

# Queen Munjeong's (1501-1565) Statecraft and Buddhist View in Confucian Joseon\*

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## Abstract

*Queen Munjeong (1501-1565) was a substantial power holder who administered national affairs from “behind the bamboo curtain” during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between her view on Buddhism and statecraft in sixteenth-century Confucian Joseon. To that end, this study examines Queen Munjeong's Buddhist activities in anti-Buddhist Confucian society, her understanding of Buddhism, and her statecraft in relation to her Buddhist policy. Queen Munjeong did not reject heterodoxy and respected tradition, which served as the logic for her favor of Buddhism. She was a substantial power holder who surpassed royal authority in power and suppressed remonstrators, and her Buddhist activities had strong elements of private character while seeking miraculous efficacy, which eventually resulted in criticism from her contemporary and immediate later generations.*

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Confucianism, Joseon, Queen Munjeong, statecraft, *suryeong cheongjeong* 垂簾聽政 (“politics from behind the bamboo curtain”)

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## Introduction

Sixteenth-century Korea saw great changes in terms of its politics, economy, and society as well as its culture and thought. The practical and political role of Neo-Confucianism was weakened due to a series of purges of the literati and the discomfiture of the Confucian politics of Jo Gwang-jo 趙光祖 (1482–1519) and others. Nevertheless, great figures of Neo-Confucian thought such as Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501–1570) and Yi I 李珣 (1536–1584), were produced in this time (Junghee Kim 2001, 5). Queen Munjeong (1501–1565) occupied an important position in the sixteenth-century political history of Korea (Junghee Kim 1999, 797-798) and was a substantial power holder who administered national affairs from behind the bamboo curtain (*suryeom cheongjeong*)<sup>1</sup> during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between her view on Buddhism and statecraft in sixteenth-century Confucian Joseon. Like in other Asian states, a monarch was traditionally the primary supporter of Buddhism in Korea.<sup>2</sup> In particular, as the mother of King Myeongjong 明宗 (1534–1567), who ascended to the throne in his childhood, Queen Munjeong revived Buddhism from its moribund state in the anti-Buddhist Joseon dynasty.

From a religious perspective, the Joseon dynasty was characterized by an anti-Buddhist policy. However, the influence of Buddhism in sixteenth-century Korean society was much greater than has been portrayed in previous scholarship (Kwon 1993). Confucian scholars and ordinary people as well as members of the royal family still believed in Buddhism and the number of monks was not few. In addition, pecuniary assistance

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1. *Suryeom cheongjeong* refers to the system through which the queen grandmother or the queen mother administered national affairs from behind the bamboo curtain beside the king (Lim 2003, 33). Six queens during the Joseon period made use of *suryeom cheongjeong* (Junghee Kim 2001, 169; Lim 2003, 58). For research on *suryeom cheongjeong*, including its execution process, institutional situation, and examples during the Joseon period, see H. Pak (2003, 33-65). The reign of King Sunjo (1800–1834) saw the establishment of articles on *suryeom cheongjeong* (Lim 2003, 39).

2. For royal Buddhist views and their statecraft in ancient Korea, see Jongmyung Kim (2010a, 297-310).

on the state level toward the monastic circles was considerable. There are many more sources on Buddhism from Joseon Korea than those from during the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC–AD 668)<sup>3</sup> and the Goryeo period (918–1392). In particular, Queen Munjeong was a key figure in the revival of Buddhism in Joseon Korea. Conventional understanding states that politics during the Joseon period was the affair of men, represented by the king and the Confucian scholar-officials, and that women's political engagement was limited. This has resulted in a lack of research on women's participation in politics. However, even at that time, women could also participate in politics through a system of administering state affairs from behind the bamboo curtain, and Queen Munjeong is representative of such case.

Despite its importance, Buddhism in Joseon has remained understudied, both in Korea and overseas (Buswell 1999, 159), and research on the relationship between Queen Munjeong's Buddhist views and her statecraft is no exception in this regard.<sup>4</sup> A considerable number of studies have been conducted on Queen Munjeong's Buddhist politics (Jongik Yi 1990; Yongtae Kim 1993; Kang 1994; Sangyeong Kim 1994; C. Han 2000) and also on the reign of King Myeongjong, including his Buddhist policy (Jang 2002, 258). However, current scholarship has primarily focused on the anti-Buddhist policy of the Joseon government. In addition, issues important for better understanding of Buddhism during the reign of Queen Munjeong still remain for further discussion, which include: what was the queen's view on Buddhism?; what was the logic for her favor of Buddhism?; what Buddhist texts and doctrine gained her special favor?; what Buddhist activities did she conduct?; and what was the relationship between her Buddhist activities and statecraft in her time?

