

Yōngt'ong-sa and its Reconstruction:
A Medieval Buddhist Site as a Space for North-South Cooperation

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In the autumn of 2005, South Korean media reported on the completion ceremony for the reconstructed Yōngt'ong-sa in Kaesōng, DPRK. Photos showed assembled dignitaries of both sides; especially eye-catching in the front rows were clerical leaders of both South and North Korean Buddhist orders.¹ As far as I could ascertain, these were the first reports on this project. While the various inter-Korean projects, notably the Kūmgang-san tourist resort and the Kaesōng industrial zone, have received high-level media attention from the beginning, this reconstruction of a Buddhist temple passed largely unnoticed. Perhaps this is because unlike the official programs, which are expected to bring economic and other benefits to each side, the temple reconstruction seems relatively insignificant, all the more so since there are hardly any Buddhist believers in the north. Yet the reconstruction seems important if we are to understand the fabric of the complicated 'interface' between north and south, and two reasons in particular stand out: one, they are the result mainly of non-governmental cooperation, ostensibly between religious organizations;² and second, they express a shared commitment to reinterpreting and reimagining the past. Unfortunately, this reconstruction of traditional heritage shows little respect for the complexities and details of history, and seems to be self-serving on both sides. Thus this paper will try mainly to unravel how history is distorted, and how unlikely bedfellows seem to create common ground through a self-serving interpretation of history.

An important actor in this plot is the South Korean Ch'ōnt'ae order. Lesser known than other Buddhist orders such as Chogye or T'aego, it nevertheless claims to have a following of 2 million (Yi Sang-hūn 2004, 157). Although re-established in the 20th century, it reveres the 11th century monk Ŭich'ōn as its founder, and because of this has an interest in Yōngt'ong-sa: Ŭich'ōn stayed at this temple after his novice ordination (tonsure), and was connected to it for much of his adult life. Apparently the north initiated the idea for the reconstruction, and the Ch'ōntae order agreed to provide financial assistance. This is in fact not the only Buddhist reconstruction project: around 2001 the Chogye order committed itself to the reconstruction of Singye-sa in the Diamond mountains. However, the projects are quite different in nature: Singye-sa was destroyed only in the Korean War, and photos of its buildings before destruction can be used for the reconstruction; no such visual data exists for Yōngt'ong-sa, which was probably destroyed in the sixteenth century. Also, the Chogye order appears to be much more involved in the reconstruction of Singye-sa. Although I have not yet had the chance to study how Singye-sa is represented, in the case of Yōngt'ong-sa there is a surprising degree of congruence between the southern Buddhist and the northern Communist [?] representation of the temple's history. Before looking at how the history of Yōngt'ong-sa has been re-invented, we will first sketch the history of the temple as far as it can be

¹ See e.g. the photo published in the *Korea Times* of Nov. 2, 2005.

² In a survey of non-governmental organizations' support to the DPRK until 2004, the Yōngt'ong-sa project ranks among the biggest with an amount of 1.2 billion KRW as of Nov. 4 2003. However, it is dwarfed by the Chogye order's 8.5 billion KRW budget for the reconstruction of Singye-sa. This is perhaps explained by the fact that the Ch'ōnt'ae order provided only selected items, such as roof tiles and pigments for the *tanch'ōng* decoration, whereas the Chogye order seems to have much more responsibility in the Singye-sa project. See Yi Kūm-sun 2004, 15.

reconstructed from written sources; finally we will also look at the reconstruction itself as a physical sign of this historical reinterpretation.

1. History of Yōngt'ong-sa

Although the Ch'ōnt'ae order proposes 1027 as the founding date of Yōngt'ong-sa (see below), its name appears earlier in the sources: as early as 946, the monk Chijong was ordained here, and around the same time the famous Hwaōm monk Kyunyō is known to have frequented this temple (Vermeersch, 387-9). Indeed, it was likely founded by T'aejo in 919; although we cannot be certain about this,³ given its prominence soon after T'aejo's death in 943, this was probably the case. It may even have earlier antecedents: according to the founding legend of Koryō, T'aejo's ancestors originally settled at the foot of Ogwan-san, where Poyuk built a temple called Maha-gap (Kim 2006, 134). T'aejo's father eventually moved to the southern foot of Song'ak, about ten kilometers south. At any rate, from this information we can glean that Yōngt'ong-sa was one of the official ordination temples of the capital region⁴ and that it was a center for the Hwaōm school; its location may also have been significant in the royal origin myth.

