

Rhetoric, Ritual, and Political Legitimacy: *Justifying Yi Seong-gye's Ascension to the Throne**

Don BAKER

Abstract

In premodern Korea, religion provided many of the important tools for legitimizing political authority. Since the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) eventually privileged Confucianism over all other religious traditions, Confucianism supplied the vast majority of the rituals and religious rhetoric that the court used to assert its right to rule during that period. However, when the dynasty was first established at the end of the fourteenth century, the dominance that Confucianism would later display was not yet evident. Instead, in addition to Confucian rituals and rhetoric, official depictions of the founder of the dynasty point to his support of Buddhist and Daoist rituals, and even supernatural phenomena, as well as his reputation for extraordinary military skill, to legitimize his overthrow of the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392). This pluralistic religious environment makes Korea in the fourteenth century look very different from Europe in the same time period, particularly in terms of the ability of the king of Korea to use religious rituals and rhetoric as he saw fit, without the worry of religious leaders trying to control him. This relationship between political and religious power in Korea is a distinctive characteristic of the political culture of premodern Korea.

Keywords: Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, military skill, political legitimacy, King Taejo

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Don BAKER is Professor of Korean Civilization in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. E-mail: don.baker@ubc.ca.

Introduction

At the end of the fourteenth century, on opposite sides of the globe, Western Europe and Korea were both going through major changes in the way they conceived the relationship between religion and government. Korea's heavily Buddhist Goryeo dynasty was coming to an end after four and a half centuries since its establishment in 918 and was in the process of being replaced by the Confucian-oriented Joseon dynasty. In Western Europe, the pope was still the head of the Christian community (the Reformation had yet to occur) but the power of the pope to determine the legitimacy of a secular ruler was much weaker than it had been in previous centuries.

In order to understand the relationship between religion and the state in Korea six centuries ago, an examination of what was happening in Korea at that time is, of course, necessary. However, the significance of this can be even better understood when viewed from a comparative perspective. The government in Korea at the time was quite different from the type of government that prevailed in Europe during the same period. Europe and Korea also had very different concepts of religion and of the roles that religious organizations should play in society. Nevertheless, since they were both involved in redefining the relationship between political power and religious authority, a brief glimpse into how the relationship between religion and government was changing in Europe can shed light on how the relationship between religious communities and the state was changing in Korea as well. Placed in a comparative perspective, the nature of the transformation in such relationships in Korea can be highlighted and therefore made more amenable to analysis.

In narrating and explaining Korean history, there are two extremes a careful historian should avoid. One is to treat Korea as *sui generis*, or to deal with Korea in isolation from its neighbors and from global history. Such an approach, if done diligently, can uncover much important information about the specifics of historical events and processes within the Korean peninsula, but it can also lead to an incomplete understanding of why Koreans responded in a certain way in certain historical circumstances.

es. For examples, research on the rise and fall of the military in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Goryeo has provided a more nuanced perspective on that important exception to the Korean tradition of civilian rule and has shown that what appears, at least on the surface, to be a military government could be more accurately portrayed as a coalition between particular elements of the military and particular elements of the aristocracy. However, when it only examines events on the Korean peninsula, such research fails to address the larger question of why military rule was so short in Korea but lasted several centuries in Japan, though the military ascended to power in both countries during roughly the same period. By failing to compare how Koreans acted in certain situations with how other countries acted under similar circumstances, the opportunity to highlight the creativity of Koreans and the distinctive flow of Korean history is lost.

The other extreme is to treat Korea as primarily a case study of global historical processes. One example is the application of Marxist categories or modernization theory to the study of Korean history. This leads not only to such common mistakes as describing the advanced centralized government of Joseon Korea as “feudal” (a term that, properly used, refers to decentralized layered governments) or searching for “sprouts of capitalism” in premodern Korea, but also to overlooking the creativity of the Korean people over the centuries, although Korean history provides many examples of Koreans responding in distinctively Korean ways to situations also faced by other societies, such as how to govern a large population, how to grow an economy, and how to manage the relationship between a government and strong religious institutions.

The question of church-state relations (with “church” broadly defined to include Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religions) has been understudied in Korean history. Often it is simply assumed that the state dominated religion, and used religion to control the population it ruled over. Moreover, studies of the Joseon dynasty often assume that, with the fall of the Goryeo dynasty and the rise of Joseon in 1392, Neo-Confucianism immediately replaced Buddhism as the “state religion.”

There is an alternative approach to the study of the relationship

between the state and religion in Korean history, one that also avoids the aforementioned two extremes. This alternative approach is particularly helpful in narrating the events both leading up to and immediately following the establishment of the Joseon dynasty in 1392. When the Joseon dynasty arose to replace the Goryeo dynasty, which had lasted for more than four centuries, Koreans, like all peoples establishing a new government, had to deal with the question of political legitimacy. New rulers in the premodern world had to win acceptance for their ascension to power, not from the masses¹ but from other politically powerful families and individuals. Since acquiring political legitimacy was not a uniquely Korean problem, one would be amiss to view the issue as an isolated case. However, at the same time, it is also necessary to remember that the situation Yi Seong-gye faced in 1392 was unique to Korea and, therefore, the solution he and his supporters chose was a distinctively Korean one, drawn from Korean tradition and based on the specific circumstances of Korea at that time. Therefore, we should address the issue of church-state relations in Korea in the last decade of the fourteenth century without ignoring comparative cases, but also without assuming that Korea merely displayed adherence to universal laws of history in the solution it found.

