

State Suppression of Buddhism and Royal Patronage of the Ritual of Water and Land in the Early Chosŏn Dynasty

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The Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land was at the center of controversy in fifteenth-century Chosŏn Korea because it received state sponsorship and royal patronage at a time when the state was attempting to reduce the institutional power of Buddhism. I argue that the seemingly inconsistent acts of the early Chosŏn kings derived from their view that the state should uphold the ritual traditions of diverse religions regardless of the validity of their doctrinal claims. As the state gradually institutionalized a system of governance based on Confucianism in the mid-fifteenth century, Confucian officials urged the kings to put an end to the sponsorship of the ritual by the state and the royal family. In the second half of the fifteenth century, Confucian scholar-officials put forth the idea that Confucianism could not flourish unless the state banned the practices of other religions. This exclusivist attitude represented a break with the existing tradition in Korea that had been characterized by diversity in terms of religion and customs. The end of state sponsorship of the Ritual of Water and Land in the early sixteenth century signaled the ascension to dominance of Confucian values in Chosŏn Korea.

Keywords: Chosŏn dynasty, Buddhism, Confucianism, Ritual, State-Religion relations

When the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) adopted Confucianism as the guiding philosophy for state governance, Buddhism became a foil within Confucian discourse. In the eyes of pro-Confucian officials, Buddhism was closely linked to the decadent culture of the Koryŏ dynasty, which had collapsed partly as a result of that religion's effect on the political and economic sphere.¹ Kings of

1. For the social and economic factors behind the emergence of these new elites and the Neo-

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the Chosŏn dynasty implemented harsh measures in order to diminish the institutional power of Buddhism as they attempted to establish Confucianism in Korea. Buddhism, however, continued to loom large in the public ritual life of the state in early Chosŏn. In particular, the performance of the Buddhist death ritual of Water and Land or *suryuk chae* 水陸齋 for deceased kings persisted as a tradition of the royal family of the early Chosŏn dynasty. At its heart, the ritual promised that offerings would assist the deceased in being reborn in a better life or attaining *nirvāṇa*, and would benefit the offerant as well. Its doctrinal appeal was felt widely, as people from a range of social strata, including members of the royal family, courtiers, commoners, and even some Confucian officials practiced the ritual. Doctrinaire Confucian officials thus kept up their criticism of this ritual practice. They would even attempt to influence a newly installed king before the rituals for his predecessor had concluded. The Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land was thus at the center of controversy in fifteenth-century Chosŏn Korea.

The Chosŏn kings' seemingly contradictory stance toward Buddhism, as the kings suppressed that religion's institutions while performing its death rituals, not only frustrated contemporary Confucian critics of Buddhism, but has also proved puzzling to modern scholars. Modern studies on the Chosŏn state's policies with regard to Buddhism have classified the kings' involvement in Buddhist affairs into three categories: anti-Buddhist, Buddhist, and Buddhist-sympathizer.² Some contemporary scholars have focused on the inconsistency between public and private religious practice on the part of early Chosŏn kings (and some Confucian officials as well) in the context of the state's policies on

Confucianism they espoused during the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn dynasty, see Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1992); An Hyoryong, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi sangje ūi pŏnch'ŏn kwa kŭ sahoejŏk ūimi" [Transformations in funeral rituals in the early Chosŏn and their social implications] (Ph.D. diss., Korea University, 1989), 49-64. Concerning the socioeconomic problems caused by Buddhist institutions, see Han U-gŭn, "Policies toward Buddhism in Late Koryŏ and Early Chosŏn," ed. Lewis R Lancaster and C.S. [Chai-shin] Yu, *Buddhism in the Early Chosŏn: Suppression and Transformation* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1996).

2. For example, Kim Hŭijun, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi suryuk chae ūi sŏrhaeng" [Performances of the Ritual of Water and Land in the early Chosŏn dynasty], *Hosŏ sabak* 30 (2001), 60; Yi Kyŏmyŏl, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi naebultang, kisin chae hyŏkp'a nonŭi wa kŭ ch'ui" [Discussions on the abolishment of the *naebultang* and the *kisin chae* in the early Chosŏn], in *Kugok Hwang Chongdong kyosu chŏngnyŏn kinyŏm sabak nonch'ong*, ed. The *Kugok Hwang Chongdong kyosu chŏngnyŏn kinyŏm sabak nonch'ong* publishing committee (Taegu, Korea: Chŏngwan munye-sa, 1994), 2-6; Kim Jongmyung, "King Sejong's Buddhist Faith and the Invention of the Korean Alphabet: A Historical Perspective," *Korea Journal* 47, no. 3 (2007), 134-159.

Buddhism.³ It is also seen as evidence of a cultural lag during the time of transition from Buddhism to Confucianism.⁴

In my view, the underlying problem with the above-mentioned approaches derives from the imposition of a particular perspective, namely religious exclusivism. That concept was foreign to Korean religious culture until a group of Korean Neo-Confucian scholars focused on the exclusivist elements of Neo-Confucianism as the key factor for both the definition of the tradition and the establishment of social order since the late Koryŏ period.⁵ It is noteworthy that this exclusivism did not prevail in China where religious pluralism endured both in the private and the public realm. This article will inquire into when and how Neo-Confucian exclusivism came to dominate Chosŏn state policy on religion by tracing the history of the Ritual of Water and Land. Over the course of the fifteenth century, the Chosŏn dynasty gradually moved toward a policy of ending royal patronage and institutional sponsorship of that ritual. This shift occurred in tandem with the process of the state's active intervention in various non-Confucian rituals. This article will investigate when and how the shift towards the abolition of the Ritual of Water and Land took place, and what triggered it. In particular, it will pay attention to how the perception of the relation between religion and state influenced the kings' decision to retain or abolish the ritual. This study will open a window into the process of installing Neo-Confucianism as a civil religion during the fifteenth century, which went beyond making its precepts the governing principles for the regulation of ethics, customs, and ritual affairs of the state.

3. Yi Kyŏmyŏl, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi naebultang," 3, 10; Yi Yŏnghwa, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi Pulgyo ūrye ūi sŏngkyŏk," [Characteristics of Buddhist rituals in the early Chosŏn], *Ch'ŏnggye sabak* 10 (1993), 15-18; Ch'oe Chaebok, "Chosŏn ch'ogi kuksang esŏ ūi 49-jae sŏrhaeng kwa pyŏnhwa" [Performances of the Seven Seventh Retreats for the royals and their transformations in the early Chosŏn], *Chosŏn sidaesa hakpo* 19 (2001), 7.

4. Ch'oe Chaebok, "Chosŏn ch'ogi kuksang," 6.

5. Along these lines, John Goulde suggests that three kinds of anti-Buddhist polemics were presented concurrently during the late Koryŏ and the early Chosŏn eras: reformation, limitation (or disestablishment), and abolition of Buddhism. Robert Buswell similarly differentiates between the types of attacks on Buddhism and their intensity. Han U-gŭn argues that the so-called "anti-Buddhist policies" of early Chosŏn were mainly triggered by the state's need to reform human and financial resources rather than by doctrinal charges based on Confucianism. John Isaac Goulde, "Anti-Buddhist Polemic in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Korea: The Emergence of Confucian Exclusivism" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1985), 174-236; Robert E. Buswell Jr., "Buddhism under Confucian Domination: The Synthetic Vision of Sŏsan Hyujŏng," in *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, eds. JaHyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 135-137; Han U-gŭn, "Policies toward Buddhism."

Tracing the Fluid History of the Ritual of Water and Land

The Ritual of Water and Land was first performed in China, and when it was transmitted to Korea it underwent some modifications. The genesis of the ritual in the Chinese context is a matter of heated debate among contemporary scholars due to the lack of definite textual references. In China, the ritual appears to have become popular during the eleventh century, though questions remain because of the difficulty scholars have encountered in trying to pinpoint the origin and definition of the term, *shuilu zhai* (*suryuk chae* in Korean). Modern Korean scholars have generally been content to define this as “a Buddhist ritual for consoling the grievance of wandering ghosts.”⁶ They also accepted the traditional Buddhist attribution of the ritual’s founding to Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty 梁武帝 in the year 505, as recorded in the *Liturgical Writings on Water and Land* (*Shuilu yiwen* 水陸儀文) written by Yang E 楊鏐 (fl. 10th-11th cent.).⁷ However, there is no mention of the Ritual of Water and Land in the *History of the Liang State* (*Liangshu* 梁書), though it is recorded that the Emperor Wu held the Great Assembly of Non-Discrimination or *Wuzhe dahui* (無遮大會) in 505.⁸ It was not until the late ninth century that scattered textual instances of the term *shuilu zhai* began to appear, although it could have been performed earlier.

The origin of the name, the Ritual of Water and Land, was perplexing to people of the time. Zunshi 遵式 (964-1032), a leading figure in the campaign for Buddhist orthopraxis, felt compelled to write an essay, “Correcting the Name for the Ritual of Dispensation of Food” (*Shishi zhengming* 施食正名), in which he offered his opinion on the matter:

6. The Japanese scholar Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮 argues that the ritual grew out of the Ritual of Dissipation of Food (*shishi fa* 施食法). Makita Tairyō, “Suiroku’e shōkō” [On the Ritual of Water and Land], *Tōhō shūkyō* 12 (1957), 14-33. Contemporary Korean scholars have in general accepted his view on the origin of the ritual: An Hyoryong, “Chosŏn chŏn’gi sangje ūi pyŏnch’ŏn,” 36; Kim Hūijun, “Chosŏn chŏn’gi suryuk chae,” 28; Yi Yŏnghwa, “Chosŏn chŏn’gi Pulgyo ūrye ūi sŏngkyŏk,” 27; Sim Hyosŏp, “Chosŏn chŏn’gi suryuk chae ūi sŏrhaeng kwa ūrye” [Performances of the Ritual of Water and Land in the early Chosŏn], *Tongguk sahak* 40 (2004), 220-221.

7. Gao Cheng (fl. 1078-1085), *Shiwu jiyuan* (the Origins of Things), Wenyan ge siku *quanshu*, *zibu*, leishu lei, vol. 920, 8: 38. The *General Catalog of the Complete Books in the four parts of the Imperial Library* (*Siku quanshu zongmu* 四庫全書總目) contends that the ritual was first performed at Jinshan in the year 505 of the Liang dynasty.

