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Privatization of Buddhism in the Chosŏn Dynasty¹

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ABSTRACT

The common assumption that Buddhism was persecuted throughout the Chosŏn dynasty needs to be re-examined. Buddhists were not killed simply because they were Buddhists. State support for Buddhism was reduced but that resulted in the privatization of Buddhism, not its prohibition. Buddhism became a private matter rather than a state project. Buddhist writings continued to be published. Temples, including temples supported by the royal family, continued to operate. And a small portion of the adult male population lived openly as monks, and occasionally interacted on friendly terms with Confucian scholar-officials. Instead of trying to eliminate those monks, the state instead utilized their labor for defense and handicraft production. Moreover, laypeople were allowed to provide support to monasteries and their inhabitants. The Chosŏn state kept Buddhism under government control but did not engage in the sort of persecution it later engaged in against Catholics. Regulation is not persecution.

Keywords: Buddhism, monks, Neo-Confucianism, persecution, rituals, temples, royal family

When the modern scientific study of Korean history was born in the early years of the twentieth century, it constructed a picture of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) shaped by the stagnation hypothesis: the notion that during the five centuries of that dynasty the Korean people were basically running in place, failing to make the advances that would have prepared them to cope with the challenges of the modern world. Japanese scholars asserted that there was no significant progress on the Korean peninsula after the 15th century as a way to justify the Japanese seizure of the Korean nation. However, many Korean scholars, in need of an explanation for the loss of national independence in 1910, accepted that Japanese hypothesis and continued to promote it even after the Japanese colonizers went home in 1945.

In recent decades, the dynamism of South Korea has stimulated many scholars to rethink that hypothesis. Pushing the dynamism of the last quarter of the 20th century onto the past, they have pointed to what they see as significant changes in Korea in the centuries immediately preceding 1910, claiming, for example, to have found “sprouts of capitalism” and the rise of a “school of practical learning.” However, most scholars who study traditional religion have remained in the grip of the stagnation hypothesis. That doesn’t mean that they ignore the significance of the emergence of Catholicism at the end of the 18th century, the birth of Tonghak in 1860, and the rise of Protestantism at the end of that century. But

when they turn to Buddhism, Confucianism, and the folk religion, they generally depict wheels spinning in place.

Of the three, Buddhism has suffered the most from the lingering influence of the notion that progress stopped in Korea around 1392. Despite the recent work by a number of scholars both in Korea and abroad over the last decade or so who have uncovered evidence for continuing vitality and growth in Korean Buddhism over the course of the entire dynasty, we are still told over and over again in general introductions to Korean history, and even in general introductions to the history of Buddhism in Korea, that Buddhism endured persecution over the entire five centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty and that it was in much worse shape in 1910 than it had been in the 14th century. When scholars identify interesting Buddhist thinkers during this period, those monks are usually portrayed as more focused on defending Buddhism from attacks by Confucian officials and scholars than in generating new insights into how to achieve enlightenment. At best, Buddhism during the Chosŏn dynasty is described as consolidating the gains made in earlier periods by creative thinkers such as Chinul (1158-1210) rather than embarking on pioneering projects of its own. Buddhism's penetration of, and integration into, the folk religion is usually dismissed as proof of how far Buddhism had fallen from the heights it had occupied in the Silla (trad. 57 BCE-935) and Koryŏ (918-1392) periods rather than as evidence that Buddhism was adapting to a changed environment by expanding its presence among the general population.

I would like to join those who challenge that negative portrayal of Chosŏn dynasty Buddhism. I will do so by shifting our focus from Buddhist thought and religious practice to the relationship between Buddhism and the state. In the process, I will problematize the claim that Buddhism was persecuted by the Chosŏn state. And I will show that, rather than deterioration, we see change, which can be interpreted negatively but only if you prioritize the role of the state in religious life.

First, in order to show that Buddhism played a much more vital role over the course of the Chosŏn dynasty than it has traditionally been seen as playing, I will examine its role in rituals used by the government and its rulers for legitimization. Then I will show that, though Buddhism may have been pushed out of the dominant position in the court it enjoyed in previous dynasties, it nevertheless remained in public view, albeit as a private religion rather than an official one.

Ritual Hegemony in Traditional Korea

We often forget in the modern world how close has been the link between religious ritual and political power. In an ancient Confucian Classic written over two millennia ago, we can read “the great affairs of state are sacrifice and war” (*Chunqiu Zuo zhuan*, 5: 379). This succinct statement of two fundamental tools of governance became an essential element of the political culture of the pre-modern Korea,

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giving “sacrifice” (ritual) a political importance it did not have in the West.

