

# A Search for New Approaches

TO RESEARCH ON KOREAN BUDDHIST HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to suggest new approaches to the study of Korean Buddhist history.<sup>2</sup> To this end, I will re-examine the conventional scholarship of the following three issues: Chajang 慈藏 (fl. 636-50) and Buddhism;<sup>3</sup> the Koryŏ 高麗 (918-1392) dynasty and Buddhism; and King Sejong<sup>4</sup> 世宗 (1418-50) and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> This article will conclude by arguing that we need to take a fresh look at the available primary data, and to conduct an in-depth analysis of first-hand source material in its proper chronological order to advance our understanding of Korean Buddhist history.

Section One of this article, “Reflection on conventional scholarship,” will discuss the limits of conventional scholarship in terms of data, methodology, and common practice. Section Two, “Discourses on the characteristics of Korean Buddhism,” will re-examine the traditional



Lanterns in the Chogye-sa, the headquarters of the Chogye Order

views with regard to the characteristics of Korean Buddhism, focusing on the notion of ‘Buddhism as state protector’ (*hoguk Pulgyo* 護國佛教). Finally, Section Three, “A search for new approaches: Three case studies,” will suggest new approaches to research on Korean Buddhist

1 This article is based on a paper that was presented at the Workshop “History as Social Process: Unconventional Historiographies of Korea,” Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, The Netherlands, 24-25 October 2009. A revised and translated version in Korean was presented at the meeting of the International Association for Korean Historical Studies 국제한국사학회 (<http://inter-history.tistory.com>), Sungsil University, Seoul, Korea, 24 November 2009.

2 References to post-division Korean scholarship on Korean Buddhism apply to scholarship in the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

3 The notion of ‘Buddhism’ (*Pulgyo* 佛教) did not exist in premodern East Asian society, including Korea. Instead, Buddhism was known at that time as *Sŏkkyo* 釋教 (lit. the Buddha’s teaching). In addition, the exact meaning of the notion of Buddhism is still being debated in academic circles. In this article, ‘Buddhism’ refers to the Buddhist traditions developed in Korean history.

4 For references to numerous academic works about King Sejong, see Kim Jongmyung “King Sejong’s Buddhist Faith and the Invention of the Korean Alphabet: A Historical Perspective,” *Korea Journal* 47.3 (2007): pp. 136-137 [pp. 134-159]. The online version of this work can be found on <http://www.ekoreajournal.net/archive/index.jsp>.

5 Historically, Buddhism in Korea has not existed alone, but has been assimilated with other traditional religions, including Confucianism and shamanism. Therefore, for a better understanding of the nature of Korean Buddhism, we also need to focus on its relationship with other religious traditions. However, this research focuses on Korean Buddhism itself.

history based on my earlier scholarly work.<sup>6</sup>

Conventional scholarship has focused on primary historical sources such as the *Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk sagi* 三國史記, 1145, hereafter *SGSG*)<sup>7</sup> and the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk yusa* 三國遺事,<sup>8</sup> c.1280,<sup>9</sup> hereafter *SGYS*)<sup>10</sup> to study Korean history, including Korean Buddhist history. Currently epitaphs,<sup>11</sup> archaeological remains,<sup>12</sup> epistolary material, and travel literature<sup>13</sup> are also emerging as new source data for research on Korean history. However, this study will argue that we still need to examine primary historical sources further to advance our understanding of Korean Buddhist history. This means that we need to refer to previously neglected available primary data and to conduct a more in-depth analysis of first-hand source material in its proper chronological order.<sup>14</sup>

## I. REFLECTION ON CONVENTIONAL SCHOLARSHIP

Conventional scholarship suffers from limits in the source data consulted for a given topic, in the understanding of data referred to, in its attitude toward previous scholar-

ship, and in the logic of its organization. It also shows a lack of convincing arguments and a tendency to jump to conclusions based on insufficient evidence; besides, it uses concepts whose meaning is unclear.<sup>15</sup> Conventional scholarship moreover tends to be ideology-oriented,<sup>16</sup> as well as oriented towards political history.<sup>17</sup> Issues that, in my view, are in particular need of urgent resolution in order to advance the study of Korean history are the insufficient analysis of available source data, the lack of methodology in research on Korean history, and the existence of certain common practices latent in scholarly circles, such as the exaggerated valuation of personal connections.

### 1. Insufficient analysis of available source data

Historical works, individual literary writings, epitaphs, and tombstones constitute important primary material for Korean Studies, including Korean Buddhist history. In particular, the *SGSG* and the *SGYS* are primary historical sources for the study of Buddhism from fourth- to tenth-century Korea, the latter being the more important of the two for the subject. While the former is the orthodox his-

6 A good precedent of this kind is Kim ChaHyön 김자현 (JaHyun Kim Haboush), "Chosön shidae munhwasa-rül öttök'e ssül kösin'ga-charyo-wa chöpkün pangböp-e taehayö 조선시대 문화사를 어떻게 쓸 것인가? -자료와 접근방법에 대하여," in *Han'guksa yön'gu pangbömnon-gwa panghyang mosaek* 한국사 연구방법론과 방향 모색 (Proceedings of Han'guksa kukche haksul hoeü 한국사 국제학술회의, Seoul kyoyuk munhwa hoegwan 서울교육문화회관, Seoul, Korea, 19-20 June, 2002), pp. 119-134.

7 Part of this work has been translated into English; see Jonathan W. Best, *A History of the Early Korean Kingdom of Paekche* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006).

8 For a bibliographical guide to these two sources, see Kim Tai-jin (ed. & trans.), *A Bibliographical Guide to Traditional Korean Sources* (Seoul: Asiatic Research Center, Korea University, 1976), pp. 11-17 and pp. 30-34 respectively.

9 Conventional scholarship has dated the compilation of this work to the year 1278, following the argument of Ch'oe Namson 崔南善 (1890-1957). However, new opinions on this issue are emerging; see Kim Jongmyung 김종명, *Han'guk üi segye Pulgyo yusan: sasang kwa üüi* 한국의 세계불교유산: 사상과 의의 (Seoul 서울: Chimmundang 집문당, 2008), pp. 11-17, 30-34.

10 There are two English translations of this work: Ilyon, *Samguk Yusa; Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, translated by Ha Tae-hung and Grafton K. Mintz (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1972); and Ilyeon, *Overlooked Historical Records of the Three Korean Kingdoms*, translated by Kim Dal-Yong (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006). While the former is an indirect translation prepared with the general reader in mind on the basis of a translation in modern Korean, the latter is a direct translation, made on the basis of both the original in literary Chinese and modern Korean translations.