8. Hong Jinchun claims that the *shuilu zhai* is a version of the *wuzhe hui* that was performed during the Liang dynasty. The information we have, however, does not support Hong’s conclusion. Hong Jinchun, *Shuilu fahui yigui* 水陸法會儀軌 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2006), 33.

These days in many temples in the regions of Wuyue 吳越, there are isolated cloisters with the name-board on which the word “water and land” is inscribed. They practice the Ritual of Water and Land so that numerous immortals [will] come to the river [in order to] eat [food] and ghosts [will come] to the clean land. [Zunshi’s comment:] Contemporaries say that the dispensation of food through the *shuilu* ritual refers to the feeding of orphaned ghosts who do not have descendents to care for them. *Their argument [however] is groundless and has nothing to do with the Buddhist teachings* [italics are mine].⁹

Zunshi did not, however, offer any evidence for his dismissal of the claim concerning the purpose of the ritual. Because other texts specified that the Ritual of Dispensation of Food (*shishi fa* 施食法) was the ritual intended as a feast for the hungry ghosts (and thus for their salvation as well as that of the offerant), it may have been that Zunshi believed the name, the Ritual of Water and Land, was here being applied incorrectly. Ironically, his mention of the Ritual of Water and Land as being a possible misnomer led to it being widely accepted as a definition of *shuilu*, because the text was the first of the canonical scriptures to refer to the term.

The exact ritual procedure practiced is not known because only a small portion of the *Shuilu yuwen*, collected in the *Zoku zōkyō* 續藏經, has come down to us. Some information is contained in the writings of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), a celebrated literary figure who was a devout Buddhist. He wrote about both the Ritual of Water and Land and the Ritual of Dispensation of Food, allowing us to differentiate between the two.¹⁰ In his “Essay on the Ritual of Dispensation of Food to Hungry Ghosts” (*shi e’gui shi wen* 施餓鬼食文), he lays out the ritual procedure.¹¹ It is indicated that lay people performed the ritual at home on a daily basis as a way of accumulating merit (*gongde* 功德) and that deceased family members were not necessarily a concern. On the other hand, in the “Odes of the Buddhist Images of the Ritual of Water and Land” (*Shuilu faxiang zhan* 水陸法像贊) Su Shi specifies both the names of the temple where the ritual for his deceased wife was held and of the priest who

9. Zunshi, “*Shishi zhengming*,” in *Shishi tonglan*, ed. Zongxiao, compiled in *Zoku zōkyō* vol. 101 (Taipei: Xinfeng chuban gongsi), 1968-1970, 214a. Concerning Zunshi and his perspective on the Ritual of Dispensation of Food, see Daniel B. Stevenson, “Protocols of Power: Tz’u-yün Tsun-shih (964-1032) and T’ien-t’ai Lay Buddhist Ritual in the Sung,” in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999).

10. Concerning Su Shi’s life and the influence of Buddhism on his literature, see Beata Grant, *Mount Lu Revisited: Buddhism in the Life and Writings of Su Shih* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994).

11. Su Shi offers similar descriptions in the “*Shishi wen*,” *Shishi tonglan*, *Zoku zōkyō* vol. 101, 215a.

officiated.¹²

His description provides us with crucial information as to the structure of the altar used in the ritual during that time. The altar had two levels, in which sixteen different kinds of painted images were installed, presumably in the form of painting scrolls. In the upper level, there were eight stations for those who were devoted to the Three Jewels: Buddha, dharma, and sangha. In the lower level, there were another eight stations for those who were inside the circle of samsara, such as the underworld officers, human beings, and hungry ghosts. This arrangement of the altar and images is identical to the description given in the portion of the *Shuilu yuwen* written by Yang E that has survived.¹³ In it the ritual procedure is outlined briefly:

For the first three days of the ritual period, place pure water in front of the Buddhist painting scrolls. At night, recite the spells, imagining that the water becomes sweet as a result. The offerings of water, wine, and food make the Three Treasures. It is the Buddhist Master who comes to the altar to announce the writings in the scripture referring to the affairs in Buddhism.¹⁴

The texts by Su Shi and Yang E reveal the core elements of the ritual that differentiated it from the Ritual of Dispensation of Food. The Ritual of Water and Land was presided over by monks and made use of an altar on which the images of the prescribed figures were installed, whereas the other ritual did not have elaborate image stations. At the same time, the two rituals shared elements: the recitation of the spell and the offering of water and food. The above-mentioned sources provide clues that the Ritual of Water and Land might have been derived from the Ritual of Dispensation of Food and might have developed into a formalized ritual initially practiced in the institutional context of monastic Buddhism. Later, in eleventh-century China, it was taken up more widely and was performed in both religious and secular settings.

The first record of a performance of the Ritual of Water and Land in Korea mentions that it took place at Karyang Temple 葛陽寺 in 970, during the reign of King Kwangjong (949-975) of the Koryŏ dynasty.¹⁵ The authoritative ritual text, *Shuilu yuwen*, was known in Koryŏ by 1090 during the reign of King Sŏnjong (1083-1094), but no version is extant.¹⁶ Not many records exist that

12. Su Shi, "Shuilu faxiang zhan," *Shishi tonglan*, *Zoku zōkyō* vol. 101, 222a.

13. Su Shi, "Xuan bai zhaoqing shangtang bawei shengzhong," *Shishi tonglan*, *Zoku zōkyō* vol. 101, 223b.

14. Yang E, "Shuilu zhaiyi wen houxu," *Shishi tonglan*, *Zoku zōkyō* vol. 101, 225b.

15. An Hyoryong, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi sangje ū pyŏnch'ŏn," 36.

detail the features of the ritual practiced during the Koryŏ dynasty, which does not necessarily mean that the ritual was not popular, given the overall lack of documentation of the period. A liturgical petition indicates that the Koryŏ state of the thirteenth century had three temples that performed the Ritual of Water and Land for the universal salvation of all beings including humans, ghosts, and animals.¹⁷ Yi Saek 李穡 (1328-1396), undisputedly the most influential Neo-Confucian scholar during late Koryŏ, wrote poems that recounted his participation in the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land.¹⁸ In this particular instance, an official of the first rank performed the ritual for the purpose of exorcizing negative influences on the life of a queen mother. This indicates that the ritual counted practitioners among Confucians.

Records from the fifteenth century concerning the Ritual of Water and Land are abundant, as the state at that time was actively working to reduce the institutional power of Buddhism. The *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok*), for example, provides information concerning locations, time, and the primary offerants. No mention was made, however, of which liturgical manual was used. One report of an outdoor ritual along the Han River portrayed the scene vividly. This performance was sponsored by Prince Hyoryŏng, the second son of King T'aejong (r. 1400-1418), in the year 1432:

Prince Hyoryŏng or Yi Po offered the Ritual of Water and Land along the Han River on a grand scale for seven days. The king granted incense to be used. They built a three-story altar, and offered food to over one thousand monks. The ritual practitioners made food offerings to everyone, including passengers. There was no one who did not receive food. Every day, the ritual practitioners threw several bushels of rice into the river to feed the fish and turtles. Flags and ceremonial parasols covered the river. The sound of drums and bells filled the air. Literati and women in the capital city gathered like clouds. Some women of elite families also prepared delicacies as offerings. In the Buddhist custom, men and women intermingled without proper distinctions.¹⁹

16. *Koryŏsa* 10, Sega 10, "Sŏnjong," 20. (Rpt. Seoul: Yŏnhŭi taehakkyo Tongbanghak yŏn'guso, 1955). It recounts the construction of the Water and Land Hall inside the Poje Temple 普濟寺 in order to perform the ritual in accordance with the ritual text prescriptions. The construction had not been completed due to fire.

17. Ch'ŏnch'aek, "Suryuk chae so," in *Hosan nok* 4: 6a-7a (Rpt. Ilchi'am edition, Seoul: Minjoksa, 1995).

18. Yi Saek, "Yugam," "Sigo," in *Mogŭn'go* 20: 32a (Rpt., Seoul: [Yŏng'in p'yojŏm] *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* vol. 4, 1996), 267a; "Chwasijung ch'ŏngsŏn suryuk chae so ō," *Mogŭn'go* 20: 33a, 268a.

19. *Sejong sillok* 55: 13a [1432/2/14], in the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, edited by Kuksa P'yŏnch'an

Monks gathered like clouds in the Han River for ten days They drew paintings depicting the pleasures in heaven and the suffering in hell to demonstrate the doctrine of retribution in life and death, and of blessings and misfortunes. Thereupon all, whether noble or lowly, men or women, were eager to see and hear the event. Because of this, the whole city was empty, and the checkpoints along the major routes were blocked. It was a waste of resources just as if one had accumulated it like a mountain and used it like mud and sand. They loaded rice on a ship to throw it away into the river's water.²⁰

These reports were addressed to King Sejong (r. 1418-1450) and were intended to convey the inappropriateness of the performance. The ritual was a “grand ritual (*taejae* 大齋),” the scale of which awed contemporaries. It lasted at least seven days; the second report gives the length as ten days, which may include the days of preparation as well.

The accounts describe the structure of the altar and the distinctive features of the ritual. The altar was three stories high and featured paintings illustrating heaven and hell. In addition, colorful liturgical paraphernalia such as flags and parasols decorated the structure. Food figured prominently in the ritual: it was offered to monks, shared among gender-inclusive lay participants, and was thrown into the river. Other descriptions confirm that the three-story structure of the altar was particular to the Chosŏn dynasty, and was not part of the tradition in China. Ritual petitions written by Kwŏn Kŭn 權近 (1352-1409), one of the architects of Chosŏn statecraft, indicate that both the middle and low altars had three halls for bathing and that the low altar had eight isolated rooms for the spirits of each of the eight royal ancestors.²¹ In the later Chosŏn dynasty, rituals sponsored by the royal family made creative use of the image stations by placing images of the buddhas in the upper level of the altar, those of prominent monks in the middle, and those of late royal family members, including queens, in the lower level.²² The locale of the above-mentioned ritual, the Han River, evidences a departure from ritual practice in China. Although

Wiwŏnhoe [National Historical Compilation Committee], <http://sillok.history.go.kr> [accessed November 1, 2009]. (The first number after the title of the book refers to the original volume number or *kwŏn* [券, *juan* in Chinese]; the number after the colon refers to the number of the page proper in the *T'aebaeksan kobon* edition. The number in parenthesis refers to the year, month, and date of a selected recording in accordance with the lunar calendar.)

