

Joseon Kings' Personal Belief in Buddhism and its Political Significance

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1. Introduction

The state ideology of the Joseon(朝鮮) Dynasty (1392-1910) was Confucianism. Yet many Joseon kings who supported Confucian values as a state ideology also followed Buddhism as a personal belief.¹ Their Buddhist beliefs were strongly criticized by Confucian scholar-officials as an undesirable behavior for a leader of a Confucian state. Why did Joseon Kings believe in Buddhism? Was it because of a personal need for religion? I argue that Joseon kings' Buddhist belief was certainly partly due to personal religious need, but it was equally due to realistic political reasons.

In this paper, I am going to explain both Joseon kings' justification and theoretical defense of their personal belief in Buddhism. After that, I will explain the political significance of the kings' Buddhist beliefs. The existing research on Joseon kings' Buddhist beliefs has been focusing too much on the description of the kings' Buddhist behaviors and the Confucian scholar-officials' criticism, and they have failed to notice its political meaning and implication. Another problem is the researchers' failure to recognize the Confucian scholars' negative perception of religions. They regarded the kings' Buddhist belief merely as a political mistake. I do not intend to look at the Buddhist belief of the Confucian state kings from an ideological point of view, but instead try to understand their politics as a statecraft exercised by a king who had ultimate responsibility for the survival and prosperity of the state and as a political actor who was naturally keen on consolidating his power. In doing this, I will try to reveal the pragmatic and realistic minds of Joseon kings revolving around some controversial religious and ideological issues. In particular I am going to focus on the sources of Joseon kings' political authority and its relations with Buddhism.

Until now Confucianism was regarded as the only source of the political authority for Joseon kings. But we cannot ignore the fact that the majority of ordinary people in the Joseon period believed in Buddhism. There were many Buddhist temples and monks. In such circumstance even if the government introduced a sudden change in its policies on religion, it

¹ I do not mean that all the kings of the Joseon dynasty were Buddhists. Some of them, who had private respect for Buddhism, sometimes oppressed Buddhist. Their attitudes to Buddhism were complex and fluid.

would not easily destroy the existing pattern of people's belief. In spite of Confucian scholar-officials' criticism and somewhat oppressive policies of the government on religion, Buddhism continued to prosper in people's daily life.²

I argue that Joseon kings acted practically on the issue of Confucianism and Buddhism for the purpose of consolidating their political authority. If there was any value for political purpose, they even supported Shamanism. When Confucian scholars urged the kings to adopt their plea for building a strong Confucian state, the kings followed them with little resistance. But as a Buddhist, the kings also did as a Buddhist normally did. This paper is about Joseon kings' flexible and realistic approaches to Buddhism.

2. Joseon kings' theoretical defense of Buddhism

1) No theoretical contradiction between Confucian politics and Buddhist beliefs

Is Confucianism a religion? This is a controversial issue.³ I start my research on the premise that Confucianism is not a religion in the proper sense of the term but a social ethic and a political theory. In a famous article, *the Miscellaneous Excuse of Buddhism*(佛氏雜辯), Jeong Do-Jeon(鄭道傳 ?1337-98) explored theoretical differences between Confucianism and Buddhism and subsequently rejected the latter on the basis of its being an other-worldly religion. He criticized that a Buddhist believed in the illusionary ideas of Heaven and Hell that never existed.⁴ From the Confucian perspective, a life does not exist after death. In the same context, the Confucian scholars of later periods, who put Christianity on a par with Buddhism, accused Christian missionaries of propagating an illusionary vision of heavenly salvation.⁵ They did not believe in life after death. They instead enjoined people to do their

² I will not exaggerate the influence of Buddhism on the Joseon dynasty. Buddhism in the Joseon Dynasty was atrophied. Compared with the Koryo dynasty Buddhism, its influence had been weakened. Monks' social positions were downgraded, and they were prohibited from entering the capital city, Seoul. In the Joseon dynasty, Buddhism lost its political, economical, and social influences. However, the important thing is the fact that Buddhism survived, and played its religious role.

