408. The second part contextualizes this information against the background of the Goryeo Buddhist system and the anti-Buddhist policies of the Neo-Confucian ideologues behind the throne. Special attention will be paid to

3. Especially Hwang (2003a) presents a comprehensive picture of Yi Seong-gye's reliance on what he calls "the Buddhist establishment" (*bulgyo seryeok*). However, his article only deals with the period before 1392. Pioneering studies were made by Yi Neung-hwa (1924) and Yi Sang-baek (1936-1937), and other studies by Hwang In-Kyu are also noteworthy (e.g. Hwang 2003a). Other studies include B. Yi (1990) and Y. Kim (1959), but these merely list Yi Seong-gye's Buddhist sympathies and do not pursue the question of what these implied for the fate of the new dynasty.

non-traditional sources, mainly votive inscriptions and other materials that are directly connected to Yi's Buddhist actions and beliefs; while they have been studied individually, these sources have not yet been reexamined against the larger, better known narratives derived from official sources such as the *Joseon wanggjo sillok* (Annals of the Joseon Dynasty). As will be shown, they allow for some important correctives to the extant views on the place of Buddhism in the early Joseon dynasty.

Yi Seong-gye and Buddhism

Yi's life can be subdivided into three periods: before he became dynastic founder and monarch (-1392); his reign as first king of Joseon (1392-1398); and as an abdicated monarch (1398-1408). Ideally, we should take into consideration the many layers of meaning that expressions of belief may hold: in particular, we should be careful to distinguish the private from the public aspects of his belief. So far, his expressions of Buddhist faith have been mainly interpreted as stemming from his personal devotion, but as Joo Kyeongmi (2008, 40) points out in a recent study, even some of the apparently personal acts of devotion can actually not be separated from the political context. I hope to make clear how most of his Buddhist acts were rooted in the Goryeo Buddhist system, and what this means for the place of Buddhism in the Joseon dynasty.⁴

Before Taking the Throne

Yi Seong-gye was born in a family of military officials based in the northeastern provinces (J. Lee 2004). Though not much is known about his ancestors, the official history of the Joseon dynasty provides some clues about the family's relation to Buddhism. According to the *Taejo sillok*

4. Yi Bong-chun (1990) has already argued that Taejo continued the Goryeo policies on Buddhism, but mainly based on the *Joseon wangjo sillok*. Given the lack of context and the anti-Buddhist bias present in the records, here I focus more on non-traditional sources such as inscriptions.

(Annals of King Taejo), his great-grandfather's wife Choe-ssi could not conceive, so in 1290 she went to the Gwaneumgul (Cave of Avalokitesvara) in Naksansa temple to pray, and consequently had a dream in which a monk promised that a precious son would be born to her, and that he should be called Seollae. This duly happened (*Taejo sillok* 1.3a8; 1290).

Apart from this, the official record contains little evidence of the Yi's Buddhist proclivities, but epigraphic material points to a very lively interest in the religion. Yi Seong-gye's name crops up in several inscriptions of the 1380s and 1390s, either as a donor or as a lay follower of Buddhist masters (Joo 2008, 37); for example, he is listed as one of the lay disciples of the famous late Goryeo monks Naong Hyegeun (J. Yi 1993-1999, vol. 5, 13) and Taego Bou (J. Yi 1993-1999, vol. 5, 19). In this, he follows in the footsteps of the Goryeo founder Wang Geon, whose name is also listed as a follower on several stelae (Vermeersch 2002). But while Wang Geon figures prominently in early Goryeo Buddhist inscriptions, vigorous protests by Confucian officials prevented Taejo from ordering any lavish Buddhist inscriptions after the founding of Joseon.⁵

Yet there exist two epigraphic sources that offer a window into the Buddhist worldview Yi wanted to project: these are the stelae for Seogwangsa temple and a votive inscription recovered in Mt. Geumgang in 1932. The former is connected to events dating to 1377 that augured the advent of the new dynasty while the votive inscription, dated 1390-1391, appears to be a vow to establish the new dynasty.

In fact, the extant Seogwangsa inscriptions date to the late Joseon period, but are very likely based on earlier traditions. The oldest inscription, apparently dated 1708, is a historic account of the temple's origins. It describes how in the summer of 1377 general for the northeast Yi Seong-gye and a retinue of military and civil officials including Jeong Mong-ju

5. See the protests against the erection of a stele for Muhak in 1405 (*Taejong sillok* 10.16b, 20th day of the 9th lunar month, 1405). In such an atmosphere, it would have been inconceivable to include any reference to the ruler's conversations with monks in the inscriptions.

(1337-1392) received orders to come to court.⁶ Subsequently, in Cheongju (present Bukcheong-gun, Hamgyeong-do province), they heard that one section of the Tripitaka,⁷ Buddhist statues, and dharma receptacles were still left after Gwangjeoksa temple in Haeyang (present-day Gilju, Hamgyeong-do province) had burned down in a battle. The monks had died and the temple was destroyed, and the great treasure (i.e., the Tripitaka) was in danger of disappearing. Assessing the situation, Yi ordered Kim Nam-ryeon to transport them by ship and complement the missing texts to make a complete set, and store everything in Seogwangsa temple on Mt. Seolbong in Anbyeon (south of Wonsan), to ensure the longevity of the ruler and obtain blessings for the country. The stele then clarifies that at this temple Taejo, before ascending the throne, had experienced an auspicious dream without specifying what the dream was (Government-General of Joseon [1911] 1968, vol. 2, 353).⁸

According to another stele, apparently authored by King Jeongjo himself in 1790, the temple was established after the founding of the Joseon dynasty. Regarding the temple's background, it briefly states:

Taejo had a dream that augured his rise to the throne, and went to the divine monk Muhak who made a divination in an earthen cave and

6. According to the record of the 8th lunar month of 1377 in *Goryeosa*, Taejo was fighting Japanese pirates in Haeju (Kim et al. [1452] 1990, 133.29b). According to the *Goryeosa jeoryo* (Essential History of Goryeo), however, this took place in the 9th lunar month (Kim et al. [1452] 1990, 30.37b). Earlier, in the 5th lunar month, he had campaigned in Gyeongsang-do province and near Mt. Jiri. It is therefore not impossible that he went to the Hamheung region in between these campaigns.

7. With regard to Daejanggyeong 大藏經, for the sake of convenience, I here translate the complete canon of Buddhist texts as Tripitaka, even though the collection is much larger than a Tripitaka.