We should also recognize that ideological change normally takes place over a considerable period of time. Any argument that Korea made the switch from Buddhism to Confucianism as the dominant tool for legitimizing rituals as soon as the Goryeo dynasty was replaced by the Joseon dynasty requires evidence that Korean history unfolded in ways rarely seen elsewhere in world history. However, a close examination of historical records reveals that an unusually rapid ideological transformation did not take place. It took several generations for Confucianism to assume its overwhelming dominance at court. At the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, Confucianism had to compete with other legitimizing forces, including not only such religious ritual systems as those provided by Buddhism, but also with nonreligious ideas such as that of military skill and charisma.

1. The masses were not significant participants in politics in premodern times.

The Rise of the Secular State in Europe

To understand the situation in Korea at the end of the fourteenth century, let us first look at Europe during the same period, in order to gain a comparative perspective on Korean history. In the fourteenth century, Europe was moving toward the modern notion of the state as an organization which monopolizes the legitimate use of force within the boundaries of a clearly defined territory (Weber 1946, 78). This new understanding of the state implies that the ruler's authority reached directly every corner of their territory, with none of the autonomous or semi-autonomous layers that, in feudal times, stood between a king and his subjects. This is the type of centralized state that had already been in place in Korea since the late Silla dynasty (668-936). At the same time, Europe was also wrestling with a component of the traditional state that it shared in common with Korea—the question of the monopoly on the legitimate use of ritual within that same specified territory.

That monopoly remained unquestioned in Korea. Korean governments, both in the collapsing Goryeo dynasty and in the emerging Joseon dynasty, exercised ritual hegemony, determining which rituals could be legitimately performed within their territory, which gods could be worshipped, and who could worship such gods. Moreover, in Korea, religious authorities had never been able to exercise independent authority over governments. Religious leaders had no power to determine if a political leader was a legitimate ruler or not.

However, in Western Europe, the relationship of the religious authority to secular authority was very different from that of Korea around the same time. In 1302, for example, Pope Boniface (1294-1303), the head of the Christian community in Europe, issued the bull *Unam Sanctam*, which declared religious authority to be superior to secular authority, thereby stating that kings and princes should obey the pope. That papal bull distinguished two manifestations of legitimate power, “the spiritual sword” and “the temporal sword.” However, it went on to state:

. . . the latter is to be used for the Church, the former by the Church; the former by the hand of the priest, the latter by the hand of princes and kings, but at the nod and sufferance of the priest. . . . the spiritual power has the functions of establishing the temporal power and sitting in judgment on it if it should prove to be not good.²

Not everyone in Europe agreed that spiritual authority extended into the secular realm. Even in Italy, though it was the home of the papacy, some began to question the claim of religious leaders' authority over secular leaders. In 1324, Marsilius of Padua, for example, argued:

Neither the Roman bishop, called the pope, nor any other bishop, presbyter, or deacon, ought to have the ruling or judgment or coercive jurisdiction of any priest, prince, community, society or single person of any rank whatsoever. . . . For the present purposes, it suffices to show, and I will first show, that Christ Himself did not come into the world to rule men, or to judge them by civil judgment, nor to govern in a temporal sense, but rather to subject Himself to the state and condition of this world; that indeed from such judgment and rule He wished to exclude and did exclude Himself and His apostles and disciples, and that He excluded their successors, the bishops and presbyters, by His example, and word and counsel and command from all governing and worldly, that is, coercive rule.³

In fact, beginning in the fourteenth century and continuing into the fifteenth century, with the exception of the Papal States in central Italy in which the pope still reigned as both a religious and a political authority, the rise of strong monarchies in which the pronouncements of church authorities on non-religious matters became increasingly irrelevant began to be seen. Interestingly enough, many of the challenges to papal authority

2. "Unam Sanctam—English Translation (1875) by Cardinal Manning," Catholic Planet, <http://www.catholicplanet.com/TSM/Unam-Sanctam-Manning.htm> (accessed February 19, 2012).

3. "Medieval Sourcebook: Marsilius of Padua: From *Defensor Pacis*, 1324," Internet Medieval Sourcebook by the Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/marsiglio4.asp> (accessed August 20, 2013).

were also couched in religious terms, such as the claims that the body of believers as a whole, not the pope alone, should be the ultimate authority. Marsilius himself called for rule by church councils rather than the pope, preferring this to the growing shift toward rule by king over rule by pope. However, even such religious claims led to a separation of religious authority from secular political authority, since it weakened the pope's role as a monarch, creating space for other monarchs to emerge without any need for papal recognition. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Western Europe's adoption of a secular notion of legitimate government was more as a result of the breakdown of ecclesiastical authority than of any deliberate attempt to renounce interference by religion in politics *per se*.

Secular rulers not only often refused to acknowledge the secular authority of the church in their realms, but also sometimes they even fought successfully for the right to name those who held high church offices, such as bishops, within their territories. So, in the beginning, it was not the separation of church and state but the localization of state control of the church that was first seen. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Western Europe was just beginning to move toward the position that Korea had adopted centuries earlier.