³ In the 1910s and 1920s, there were movements of the reform and revival of Confucianism as a religion. Lee Byeong Heon(李炳憲) was a central figure of that campaign. His effort was unsuccessful. 8th December 1995, the Sungkyunkwan Confucian Union(成均館 儒道會) declared the religious roles of Confucianism. After such a declaration, the Sungkyunkwan is not likely to be more prosperous. For the religiosity of Confucianism, see Geum Jang Tae "The Religiosity of Confucianism and the Interchange between Confucianism and Catholicism". *Religion and Culture*, vol.9, 2003.

⁴ Jeong Do-Jeon, *Sam Bong Gip*(三峯集) *the Miscellaneous Excuse of Buddhism*(佛氏雜辯), "on the Buddhist theory of Hell".

⁵ Lee Hang-Ro(1792-1868), *Hwa Seo Gip* (華西集) "on the doctrine of Christian Heaven and Hell"

best on this side of time, such as fulfilling loyalty to the king and the state.

Yet for Buddhists, and for Christians as well in this matter, the goal is to reach an ultimate state of liberation or to acquire the beatific vision of the supreme God. Even in theory, Confucianism did not satisfy the metaphysical need of presumed innate human religiosity as Buddhism and Christianity did. Insisting on the ideological monopoly of Confucianism over Joseon, many fundamentalist Confucian scholars pursued their life without religion. They believed that a life without religion was possible and was even more desirable than one with it. They thought that if people practiced the Confucian concept Li(理), everything would go well including for self-cultivating study, family ethics, and the relationship between kings and subjects.

But there were equally many Confucian scholars who did not share the Confucian perspective of religion. Some scholars saw acute need for religion in people's daily life. But this group failed to prove the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Confucianism and religion. They just kept Buddhist beliefs without paying much attention to possible contradiction between the two.

Confucianism as a political ideology and Buddhism as a religion coexisted without any problem during the Koryo Dynasty(高麗 918-1392). Moreover at the time of the founding of the new Dynasty, Buddhism was the most popular religion. Only a few educated scholars or officer-candidates had studied Confucianism. And some academically enthusiastic Confucian scholars were interested in the newly imported neo-Confucianism. Even though the Joseon Government declared Confucianism as the only state official ideology, most ordinary people kept their Buddhist belief. At the beginning of the Joseon period, Confucian scholar-officials criticized Buddhism as a heresy. But on the other hand they needed Buddhism. During the early years of the Dynasty ritual ceremonies for national events could not be performed without having some Buddhist elements in them. Here Buddhism played a role that Confucianism could not. Confucianism was not ready to take over the role that Buddhism as a religion provided.

Because of this religious role, the value of Buddhism could not be ignored. But the most important thing was that ordinary people naturally needed a religion in daily life. Even some Confucian scholars believed in Buddhism as their predecessor had done before. For them, the theoretical contradiction involved in a Confucian scholar praying to Buddha was not an issue. They did not consider this theoretical contradiction to be a serious problem. When a

Confucian scholar-official advised Taejo(太祖 r.1392-98)⁶ to abandon his Buddhist belief, Taejo retorted as follows:

“What kind of Confucianism have you studied so that you know so little? Even a leading Confucian Scholar in Koyro, Lee Saek(李穡 1328-96), believed in Buddhism.”⁷

For Taejo, himself a king of a Confucian state, believing in Buddhism did not cause tension. He accepted the Confucian criticism of Buddhism, but merely as a political and rhetorical device designed to demolishing the legacy and legitimacy of the Koryo Dynasty and for the justification of the new Dynasty Joseon. Taejo accepted Confucian scholar’s advice. But he appointed a Buddhist monk as his mentor.⁸ Also, he maintained the office of the mentor of the state.⁹ For him, Confucian scholars’ objection to Buddhism could be tolerated insofar as it remained as an academic matter, but their appeal for the abolition of Buddhism in real life or as a policy tool could not be accepted. He himself visited a Buddhist temple to hear his mentor monks’ sermon and let monks hold a celebration party for the construction of five-story pagoda at Yeonboksa(演福寺) temple(*Taejo Sillok*太祖實錄 28/3/2[1393]). Also for the celebration of his birthday, he pardoned prisoners who committed a slight crime and provided food to 1500 monks(*Taejo Sillok* 太祖實錄11/10/2[1393]). For his ancestor’s memorial celebration, he held that events at the Sukwangsa(釋王寺) temple where he dreamed of being a new king of new dynasty(*Taejo Sillok* 太祖實錄19/8/7[1398]). As for Buddhism, Taejo tried to maintain the same policy as before.