8. It is not clear whether this stele still exists. In this edition it is not given a title; in Government-General of Joseon ([1919] 1976), it is given as Seogwangsa Janggyeongbi (Hwang 2003a, 531n27), in National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage as Seogwangsa Sajeokbi. Both are likely reconstructions. According to the stele, the description of the events from 1377 is copied from an inscribed board said to have been written by Taejo himself. The reference to the dream is not from this board but was added around the time the stele was erected.

explained its meaning. Therefore, when the dragon soared, a temple was constructed on the site where the earthen cave used to be, and it was called Seogwang 釋王 (literally, “explaining kingship”).⁹

Whereas the first text suggests the temple was already extant and that Taejo donated the Tripitaka set from Gwangjeoksa temple, thus enhancing its prestige, the second text says that the temple was founded to commemorate the augury of Taejo’s rise, hence its name. Whichever is correct, what is beyond doubt is that the temple has a strong connection to Taejo and his home region, the northeastern area around Hamheung. Although the records are very late, there are early Joseon references to the temple showing that it was held in particularly high esteem.¹⁰ In official historiography, explicit mention of the augury is found in the *Jeongjo sillok* (Annals of King Jeongjo): in an entry for the 15th year of his reign (1791), we find almost the same description as the one cited from the inscription above.¹¹ Both this entry and the inscription also claim that Kings Sukjong (1674-1720) and Yeongjo (1724-1776) had added texts to an earlier stele erected at the temple under King Taejo.

The earliest source claiming that the temple was indeed founded in connection with the augury is a record by Hyujeong (also known as Seosan Daesa; 1520-1604), which explains that the monk Muhak (also known as Jacho; 1327-1405) had been practicing austerities in a cave on Mt. Seolbong in 1375; in 1384 Yi Seong-gye went to Muhak to ask him to explain his dream, and Muhak confirmed that it revealed his destiny, and added

9. See Government-General of Joseon ([1911] 1968, vol. 2, 357). Most modern editions have a postscript with a different title indicating the rebuilding of the temple (Chongheung Sajeokbi) and stating that the stele was erected in 1812. However, a rubbing of the stele in the Kyujanggak collection does not have this part; it simply finishes with the date written by Jeongjo (Kyujanggak Archives, *Kyu* 10098, 10151). Since it is a cut-up version rather than a complete rubbing, it is also possible that the part with the 1812 date was left out.

10. A *samseongje* 三聖齋—the *samseong* (“three sages”) probably refers to his three ascendants—ritual was held at the temple (*Taejo sillok* 14.19b, the 19th day of the 8th lunar month, 1398).

11. *Jeongjo sillok* 32.45a-b, the 17th day of the 4th lunar month, 15th year of King Jeongjo’s reign (1791).

that he should build a temple within a year and hold a five-hundred Arhat ritual for three years to ensure the fulfillment of his destiny.¹²

Although there are some discrepancies regarding the dates and the details of these events, it is very likely that the tradition of the augury dates at least to the beginning of the Joseon period. Whether or not this meeting actually took place cannot be ascertained; Muhak's official stele, authored by Byeon Gye-ryang (1369-1430), makes no mention of the augury, but it notes that in 1376 Muhak refused overtures by the Goryeo court, hinting that his loyalty already lay elsewhere (J. Yi 1993-1999, vol. 6, 82). Yi Seong-gye's connection with Muhak certainly predates the founding of the Joseon dynasty, and as with all new dynasties, stories about auguries abounded (Pu 2011, 43n14).

Thus, the legend was likely widely known, but was clearly not deemed fit to be included in the *sillok* for Taejo's reign. Just as was the case for Doseon's augury of the rise of Wang Geon (877-943) as founder of the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), it was recycled and reemphasized by later rulers when it suited their own quest for legitimacy. The important point, however, is that, by setting so much store on a Buddhist prophecy, Yi Seong-gye clearly modeled himself on the Goryeo precedent. According to a document made under King Uijong (1146-1170), the monk Doseon (827-898) had prophesied the rise of Wang Geon in 892, and also indicated how the prophecy could be fulfilled (Rogers 1982-1983, 11). Doseon was a popular figure in early Joseon too, and though neither the contents of the dream nor Muhak's explanation have an explicitly geomantic component, it is very likely that geomancy also played a role.¹³

12. "Seolbongsan seogwangsa bi," as cited in Hwang (2003a, 536). Also see N. Yi ([1918] 1968, vol. 1, 375).

13. According to Seosan's record, Yi Seong-gye had dreamt that he was in a destroyed house covered by three rafters. Muhak explained that the three rafters formed the character *wang* 王 (king), hence the dream revealed his destiny to be king (N. Yi [1918] 1968, vol. 1, 375). According to N. Yi ([1918] 1968, vol. 1, 376), the story of the dream can also be found in the *Jibong yuseol* (Topical Discourses of Jibong Yi Su-gwang) (1614) by Yi Su-gwang (1563-1628) and the *Nakcheonjip* (Collected Works of Nakcheon Nam Gu-man) by Nam Gu-man (1629-1711). Yi also includes comments by the monk Haewon (1691-1770), but gives no clear reference.

The fact that he lived in an “earthen cave” may have a geomantic significance, while in selecting a new capital Muhak also played an important role as Taejo’s geomantic advisor.

Even if the meaning of the founding of Seogwangsa was ignored by official historiography, at the time it must have had a distinct public function. At first glance, the same cannot be said for other striking acts of devotion that Taejo took, apparently with an eye on establishing his legitimacy. In 1932, a reliquary set was discovered in a stone casket on Wolchulbong, Mt. Geumgang. A round stupa-shaped silver reliquary was found inside an octagonal casket, which was in its turn placed inside a bronze bowl, which was then put into a white porcelain bowl. There are few details available regarding the place where this relic deposit was found or the context, but it does seem that there was no evidence of other structures, such as a stupa or temple.¹⁴ It is now kept in the National Museum of Korea, and has recently been studied in detail (Joo 2008).

There are at least five different inscriptions in this relic set: one in the inside tube of the stupa-shaped reliquary, one in the inside tube of the octagonal casket, one on the rim of a bronze bowl, and two on porcelain bowls.¹⁵ While the inscription on the reliquary itself mentions only Yi Seong-gye and his second wife (Queen Sindeok née Gang-ssi), the others contain the names of various other people as well as a short dedication. The octagonal casket carries the name of the monk Woram 月菴 as the main donor and the names mainly of women but also of one high official,

14. Apparently found on October 6, 1932 while clearing trees to create a fire alley in autumn; see http://bansanm.or.kr/bansanm/bbs/board.php?bo_table=o12345&wr_id=1 (accessed December 20, 2009; original article was published in *Gangwon Ilbo*, November 9, 2006).