This article is composed of three sections. The first section examines

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3. However, American scholarship of Korean studies argues that the Three Kingdoms period was from the fourth to the seventh centuries (Best 2006, 8-11; Buswell 2011, 734; McBride 2011, 127).

4. For trends in overseas research on Korean Buddhism, refer to Jongmyung Kim (2006, 5-8), Jorgensen (2006, 9-26), McBride (2006, 27-48), Mohan (2006, 49-57), and Sørensen (2007, 212-233).

Queen Munjeong's statecraft in relation to her Buddhist policy. The second section investigates the queen's Buddhist activities in anti-Buddhist Confucian society. The final section evaluates Queen Munjeong's statecraft and Buddhist activities in terms of her understanding of early Buddhism in Confucian Joseon, which is important because she was not just a Buddhist believer but a substantial power holder of her time.

To examine these issues, this study analyzes such texts as the *Myeongjong sillok* 明宗實錄 (Annals of King Myeongjong), the *Joseon wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 (Annals of the Joseon Dynasty), and relevant literary texts in classical Chinese.

### Queen Munjeong's Statecraft

Queen Munjeong's administration lasted for eight years, from 1545 to 1553. However, her political influence continued even thereafter and her movement for the revival of Buddhism developed over a twenty-year period (U. Kim 2001, 8), aided by monks such as Bou 普雨 (1515–1565), her maternal relatives such as Yun Won-hyeong 尹元衡 (d. 1565), and eunuchs, including Bak Han-jong 朴漢宗 (d. 1563).

Called *yeoju* 女主 (female lord), Queen Munjeong exerted her influence on the political arena even before her official participation in national politics (Junghee Kim 1999, 800). Queen Munjeong's administration of national affairs from behind the bamboo curtain began with the accession to the throne of King Myeongjong in 1545, when he was twelve years old, and she officially participated in significant national affairs alongside the king. Queen Munjeong made good use of the ruling system, her blood relatives, eunuchs, and the Royal Treasury (Naesusa 內需司).<sup>5</sup> She used two methods of administering national affairs: power politics and in-law politics. As a result, she was more than a king's mother and played a role as the absolute ruler beyond her royal power (Junghee Kim 1999, 798-809).

5. The Royal Treasury functioned as a private safe of the royal household and also played a role in administering temples (Jang 2002, 264).

### *Power Politics*

The maintenance and strengthening of her political power were executed through her official activities. For example, the literati purge in the year of Eulsa [1545] (Eulsa Sahwa 乙巳士禍), which became the impetus for the establishment of the ruling system by the Lesser Yun (Soyun 小尹) family, was begun by Queen Munjeong's secret order to Yun Won-hyeong. The assistance of government officials, including conservative ministers, was also necessary for Queen Munjeong's administration of national affairs. In particular, the Wonsangje 院相制 (Government by Elder Statesmen) system, which was in charge of the whole field of national politics in the initial period of King Myeongjong's reign, was representative of how Queen Munjeong administered national affairs, being assisted by the ministers of the court (Junghee Kim 1999, 808-811).

During her reign, Queen Munjeong was engaged in 45 items of national affairs, which included 15 items of personnel management, nine items of winning the hearts of the people, four items of criminal law, and three items of Buddhism, public opinion, and education, respectively. In particular, the issues of personnel management included the impeachment of individuals, the estimation of merits and awards, the pacification of the people's minds, criticism of the ruling power, and the negative work performance of officials (Junghee Kim 1999, 804-805).

### *In-law Politics*

The political roles of women were limited during the time when Neo-Confucian ethics were in expansion. Despite such context, Queen Munjeong developed unofficial political activities already during the reign of King Jungjong 中宗 (1506-1544), her husband, and then further strengthened her unofficial participation in politics after the death of the king (Junghee Kim 1999, 807). Her in-law statecraft was aided by her blood relatives, the monk Bou, and eunuchs.

### *Blood Relatives*

While Queen Jeonghui (1418–1483) regarded meritorious subjects and blood relatives as her two political poles, Queen Munjeong depended primarily on her blood relatives for governing. For Queen Munjeong, her blood relatives of the Papyeong Yun 坡平 尹 clan, including her brothers such as Yun Won-ro 尹元老 (d. 1547) and Yun Won-hyeong (Junghee Kim 1999, 818-821), were the most reliable political comrades. While controlling royal power, Queen Munjeong appointed in-law family members (Jang 2002, 261). In particular, her younger brother Yun Won-hyeong held substantial power during her reign as regent (Joongkwon Kim 2000, 75), and works related to the monk Bou and the reestablishment of the two Buddhist orders were supported and led by him.<sup>6</sup>

Queen Munjeong made her stepson, King Injong 仁宗 (1544–1545), administer state affairs by her order as early as the initial years of his reign. The king also attempted to appoint Yun Won-hyeong as Vice Minister of Construction to curry favor with her. In addition, it is highly probable that Yun Chun-nyeon 尹春年 (1514–1567) also played a certain role in the formation of Queen Munjeong's Buddhist policy. This is because Injong was the greatest political supporter of Yun Won-hyeong. He said that the Three Learnings of Buddhism—precepts, meditation, and wisdom—were the same and thought that he was the monk Seoljam 雪岑<sup>7</sup> in his previous life. In addition, he respected Bou (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 80). Queen Munjeong maintained her political power aided by her blood relatives even after King Myeongjong governed in person (Jang 2002, 257) in 1553, and her influence was absolute (Jang 2002, 260).