In the modern West, as Max Weber pointed out, a state has been understood as “a human community which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber 1946, 78). In traditional East Asia, on the other hand, that definition has to be expanded to read “a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of ritual and physical force within a given territory” (Baker 1997; Kim, Han-shin 2014).² I label this state claim to a monopoly of the legitimate use of ritual within the territory it controls “ritual hegemony” (Baker 2006, 262).

Neo-Confucianism seized ritual hegemony in the first two centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty, a hegemony it had not monopolized when the Wang family sat on the throne during the Koryŏ dynasty. To do so, Neo-Confucianism had to push Buddhism as well as Daoism and shamanism off the public stage. That took about two centuries to accomplish. However, the traditional claim that Buddhism was persecuted when it was pushed aside is an exaggeration. Withdrawal of state support, which is what Buddhism experienced, is not the same as persecution. Buddhism continued not only to be tolerated but also received some private support from the royal family and other members of the ruling elite.

Moreover, in the beginning of the dynasty, in 1392, when Yi Sŏnggye (1335-1408, r. 1392-1398) unseated the last representative of the Wang family on the throne, after four and a half centuries of the Koryŏ dynasty, and assumed the throne for himself and his descendants, he knew that it was essential that he get his subjects to accept his action as legitimate. There was no outside authority he could call upon to confirm his legitimacy. The Emperor of Ming China (1368-1644) would only ratify rule by a king of Korea who had already been accepted by the Korean elite as legitimate. Therefore he, and those who supported his claim to the throne, had to turn to legitimizing ritual and rhetoric to convince those whom he intended to rule over that he had the right to do so.

There were a number of tools available they could use to establish his legitimacy. They could, and did, claim he had been given the Mandate of Heaven (*ch'ŏnmyŏng*), as defined by Confucianism. But Yi, and some of his supporters as well, knew Confucianism was not yet strong enough to be the sole provider of legitimizing religious rhetoric and ritual. Instead, in addition to wielding the Mandate of Heaven, Yi had to draw on a number of different sources, among which was Buddhism. He and his supporters also made claims of supernatural sanction and of extraordinary military prowess to justify his seizing the throne from the Wang family and establishing a new dynasty (Baker 2013).

Once he was on the throne, Yi is portrayed in the *Sillok* and other sources as acting like the Confucian monarch his officials wanted him to be, most of the time. He relied on Confucian-scholar officials, and he issued pronouncements filled

² Kim, Han-shin (2014) shows how the Chinese state during the Song dynasty (960-1127) broadened its attempts to regulate popular religion instead of trying to eradicate it. This is similar to the approach adopted by the Korean government toward Buddhism, and the attempt adopted by successive pre-modern Japanese governments toward religious institutions.

with standard Confucian rhetoric. However, the official records report that he also continued to turn to Buddhism both for personal consolation and also because he thought that there were still many people in Korea who expected their monarch to show that he had the support of the Buddha by sponsoring Buddhist rituals and supporting Buddhist monks and temples (Vermeersch 2013).

It is well known that he appointed Chach'o, also known as Muhak (1327-1405), as his Royal Preceptor and also appointed another monk, Chogu (?-1395), as the State Preceptor. Less well known are the many Buddhist rituals Yi held at his court. They included prayers for warding off disorder in nature (*sojae*), rituals to console the spirits of the dead (*kijae*, *ch'önhoe*), and rituals to ask the Buddha's help in overcoming illness (*tobul pyōngyu*). Moreover, he sometimes treated large numbers of monks to a feast, and provided financial support for the printing of sutras (Han Ugūn 1993, 29-30 and 50-52). There are 60 instances recorded in the *Taejo Sillok* of T'aejo (Yi Sōnggye's posthumous name as founder of the dynasty) sponsoring Buddhist rituals or entertaining monks over the course of the six years of his reign. He also mandated that the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land (*suryukchae*) be performed under royal auspices twice a year (Choi Mihwa 2009).

We also find Buddhist rhetoric being used alongside Confucian rhetoric deep into the 15th century. For example, in *the Songs of Dragons Flying to Heaven* (*Yongbi ōch'ōn'ga*), songs composed during the reign of Taejo's grandson Sejong (r. 1419-1450) to praise (and legitimize rule by) the Yi royal family, there are 125 cantos of praise for the Yi family. I found only twelve that explicitly mention the Mandate of Heaven. However, thirty-one of the cantos laud the military skill displayed by Yi and his ancestors. And canto 11 tells us that, after Yi Sōng-gye's great-grandfather prayed to the Bodhisattva Kwanūm, a monk appeared to him in a dream and promised that he would soon have a son to continue the family line (Hoyt 1971). This episode is also reported in the *Taejo Sillok*.