Sejong(世宗 r.1418-50)¹⁰ also had a similar view: that Confucianism as a political

⁶ Taejo(太祖: the posthumous temple name of Lee Sung Gye 李成桂) was an interesting case. Even though as the founder of the Joseon Dynasty Taejo had followed Confucian scholar-officials’ advice for adapting Confucianism as the state ideology, he was a sincere Buddhist believer.

⁷ *Taejo sillok*(太祖實錄) 6/12/1(1392). Of course, Lee Saek’s Buddhist faith was well known. But he as a Confucian scholar-official pointed out that Buddhism has heretic beliefs. Sometimes, he commented on the positive sides of Buddhism that Buddhism enlightens people’ soul(Koh 2006, 385-386). He was a Confucian scholar and a Buddhist at the same time. But he had no solid theory about the functional coexistence of Buddhism as a religion and Confucianism as a social ethics and political theory. These kinds of theories have been developed by Buddhist monks.

⁸ Taejo appointed Jacho(自超 無學大師), who was a famous monk and Taejo’s political advisor, as king’s Buddhist mentor(王師). *Taejo sillok*(太祖實錄) 9/10/1(1392)

⁹ Taejo appointed Jogu(祖丘) as a state Mentor(national teacher 國師).*Taejo sillok*(太祖實錄) 8/9/3(1394).

¹⁰ Sejong, who invented the Korean Alphabet Hunmin Jeongeum(訓民正音), was a famous Buddhist. But he also encouraged the import of neo-Confucian books from China, and reprinted them for the academic development of Korean Confucianism. Most of his Confucian scholar-officials respected him as a king who supported Confucianism, but they were very critical of his Buddhist belief.

ideology and Buddhism as a religion can coexist. He had always wondered about this problem. And he asked about the cases of this problem to the Chinese envoy.

“In China, Buddhist rites are liked by all since Emperor Taizu(太祖), especially by emperor Hongxi(洪熙) who held the Water-Land ritual (水陸齋), himself. It has been a long time since Buddhism has reached China. Are there no Confucian scholars (, who criticize Buddhism,) in China?”¹¹

He thought that Confucianism and Buddhism could coexist peacefully since they were supposed to play different roles. Because Confucianism entailed no religious theory, Buddhism could compensate for the deficiency. For this reason Sejong insisted that Confucianism does not clash with Buddhist belief.

2) Buddhism is a tradition

Joseon Kings were very reticent in changing the existing practices and institutions. They cherished them as their own tradition inherited from their predecessors. They thought that changing the institutions would be regarded as a challenge to earlier kings' authority. Also they knew that frequent changes of institutions and policies would result in the weakening of their kingly authority. Mungjong(文宗 r.1450-52) who succeeded a famous Buddhist king Sejong explained his view on Buddhist.

“Even though Buddhism is contrary to the ethics of Confucianism, Buddhist faith of ordinary people has existed for a long time. So I will not change the policy on Buddhism suddenly.”¹²

Often such conservative tendencies led to conflicts between the kings and their ideologically radical Confucian scholar-officials. Active in introducing Confucian fundamental and ideal politics in order to justify his palace revolution(中宗反正), Jungjong (中宗 r.1506-44) was responsive to the demands of the Confucian scholar-officials to punish

¹¹ *Sejong Sillok*(世宗實錄) 12/11/12(1430).

¹² *Munjong sillok*(文宗實錄) 17/4/1(1451).

or remove corrupt conservative officials. But sometimes there was an exception in his accommodation of the demands made by them, as was exemplified in his resistance to the demolition of the Daoist Temple Sogyekseo(昭格署) in the Palace. A high official asked the abolition of Sogyekseo to Jungjong as follows...