6. *Myeongjong sillok*, 24th day of the 8th lunar month, 1551.

7. Seoljam was the dharma name of Kim Si-seup (1435–1493), one of six royal subjects who were against King Sejo's (1455–1468) usurpation and a pro-Buddhist Confucian scholar. For King Sejo's Buddhist view and his statecraft, see Jongmyung Kim (2010, 117-154).

### *The Monk Bou*

Buddhism during the Joseon dynasty was revived primarily due to the efforts of Queen Munjeong, aided by the monk Bou<sup>8</sup> (U. Kim 2001, 6; Sanghyun Kim 2009, 69). Bou played a decisive role in the revival of Buddhism (Jang 2002, 264).

Records indicate that Bou was recommended to Queen Munjeong through various channels. *Seoae japgi* 西厓雜記 (Miscellaneous Writings of Seoae Yu Seong-yong) records that it was Jeong Man-jong 鄭萬鍾, a provincial governor, who recommended Bou to Queen Munjeong (Sangil Kim 2008, 126; Sanghyun Kim 2009, 74). In addition, the *Myeongjong sillok* points out that the Royal Treasury recommended Bou to Queen Munjeong:

The Queen Mother [Queen Munjeong] attempted to restore Buddhism. However, there was no proper monk to assume it. She searched for such a monk by tracing rumors, but ended in failure. The wicked monk Bou stealthily recognized her wishful thinking and set himself up as a high monk while living in a protective temple for a royal tomb (*neungchimsa* 陵寢寺). The Royal Treasury reported his name to the palace and royal-ties regarded him as a living Buddha.<sup>9</sup>

According to this entry, Queen Munjeong was looking for a candidate monk for her Buddhist project and Bou also attempted to contact political circles, thus coming to an understanding with each other. This quotation is from a 1552 record. However, the first meeting between Queen Munjeong and Bou was earlier than 1552. This is because in 1548 Queen Munjeong appointed Bou as abbot of Bongeunsa monastery, which was a protective temple for the tomb of King Seongjong 成宗 (1457–1494) and the most significant base of monks at that time. In addition, Bak Han-jong, who was a eunuch and Director of the Royal Treasury at that time (San-

8. As for research on Bou's thoughts and life, see Sangil Kim (2008, 118) and Han (2009, 101).

9. *Myeongjong sillok*, 29th day of the 5th lunar month, 1552.

ghyun Kim 2009, 75), played a leading role in recommending Bou to the queen (Jang 2002, 267). Therefore, it is certain that the first meeting of Queen Munjeong with Bou was at least the year 1548.

Bou also attempted to unite Buddhism with Confucianism while giving priority to the former (Sangil Kim 2008, 117). In his poem, Bou also sang about Jeong Man-jong's governing through such Confucian concepts as loyalty and compassion (*chungseo* 忠恕), glorious deeds (*gongmyeong* 空名), and the right time (*sijung* 時中) (Sangil Kim 2008, 126-127).

### *Eunuchs*

Queen Munjeong adroitly took advantage of eunuchs as a means to maintain her political power. In response, eunuchs served as informants of Queen Munjeong and contributed to maintaining her in-law politics (Jang 2002, 258-261).<sup>10</sup> Buddhism during the reign of King Myeongjong also gained strong support from the Royal Treasury (Kang 1994, 178). In particular, the eunuch Bak Han-jong was the most favored by both Queen Munjeong and King Myeongjong. Queen Munjeong and Bak Han-jong met each other around 1544 (Jang 2002, 269). Bak contributed to the revival of Buddhism through the Royal Treasury (2002, 264), which he was in full charge of as its director and was allowed to report things concerning the treasury directly to the king, bypassing the Royal Secretariat (Seungjeongwon 承政院).<sup>11</sup> In addition, Bak advised the king to respect Buddhism and educated monks in support of the Buddhist policy of Queen Munjeong (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 80). Unwontedly as a eunuch, Bak was also appointed as Lord of Milseong (Jang 2002, 262), the official title granted to him in recognition of his meritorious service on the side of Queen Munjeong in the literati purge of 1545.

10. For research on eunuchs in terms of the institutional history, see Jang (2002, 259-260).

11. *Myeongjong sillok*, 14th day of the 3rd lunar month, 1553.