However, the temple only starts appearing in the official historiography (i.e., the *Koryōsa*) from the beginning of the eleventh century. This may be due to the fact that historical records had disappeared in the Khitan invasions of 1010-1011, but this may also be due to the higher profile of its abbots: sometime during the later years of King Hyōnjong's reign (1009-1031), Nanwōn, a son of kingmaker Kim Ŭn-bu, became abbot. Hyōnjong owed his life and the survival of his dynasty to Kim Ŭn-bu, of the Ansan Kim, and in recognition took one of Kim's daughters as his consort. From that time onwards until the military period, monastic elites, the royal family, and the aristocratic families were all fundamentally entwined. Not much is known about Nanwōn (999-1066), but towards the end of his life, King Munjong (1043-85) sent his fourth son to Yōngt'ong-sa to study with him. This was of course Ŭich'ōn, who was thereby trained as a Hwaōm monk with one of his great-uncles.⁵ The royal character of the temple was further strengthened when it was also designated a memorial hall for a deceased king. We know for certain that Injong's portrait was enshrined here in 1148 (KRS 17.24a), as well as those of Sejo and T'aejo (KRS 19: 17b) and some argue that it was even used for Munjong's portrait as well (Kim 2006, 136).

Throughout the Koryō period, kings frequented Yōngt'ong-sa, apparently in connection with the ancestor cult (eg. in 1198, third month, king wanted to organize memorial ritual for Injong in Yōngt'ong-sa; KRS 21: 5a). Especially in the eleventh century the temple is frequently mentioned, but much less later: in the 11th month of 1310 (KRS 33: 39b) Myōngjong's portrait was moved here, and an entry for the 5th month of 1371 (KRS 43: 3a) records the last visit of a Koryō king. After the demise of Koryō, the temple continued to be active; many Chosōn literati visited in the 15th century and have left poems of their visits (Kim 2006, 138-9). These poems continued to the 19th century, but in most cases it is not clear whether the site visited by these literati still had an active temple. It was most likely destroyed in the Hideyoshi invasions,⁶ but some buildings remained or were restored, as witnessed by the

³ See Kim 2006, 134.

⁴ Something confirmed by a 1036 edict by King Chōngjong; see KRS 6: 8a.

⁵ According to the *Koryōsa*, King Munjong called Nanwōn to the palace in 1065 to tonsure Ŭich'ōn (KRS 8: 27b); after that, Ŭich'ōn apparently moved to Yōngt'ong-sa. See KSPM 4-4: 118

⁶ See the archeological evidence adduced in *Reitsūjiseki* 2: 143-4, pointing to a destruction during the Hideyoshi invasions.

1671 record by Kim Ch'ang-hyöp (1651-1708), indicating that some monks still lived there. However, a 1676 stele of land donations to the temple suggests "all that remained was the name" (CKS 294). Still, the fact that land was donated and that monks remained suggests the temple was still active, even if no decent structures remained.

The most important figure in its history was of course Ŭich'ön. Despite his early connection with Yöngt'ong-sa and the fact that his stele was erected there after he died, apparently he never became abbot of this temple. The stele at Yöngt'ong-sa mentions that he became abbot of Hüngwang-sa in 1086, and of Kukch'öng-sa in 1097. Apparently he kept both positions till his death in 1101. Since he had already been elevated to the rank of *süngt'ong* in 1069 (KSPM 4: 181), it is possible that he was at the same time appointed to Yöngt'ong-sa, but this remains speculative. Although it was not unusual for royal abbots to control two temples, three major capital temples seems excessive. Then why was the stele erected at a temple where he was not even abbot? As I have discussed elsewhere, Hüngwang-sa and Yöngt'ong-sa temples were very close, with many monks showing combined affiliations. It is possible, however, that Yöngt'ong-sa retained a higher prestige as a seat of Hwaöm learning. Thus the research by Ch'oe Yön-sik has shown that the erection of a stele for Ŭich'ön at Yöngt'ong-sa was very much driven by Hwaöm disciples, who were protective of the Hwaöm identity of their master. As a result, the stele makes scant reference to Ŭich'ön's Ch'önt'ae activities, prompting the erection of a later stele at Sönbong-sa by his Ch'önt'ae disciples. The weak position of Ch'önt'ae at the time is indicated by the fact that Kukch'öng-sa, founded as the main Ch'önt'ae temple in 1097, was never even considered to host his stele and grave. Thus, even though Ŭich'ön is chiefly remembered as a Ch'önt'ae patriarch, it should not be forgotten that he was first and foremost a Hwaöm monk, and never renounced that tradition (Ch'oe 1995).