However, Confucianism slowly gained hegemony in government rituals, even though quite a few of the kings of Chosŏn personally believed in Buddhism (Pu Namchul 2011). As Confucianism began to monopolize the ritual tools wielded by the government, Buddhism had to retreat to the sidelines. In the process, it suffered a withdrawal of government support.

The third king of the dynasty, T'aejong, eliminated the official positions of Royal Preceptor (*Wangsa*) and State Preceptor (*Kuksa*) that had existed since early in the Koryŏ dynasty (Yi Chaech'ang 1993, 151). He also reduced the number of officially recognized Buddhist denominations from eleven to seven. His successor King Sejong reduced that number further to two, one meditation-oriented denomination and one doctrine-oriented denomination. He also reduced the number of temples, and of the monks allowed to dwell in those temples, until only 36 temples, with a total population of less than 4,000 monks and approximately the same number of temple slaves, were granted official sanction (Pu Namchul 2005). Then, a little over a century later, King Myōngjong (r. 1545-1567) abolished the official civil service examination system for Buddhist monks (*sūngkwa*) that had been established in 958. He also repealed the law that provided for official certification (*toch'ōpche*), and therefore official recognition, of clerical status, ending

tax exemptions for monks and for temple land (Yi Chaech'ang 1993, 155-56).³

Buddhism after the Withdrawal of State Support

This is not persecution. It is simply the withdrawal of state support. Men could still be monks, though they would have no official status as such and were supposed to be subject to the same taxes as commoners. Moreover, it is not clear how effective these measures were. Instead of the 36 temples mandated by King Sejong, hundreds continued to operate. In fact, into the second half of the dynasty, there were still around 1,500 temples on the peninsula (Pak Pyŏngsŏn 2009, 58). And the number of monks must have remained substantially more than King Sejong decreed was the maximum. Otherwise, the government could not have called on the aid of a monks' army during the resistance against the Hideyoshi invasions of the 1590s.

Moreover, since even kings and their wives occasionally encounter areas of unpleasant uncertainty in their lives, such as when disease threatens them or a member of their family, Buddhist practices were not completely eliminated from the palace grounds. Nor would the potential power of the Buddha be ignored when a natural disaster such as a drought threatened the well-being of the inhabitants of the peninsula and of the dynasty which ruled over them. Seeking supernatural assistance to supplement the beneficial impact virtuous behavior was believed to have on nature, even kings who had sought to eliminate Buddhism from the public sphere would sometimes invite monks into their palaces to pray privately for them or for royal offspring, or they would permit the women of the palace to discretely sponsor a Buddhist ritual (Han Ugŭn 1993, 106-08; Kamata Shigeo 1988, 192-203).

When the dynasty was still in its adolescence and Neo-Confucian strictures on official behavior had not yet solidified into barriers even kings could not ignore, a government printing office (the Chujaso) could be used to reprint Buddhist texts (Kang Sinhang 1990, 251-52). In another sign that anti-Buddhist sentiment did not yet totally dominate the court, one of the first prose works published in *han'gŭl* was the *Sŏkpo sangjŏl*, a life of the Buddha compiled, edited, and translated by the future king Sejo for his father Sejong. Furthermore, when Sejo took the throne, he established a Buddhist sutra printing office (Kan'gyŏng togam), which published eleven other Buddhist works in the new Korean alphabet as well as some in pure Chinese. Even as late as King Sŏngjong's reign, the supposedly anti-Buddhist Chosŏn government was still publishing Buddhist texts (Kang 1990, 221-86).

In more striking evidence of the lingering influence of Buddhism in the court, a Buddhist ritual for the dead, the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land (*suryukchae*), continued to be performed as an official state rite until the last decade of the 15th century. After that, even when the kings stopped using that ritual to officially console the spirits of deceased members of the royal family, it maintained its popularity among the general population and even among some of the supposedly staunchly Confucian elite (Choi Mihwa 2009). Books explaining how

³ For more on the Korean withdrawal of official support for Buddhism, and the reasons for it, see Han 1993 and Goulde 1985.

to carry out that ritual were published in the 17th and 18th centuries (Nam Hee-sook 2012, 9-12). If Buddhism had actually been persecuted, it is unlikely as elaborate a ritual as this could have been continued to be performed.