## Queen Munjeong's Buddhist Activities

Queen Munjeong's Buddhist activities are characterized by the restoration of Buddhist orders, the reestablishment of the monk registration system, the reinstatement of the monastic examination system (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 77), and the support for the production of Buddhist paintings. Queen Munjeong was a devout Buddhist believer in person and a substantial power holder beyond royal authority. Therefore, it is not easy to distinguish her Buddhist activities in terms of them being official or unofficial. However, the restoration of Buddhist orders, the reestablishment of the monk registration system, and the reinstatement of the monastic examination system were institutional devices to utilize Buddhism on the state level, whereas the production of Buddhist painting during her time was maintained by her private support. Accordingly, the former will be considered official and the latter unofficial.

### *Official Buddhist Activities*

Queen Munjeong's favor of Buddhism reinstated the two orders of Seon 禪 (Meditation) and Gyo 教 (Doctrine). Queen Munjeong ordered the reinstatement of the Meditative Order and the Doctrinal Order in 1550, saying:

The institution of the Meditative Order and the Doctrinal Order, which was recorded in the grand canon during the reign of ancestral kings, did not aim to respect Buddhism, but to prohibit people from becoming a monk. However, that system was abolished in recent years and it is not easy to redress this evil practice. Make Bongeunsa 奉恩寺 and Bongseonsa 奉先寺 as the head monasteries of the Meditative Order and the Doctrinal Order, respectively, and strengthen the conditions of being ordained to monkhood in the great code.<sup>12</sup>

This quotation indicates that Queen Munjeong admitted Buddhism as a

12. *Myeongjong sillok*, 15th day of the 12th lunar month, 1550.

political tool and accepted Bou's advice for the revival of the monk registration system in 1552. In addition, in 1552<sup>13</sup> she revived the monastic examination, which had been stopped in 1504, and it survived until 1566 (U. Kim 2001, 8-9).

### *Unofficial Buddhist Activities*

Queen Munjeong's unofficial Buddhist activities are represented by her support for the production of Buddhist paintings.<sup>14</sup> The sixteenth century was the most important turning point in the history of Korean Buddhist painting and saw the production of a plethora of Buddhist paintings.<sup>15</sup> Ninety out of 120 extant Buddhist paintings that belong to the early and middle period of the Joseon dynasty were a product of the sixteenth century. In particular, it was during the reign of Queen Munjeong when production was at their peak, suggesting that the queen's Buddhist policy was instrumental in this production boom.

Even in the early period of the Joseon dynasty, when the anti-Buddhist policy reached its climax, queens, princesses, and royal concubines supported the production of Buddhist paintings (U. Kim 2001, 14). Of the fifty-plus Buddhist paintings produced during the same period, twenty-plus paintings were created with the support of royal family members. These Buddhist paintings supported by the royal household are regarded as "the palatial style of the sixteenth century." In particular, Queen Munjeong supported the production of the greatest number of Buddhist paintings in the sixteenth century (U. Kim 2001, 6-14). For example, in 1561

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13. Hyujeong (1520-1604), the most influential of monks in Joseon Korea, passed the revived monastic examination in 1552, and Yujeong passed it in 1561 (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 78-79).

14. In spite of an anti-Buddhist policy in fifteenth-century Joseon, royal Buddhist activities flourished. In particular, sponsored by the royal household, Buddhist art produced in the same period was representative of its kind and became the model throughout the dynasty (D. Park 2002, 155).

15. For the catalog of Buddhist paintings supported by the royal household in the sixteenth century, see U. Kim (2001, 12).

Queen Munjeong commissioned five Healing Buddha<sup>16</sup> paintings in pure gold and two scroll paintings. In 1562, the queen funded the production of 200 paintings of arhats (*nahando* 羅漢圖) (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 72-73). In 1565, Queen Munjeong also funded 400 Buddhist paintings, including those of the Sakyamuni, the Maitreya, and the Amitabha. This tradition of court-commissioned paintings continued down to the reign of King Seonjo (1567–1608) (U. Kim 2001, 10).

Queen Munjeong's favor of Buddhism continued until her death. In her message, written on the verge of her death in 1565 and composed in Hangeul (Korean alphabet), Queen Munjeong said:

I am sorry to say this to the Court. However, I say it because it has been my long-cherished wish. Although Buddhism is heterodoxy, it has been tradition from the period of royal ancestors and the establishment of the Doctrinal Order and the Meditative Order was to put monks under the control of the state. People say that monks are bootless. However, I truly wish the Court to comprehend my intention and protect them as in the past. Ancient people said, "We cannot believe in Buddhism in ordinary times. However, if our parents turned a deaf ear to our counsel not to believe in it, we respected their intention." Although the king prohibits Buddhism and controls it, I truly wish the Court to accept my intent.<sup>17</sup>

This entry shows that the monastic orders had been under political control traditionally; nevertheless, Queen Munjeong as a senior of the royal house wished to protect them with her personal favor, even if it was against the royal will.