11 A considerable number of epitaphs from the Koryö period are extant. More than half of them are associated with Buddhism and they are very important sources, both in their quantity and in their content. Stone monuments are more important than inscriptions in metal, both in the number of examples and the number of characters recorded. The former are also more aesthetically significant than the latter. The relic stüpas (*pudo pi* 浮屠碑) for National Preceptors (*kuksa* 國師) and Royal Preceptors (*wangsa* 王師) are particularly valuable examples of epigraphic sources; see Hö Hüngshik 許興植, "Koryö Pulgyo kümsöngmun üi t'üksöng kwa chöngni panghyang," 고려 불교금석문의 특성과 정리 방향, *Taedong munhwa yön'gu* 大東文化研究55 (2006): pp. 35-64.

12 In his series of groundbreaking works based on epitaphs and archaeological evidence, Gregory Schopen also rebutted traditional scholarship which had focused on canonical texts, and argued that just like laypeople, Buddhist monks in India were also engaged in donative activities for fulfilling their secular wishes and in performing Buddhist rituals for the repose of the dead. Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); idem, "Monks and the Relic Cult in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*: An Old Misunderstanding in Regard to Monastic Buddhism," in *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religion*, edited by Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schopen (Oakville - New York - London: Mosaic Press, 1991): pp. 187-201; Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Gregory Schopen, *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

13 Xu Jing's 徐兢 *Illustrated Account of Koryö* (*Gaoli tujing* 高麗圖經, *Koryö tog'yöng* in Korean, 1123) is a representative travelogue related to Koryö Buddhism.

14 Michael Allen is of the same view and has said, "To do my study well, I had to commit myself to reading everything Shin [Ch'aeho] had written - not just the passages that were regularly quoted in Western studies, but the entire books from which those passages were taken. And then I had to read everything else Shin wrote that was not quoted by scholars" (J. Michael Allen, "How Early is Korean Modernity? The 'Early-Modern' in Korean Historiography," in *Han'guksa yön'gu pangbömnon-gwa panghyang mosaek*: p. 158 [pp. 157-167]).

15 Yi Sönggyu 이성규, "Han'guk-üi Chungguksa yön'gu samshimnyön-Sönsa shidae-esö Tang mal kkaji 한국의 중국사 연구 삼십 년-선사시대에서 唐宋까지," in *Hyöndae Han'guk yöksahak üi tonghyang (1945-1980)* 현대 한국 역사학의 동향 (1945-1980), edited by Yöksa hakhoe 역사학회 (Seoul: Ilchogak 一潮閣, 1982), pp. 185-217.

tory compiled by royal order, the latter, a rich source of Buddhist culture in Korea, is an unofficial chronicle by the Zen monk Iryōn 一然 (1206-89). In addition, for the study of Koryō Buddhism, the most important primary source is the *Historical Records of the Koryō Dynasty* (*Koryōsa* 高麗史, 1451, hereafter KRS).<sup>18</sup> The *Veritable Records of the Chosōn Dynasty* [1392-1910] (*Chosōn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄, hereafter CWS)<sup>19</sup> is also a valuable official source for the study of Chosōn Buddhism. Furthermore, for the hagiographical and philosophical study of Korean Buddhism, the *Tripitaka Koreana* (*Koryō taejanggyōng* 高麗大藏經, mid-thirteenth century) and the *Collection of Korean Buddhist Works* (*Han'guk Pulgyo chōnsō* 韓國佛教全書, 1998-2004) are indispensable.

Particular problems in Korean scholarship of Korean Buddhist history are the lack of in-depth examination of available primary sources and comparative analysis of particular themes.

## 2. Deficiency of methodology

Conventional scholarship of Korean Buddhist history in contemporary Korea largely lacks a Korea-centred methodology, comparative analysis, and an understanding of Buddhist doctrine.

### *Lack of Korea-centred methodology*

Japanese scholars pioneered Korea's modern historiography during Japan's rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945. Since the liberation of Korea from Japan in 1945, Korean



The woodblocks of the *Tripitaka Koreana*, stored in the Haein-sa Monastery

historians have devoted themselves to overcoming the Japanese imperialist view of Korean history, and their achievements have been considerable. However, the approach of Korean scholars to Korean history has shortcomings in terms of methodology. There have been three paradigms of history writing in Korea: nationalist historiography, Rankean (positivist) historiography, and Marxist historiography.

Emphasizing the national spirit of Korea, to serve in the struggle to survive as the fittest, nationalist historiography developed as a major vehicle of political activism in response to the Japanese imperialist view of Korean history, which was based on a Western linear and imperialist model of history. As the mainstream of Korean historiography, factualists were the first generation of professional historians in modern Korea and they stressed 'facts,' scrutinizing documents and textual criticism. In addition,

16 Chōng Tuhūi 정두희, "Kaein-ūrosō-ūi 'na'-ūi palgyōn-gwa Chosōn chōn'gisa-ūi saeroun mosaek 개인으로서의 '나'의 발견과 朝鮮前期史의 새로운 모색," in *Han'guksa yōn'gu pangbōmnon-gwa panghyang mosaek*, pp. 101-108; Kim Chahyōn, "Chosōn shidae munhwasa rūl öttök'e ssūl kōsin'ga-charyo wa chōpkūn pangbōp e taehayō," pp. 119-134; Sō Chungśōk 서중석, "Han'guk hyōndaesa yōn'gu-wa ideologi: 1948nyōn 4wōl P'yōngyang NamPuk chidoja hoeūi rūl chungsim ūro 한국현대사 연구와 이데올로기 -1948년 4월 평양남북지도사회의를 중심으로," in *Han'guksa yōn'gu pangbōmnon-gwa panghyang mosaek*, pp. 315-333.

17 This tendency is presumed to have been formed under the influence of the German historical circles during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) in Korea. This is because Japan was heavily influenced by European countries, including Germany, after the Meiji 明治 Reform (1868-1889) and the contemporary Korean academic world, including the historical circles, stood in turn under the influence of Japanese scholarship. German historical circles before the 1960s had focused on the evaluation of national development and historical figures who played a significant role in German history on the basis of historicism. H. U. Wehler has said that the tradition that emphasized political history, diplomatic history, and military history was established during the period of absolutism. Yi Minho 李敏鎬, "Pellō ūi sahoesa 벨리의 社會史, in *Hyōndae yōksa iron-ūi chomyōng* 現代歷史理論의 照明, edited by Yōksa yōngushil 歷史研究室 (Sōngnam 城南: Han'guk chōngshin munhwa yōn'guwōn 韓國精神文化研究院, 1984), pp. 59-82. Specifically, it was Germany that put particular emphasis on national and political activities in history, which transformed itself into an ideology to support the established order, including the nation (Ibid., p. 77).

18 Jongmyung Kim, *Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea (918-1392)* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1994), pp. 12-13.

19 These *Veritable Records* were registered on the UNESCO Memory of the World list in 1997, the first and only heritage item of its kind in East Asia. As for Buddhist thought and the significance of Buddhism as world heritage property in Korea, see Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk ūi segye Pulgyo yusan: sasang-gwa ūūi*.

