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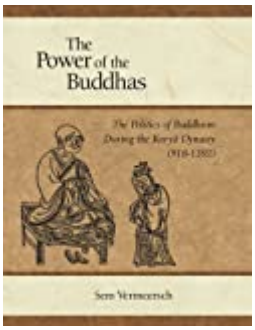

Sem Vermeersch. *The Power of the Buddhas: The Politics of Buddhism during the Koryŏ Dynasty.* Harvard East Asian Monographs Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008. 485 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03188-3.

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Sangha-State Relations in the Koryo Dynasty

Buddhism is frequently referred to as the state religion of KoryÅ, a dynasty that ruled most of the Korean Peninsula from 918 to 1392. The type of Buddhist ideology adopted is routinely described as "state-protection Buddhism," meaning that the state sponsored Buddhist rituals and works in order to invoke sympathetic spiritual powers to ward off natural and military disasters, and bolster the status of the ruler as a Buddhist monarch or *cakravartin*, thereby gaining the support of the Buddhist Order and the king's Buddhist subjects. This ideology is said to have been initiated by Wang KÅn (r. 918-43), the founder of the dynasty. This state sponsorship of Buddhism is alleged to have given the Buddhist Order or Sangha great wealth and economic influence, leading in turn to corruption and the mounting manipulation of Buddhism, along with the restrictions made in response. It is also alleged that Buddhist monks were co-opted into the state bureaucracy via an examination and political appointments as spiritual advisors to the king.

Sem Vermeersch's *The Power of the Buddhas* critically reexamines these standard characterizations using the best editions of original sources, most Korean scholarship on Buddhism, plus some Japanese and Chinese primary and secondary sources. In particular, he has used epigraphical evidence and the study based on this type of evidence by HÅ HÅng-sik, especially HÅ's *KoryÅ Pulgyosa yÅn'gu* (Studies in the history of KoryÅ Buddhism) (1986), which at 930 pages is a mine of information. As there is much to discuss, Vermeersch's book, including bibliography and index, is relatively long at 485 pages. The existing literature in European languages on KoryÅ Buddhism is limited to a handful of monographs, book chapters, articles, and unpublished doctoral dissertations. Therefore, this book is a welcome contribution to the study of medieval Korea and the state that produced one of the major achievements of East Asian Buddhism, the KoryÅ Tripitaka.

Focus is concentrated on the founding of the KoryÅ dynasty, for Vermeersch judges that this "marked a real break in the Buddhist world, reshaping it fundamentally, initiating an organizational and ideological template that remained more or less in place throughout the dynasty,"

a structure that was "inherently bureaucratic" (p. vii). Therefore, this book is not about doctrine, but about the political and social roles Buddhism played in KoryÅ history. In particular, it deals with religion and the state, which in early KoryÅ was only a small coterie of eminent officials in the king's circle.

The book opens with sociological discussions of the relation of religion and state in theoretical terms, such as legitimation and ideology. It then shifts to an examination of Confucian and Buddhist legitimating strategies in China and how these were adapted in KoryÅ, which had very few Confucian bureaucrats in its early history. Vermeersch analyzes the relation with Buddhism, called "State-Protection Buddhism," and discusses Chinese precedents and modern scholarship on the topic. He dismisses "State-Protection Buddhism" as too broad and not distinctive enough to be useful.

What makes all of these topics controversial though are the limitations of the sources, which are mostly official histories compiled well after the events by Confucians who were negative about the role of Buddhism and as a result excluded much material; literary collections chosen for style, which often lacked background information and even dates; and epigraphical inscriptions (or copies thereof) that were hagiographical but had state sanction, and so described only the official aspect of religious life. This fragmented, sometimes hostile, and elitist material means that the interpretation of many terms, titles, rituals, and functions is difficult and varies considerably, even to the extent of a lack of clear determination as to how many "lineages" of SÅn (Chinese, Chan) Buddhism there were, or how many Buddhist "schools" existed.