“Although Sogyekseo(昭格署) has been established for a long time ago, it is heretic and wasteful. So it should be abolished.” Jungjong(中宗) said. “I agree that the number of officers should be reduced. But Sogyekseo is listed in *Gyeon Guk Dae Jeon*(經國大典 Joseon National Code). The old law and institution of government should not be changed lightly.”¹³

Because of the conservative tendency in regard to legacies and traditions, Joseon kings were also conservative with policies about Buddhism. They accepted the Confucian scholars-officials’ accusations about the moral corruption of Buddhists and the problem of expensive temple construction. The kings agreed that such cases duly required correction. But they did not deny the essential value of Buddhist ideas and practices that it possessed as a religion. For Joseon kings, Buddhism was the very tradition that their ancestors created and hence it should have been preserved at all cost.

3. Joseon kings’ political authority and Buddhism: Buddhism as a source of legitimacy

At the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, Buddhism was treated as the symbol of the Koryo Dynasty. The criticism of Buddhism was intensified by various hidden political motives as well as by the theoretical refutation of religion by Confucianism. Confucian scholar-officials carried out these criticisms. But Joseon’s first king Taejo was not so much enthusiastic in criticizing the Koryo Dynasty and Buddhism. According to Confucian political ethics, he was clearly a subject of the Koryo kings, so he just acted like an ordinary humble figure in this regard. Of course his goal was to take over the kingship of the dynasty, but at least in appearance he tried to obey the sacred Heavenly Ordinance(天命). When he became the founding father of a new dynasty, he tried to coordinate the positions of all political,

¹³ *Jungjong sillok*(中宗實錄) 15/5/6(1511). According to the repeated requests of Confucian scholar officials, Jungjong had abolished Sogyekseo temporarily[*Jungjong Sillok*中宗實錄 3/9/13(1518)]. But he order to restore it[*Jungjong sillok*(中宗實錄) 14/12/17(1522)].

social, and religious groups in Joseon. But Confucian scholars, who represented the highest part of the intellectual force, tried to change the society into an ideal Confucian kingdom. They provided a theory of political authority for the kings of Joseon. In *the Annals of the Joseon Danasy*(朝鮮王朝實錄), the legitimacy of dynastic change is described in Confucian terms and perspective.¹⁴ The key concept was the command of the sacred Heavenly Ordinance(天命). For Confucianism this concept means the support of ordinary people for the new king. But if we leave too much weight on the Confucian terms and perspectives in the *Annals of the Joseon dynasty*, it is not easy to discover the ideological diversity of the politics of the Joseon dynasty. The kings of Joseon dynasty and their supporters tried to justify the dynastic change and the new political authority of Joseon kingship in many ways.¹⁵ We can find other sources in addition to Confucianism in the record of the first day[lunar calendar 17th July1392) of *Taejo Sillok*(太祖實錄). There are mysterious stories and teaching of Dochamseol(圖讖說) that predicted Lee Sung Gye(Taejo) will be king.¹⁶

Until now there has been relatively a lot of research on the theories of Confucianism in justification of Joseon kingship. But the fact that Joseon kings have used Buddhism politically did not get much attention. There were the preconceptions of Confucian criticism to Buddhism and Buddhism as the state-sponsored religion of Koryo dynasty, so Buddhism was considered as an unnecessary element in the justification of Confucian state Joseon king's political authority. Here we need to consider Buddhism as an important element constituting Joseon kings' political authority. However, I could not find any comments describing Joseon kings as wheel-turning sage kings(轉輪聖王) or Maitreya(彌勒), for the legitimacy of political power of Joseon king in *the Annals of the Joseon dynasty*. The wheel-turning sage king is the symbol of the Buddhist politics of virtue and law. The concept of wheel-turning sage king' rule by righteousness rather than by force is very useful for the legitimacy of the political power. Maitreya is regarded as a kind of future savior, so an

¹⁴ *Taejo sillok*(太祖實錄) 17/7/1(1392).

¹⁵ Confucian scholars, who involved in the dynastic revolutionary, more were practical and realistic than Confucian scholars who were resistant to the new dynasty Joseon.