Marxist historiography, which emphasizes that the base (material conditions) determines the superstructures (political, social, and ideological realms), also developed during the Japanese colonial rule of Korea. However, the division of Korea into South and North after Korea's liberation caused a division of historians in Korea. As a result, while historians of a Marxist persuasion disappeared from the scene in South Korea, they were active in North Korea. In addition, few historians truly mastered any of the three paradigms mentioned above. However, while Western models cannot be applied to Korea as they are, Korea-centred methodology has not yet been developed.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Need for comparative analysis***

Since the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE-668 CE), Korea had been in a close relationship with kingdoms that existed in the territory of modern China;<sup>21</sup> to a lesser extent, it had also been in contact with the Japanese isles. However, Korean scholars have primarily studied Korean history within the isolated nation of Korea, to the neglect of its relationship with neighbouring countries.<sup>22</sup> Regarding this phenomenon, it has been said:

*One [form of this parochialism] is the indifference to and ignorance of histories outside Korea, be they Chinese, Japanese, or European. This narcissistic tendency has much to do with the reaction to the degradation by colonialist historiography, that is, Korea's dependence on superpowers.<sup>23</sup>*

It is my recognition that while Western scholars of Korean history refer to works in Korean by Korean historians, Korean historians rarely take into account the achievements of overseas scholars on Korean history.<sup>24</sup> A Western scholar expressed concern about this situation, saying, "I will confess [...] that one thing that worries me is the question of whether or not scholars in Korea will ever read my work."<sup>25</sup> In fact, Korean historians are in general indifferent to and ignorant of the work of foreign scholars, unless it is translated into Korean. Recent academic works and journal articles on Korean history published in Korea and papers by Korean historians presented at international conferences<sup>26</sup> also bear out this situation, thus producing a discrepancy between the two groups in their understanding of Korean history. The two groups' interpretations of the nature of early Chosŏn history is a good example: while the Korean group has argued for the theory of change, some non-Korean scholars have maintained the theory of continuation. For the former group, the latter's argument is none other than the theory of stagnation maintained by Japanese scholars during the colonial period. In contrast, for the latter, the former's opinion entails the subordination of Korean history to the sentiment of nationalism.<sup>27</sup> Korean Buddhist history is not exceptional in this regard.

### ***Shortage of knowledge of Buddhism***

Buddhist historians and Buddhist art historians in Korea barely study Buddhist doctrine.<sup>28</sup> There are more than 250 Korean universities, but few of their curricula include

<sup>20</sup> Kwon Yonung, "Korean Historiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: A Configuration of Paradigms," *Korea Journal* 40.1 (2000): pp. 51-52 [33-53].

<sup>21</sup> 'China' was only used as the name of a country after 1911 or 1949. Therefore, it is inappropriate to denote kingdoms that existed in the territory of modern China before the twentieth century as China. See Hō Hūngshik, "Koryō Pulgyo kümsōngmun-ūi t'üksōng-gwa chōngni panghyang," pp. 35-64.

<sup>22</sup> In contrast, in his provocative, but fine, rich, and persuasive piece of work, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China 221 BC to AD 1757* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), Thomas J. Barfield offered a new interpretation of relations between China and her northern neighbours, including Koryō, in premodern times.

<sup>23</sup> Kwon Yonung, "Korean Historiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Some noticeable works of Korean history have been published in foreign languages, including English. Among them are Marina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992); James B. Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyōngwōn and the Late Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996); Robert E. Buswell, Jr., "Buddhism Under Confucian Domination: The Synthetic Vision of Sōsan Hyujong," in *Culture and the State in Late Chōson Korea*, edited by JaHyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler (Harvard East Asian Monographs 182, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: the Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), pp. 134-159; John B. Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000); Edward J. Shultz, *Generals and Scholars* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000); and Sem Vermeersch, *The Power of the Buddha: The Politics of Buddhism During the Koryō Dynasty* (Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 2008), which won the first James Palais Prize from the Association for Asian Studies in 2010.

<sup>25</sup> J. Michael Allen, "How Early is Korean Modernity? The 'Early-Modern' in Korean Historiography," p. 166. The activities of Hyōndae Han'gukhak yōn'guso 현 대한국학연구원 [Institute of Modern Korean Studies], which included reviews of books on Korean history published in the West, led by Ryu Yōngik 柳永益, constituted one exception. However, such review activity by the institute was suspended as of 2010.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Session 246, entitled "History as Progress? Agency and Modernity in Korean History," for the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, Philadelphia, USA, 25-28 March 2010, was composed of three papers by Korean scholars of Korean history. When I pointed out this issue during the Q & A time, no presenter responded to me.

<sup>27</sup> Chōng Tuhūi, "Kaein-ūrosō-ūi 'na'-ūi palgyōn-gwa Chosŏn chōn'gisa-ūi saeroun mosaek," p. 110.

courses on Buddhism. Such courses are offered only at a small number of universities affiliated with Buddhist orders and at a handful of other universities. In addition, courses on Buddhism in the former are apologetic in orientation, while those in the latter are too few in number. Therefore, while Korean historians refer to source data on Korean Buddhism for their research, in general they possess only a smattering of knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, and therefore often jump to hasty conclusions. However, Kim Lina (Lena Kim),<sup>29</sup> a Buddhist art historian and former professor at Hongik University in Korea, and John M. Rosenfield,<sup>30</sup> an art historian and emeritus professor at Harvard University in the USA, have both pointed out that a good knowledge of Buddhist doctrine is crucial for a better understanding of Buddhist art.

**3. Common practices**

Parochialism, lack of interdisciplinary approach, and neglect of previous scholarly work are common practices in Korean historical circles.

Many faculty members in the history departments of Korean universities are alumni of the universities at which they are now employed. In particular, all the professors in the department of Buddhist Studies at Dongguk University, once the Mecca of Buddhist studies in Korea, are alumni of the university. As a result, there is a lack of critical attitude towards the work of senior scholars belonging to the same school, to the disadvantage of the advancement of the field.<sup>31</sup>



Pages from the thirteenth-century *Tripitaka Koreana*

In addition, Korean historians concentrate on a particular sphere, be it political or social, in a particular period, compartmentalizing history<sup>32</sup> and showing indifference to an interdisciplinary approach.<sup>33</sup> The neglect of previous scholarly works on a given topic is another problem found in contemporary scholarship of Korean Buddhist history. For instance, two books<sup>34</sup> examined the role of major Buddhist rituals during the Koryŏ period and interpreted the subject in different manners. The book published in 2001 criticized the conventional view that the Buddhist rituals played a role with regard to the function of Buddhism as a state protector. In contrast, the book published in 2005 simply accepted the traditional view, while neglecting to examine the arguments of the 2001 study.