This book attempts to remedy some of these deficiencies by putting as much of the information as possible into context, first by looking at the relations Buddhism had with the state in late Silla, the preceding dynasty. Silla had been aristocratic. Silla aristocrats began to lose their control over the regional areas where the local elites sponsored SÅn monks who had connections with China. After several warlords, including Wang KÅn, had set up rival dynasties, the doctrinal schools of Buddhism that had been tied to the aristocratic clans and court of Silla, often by family connections and appointments, lost influence, leaving SÅn dominant. As a result, the Silla court approved and supported some SÅn lineages, but they were located in the provinces and not the capital. Wang KÅn thus lured them over to his side and thereby demonstrated that he was the legitimate successor to the previous rulers. To do so, he tried to appropriate all the Silla symbols of state Buddhism and left a political testament calling on his heirs to obtain the protection of the Buddhas, establish Buddhist festival or rituals, and maintain certain monasteries.

Only two texts attributed to Wang KÅn survive: one is his political testament or Ten Injunctions; and the other is a prayer text for the opening of Kaet'ae-sa, the Monastery of the Inauguration of Peace. The injunctions begin with an appeal to the protective powers of the Buddhas and a caution against allowing disputes between doctrinal schools or monasteries. The second injunction says that only the monasteries and stupas that were approved in the geomantic directions of the SÅn monk TosÅn were to be permitted, because private construction of personal temples and stupas could lead to the fall of the dynasty. These seem to give conditional support for Buddhism. The sixth injunction encourages the holding of Buddhist festivals, again with warnings against altering them.

While the invocation of the Buddhas' powers to gain a response of protection was standard practice in East Asian Buddhism, the geomantic stipulations were not. To be sure, Chinese Buddhists also used geomancy in the selection of monastery sites, but this was never (as far as I am aware) encoded in the fashion Wang KÅn intended, and nor were the selections attributed to one person as it was with TosÅn. The problem here lies in how to interpret this geomancy (*p'ungsu*), Wang KÅn's use of it, and the role of TosÅn. Even the most recent survey of that relatively underdeveloped area of research, geomancy, the book by Hong-Key Yoon, *The Culture of Fengshui in Korea* (2006), does not discover the origins of TosÅn's alleged geomancy, but it does make clear the geomantic considerations for Wang KÅn's selection of KaesÅng as his capital, though since this was his ancestral seat, it was also a geomantic justification or explanation of his rise to the throne. Much of this information appears in the *P'yÅnnyÅn t'ongnok* legends of Wang KÅn's ancestry.

However, the full-blown promotion of TosÅn and his theories of Buddhist geomancy appear only in the reign of King Å¬ijong, soon after the 1136 crushing of a revolt led by the monk Myoch'Ång, who seems to have used an esoteric Buddhist geomancy to push for a shift of the capital north to P'yÅngyang. Despite the extensive literature on TosÅn and his geomancy (for example, see *TosÅn Kuksa* [National preceptor TosÅn] [1997], compiled by Pulgyo chÅn'gi munhwa yÅn'guso, Kim Chi'gyÅn, and others, *TosÅn yÅn'gu* [TosÅn studies] [1999]), many is-

sues are yet to be resolved, such as the relationship of SÅn and esoteric Buddhism with the theories ascribed to TosÅn. Some scholars thus think that the methods for the selection of a place for a mandala in esoteric Buddhism could also be used to select a monastery site or *toryang*, a bodhi-mandala.