¹⁶ Such cases are as follow. ① “A sacred man(神人) appeared in Lee Sung Gye's dream. He gave Lee Sung Gye a gold scale(金尺) and said. With this, you rule the country right.” ② “A prophecy book(書雲觀 所藏 秘記) that Lee Seong Gye(Taejo) will be king was found.” ③ “As Lee Sung Gye became the king, a dead tree was regenerated. People thought this was the sign of the rise of new dynasty(開國之兆).” ④ “A fortune teller(相命師) predicted that Lee Sung Gye will be a future king.”

emerging new leader tends to claim that he is a Maitreya. But these kinds of positive expression to justify political authority or political changes in Buddhist terms were not used in Joseon dynasty. Anyway, the fact that Confucian political theory constituted the important rationale for the political authority of Joseon king was evident. At the same time, simple but convincing to ordinary people, Buddhist tales were created and circulated. Let's look at such cases:

(1) A Buddhist monk predicted that Taejo would be a king.

Another mysterious story that Lee Sung Gye(Taejo) will be the first king of the new dynasty is recorded in *Taejo Sillok*(太祖實錄).

“Taejo had a dream while sleeping. That dream was the sign of being a new king. He asked a monk Muhak(無學 1327-1405), who had been trained in a near crypt, the meaning of his dream. After becoming king of the new dynasty Joseon, Taejo built a temple and named that crypt as Sukwangsa(釋王寺) there. He planted a pine tree and a pear tree there. Sukjong(肅宗 r.1674-1720) and Yeongjo(英祖 r.1724-76) set a stone monument written by themselves. Jeonjo(正祖 r.1776-1800)¹⁷ also set a stone monument again and engraved his letters on the monument.”¹⁸

“Jeongjo has mentioned that Sukwangsa has been the sacred place where the Joseon dynasty has started and so it is more precious than any other place.”¹⁹

Joseon kings repeatedly cited the sentence on the stone monument in the Sukwangsa temple that “Taejo will be the king of new dynasty”(Yeongjo Sillok 英祖實錄 17/4/34[1758]). And they emphasized the preservation of such record and the temple as historical sites.

¹⁷ In late Joseon Dynasty, Jeongjo(正祖) who had firm conviction in a civilized world by Confucianism and Confucian politics prided himself as a Confucian scholar-king. But interestingly, sometimes he took a favorable policy to Buddhism. He built a Buddhist temple to commemorate his unfortunately deceased father.

¹⁸ *Jeonjo sillok*(正祖實錄) 17/4/15(1791).

¹⁹ *Jeonjo sillok*(正祖實錄) 6/5/15(1791).

(2) Taejo's 100 days of prayer and being a king of the new dynasty of Joseon

At Namhae-Gun Gyeongsangnam-Do(南海 慶南 Southern coast area of Korea), there are legends and sites where Taejo became king after 100 days of prayer and with the help of Buddha.

“The high virtue priest Wonhyo(元曉 671-686) built Bogwangsa(Bogwang temple) and named the mountain Bogwangsan(普光山 Bogwang Mountain). Then Lee Sung Gye(Taejo), who after praying 100 days in the mountains for success in establishing a new dynasty, changed its name to Geumsan(錦山 Geum Mountain). After succeeding he had promised to cover in silk. ...Bori-am(one of the three Buddhist sacred grounds for praying) on the summit of Geum Mountain which is one of the three most revered places in Korea...”²⁰

Since Buddhism was popular largely as a religion whereas people studied and practiced Confucianism as a political theory, we can say that only a small number of educated people had a sound knowledge of Confucianism and its ethics. The majority of the population adopted Buddhism as a religion. Even some Confucian scholars believed in Buddhism as the common people did. They just repeated what the ancestors had done. Also at that time the influence of Neo-Confucianism was creeping in the society of the Confucian scholars. But many scholars who were working in the vein of Neo-Confucianism maintained the same standpoint towards Buddhism.