20. *Sejong sillok* 64: 5a [1434/4/11].

21. Kwŏn Kŭn, “Chin'gwansa suryuksa Chosŏng ki,” in *Yangch'on-jip* [Collected works of Yangch'on Kwŏn Kŭn] 12: 16a (Rpt., [Yŏng'in p'yojŏm] *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* [Seoul: Minjok Munhwa ch'ujin wiwŏnhoe, 1996], vol. 7, 139c.

22. *Yŏnsan'gun ilgi* 48: 9b, [1503/1/28].

the name of the ritual did include the word “water,” the ritual was not performed near water in China. The performer(s) of the ritual in the Chosŏn dynasty interpreted the phrase in the *Shishi zhengming* literally: “numerous immortals come to the river in order to eat [food].”²³

The three-story structure of the altar generally adopted in Korea was at odds with the two-story altar presented in the *Shuilu yiwen*, presumably the standard liturgical text of the kind during the time. King T’aejo (r. 1392-1398) had 37 copies of the *Shuilu yiwen* printed and later King Sejo (1455-1468) gave a copy to the Japanese embassy along with other Buddhist sūtras.²⁴ Definite clues are scarce as to how widely and for how long the text was used, but it is known that the *Ch’ŏnji myŏngyang suryuk chaeü chammun* 天地冥陽水陸齋儀雜文, the earliest extant liturgical manual of this kind, was printed in Korea in 1342.²⁵ The three-story altar with bathing rooms mentioned by Kwŏn Kŭn and the image stations of the ten kings of hell were among its prescriptions. Thus it is very likely that Koreans in the fifteenth century used the *Ch’ŏnji myŏngyang suryuk chaeü chammun* rather than the *Shuilu yiwen*.

The ritual’s murky origins and the lack of canonicity in the Chinese context were conducive to the broad interpretation of its prescriptions in Korea. Although there is no conclusive evidence that explains why the Chinese and Korean Buddhist traditions used different versions of the altar, this divergence indicates that the Buddhist ritual tradition in Korea developed in its own way and not necessarily according to the constraints of the major liturgical manuals introduced from China. The fluid tradition of the Ritual of Water and Land both in China and in Korea inclined Korean Buddhist practitioners to be receptive to the state’s modifications of the ritual, which will be discussed later in this essay.

A Royal Ritual Following Homicide and Fratricide

The Ritual of Water and Land was institutionalized by the state as an element of the statecraft of King T’aejo, founder of the Chosŏn dynasty. Of the many kinds of Buddhist death rituals, why did this particular ritual attract the king’s

23. Zunshi, “Shishi zhengming,” in *Shishi tonglan*, *Zoku zōkyō* vol. 101, 214a.

24. Kwŏn Kŭn, “Suryuk ūmun pal,” in *Yangch’ŏn-jip* 22: 4b, [Yŏng’in p’yojŏm] *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* vol. 7, 221d; *Sejo sillok* 43: 35b [1467/8/14].

25. Daniel B. Stevenson, “Text, Image, and Transformation in the History of the *Shuilu fabui*, the Buddhist Rite for Deliverance of Creatures of Water and Land,” in *Cultural Intersections in Later Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Marsha Weidner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 36.

attention? To answer this question, I turn now to an examination of the establishment of this ritual as an official state ritual. In so doing I will lay bare the historical conditions and social ethos with which the new king was grappling, and illuminate how he envisioned the religious policies of the new dynasty.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that the Chosŏn dynasty was established based on Confucian principles of governance, King T'aejo, the dynasty's founder, was deeply involved with Buddhist affairs on both a personal and a state level. The first two Chosŏn kings, T'aejo and Chŏngjong (r. 1398-1400), maintained the religious legacy of the Koryŏ dynasty, although both agreed to accept Confucianism as the guiding philosophy of the state's governing and educational policies, as was the case in China. Confucian ritual practice was not institutionalized during the reign of King T'aejo, however, and Buddhist ritual practice continued to predominate. King T'aejo appointed Chach'o 自超, better known as Muhak 無學 (1327-1405), as the Royal Master (*wangsa* 王師) in the first year of his reign: the latter was to oversee Buddhist ritual matters both for the royal family and for the state.²⁶ The king caused many different kinds of Buddhist rituals to be performed at the palace, and frequented many Buddhist temples. In particular, King T'aejo specified that the state would hold the Ritual of Water and Land twice a year, which became the basis for the ritual's legitimacy and allowed it to endure in the face of the broad anti-Buddhist campaign in the Chosŏn dynasty.²⁷

This action was an outcome of particular historical circumstances. T'aejo was a former general, and his rise to power had involved the elimination of his political opponents (among them kings, military officials, and civil officers) often by means of murder. Upon founding the new dynasty, King T'aejo was deeply concerned with justifying his rule. He attempted to move forward from the legacy of the Koryŏ dynasty in order to bring forth a new era, and at the same time he wanted to make the transition of power appear natural. He therefore took care to make a limited show of respect to the royal family of the Koryŏ dynasty. For example, he permitted the making of regular offerings to the founder of the Koryŏ dynasty as well as to two other prominent kings.²⁸ He was also reluctant to demolish the royal ancestral shrine (*chongmyo* 宗廟) of the Koryŏ and replace it with his own family shrine. This revealed his

26. The king also consulted with Chach'o concerning the location of a new capital city. *T'aejo sillok* 3: 6b [1393/3/28]; 6: 11a [1394/8/12].

27. *T'aejo sillok* 7: 5b [1395/ 2/24].

28. *T'aejo sillok* 1: 51b [1392/ 8/8]; 1:52a.

discomfort with exalting his personal royal authority at the expense of his predecessors.²⁹ His initial attitude – or rhetoric, at least – of respect toward the former royal family, the Wang, quickly faded away when allegations were made in 1394, the third year of his reign, that some members of the Wang clan were planning a revolt. King T'aejo responded by ordering the indiscriminate homicide of all the men of the Wang clan. The *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* recorded that the government tracked down all male descendents of the former royal family both in the capital city and local areas and beheaded them. The government even banned the use of the family name, Wang, by ordering people with that surname to take the name of their maternal line, even if they did not have ties to the former royal family.³⁰ Wiping out a family line was the harshest punishment possible in a culture in which preservation of the family line was the most significant social value.

Four months after the massacre of the Wang clan, King T'aejo turned to Buddhist death rituals. He had three gold-letter copies of the *Lotus Sūtra* made that were to be recited for the sake of the well-being of the deceased Wangs. In addition, he established a tradition of state-sponsored memorial services for their souls through performance of the Ritual of Water and Land. Kwŏn Kūn wrote many liturgical petitions for different performances on behalf of King T'aejo. In those petitions the king offered his apologies for the massacre, and repeatedly emphasized that the foundation of the Chosŏn dynasty was Heaven's Commandment, which had been bestowed upon him as a response to the will of the people:³¹

Shifting the Commandment of Heaven and replacing the previous dynasty is certainly an unusual way of founding a new dynasty In retrospect, [despite] my poor qualifications, I [ascended to] the [exalted] position [of king] and took on great responsibility. I must have [been swayed by] the conspiracy of many [of my] officials. The circumstances were urgent and dangerous. I was not able to protect the former dynasty's royal clan. It was a result of fulfilling my kingly duty. How could it be my wish? Not being able to coexist with them [in this world], I only wish that they be reborn in heaven. I commissioned a version of the *Lotus Sūtra* written in gold. Each year in the tenth month I perform the Ritual of Water and Land I humbly wish [that] all the spirits of the Wang clan resolve their grievances. May all have joy and happiness, and be liberated for all eternity from the paths of samsara.³²

29. T'aejo *sillok* 2: 6b [1392/9/30].

30. T'aejo *sillok* 5: 19b [1394/4/26].

31. Kwŏn Kūn, "Suryuk ūmun pal," in *Yangch'on-jip* 22: 3b-4b, [Yŏng'in p'yojŏm] *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* vol. 7, 221b-221d.

The rhetoric of the liturgical petitions consistently emphasized that the killings were against his will; rather, they were unfortunate outcomes of his fulfilling of the role of king. Moreover, it was made clear the king regretted that his hands were tied and that he could not allow the Wang men to live. In some petitions, the blame was placed on the Wang clan, who had chosen their fate; and in other petitions, on the officials of the Chosŏn dynasty who were guilty of plotting against the Wang families.³³ One of Kwŏn's texts states:

Despite my lack of virtue, I was compelled to replace the Wang clan as the ruler of the state by the earnest support of many people for my assuming of the kingship. There was no alternative. Nevertheless, there are many things that I am ashamed of. I wished to let the Wang clan live in peace so that I could share the joy of the new state with them. To my surprise, officials of the previous king [of the Koryŏ] were suspicious of [my intentions] and plotted seditious actions. They themselves hastened their demise. The officials and advisors of the state unanimously requested that I enforce the laws in this case. I did not dare challenge their wishes. I am deeply sad about it.³⁴

Charged with providing a reasonable explanation for the king's brutality, the ritual addressing the fate of the deceased Wangs represented an opportunity to offer King T'aejo's apologies. Kwŏn went further than that, and argued that King Taejo had demonstrated his benevolence by making offerings for the sake of the victims.³⁵

The king's performance of the ritual, however, was not driven by his personal compunction, but by his concern for the prosperity of the new dynasty and for his own family. The type of ritual performed on behalf of the Wang clan was the collective death ritual for condemned souls in hell. This idea of the condemned souls in Buddhism was combined with an indigenous Chinese notion of the "wandering ghosts" (*muju kohon* 無主孤魂) who were without descendents to make offerings on their behalf. Some believed that these wandering ghosts would cause harm to the living by bringing about disaster and pestilence. Kwŏn Kŭn's petitions also expressed the notion that a king would be endowed with Heaven's Commandment only after he satisfied the

32. Kwŏn Kŭn, "Kwan'ŭngul haeng suryuk chae so pong," in *Yangch'on-jip* 28: 2b-3a, [Yŏng'in p'yojŏm] *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* vol. 7, 260d-261a.

33. Kwŏn Kŭn, "Suryuk ūmun pal," in *Yangch'on-jip* 22: 4a, [Yŏng'in p'yojŏm] *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* vol. 7, 221c.

34. Kwŏn Kŭn, "Pyŏlwŏn Pŏphwagyŏng parŏ," in *Yangch'on-jip* 22: 2b-3a, [Yŏng'in p'yojŏm] *Han'guk munjip ch'onggan* vol. 7, 220d-221a.