Moreover, unwilling to waste the talents of even those with as low a social status as the Chosŏn dynasty accorded monks, the Chosŏn court availed itself of the manpower and expertise monks represented. Monk-healers were sometimes dispatched when an outbreak of disease threatened the population of a local area and monks were attached, along with shamans, to some official public health clinics (Han 1993, 135-38). Monk-artisans were required to manufacture paper and other products for the use of government officials (Kim Kapchu 1994, 330-31). And, for a brief while in the mid-fifteenth century, monks were even authorized to make up for their loss of land and slaves by acting as tribute contractors, profiting as middlemen between those who produced the goods the government demanded in payment of the tribute tax and those who owed that tax but did not have ready access to the specified tribute items (Han 1993, 134-35). There were even monks who were called upon to assume military duties and defend Korea's borders against bandits in the north and against pirates along the southern coasts (An Kyehyŏn 1983, 326-35).

This does not fit the usual description of religious persecution. Regulation and exploitation are not persecution, especially when those who are not associated with that religious community are subjected to similar regulation and exploitation. However, the growing domination of Neo-Confucian values over Chosŏn dynasty politics meant that, by the end of the 16th century, all official support for Buddhism as a religion, even the official division of monks into two denominations, was ended. No longer did the government grant monks or monasteries any privileges or tax exemptions denied commoners, nor were government printing facilities used to print Buddhist texts any more. Instead, the government increasingly treated monks and their monasteries as simply another resource available to serve the needs of the state.

Shamanism and Daoism in Confucian Korea

The government did the same with shamanism and Daoism for a while as well. There was an official Daoist shrine until the end of the 16th century. The Hall for Enshrining Deities (Sogyŏkchŏn) began the dynasty with an official staff of six or seven. However, as the Neo-Confucian tone of the court grew stronger, those numbers were reduced and the Hall for Enshrining Deities itself was downgraded to an Office for Enshrining Deities (Sokyŏksŏ) in 1466. As the Office for Enshrining Deities, however, it survived for over another century, only to be destroyed during Hideyoshi's invasions and never rebuilt (Yi Chongŭn 1988). For the rest of the dynasty, Daoism did not play an official role, unless we want to include in official Daoism the shrines to the Chinese god-general Guan Yu, which appeared in Seoul and then other parts of the country after the sixteenth-century invasions.

As for shamanism, it was held in more disdain than Daoism was, but it was also more ingrained in the popular culture. The government could not afford to ignore the popular belief in the powers of shamans, particularly when the

people were faced with epidemics or famines. In the first part of the dynasty, some shamans held official government appointment. King Sejong, for example, though he condemned privately-held *kut* as lewd rituals, appointed shamans to posts in an official public health clinic outside the city walls, the Hwarinsŏ, a precedent his successors followed off-and-on for at least another three centuries (Yu Tongshik 1975, 98; Han Ugŭn 1993, 185-86). In the first half of the dynasty, shamans were also appointed to another government agency, the Hall of the Heavenly Bodies (Sŏngsuch'ŏng), which, despite its astronomical name, was actually the palace shaman shrine. Shamans serving there were exempt from the law forbidding shamans from entering the capital since, at least through the reign of King Yŏnsan'gun (r. 1494-1506), there were still some in government who believed that shamans could help protect the health of the royal family by performing rituals honoring the gods of the sun, the moon, the planets, and important stars and constellations (Yu Tongshik 1975, 198-99).

There were also shamans assigned to serve in local government offices. Spirit halls were established within the grounds of those offices for the use of those shamans (Yu Tongshik 1975, 203-04; 217). Moreover, shamans were occasionally mobilized by government officials, both in the capital region and in the provinces, to participate in a number of state-sanctioned rituals, such as rituals for rain in times of drought, rituals for the recovery of the health of an ill member of the royal family, or rituals in honor of local guardian deities (Yi P'iryŏng 1993, 23-26). In a further sign of official state recognition of shamans, there was a nation-wide occupational tax on shamans similar to the tax on artisans and fishermen (Im Haksŏng 1993).

Buddhism in the Second Half of the Chosŏn Dynasty

Buddhism was taken more seriously, and granted more responsibility than either Daoism or shamanism. One of the responsibilities Buddhism was supposed to shoulder was the defense of the dynasty. When the Japanese invaded Korea in 1592, King Sŏnjo (r. 1567-1608) asked the monk Hyujŏng (1520-1604) to organize all of Korea's monks into a fighting force to defend Korean soil against Hideyoshi's forces. Hyujŏng did as his king asked him to do, creating an army 5,000 monks strong (that's more young, healthy monks than the total number of monks Sejong's decree had allowed!). Impressed by how well those monks fought, for much of the rest of the dynasty Korea's kings relied heavily on monk-soldiers. Under royal orders, monks built and defended the fortresses on both Mt. Namhan and Mt. Pukhan. A nation-wide network of monastery-military outposts was established and there were even monks serving as a naval fighting force (An Kyehyŏn 1983, 325-404; Yŏ Ŭn'gyŏng 1992).