### Evaluation of Queen Munjeong's Statecraft and Buddhist View

How can we evaluate Queen Munjeong's statecraft, which was based on

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16. For recent research on belief in the Healing Buddha in East Asia, see Jongmyung Kim (2013).

17. *Myeongjong sillok*, 6th day of the 4th lunar month, 1565.

her political influence as regent, and Buddhist view? Let us examine these issues in terms of literacy and finance, statecraft, and Buddhist policy.

### *Literacy and Finance*

#### 1) Level of Literacy

There was a certain difference among women of the upper class in their ability to understand classical Chinese, the official script in Joseon Korea and the *lingua franca* of Buddhist texts in East Asia. In that context, the Korean alphabet contributed to forming the Buddhist beliefs of women of the upper class, including royalties.<sup>18</sup> For example, Queen Jeonghui, King Sejo's (1455–1468) wife, said, “I am not aware of *munja* 文字,”<sup>19</sup> the classical Chinese. Instead, Queen Jeonghui was aware of the Korean alphabet. On the other hand, Queen Munjeong was aware of both the classical Chinese<sup>20</sup> and the Korean alphabet. Queen Munjeong, however, left her message in the Korean alphabet in 1565 (Lee 2004, 27-28) and Bou translated *Gwon yeom yorok* 勸念要錄 (Encouragement to the Recitation of the Buddha's Name) into the Korean language for Queen Munjeong (Han 2009, 102), suggesting that the queen's access to Buddhist texts was primarily through the Korean language.

#### 2) Financial Basis

It was tradition that the royal household supported the performance of Buddhist activities with royal private funds. For example, Queen Jeonghui was concerned with Buddhism out of her personal faith (U. Kim 2001, 205-206), and Queen Sohye (1437–1504), who was King Seongjong's mother, said that her Buddhist activities were funded privately and unrelated to

18. As for the relationship between King Sejong's Buddhist view and the Korean alphabet, see Jongmyung Kim (2007, 134-159). For King Sejong's (1418–1450) Buddhist view and Confucian statecraft, refer to Jongmyung Kim (2010c, 239-282).

19. *Yejong sillok*, 28th day of the 11th lunar month, 1469.

20. *Myeongjong sillok*, 6th day of the 4th lunar month, 1565.

the state (Lee 2004, 8). In addition, Buddhist paintings supported by the royal house in the sixteenth century were also financed by royal private funds.

Queen Munjeong used the Royal Treasury, which was in charge of royal private property, to enable her to secure the monastic economy, pursue a strong pro-Buddhist policy, and hold political power (Junghee Kim 1999, 813-817). The Royal Treasury was also deeply involved with creating the Buddhist paintings and the role of the treasury was strengthened (U. Kim 2001, 25-26) when Queen Munjeong ran it privately.<sup>21</sup> In particular, the Healing Buddha paintings and scroll paintings sponsored by Queen Munjeong in 1561 were funded from the Royal Treasury (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 72). In addition, Queen Munjeong's interest in Buddhist services also exacerbated the economic burden of the populace (U. Kim 2001, 8).

#### *Queen Munjeong's Statecraft*

Queen Munjeong, as the queen mother to King Myeongjong, administered state affairs from behind the bamboo curtain (Bak 2003, 56-57). The reign of King Myeongjong was characterized by conflicts among the Yun clan backed by Queen Munjeong, the Neo-Confucian literati, and meritorious elites (Jang 2002, 257). In such context, Queen Munjeong even excelled King Myeongjong in political power. For instance, a Chinese envoy observed that "The king's mother [Queen Munjeong] held political power and acted high-handedly. She administered national affairs as she planned and nobody could make her change her mind."<sup>22</sup> This quote indicates that the Queen could do as she pleased beyond royal power. The queen also pressured King Myeongjong regarding personnel management (Junghee Kim 1999, 808-809). When certain national policies faced severe criticism from officials, Queen Munjeong emphasized that responsibility did not lay with the king but with her. In fact, her control was so great that King

21. *Myeongjong sillok*, 7th day of the 8th lunar month, 1549.

22. *Myeongjong sillok*, 8th day of the 1st lunar month, 1562.

Myeongjong intended to free himself from Queen Munjeong's political intervention in 1565, thus causing trouble with her.

Queen Munjeong also played a leading role in discussions with government officials through royal lectures, audiences, and face-to-face meetings (Junghee Kim 1999, 805-813). The main participants in audiences and face-to-face meetings with Queen Munjeong were high-ranking officials who were the Ministers of the Six Boards or higher. Queen Munjeong, on the other hand, oppressed remonstrators (*eongwan* 言官) because she viewed that remonstrators should act within the scope of not limiting her kingship. She believed that discussions with high officials were better than those with remonstrators.