35. *Ibid.*

worlds of both “the living and the dead (*yumyŏng* 幽明).”³⁶ This had its textual source in the *Record of Ritual (Liji)*, in which it was stated that the king, duke, and officials were to make offerings for wandering souls whose official ranks had been equivalent to those of the offerants.³⁷ This may have been why King T’aejo felt it was his duty to make offerings for the Wang family. In the sixth year of his reign (1397), the king increased the number of the ritual’s beneficiaries to include “the royal ancestors, and wandering ghosts of ministers and people at large.”³⁸ To this end he ordered the construction of the so-called “Shrine of the Water and Land” within the Chin’gwan Temple, the sole purpose of which was to serve as a venue for the ritual.

Only a few years after the murder of the Wang family, King T’aejo himself suffered the pain of seeing fratricide committed within his own family in two consecutive incidents, the so-called Revolts of Princes in the years 1398 and 1400. Along with his two sons, the king lost his advisor, Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (1342-1398), who had assisted him in the founding of the new dynasty. After being forced to abdicate in 1398, King T’aejo’s commitment to Buddhist affairs and especially to the Ritual of Water and Land deepened. He spent a great deal of time in Buddhist temples shedding tears, perhaps overwhelmed with sorrow as he thought of the deaths that he had brought about as well as the ensuing tragic fate of his sons.³⁹ After King T’aejo’s death, the royal family held the Ritual of Water and Land on behalf of his soul out of respect for his patronage of the ritual. From this point on this ritual became a tradition within the royal family, a tradition that would last through the fifteenth century.

Another devotee of Buddhism and patron of the Ritual of Water and Land was King Sejo (1455-1468), the seventh king in the Chosŏn dynasty. Sejo gained the throne by killing his older brother, Prince Anp’yŏng (1418-1453), and then driving into exile the king, his nephew Tanjong (r. 1452-1455). The fratricide in particular was a grave violation of Buddhist ethics, and so in the second year of his reign, he requested that officials arrange for the Ritual of Water and Land to be conducted, saying,

Unfortunately I came across a harsh fate that involved slaughtering many people.
I deeply sympathize with the souls who died because of [my] punishment. Having

36. Kwŏn Kŭn, “Suryuk ūmun pal,” in *Yangch’ŏn-jip* 22: 3b-4a, [Yŏng’in p’yŏjŏm] *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* vol. 7, 221b-c.

37. Zheng Xuan, *Liji zhushu* 46: 5a (Rpt. Teipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shuju, 1965).

38. Kwŏn Kŭn, “Chin’gwansa suryuksa Chosŏng ki,” in *Yangch’ŏn-jip* 12: 16a, [Yŏng’in p’yŏjŏm] *Han’guk munjip ch’onggan* vol. 7, 139c.

39. *T’aejong sillok* 11: 20a [1406/5/2].

no place to reside in, they have long fallen into the paths of suffering. In addition, there are many other ghosts within the state. All the provincial governments should establish the altars for the Ritual of Water and Land at clean places in spring and fall so that those grieving souls will be saved.⁴⁰

Here the king admits that he is responsible for the killings, but excuses himself by saying he was a victim of circumstances. King Sejo thus attempted to transform his personal feeling of guilt concerning the souls whose deaths he had caused for the sake of the state by ordering that the Ritual of Water and Land be performed throughout the land. These gestures notwithstanding, Sejo did not shrink from further violence to consolidate his rule: he had Tanjong killed a year after performing that ritual, along with others who were conspiring to restore the deposed king. Sejo resumed his patronage of the ritual afterwards. For example, he personally wrote a liturgical petition on behalf of the large number of people who died in the Revolt of Yi Si'ae in 1467.⁴¹

King T'aejo initiated the Ritual of Water and Land in order to repair the damage to his prestige and authority as a result of the massive homicide, and there is no record of any objection on the part of the officials to his having done so. Because Buddhist death rituals were cultural conventions at this time, T'aejo saw them as a strategic means to legitimize his kingship and make a public apology for the deaths. In particular, his broadening of the application of this particular ritual to serve the public interest evidenced that King T'aejo envisioned a statecraft that could embrace both Confucianism and Buddhism; T'aejo turned to the former as a source for principles of governing rather than as the orthodox religion of the state.

The Suppression of Buddhism and the Institutionalization of the Buddhist Ritual

The state had actively sought to instill Confucian principles and ritual practices in public life since the ascension of King T'aejong (r. 1400-1418), who was behind the fratricide in the Revolts of Princes. He sought to legitimize his kingship through comprehensive reform measures, which made Buddhist institutions prime targets, being as they were the only major non-governmental entities in Korea. As Confucian officials located the identity of the new dynasty

40. *Sejo sillok* 4: 32b [1456/7/26].

41. *Sejo sillok* 42: 33b [1467/ 6/6].

in the broad-based implementation of Confucian principles, Buddhism became a stand-in for the legacy of the previous era.

State limits on the autonomy of Buddhist institutions expanded quickly once King T'aejong began to follow the advice of Neo-Confucian officials. To meet the financial needs of the state, the king ordered the closure of many Buddhist temples, such that only 378 remained in 1405; that number was reduced to 242 the following year. Also, in 1405 he ordered that Buddhist temples divest themselves of land and servants.⁴² At the same time, King T'aejong laid the groundwork for a society and governmental system based on Confucianism. The first step toward the realization of this goal was to institute proper Confucian ritual practices on the state level and to encourage officials to follow these practices in their private lives. He ordered the distribution of one hundred copies of Zhu Xi's *Family Ritual (Jiali)*, considered the orthodox ritual manual of the Neo-Confucian tradition.⁴³ The Board of Ritual (Yejo 禮曹) specified the requirements for proper rituals in consultation with the Confucian classics. The board determined that the Confucian state rituals should be performed at the royal ancestral shrine, modeling them after those conducted in the Song 宋 state of China.⁴⁴ It also issued directives concerning the observance of Confucian traditions, and prohibited the use of stone chamber tombs as being contrary to ritual prescriptions.⁴⁵

In moments of crisis, however, the central government did not hesitate to perform rituals of non-Confucian traditions. For rituals to cause rain (*kiu che* 祈雨祭) and dispel disasters (*kiyang che* 祈禳祭), the government drew on various religious traditions including Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Shamanism.⁴⁶ For example, King T'aejong directed that both Buddhist monks and shamans perform rain rituals, albeit not in the same place.⁴⁷ This did not meet with universal approval: Confucians criticized the performance of these

42. Some monks protested by beating the Drum of Petition or the *sinmun'go* in order to appeal directly to the king. The king paid no attention to their petition. *T'aejong sillok* 11: 9a [1406/2/26].

43. *T'aejong sillok* 6: 9b [1403/8/ 29].

44. *T'aejong sillok* 16: 18a [1408/ 9/24].

45. *T'aejong sillok* 12: 13a [1406/ Intercalary 7/ 28]

46. For studies of the state's control of these two rituals, see Yi Uk, *Chosŏn sidae chaenan kwa kukka ūrye* [Calamities and state rites in the Chosŏn period] (Seoul: Changbi, 2009).

47. *T'aejong sillok* 9: 20a [1405/5/11]; 26: 1a [1413/7/2]. Other instances of these types of rituals during the reign of King T'aejong included the performance by Daoists of a Yŏngbo ritual, and the performance by shamans of a rain ritual. *T'aejong sillok* 10: 24a [1405/11/2]; 9: 17a [1405/5/11]; 12: 5a [1406/7/25].

rituals in the Board of Ritual, because it was not appropriate according to the Confucian liturgical tradition.⁴⁸ Their criticism, however, had to do with the location, not the ritual itself or who was presiding over them. When it rained, the king rewarded the officiants who had performed the ritual.⁴⁹ In this case, the king and Confucian officials attributed the rain following the ritual to the efficacy of the performance. The ritual practices that were generally utilized to produce rain and dispel disasters demonstrate that the state and Confucians alike were not opposed to invoking spirit or supernatural powers. These could influence the natural world, a source of great concern to the government. The openness of the kings and officials towards non-Confucian rituals in some situations indicated that Confucian criticism of Buddhism in the first half of the fifteenth century grew more out of practical considerations than doctrinal issues. This kind of religious pluralism in state affairs could look to China as a model, where Confucianism's deeply felt influence on methods of governing and social values did not preclude other faiths.

Although King T'aejong delivered a major blow to the institutional power and the financial strength of the Buddhist temples, he did not end his own involvement in Buddhist ritual matters. On the state level, he guaranteed that the temples designated for the performance of the state-sponsored Ritual of Water and Land would retain their privileged status despite his overall policy of constraining Buddhist institutions.⁵⁰ He showed his support for one particular temple by granting its request for grain to be used for the Ritual of Water and Land.⁵¹ On a personal level, he had the Ritual of Water and Land performed at critical moments in his family life. For example, in 1408 he not only had a monk conduct the Ritual of Water and Land, but also attended other Buddhist ritual services in order to assist his father's recovery from illness.⁵² His son's premature death in 1418 spurred him to make an offering at the Ritual of Water and Land.⁵³ In seeming contradiction to his suppression of Buddhism in the early years of his reign, King T'aejong's participation in Buddhist rituals was quite marked, especially toward the end of his reign.

King Sejong (r. 1418-1450), son of King T'aejong, took another major step towards weakening the institutional power of Buddhism. Confucian officials

48. *T'aejong sillok* 19: 64b [1410/6/24].

49. *T'aejong sillok* 9: 20a [1405/5/23].

50. *T'aejong sillok* 27: 9a [1414/2/6].

51. *T'aejong sillok* 30: 36b [1415/11/16].

52. *T'aejong sillok* 15: 4b [1408/1/28].