Thinking of this complex ideological landscape, Joseon kings tried to compromise between all the divergent religious and academic tendencies. For more radical Confucian intellectuals, the kings followed their advice for the matter of justifying the building of a new dynasty and the legitimacy of Confucian kings' political authority. On the other hand, in order to secure support from Buddhists, the kings acted like a Buddhist. They had no urgent need to reject the existing religious force in the society. In politics, they respected the Confucian scholars who urged the construction of a strong bureaucratic government based on Confucian political values. In the religious realm, the kings were considerate to Buddhists. Towards the Confucian scholars, they acted as a Confucian king, and towards Buddhists they acted as a Buddhist king.

²⁰ <http://WWW.namhae.go.kr>. Culture/tourism.

The kings tried to balance between conflicting interests in order to strengthen their political authority maximally. In the mind of Confucian scholars, the crucial evidence of a Confucian king was to be revealed by whether he has strong will to build a Confucian bureaucracy. But for Buddhists, a true sign of a Buddhist king was his personal Buddhist belief, attendance to Buddhist ceremonies, and support for the publication of Buddhist scriptures.²¹ The Confucian scholars were jealous of the kings' cordial attention to Buddhists. But the kings maintained the policy of standing in the middle, or more apt to say, standing nowhere, as a skillful political coordinator.

4. Kings' personal Buddhist belief and the efficiency of policy: a political use of Buddhism

I think that the kings' Buddhist belief had positive effect on political stability in the newly established Dynasty. If the kings had been actively engaged in oppressing Buddhism as a heretic belief, there would have been strong resistance from Buddhists. The kings wished to minimize political resistance at any cost. They just wanted a successful transition of kingship from the Koryo Dynasty to their own lineage. But the Confucian scholar-officials wanted changes in all aspects of the society- political, social, and ideological. They tried to build an ideal kingdom. Clearly there was difference between the king who was a state leader and a Confucian scholar-official who was a fundamental idealist. The kings' Buddhist belief, kept in low profile, helped to forge a strong alliance with Buddhists who constantly worried about the radical changes brought by the government led by Confucian scholar-officials.

Also, we need to consider the intellectual diversity among Confucian scholars.²² During the transitional period, only half of the Confucian scholars joined the force which built the new dynasty and attacked Buddhism as the main villain for political, economical, and social corruption in the previous era. The Confucian scholars who joined the new dynasty tried to legitimize the dynastic change. They exploited Confucianism as a good ideological weapon for attacking the corruption of the Koryo Dynasty which they attributed to excessive spending by the Buddhists and political instability brought by exploitive tax policies.

²¹ In order to pray for the longevity of king and princes, the royal family supported the publication of a lot of Buddhist Scriptures. See Nam Hee Suk, "the Buddhist beliefs of royal family and the publication of Buddhist Scriptures in late Joseon dynasty", *Guksagwan Nonchong*(國史館論叢), vol.99.p.78.

²² Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty*, p. 240: "There is evidence to suggest that the intellectual landscape of the Koryo-Chosŏn transition, too, was quite complex. The majority of the early Chosŏn officials, as Deuchler has pointed out, were not committed to Ch'eng-Chuo Learning vision of society and politics"

At the end of the Koryo Dynasty, Confucian scholars were divided into two groups. Jeong Mong Ju(鄭夢周 1337-92), a towering figure in the late Koryo period, was against the political change. Ironically, his resistance rested upon one of the Confucian teachings that a good Confucian subject should be loyal to the existing kingship. The conservative group, led by Jeong Mong Ju, criticized the Confucian officials who supported the coup d'état from the standpoint of Confucian ethics. They accused the latter group of having seriously violated the Confucian ethics on the desirable relationship between a king and a subject. Yet, on the other hand, Confucianism also offered itself as an ideological platform in which the Joseon dynasty was justified. This means that even Confucian scholars who participated in the building of the new dynasty were not motivated purely by ideological motives. For them, Confucianism was an ideology, but also a means to justify their actions.

In this fluid situation, the kings had no need to create enemies by pursuing rigid ideologically-oriented policies. For Confucian scholars, the kings followed their idealist Confucian vision and let them freely create a new Confucian government as it was envisaged in *Zulie*(周禮). With Buddhists, the king shared his Buddhist belief, and let them enjoy a sense of political security and perceived emotional unity with him. Although a number of Confucian scholar-officials criticized the king's dubious attitude, he knew that he needed to balance the conflicting interests of all parties to secure political stability in the realm and boost his political authority.