Of course, there was a major difference between the situation in Korea and that in Western Europe. In Western Europe, the authority that powerful religious institutions had once exercised over much of Europe was in decline due to a shift toward control of local religious institutions being held by local secular leaders, a shift that exploded with the fragmentation of Christianity in the sixteenth century (Wandel 2011, 147-172). In Korea, on the other hand, there had never been any powerful religious institutions threatening the power of the state from beyond its borders. Instead, the transition that took place at the end of the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth century in Korea was a move from one religious community preferred by the local ruler as a legitimizing force (Buddhism) toward another (Neo-Confucianism). In both cases, however, the ruler and his government maintained supremacy. Unlike in Europe, the Korean court did not have to struggle for supremacy. It simply had to decide how to use the supremacy it already had in order to decide which religious communi-

ties it preferred to work closely with.

In Western Europe, because of a long history of the Catholic Church as a relatively strong institution vis-à-vis kings and princes, it became necessary to theorize the relationship between church and state. This was not necessary in Korea, since religious organizations never posed a serious threat to the power of the state. To the contrary, they were under the authority of the state, an authority they never seriously questioned. In Korea, therefore, the question was not whether or not a religious leader, such as the pope, could exercise authority over a secular ruler or over the territory that the ruler controlled, but which religious rhetoric and which religious rituals would provide the most powerful legitimation of monarchical authority. That debate was not theoretical. Instead, it was waged in the halls of power in the early Joseon by officials who wanted the government to rely solely on Confucianism for ideological legitimation versus kings who preferred to have a wider range of religious tools to strengthen their claim to the throne.

State Control of Religion in Pre-Joseon Korea

In traditional East Asia, there was no word for religion as a separate and distinct sphere of life. There were religions, of course, but Buddhism, Daoism, Shinto, Confucianism, and folk beliefs and traditions were not brought together under one umbrella term or seen as inherently different from other forms of communal activity. Religious groups were granted no privileges that political, economic, or social groups did not share. All were treated as a part of society rather than as being apart from society and were expected to recognize that the locus of ultimate authority was the state. The little autonomy religious communities did enjoy, which they enjoyed only because of neglect or indifference by the state, could be violated by the state at any time it chose to do so. This was as true of Korea as it was of China and Japan.

The indigenous religion of Korea, the combination of animism and shamanism which constitute Korea's folk religion, never created the sort of

institutional structure that might have allowed it to mount a challenge to the state's authority. It was, as folk religions tend to be, too diffused and localized to pose a serious challenge to any centralized and institutionalized authority. Buddhism and Confucianism—although the debate over whether Confucianism is a religion or not is unresolved, it cannot be denied that it operated in the same way that religions operated in other societies—were brought to Korea for the explicit purpose of strengthening royal authority. They arrived in the fourth century, after kingdoms had already emerged, and therefore were never able to establish independent power.

The history of Buddhism in East Asia provides a paradigmatic example of the traditional relationship between the state and religious communities. Buddhism was the first organized religion with international ties to penetrate East Asia, reaching China in the first century from India via Central Asia. Buddhism first took root in China not as a challenge to but as a servant of the state. Aspirants for hegemony at a time of warfare among competing kingdoms imported Buddhist monks and patronized Buddhist temples in order to enhance the prestige of their courts over those of their rivals, as well as out of hope that the Buddha would be so moved by their support that he would lend his supernatural power to their side, giving them an advantage over their competitors.

Buddhism played a similar role in Korea. Buddhism entered Korea during the Three Kingdoms period, when Goguryeo, Baekje, and later, Silla vied for dominance over the peninsula. After Silla defeated its rivals, the court continued to promote Buddhism because by that time Buddhism was seen as one aspect of the advanced civilization of China, which Silla was proud to share. Moreover, support for Buddhism was one of the ways the Silla throne legitimized its rule. By patronizing Buddhism, Silla monarchs not only polished their image as civilized but also made sure their subjects saw that they had powerful supernatural beings on their side, intimidating any potential opposition.

In the Goryeo dynasty, which followed Silla, an even more explicit linking of Buddhism to the legitimacy and authority of the state can be seen. The “Ten Injunctions” of Wang Geon, the founder of the dynasty, even goes as far as stating, “The success of every great undertaking of our

state depends upon the favor and protection of the Buddha” (Lee and de Bary 1997, 154). The further institutionalization of state control of Buddhism can also be seen. In Goryeo, the state, rather than any Buddhist institution, determined who was a respected monk. Those who wanted to exercise any authority within the Buddhist community had to pass government-administered monastic examinations. The Goryeo state also named the abbots of major monasteries. On top of that, the state appointed a royal preceptor and a national preceptor, the top positions in the nationwide Buddhist clerical hierarchy. In addition, the state controlled the performance of important Buddhist rituals, such as the Lotus Lantern Festival (*yeondeunghoe*) (Suh 1993; Hö 1996).

Politics, Legitimation, and Religious Culture

One explanation for why medieval Korean kings tended to wield more power over religious institutions than their counterparts did in Europe, and why ritual hegemony was so much more important in Korea than it was in Europe at the same time period, can be found in the differences in the religious cultures of the two regions. The dominant religion in Europe was monotheistic. Korea’s religious culture was polytheistic. Moreover, Europe was dominated by one religion, Christianity. Korea had many religions, which not only coexisted but also interacted with each other. Though one of those religions (Buddhism in Goryeo or Neo-Confucianism in Joseon) might have been much stronger than the others, medieval Korea had a much more pluralistic religious culture than Europe had at the time, since secondary religions were much more visible and played a much more important role in government than they did in Europe. These religious differences have important political implications.