53. *T'aejong sillok* 39: 19a [1418/ 3/3].

lost no time in presenting memorials to the new king that called for a return to the policy of suppressing Buddhism, from which King T'aejong had moved away in his later years. These efforts were consonant with the new king's intention to make Confucianism the ideological foundation of the state. In the first year of his reign Sejong promulgated regulations on death rituals to be observed by members of the royal family and by the state.⁵⁴ In particular, the king pointed to the *Family Ritual* written by Zhu Xi as the guide in these matters and emphasized the practice of building the family shrine (*kamyo che* 家廟制).⁵⁵ At the same time he initiated a radical intervention by the state in Buddhist affairs by abolishing many Buddhist denominations and reorganizing them into two groups, Sŏnjong 禪宗 (meditation order) and Kyojong 教宗 (doctrinal order), a measure intended to strengthen state control of the religion.⁵⁶ King Sejong's next step in this direction was to institute reforms of Buddhist death rituals, which he did in the second year of his reign. Buddhism specified a variety of death rituals to be performed at different times and for different purposes; King Sejong consolidated them into the Ritual of Water and Land, which had been designated an official state ritual. This meant that the Ritual of Water and Land superseded *kisin chae* 忌晨齋, an annual memorial service for an individual soul (rather than for collective souls).⁵⁷ The *ch'uch'ŏn chae* 追薦齋, a series of rituals for the benefit of the deceased, was likewise replaced by the Ritual of Water and Land.⁵⁸ Sejong believed that these rituals shared the idea of the salvation of souls and that their liturgies were overlapping.⁵⁹ The

54. He accepted the officials' view that the *kisin chae* for the late Queen Sindök should be a private ritual of the royal family rather than a state ritual. *Sejong sillok* 1: 10a [1418/8/20].

55. *Sejong sillok* 16: 8a [1422/5/13]; 23: 27a [1424/3/8]. Later he initiated a project of writing "An Expository Commentary to the *Five Rites* (*Orye ūju* 五禮儀注)" in order to systematize the state rituals as prescribed by the Confucian ritual tradition. *Sejong sillok* 106: 12a [1444/10/11].

56. *Sejong sillok* 24: 2b [1424/4/5].

57. *Sejong sillok* 10: 1a [1420/10/1]. This measure did not abolish the *kisin chae* altogether. It persisted as an isolated ritual, but became a target for Confucian attacks and was no longer part of royal ritual practice by the sixteenth century. Exactly when this occurred is uncertain, and there is a divergence of opinion among modern scholars: Sim Hyosŏp, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi suryuk chae ū sŏrhaeng kwa ūrye," 233; Yi Kyŏmyŏl, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi naebultang," 19-20.

58. *Sejong sillok* 9: 5a [1420/8/22]. The *ch'uch'ŏn chae* was performed during a series of memorial services: the seventh-day memorial services after death (*ch'il-ch'il chae* 七七齋), the service on the hundredth day (*paegil chae* 百日齋), the minor service for good fortune (*sosang chae* 小祥齋), and the major service for good fortune (*taesang chae* 大祥齋). The last three services derived from Confucian death rituals.

59. The late king T'aejong had also suggested the consolidation of the *ch'uch'ŏn chae* and *suryuk chae*, seeing that the latter was similar to the *yŏje*, the Ritual against Pestilence in the Confucian tradition, but did not take any action.

king instituted this change in large part to simplify Buddhist ritual practice, which would in turn reduce the number of performances of death rituals. He registered the Ritual of Water and Land in the [*Yukchŏn*] *Tŭngnok* 謄錄, the statutory laws, paving the way for proponents to make the case that it was a legitimate ritual of the state.⁶⁰

The impact of the state's intervention in Buddhist ritual practice went beyond limiting the number of ritual performances. The Board of Ritual oversaw the selection of location and presiding monks, logistics of preparations, and procedure when the Ritual of Water and Land was held as a state ritual. In other words, the pro-Confucian bureaucracy assumed the lead role in the state-sponsored Buddhist rituals, and Buddhist priests were reduced to merely officiating performances. As a result, the Board of Ritual dictated that aspects of Buddhist ritual practice be shaped by Confucian norms: for example, consideration of official rank influenced certain ritual details, such as the number of participants and material items.⁶¹ It also mandated that the recitation of Buddhist scriptures be excised from the Ritual of Water and Land.⁶² The assuming of Confucian control of this ritual represented a dramatic change from what had been the case during the Koryŏ dynasty, when the Buddhist temples had overseen the ritual's performance.

The government regulated the performance of Buddhist death rituals by individuals as well. People were not allowed to conduct the Ritual of Water and Land on their own, but were required to have presiding monks.⁶³ The government also prohibited high-ranking officials from making private offerings for deceased kings on the days of their memorial service. This ban was justified by the Confucian idea that people could not make offerings for deceased people who were of higher rank than themselves. The Board of Ritual announced that "personal feeling" (*sajŏng* 私情) could not override the regulations of the Confucian ritual canons, although devotion to deceased kings was regarded favorably.⁶⁴ An accidental fire in 1425 that destroyed a temple designated for making offerings on behalf of the Wang clan offered the

60. During Sejong's reign, the government also compiled the *Sin-sok yukchŏn* (The New Supplemental Six Codes of Governance). In addition, the state issued the *Tŭngnok*, which contains contemporary regulations that may not necessarily have been enforced in later eras.

61. *Sejong sillok* 9: 29b [1420/9/22]. The various departments of the central government took turns in handling the logistics for the performance of the Ritual of Water and Land sponsored by the state. Kim Hŭijun, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi suryuk chae," 39.

62. *Sejong sillok* 9: 33b [1420/9/24].

63. *Sejong sillok* 43: 13b [1429/2/5].

64. *Sejong sillok* 24: 13a [1424/5/15].

government an opportunity to reduce the significance of the ritual for this specific purpose. King Sejong ordered that the temple not be rebuilt because he did not feel it necessary to make offerings for them; the legitimacy of the new dynasty was well established by then.⁶⁵

Prior to King Sejong's policy of consolidation, the motivations for performing the Ritual of Water and Land were broadly related to death. For example, it was thought that the ritual had the power to ensure a long life, recovery from illness, or the safety of boatmen who were about to embark on a voyage.⁶⁶ In other words, the efficacy of the "death" ritual was extended to avoiding the death of the living. Performances of the ritual for this reason became even more common after the state consolidated the various rituals. Following the consolidation, the state performed the Ritual of Water and Land for diverse purposes, such as to dispel pestilence and to influence positively the afterlives of deceased soldiers.⁶⁷ Because the boundaries of the ritual tradition itself were fluid from the outset, the state's institutionalization of the ritual did not provoke overt resistance either from Buddhist temples or from practitioners. Rather, the Ritual of Water and Land became the sole legitimate venue in which Buddhism could assume a public presence during a time when that religion was under attack. The state's arbitrary consolidation of Buddhist death rituals was part of its attempt to limit that religion's autonomy. The Kings T'aejong and Sejong, in the belief that the reform of Korean society would provide a solid foundation for the new dynasty, reined in the power of institutional Buddhism. One operative paradigm for this policy was to subordinate religion to state authority by defining the parameters of religious rituals. Ideological issues were not of great concern to the kings, however, who focused their attention on more practical areas such as the finances and legal privileges of the Buddhist institutions.

Ambiguities of Royal Religious Practices: Public versus Private?

The attitudes of individual kings towards Buddhism in the fifteenth century appear to have varied according to where the kings were in their reigns and whether they were acting in the public or private sphere. Kings tended to be harsh on Buddhism in the beginning of their reigns, but softened their stance or

65. *Sejong sillok* 30: 21a [1425/12/19].

66. *T'aejong sillok* 1: 10a [1401/1/17]; *Söngjong sillok* 285: 453 [1493/12/20].

67. *T'aejong sillok* 9: 3a [1396/2/27]; *Sejong sillok* 97: 18a [1442/8/4].

became actively involved with Buddhist affairs in the waning years of their rule. In some cases, they participated in Buddhist rituals while simultaneously implementing a policy of suppressing Buddhism. These inconsistent attitudes naturally gave rise to tensions between the kings and the officials who tended to be against Buddhism. In order to clarify the points of the disputes, I will now discuss the aspects of Buddhism on which the kings focused, and how they rationalized participation in Buddhist rituals.

Other than Kings T'aejo and Sejo, who were explicit about their commitment to Buddhism in their personal lives, most kings were either critical of or skeptical about its doctrines, especially in relation to life after death. For example, King T'aejong referred to its teachings as "groundless and misleading."⁶⁸ One particular remark of his concerning Buddhism was recalled the day he died: "Nothing is more befuddling to the world and deceptive to people than Buddhism and Daoism."⁶⁹ Here it is worth clarifying the context in which they denounced Buddhism so strongly. In many cases, kings could not afford to ignore the criticism of their actions by Neo-Confucian officials, and in response attempted to justify their participation in Buddhist rituals or allowing the rituals to go on in general. For example, King T'aejong answered his critics concerning his building of a Buddhist temple near a royal mausoleum and a Daoist hall within the palace by saying, "Although Buddhism and Daoism are heterodox, I built the temple and shrine. But it was not to serve my personal interest. Furthermore, I have never been so misguided as to believe in the tenets of those religions."⁷⁰

King T'aejong was typical of the religiously inconsistent rulers of this time.⁷¹ In his later years he changed his opinion on Buddhism as he himself arranged Buddhist rituals on various occasions for the royal family. He is reported to have said, "Buddhism has a long tradition. I would neither criticize nor compliment its teachings. I, however, would respect and serve those who live by Buddhist teachings."⁷² This statement testifies to his skepticism

68. *T'aejong sillok* 1: 23a [1401/ Intercalary 3/23].

69. *Sejong sillok* 16: 7a [1422 /5/10].

70. *T'aejong sillok* 18: 7a [1409/8/9].