Theoretically a Buddhism-believing Confucian scholar is a self-contradictory term. Yet many Confucian scholars believed in Buddhism, and they were not conscious of this contradiction. The kings were in a similar situation. They did not explain why they held their Buddhist belief. Nor did they respond actively to the criticisms raised by radical Confucian scholars. In short, they took a policy of no comment towards the scholars. Clearly the kings thought that Confucian scholars who had firm conviction in Confucianism would not be persuaded by rational explanation about the values of Buddhist ideas and practices. There could be no possibility of compromise with the Confucian scholars. So the kings preferred the policy of no response and no comment, while they kept their Buddhist belief and practice.

Joseon kings, as political coordinators between competing ideological groups, tried to reflect all ideological and religious elements in society. These attempts were aimed at strengthening their political authority. This approach not only helped to establish the legitimacy of his regime, as we have seen so far, but enhanced the efficiency of their government. With amicable attitudes to Buddhists, Joseon kings facilitated the cooperation of

the Buddhist leaders with the government. For example, Sōsan(休靜 西山大師 1520-1604) who was an eminent monk and a commander general of the Buddhist force during Japanese warlord Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592, encouraged Buddhist monks to understand “not only their own tradition but also its intersections with the dominant ideology of their time, Confucianism”(Buswell 1999, 147). He provided the theoretical justification for the Buddhist's cooperation to government. So a number of Buddhist monks organized monk-armies to wage guerrilla wars against the Japanese soldiers during the Imjin(壬辰) War. They constructed mountain castles to defend militarily important areas. They also manufactured and supplied much material to the government. We should also think about whether that kings' amicable policy towards Buddhists also helped to prevent possible resistance to government from this sector. While denying scholar officials request to oppress Buddhist, Mungjong(文宗) has explained the reason of the moderate response to Buddhism:

“If we performed the expulsion of monks by a sudden force, this will cause a lot of disturbance.”²³

Kings were generous to monks. Whenever Confucian officials asked about the oppression policy towards monks, the king always took a reserved stance. This is a sentence expressing the king's position. “You are right, but...”²⁴ The king did not oppose the Confucian scholar officials' claims, but he did not accept all their demands. The king neither accepted nor rejected their demands. Rather than thinking in terms of Confucianism, the king tried to make a decision favorable to him and state. And always, the king was trying to protect the monks. So, sometimes kings' personal Buddhist beliefs and the amicable relationship with them helped to enhance the efficiency of government during the Joseon period.

Joseon kings took a very practical approach to statecraft. They handled the problem of Buddhism with great political prowess. Buddhist monks were also their own subjects who needed as much care and protection as all other non-Buddhist subjects did in their kingdom. But Confucian scholars approached the same issue ideologically. In their view, Buddhist

²³ *Munjongsillok*(文宗實錄) 17/4/1(1451). During the Joseon dynasty, civil rebellion broke out several times, as like Hong Gyeong-Rea rebellion(洪景來 亂 1811-12), Civil Uprising of Jinju(晉州民亂 1862). But rebellions by Buddhist monk almost never happened. Once that happened, but it was a small scale event. In 1688 a monk Yeohwan(呂還) and his followers, saying the Maitreya(彌勒) world was coming, organized a group rebellion. *Sukjong Sillok*(肅宗實錄) 1/8/14(1688).

²⁴ *Sejong sillok*(世宗實錄) 3/4/24(1442). “汝等之言雖是...然”

monks were merely useless beings who succumbed to a heretic belief. Such Confucian prejudice to Buddhism was persistent among Confucian scholar-officials. Even during the Japanese invasion, the Confucian scholar-officials were not active in the mobilization of voluntary armies consisting of Buddhist monks. But Seonjo(宣祖 r.1567-1608) acknowledged the voluntary Buddhist armies as a proper national army. The Buddhist monks rushed to help the government in the time of crisis, since the kings previously had adopted a policy of involvement. On the part of the Buddhists, their support during the war was an attempt to save the Confucian Joseon.