In trying to retrieve some of its subjects who had been taken to Japan after the war, the Korean government even dispatched a monk, Hyujŏng's disciple Yujŏng (1544-1610), to Japan as a diplomat to negotiate with the Japanese warlords. A century later, in the 18th century, Yujŏng and Hyujŏng were both enshrined in P'yoch'ungsa (Shrine in Praise of Loyalty), an official shrine in Miryang supported by the government, in recognition of the contributions they made to Korea's

security (Park Saeyoung 2011).

The official recognition given to two monks in the second half of the supposedly anti-Buddhist Chosŏn dynasty shows that Buddhism still maintained a certain amount of respectability in some circles. It may have lost its power to provide official legitimizing rituals for the government, but it remained a religious force on the peninsula. In fact, even the royal family, in their private capacity, continued to support some Buddhist shrines. It was standard practice throughout the dynasty, all the way into the 19th century, for kings to endow *wŏndang*, Buddhist votive temples, for deceased predecessors and other members of the royal family (Kim Sung-Eun Thomas 2013, 10-11). One contemporary scholar has found records attesting to the existence of over 208 such Buddhist prayer halls being erected and maintained over the entire five centuries of the dynasty, with almost half, 103 of them, being built after 1600 (Park Pyŏngsŏn 2009, 58). One king in the late 18th century, King Chŏngjo (r. 1776-1800), went even farther and had an entire temple renovated, renamed, and dedicated to his father, the unfortunate “coffin king,” Sado seja (1735-1762). The reconstruction of that temple, Yongjusa, was finished in 1795, four centuries after the supposedly anti-Confucian Chosŏn dynasty emerged in Seoul (Yu Ponghak 2001, 66-68).

These *wŏndang*, and Yongjusa, however, were seen as projects of the royal family as a family, not of the state as the state. Despite occasional criticism from officials who wanted the royal family to expel all Buddhist elements from their family life, these practices survived. They survived probably because the royal family felt the need to do more than just conduct Confucian rituals to help their loved ones who had left this world and were now in another realm. But they also may have served indirectly to support the power of the royal family, in two ways.

First of all, the kings of Korea were supposed to be paragons of Confucian virtue. One very important Confucian virtue is filial piety. Erecting a Buddhist votive temple for the repose of the spirit of a parent or ancestor is a manifestation of filial piety. Therefore supporting such prayer halls, even though they were Buddhist in nature, helped strengthen the image of the Yi kings as virtuous and therefore worthy of ruling the country. In addition, by resisting the calls of some officials to end this non-Confucian practice, the kings were able to show their officials that those officials did not control them. Continuing to support rituals their officials disapproved of showed that the kings were more powerful than those officials.

The continuing building of *wŏndang*, and government support for the temples which maintained them, shows that it is an exaggeration to say that Buddhism was persecuted during the Chosŏn dynasty. I know what full-scale persecution means. I've studied the early history of the Catholic Church in Korea. Full-scale persecution doesn't mean clerics being forbidden to enter Seoul in their clerical robes. It means clerics being hunted down and killed wherever they are in the country. Full-scale persecution doesn't mean limits on the number of houses of worship. It means that no houses of worship whatsoever are permitted by the government. And full-scale persecution doesn't mean that practitioners are treated with disdain but left alone. It means that believers, male and female alike, are killed. Full-scale religious persecution means an attempt to eradicate the religious

beliefs and activities of a particular religious community. Such persecution needs to be distinguished from regulation and control.

Buddhism was regulated and privatized, not persecuted. We see the curtailment of government support but Buddhism survived. It survived not only in the villages and mountains of Korea but even, as a private practice, among members of the royal family. It lost its status as the official religion, but it remained a significant factor in the religious culture of Korea. It was popularized and privatized, not persecuted.

Buddhism and Law in Korea

However, to say that Buddhism did not undergo a full-scale persecution is not to say that Buddhist monks were treated just the same as other commoners. Quite the contrary. The state let them know that it considered their choice of a religious profession to be unwise. The state wanted young men to get married and produce a new generation of taxpayers. Monks didn't do that. As a result, the government tried to make a monk's life a fairly uncomfortable one so that few men would choose that option. The Chosŏn dynasty took the law code of Ming China as the foundation for its own laws. It found in the Ming laws ample justification for the control and mistreatment of monks. For example, the Ming codes forbade the establishment or enlarging of any temples without government authorization. Those who violated that clause in the law code were to be "sent to the distant frontiers in military exile." And if a monk was ordained without an official ordainment certificate, they were supposed to be punished "by 80 strokes of beating with a heavy stick" (*Great Ming Code* 2005, 71). The state also took it upon itself to enforce monastic discipline. The Ming Code stated that if a monk violated the monastic requirement of clerical chastity, they would be punished "by 80 strokes with the heavy stick, and they shall return to lay status" (*Great Ming Code*, 87).