15. See the illustrations (pp. 92-93) and transcriptions (pp. 252-253) in Kang (1991). The reliquary is oblong-shaped and can be detached from its lotus pedestal; on the lotus pedestal there is a cylinder which supports the detachable top part. The inscription is on this cylinder, and can only be seen once the top part is removed. Likewise for the octagonal casket. The transcribed texts are numbered 1 to 5 in Kang (1991), but number 4 is missing: this would appear to be the inscription on the innermost reliquary. For this, see Heo (1984, 1243-1244) and Joo (2008, 57).

the royal secretary (*miljik*) Hwang Hui-seok.¹⁶ It is dated 1390. One of the porcelain bowls (a smaller one, apparently not the one containing the reliquary) has another inscription that states:

More than 2,400 years have elapsed since the nirvana of the Buddha; on a certain day in the 5th lunar month in the 24th year of Hongmu (1391), Woram and the present chief councilor (*sijung*) Yi Seong-gye and ten thousand people together make a vow, wishing to deposit [this] together in Mt. Geumgang awaiting the appearance of Maitreya in the world to the people, to aid and propagate the true transformation and together attain the Buddhadharmā. That this wish is firm, the Buddhas and patriarchs vouchsafe (Kang 1991, 253).¹⁷

Then follow the names of Woram and Yi Seong-gye, his wife Gang-ssi, and four other women, and it closes with the wish that all may see the three councils of Maitreya and achieve complete enlightenment. Although it would be unique to have a deposit like this without any stupa,¹⁸ in the absence of any other evidence this is what we have to accept. The exact nature of this deposit is therefore hard to ascertain; it has all the appearances of a private vow, especially considering the innermost reliquary, closest to the relics, bears the names of Yi and his second spouse and the fact that it was buried rather than displayed. On the other hand, the names of others mentioned on the outer containers speak against this.

16. Concerning Hwang Hui-seok (d. 1394), see Kim et al. ([1452] 1990, 45.23b). One of 45 merit subjects who returned with Yi in 1388 to depose King U. Also instrumental in helping Yi establish the authority of the Joseon state and overcome opponents like Jeong Mong-ju. He had originally been a monk but under King U he started an official career (see National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage [NRICH], “Hanguk geum-seongmun jonghap yeongsang jeongbo siseutem” [A Comprehensive Visual Information System for Korean Epigraphs], http://gsm.nricp.go.kr/_third/user/main.jsp [accessed December 20, 2009]).

17. The contents of the other inscriptions are similar, but this text is the most detailed one.

18. Perhaps the deposit may be connected to the practice of “incense burial” (*maehyang* 埋香), a popular votive practice in Korean history—many inscriptions attest to it, but as far as I know no objects have been recovered that allow a more detailed study of this practice. For comparison with *maehyang* practice, see Joo (2008, 40).

Most prominently among these other devotees are officials, such as the merit subject Hwang Hui-seok. Also, four ladies are mentioned. Their presence has not been satisfactorily explained yet, but the fact that some bear Buddhist names suggests that they are widows of officials or other influential figures who retired to temples after their husbands' death.¹⁹ Also, it is said that "ten thousand" people made the vow together, and while this figure should not be taken literally, it does mean that the vow had a public character. Finally, on the outer rim of the porcelain bowl is carved the name of the potter, who was from the Bangsan kiln (south of Mt. Geumgang). Given that the Yis had a connection to the region (an ancestor had moved here first after leaving Jeonju), perhaps this was a way of establishing a bond with local society and ensure their loyalty in the founding of the new dynasty.

According to one interpretation, this votive set was thus part of a series of many vows across the country around this time (Hwang 2003a, 532n33),²⁰ so that we can speculate that this was indeed part of a "support rally." Another interpretation emphasizes that this was made at a particularly auspicious place (e.g. Mt. Geumgang), and that the reference to the advent of Maitreya was part of Yi Seong-gye's personal preparation to take over the throne (Joo 2008, 40). What is beyond dispute, however, is that these inscriptions show that the most readily identifiable elements in Yi's groundwork for his new dynasty were Buddhist.

19. "Gangyang-gun buin Yi-ssi Myojeong 江陽郡夫人李氏妙情" could refer to Kwon Geun's grandmother, of the Hapcheon Yi, but she would have had to be in her nineties by 1391. Another Gangyang-buin (a generic title for a wife from the Hapcheon Yi) was married to Heo Ong, but she died in 1380. This Gangyang-buin is said to have founded three temples for the repose of her family members. See her epitaph, dated 1381 and authored by Yi Cheom (<http://gsm.nricp.go.kr>). A Nangnang-buin Kim-ssi also appears in the *Silleuksa daejanggak gi bi* (ca. 1380). Even though their identities cannot be firmly established, it is clear that these were all women from influential families.

20. No evidence is offered of other similar acts. Also, none of the people whose names appear in the inscription, with the exception of the potter, appear to have been connected to this area.

As Ruler of Joseon

After dethroning the last king of Goryeo, Gongyang (1389-1392), Yi Seong-gye took the throne in the 7th lunar month of 1392. One of the first memorials he had to deal with as a king urged the “purification” of Buddhism; the king refused to accept it, saying that it was not feasible to carry this out at the very beginning of the dynasty.²¹ This very much set the pattern for his reign: he steadfastly refused to accept any of the memorials that sought to implement policies that would heavily curtail or abolish Buddhism, thus leaving all the mainstays of the Goryeo Buddhist system in place.

Although Buddhist institutions are barely mentioned in early Joseon sources, all the evidence points to the fact that key institutions like the Seungnoksa 僧錄司 (Sangha Bureau), which functioned as an intermediary between the monasteries and the central government, continued to operate.²² Thus, the *Gyeongguk daejeon* of 1471, the administrative code that provided the legal basis for the operation of Joseon institutions, has only one substantial lemma on Buddhism, namely on the obtaining of ordination certificates. It states that anyone wishing to become a monk has to report their desire to the Seungnoksa, which in turn relayed this request to the Board of Rites, which reported it to the king. After this, permission could be granted (No et al. [1471] 2011, 3.46a). Although there is no entry describing the functioning of the Seungnoksa, the way it is mentioned suggests that its role was accepted by the state.