When one religion monopolizes the public sphere of a particular country, and that religion has a centralized institutional structure, there is a strong possibility that that religion will have both the means and the will to challenge the power of the government. If, on the other hand, there are a number of different religions operating openly in that country, it is

unlikely that any one of them would be strong enough to challenge the government. It is equally unlikely that those competing religions would join forces to challenge the government. Moreover, when one religion dominates, it can try to deny ritual support for the ruler. However, when more than one religion is deemed legitimate, if one religious community fails to provide the ruler with the rituals he needs to assert his legitimacy, he can always turn to a rival religion. In the Goryeo dynasty, kings primarily used Buddhism to legitimize their rule but they could also turn to Daoism when they needed legitimizing rituals (Yun 2002). Daoism was fading into relative irrelevance at the beginning of the Joseon dynasty (Kim 2010), but the new court, in addition to sponsoring a few remaining Daoist rituals, relied heavily on both Confucian and Buddhist rituals to support its claims to legitimacy. That allowed the monarchy to be stronger than any single religious organization.

Not only was the religious culture in both Goryeo and Joseon pluralistic, it was also polytheistic. This, too, has political implications. A religion defined by belief in only one God worthy of worship is normally more concerned than a polytheistic religion would be with defining how that one God is worshipped and what that God tells the human community. That one God rules over about how human beings should behave, and even how He is defined and perceived. In premodern times, strong monotheistic religious organizations often tried to use the power of their government to help them enforce doctrinal orthodoxy. That is not the case in polytheistic societies. When there are many gods, there are usually many different ways to engage in ritual interactions with those gods. Moreover, rather than one set of revelations binding everyone, there can be many different revelations from many different gods. And, when there are many gods, there is no need for clear definitions of them. Theology is a discipline for monotheism, not for polytheism.

In polytheistic religions, ritual tends to be emphasized more than doctrine. When you are surrounded by powerful supernatural beings, you want to make sure you maintain good relations with them. The exact form of the rituals is not particularly important, since you are expected to interact with different gods in different ways. However, it is important that you

regularly interact with those gods. That is why we see a much stronger emphasis on ritual than on doctrine in polytheistic religions such as Shinto in Japan and Hinduism in India. We see the same emphasis on ritual in the indigenous Korean folk religious tradition and in the Mahayana Buddhism, which was imported to Korea a thousand years before the Joseon dynasty emerged and brought with it a number of different supernatural entities from various Buddhas to even more numerous Bodhisattvas. Although Neo-Confucianism cannot be called either monotheistic or polytheistic,⁴ it shared the emphasis on ritual seen in polytheistic religions.

In premodern times, governments ruling over a population committed to a single monotheistic religion were often concerned with maintaining doctrinal as well as ritual uniformity among those they governed. Doctrinal uniformity is not usually a major concern of governments ruling over peoples who believe in different religions and many different gods. They are concerned about ritual, however, since uncontrolled ritual interactions with supernatural beings can lead to some of those supernatural beings contradicting government policies. That is why we often see governments of polytheistic societies claiming ritual hegemony. Different types of rituals, and ritual interactions with different gods and spirits, are allowed as long as the government maintains ultimate authority over who worships those gods, and when, how, and where they do so (Baker 2006). That authority over ritual performance is wielded to prevent religious challenges to the government arising from the messages the gods deliver in ritual contexts.

Medieval Korea, since it was polytheistic and religiously pluralistic under both the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties, displays a very different relationship between the state and religious organizations than what was seen in Europe. Kings in Korea could stand above the various competing religious communities and did not have to worry about being controlled by them. Instead, they exercised ritual hegemony over them. As the Joseon dynasty matured and Neo-Confucianism grew stronger and Bud-

4. The many supernatural beings, such as ancestors whose existence Neo-Confucianism recognizes, did not play the central role that gods play in theistic religions.

dhism and Daoism weakened, a tug-of-war between the monarch and Confucian scholar-officials over control of the government began. But when the Joseon dynasty first emerged at the end of the fourteenth century, it still shared much of the pluralistic political and religious culture of the previous dynasty.

One scholar of the Goryeo dynasty recently noted that “[t]he Goryeo ruler was the . . . head of the bureaucracy, leader of the aristocracy, Son of Heaven, foremost Buddhist believer and sponsor of Buddhist rituals, sponsor of Daoist rituals, embodiment of the Koryŏ [Goryeo] landscape and its spirits and, perhaps most importantly, descendant of T’aejo [Wang Geon]” (Breuker 2010, 193). The range of titles and roles exercised by Yi Seong-gye when he ascended the throne in 1392 was not quite as broad as that of the typical early Goryeo kings. He never claimed to be the Son of Heaven, for example. Nevertheless, he claimed that he had been given the Mandate of Heaven, a claim Goryeo monarchs also made before Goryeo was conquered by the Mongols (Breuker 2010, 165). In addition, Yi Seong-gye assumed the mantle of patron of both Buddhist and Daoist rituals, patronizing Buddhist temples and monks and allowing the official Daoist temple, the Sogyekjeon, to continue to operate, which it did well into the sixteenth century.⁵ And he was, of course, the head of the bureaucracy and the leader of the aristocracy. In all these roles, he wielded rituals and rhetoric from Confucianism, Buddhism, and, to a lesser extent, Daoism, to legitimize his claim to supreme political power. Moreover, he supplemented his religious and ritual claim to the throne by also allowing himself to be portrayed as the most powerful military figure in the land.