71. King Sejong was a controversial figure in this regard. While he was generally known for establishing Confucianism, he was also noted for his active participation in Buddhism, especially toward the end of his life. Kim Jongmyung argues that King Sejong was a Buddhist; Yi Yŏnghwa claims he was a Buddhist sympathizer: John Gouldie says that it is "not so clear." Kim Jongmyung, "King Sejong's Buddhist Faith and the Invention of the Korean Alphabet;" John Gouldie, "Anti-Buddhist Polemic in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Korea," 233; Yi Yŏnghwa, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi Pulgyo ūrye ūi sŏngkyŏk."

regarding Buddhist teachings on the one hand, and his respect for the religion as a cultural element on the other. Many other kings shared his skepticism, but this did not prevent them from participating in Buddhist rituals, nor did it spur them to abolish the religion altogether. They were willing to perform a Buddhist ritual if it would satisfy those for whom they cared, such as their families or the general public. Several years after declaring that Buddhism was “befuddling and misleading,” and that its rituals had no effect, King T’aejong must have felt embarrassed to ask a high-profile official, Hwang Hüi 黃喜 (1363-1452), whether or not it would be appropriate for him to make a Buddhist offering for his father’s recovery:

“His Majesty [i.e. King T’aejo]’s illness has not improved for long. Although serving Buddhist affairs is not proper, I am not able to control my impatience [to see his condition improve]. Thus I desire to ask Buddhist monks to have a prayer ritual [for his recovery]. What do you think about it?” Hwang replied, “Because it seeks the recovery of Your Majesty’s father, it would not be harmful.”⁷³

By invoking filial piety, King T’aejong was able to get Hwang Hüi’s endorsement. During the ritual performance, the former king Ch’ongjong (King T’aejong’s brother) went so far as to burn his arms in twelve places in accordance with a Buddhist ritual tradition of self-immolation as an offering.⁷⁴ Five years after conducting this ritual, King T’aejong did likewise to ensure the recovery of his wife from illness, saying by way of justifying his action, “From the outset, I am aware that the Buddhist teachings are groundless, yet I am offering this prayer because the queen believes in it.”⁷⁵ When the queen’s condition improved, the king made a grant of land and grain to the temple that had hosted the ritual. The king’s actions irritated some officials, who asked him to withdraw the grant, arguing,

Recently the queen did not feel well, and Your Majesty called for Buddhist monks to pray to the Buddha. The ritual was performed because her condition was urgent and Your Majesty’s feelings were very sensitive. Your Majesty was not able to get a hold of yourself to see the situation. Your Majesty’s utmost sincerity and the prince’s earnest filial piety reached Heaven, which prompted her recovery.⁷⁶

72. *T’aejong sillok* 27: 46a [1414/6/20].

73. *T’aejong sillok* 15: 14b [1408/1/28].

74. *T’aejong sillok* 15: 12b [1408/3/24].

75. *T’aejong sillok* 25: 24b [1413/5/6].

76. *T’aejong sillok* 25: 26a [1413/5/19].

There was no efficacy to the Buddhist ritual; the queen had recovered thanks to the earnest hearts of the king and prince. This interpretation grew out of the Confucian conception that earnest feelings could touch Heaven; and Heaven, in turn, assists the petitioner in attaining his or her wishes. The king responded that this was nothing more than “sly speech,” having apparently forgotten his previous disbelief in the efficacy of Buddhist rituals. He asked them not to bring up the issue again and held another Buddhist ritual. King Sejong also performed the Ritual of Water and Land in order to bring about his son’s recovery – even after imposing restrictions on the activities of Buddhist temples.⁷⁷

King T’aejong’s positive outlook toward Buddhism was evident well before he began to participate in that religion’s rituals. In the seventh year of his reign (1417), the king was made aware that some Buddhist monks were being mistreated by the state. He wanted to put an end to the practice of forcing them to labor without good cause:

Soon after my inauguration, some officials of astronomy (*ilgwan* 日官) presented a remonstrance suggesting that certain Buddhist temples be abolished or be maintained. I trusted their words and immediately implemented their suggestions. Then I gave some thought to the issue. Although Buddhism is heterodox, the initial intention behind the founding of the religion was to establish compassion as its primary teaching. The state had already granted ordination certificates to the monks. Because they left the secular world in entering the forest, it is clear that the monks no longer have anything to do with the state The state harasses them by making them do hard labor, as though they are no different from commoners. The monks are also people (*min* 民) [of the state.]⁷⁸

Here the king expresses his regret for having uncritically followed the officials’ advice with regard to his policy concerning Buddhism. Seven years later, he learned that some government officials were abusing Buddhist monks, as if the state’s harsh treatment of Buddhism as an institution was not enough. The king reminded these officials that the state had already forced non-ordained monks to return to lay life and maintained that ordained monks should at the very least be treated with decency.⁷⁹ King T’aejong here was advancing a new idea: Buddhist monks were people of the state and consequently deserving of the king’s care. Generally speaking, when the state granted Buddhism autonomy

77. *Sejong sillok* 126: 4a [1449/11/1].

78. *T’aejong sillok* 34: 28a [1417/11/1].

79. *Ibid.*

based on its status as a non-secular institution, Buddhist monks were considered as being outside the authority of the state. Therefore, the king's care for the monks in this case was just another way in which the state exercised greater control over religion.

The notion that it was the king's duty to care for his people was one of the most important justifications for retaining the Ritual of Water and Land as one of the primary state-sponsored rituals. As pressure mounted for the outright abolishment of the ritual during the mid-fifteenth century, serious debates took place between King Munjong (r. 1450-1452) and court officials, and among the officials themselves. When pestilence was widespread in 1451, certain officials in local areas wanted to hold the ritual in response to the wishes of the people.⁸⁰ The main reason for performing the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land was to console grieving wandering ghosts, whom it was popularly believed were the source of pestilence. The Confucian Ritual against Pestilence, the *yōje* 厲祭, was derived from a very similar idea, namely that the ghosts of pestilence caused disease.⁸¹ The officials at the central bureaucracy maintained that the government should not perform the Buddhist ritual but rather the Confucian Ritual. The king, however, perceived that these two rituals functioned in essentially the same way, despite belonging to different religious traditions:

The king said, "People are the same. If a person wears a monk's garment and performs a ritual, it is called a Buddhist affair. If a person wears a Confucian garment, it is called a 'sacrificial offering.' Both the Confucian Ritual against Pestilence and the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land are the same in serving the spirits. In performing the Ritual against Pestilence, how does one know where the gods are? Furthermore, the ghosts and spirits are manifest in all material [in the world] without missing anything. If one serves a spirit, then one does not need to make offerings to all other gods; there is no spirit that does not penetrate to another If this performance of the Ritual of Water and Land gives rise to heterodoxy and there will be great harm [to the state], then it is not necessary that the ritual be performed. It is just to respond to people's wishes and temporarily comfort their hearts. In general, illness is caused by the mind; if one's mind is at ease, sometimes illness also stops."⁸²

80. *Munjong sillok* 9: 37a [1451/9/15].

81. Boudewijn Walraven, "Confucians and Restless Spirits," in *Conflict and Accommodation in Early Modern East Asia* ed. by Leonard Blussé and Harriet T. Zurndorfer (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 71-93; Yi Uk, "Chosŏn chŏn'gi wonhon ūl wihan chesa ūi pyŏnhwa wa kŭ ūimi" [Changes in the memorial services for grieving souls and their social implications during the early Chosŏn], *Chonggyo munhwa yŏn'gu* 3 (2001): 169-87.

82. *Munjong sillok* 9: 39a [1451/9/18].

In this case King Munjong was expressing a syncretistic understanding of religions, with his contention that all religions were in essence the same. His reasoning derived from the emerging Neo-Confucian discourse that explained natural disasters as the outcome of the disharmony of material force (*ki* 氣) in the natural world. Unlike the Confucian literati, the king argued, commoners believed that the Buddhist ritual would relieve illness; that belief would uplift their hearts, which in turn would influence the harmony of the natural world. He suggested that this harmony might consequently improve the commoners' physical condition, and that the spirits whom the Buddhist rituals were intended to appease in fact caused undesirable natural phenomena.

With regard to the continuing debate on this matter, King Munjong opined that one could not insist on a particular way of thinking in matters that lay beyond human comprehension.⁸³ This comment conveyed his criticism of the exclusivist attitudes of Confucians. Thus his skepticism as to the veracity of religious truth led him to take a practical approach to religious affairs. King Munjong's liberal interpretation of religion drew an immediate and caustic response from the Office of the Inspector-General (*sahŏnbu* 司憲府):

We ministers humbly say that there are two kinds of the Dao 道 on earth: the good and evil, and orthodoxy and heterodoxy. That is all Doubtless nothing is worse than heterodoxy in damaging the good and disturbing orthodoxy. With Your Majesty's bright intelligence, how could you not know its absurdity? Even if Buddhism is capable of resolving people's misfortune, it is not [the method] that a gentleman who guards the Dao would accept. If Your Majesty desires to rescue our people and falsely rely on a barbarian god wishing his retribution, how is it not distorted? If Your Majesty after all considers that the prayers at the Ritual of Water and Land do not contradict the Principle (*li* 理) and also can ensure efficacy, then Your Majesty's perspective of liking good and disliking evil does not originate from sincerity, but perhaps from the misguidedness of the deviant.⁸⁴

This institutional criticism represented the concerted expression of frustration felt by many officials in the face of the king's holding fast to his beliefs. It was aimed directly at the king's practical approach to religious issues. These officials categorized Buddhist practice as heterodoxy and dismissed that religion outright, attaching no importance to Buddhism's function in society. Acting for the benefit of the people was thus at odds with upholding Confucian principles. The king prioritized the former, and the Confucian officials the latter. The officials flatly denounced the king's position as one of confusion

83. *Munjong sillok* 9: 40a [1451/9/19].

84. *Ibid.*

brought on by heterodoxy. The king for his part contended their criticism went too far in challenging the wisdom of the kings of the past, who had endorsed the Ritual of Water and Land. He added that the Buddhist doctrine of retribution was not entirely groundless; and even if it were groundless, he would not be ashamed of performing the ritual for the sake of the people.⁸⁵ The king did not yield to pressure and went ahead with the performance of the ritual in 1451.

The arguments made by Kings T'aejong and Munjong exhibited remarkable coherence as well as a seemingly nonconformist attitude towards Confucian governing principles. Both maintained the separation of their personal beliefs from the state's policies on religion in order to maintain religious diversity within the state. Hence, the state's control of religions was not always expressed in a negative way, as that control also involved supporting religions by way of seeing to the needs of people. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, however, Confucian criticism of Buddhism increasingly invoked the epithet of "heterodoxy" in order to invalidate the latter both in terms of its teachings and its social functions.

Setting the Limits of Control

Over time Confucian officials raised the bar by setting as their ultimate goal the outright abolishment of Buddhism. In this climate the Ritual of Water and Land became a political albatross for the royal family who continued to perform it. The anti-Buddhist forces finally achieved victory when King Sŏngjong (r. 1469-1494) agreed with the core rationale of Confucian critiques. The points of debates between officials and the royal family over the Ritual of Water and Land reveal that Confucian attacks on the ritual were triggered by various factors: Confucian ideology, Confucian officials' concerns about social order, and their political interests.