This clearly shows that whatever inroads the Neo-Confucian critics managed to make into Buddhism, they failed to disestablish it. Some

21. *Taejo sillok* 1.41b, the 20th day of the 7th lunar month, 1392.

22. Besides the Seungnoksa, there were of course many other aspects of Buddhist institutions at the state level; the most important of these was the monastic examination, known as *seungwa* in modern scholarship. There were also established procedures regarding the administration of Buddhism known as *seungjeong* or *seungbi*, and numerous other institutions or procedures. Most of these features of the Goryeo Buddhist system seem to have continued into Joseon, but there is still no comprehensive study of how it evolved during the first century of the Joseon period. The best introduction to the basic facts remains Han (1993, 30-47).

aspects they managed to curtail: already during the first year of Taejo's reign, the Privy Council (Dodang 都堂) requested the abolition of the directorate to print the Tripitaka, as well as the Assembly of the Eight Commandments (Palgwanhoe) and the Lantern Festival (Yeondeunghoe);²³ although no answer is recorded, the absence of any further reference to them suggests that Taejo acquiesced. However, when officials started to encroach on temples, for example by forbidding mourners to use temples, Taejo did not hesitate to rebuke them,²⁴ clearly drawing the line at illegal attacks against Buddhism.

Furthermore, he continued to sponsor many other Buddhist rituals,²⁵ and also constructed several Buddhist temples. Some of these projects, such as the construction of Yeonboksa temple in Gaeseong (until 1394 also capital of Joseon), were continued from the previous dynasty.²⁶ He also continued the Goryeo practice of constructing memorial temples (*wonchal*) for prominent members of the royal family: the most prominent example is Heungcheonsa temple, built in 1396 for his second queen Sindeok next to her tomb in the center of the new capital Hanyang (present-day Seoul).²⁷ The year after, he started the construction of Heungdeoksa temple, which was evidently designed to become his own memorial temple (Y. Kim 1959, 80).

Arguably the boldest statement of his intention to continue the Buddhist system from the Goryeo period was his appointment of Muhak as royal preceptor in the 10th lunar month of 1392;²⁸ clearly Muhak was his preferred and most trusted monk, and Taejo relied on him for the selection of the capital, as is well known.²⁹ When challenged about his faith in

23. *Taejo sillok* 1.51a, the 5th day of the 8th lunar month, 1392.

24. *Taejo sillok* 2.16a, the 6th day of the 12th lunar month, 1392.

25. Extensively documented in Han (1993, 50-52).

26. See Hwang (1999b).

27. *Taejo sillok* 10.10a, the 1st day of the 12th lunar month, 1396. See also Y. Kim (1959, 55-68).

28. Usually regarded as the last such appointment, but in the 9th lunar month of 1394 the Cheontae monk Chogu was appointed *guksa*. On Muhak, see Hwang (1999b).

29. Here one should be cautious regarding the extent of Muhak's actual influence on the decision making process. Note here too the discrepancy between the official record (e.g.

Buddhism, he simply referred to Yi Saek (1329-1396); as a great Confucian, he pointed out, Yi Saek also believed in Buddhism, so why would it not be possible for him to do the same?³⁰ This appears to be an attempt at continuing the Goryeo ideal whereby Confucianism was regarded as proper for the public domain and Buddhism as a private religion (Breuker 2010, 266, 279-281).

All of the above information on Taejo's Buddhist policies is gathered from the *Taejo sillok*; it gives the impression of a monarch besieged by avalanches of protests, yet somehow staunchly upholding Buddhism. Again we must turn to alternative sources to get a more nuanced picture. According to an entry for the 12th intercalary lunar month of Yi's first year, he ordered an official to make a "votive text for the printing of the Tripitaka."³¹ This is typical for the extremely elliptic information contained in the *sillok*. It is easily overlooked as just one more Buddhist belief of the new king; moreover, it is followed immediately by the official's protest against the ruler's dedication to Buddhist affairs. Except that in this case we still have the votive text, which is kept at Haeinsa temple. The brief text states the following:

[Imperially composed text vowing to complete the Tripitaka] I have heard that the *sutras*, *vinaya*, and *sastras* are together called the "Great Baskets" ("Daejang" in Korean). . . . But when I think of my lack of virtue, the burden becomes too much to bear, thus I still rely on the power of Buddhist skilful means (*upaya*); I hope it will bestow blessings on the previous generations and benefit all living beings. As a dilettante having just ascended the throne, I have repaired an old pagoda; now that its restoration and decoration is complete, I wish together with my officials to complete the Great Basket to store it in the stupa. I hope that through the secret protection and

Muhak's stele, which does not credit him with any influence), and later semi-official accounts, such as the *Osan seollim* (Collected Essays by Osan Cha Cheon-ro) by Cha Cheon-ro (1556-1615); quoted in N. Yi ([1918] 1968, vol. 1, 361). As I could find no work entitled *Osan seollim*, Yi Neung-hwa probably referred to the *Osan seollim chogo* 五山說林草藁.

30. *Taejo sillok* 2.20a-21b, the 4th day of the 12th intercalary lunar month, 1392.

31. *Daejanggyeong wonmun* 大藏經願文; *Taejo sillok* 2.20b, the 4th day of the 12th intercalary lunar month, 1392.

the wide spread of the dharma cloud, all things will flourish and bless the country and benefit the people; that arms will desist and the world be governed, for the myriad generations to find eternal refuge, this is my vow (as cited in N. Yi [1918] 1968, vol. 1, 384).³²

The vow is followed by a very extensive list of names, starting with Yi's wife (Queen Sindeok) and his sons, then his officials in descending rank, a few aristocratic ladies, a few local officials and finally a number of monks.³³ Among the officials we find the core group who supported Yi Seong-gye's rise to the throne; nearly all his first-rank merit subjects are included in this list of devotees, together with a prominent number of second- and third-rank meritorious subjects (O 2000, 42). The pagoda mentioned in the text is most likely the pagoda at Yeonboksia temple (located in Gaeseong); we know that the repairs were finished in the 1st lunar month of 1393, and that Muhak lectured there on the Tripitaka in the 10th lunar month of that year (O 2000, 51-52).