Legitimizing Regime Change in the Fourteenth Century

In 1392, when Yi Seong-gye unseated the last representative of the Wang family from the throne after four and a half centuries of the Goryeo dynas-

5. *Taejo sillok*, 10th day of the 1st lunar month, 5th year of King Taejo’s reign (1396); Yi (1988).

ty, and assumed the throne for himself and his descendants,⁶ he knew that it was essential that he get his subjects to accept his action as legitimate. There was no outside authority he could call upon to confirm his legitimacy.⁷ Therefore, he, and those who supported his claim to the throne, had to turn to legitimizing ritual and rhetoric to convince those whom he intended to rule over that he had the right to do so. There were a number of tools available they could use to establish his legitimacy. They could claim that he had been given the Mandate of Heaven, as defined by Confucianism. They could claim the sanction of Buddhism, drawing on the example of the Goryeo dynasty. They could claim other supernatural sanctions. Or they could simply claim that he was, in secular terms, the best man for the job, since he had shown himself the best commander. Yi and his supporters used all of those tools.

Before enumerating the specific ways Yi's ascension to power was legitimized, first it is necessary to define the powers he needed to claim the legitimate authority to use, and also define the tools that could be used to legitimize such authority. As a king of an East Asian state, there were two important powers Yi Seong-gye had to claim. For well over a thousand years before Yi sat on his throne, rulers in East Asia had been guided by the words of the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Chronicle of Zuo), a text on the ancient history of China. The commentary on the 13th year of Duke Cheng 成 of Lu (585 BC) in *Qunqiu* [Ch'un Ts'ew] 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals) states, "sacrifice and war are the great affairs of a state" (quoted in Legge 1972a, 379). This told Yi that he had to claim both a monopoly of the legitimate use of force and a monopoly of the legitimate performance of the most important rituals. He accomplished the first task by becoming the most powerful warrior of his day, and the second by performing or sponsoring important Buddhist and Confucian religious rituals.

Buddhism was available as a legitimizing tool because it had been the primary religious legitimizing tools of the royal families that preceded Yi.

6. Yi Seong-gye would come to be known as Taejo to later generations.

7. The Emperor of Ming China would only ratify rule by a king of Korea who had already been accepted by the Korean elite as legitimate.

A ruler could use Buddhism to legitimize his rule in three ways. He could present himself as a devout Buddhist and therefore claim to have the support of the Buddha. He could sponsor Buddhist rituals, especially rituals with political implications like the Inwanghoe (Assembly of the Benevolent Kings), and also provide official sanction and financial support for monks and temples (Vermeersch 2008, esp. 327).

Confucianism, on the other hand, provided the notion of the Mandate of Heaven. According to the Mandate of Heaven concept, it could be explained that Yi had ascended the throne because Heaven had clearly recognized that he was the most virtuous and capable person on the peninsula and Heaven had ensured that the people of Korea shared that recognition. In other words, Yi had not sought to become king, but had been raised to the throne because Heaven, speaking through the people, had determined that he should do so.

The Mandate of Heaven concept has been used in China to justify the change from one royal family to another, and therefore it would seem to be appropriate for use in the Goryeo-Joseon transition. But what is this “Mandate of Heaven?” How is it supposed to be manifest? The classic statement of the Mandate of Heaven comes from Mencius: “The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler. That is why one who gains the allegiance of the tillers of the field will become the Son of Heaven” (*Mencius* 7B:14, quoted in Bloom 2009, 159). Mencius also explains, “Heaven sees with the eyes of the people. Heaven hears with the ears of the people” (*Mencius* 5A:5, quoted in Bloom 2009, 104). Both statements make clear that popular support reveals who has the Mandate of Heaven.

Mencius, speaking in the fourth century BC, is citing a much earlier Chinese source, *Shujing* 書經 (Book of Documents). This earlier text used the Chinese character 民 (people) to indicate the relatives of the king, those who had the power to decide who could rule and who could not. However, by the fourth century BC, the meaning of “people” had changed to mean the common people, the masses who provided the tax revenue that kept a government afloat, and could rise up in rebellion against a ruler who overtaxed them or otherwise threatened their ability to survive

(Nylan 2001, 155). Yi Seong-gye, and those around him, understood Mencius' statement with the latter, broader meaning. It seems clear, therefore, that a newly enthroned ruler had to convince those he sought to rule over that he had popular support, which would point to him as the recipient of the Mandate of Heaven. Traditionally, in China, those who had led a successful popular rebellion against the previous dynasty had been able to claim that they have been given the Mandate of Heaven. Korea, however, did not have a history of widespread popular rebellions. Yi Seong-gye was not ushered into the palace by a peasant uprising. How, then, could he claim that he had been awarded the Mandate of Heaven?