2. The Ch'önt'ae view

Between 2003 and 2005, the South Korean Ch'önt'ae order contributed about 15 billion KRW to the reconstruction of Yöngt'ong-sa, mainly in the form of materials which were transported to the construction site (Kim 2005). The Ch'önt'ae order was re-established in the 1960s by patriarch Sangwöl (Pak Chun-dong, 1911-1974), and has its headquarters at Kuinsa near Tanyang, North Ch'ungch'öng. Ŭich'ön is revered as the first Korean patriarch of the school, and though the order has no control over the Yöngt'ong-sa temple, it is heralded as a 'holy place' and every year believers travel there to commemorate the reconstruction. In an interview with the monthly Chosön, the monk Muwön, who was in charge of dealings with the north, reveals that the negotiations were fraught with difficulties, and although the hard bargaining paid off in that no funds were misappropriated by the north, it seems clear that the South Korean order had to adapt to a long-standing north Korean plan. Yöngt'ong-sa had probably been singled out for reconstruction for a long time, as thorough excavations were carried out between 1998 and 1999. For these excavations, help was sought from the Japanese Taisho University, who published a report in 2005. One wonders whether, if given the choice, Ch'önt'ae would not have given preference to Kukch'öng-sa – a more logical choice, since it was the headquarters of the Ch'önt'ae order during the Koryö period.⁷

Also striking in the interview is that Muwön claims the temple was founded in 1027. It is not clear what the source is for this; it is a claim repeated in many of the materials put out by the

⁷ Of course the presence of Ŭich'ön's stele at Yöngt'ong-sa is a decisive factor in choosing this site; also, although the site of Kukch'öng-sa is most likely known, I have not yet seen any evidence of identifiable remains.

Ch'önt'ae order, for example, one finds it on the official website of the order,⁸ and also some foreign news media seem to have taken over this interpretation.⁹ However, this date is not exclusively found in Ch'önt'ae material: even the dictionary of Korean temples compiled by Yi Chǒng (Yi 1996) – who appears to be affiliated with the Chogye order – gives 1027 as the founding date. I have not yet been able to trace any article explaining why this date has been taken as the founding date; there is an entry for that year in the *Koryōsa* that says the king gave order to construct Hyeil Chunggwang-sa, which is perhaps connected by some to Yōngt'ong-sa. Another factor that may have played a role is that this date roughly coincides with the rise of Nanwōn as abbot of the temple, as explained above. One article in the *Kūmgang sinmun* gives a different interpretation, ignoring the 1027 date but noting that the temple was known originally as Sungbok-wōn before it was expanded by Wang Kōn in 919 and renamed Yōngt'ong-sa.¹⁰

The Sungbok-wōn appears twice in the *Koryōsa*: in 1124 King Injong, in the second full year of his reign, went to Yōngt'ong-sa and ordered officials to repair [or construct] Sungbok-wōn (KRS 15: 8a). In 1125 he went to Sungbok-wōn again to organize a banquet to mark the completion of the works (KRS 15: 10a), and renamed it Hūngsōng-sa. According to the *Han'guk Pulgyo sach'al sajōn* Sungbok-wōn came about in 918 when Wang Kōn turned the house of his ancestor Poyuk into a temple and called it Sungbok-sa.¹¹ As will be seen below, in the reconstruction Sungbok-wōn is regarded as an integral part of Yōngt'ong-sa. However, I have not yet seen any reliable evidence predating it to 1124, and although the above descriptions of Injong's visits suggest that Sungbok-wōn had been in close proximity to Yōngt'ong-sa, they were not necessarily part of the same complex: in 1152, the *Koryōsa* notes, King Ŭijong first went to Yōngt'ong-sa and then to Hūngsōng-sa (KRS 17: 37a), suggesting again that they were adjacent temples.