When Korean Confucians started building private academies in the 16th century, they sometimes found that there were Buddhist temples on the grounds they claimed for those academies. Rather than chase the monks away, in many cases the academies forced those monks to help in the construction of the academy buildings and to provide the students in those academies with items such as paper and brushes that the students needed. They treated the monks as their servants (Yi Suhwan 2001, 64-99).

Occasionally the state took active steps to reduce the number of monks, claiming that many of them were using the cloak of monastic status to avoid their tax obligations. The harshest anti-Buddhist policies were during the reign of King Chungjong (r. 1506-1544), when over 3,500 men who claimed to be monks in Chŏlla province were forcibly laicized and over half the temples in that province were demolished (Yi Pongch'un 1997; *Chungjong sillok* yr 34. m 6, 12 [*musin*]). However, such a strict anti-monastic policy was not strictly enforced for very long and soon there were again more monks and temples in the countryside than the law allowed.

We can find a few cases of individual monks who were harshly punished by the state, but, in those cases, the monks were not punished merely for being

monks but because they appeared to pose a threat to the state. One such monk was interrogated by the State Tribunal (which means that he was tortured) in 1676 and then executed because he had claimed to be not only a living Buddha but also the posthumous son of a former crown prince. He may have survived execution if he had only claimed to be a living Buddha but the *lèse-majesté* of his claim to be of royal descent sealed his fate (Ch'oe Chongsöng 2013). Another famous case occurred just a few years later, in 1688, when a monk named Yöhwon came to believe that he was destined to replace the royal family and rule over the peninsula. He promised his followers that a torrential rain would flood Seoul and wash away the palace, making it possible for him to seize control. Even though the most subversive action he actually took was to climb a mountain above Seoul and wait for that flood, he, too, suffered the full force of the state's anger. However, he was accused of treason and resorting to sorcery, not simply of being a Buddhist monk (*Sukchong sillok* yr. 14 m. 8, 1 (*shinch'uk*)).

Although it is clear that officially the Chosön dynasty was ideologically anti-Buddhist, the government used institutional means, not large-scale persecution, to curtail the role of Buddhism in the Neo-Confucian-dominated government. Unlike Catholics, Buddhists were not killed for being Buddhists (Roux 2012; Rausch 2012).⁴ Instead, the government used both a carrot and a stick to Confucianize elite society.

The carrot was the civil service examination system. With official Buddhist exams and titles eliminated, the primary route to power and wealth for an ambitious young man from a respectable family was to study Confucianism so that he could pass the civil service exams and become an official. Studying for those exams took up so much of their time that they hardly had time to read Buddhist texts, even if they moved temporarily to the peace and quiet of a temple or hermitage to study the Confucian Classics.

The stick was the limit placed on the number of tax-free monks, and on tax-free land. Even though those limits were rarely, if ever, strictly enforced, they placed monks in a vulnerable position. A young man had to be either worried about where he was going to get his next meal or a very strong believer in Buddhism to risk becoming a monk.

Yet some did so. Moreover, Buddhism appears to have penetrated the general population, those who were not concerned with studying for the civil service exams, to a greater extent during the Chosön dynasty than it had previously. There are number of signs of the continued vitality of Buddhism into the second half of the dynasty. For example, Buddhist music survived. *Pömp'ae*, which is not a quiet sort of music that could be played in times of deadly persecution, continued to be played into the eighteenth century at least (Lee Byong Won 1971).

And, when the government stopped printing Buddhist texts, the people

⁴ Roux persuasively argues that, even though Catholics were much more likely to be subjected to the death penalty than Buddhists were, even the treatment of Catholics in the 19th century should not be categorized as systematic persecution, since the execution of Catholics for being Catholics was sporadic and localized.

stepped in to help monks do so. In the latter half of the dynasty, a number of Buddhist ritual guides as well as reproductions of sutras, some in *han'gŭl* translation, were published and made available to the general public. Sometimes even local Confucian scholars and local officials supported those publications (Younghee Lee 2012). Such publishing of Buddhist texts continued right up until the end of the dynasty (Nam Hee-sook 2012).