There are three other ways he could make a persuasive argument that he had the Mandate of Heaven before he actually took the throne, and four ways he could claim after he gained the throne that he had done so legitimately through the Mandate of Heaven. First of all, to pave the way for his seizure of the throne, Yi needed to show that his predecessor had lost the Mandate of Heaven because he was illegitimate, incompetent, or immoral. In China, this was often seen as indicated by unusual natural events, such as major droughts, famines, and earthquakes, showing that the incumbent had lost Heaven's favor. Second, once a case had been made that the throne did not currently have a worthy occupant, he should show that he was more virtuous than other potential claimants to the throne. His superior virtue should be displayed in traditional Confucian ways. He should be unusually filial to his parents, loyal to his superiors, trustworthy with his friends, benevolent towards those under his command, and sincere in everything he does. Third, he could show that he has the support of the people, usually by being asked to lead a rebellion against the previous ruler.

Once he is on the throne, he needs to act in a way that shows that he accepts the Confucian criteria for a legitimate ruler, and that he acts in accordance with them. He should, first of all, rely on Confucian officials to help him govern. Second, for those who have taken the throne of a country subordinate to China within the Sino-centric world order, he should honor and show ritual respect for China and its emperor. Third, he should promote Confucian rituals at court. And, fourth, he should

study and cite the Confucian classics. If he acts as a proper Confucian monarch, the odds are that he will be accepted as a legitimate ruler. However, there was still the problem of getting his ascension to the throne accepted in the first place. Claiming that he had the Mandate of Heaven might not be sufficient. Besides showing that his predecessor had lost his mandate and that he himself was more virtuous and popular than any other alternative, he might also point to supernatural phenomenon or anomalies in nature, indicating that he was destined for greatness (S. Park 1998). Or he could simply make himself the most powerful general in the land so that all possible rivals would recognize his superior strength and skill and decide not to challenge him.

Yi Seong-gye, as he is portrayed in official accounts of his life and reign, did all of the above. He did what was necessary to gain his throne and then he did what was necessary to keep it. However, a study of the image of Yi that was projected in order to enhance his legitimacy, as well as the legitimacy of the royal family line he established, reveals that initially the emphasis was not on religious legitimacy, but on his military prowess and charisma. Even after he gained the throne, the traditional Mandate of Heaven rhetoric was accompanied by reliance on Buddhist rituals and Buddhist monks, and even on supernatural omens, to assert his right to the throne. It was only later on in the dynasty that talk of Heaven granting him the throne outweighed talk of his military qualifications, and even then his feats of military skill and valor, especially his skill at archery and horse-riding, were used more than any purported popular support to show that Heaven favored him above all others.

The Martial Origins of the Yi Family's Rise to Royalty

Taejo sillok (Annals of King Taejo) for Taejo Yi Seong-gye includes a lengthy preface explaining who Yi was before he became king and who his ancestors were. The emphasis is on his unusual military talent, not on his virtuous character. Here is one of many examples, a description of Yi in action against Japanese invaders in 1380:

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The enemy, using its best warriors, suddenly launched a surprise attack on him. Taejo quickly shot down the enemy. . . . All [his] arrows hit the enemy soldiers on the head. Someone was sure to fall dead as soon as the sound of the trembling bowstring was heard.⁸

Even when he was not engaged in battle, it is told that he displayed remarkable martial skill. Here is just one of many examples:

When Taejo was engaged in hunting in Mt. Jopo of Hongwon, three roe deer suddenly came out in a group. Running on horseback, Taejo shot down the first one. As the other two ran away, he shot one more arrow. It sailed through the bodies of the two.⁹

Even at play, Yi is depicted as much more physically gifted than ordinary men. For example, a description of how he played a game similar to polo lauds his unusual agility as follows:

Once when he was attacking the ball, his horse ran so fast that when he was hitting the ball toward the goal, the ball unexpectedly hit a rock and bounced back and passed through the four legs of his horse. Taejo instantly twisted his body backwards and sideways and then, reaching through his horse's tail, got the ball to reverse direction and come out through his horse's two front legs. When he hit it again, the ball passed through the goal . . . Everyone in the country was amazed to see his great skill and said that such talent was unprecedented.¹⁰

Not to belabor a point, here is yet another example of Yi's amazing skill with the bow:

When Taejo was young, Lady Kim, later known as Queen Jeongan, saw

8. *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign (1392), *chongseo* 66. In citing the *Taejo sillok*, I rely on a draft translation by Choi Byonghyon. He and I are working together on an English translation of the *Taejo sillok*, though he is handling the majority of the work. The citations reference the online version at <http://sillok.history.go.kr/inspection/inspection.jsp?mTree=0&id=kaa>.

9. *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign (1392), *chongseo* 53.

10. *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign, *chongseo* 35.

five magpies sitting on the corner of a fence. She asked Taejo to shoot them. With just one shot from Taejo's bow, all five magpies fell to the ground.¹¹

The reference to Lady Kim is important because she appears again in the *Taejo sillok*, but in her next appearance she is used to show how virtuous Yi was:

After Hwanjo [his father] passed away, Taejo brought Lady Kim to his house in the capital city and served her with the utmost propriety. Whenever he visited her, he knelt down below the stone steps of her home. . . . He also always shared his home with Yi Hwa [the son of Lady Kim] and another stepbrother Yi Won-gye, who was older than him. His brotherly love for them was so great that Taejo burned the slave documents related to their mother.¹²

This is one of the few examples in the background material on Yi Seong-gye that shows him virtuous enough to earn the Mandate of Heaven. There are a few other examples, such as this one:

Taejo always had great respect for Confucianism. Whenever he took a break after throwing spears in his military camp, he called on Confucian scholars such as Yu Gyeong and others to discuss classical texts with him. He particularly enjoyed reading the *Daxue yanyi* (Extended Meaning of the Great Learning) by Zhen Dexiu, so he read it until late at night, growing a dream of changing the world.¹³

However, examples of his skill on a horse and shooting arrows far outnumber examples of him acting in a way that a good Confucian would be expected to act.