This short overview of historical revisionism is necessarily incomplete, since I have not yet been able to find which arguments are mustered for these interpretations. It is of course possible that they rest on a simple error, or that there is sound evidence that I have overlooked. But there does seem to be willful twisting of the facts, although it is not clear what they aim to achieve, especially as far as the 1027 date goes. I have not yet found any evidence that the north uses 1027 as a plausible date, but most North Korean scholars seem to agree that Sungbok-wōn is an integral part of Yōngt'ong-sa, and this is reflected in the reconstruction.

3. Plan of the reconstructed temple

Although a detailed record of the excavation of the temple is available (*Reitsūjiseki*), I have not yet come across any designs or studies on its reconstruction. All I can use is the tourist brochures and reports of visitors, combined with fragmentary reports from North Korean scholars. This suffices to study the broad outline of the reconstruction and compare it with the excavation reports; it also allows us to study how the temple plan was interpreted and how the buildings were interpreted. A more detailed interpretation of the architectural construction falls outside the scope of this paper. A good starting point is the following observation by a

⁸ See http://www.cheontae.org/04_group/ytong/main.htm?hcode=about_yt, accessed August 29.

⁹ E.g. Reuters: See <http://www.reuters.com/news/pictures/slideshow?collectionId=547#a=10>. Accessed Aug. 31, 2008. This photo report was on the third anniversary of the completion of Yōngt'ong-sa, June 8. 2007.

¹⁰ See <http://www.ggbn.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=3221>, dated June 1, 2007. Accessed Sep. 1, 2008.

¹¹ Yi Chǒng gives as his sources the *Koryōsa*, the *Tongmunsōn*, and Kwōn Sangno's *Han'guk sach'al chōnsō*. This information is definitely not in *Koryōsa*, perhaps in *Tongmunsōn*?

North Korean scholar:

Chronologically speaking, Yōngt'ong-sa can be regarded as a construction from the first half of the eleventh century. The temple precinct is formed of the following parts: an entrance compound, the main temple compound, the monks' residence, and the stūpa compound. Through an analysis of the royal acts recorded in historical documents and in the stele for Ŭich'ŏn, the connections with the religious beliefs of the time, and the designated function of several temple compounds compared, [it was concluded that]: the construction surrounded by a covered walkway at the back of the principal temple compound was a temporary palace for use when the king visited (=Sungbok-wŏn); the construction in front of it was a lecture hall for lectures of the Hwaŏm sūtra (=Chunggak-wŏn); and the construction at the back of the auxiliary compound was a portrait shrine where the portraits of royal ancestors were venerated (=Yōngnyŏng-wŏn)...¹²

The following diagram clarifies this structure, in which the numbers correspond to the following buildings:

1. central gate (Chungmun) 2. West Gate (Sŏmun) 3. Bell pavilion 4. scriptorium (kyŏngnu) 5. Pogwang-wŏn 6. Chunggak-wŏn 7. Sungbok-wŏn 8. Stele pavilion 9. East Gate (Tongmun) 10. Pojo-wŏn 11. Yōngnyŏng-wŏn 12. Monks' quarters¹³



In general, the description is accurate, in that one can discern these compounds from the archeological drawings; also they appear in other Koryŏ temples such as Puril-sa or Hyeŭm-wŏn. Notably the temporary palace compound (*haenggung*), used by kings on their frequent visits to temples, the private monastic residences (*wŏn*) and the portrait shrines (*chinjŏn*) are hallmarks of Koryŏ Buddhist complexes. Moreover, the Taishō team discerned three building

¹² Wi 2005, p. 6, quoted in Kim 2006 p. 148. The original text is in a volume of proceedings of a conference that took place at the official re-opening of Yōngt'ong-sa.

¹³ Picture downloaded from <http://www.youngtongsa.co.kr/>, Aug. 31, 2008. Note that in an aerial photo published in another brochure, the stele pavilion was not yet built.

layers, with the second being the most important, corresponding to an expansion which may have taken place around Ŭich'ŏn's time in the 11th century;¹⁴ thus it is realist to speak of an 11th century complex.