Here again we see a project that is reminiscent of the founding of Goryeo; namely the dedication of the dynasty to the protection of the Buddha, the construction of stupas to commemorate this, and the writing of a votive text (Vermeersch 2008, ch. 2). What is furthermore remarkable is that so many officials, including leading Neo-Confucians such as Jeong Do-jeon and Jo Jun, put their names under this Buddhist manifesto. We also find three names that already appeared on the 1391 Mt. Geumgang inscription: the officials Hwang Hui-seok and Hong Yeong-tong, and Nang-nang-gun lady Kim. Thus, most likely this was not the only Buddhist vow that was made, but it was certainly one of the most important statements of

32. It appears that this votive text and the list of donors and devotees were carved on a wooden printing block; two versions, or at least the print-offs, remain, which have been studied by O Yeongseop (O 2000, 28-31). I have also referred to a Haeinsa temple gazetteer, the *Haeinsa sajeok* (Kyujanggak Archives, *Kyu* 2363), which contains a print of the oldest version (called *wongakbon* by O). The text of the vow is identical to the one edited in N. Yi ([1918] 1968), except that it has no title, which appears to have been added by Yi Neung-hwa.

33. The sequence of the devotees differs according to the edition of the text (see O 2000, 30).

the new dynasty's intent to continue along the same lines as Goryeo.

For the remaining years of Taejo's reign, we can adduce more evidence of his sponsorship of Buddhist rites and the construction of some temples (U. Han 1993, 50-52), but since all the information is derived from the *sillok*, it provides little context. Regarding alternative sources, it is also important to mention that he ordered the erection of three stelae for eminent monks during his reign, on whom he also bestowed posthumously the title of *guksa* (state preceptor), the highest Buddhist rank under the Goryeo dynasty. Honsu (1320-1392) in particular showed his loyalty to Taejo by writing a letter of congratulations on his accession and retiring from his position (received under the previous dynasty). Most likely Taejo would have reinstated him, but he died shortly after the founding of the dynasty; in 1394, Taejo rewarded him with a stele.³⁴

Before he became king, in 1391 Yi had already requested Honsu to print the Tripitaka (J. Yi 1993-1999, vol. 2, 36), and his interest in the Tripitaka thus forms an interesting red thread in his sponsorship of Buddhism. It already appeared in Seogwangsa temple, for which he secured a Tripitaka saved from a destroyed temple, and of course in the vow of 1393.³⁵ In 1393, he also agreed with a proposal from the Seungnoksas to continue the Goryeo custom of holding a scripture procession in the 3rd lunar month. In 1398, finally, he oversaw the move of the printing blocks for the Tripitaka Koreana from Ganghwado's Seonwonsa temple to Jicheonsa temple;³⁶ since he is said to have provided his own funds for printing out the Tripitaka at Haeinsa temple in 1399, when he had already abdicated, it would appear that he also oversaw their transportation from Seoul to Haeinsa temple.³⁷ The exact circumstances for this transport have always been the object of speculation, but as will become clear, it is significant that Taejo took personal charge of this project.

34. For Honsu's stele inscription, see J. Yi (1993-1999, vol. 6, no. 2). The other two monks are Chanyeong (1328-1390) (see J. Yi 1993-1999, vol. 6, no. 1) and Jicheon (1324-1395) (see J. Yi 1993-1999, vol. 6, no. 3).

35. *Taejo sillok* 2.5b, the 12th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1393.

36. *Taejo sillok* 14.2a, the 10th day of the 5th lunar month, 1398.

37. *Jeongjong sillok* 1.2a, the 9th day of the 1st lunar month, 1399.

As Retired Monarch

In 1398, Yi Bang-won, Taejo's fifth son by his first wife Queen Sinui née Han-ssi (who had died in 1391), revolted because he and his brothers were being passed over for the throne in favor of Yi Bang-seok, Taejo's son with his second wife Queen Sindeok. He assassinated Yi Bang-seok and another half-brother and also Jeong Do-jeon, who had supported Yi Bang-seok as crown prince. After the murder of his two sons from his second wife, Taejo fled to his home region Hamheung, and was so enraged that he shot envoys sent to ask him to return. He abdicated to his second son by his first wife, Yi Bang-gwa (King Jeongjong), who tried to mediate by asking Muhak to persuade the former ruler to return. Muhak succeeded, but Taejo went only as far as Mt. Soyo in Yangju (present-day Dongducheon), not venturing into the capital (Gaeseong under King Jeongjong). He used this as a retreat, but although ousted from power, as "supreme monarch" (*taesangwang*) he continued to sway the affairs of state, notably in matters of Buddhism.³⁸

Under Jeongjong's brief reign (1398-1400), he seems to have mainly restricted himself to numerous Buddhist rituals, for example at Heungcheonsa temple next to his second wife's tomb or for her sons, killed in the 1398 coup.³⁹ Jeongjong for his part continued very much in his father's footsteps; in terms of his relation to Buddhism, nothing changed. He was but a temporary ruler anyway, and in 1400 Yi Bang-won took over the throne. Posthumously styled Taejong, his attitude towards Buddhism was more ambivalent, as is clear from the following statement: "Yi Saek is an outstanding Confucian of our Eastern lands, yet he is the laughing stock of Confucians because he loves reading the Tripitaka. These days the only one who does not engage in Buddhist affairs is Ha Yun; all the other Confucians secretly engage in Buddhist affairs. But since the Buddha's explanation of retribution is something belonging to the other

38. See N. Yi ([1918] 1968, vol. 1, 369-370); quoting the *Yeollyeosil gisul* (Narratives of Yeollyeosil) by Yi Geung-ik (1736-1806) and Cha Cheon-ro's *Osan seollim*.

39. *Jeongjong sillok* 2.15a, the 19th day of the 10th lunar month, 1399.

world, there is no way of proving it, so how can we believe in it?”⁴⁰ When approving policies in favor of Buddhism, he often gave the excuse that it was his father’s will or simply precedent, without ever revealing his own sympathies; in some cases, he wholeheartedly agreed with Confucian criticism, yet again without going as far as rejecting Buddhism.

