

Ch'önt'ae after Ŭich'ön: The Formative Period of the Korean Ch'önt'ae Order*

Sem Vermeersch

Observing the English-language literature on Ch'önt'ae, one might get the impression that Ch'önt'ae begins and ends with Ŭich'ön (1055–1101). Most scholars agree Ŭich'ön was the founder of the Ch'önt'ae school, the Korean counterpart of Tiantai, but what happened after him? The next figure about whom we have fairly substantial information is Yose (1163–1245), leaving a gap of nearly eighty years; and when Yose comes into his own, it is by founding the White Lotus society at Mandök-sa in 1216, reflecting a type of devotional practice not traditionally associated with Ŭich'ön. This shift is usually explained in Korean scholarship by referring to the historical background. Yose lived during a period of military rule (1170–1256) when many monks seem to have foregone the traditional bureaucratic institutions of Buddhism and founded their own faith-based societies; for example, Chinul's founding of Chöngnye-sa in 1190 and Susön-sa (later Songgwang-sa) in 1200. In what sense is Yose's movement a departure from Ŭich'ön? Should we take Ŭich'ön's writings as the be-all and end-all of Korean Ch'önt'ae? I argue that Ŭich'ön failed to put in place any clear structure, ideology, or training course for the school he founded, and hence disciples selected through the first Ch'önt'ae examination of 1101 had to fend for themselves. Riven by conflict, they likely failed to develop a clear identity, perhaps because they were mostly originally trained in other schools. Ŭich'ön seems to have perceived the need to implement Pure Land societies as an essential component of the Tiantai tradition as it had formed in Song China, but it was only Yose who finally managed to integrate all the various practices of the Tiantai tradition into the Ch'önt'ae school.

Keywords: Tiantai, Ch'önt'ae, Ŭich'ön (1055–1101), Yose (1163–1245), religious schools, Pure Land Buddhism

*This paper was first presented at the conference “From Tiantai to Hiei: Transborder and Transcultural Spread of Tiantai/Cheontae/Tendai Buddhism and its Impact on East Asian Societies,” organized by the Center for Buddhist Studies at Peking University on December 7 & 8, 2019. I am grateful to the organizers for giving me the opportunity to present the first draft of this paper. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and feedback.

Sem Vermeersch (semver@snu.ac.kr) is an associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Seoul National University.