When I was still relatively new to the field of Koreans studies and had not yet learned to doubt the narrative about Buddhism being persecuted during the Chosŏn dynasty, I was quite surprised to find an eighteenth-century publication of the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* (*Yaksagyŏng*) with the names of the many lay people who had supported its publication attached (they appear to have been mostly women). I would have been even more surprised at the time if I had learned then that a king himself had arranged for the publication of another sutra, the *Sutra of Filial Piety* (*Pumo ūnjunggyŏng*) (Kim Chongmyŏng 2012, 210) or that, in 1853, the Chief State Councilor and brother-in-law of King Sunjo had sponsored the publication of yet another sutra, the Diamond Sutra (*Kūmganggyŏng*) (Nam Hee-sook 2012, 99).

Lay Buddhists did more than just help monks publish ritual guides and sutras. They also helped them overcome the financial difficulties the temples had fallen into after the withdrawal of government support. Just as they formed *kye*, mutual credit associations, to help with Confucian ritual obligations such as marriages and funerals and with the expenses of maintaining bridges over local streams and helping each other out in case of a fire or a flood, they also formed temple mutual credit associations. One scholar has identified at least 268 *sach'algye* operating in the second half of the dynasty. They supported temples in a number of ways, such as the donation of supplies, agricultural lands, and cash; temple restoration; donation of Buddhist statuary, paintings, bells, and other objects; sutra publication; contributions of labour; educational activities; and specifically religious activities, such as forming groups to chant mantras or invocations of the Buddha's name. Sometimes lower-level government officials or military officers joined these *kye* (Han Sangkil 2012, 44 and 56).

Differing Treatment for Buddhists and Catholics

Buddhists clearly were openly involved in activities that Catholics, when they were being persecuted in the 19th century, could not engage in as openly. Buddhists even began running their own formal educational institutions in the second half of the dynasty, without any interference from the government (Lee Jong-su and Seon Joon Sunim 2012). And there is plenty of evidence that Confucian scholars were not afraid to meet with and talk with Buddhist monks or read their literature, though a similar association with a Catholic cleric or Catholic literature would have been deadly (Walraven 2007; Kim Sung-Eun Thomas 2013, 7-9). Buddhist *kasa* may even have circulated in Seoul in the 19th century (Lee Younghee 2012).

Perhaps the strongest evidence that persecution is too strong a word to describe the government and societal attitude toward Buddhism in the Chosŏn dynasty is the behavior of Tasan Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836). In 1801, Tasan was

sent into exile for 18 years because of his youthful involvement with the illegal Korean Catholic community. One of his brothers was also exiled. Another brother was executed. One would think that would have convinced Tasan to keep his distance from any group that was being persecuted out of fear that he may be caught up in another religious persecution. However, when he was in exile in Kangjin, he became friends with a Buddhist monk at a temple a short walk from his hut. He also left written records of his friendship with various monks and of his respect for their dedication to self-cultivation, though he also made it clear he did not agree with them on many philosophical issues (Kim Daeyeol 2012).

Conclusion

This short overview of the relationship between Buddhism and the government, and Buddhism and society, during the Chosŏn dynasty reveals that, though it is misleading to say the Buddhism suffered full-scale persecution by the Chosŏn dynasty government, the relationship Buddhism had with its government and with the Korean people undoubtedly changed. Buddhism lost the favoured position it had enjoyed with Korean governments before the emergence of the Chosŏn dynasty. Neo-Confucianism was able to establish ideological superiority in the political arena and therefore came to establish hegemony over official rituals used to legitimize political authority.

Neo-Confucianism was able to establish hegemony for several reasons. First of all, Koreans wanted to appear to be up-to-date in Chinese eyes, since China was, in Korean eyes, the most advanced civilization they knew. In order to appear up-to-date, they had to move beyond the official respect accorded Buddhism during China's Tang dynasty (618-907) and adopt Neo-Confucian ideology and rituals of China's Song dynasty (960-1279) as the primary tools of governance. Second, Neo-Confucianism was grounded in a philosophy centered on the relationship between society and government and therefore was more practical for the everyday business of governing. It assumed that human beings were social beings and that the most important duty of human beings was to interact appropriately with their fellow human beings. Governments by their very nature focus on human beings and strive to get them to cooperate harmoniously. Therefore Neo-Confucianism appeared to be the best philosophy for such a task. Third, the government was able to use the tools of government, its taxation powers in particular, to make Buddhism a less attractive alternative for members of the elite than Neo-Confucianism was.