I think that the leading Buddhist monks were aware that the kings' personally received Buddhism with great enthusiasm, and so that the kings were not their enemy. In giving support to the government the Buddhists expected a favorable policy towards Buddhism as a quid pro quo, or at least less oppressive policies towards it. Indeed, through various supportive actions, the Buddhist monks provided Joseon kings with the rationale for endorsing favorable policies to the religion. The kings were keenly aware of the political utility of Buddhism as well as its value as a personal religion.

At the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, there were ideological conflicts between Buddhist kings and Confucian scholar-officials. The Buddhist beliefs of Taejo(太祖), Sejong(世宗), and Sejo(世祖) were the typical cases. But those conflicts were not serious enough to bring any damage to their kingly authority. Also as Buddhism was losing its political, economic, and social influence at the inauguration of the new government, the Confucian scholar-officials became more generous to Buddhism. Under tacit acknowledgement of their role, Buddhism kept playing its religious role quietly.

In addition there were attempts to instate Buddhist officials in the central government. The queen-mother Mungjeong(文定王后 1501-65), the widow of Jungjong(中宗) and a guardian of the juvenile king Myeongjong(明宗 r.1545-67), had strong Buddhist belief. She supported the policy of instituting the Buddhist official system.²⁵ However, due to her death, the planned policy was ended.²⁶ One might argue that such a pro-Buddhist policy was one isolated event which would not have received any consideration without the personal involvement of a devout Buddhist the queen-mother Munjeong. However this incident could

²⁵ Buswell, "Buddhism Under Confucian Domination," *Culture and the State in late Chosŏn Korea*, p.140 : "In 1552 the monastic examinations were reinstated, for what turned out to be the last time during the Chosŏn(朝鮮) dynasty, as a means of recruiting new monks in to the order."

²⁶ See Kim Sang Hyun, "Buddhist Restoration Policies of the Queen Mungjeon", *The Journal of Korean Association for Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 56.

be interpreted as the continual influence of Buddhism throughout the Joseon period.

The intended change of policy on Buddhism as it is seen typically in this incident was in fact a significant concession on the part of Confucian scholar-officials. Even though they still denied the basic value of Buddhism, they now to a certain degree acknowledged contribution made by Buddhists to the general welfare of the kingdom and its value as a religion. After Munjeong Princess, the kings' Buddhist belief no longer became a political issue. A king also needed solace and comfort for their weary souls. As a result the kings and the royal family freely supported the publication of Buddhist scriptures hoping that it would bring good fortune and long life.

5. Conclusion

Joseon kings were loyal to the ideals of Confucian politics and yet were Buddhist. The coexistence of the two realms was unacceptable to orthodox Confucian scholars who believed in the ideological supremacy of Confucianism. Naturally there arose conflict between the kings' practical policy and Confucian scholars' ideological fundamentalism. But any aggravation of conflict was avoided by the kings' moderate or non-response policy towards Confucian scholar's critical stance. Meanwhile Joseon kings were able to maintain their Buddhist belief.

To sum up my point, Joseon kings tried to be a Confucian king for Confucian scholars, and a Buddhist king for Buddhists. The kings were most sensitive practitioners of *real politik*. They put the priority on how to consolidate political power and secure the survival of the state. To achieve this goal, they tried to find a compromise between the conflicting interests of various sectors of the society. The kings acted as a coordinator for competing political and religious groups in Joseon society. They approached Confucianism instrumentally. They stood above the moral framework of Confucian values and beliefs, while using it as a political theory to boost their political authority and run the state effectively. Also, their Buddhist beliefs were a political representation of the Buddhist segment of the society as well as a genuine expression of personal religious sentiment. Such a pragmatic approach to Buddhism led Buddhists to following government policies without strong resistance and all the more respecting the kingly authority.

I am not arguing that Buddhism or the personal Buddhist belief of the kings played as much an important role as Confucianism did in the formation of the political authority of

Joseon kings. What I am arguing is that their Buddhist belief was instrumental to consolidating their political authority. The kings undoubtedly owe much of their political realism and their role as an ideological coordinator to the Confucian scholar-officials theory of good politics, but it is also certain that they included Buddhism as an important player in this game as much as they held it as a path to personal salvation.

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