It is therefore not surprising that a confrontation developed over the issue of Buddhism with his father. This culminated in a series of events in the course of 1402, the third year of Taejong’s (Yi Bang-won) reign, which appear crucial for the fate of Buddhism. In an apparent attempt at reconciliation, Taejong went to Mt. Soyo to offer his father a meal, wishing him a long life; he also pleaded with him to return to the capital. The officials Yi Seong-seok and Yi Im separately tried to convince him by saying that he could also read Buddhist texts there; however, Taejo replied curtly that the only reason he is devoted to Buddhism is to obtain rebirth in the pure land for his two sons—killed by Taejong—and stayed put.⁴¹ The next month saw him back in the capital, however, where he built a house inside the Sungin gate, intending to convert it into a temple later, citing the precedent of Goryeo Taejo’s Gwangmyeongsa temple.⁴² In the 5th lunar month of that year, Taejong again traveled to Mt. Soyo, but was barred from entering because of a ritual being held there.⁴³

In the 6th lunar month of that year, Taejo took up residence in Ho-eamsa temple (near Mt. Soyo),⁴⁴ and Taejong granted lands and ordered the construction of a palace on the temple site. In the 7th lunar month, Muhak was appointed principal of the temple (*gamju* 監主). Having taken the precepts from Muhak, the former king stopped eating meat, and grew more and more gaunt. When the court heard about this, they put pressure on Muhak to convince the king to eat meat, but when he did so, Taejo replied, “if the king (i.e. Taejong) could worship Buddha like me, then I

40. *Taejong sillok* 5.11b, the 27th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1403.

41. *Taejong sillok* 3.6a, the 28th day of the 1st lunar month, 1402.

42. *Taejong sillok* 3.7a, the 2nd day of the 2nd lunar month, 1402.

43. *Taejong sillok* 3.26b, the 8th day of the 5th lunar month, 1402.

44. See M. Yi (2001).

would eat meat.”⁴⁵ Two days later, in a conversation with the king, the real reason for his behavior is revealed: “if you believe in the Buddhist law, even the lands of those temples that are not recorded in the *Milgi* (Secret Record) should be returned; you should not push monks and nuns to get certificates, and not forbid women from going to temples; and also you should build temples to continue my will. Then even if it means breaking the precepts, I will follow [your request to eat meat].”⁴⁶

Thus, Taejo appealed to Taejong’s Confucian sense of filial piety to allow him to break the Buddhist precepts by honoring his request not to confiscate temple lands. Taejong consented, and though Taejo was extremely suspicious—going as far as asking officials to show him the draft edict calling for a return of all confiscated temple lands—he seemed pleased with the outcome. Most likely this confrontation was triggered by the impending confiscations of temple land. In the 4th lunar month of 1402, the Office of Astronomy and Geomancy (Seoungwan) had proposed to confiscate all temples and their land except 70 listed in the *Milgi* attributed to Doseon. Though it was only partially endorsed—the state council decided that well-established temples (with more than 100 permanently residing monks), even those not on the list, would also be allowed to exist—the writing was clearly on the wall.⁴⁷

Taejo, therefore, wagered his own body to protect Buddhism, apparently succeeding. As Breuker (2010, 176) points out, during the Goryeo dynasty the ruler functioned as an ontological link between the Buddha and the country, and Taejo appears to inscribe himself in that tradition by giving himself hostage to Buddhism and demanding that his son bail him out by leaving Buddhism alone. Perhaps, he was also inspired by the model of Emperor Wu of Liang (502-549), famous for giving himself over to temples in the expectation that his ministers would pay a huge ransom to the temple to get their emperor back (Ch’èn 1964, 125). However, though Taejong is recorded as ordering his officials to return all land and

45. *Taejong sillok* 4.7a, the 2nd day of the 8th lunar month, 1402.

46. *Taejong sillok* 4.7a, the 4th day of the 8th lunar month, 1402.

47. *Taejong sillok* 3.23a-b, the 22nd day of the 4th lunar month, 1402. See also B. Yi (1993, 360-361).

rescind the other laws affecting Buddhism mentioned by his father, a few years later he apparently reneged on this agreement.

Muhak died in the 9th lunar month of 1405, and barely two months later the State Council seized on the sexual demeanors of a few monks to relaunch the 1402 proposal. However, it was formulated somewhat differently: besides allowing for the temples on the *Milgi* to exist, it also accepted that temples listed in local geomantic records (*tapsangi*) could also remain; however, strict quota were established, so that only one of the temples on the lists could exist in the old and new capitals for each school, and only one or two in local districts. Taejong accepted the proposal, but added 15 temples, most of which seem to have been connected with his father, like Seogwangsa, Hoeamsa, and Heungcheonsa temples.⁴⁸ The next year saw a further refinement of this policy, stipulating that exactly 242 temples could remain, divided over twelve schools, some of which were forcibly merged with others, however, leaving only seven schools.⁴⁹

Most likely what is meant here is that these temples were officially recognized and guaranteed a certain income through landholdings; the remaining temples were likely not destroyed outright but simply had to fend for themselves.⁵⁰ What Taejo's reaction to this was is not recorded. Given his extreme reaction to the 1402 proposal, we would expect that he was incensed that his son had reneged on his promise, but there is no evidence that he protested. However, the following event may offer a clue; in 1407, he constructed a new building and wanted to turn it into a temple. Taejong asked if he needed any financial support, and his father replied

48. *Taejong sillok* 10.25b-28a, the 21st day of the 11th lunar month, 1405. Four other temples were venues for the Rites for Mountains and Earth Spirits (Suryukjae 水陸齋) held to appease the spirits of the dead: Gwaneumgul, Jingwansa, Sangwonsa, and Gyeonamsa (Y. Kim 1959, 67). Naksansa temple is presumably included because of the successful prayer for the birth of his grandfather that took place there. For nearly all the other temples, connections can be established with Taejo, too.

49. *Taejong sillok* 11.13a-b, the 27th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1406.

50. This is evident from some compromises to this legislation. For instance, in 1407 *myeongchal* (famous temples) were allowed to take the place of the *jaboksa* 資福寺 (temples assisting blessings, presumably another name for the temples specified on Doseon's list) (*Taejong sillok* 14.47a, the 2nd day of the 12th lunar month, 1407).

that he would like the king to bestow a name, an affiliation (either Jogye or Hwaeom) as well as land and slaves. Taejong agreed, but as the number of temples had already been fixed, he simply took the lands (and status) from another temple.⁵¹ Thus, we might infer that under the terms of the 1402 reform plan, some of the temples favored by Taejo would have been abolished, since they were neither on the *Milgi* nor significant enough (having more than 100 monks) to justify their existence. Yet under the “renegotiated” measures of 1406—even though on the whole these were somewhat more negative for Buddhism—the *Milgi* was essentially ignored, a strict quota of temples was established, yet the possibility of transferring land and slaves to temples without such assets in the new capital was allowed.⁵² Therefore, Taejo may have been satisfied that at least the temples that had a special meaning for him could be preserved, and that the royal family would retain some leverage in sponsoring temples they personally favored.