However, the Neo-Confucian government was unable to totally eradicate Buddhism from Korean soil, nor did it ever seriously try to do so. First of all, Buddhism was superior to Neo-Confucianism in dealing with less political and more spiritual matters. Neo-Confucianism doesn't hold out any hope for a better life for ourselves or our loved ones beyond the grave. Buddhism does. Neo-Confucianism doesn't offer a clear explanation of why we find life so frustrating at times. Buddhism does. Finally, Neo-Confucianism offers no techniques for accessing supernatural power to overcome the problems that are an inevitable part of human existence. Buddhism does.

Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism may have been ideologically incompatible

(there are plenty of anti-Buddhist Neo-Confucian texts which point that out) but otherwise they could work well together, as long as they both tacitly accepted a division of responsibility. It took a while to work out that division. But finally the royal family and members of the yangban elite came to see Buddhism as a private matter and Neo-Confucianism as a public matter and therefore the two were allowed to co-exist. That co-existence is particularly evident in the second half of the Chosŏn dynasty, when government attempts to curtail Buddhist resources subsided. Moreover, the position of Buddhism under that unspoken agreement was strengthened by its ability to reach the masses in a way the more intellectual and rigorous Neo-Confucianism could not.

As Buddhism merged with the folk religion, it gained one more reason for its survival. According to the Confucian Mandate of Heaven, a legitimate ruler must have the support of the people, or, at least, not their active opposition. Since Buddhism had a long history in Korea and during the Chosŏn dynasty sunk even deeper roots into popular culture, a ruler who wielded the might of his government against it would run up against popular resistance. To totally outlaw Buddhism, in the way Catholicism was outlawed, would have cost the monarchy much of the popular support Confucianism said it should maintain, support it needed to sustain itself. Moreover, by occasionally supporting Buddhism privately, the royal family and some members of the governing elite actually gave the masses reason to support the government, since they appeared at times to share the religious orientation of the general population.

The unspoken compromise that was finally formed between the Neo-Confucian government and the Buddhist religion may have been one of the factors that allowed the Chosŏn dynasty to last so much longer than dynasties in China and ruling coalitions in Japan had. Ironically, Buddhism, though it was forced out of an openly political role, ended up providing one of the props that strengthened the political power structure that defines the Chosŏn dynasty. That role, rather than the role of a “persecuted religion,” is how we should remember Buddhism in the Chosŏn dynasty.

GLOSSARY

Chach'o	自超	Chungjong	中宗
Chinul	知訥	Guan Yu	關羽
Chogu	祖丘	<i>han'gŭl</i>	한글
Chŏngjo	正祖	Hideyoshi	秀吉
<i>ch'ŏnhoe</i>	薦會	Hwarinsŏ	活人署
<i>ch'ŏnmyŏng</i>	天命	Hyujŏng	休靜
Chosŏn	朝鮮	Kan'gyŏng togam	刊經都監
Chujaso	鑄字所	Kangjin	康津

<i>kasa</i>	歌辭	<i>Sogyöksö</i>	昭格暑
<i>kijae</i>	忌齋	<i>sojae</i>	消災
<i>Koryö</i>	高麗	<i>Söngsuch'öng</i>	星宿廳
<i>Kuksa</i>	國師	<i>Sönjo</i>	宣祖
<i>Kūmganggyöng</i>	金剛經	<i>Sukchong</i>	肅宗
<i>Kwanüm</i>	觀音	<i>suryukchae</i>	水陸齋
<i>kye</i>	契	<i>T'aejo</i>	太祖
<i>Miryang</i>	密陽	<i>Tang</i>	唐
<i>Ming</i>	明	<i>Tasan Chöng Yagyong</i>	茶山 丁若鏞
<i>Muhak</i>	無學	<i>tobul pyöngyu</i>	禱佛病愈
<i>Myöngjong</i>	明宗	<i>toch'öpche</i>	度牒制
<i>Namhan</i>	南漢	<i>Tonghak</i>	東學
<i>pömp'ae</i>	梵唄	<i>Wang</i>	王
<i>Pukhan</i>	北漢	<i>Wangsa</i>	王師
<i>Pumo ünjunggyöng</i>	父母恩重經	<i>wöndang</i>	願堂
<i>P'yoch'ungsa</i>	表忠寺	<i>Yaksagyöng</i>	藥師經
<i>sach'algye</i>	寺刹契	<i>Yi Sönggye</i>	李成桂
<i>Sado seja</i>	思悼世子	<i>Yongbi öch'ön'ga</i>	龍飛御天歌
<i>Sejong</i>	世宗	<i>Yongjusa</i>	龍珠寺
<i>Sillok</i>	實錄	<i>Yönsan'gun</i>	燕山君
<i>Sogyökchön</i>	昭格殿	<i>Yujöng</i>	惟政

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