The above-mentioned issues still exist in Korean academia. In the following, I will examine some discourses on the characteristics of Korean Buddhism, dis-

28 In this article, 'Buddhist doctrine' refers to the basic teachings of the Buddha, including the Four Noble Truths. The content of the basic teachings of the Buddha is in debate among scholars. However, in general it refers to the Buddhist teachings of up to 100 years after the death of the Buddha, i.e. the period when the Buddha's direct disciples were in activity. This article adheres to this generally held definition.  
 29 In my talk with her in the summer of 2007.  
 30 After I presented my paper, "The Philosophical Underpinning of the Calamities – Solving Ritual and Its Nature in Medieval Korea," at the Buddhist Conference "Esoteric Buddhist Tradition in East Asia: Text, Ritual and Image," at Yale University, USA, on 9-11 November 2007, Professor Rosenfield approached me and said that my level of knowledge of Buddhist doctrine was what he was advocating.  
 31 For example, in 2009 the ratio of alumni professors of Princeton University and Harvard University was less than ten percent and twenty percent respectively.  
 32 Kwon Yonung, "Korean Historiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: A Configuration of Paradigms," p. 51; Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk chungse-üi Pulgyo üiry: sasang chök paegyöng-gwa yöksa chök üimi* 한국중세의 불교의례: 사상적 배경과 역사적 의미 (Seoul: Munhak-kwa Chisöngsa 문학과지성사, 2001), pp. 14-15.  
 33 Similar problems are also found in Korea's philosophical circles; see Kim Jongmyung, "Han'guk ch'örhakkye-üi tonghyang-gwa t'öksöng" 한국철학계의 동향과 특성, *Ch'örhak sasang* 철학사상 35 (2010): pp. 379-420.  
 34 Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk chungse-üi Pulgyo üiry*; An Chiwön 안지원, *Koryö-üi kukka Pulgyo üiry-wa munhwa* 고려의 국가 불교의례와 문화 (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2005).

courses that are products of traditional scholarship of Korean Buddhist history, with its limitations in terms of source data, methodology, and common practices.

## II. DISCOURSE ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREAN BUDDHISM

Among the concepts used to characterize Korean Buddhism are 'syncretic Buddhism' ([*hoe*]t'ong *Pulgyo* [會通佛敎]), 'Buddhism as state protector', 'Buddhism for good fortune' (*kibok Pulgyo* 祈福佛敎),<sup>35</sup> and 'skirt Buddhism' (*ch'ima Pulgyo* 치마불교). These concepts represent Korean Buddhism in terms of ideology, history, function, and gender, respectively. Of these four, conventional scholarship has regarded syncretic Buddhism and Buddhism as state protector as the two most important ideas to characterize Korean Buddhism. However, these two concepts are now under scholarly attack.

### 1. Korean Buddhism as syncretic Buddhism

A characterization of the nature of Korean Buddhism from the ideological perspective, 'syncretic Buddhism' stands for a harmonized form of Buddhism that is distinctive from sectarian Buddhism, which is the alleged tradition of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism.

According to Shim Jaeryong, the notion of syncretism was first put forward by Ch'oe Namsŏn 崔南善 (1890-1957), who assigned a central role to Wŏnhyo 元曉 (617-86) in 1930, in response to the Japanese scholar Takahashi Tōru's 高橋亨 (1878-1967) blanket characterization of Korean Buddhism as a mere copy of Chinese Buddhism, lacking any sign of creativity.<sup>36</sup> However, Shim points out that there is no reason to claim that syncretism is a feature peculiar to Korean Buddhism and argues that the term 'syncretism' should not be used to characterize Korean Buddhism in its entirety.<sup>37</sup> Subsequently, the history of the discourse on syncretic Buddhism has

developed into a major issue in the Korean Buddhist academic world, and the meaning of the discourse and its validity have been examined from a critical point of view.<sup>38</sup>

Bernard Senécal has also criticized the notion of syncretic Buddhism, saying that it was rather "an ideal of whole Buddhist harmonization, an ideal being something to tend toward, not something actually realized." To bolster his assertion Senécal continued by saying: "If such an ideal had been concretely achieved, how could we explain, for instance, the bloody feuds that have taken place between the monks of the T'aego Order (T'aegojong 太古宗) and those of the Chogye Order (Chogyejong 曹溪宗)<sup>38</sup> during the years that followed liberation?" He eventually concludes that the "whole Buddhist harmonization"-doctrine does not constitute a distinctive feature of Korean Buddhism.<sup>40</sup>

### 2. Korean Buddhism as a protector of the state

Throughout Korean history, the fortunes of Korean Buddhism have depended on the attitude of the political leadership and the collaboration of Buddhist circles with that leadership. The symbiotic relationship between the nation and the ecclesiastical orders in traditional Korea has led scholars to propose the idea of Buddhism as state protector as one of the typical characteristics of Korean Buddhism.<sup>41</sup> The notion of Buddhism as state protector implies that historically Korean Buddhism has served to protect the state from natural calamities and foreign invasions. Common assertions in this regard include the assertion that many eminent monks of Korea, including the Shilla monk Chajang, served as political advisors and Buddhist rituals were performed to protect the state.<sup>42</sup> In addition, this notion was highlighted, both in academic and monastic circles, as having special cultural value for Korean Buddhism.<sup>43</sup> Buddhist academic circles, Buddhist

35 For the origin, nature, present and future of the notion of Buddhism for good fortune, see a series of articles in *Pulgyo p'yŏngnon* 불교평론 7 (Summer 2001); "Kibok Pulgyo t'oron pang" 기복불교 토론방 (2004). For an argument against the tradition of Buddhism for good fortune, refer to Chinhyu 진휴, "Han'guk Pulgyo ūi kibok chŏk sŏngkyŏk e taehan koch'al" 한국불교의 기복적 성격에 대한 고찰, *Haein* 해인 海印 323 (2009) at (<http://www.haeinji.org>).

36 Takahashi's view of Korean Buddhism was not comprehensive either. For example, his work was selective with regard to Buddhism during the reign of King Sejong; see Kim Jongmyung, "King Sejong's Buddhist Faith and the Invention of the Korean Alphabet: A Historical Perspective," p. 138, note 6.

37 Shim Jaeryong, *Korean Buddhism Tradition and Transformation* (Seoul: Jimoondang Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 148-156.

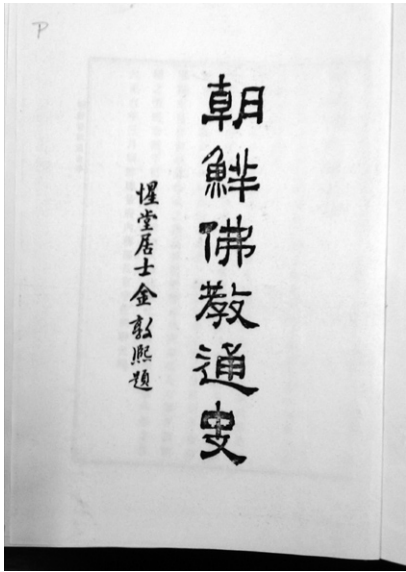
38 Cho ūnsu 조은수, "T'ong Pulgyo tamnon-ŭl chungsim-ŭro pon Han'guk Pulgyosa inshik '통불교' 담론을 중심으로 본 한국 불교사 인식," *Pulgyo p'yŏngnon* 21 (2004): pp. 1-13 ([www.budreview.com/news/articlePrint.html?idno=335](http://www.budreview.com/news/articlePrint.html?idno=335)).