Taejo died soon after in 1408, and his son lavished numerous Buddhist ceremonies in his memory. It is possible that in his waning years his behavior had become eccentric and his attachment to Buddhism became a personal obsession; many of his successors would also turn to Buddhism in their later life. Regardless of his exact motivations, his actions influenced the course of Buddhist policy, and it is to this that we should now turn.

The Failed “Disestablishment” of Buddhism

When discussing the incipient policies of the early Joseon dynasty, the only voices heard are those of the strident Neo-Confucian memorials deriding Buddhism. The sheer number of memorials and the volume of the diatribe seem to have succeeded in obfuscating the possibility that there was any alternative to the establishment of a “pure Neo-Confucian society.” In perhaps the most perceptive study of the mentality of early

51. *Taejongillok* 13.6a, the 24th day of the 1st lunar month, 1407.

52. *Taejongillok* 11b2, the 27th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1406.

Joseon Confucians, Michael Kalton (1985, 113) points out, however, that the Neo-Confucian view was still very much a minority view in early Joseon. More importantly, it is important to realize that what irked them the most about Buddhism was that fundamentally they had a shared worldview: Neo-Confucianism was persuasive as doctrine because Buddhism had prepared the way. Ideologues like Kwon Geun implicitly recognized this by engaging with Buddhist ideas on the mind but showing that Confucians have a more accurate view.

This helps to explain the slow progress of Confucian reforms and the confusedness of the anti-Buddhist rhetoric. In most cases it seems to have served more as a sounding board to experiment with new ideas about society and politics. John Goulde (1985, 176) has provided a very useful scheme of the late Goryeo critics, dividing them into three categories regarding their views on Buddhism: those who argued that Buddhism was useful but in need of reform, those who wanted to exclude it from government but allow it as a private belief, and finally those who wanted to eliminate Buddhism completely. However, it is doubtful whether they had such clear views. Unfortunately, the anti-Buddhist memorials have all too often been used as historical sources, and their claims taken at face value. One of the most longstanding mistakes is to take the criticism that Buddhism could not serve as a basis for politics literally, and conclude that Buddhism indeed formed the basis of the Goryeo body politic.

This is simply not the case: Buddhism in Goryeo was never referred to for any political decision or social measure; the official dictum was that Buddhism was for private practice, and Confucianism for state affairs (Vermeersch 2008, 87). Thus in the modern sense of the word “politics,” as a system of governance, Goryeo Buddhism cannot be said to have been involved in politics. Only in so far that it was used in the rationalization of royal legitimacy, can it be said to have had a political function. While Neo-Confucians were probably genuinely upset by Buddhist excess, and wanted to attack the established order by assailing Buddhism, it is important to understand that their main target was social reform, because the ideal Confucian body politic is society. It is in this realm especially that they sought to supplant Buddhism, and this is perhaps why so many of

their arguments are emotive rather than rational. But since most of their writings were about pushing the boundaries of thinking and perception, they cannot be seen as concrete reform plans for Buddhism. Buddhism was involved in “politics” only in so far that the personal is political, and in terms of the legitimation of power, but not in terms of the exercise of power.

This is perhaps why Yi Seong-gye was so complacent in ignoring their propaganda and simply continued with the Goryeo system: he found the vague proposals to do away with Buddhism completely unrealistic and either hoped they would abate or waited for more concrete proposals to emerge. Although conquering the private realm, and through that the social realm, would indeed entail the elimination of Buddhism, everybody would have realized that this was a very distant ideal, hence perhaps the absence of any practical proposal on what to do with Buddhism. “Disestablishment”—i.e. removing it from the public, government-supported realm—was likely the goal pursued by many reform-minded statesmen in early Joseon, but most memorials called simply for the “suppression of Buddhism” (*baebul* 排佛) or even “abolition of Buddhism” (*cheokbul* 斥佛), mostly without outlining any specific steps to be taken.

Moreover, those who had helped Yi take the throne tuned down their rhetoric after gaining power, partly out of respect for their ruler and because they felt some of the young turks had gone too far in their attacks (Goulde 1985, 209). Gradually, however, they started to probe again how far they could go. Jeong Do-jeon published *Bulssi japbyeon* (Arguments against the Buddha), his most strident attack against Buddhism, shortly before 1398;⁵³ this, together with the coup by his son, must have made it clear to Taejo that he could not safeguard the Goryeo Buddhist system. Although he had probably initially been convinced that a lower profile of Buddhism and a curtailing of abuses would allay the Neo-Confucian protests—together with the land reforms carried out before he took the

53. Jeong Do-jeon had earlier published tracts about Buddhism, but those were comparatively moderate. In his 1394 *Simgiri pyeon* 心氣理篇 (On the Mind, Material Force, and Principle), for example, he compares Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and though he finds Buddhism wanting in this essay, it is not rejected (Muller 1999, 185).

throne, which also affected Buddhism—⁵⁴ around the time of his abdication his views must have changed.

While it is possible that he had stuck to Buddhism out of habit—or, as Pu Nam Chul (2011, 42) points out, because he had been a subject of Goryeo and thus wanted to show his loyalty to that order—it was also clear that he realized its continued potential to justify royal authority. Many of his supporters were out to limit royal power: Jeong Do-jeon notably had plans to turn the king into a mere figurehead (Chung 1985, 68). His own son Taejong, who took over the reins of power, may also have seemed to be under the sway of such forces. Therefore, his decision to take personal charge of the printing of the Tripitaka after abdication—a project that was especially close to his heart, as the first printing had served as a symbol to seal the new dynasty with his merit subjects (one of whom, Jeong Do-jeon, then proceeded to cut away the *raison d'être* of Buddhism)—was surely also meant to safeguard his dynasty.

Dynastic legitimacy in Korea had, in living memory, always been cast in Buddhist terms, so Yi appears to have tried to anchor this project in his very person. By giving over his body to Buddhism, he was also signaling that it was an inalienable part of the body politic, or at least of the dynasty. Of course, his insistence in 1402 that Buddhism would be left untouched was already completely unrealistic at the time. Perhaps it may signify that the ruler was out of touch with reality or blinded by arrogance and power. But it may also have played in Taejong's hands. Since the whole process of disestablishing Buddhism was up in the air, this can also be seen as a negotiating or bargaining process. Under Taejong, concrete proposals were drawn up to drastically cut the size of Buddhist institutions, something which Taejong, even if he wanted, could no longer have resisted. His father's raising the stakes to a zero-sum game may then be seen as a negotiating ploy to salvage as much as possible, and prevent the complete disestablishment of Buddhism, which no longer seemed so far-fetched.