In addition, personnel management and attempts to win the people's mind dominated the national affairs administered by Queen Munjeong, signifying that the political situation during her reign was unstable (Junghee Kim 1999, 805). According to the *Myeongjong sillok*,

Even when she was no longer in a position to administer national affairs from behind the bamboo curtain, Jijeon [Queen Munjeong] ordered a eunuch to deliver a royal order to be sent out. This meant that two rulers [the queen and the king] governed the state. In addition, local magistrates were under examination by state law. Nevertheless, they had to leave their offices following the accusations of monks. This suggests that state law was not in proper order.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Queen Munjeong was a stern woman. Regarding this, chroniclers recorded,

Queen Yun [Queen Munjeong] was a woman of stern and steadfast character. She did not make her countenance soft even when she faced the king. While she administered state affairs from behind the veil, the king had a hard time in displaying his sovereign power at his discretion.<sup>24</sup>

23. *Myeongjong sillok*, 13th day of the 4th lunar month, 1560.

24. *Myeongjong sillok*, 6th day of the 4th lunar month, 1565.

After the death of Queen Munjeong in 1565, King Myeongjong strengthened his power and the Neo-Confucian literati (Sarimpa 士林派) came to the political forefront. As a result, the authority of the eunuchs rapidly weakened (Jang 2002, 261-269). Queen Munjeong's administration eventually drew criticism from the Neo-Confucian literati that led to her losing, posthumously, her justification in administering national politics (Junghee Kim 1999, 813).

The private character of her governing of the state made Joseon Confucian scholar-officials feel negative towards women's political participation (Junghee Kim 1999, 823). Regency by an Empress Dowager was begun during Han China (206 BC–AD 219). However, it was Empress Zetian (624–705) who administered state affairs from behind the bamboo curtain for the first time (Bak 2003, 44). Queen dowagers of Joseon followed suit<sup>25</sup> and modeled themselves after Empress Dowager Xuanren 宣人 (d. 1093) of Song 宋 (960–1279) China in particular due to her good governing. According to them, the Chinese dowager governed the state well aided by ministers, remonstrators, and other government officials, thus minimizing the influence of eunuchs and maternal relatives (Bak 2003, 53-54). In contrast, Queen Munjeong heavily depended on her blood relatives and eunuchs<sup>26</sup> to administer state affairs.

### *Queen Munjeong's Buddhist View and Policy*

An analysis of the logic of Queen Munjeong's favor of Buddhism, her Buddhist policy, her favorite Buddhist books, and the role of Buddhist activities point out that Queen Munjeong used Buddhism for her political

25. Queen Jeonghui was the first example of a queen mother that participated in national politics during the Joseon dynasty. She administered national affairs for seven years from 1469 until 1476, and modeled her administration after that of Empress Dowager Xuanren during Song China (Lim 2003, 33-39). Queen Jeonghui's regency covered the whole field of national affairs and she exerted a considerable influence even after her regency (U. Kim 2001, 208-211). For research on blood politics of Queen Jeonghui, see Han (2002).

26. In particular, Bak Han-jong served as an actual ringleader of the rampancy of eunuchs during the reign of King Myeongjong (Jang 2002, 267).

and secular purposes, but lacked an in-depth understanding of basic Buddhist teachings, including the Four Noble Truths, principles that contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings.

### 1) Logic of Favoring Buddhism

The logic behind Queen Munjeong's favor of Buddhism was twofold: respect for tradition and a broad-minded stance toward learning. Pro-Buddhists during the Joseon period defended Buddhism on the grounds that it was tradition from the past. Queen Munjeong was not an exception. In addition, Queen Munjeong accepted both orthodoxy and heterodoxy of her time. Regarding this, in his "Bongnyeongsa saseong jungsugi" (Records of the Restoration of the Images of the Four Saints at Bongnyeongsa Monastery), Bou said,

The Queen Mother [Queen Munjeong] respected Confucianism and valued Buddhism. It was a rare thing in the past. She also served Heaven and made high of the Buddha. That would also be unwonted in the future (Bou 1996, 628).