Some aspects of Wang KÅn's use of TosÅn's geomancy can be seen by reading the Ten Injunctions and prayer text for Kaet'ae-sa together. In 940, Wang KÅn opened a HwaÅm Dharma Assembly to celebrate his victory over his strongest rival, Later Paekche, partly to thank the Buddhas and mountain spirits for their support and for bringing the country to peace. The exact site was where the leader of Later Paekche had his military camp. The eighth injunction, thus, warns against the traitorous geography and people of the Paekche region, specifically the region around Kongju, close to where Kaet'ae-sa was built. Wang KÅn cautioned against employing its people in government. Although Wang KÅn built many monasteries around KaesÅng, he founded (as distinct from approving existing monasteries) only one in the provinces, Kaet'ae-sa. The monasteries he built in the capital served his needs for ritual locations and memorial temples, and the refurbishment and recognition of the monasteries in the provinces were meant to gain support from the regions. Kaet'ae-sa then should be considered special. Its grounds include strange images of Maitreya emerging from the earth, possibly to overawe the people of the region.[1] This illustrates Wang KÅn's appreciation of how geomancy and Buddhism could influence people. Perhaps this was one of the sites TosÅn had judged as adverse or rebellious, *yÅk*, the same word used to describe the geography and people of Later Paekche, the opposite of obedient or favorable (*sun*) geomancy and people. Note, *yÅk* and *sun* are elided in Vermeersch's translation of the second injunction as "properties of the landscape" (p. 92). I think greater emphasis could have been given to these connections and to Kaet'ae-sa.

Wang KÅn also advocated the holding of festivals to revere native deities. Earlier rituals were altered to become festivals. In addition, Wang KÅn built monasteries for the doctrinal and SÅn schools in the capital. He took the bodhisattva precepts, as did the succeeding kings, and probably also saw himself as a *cakravartin* ruler, a protector of the Dharma. The king's spiritual counterpart was the royal preceptor. In these ways, Wang KÅn set the direction for the KoryÅ state's relations with Buddhism.

Critical to this project was the creation of a monastic bureaucracy. The state restricted ordinations to the third or fourth sons of free people, and there was probably no real qualifying examination as in China. As time passed, monks received their tonsure at an increasingly young age, possibly to avoid corvÃ©e and conscription. Moreover, the state failed to guarantee the proper behavior of monks, many of whom married. By the late KoryÅ, many had families, drank alcohol, and wore splendid clothes. That many monks came from elite families probably contributed to this lifestyle. Vermeersch uses his data on the monks (see the appendix) to demonstrate the social origins of the monks. The KoryÅ kings appointed their younger sons as abbots, many of whom abused the post. After a military coup in 1170, many frustrated officials became monks temporarily. In addition, there were monastery dependents, the workers, who were incorporated into monastic armies and contributed to the wealth of the Sangha.

The fourth chapter considers the Sangha examinations that enabled monks to be promoted into the monastic administration. These began in the 950s, and took the form of debates. Success meant a rise in a fixed hierarchy of six ranks, the final two differentiated between SÅn and Doctrine. The lowest rank was necessary for even minor abbacies. The first exam was usually taken by monks in their twenties at designated monasteries in the capital. The graduates filled vacant posts, either as abbots or in the state-run monastic bureaucracy. The bureaucracy may have been adapted from that of Silla, which in turn had been borrowed from Northern Wei. This chapter discusses the history of this institution and the role of the abbot. Abbots had only five- or six-year terms. The monastic bureaucracy, the Sangha Registry, was apparently not popular with most monks, possibly because it seems to have been subordinate to civil bureaucracy. In contrast, abbots of provincial monasteries may have been more autonomous and important to the dynasty.

The highest ranks were the royal and state preceptors, who have the next chapter devoted to them. The royal preceptors were more influential because they (only one at a time) were in frequent contact with the king. The state preceptor was promoted from royal preceptor, but the position was more symbolic and meant retreat to the provinces. The title of national preceptor originated in China and probably came from Silla. Wang KÅn, though, introduced the post of royal preceptor (*wangsa*) as an innovation to emphasize the personal relations of the king with the Sangha. These titles were given to monks mostly in their sixties. From the mid-KoryÅ, the selection process was corrupted by aristocratic and royal interests, and the monks selected now came rather from the doc-

trinal schools and not from SÅn as previously, though SÅn regained its hold over these posts late in the dynasty. The period of appointment of the royal preceptors tended to be short because of their age and promotion to replace deceased national preceptors. Some Dharma lineages, though, managed to gain near monopolies on the titles over some generations, suggesting they were influential. The preceptors served as ritual performers, bestowing precepts on the kings and consecrating leading laymen.