It may also have been Taejo's intention to simply safeguard the Buddhist institutions closely linked to the throne. Taejo achieved that the

54. See B. Yi (1993, 354-355).

temples dear to him, such as Heungcheonsa, Seogwangsa, and Hoeamsa temples, were exempted from confiscation.⁵⁵ Perhaps that was what he had hoped for in the first place: because *his* temples were not part of the *Milgi*, he pushed for an exemption for all temples, and his entourage understood that he was playing high stakes to protect his own interests. Thus, Taejo managed to stem the tide, but after the death of his trusted advisor Muhak, and shortly before his own demise, the full-blown, forced reorganization of the Buddhist institutions went ahead, and the retired monarch let the inevitable happen. In the end, however, not even some of Taejo's favorite temples escaped: Heungdeoksa burnt down in 1503, and Heungcheonsa the following year;⁵⁶ with them the last Buddhist temples disappeared from the streets of Seoul.⁵⁷ Hoeamsa, the temple where Muhak had resided, also burnt down in the mid-sixteenth century;⁵⁸ all temples were most likely destroyed through arson rather than accident.⁵⁹ It shows the extent of Confucian hatred for the reminders of Buddhist power in the streets of Seoul, but the fact that they had to resort to arson also shows they could not take official action against these royal temples.

55. See U. Han (1993, 22).

56. *Yeonsangun ilgi* 56.26b, the 9th day of the 12th lunar month, 1504.

57. However, the pagoda of Heungcheonsa temple was apparently still standing; for there is an entry in the *sillok* claiming that the pagoda of Jeongneungsa temple (Jeongneung was the tomb for Queen Sindeok; since Heungcheonsa temple was constructed in her memory, Jeongneungsa temple likely refers to Heungcheonsa temple) burnt down in 1510 (*Jungjong sillok* 10.62b, the 28th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1510).

58. In 1566 rumors circulated that some were planning to set fire to the former Hoeamsa temple (*Myeongjong sillok* 32.63b, the 20th day of the 4th lunar month, 1566); in 1595 it was described as the site of the former Hoeamsa temple (*Seonjo sillok* 64.4a, the 4th day of the 6th lunar month, 1595); thus it either burnt down because of anti-Buddhist arson or as a result of the Imjin War.

59. That the temples were destroyed by arson is clear from the investigation launched by King Jungjong upon the conflagration of the pagoda at Heungcheonsa temple in 1510 (see *Jungjong sillok* 10.63a, the 30th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1510). From a petition by Seonggyungwan students, it appears that the king had even jailed and flogged some officials whom he suspected of starting the fire (*Jungjong sillok* 11.61b, the 19th day of the 12th lunar month, 1510). Around 1510 there was also strong pressure, because of pirate raids, to confiscate temple bells to be recast as cannons (B. Yi 2011, 194-195).

The process of eroding Buddhism's ties with the state continued, but crucially, whether or not to continue the legacy of their ancestor and founding father was in the hands of kings; the only monarch who directly attacked the Buddhist system was Yeonsangun, who abolished the system of head monasteries and examinations (Buswell 1999, 140); yet, crucially he was also a monarch who dismally failed to protect the royal legacy. Taejo's legacy left kings a window of opportunity to source alternative forms of legitimacy, which as late as King Jeongjo was tapped into: Jeongjo in his inscription for Seogwangsa temple clearly turned to his ancestor and Buddhism to aggrandize his own standing as monarch.⁶⁰

Conclusion

We can draw several important conclusions from the above discussion of Yi Seong-gye and Buddhism. First of all, it is clear that he modeled himself much more closely on the Goryeo model of state Buddhism than previously acknowledged. The key features of this model are the separate and complementary roles of Buddhism and Confucianism: the dedication of the dynasty to the Buddha; the ritual and symbolic expression of the dynasty's legitimacy through Buddhist prophecies, rituals, and the validation of a royal preceptor; and the existence of a Buddhist bureaucracy that integrated with the regular bureaucracy through the Seungnoksas. Whether Yi continued the Goryeo system out of convenience or whether it was a conscious decision to adhere to it could not be ascertained, but it is certain that he followed established customs about Buddhism wholeheartedly and decisively. Hence, though Buddhism in this period is usually depicted in terms of decay and corruption, it is beyond doubt that it held great appeal and persuasion, especially when it came to substantiating royal authority.

Second, although I have followed the general convention of writing

60. See S. Han (2011) for Jeongjo's attempts at making a stronger monarchy; no mention is made, however, of Jeongjo's support for Buddhism, something still seen as incongruous with the "Confucian monarchy."

about the *disestablishment* of Buddhism, it is not clear whether there was a sustained attempt at disestablishing Buddhism. Given the ideological nature of the attacks on Buddhism and their distinctly unrealistic character, it seems that there was initially no consensus on what to do with Buddhism. Moreover, since criticism of the religion had started in late Goryeo and since land reforms—though it is not clear how far they affected Buddhism—had already been implemented before Joseon, it is reasonable to surmise that Yi Seong-gye thought that curbing Buddhist excesses would suffice. Although it gradually became clear that Confucian critique of Buddhism would have far-reaching effect, legislation that proscribed the religion altogether was never passed. Many would undoubtedly have favored a complete proscription of Buddhism, but clearly this was not possible without royal support.

Third, by almost giving himself up to Buddhism, he managed to extract sufficient concessions to maintain a core group of royal temples and a small number of temples that retained official status. By inscribing Buddhism onto the royal body, Yi may have forestalled any attempt at officially eradicating Buddhism. Of course, Confucians tried to persuade kings to remove Buddhism completely of their own accord, but any king sympathetic to Buddhism would be able to point to precedent and bestow certain favors on Buddhism right to the end of the dynasty. Despite all the harrying of Buddhism, it could not be simply abolished—while attempts at cutting off its lifeblood were at several points nearly successful (Choi 2009, 205-213), as an official institution it never completely lost its *raison d'être*.

Recent research has focused on late Joseon Buddhism to prove that it was not as moribund as long thought, but the view that it had been doomed from the start of the dynasty has never been challenged. Like the “tree with deep roots” referred to in the royal panegyric *Yongbi eocheonga* (Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven), Buddhism, which was so much entangled with that dynastic lineage, could be shaken and pruned but never uprooted without also uprooting the dynasty.

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