39 Unique to Korea, the Chogye Order represents mainstream Buddhism in contemporary Korea and its official name is also romanized as Daehan Bulgyo Jogyejong 大韓佛敎曹溪宗. As for its history and related issues, see Kim Jongmyung, "Chogye School," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume 1, edited by Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), pp. 158-159.

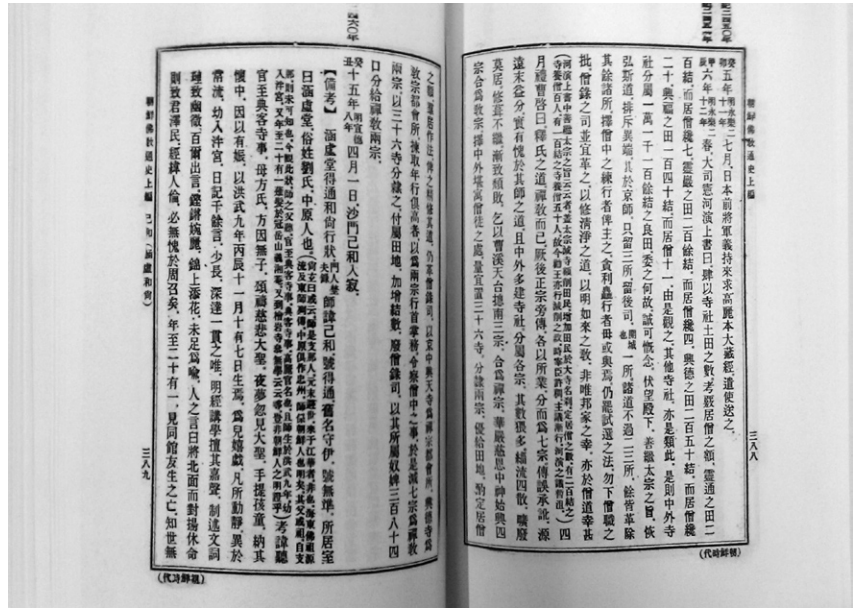
40 Bernard Senécal, "On Writing a History of Korean Buddhism: A Review of Two Books," *Korea Journal* 37.1 (1997): pp. 154-177, especially p. 173.

41 For related works, see Jong Myung (Jongmyung) Kim, "Chajang (fl. 636-650) and 'Buddhism as State Protector' in Korea: A Reconsideration," in *Religions in Traditional Korea* (The Seminar for Buddhist Studies, SBS Monographs, Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1995), p. 23, note 1 [pp. 23-55].

42 Kim Jongmyung, "Chajang (fl. 636-650) and 'Buddhism as State Protector' in Korea," pp. 23-24.



Frontispiece of Yi Nünghwa's *History of Chosŏn Buddhism* (1918)



Pages from Yi Nünghwa's *History of Chosŏn Buddhism* (1918)

orders, and even the government in contemporary Korea still use this concept to express a desirable relationship between the nation and Buddhism.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, the emphasis on the idea of Buddhism as state protector is a fairly recent development.<sup>45</sup> A product of the 1920s, the concept was woven into a fixed national ideology by Korean scholars, particularly in the 1970s, when Korea was under the military dictatorship led by President Pak Chŏnghŭi 朴正熙 (1917-1979).<sup>46</sup>

However, the term 'state protection' has been used without a clear definition and much textual evidence suggests that it does not have the meaning commonly used by contemporary scholars.<sup>47</sup> For example, conventional scholarship did not clarify what the term 'state' (Ch. *kuo* 國; Kor. *kuk*) meant in 'the protection of the state' (Ch. *hukuo* 護國; Kor. *hoguk*). Ancient Buddhist scholiasts did not interpret the term *kuo* in a territorial sense. For example, for them the term 'state' as described in the *Book for Humane Kings* (*Renwang jing* 仁王經), an important source text for the notion of Buddhism as state protector, meant one's mind in pursuit of enlightenment. However,

by identifying the true dharma with kingship, contemporary scholars simply conclude that Korean Buddhism is 'Buddhism as state protector'.<sup>48</sup>

Conventional scholarship has also regarded many kings' participation in Buddhist rituals in Korean history as part of the evidence that supports the idea of Buddhism as state protector.<sup>49</sup> However, there is little evidence to indicate that the king was identified with the state. In fact, the replacement of many kings in the latter period of the Shilla 新羅 kingdom (57 BCE-935 CE), when the political situation was in turmoil,<sup>50</sup> and the distinction between the National Preceptor and the Royal Preceptor in Koryŏ, suggest the opposite.<sup>51</sup> There is also some textual evidence to support that Buddhism in premodern Korea did not play a role in protecting the state. For example, kings during the Koryŏ period regarded the people as the root of the state and emphasized that their primary duty lay in securing their lives. However, records point out that the frequent performance of Buddhist rituals during the period made the people's lives harder than before.<sup>52</sup>

Reflexive scholars such as Sŏ Kyŏngsu 徐景洙 (1925-

43 Idem, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," p. 271.

44 Idem, *Han'guk-ŭi segye Pulgyo yusan*, p. 311.

45 Idem, "Chajang (fl. 636-650) and 'Buddhism as State Protector' in Korea," pp. 53-55.

46 Idem, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," p. 271; idem, *Han'guk chungse-ŭi Pulgyo ūiryŏ*, pp. 279-282.

47 Idem, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," p. 270.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

49 Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk chungse ūi Pulgyo ūiryŏ*, pp. 282-286.

50 Twenty kings ascended the throne during the 150 years from mid-eighth-century Shilla to its demise in 935 and many of them fell victim to domestic warfare. Yi Kibaek 李基白, *Han'guksa shillon* 韓國史新論 (Seoul: Ilchogak 一潮閣, 1991), p. 133.

51 Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk chungse-ŭi Pulgyo ūiryŏ*, pp. 295-297.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 300.

86), Robert Buswell, Kim Yongok 金容沃, and Shim Jaeryong 沈在龍 (1943-2004)<sup>53</sup> have already rebutted the notion of Buddhism as state protector by arguing that the concept of Buddhism as state protector resulted from an uncritical examination of the symbiotic relationship between the nation and the ecclesiastical orders. For my part, I have criticized the concept through a series of academic works,<sup>54</sup> and have reached the conclusion that it should not be used to characterize Korean Buddhism. Scholars such as Bernard Senécal,<sup>55</sup> Pankaj Mohan,<sup>56</sup> and Cho ūnsu<sup>56</sup> share this opinion.