This does not mean that there are no references to the Mandate of Heaven. The day after he entered the throne room and began his reign,

11. *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign (1392), *chongseo* 29.

12. *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign, *chongseo* 51.

13. *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign, *chongseo* 80.

Heaven signaled its pleasure by sending a downpour to end a drought that had afflicted the Korean people.¹⁴ Ten days later Taejo explained officially why he had “reluctantly” agreed to become king. In his official announcement that he had become the king, Yi used typical Mandate of Heaven rhetoric to explain his decision to dethrone the previous king and assume royal power himself:

The Privy Council and the officials of high and low ranks requested me to ascend the throne Being unworthy and lacking in virtue, I was worried that I would be unable to assume such responsibility and declined their request a few times. However, they all persisted saying, “Since the hearts of the people are like this, it is not hard to know the will of Heaven. You cannot resist the people and disobey the command of Heaven.” So I had no choice but to accede to their request and reluctantly rose to the throne.¹⁵

This is all standard Confucian Mandate of Heaven rhetoric, with one conspicuous exception. Instead of the people in general placing Yi on the throne after a popular uprising, it was the “Privy Council and the officials of high and low ranks” who did so. This is not quite the way Mencius described the changing of the Mandate of Heaven. Nevertheless, there are 22 more references to Taejo being awarded the Mandate of Heaven in the annals of his reign, sometimes emerging in attempts by his officials to convince him that he should rule in a strictly Confucian manner.¹⁶

Non-Confucian Sources of Legitimization in the First Years of the Joseon Dynasty

Once he was on the throne, Yi is portrayed as acting like the Confucian monarch his officials wanted him to be, most of the time. He relied on

14. *Taejo sillok*, 18th day of the 7th lunar month, 1st year of King Taejo's reign (1392).

15. *Taejo sillok*, 28th day of the 7th lunar month, 1st year of King Taejo's reign.

16. *Taejo sillok*, 11th day of the 8th lunar month, 1st year of King Taejo's reign.

Confucian-scholar officials and he issued pronouncements filled with standard Confucian rhetoric. However, the official records report that he also continued to turn to Buddhism both for personal consolation and because he thought that there were still many people in Korea who expected their monarch to show that he had the support of the Buddha by sponsoring Buddhist rituals and supporting Buddhist monks and temples. It is well known that he appointed Jacho, also known as Muhak, as his Royal Preceptor and also appointed another monk, Jogu, as the National Preceptor (Han 1996, 29-30). Less well known are the many Buddhist rituals Yi held at his court. They include *sojae* (prayers for warding off disorder in nature), *gijae* and *cheonhoe* (rituals to console the spirits of the dead), and *dobul byeongyu* (rituals to ask the Buddha's help in overcoming illness). Moreover, he sometimes treated large numbers of monks to a feast and provided financial support for the printing of sutras (Han 1993, 50-52). There are sixty instances of Taejo sponsoring Buddhist rituals or entertaining monks over the course of the six years of his reign recorded in the *Taejo sillok*. He also mandated that the Buddhist *suryukjae* (ritual of water and land) be performed under royal auspices twice a year (Choi 2009). For example, the *Taejo sillok* tells us that, in his second year on the throne:

The king visited Yeonboksa temple and had meals served to the monks there. He had the monks read aloud from the sutras and had Royal Preceptor Jacho give a sermon. He did this to celebrate the fact that, shortly before, the five-story pagoda in the temple had been constructed to hold a complete collection of Buddhist sutras [*Daejanggyeong*] inside the pagoda.¹⁷

It states that less than two weeks later, "When astronomical anomalies began to frequently appear in the heavens, the king gathered monks at his temporary royal quarters and had them perform the rite for eliminating

17. *Taejo sillok*, 17th day of the 10th lunar month, 2nd year of King Taejo's reign (1393).

natural calamities. The king burned incense together with the queen.”¹⁸ Royal support of and participation in Buddhist rituals was a regular occurrence during the first years of the Joseon dynasty.

Yi's claim to the throne was also supported by omens and other supernatural phenomena. Many of those omens are included in the *Taejo sillok* record for the 17th day of the 7th lunar month of 1392, the day he ascended the throne. For example, it is written that once, when Yi was sleeping, a spirit appeared to him in his dreams and handed him a golden ruler, saying, “Who can use this ruler to straighten out the state except you?” Another record tells of a tree which had appeared to have died being suddenly revived and sprouting numerous new branches and leaves. Moreover, before Yi became king, a strange man dropped by his home and handed him a book that appeared to prophesy that Yi would soon rule over Korea. That man then disappeared.¹⁹

There are many more examples too numerous to mention here. Some of those examples are repeated in *Yongbi eocheonga* (Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven), a collection of songs composed during the reign of Taejo's grandson Sejong (r. 1419-1450) to praise and legitimize the rule of the Yi royal family (Hoyt 1971). By the time Sejong held the throne and commissioned the writings of those songs, Neo-Confucianism was more firmly entrenched as the hegemonic legitimizing ideology than it had been when Taejo ascended the throne five decades earlier. Nevertheless, we can still see evidence of a perceived need to draw from a variety of sources to justify the legitimacy of the Yi's claim to the throne.