The Confucian notion of filial piety served as a conceptual cornerstone for the criticism of the ritual. An argument on this basis appeared for the first time in the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* in the seventh year of King Sejong's reign (1425). A memorial suggested that consolidation of Buddhist death rituals into the Ritual of Water and Land would leave the door open for further harm:

85. Ibid.

Among the three thousand cases that fit into the five categories of crimes, doubtless none is greater than the lack of filial piety. Among all the crimes of the lack of filial piety, nothing is greater than divulging the faults of parents. These days, some people hold Buddhist rituals on an enormous scale after the death of a parent. They always make their innocent parents criminals, and inform the Buddha and the Ten Kings in hell by praying for their exoneration. Even if the Buddha and the Ten Kings exist, how could offering a bowl of food to them absolve someone of their sins? Its absurdity has become too extreme.⁸⁶

The central point of this critique is the contention that the offering of the ritual would offset the sins committed by a deceased ancestor during his life. It argues that characterizing ancestors as sinners is unfilial; according to the Confucian concept of filial piety, the admission that one's parents are guilty of wrongdoing is forbidden. The Confucian point of view could not accept the idea that filial piety, a universal value, could be expressed in a variety of religious settings – only the Confucian notion of filial piety was legitimate. When the Kings T'aejo and T'aejong performed the ritual, it was accepted as proper expression of filial piety. By the coronation of Prince Yönsan a century later, however, officials were arguing that the Ritual of Water and Land was unfilial. Prince Yönsan disputed this, and countered that it was unjust that he would not be able to observe the family tradition.⁸⁷

On a societal level, the royal families' private sponsorship of the Ritual of Water and Land represented a major obstacle to the suppression of Buddhism. Confucian critiques took note of the public's enthusiastic response to participation by the royal families in ritual performances. For example, not long after King Sejong's comprehensive measures to bring Buddhism under state control began to be enforced, including the reorganization of the Buddhist institutions, the king's uncle Prince Hyoryöng sponsored a performance of the Ritual of Water and Land that was met with wild approval on the part of the public. A report on the ritual revealed the anger of the Confucians as well as their fear that it might ignite a revival of Buddhism:

Prince Hyoryöng revered an ignorant monk, Haengho 行乎. As a senior member of the royal family, he kowtowed [to Haengho] in order to worship [the Buddha]. The prince persuaded the royal families [to believe in Buddhism]. He reached out to people involved in trade and had them donate property in order to refurbish a collapsed temple. It has now been splendidly renovated. They sculpted the image

86. *Sejong sillok* 27: 13b [1425/1/25]. Because the king did not accept this memorial, another making the same request was presented in 1432. *Sejong sillok* 58: 5a [1432/10/17].

87. *Yönsan'gun ilgi* 1: 2b [1494/12/26].

of the Buddha and printed the sūtras. There was nothing that was not done, including the Assembly for Monks' Retreat (*angŏhoe* 安居會) among others. Rascally monks and merchants submitted to the prince and flattered him. Thereupon, on a board on the temple there was a special text, "Donor Prince Hyoryŏng." The board is laid out amidst merchants and lowly servants. If people see and hear about all these, how could it not be shameful and embarrassing? We ministers humbly fear that the revival of heterodoxy would certainly spring from Prince Hyoryŏng.⁸⁸

The overriding concern expressed here is that certain members of the royal family have not acted in accordance with their rank; and what was worse, one kowtowed to a Buddhist monk. It also notes that Buddhists of low social status were holding out hope of retaining their religion through the royal family's support. This memorial makes it clear that the royal family's rapport with monks and merchants was cultivated through Buddhist rituals: one notable example was the spectacular performance of the Ritual of Water and Land near the Han River. The author even blames the king's uncle for bringing about the revival of the "heterodoxy." Such memorials doubtlessly put the king in an awkward spot. He therefore chose not to respond to this accusation concerning Prince Hyoryŏng's unseemly involvement in Buddhist activities and avoided conflicts with his family members as much as possible.⁸⁹

Confucian officials often used criticism of the royal families' participation in the ritual as a way to check the power of kings. The pressure was particularly intense whenever a new king assumed the throne at a young age. King Munjong, for example, was put on the defensive in the first year of his reign (1451) concerning his brother's performance of the Ritual of Water and Land on a day that was not specifically related to anyone's death.⁹⁰ Four months earlier, an official had accused the king's sister-in-law of performing a Buddhist ritual for her late husband, Prince Kwangp'yŏng, at a Buddhist temple near her house. To do so would have been in violation of a new regulation that forbade women from elite families from going to Buddhist temples.⁹¹ Although the king

88. *Sejong sillok* 94: 15b [1441/ Intercalary 11/9].

89. Kings sidestepped the potential problem posed by criticism of the royal families in a variety of ways: in one case, the king would simply not respond, *Sejong sillok* 64: 5a [4/11]; another time, he would declare that he had no knowledge of the accusation and thereby wash his hands of the matter, *Sejong sillok* 55: 17a [1432/3/5]; and in one case the king asked that he be excused from dealing with the situation, saying his hands were tied, *Sŏngjong sillok* 271: 244 [1492/11/24].

90. *Munjong sillok* 9: 28b [1451/9/7].

91. The criminal laws in the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* prohibited women of elite families from entering Buddhist temples, and specified the punishment for violations as being one hundred lashes. Since

suspected the charge did have some basis, he refused to question the widow. As a counterattack he complained that the officials were trying to take advantage of him as a newly installed ruler: “You would not even dare to address the late king concerning such an issue.”⁹² His comments were not atypical. Many kings were well aware that Confucian officials were challenging their authority when they voiced their criticism of the royal family’s conduct with regard to ritual affairs.

Confucian criticism of this type, as a pretext for political maneuvering, intensified in the late fifteenth century during the reign of King Sŏngjong. The Queen Mother Insu’s 仁粹王大妃 commitment to Buddhism and its death rituals came under fire in part because many people believed that King Sŏngjong had ascended the throne thanks to her active manipulation of court politics. In the sixth year of King Sŏngjong’s reign (1475), several officials authored a collective memorial calling for comprehensive reform. The memorial pointed out the injustice of Queen Mother Insu being of higher rank than Inhye 仁惠, another queen mother, in the hope of checking the power of the former.⁹³ The same memorial addressed the problem of the involvement of Buddhist monks in the grain-lending business; their high interest rates led to more Confucian criticism.⁹⁴ The king disregarded this memorial, but another conflict arose two years later when Queen Mother Insu planned to copy a Buddhist sūtra in a temple in 1478. Aware that the officials felt the plan was inappropriate, the queen mother told the king,

Praying for the salvation of the deceased is not what I alone do. It has been practiced in the past. I have not forgotten about this ritual in my heart even for a short moment: first for the sake of the late king and then for my late husband. Furthermore, King Sejo could not bear to see my sorrowful tears, and allowed me to make offerings at the mausoleum every spring and fall so that I can exhaust my painful wailings to Heaven. As I have now become a queen mother, I often fear discussions in the royal court. I thus am not able even to do a thing I wish. In general, to the present day the reason for the Confucians’ suppression of

women were not actually punished in this way, King Sejong acceded to the suggestion that the male relatives of the violator be punished instead. *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* 5, “Hyŏngjŏn,” 7a, Rpt. (Seoul: Kyujanggak, Seoul National University, 1997), 495. *T’aejong sillok* 8: 31b [1404/12/8]; *Sejong sillok* 64: 19b; 116: 10b [1147/ Intercalary 4/27]. An Hyoryong, “Chosŏn chŏn’gi sangje ūi pyŏnch’ŏn,” 75, footnote 14.

92. *Munjong sillok* 7: 22a [1451/5/3].

93. Queen Mother Inhye was the wife of the previous king Yejong. Queen Mother Insu was the wife of a prince, an older brother of Yejong who had died prematurely; yet she was the mother of the current king Sŏngjong.

94. *Sŏngjong sillok* 55: 6b [1475/5/12].

Buddhism is none other than that a ruler's excessive worship of the Buddha would cause him to be blind to the affairs of the state In contrast, I use private resources to print the sūtra and private grain to feed people. *I have not caused my Buddhist affairs to be associated with the state even for a moment.* Nevertheless, the discussions in the Department of Inspection and Remonstrance being as heated as this, there is nothing I can do. In addition, when King Munjong stayed in a cottage in order to make the Buddhist scriptures and images on a grand scale, he did not hear anyone utter a remonstrance. Was it like that because there were no great ministers nor a Department of Inspection and Remonstrance in his time? (Italics are mine.)⁹⁵

Her statement addresses the problems with the current state control of religion, which she observes goes beyond its initial purpose. She makes the point that the suppression of Buddhism was initiated in order to prevent the state from becoming too preoccupied with religious affairs, but that the restriction of her heartfelt expression was a denial of religious freedom. Her main point here is to draw a line with regard to the state's control of individual religious practice, presenting herself as a private person who should be permitted to make use of her own resources for religious expression.

King Sōngjong favored Confucianism but found himself caught in the middle of the conflict between the queen mother and a certain faction among the officials. The king took the criticism as an affront to himself, thinking the officials must have known that it was not his plan, but rather that of the queen mother. Yu Sun 柳詢 (1441-1517), an official, took the king's side in saying that the king was not in a position to intervene because the queen mother would claim her actions were on behalf of the late king. He added: "It was customary for people to make the *chae* 齋 ritual to the Buddha, and food offerings to the monks. How could copying a sūtra damage the principle of governance?" Another official, Son Pijang 孫比長 (fl. 1464-1485), countered, "We cannot help but prohibit it because people of low status will learn from the practice of the nobles."⁹⁶ Son spoke for many Confucians, who thought that unless the royal families refrained from performing Buddhist rituals, there was no hope of ending such practices among the general population. Confucian officials also found fault with the royal family's sponsorship of the Ritual of Water and Land, which allowed some monks to claim that it was the royal families who made the offerings, not the state.⁹⁷ One Confucian critique argued that what

95. *Sōngjong sillok* 78: 4a [1477/3/7].

96. *Ibid.*

97. *Sōngjong sillok* 91: 16a [1478/4/15].

the royal families offered, although technically their own private property, came ultimately from the people.⁹⁸ In response the queen mother lamented that it was her devotion that aggravated the opponents of the religion.

These debates between the king and the officials exposed the bottom line of the conflict. The king and the royal family wished to limit the state's control of religion to the circumscribing of religion's institutional authority and the reducing of its negative social influence. Confucian critiques aimed for the abolition of all religions (except Confucianism, naturally) by condemning them as heterodoxy. Members of the royal family, however, considered themselves to be private individuals when it came to religious practices. They contended they should not be expected to be committed exclusively to Confucianism, even if that religion served as the ideological basis for the state's governance. In contrast, Confucian officials saw members of the royal family as public figures who should be role models for society at large. These officials envisioned Confucianism as the orthopraxis of the state, to be observed from the top to the bottom of society.