It is important to recognize that the concepts of syncretic Buddhism and Buddhism as state protector did not develop on the basis of solid textual evidence, but were developed for ideological or teleological purposes to meet the interests of certain groups.<sup>58</sup> The divergent opinions between conservative scholars and their more reflexive counterparts with regard to the nature of Korean Buddhism have derived from the former's failure to conduct an in-depth analysis of primary historical data. Let me examine the limits of the conclusions drawn by conventional scholarship of Korean Buddhist history, based on my previous work.

### III. A SEARCH FOR NEW APPROACHES: THREE CASE STUDIES

In the following section I will examine three examples of new approaches to the study of Korean Buddhist history.

#### 1. Chajang and Buddhism as state protector

Korean scholars, including Yi Nūnghwa 李能和 (1869-1943), the founder of religious studies in Korea, have regarded Chajang as one of the most important pioneers

for the development of Buddhism as state protector. They have also argued that, as the Great National Overseer (*Tae kukt'ong* 大國統), Chajang founded the Vinaya School in Shilla and controlled the Shilla people through Buddhist precepts, while he also served as political advisor, advocating the idea of 'Shilla as a Buddha land' (*Shilla Pulgukt'o* 新羅佛國土).<sup>59</sup> Their textual basis for the study of the biography of Chajang has been the *SGYS*. However, they have neglected to consult the *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳, 645, hereafter, *XGZ*), a more important source text than the *SGYS*.

In my article on Chajang and Buddhism as state protector,<sup>60</sup> I sought to respond to conventional scholarship concerning the role of Chajang and argued for a revision of the view which regards Chajang as an advocate of Buddhism as state protector. To this end, I examined the life of Chajang as it appeared in the *XGZ* and in the *SGYS* from a comparative perspective.

As far as their contents on the life of Chajang are concerned, the *XGZ* and the *SGYS* have considerable affinity. However, the two sources also contain divergent points of view with regard to various aspects of Chajang's life, including his reception of the five precepts, the motive for his entry into Tang 唐 (618-907) China, the record of his meeting with Mañjuśrī, and the time of and motive for his establishment of the system of the Great National Overseer. The *XGZ* was compiled in 645, just two years after Chajang's return to Shilla from Tang, a full six centuries earlier than the compilation of the *SGYS*. Since the *XGZ* was written much earlier than the *SGYS*, I believe that the information it provides can be regarded as more reliable than that provided by the *SGYS*.<sup>61</sup>

The *XGZ* describes Chajang as a religious cultivator

53 Sō Kyōngsu, "Kwagō chihyang chōk Pulgyo-esō pōsōnal su innūn Pulgyo-ga 과거지향적 불교에서 벗어날 수 있는 불교가," *Pōmnyun* 法輪 135 (1980): pp. 24-32; Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Korean Approach to Zen: The Collected Works of Chinul* (Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press, 1983), pp. 2-5, ff.; idem., *The Korean Origin of the Vajrasamādhi-sūtra: A Case Study in Determining the Dating, Provenance, and Authorship of a Buddhist Apocryphal Scripture* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1985), p. 91. The revised version of this work was published as Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Formation of Ch'an Ideology in China and Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); idem., *Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul's Korean Way of Zen* (Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), p. 2, ff. This book was an abbreviated version of Buswell, *The Korean Approach to Zen*; Kim Yongok 金容沃, *Na-nūn Pulgyo-rūl irōk'e ponda* 나는 불교를 이렇게 본다 (Seoul: T'ongnamu 통나무, 1990), pp. 80-88; Shim Jaeryong 沈在龍, *Tongyang-ūi chihye-wa Sōn* 동양의 지혜와 禪 (Segyesa 世界社, 1990), pp. 121-122, ff.

54 Kim Jongmyung, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," pp. 270-276; idem., "Chajang (fl. 636-650) and 'Buddhism as State Protector' in Korea," pp. 23-55, which was the first journal article criticizing the notion of Buddhism as state protector; idem., "Hoguk Pulgyo kaenyōm-ūi chae kōmt'o: Koryō Inwang hoe-ūi kyōngu 호국불교 개념의 재검토: 고려 인왕회의 경우," *Chonggyo yōn'gu* 宗教研究 21 (2000): pp. 93-120; idem., *Han'guk chungse ūi Pulgyo ūirye*, pp. 277-297; idem., *Han'guk-ūi segye Pulgyo yusan*, pp. 310-318.

55 Bernard Senécal, "On Writing a History of Korean Buddhism: A Review of Two Books," p. 172.

56 Pankaj N. Mohan, "Beyond the 'Nation-Protecting' Paradigm; Recent Trends in the Historical Studies of Korean Buddhism," *The Review of Korean Studies* 9.1 (2006): pp. 49-67.

57 Cho ūnsu, 'T'ong Pulgyo tamnon-ūl chungshim-ūro pon Han'guk Pulgyosa inshik," p. 12.

58 Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk chungse ūi Pulgyo ūirye*, p. 311.

59 Idem., "Chajang (fl. 636-650) and 'Buddhism as State Protector' in Korea," pp. 25-51.

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-55.

rather than as a political advisor. In comparison, Iryŏn, author of the *SGYS*, did not regard Chajang's religious attainment very highly.<sup>62</sup> For a better understanding of the *SGYS*, we need to examine the milieu of its composition, because it was compiled, with sponsorship from the king, as a social, political, cultural, and ideological product of the transitional period of Koryŏ society.<sup>63</sup>

In reaction to the difficult situation of mid-Koryŏ society, literary works that emphasized the enduring Korean traditional heritage appeared and the *SGYS* was one such product. Iryŏn wrote the *SGYS* when the Koryŏ dynasty was suffering political and social hardship. Political hegemony and conflicts with the military, as well as strife between the military and the aristocracy, continued to cause serious social problems up to Iryŏn's time. In addition, after the age of fifty Iryŏn maintained close relations with the royal court and so his work was written during a time when the bond between him and the king was strong.<sup>64</sup>

During Iryŏn's lifetime, the *Lives of Eminent Korean Monks* (*Haedong kosŭng chŏn* 海東高僧傳) was compiled by Kakhun 覺訓 (fl. early thirteenth century) in 1215. The work was compiled by the order of King Kojong 高宗 (1213-59), and is an example of cooperation between the ruling class and the monastic order, just as the *SGYS* reflects the close relationship between Iryŏn and the court of King Ch'ungnyŏl 忠烈王 (1274-1308).<sup>65</sup>

The *SGYS* focuses on the royal lineage as a distinct social class, the supremacy of the Shilla dynasty among the Three Kingdoms, the area of Kyŏngju 慶州 in geographical terms, and Buddhism in ideological terms, but lacks an objective view of history. With regard to Chajang in particular, Iryŏn's work is not based on solid textual evidence<sup>66</sup> and Iryŏn intentionally made Chajang into an advocate for the idea of Buddhism as state protector.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the *SGYS* is a problematic source, with several issues still to be resolved, relating to its compiler, the date of its compilation, its original edition, the back-

ground of its compilation, its structure and content, and the historical evaluation of the source.<sup>68</sup>