In fact, Queen Munjeong followed Confucianism, orthodoxy of her time. Like Queen Sohye, who authored *Naehun* 內訓 (Instructions for Women) (Lee 2004, 8), which consisted of quotations from works on education, Queen Munjeong published *Sohak eonhae*, a Korean translation of Zhu Xi's (1130–1200) *Xiaoxue* 小學 (Lesser Learning), a primer on moral education for children, in 1189 at the recommendation of Yi Eon-jeok 李彦迪 (1491–1553), and used it as a textbook on filial piety and brotherly love for her child King Myeongjong (Joongkwon Kim 2000, 79-80). Queen Munjeong also accepted Buddhism, heterodoxy of her time, while saying, "It is not reasonable to reject heterodoxy simply because it is heterodoxy."<sup>27</sup>

### 2) Buddhist View

Although it is difficult to fully understand Queen Munjeong's Buddhist

27. *Myeongjong sillok*, 19th day of the 1st lunar month, 1511.

view due to the lack of source materials, we can glean her knowledge of Buddhism through the Buddhist texts of her interest. Bou's writings and other circumstantial evidence hinted that her favorite Buddhist texts were those on miraculous efficacy and secular benefit. Bou translated the *Gwon yeom yorok*, which was composed of stories of miraculous efficacy and better rebirth, for Queen Munjeong (Han 2009, 102). Bou also produced *Jijang siwangdo* 地藏十王圖 (Painting of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and Ten Underworld Kings) in 1562 and prayed for the longevity of the royal family (U. Kim 2001, 20-21). In addition to these, there were a number of Buddhist texts that were popular during the Joseon period, which included *Geumganggyeong* 金剛經 (Diamond Sutra), *Beophwagyeong* 法華經 (Lotus Sutra), and *Bumo eunjunggyeong* 父母恩重經 (Book of Parental Gratitude). In particular, Buddhist texts on miraculous efficacy and secular benefits were already popular around the time of Queen Munjeong.

For example, the monk Hakjo 學祖, who was actively sponsored by the royal house from the mid-fifteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, translated the *Dizang pusa benyuanjing* 地藏菩薩本願經 (Sutra of the Great Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva), *Qianshoujing* 千手經 (Thousand Hands Sutra), *Zhengdaoge nanming jiesong* 證道歌南明偈頌 (Nanming's Eulogies of the Song of Attaining Enlightenment), and composed epilogues to Buddhist texts, including the *Buljeongsim daranigyeong* 佛頂心多羅尼經 (Book of the Buddha Pate Mind in True Words), *Odae jineon* 五大真言 (Five Great True Words), *Jineon gwongong* 真言勸供 (Admonition for Offering in True Words). *Suryuk mucha pyeongdeung jaeui chwaryo* 水陸無遮平等齋儀撮要 (Excerpts from the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land with Indifferent Equality), *Suryuk uimun* 水陸儀文 (Procedure of the Ritual of Water and Land), *Gyeolsumun* 結手文 (Text of Ritual Hand-Sign), *So mitacham* 小彌陀懺 (Lesser Repentance to Amitabha Buddha), *Beophwagyeong* (Lotus Sutra), *Jijang bosal bonwongyeong* (Sutra of the Great Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva), and *Bulseol yesu siwang saengchilgyeong* 佛說豫修十往生七經 (The Buddha's Utterances on Rituals of Seven Prostrations While Living in Preparation for Judgment by the Ten Kings of Hell) were also published with the support of the royal house of the Joseon dynasty (Park 2002, 156-159).

These Buddhist texts were in general apocryphal<sup>28</sup> and were about repentance to abolish karmic disturbances or a better rebirth after death, which is considered an expedient for people of lower spiritual faculty. In particular, the *Beophwagyeong* (Lotus Sutra) was the most popular among Buddhist canons published in the initial period of the Joseon dynasty,<sup>29</sup> followed by the *Jijang bosal bonwongyeong*. The meritorious character of the salvific nature of the *Jijang bosal bonwongyeong* seems to have attracted attention among the Korean people at that time (Park 2002, 165).

The Buddhist texts of Queen Munjeong's interest were primarily concerned with making merits. In addition, as far as extant sources are concerned, no evidence indicates that Queen Munjeong had an in-depth knowledge of the basic teachings of the Buddha, including the Four Noble Truths, and of major Mahayana Buddhist doctrines such as the Doctrine of Emptiness, unlike Emperor Taizong (976–997) of Song China (Jongmyung Kim 2002, 162).

### 3) Buddhist Policy

After the abolition of the Gangyeong Dogam 刊經都監 (Superintendency for Sutra Publication) in 1471, royal Buddhist events were developed on the private level (Park 2002, 156). Although Queen Munjeong's Buddhist policy was assumed to be official, it had strong elements of private character. Regarding this, a historian at the time recorded that the pants and socks for the monks of the Meditative and Doctrinal Orders were all produced at the palace; and the queen grandmother [Queen Munjeong] always sat face to face with nuns who visited the palace and said, "The Buddha should be respected."<sup>30</sup>

Although Confucian scholars, who were against her attempt to restore Buddhism, presented a number of memorials to the queen (Junghee Kim

28. For a discussion of Chinese Buddhist apocrypha, see Buswell (1990).

29. The *Beophwagyeong* is also included in the extant woodcuts of Buddhist canons sponsored by Queen Jeonghui.

30. *Myeongjong sillok*, 23th day of the 4th lunar month, 1555.