Although King Sōngjong did not bar the queen mother from performing the ritual out of respect for her, he did agree with the officials' criticism in general. Due to his ambition to make Confucianism the orthopraxis of the state, he attempted to strengthen state control of Buddhism to the extent of oppressing the Buddhist religion itself. In 1469, the government banned Buddhist nuns from participating in gender-inclusive meetings in temples by extending the state law that made it illegal for women to enter Buddhist temples.⁹⁹ In 1471, the state had the *yōmbulso*, or the shrines for chanting the name of the Buddha Amitābha, shut down in the capital city, and closed the *Kan'gyōng togam*, the governmental institution that oversaw the translation of Buddhist literature into Korean.¹⁰⁰ The effort to suppress Buddhism reached a peak in 1492 when Confucian officials pressed the king to not only defrock unordained Buddhist monks but also to end the ordination of Buddhist monks entirely, which would likely result in the extinction of institutional Buddhism. King Sōngjong acceded to this request, but not long thereafter yielded to his mother's opinion and rescinded the new regulation. As the hard-fought final blow to Buddhism failed to materialize, a more fundamental political conflict emerged.

One Confucian official said bitterly, "These days the words of monks [supposedly] outside the political domain have entered the inner palace; and

98. Ibid.

99. *Sōngjong sillok* 32: 7b [1473/7/18].

100. *Sōngjong sillok* 10: 28a [1471/6/8]; *Sōngjong sillok* 13: 616 [1471/12/5].

the letters of court women came out into the royal court. It is profoundly improper.”¹⁰¹ The king admitted the criticism was valid, but asked them not to broach the subject again because it put him in an awkward position. The two queen mothers then issued a collaborative statement. This was quite unusual, as queen mothers only very rarely made public written statements on political affairs. The queen mothers opined that the recent law on the ordination of monks went too far in changing the *Kyōngguk taejōn*, or the Grand Code of State Administration, so abruptly and so casually. They said that the new policy treated unjustly those among the general public who practiced Buddhism, and that it was impractical and inhumane to assign old nonordained monks to military posts. The king continued to take the side of his mother and remained firm in his revocation of the new law.¹⁰² This incident revealed how policies concerning religion were entangled with court politics. Monks who found themselves without any political support turned to women of power for protection; these women were not afraid to join the political debate in invoking the legal authority that clearly validated Buddhist practice.

Although Queen Mother Insu gained a small victory in the debate concerning the abolishment of the ordination of monks, the damage done to Buddhism during King Sōngjong’s era was grave. Several years before the above-mentioned debate, King Sōngjong in 1484 declared that he would no longer sponsor the Ritual of Water and Land as a means for dispelling pestilence. He declared that the ritual was not “canonical” although “it was practiced by the late king.”¹⁰³ He remarked,

As for heterodoxy and our Dao, their forces cannot tolerate each other. After heterodoxy is extinguished our Dao can operate. When heterodoxy thrives, our Dao’s operation cannot be achieved, even if it desires to do so. Today [Ch’oe 崔] Howōn 灑元 (fl. 1453-1485) said that previous kings practiced geomancy, the Ritual of Water and Land, and other such activities. Nonetheless, these lately adopted practices were not canonical rituals to be performed throughout all time.¹⁰⁴

In the king’s opinion, the two religions could not coexist. He was the first king to espouse the very exclusivist stance of Neo-Confucianism with regard to state governance, which had been the subtext of Confucian critiques of the previous

101. *Sōngjong sillok* 272: 1b [1492/12/1].

102. *Sōngjong sillok* 271: 13b [1492/11/21].

103. *Sōngjong sillok* 172: 5b [1484/11/15].

104. *Sōngjong sillok* 174: 4a [1485/1/6].

kings' support for religious pluralism. King Sŏngjong stated that even his predecessors' endorsement of the ritual, as evidenced by its registration in the state laws, could not suffice to make a practice valid, if that practice did not follow Confucian canonical prescriptions. He thus considered the Confucian canon as a higher authority than the Grand Code of State Administration, a major shift in the state's religious policies. King Sŏngjong was also the first king to challenge the very legitimacy of the Ritual of Water and Land. In 1494, he abolished another annual performance of the ritual that was specifically held for safety of water transportation.¹⁰⁵

King Sŏngjong's negative views and policies toward Buddhism, however, did not prevent his son, Prince Yŏnsan (r. 1494-1506) from performing the Ritual of Water and Land on behalf of his father. In doing so he followed the example of kings before him, who had performed the ritual regardless of their personal disbelief in Buddhism. In response to the objection of the officials, Prince Yŏnsan replied,

How would all the previous kings have liked Buddhism! Nonetheless, they established the Ritual of Water and Land. It has been this way since the time of the founding father of the dynasty. And the late king also did not leave a will to stop the practice – I cannot abolish it abruptly today.¹⁰⁶

Prince Yŏnsan himself did not see much point in retaining the Ritual of Water and Land as a state ritual. He was not even aware of the origin and the purpose of the ritual; upon learning that the ritual was held on behalf of deceased kings and queens, he announced that a practice upheld by previous kings should not be changed all of a sudden.¹⁰⁷ However, in the fifth year of his reign (1504) Prince Yŏnsan requested that another death ritual, not the Ritual of Water and Land, be performed for his late grandfather Tŏkchong. This decision put an end to the traditional practice without officially banning it. This was not a sudden change, but rather the outcome of the erosion of the prestige of the ritual over the course of a persistent campaign against Buddhist religious practice.

By this time, the supporters of the Ritual of Water and Land could no longer provide any rational basis for state sponsorship of the ritual. Another argument in favor of the legitimacy of the ritual was that it had been practiced

105. *Sŏngjong sillok* 287: 14b [1494/2/18].

106. *Yŏnsan'gun ilgi* 1: 2b [1494/12/26].

107. *Yŏnsan'gun ilgi* 48: 9b [1503/1/27].

in Ming China. Since the Chosŏn dynasty maintained diplomatic relations with the Ming state, being a tributary of the latter, many kings felt that abolishing Buddhism entirely would not be a wise decision. Furthermore, some kings were not convinced that the Chosŏn state needed to pursue religious exclusivism since in China, the home of Neo-Confucianism, various religions were allowed to flourish. To this, Confucian officials replied that Chinese dynasties frequently collapsed as a result of their tolerance of Buddhism.¹⁰⁸

Due to King Sŏngjong's policy of suppressing Buddhism, which included the closing of a majority of temples, the influence of Buddhist institutions waned substantially during this time. A witness noted that in the mid-sixteenth century Buddhist monks were no longer prominent in Korean public life. Many of them did not have a place to stay after the closing of their temples. Some needed to hide themselves for protection.¹⁰⁹ The *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* makes no further mention of performances of the ritual by the royal family after this time. Records from the sixteenth century do indicate that the ritual continued to be performed by members of the general population, and even by some members of the upper class.¹¹⁰ As the survival of their religion depended in no small measure on the Ritual of Water and Land, Buddhist temples printed various versions of the liturgical texts from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.¹¹¹ The Ritual of Water and Land never regained state sponsorship, however, and its practice was limited to individual Buddhist temples.¹¹²

Conclusion

The rise and fall of the Ritual of Water and Land in the public religious life of the Chosŏn dynasty allows us to trace the historical process of the formation of the state's religious policies. The Ritual of Water and Land survived as the sole legitimate public Buddhist ritual sponsored by the state at a time when, a policy

108. *Sejongillok* 50: 271 [1430/11/12].

109. *Chungjongillok* 1: 42b [1506/10/29].

110. *Myŏngjongillok* 17: 37a [1554/9/5]; *Chungjongillok* 81: 34a [1536/4/7].

111. Nam Hŭisuk, "16-18-segi Pulgyo ūisikchip ūi kanhaeng kwa Pulgyo taejunghwa" [Publications of Buddhist liturgical manuals and popularization of the religion during the sixteenth- to eighteenth- centuries], *Han'guk munhwa* 34 (2004): 97-165.

112. The Confucian Ritual of Pestilence began to replace the Buddhist Ritual of Water and Land beginning in King Sŏngjong's reign (the late fifteenth century). Yi Uk, *Chosŏn sidae chaenan kwa kukka ūrye*, 341.

of religious pluralism notwithstanding, the state was gradually reducing the institutional autonomy of religions in Korea. The history of this ritual shows that the exclusivism advocated by the Neo-Confucian officials of Zhu Xi's school became the dominant paradigm during King Sŏngjong's reign in the late fifteenth century as the king and the officials reached a consensus on the issue. However, it should be noted that the Chosŏn kings and Confucian officials had differed in their views of the roles of the state in the regulation of people's religious practices and institutions as well as in the definition of official rituals.

The seemingly inconsistent acts of the early Chosŏn kings derived from their perspective on the state's policies toward religion, which contrasted sharply with that of many Confucian officials. Many kings believed that the state should embrace diverse religions regardless of the validity of specific doctrinal claims. In their view, the state needed to respect people's beliefs for the sake of their spiritual well-being, a major concern of the state. Although the kings of the Chosŏn dynasty acknowledged the supremacy of Confucianism over other religious traditions or value systems, not all of them supported the suppression of other religions in order to make Confucianism the philosophical and ethical foundation of Korean society. The kings favored state control of religion, but at the same time wished to tolerate some degree of individual religious expression. This judgment reflected the kings' practical approaches to religion that emphasized its social functions rather than conformity with Neo-Confucian doctrines.

This line of reasoning on the part of the kings gradually brought them into conflict with the officials who wished to institutionalize Confucian ritual practice at all levels of society. In the second half of the fifteenth century, Confucian scholar-officials advanced the idea that Confucianism could not flourish unless the state banned the practices of other religions. This exclusivist attitude represented a break with the existing tradition in the Korean peninsula, which had allowed for diversity in religion and customs. Confucian officials and the governmental institutions thus mounted an aggressive campaign against state sponsorship of the Ritual of Water and Land, the last holdout of Buddhist ritual. The end of state sponsorship of the Ritual of Water and Land in the early sixteenth century signaled the dominance of Confucian values in the Chosŏn dynasty.