After my comparative analysis of the two source texts on the life of Chajang, I came to the conclusion that Chajang, in his role as the Great National Overseer, did not found the Vinaya School in Shilla, nor did he control the Shilla people through the Buddhist precepts. Moreover, his asserted role as political advisor has been over-emphasized. Lastly, it is highly questionable whether he ever advocated the idea of Shilla as a Buddha land. In fact, Chajang's real concern was not with political matters, but with ascetic cultivation; his concerns were primarily religious.<sup>69</sup> For these reasons the commonly held view regarding the role of Chajang in the history of Korean Buddhism needs to be revised.<sup>70</sup>

It appears that as far as the discussion of the relationship between Chajang and the idea of Buddhism as state protector is concerned, the most common misunderstanding found in conventional Korean scholarship lies in its lack of a proper analysis and understanding of the available first-hand source material. These elements together have resulted in the overemphasis of Chajang's political role during the Shilla dynasty.<sup>71</sup> Chajang cannot be regarded as an advocate of the tradition of Buddhism as state protector.

## 2. Koryŏ and Buddhism

Contemporary scholarship has, primarily based on the *KRS*, regarded Koryŏ as a Buddhist nation and characterized Koryŏ Buddhism as state-protecting Buddhism. In particular, it has been argued that Buddhist rituals during the period served to support the idea of Buddhism as state protector.<sup>72</sup> However, much counter-evidence in the *KRS* points to the contrary.

During the Liao 遼 dynasty (907-1125), a contemporary nation that influenced Koryŏ Buddhism, it was customary for Buddhist believers to ordain their eldest sons. Even during its decay, when the Liao government needed to

61 Ibid., pp. 36-53.

62 Ibid., p. 35.

63 Ibid., pp. 35-39.

64 Ibid., pp. 36-38.

65 Ibid., p. 38.

66 Ibid., p. 39.

67 Ibid., p. 50.

68 Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk chungse-ŭi Pulgyo ŭirye*, pp. 363-369.

69 Idem, "Chajang (fl. 636-650) and 'Buddhism as State Protector' in Korea," p. 25.

70 Ibid., p. 53.

71 Idem, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," pp. 53-55; Kim Jongmyung, *Han'guk chungse-ŭi Pulgyo ŭirye*, p. 278.

72 Idem, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," pp. 3-5.

mobilize all its manpower, it still admonished Buddhist monks and nuns not to break their vows.<sup>73</sup> However, Koryŏ was different from Liao as far as the status of Buddhism was concerned.

The way in which the people of Koryŏ viewed Buddhist customs was not always positive. King Munjong 文宗 (1046-83) opposed cremation because it was a Buddhist practice. Actions of self-immolation undertaken by monks, such as burning their heads or arms as an ordination ritual, were not regarded as proper for Confucian gentlemen (*kunja* 君子). The people of Koryŏ often had negative opinions of monks and nuns. The primary motivation for many to become a monk or a nun was for political reasons or to escape from the agony of their lives, and the eldest son was rarely allowed to become a monk.<sup>74</sup> In addition, Koryŏ monks were frequently drafted for military service; the existence of a Demon Subduing Corps (*Hangmagun* 降魔軍) is a good example. Monastic circles also had restricted access to certain institutions, to the social disadvantage of the monks. For example, a monk's son could not enter officialdom and local officials' sons who became monks could not become local officials themselves.<sup>75</sup>

Such textual evidence indicates that Koryŏ was not a Buddhist state in the strict sense of the term. Ch'oe Pyŏnghŏn 崔炳憲,<sup>76</sup> former professor of Korean Buddhist history at Seoul National University 서울대학교 concurs with me in this view. Therefore, conventional scholarship that has regarded Koryŏ as a Buddhist state needs to be re-examined.

Historical records such as the *KRS* indicate that various



Frontispiece of Ch'oe Namsŏn's edition of the *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*

types of Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, shamanistic, astrological, and geomantic rituals were held throughout the Koryŏ period. In particular, Buddhist rituals flourished during this time. The importance of Koryŏ Buddhist rituals for understanding Koryŏ society is obvious from the amount of historical records related to Buddhist rituals; the Koryŏ king's great concern for them; the amount of funds assigned to them; and the influence of Buddhist customs on the society. For example, in the *KRS*, which due to its precise information and abundant records of native legend and custom is the most important source for the study of Koryŏ Buddhist rituals, there are some

6,000 records concerning Koryŏ Buddhism, of which about 1,300 are related to Buddhist rituals. The *SGSG* and the *SGYS* record only around ten cases of Shilla Buddhist rituals, suggesting that Koryŏ was more interested in holding Buddhist rituals than was Shilla. Koryŏ kings also took a strong interest in Buddhist rituals and King T'aejo 太祖 (918-43),<sup>77</sup> the founder of the Koryŏ dynasty, and his successors personally participated in various types of Buddhist rituals throughout the dynasty. In addition, more Buddhist rituals were held during the period than at any other time in Korean history, a frequency also unsurpassed in China or Japan. Some important Buddhist rituals were unique to Koryŏ.<sup>78</sup>

The most important characteristic of Koryŏ Buddhism is that medieval Korea's essential ideas were expressed in the form of Buddhist rituals.<sup>79</sup> Koryŏ Buddhist rituals were the Koryŏ people's Buddhist expressions of indigenous Korean beliefs. However, primarily aimed at ances-

<sup>73</sup> *Idem*, *Han'guk chungse ūi Pulgyo ūiryŏ*, p. 311

<sup>74</sup> An examination of the life of the lower nobility in the medieval West may be useful for a better understanding of the place of monks and nuns in medieval Korea. The lower nobility in twelfth- to thirteenth-century Europe could survive in two ways: by becoming a knight or by becoming a friar. Those who were not inclined to become a knight or were not the eldest son of a family tended to become friars. They were left by their parents at a monastery and were supposed to live up to the monastery's strict discipline and rigorous schedule. According to the daily schedule of the Benedictine Order, they were required to conduct three to eight hours of labour, to eat just one meal, to sleep less than four hours, and to practise modesty and temperance. "DIA-VISION at Beaufort Castle: The Life of the Nobility of the Middle Ages in Beaufort Castle," *Les Amis de l'ancien Château de Beaufort, Association sans but lucratif*, (Luxembourg), October 2009.

<sup>75</sup> Kim Jongmyung, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," pp. 47-49; *idem*, *Han'guk chungse-ūi Pulgyo ūiryŏ*, pp. 311-316.

<sup>76</sup> In my talk with him in November 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Regarding King T'aejo's Buddhist politics in Koryŏ, refer to Kim Jongmyung, "King T'aejo's Buddhist View and His Statecraft in Tenth-century Korea," presented in Session 66, entitled "Buddhism and the Politics of Power in Medieval Korea: A Re-examination," which I organized, at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, Philadelphia, USA, 25-28 March 2010.

