

Power-Sharing and the Tug of War at the Royal Court: The Significance of Queen Munjeong's Restoration of Buddhism in Mid-Joseon Korea Reconsidered

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This article aims to reconsider the significance of the controversy surrounding Queen Munjeong's (1501–65) reinstatement of the two Buddhist orders, Seon (meditation) and Gyo (doctrine), by using it as a window onto the nature of politics in the Joseon Dynasty. Queen Munjeong's restoration of Buddhism has received significant scholarly attention since the early 1990s, and most studies agree that the queen mother was able to bring her pro-Buddhist policy to fruition thanks to her supporters, i.e., officials loyal to her. Nevertheless, these allies were also found to have articulated opposition to her pro-Buddhist policies. Thus it would be logical to query what significance the disputes might have had in the context of early and mid-Joseon political dynamics. In King Myeongjong's reign, the monarch had to share power with the high-ranking officials and bureaucrats; the scholar-officials were acting as arbiters and the king sought their approval prior to taking any action. In case of a dispute, precedents were invoked to substantiate one's claim. By closely reading the contestations, I argue that Queen Munjeong's restoration of the Buddhist orders was an aborted attempt at establishing a precedent that the throne could use to its advantage in its attempts to wrestle back control from the scholar-officials.

Keywords: Queen Munjeong (1501–1565), King Myeongjong (r. 1545–1567), power-sharing, precedent, legality, the reinstatement of the two Buddhist orders, Seon (Meditation) and Gyo (Doctrine)

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