However, where this account turns purely speculative is in assigning names to buildings. The Sungbok-wŏn has already been discussed: this is perhaps the only building for which a [flimsy] case can be made, notably on the basis of a similar structure such as found in the south at Hyeŭm-wŏn. But the so-called scripture-hall, Chunggak-wŏn, appears only in the postscript to Ŭich'ŏn's stele (KSPM 4: 129), because the head of this 'wŏn' or hostel took part in the construction of Ŭich'ŏn's mausoleum. On what basis this particular building is designated Chunggak-wŏn, and how its function has been determined, is not clear. Similarly, Yŏngnyŏng-wŏn appears in the same postscript, but again its assignation as a portrait shrine (*chinjŏn*) seems purely arbitrary. It is not even certain whether these 'wŏn' were all located within Yŏngt'ong-sa, since personnel from other temples also took part. Pogwang-wŏn then was likely located at Yŏngt'ong-sa, since the postscript describes how a stone from its garden was used for the turtle base of Ŭich'ŏn's stele (KSPM 4: 130). However, it is very unlikely that the main hall of a temple would be designated as 'wŏn' (hostel). Oddly, the only 'hostel' that is explicitly said to have belonged to Yŏngt'ong-sa, Sŏnso-wŏn, does not appear in the reconstruction. Another compound not discussed here, that of the mausoleum for Ŭich'ŏn, is likely more correct, because the name (Kyŏngsŏn-wŏn) is explicitly given in the postscript.

Much more could be discussed here; but let us just conclude with another example of how the compound was arbitrarily rearranged, i.e. the three stūpas. The temple is unique in having three stūpas, a five-story one flanked by two three-story pagodas. All pictures taken before reconstruction show that all three are aligned; however, after reconstruction the middle one has been placed deeper in the compound so that it stands at the tip of a triangle with the line between the two three-story pagodas forming the base. Why the arrangement has been changed is, again, not clear.

Conclusion

Let me emphasize again that this is very much a preliminary paper, based on very incomplete information, in the hope of preparing the groundwork for a more detailed look at the reconstruction of heritage through North-South cooperation.

The Ch'ŏnt'ae order is proud of its patriotic stance, and hopes that the reconstruction will contribute to the reunification of the country. In a sense this wish is very 'authentic' in so far that during the Koryŏ era too Ch'ŏnt'ae sometimes presented itself to the state as a tool for unification (Vermeersch 2008, 110-11). Indeed, Ŭich'ŏn's project of establishing the Ch'ŏnt'ae order was meant to unite the different Buddhist schools, and this religious unification was likely intended to help social and political unification too.

The North's motives are less clear. Most likely the state's main goal is to rebuild the temple as a tourist attraction. The fact that it has fairly ample remains (stele, flagpole, stūpas), perhaps combined with its isolated location, were factors in choosing this particular temple for restoration. But surely its connection with the incipient Koryŏ dynasty and the Wang

¹⁴ *Reitsūjiseki* 2: 133-4. However, the second period is very hard to pin down as there seems to have been continuous construction going on.

dynasty before it had established itself as such also played a role. It is also striking that scholars from the north seem to have no hesitation in declaring Yōngt'ong-sa “a holy place of Ch'ōnt'ae” (Ri 2005). Perhaps the unifying ideology of Ch'ōnt'ae has been co-opted in the north too for its evident parallels with north-south unification rhetoric. In general, the north looks favorably to the Koryō dynasty as a period when true unification was achieved, and wants to reflect this in its rhetoric on Kaesōng. The fact that this is expressed through religious structures seems to be no obstruction in this; in this respect it is also worth noting that the North Korean Buddhist organization seems much more carefully nurtured and insistent on its genuine Buddhist credentials than I initially assumed.¹⁵

It should be clear, however, that this particular interface was enabled by a common desire to elevate the stature of a putative Ch'ōnt'ae temple and gloss over its Hwaōm status. The focus on Ŭich'ōn alone at the expense of the temple's wider history also brings the sides together in a common focus on the 11th century alone. Contrary to what the title of this paper suggests, I doubt that this can function as a genuine space for North-South cooperation, only for superficial contact. It is basically a North Korean project which happens to coincide with the aims of the South Korean Ch'ōnt'ae order, but will probably neither satisfy nor engage many other parties. For that, the striking temple complex in a stunning setting simply hides too many flaws, some of which have been exposed here.

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¹⁵ Again, this is an area that needs more study, but one cannot simply reject the North Korean monks as mere stage props.

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Abbreviations:

- *CKS*: Chōsen sōtokufu, *Chōsen kinseki sōran*. Seoul: Chungang munhwa ch’ulp’ansa, 1968.
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