<sup>78</sup> Kim Jongmyung, "Buddhist Rituals in Medieval Korea," pp. xiii-3.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

tor worship and longevity of the royal family, they did not, on the whole, function to legitimate the exercise of political power.<sup>80</sup> Those scholars who have shown interest in Koryŏ Buddhist rituals have focused on a limited historical survey. Their textual analysis has been weak and they have ignored the sociopolitical context of the time, thus failing to clarify the historical meaning of the Buddhist rituals in the context of the Koryŏ period.<sup>81</sup> In spite of its significance for the study of Koryŏ Buddhist rituals, the *KRS* does have certain limits for study in this area. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship has argued on the grounds of this text that Koryŏ Buddhist rituals functioned to legitimate the exercise of political power.

In fact, Buddhist rituals were not the most significant among rituals performed in Koryŏ, but functioned rather as auxiliary rituals, classified as miscellaneous entertainments among felicitous rites (*karye chaphŭi* 嘉禮雜戲) to the great auspicious rituals (*killye taesa* 吉禮大事), the most important of all the types of Koryŏ rituals.<sup>82</sup> In addition, challenging the traditional perspective, I have argued that Koryŏ Buddhist rituals functioned to solace the heart of the royal court, but had little to do with the strengthening of political power because they were held regardless of whether kingship status was strong or weak.<sup>83</sup> It should also be noted that though the Koryŏ court strongly sponsored Buddhism, Confucianism was the ideology for governing the nation and Confucian scholar-officials stood against Buddhism. Koryŏ Buddhism offered worldly benefits to the royal court and in return the religion secured socio-economic stability under the court's protective umbrella.

### 3. King Sejong and Buddhism

Scholars of Korean history have regarded the Chosŏn period as the time bridging the medieval era and the modern age of Korea. As a result, traditionally the history of the Chosŏn period has occupied a central position in research on Korean history.<sup>84</sup> In particular King Sejong's reign has been considered the most glorious period, not only of the Chosŏn dynasty, but in all Korean history. King Sejong is still considered the greatest Korean king

of all. While that may be the case, the argument that an in-depth examination of written sources, both in classical Chinese and in the Korean alphabet, is necessary for a better understanding of the diversity of society in the Late Chosŏn period<sup>85</sup> is also applicable to research on the reign of King Sejong.

Primarily based on the *Veritable Records of King Sejong* (*Sejong sillok* 世宗實錄, hereafter, *SJSL*), which contains the most important information on King Sejong's reign and is the single most important text for the study of Buddhism during his reign, and the *CWS*, a valuable official source for the study of Chosŏn Buddhism, traditional scholarship has argued that the core of the anti-Buddhist policy in the early Chosŏn period, including the reign of King Sejong, was the confiscation of monastic estates and servants, the reduction of temples and numbers of monks, and the removal of Buddhist rituals from national rites. In particular, with regard to the relationship between King Sejong and Buddhism, the commonly held view is that King Sejong adopted strong anti-Buddhist policies at the initial stage of his reign and at best tolerated Buddhism. Of evidence that might be marshalled to the contrary, it is said that the king merely recognized Buddhism in a superficial manner; that he had no clear perception of Buddhism in his early career; that the invention of the Korean alphabet had nothing to do with Buddhism; and that the *CWS* includes more examples of King Sejong being against Buddhism than of him favouring the religion.<sup>86</sup> However, traditional scholarship has neglected to perform an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Chosŏn and Buddhism and between King Sejong and the religion as specified in the source texts, thus arriving at conclusions that are inconsistent with the sources.<sup>87</sup>

My research based on relevant records in the *SJSL* and the *CWS*, in their proper chronological order, showed that King Sejong favoured Buddhism from the outset of his reign and maintained a positive and pious stance toward Buddhism throughout his time as king, eventually leading him to the invention of the Korean alphabet and to promoting its usage. In fact, King Sejong's anti-Buddhist activities were limited to a few instances. A record

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-15.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-13.

<sup>84</sup> Kim Chahyŏn, "Chosŏn shidae munhwasa-rŭl ōttŏk'e ssŭl kŏsin'ga-charyo-wa chŏpkun pangbŏp-e taehayŏ," p. 122.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>86</sup> Kim Jongmyung "King Sejong's Buddhist Faith and the Invention of the Korean Alphabet: A Historical Perspective," pp. 151-152.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

from the middle period of his reign indicates that these included the abolition of the Buddhist shrine in the inner court, the integration of Buddhist religious orders, the prohibition of the entry of monks into the capital area, and a prohibition to enter the monkhood. Verbal evidence from Chŏng Inji 鄭麟趾 (1396-1478), a high-ranking official during the reign of King Sejong, supports the interpretation that the king only undertook a few anti-Buddhist activities: “King Sejong abolished three to five great abuses of Buddhism.” As a result, I suggested the need to re-examine commonly accepted theories on Buddhism during the reign of King Sejong. I also came to the conclusion that the king’s creation of the Korean alphabet was closely related to his faith in Buddhism.<sup>88</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have examined the relationship between Chajang and Buddhism, the Koryŏ state and Buddhism, and between King Sejong and Buddhism, and on the basis of this examination suggested new approaches to research on Korean Buddhist history. Regarding the relationship between Chajang and the idea of Buddhism as state protector, the most common misunderstanding found in conventional Korean scholarship lies in its lack of a proper analysis and understanding of the available first-hand source material. The conventional idea that regarded the role of Buddhism during the Koryŏ period as the protection of the state was an ideological product, and the common view of the relationship between King Sejong and Buddhism was also a product of a partial and insufficient examination of primary sources. Therefore, we need to refer to all the available primary data and to conduct a more in-depth analysis of first-hand source material in their proper chronological order for the advancement of the study of Korean Buddhist history. In addition, researchers cannot simply rely on the evidence of only a limited number of particular sources, including historical material compiled by the government, in which they are interested. Historicization and contextualization of source data,<sup>89</sup> a focus on myth, memory, and symbol,<sup>90</sup> and an exploration of new angles on history<sup>91</sup> are also necessary to advance research on Korean Buddhist history, and by extension, research on Korean history in general.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 134-159.

<sup>89</sup> Kim Chahyŏn, “Chosŏn shidae munhwasa-rŭl ōttŏk’e ssŭl kŏsin’ga-charyo-wa chŏpkun pangbŏp-e taehayŏ,” 127-128.

<sup>90</sup> John B. Duncan, “Sŏyang sahak-kwa Han’guk chon’gundae” 서양사학과 한국 전근대, *Han’guksa yŏn’gu pangbŏmnon-gwa panghyang mosaek*, pp. 51-59.

<sup>91</sup> Barfield had no knowledge of classical Chinese. Nevertheless, his *The Perilous Frontier* has been an essential text for the study of Chinese-nomadic relations in premodern times. This suggests that originality in approach may be no less significant than a perfect understanding of primary data in the study of history.