The Sangha still required an economic base, which in KoryÅ was built on state land grants, land rents, and slaves. The chapter on this surprisingly complex issue deals with what constituted land rights in KoryÅ, which is still not well understood. Vermeersch introduces readers to the differences between state, private, and monastic land; and he explores the taxation of different types of land. Even monastic land was categorized into private property and prebendal property, and there were differences between grants, private gifts, and peasants' land relinquished to the monasteries. Vermeersch offers a number of case studies, especially donations by Wang KÅn. The monasteries had to pay tax or levies, and needed state recognition of their status to secure their income. The monasteries that had geomantic functions were especially favored. However, the list supposedly drawn up by TosÅn of seventy remedy (*pibo*) temples was added to in order to reward monasteries for services rendered. Moreover, private votive temples (*wÅndang*) expanded beyond the recognized list by having them dedicated to the king or state, and private individuals began calling their residences monasteries and donated them to the Sangha when they died, probably out of a mixture of piety and tax avoidance. Thus, Wang KÅn's plans were subverted.

The monasteries, in turn, had to perform rituals and contribute monks to the rituals conducted in the royal presence. This subject fills the last chapter, for these rituals and festivals dominated the calendar, at least in the capital. The court or state Buddhist rituals took up much of the king's schedule, and were many and varied, ranging from prayers for rain to prayers to avoid calamities. At least ninety are known by name. Some were for the Buddha's birthday, others for the merit of the king and country. The last could be included in the royal ancestor cult, where the deceased king's portrait was enshrined in selected monasteries throughout the country. All of these rituals were believed efficacious because they could influence the powers of the Buddhas and deities to protect the state and its ruler. Vermeersch describes the royal ancestor cult of the monasteries in some detail, and shows that this was subject to political vagaries.

Vermeersch also considers the compilation and carving of the KoryÅ Tripitaka to be ritual actions, part of a vow to convey merit to the parents of King HyÅnjong and to protect the state. It also demonstrated KoryÅ's "independence" from the threatening Khitan to the North. This project is viewed through Buddhist perspectives on the veneration of the scriptures and the history of printing. Once the canon was carved, the printed books were used in the Turning of the Tripitaka ritual (*chÅn taejonggyÅng toryang*). Here, Vermeersch is unclear as to what was meant by "turning," but evidence from elsewhere informs that "turning the pitaka and viewing (*kan*) the pitaka are not the same. Viewing is reading over each line from start to finish. Turning is reading several lines from the start, middle, and end of each fascicle; the first seven lines; the middle five lines; and the end three lines" (*Zenrin shÅkisen*, section 17, *tenzÅ* entry). *ChÅndok* (turning and reading) was used to pray for the longevity of the ruler, and is contrasted to *chindok* or "true reading." This part is a fitting climax to the book, as it places this lasting monument of KoryÅ Buddhism in its religio-political milieu.

This book should be a reference for anyone interested in the history of Korean Buddhism, and it should be studied for comparative purposes, for it puts this Buddhism into its East Asian context, and gives some indications of the changes in KoryÅ Buddhism over time. KoryÅ Buddhism was not only state-supported but also inclusive, having its origins in Silla Buddhism. However, due to Wang KÅn, Buddhism developed in distinctive ways in KoryÅ, the most remarkable of which were the monastic bureaucracy, the proliferation of rituals, and the intimate associations with the ruling dynasty. In addition, the appendix includes biographical abstracts of seventy-six KoryÅ monks in order of their date of death. The criteria for inclusion were the existence of certain key data, which means some monks who were otherwise relatively important, such as KyÅnghan Paek'un (1298-1375), were not included. This data is useful for various purposes. Vermeersch also provides a character list, bibliography, and index. This book covers much material expertly and opens up some new avenues for research into areas that have been relatively neglected in Buddhist studies.

Note

[1]. Kim Samyong, *Han'guk MirÅk sin'ang Åi yÅn'gu* [Studies of Korean Maitreya belief] (Seoul: Tonghwa, 1983), 150-152; and Kim Kil'ung, *KoryÅ Åi sÅk pulsang* [The stone Buddhas of KoryÅ] (Seoul: PÅpin munhwasa, 1994), 61-62, 64, 76-79.

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