There are 125 cantos in this paean of praise for the Yi family, but only twelve that explicitly mention the Mandate of Heaven though there are another seven that mention the popular support for Yi Seong-gye and another seventeen that praise the virtue displayed by Yi and his ancestors. However, thirty-one of the cantos laud the military skill displayed by Yi and his ancestors (Lee 2003, 153-157) and another thirteen cantos point to non-Confucian and non-military signs that the Yi family was destined

18. *Taejo sillok*, 29th day of the 10th lunar month, 2nd year of King Taejo's reign (1393).

19. *Taejo sillok*, 17th day of the 7th lunar month, 1st year of King Taejo's reign (1392).

to rule over Korea. For example, canto 11 tells us that, after Yi Seong-gye's great-grandfather prayed to the bodhisattva Gwaneum (Avalokitesvara), a monk appeared to him in a dream and promised that he would soon have a son to continue the family line.²⁰ The next canto tells us that that son, in turn, had a dream in which a dragon told him that his sons would have an auspicious future.²¹ A few cantos later, in canto 34, we learn that as early as 1370, when Yi Seong-gye led an army across the Yalu River in response to the command of the King of Goryeo to engage the Mongols, the sky turned purple, signaling, according to the official court astrologer, that Yi would soon become a great military leader.²²

It is worth noting that both *Yongbi eocheonga* and the version of the *Taejo sillok* we have today were written five decades after Yi Seong-gye ascended the throne in 1392 (Y. Park 1996). Even though Confucianism was gaining ascendancy over Buddhism and Daoism in the middle of the fifteenth century, both *Yongbi eocheonga* and *Taejo sillok* reflect the fact that it had not yet been settled whether Confucianism would be the sole source of political legitimacy or whether Joseon would be like Goryeo, drawing on diverse sources to assert the prerogative of the royal family to rule.

Conclusion

At this early stage in the establishment of the new Joseon dynasty, Confucianism, particularly the Mandate of Heaven, was not yet deeply ingrained enough in the minds of the Korean people, or even in the minds of the elite and powerful, that Confucian rhetoric and ritual alone could suffice to grant the new Yi royal family the support they needed to seize the throne and then maintain their grip on the throne. Instead, Confucian rhetoric and ritual had to be reinforced with Buddhist and Daoist rituals

20. See also *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign (1392), *chongseo* 11.

21. See also *Taejo sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign, *chongseo* 18.

22. See also *Taejo Sillok*, 1st year of King Taejo's reign, *chongseo* 47.

in order to solidify Yi Seong-gye's ascension to the throne. Moreover, it appears more important to show that Yi Seong-gye was a skilled warrior than that Heaven had chosen him to lead Korea because of his virtue. That is, it was not so much religious considerations that made Yi Seong-gye the king, but his personal skill and charisma. Religion played only a secondary role in legitimizing his seizure of the throne. Moreover, he was not beholden to any one religion. Buddhism played almost as important a role as Confucianism did, even though many of Yi's top officials would have had it otherwise. Over the generations of Yi family kings that followed Taejo for the next five centuries, Neo-Confucianism would grow powerful enough that Confucian ritual and rhetoric needed only to be supported by the proper ancestry to make a claimant to the throne legitimate. Supernatural omens, and even Buddhist and Daoist rituals, became irrelevant to questions of royal legitimacy. However, this examination of records from the first years of the Joseon dynasty reveals that a pluralistic relationship between ritual, rhetoric, and political legitimacy did not change overnight at the end of the fourteenth century. Instead, the change to a predominantly Confucian government and legitimizing ideology took several decades to solidify. That delay allowed the establishment of parameters for the relationship between political power and religion which would prevail over the centuries that followed and ensure that Korea would enter the modern world along a different path than the one Western Europe followed.

First of all, because Taejo was able to confirm the traditional supremacy of the state over religious communities, and gained power in his own right, rather than having it handed to him by an all-powerful God or by someone who claimed to be that God's representative on earth, his successors did not have to deal with the complicated delineating of boundaries in church-state relations that shaped much of the West's political thought and practice. Even after Confucianism gained hegemony and dominated official discourse, his successors retained the power Taejo had exercised over religious rhetoric and ritual. As a result, the Joseon state was much stronger vis-à-vis organized religion than its counterparts in early modern Europe were.

In addition, the use of Buddhism and Daoism, as well as Confucianism, to reinforce the legitimacy of Yi Seong-gye's ascension to the throne earned those non-Confucian religions enough respectability to survive the elevation of Confucianism to hegemony in official circles. In particular, the continued vitality of Buddhism outside of the capital ensured that Korea would retain a more diverse religious culture than was seen in Europe at the same time. That diversity, combined with the traditional supremacy of the state, allowed the Yi kings of the Joseon dynasty to exercise more authority over religious ritual and rhetoric than monarchs were normally permitted in early modern Europe.

Historians insist that we can understand the present only if we understand the past out of which it emerged. To understand how Korea became the modern nation it is today, how it has managed to remain distinctively Korean despite borrowing much from the outside world, it is necessary to trace the path Korea followed to modernity. One important stop on that path is the reign of Yi Seong-gye, the king who established a dynasty that lasted over five centuries and solidified the distinctive Korean solution to the problem of church-state relations.

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