1999, 813), she unflinchingly pushed on with her plan for the reinstatement of the two Buddhist orders (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 78). She said,

My will [the reestablishment of the Doctrinal Order and the Meditative Order] was already decided and cannot be cancelled in any circumstances. Therefore, I manifest my intention to the Court today.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, Confucian scholars were once whipped as a result of Queen Munjeong's favor of Buddhism. When the scholars requested the punishment of the eunuchs who were involved in the whipping, it was rather those Confucian scholars who were blamed, on the grounds that what the eunuchs did was done by a royal order. This was such a rare case that none like it was found during the reign of any king except for King Myeongjong (Jang 2002, 267).

Queen Munjeong, as the substantial power holder beyond royal power, developed her own Buddhist policy. It is considered that her proper understanding of Buddhism was *sine qua non* in developing her Buddhist policy. In particular, the Buddha originally rejected making miracles and Buddhism was not a religion for the invocation of blessings. Nevertheless, as far as extant evidence is concerned, Queen Munjeong was not interested in Buddhist doctrine, but in making merits through depending on the Buddha's miraculous power. Her overall Buddhist policy also appears to have been a product of such beliefs.

#### 4) Nature of Buddhist Activities

Until the latter period of the Joseon dynasty, following the death of King Taejong (1400–1418), tens of royal concubines became nuns, which is considered a result of their personal faith in Buddhism (Hwang 2011, 117–143). Royalties of Joseon believed in Buddhism in their pursuit of miraculous efficacy and secular blessings. For example, the motive of the royal household for publishing Buddhist texts was to pray for the solace of a

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31. *Myeongjong sillok*, 19th day of the 1st lunar month, 1511.

deceased family member (Park 2002, 165). Queen Sohye also copied Buddhist texts for the consolation of deceased kings and the incumbent king (Lee 2004, 8). Queens during the Joseon period also funded the production of a number of Buddhist paintings for the purpose of longevity and otherworldly happiness of royal family members (U. Kim 2001, 10). Therefore, for many Buddhist believers, including royalties, Buddhist books or paintings were not used for learning Buddhist doctrine, but for praying for secular benefit. Queen Munjeong followed suit.

The twenty-plus paintings created through the support of royal family members in the sixteenth century were also for the purpose of the longevity of the royal household, rebirth into a Buddhist paradise, the curing of a disease, and the birth of a crown prince (U. Kim 2001, 14). Queen Munjeong sponsored the Healing Buddha paintings, 200 arhats paintings, and 400 Buddhist paintings in the 1560s, and they were aimed at the peace of the state and the people, health and longevity of the king, good governing, cultivation of royal virtue, birth of a prince, prosperity of royal offspring, and longevity of the Buddha's son (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 72-73).

In addition, the ratio of slaves to the total population of sixteenth-century Joseon was at least 40 to 50 percent (Yong-Man Kim 1997, 10) and they were probably mobilized to carry out the Buddhist activities led by the queen. This means that her Buddhist faith was not based on the Buddhist spirit that emphasizes equality and compassion among people.

In short, Queen Munjeong was permissive of diverse teachings and respected tradition, which served as the logic for her favor of Buddhism. She was a substantial power holder surpassing royal authority and her Buddhist activities were primarily sponsored by royal private funds and aimed at seeking miraculous efficacy. Therefore, it is said that Queen Munjeong's effort to revive Buddhism had a historical significance, so as to say that the Bodhi tree [i.e., Buddhism] that had withered for fifty years had come to be rejuvenated (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 82). Other records, however, indicate the contrary. After Queen Munjeong's death, the system of the two Buddhist orders, the monastic examination system, and the monk registration system, all of which constituted a major part of the queen's Buddhist policy, were abolished (Sanghyun Kim 2009, 82). Chroniclers of Joseon also seem

to evaluate Queen Munjeong's governing from a critical point of view and state that she controlled the king internally while respecting Buddhism.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

Queen Munjeong was a substantial power holder who administered national affairs from behind the veil during the Joseon dynasty. The purpose of this article was to examine the relationship between the queen's view on Buddhism and statecraft in sixteenth-century Confucian Joseon. To that end, this article examined Queen Munjeong's statecraft and Buddhist activities in anti-Buddhist Confucian society. Queen Munjeong had a liberal attitude toward learning and respected tradition, which served as the logic for her favor of Buddhism. As a substantial power holder who surpassed royal authority in power and suppressed remonstrators, her Buddhist activities had strong elements of private character, heavily depending on in-law politics and seeking miraculous efficacy, which eventually resulted in criticism from contemporary and immediate later generations.

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32. *Myeongjong sillok*, 4th day of the 7th lunar month, 1562.

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