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Buddhist Yŏnghŏm (Wonder) and Royal Power in Early Chosŏn Korea: The Political Use of Buddhism during the Reign of King Sejo

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Abstract: With the establishment of Chosŏn, the adoption of the Cheng-Zhu learning as its official ruling ideology led to the suppression of Buddhism, and the role of Buddhism in the public domain gradually diminished. However, the importance and influence of Buddhism in both thought and faith since the period of the Three Kingdoms were so great that it was very difficult to reduce them in a short period of time. Moreover, the state policy regarding Buddhism was a very complicated issue, involving the practical interests of the political powers of early Chosŏn. As a result, for a period of time after the foundation of the new dynasty, Buddhism still remained rather influential in many areas, not only as an ideology but also as a religion, and the differences in positions toward Buddhism between the king and the Confucian literati sometimes led to tensions and conflicts. Under these circumstances, Sejo, the seventh king of Chosŏn, came to power through a coup, purging many officials as well as his own blood relatives. Consequently, it was difficult for him to legitimize his kingship through Confucianism, which emphasizes socioethical values. Although the official role of Buddhism in the state was diminished, King Sejo sought to capitalize on its sociocultural influence, especially by endowing the phenomena of Buddhist wonders with political significance and using them as a means to enhance his authority. During his 14-year reign, Buddhist wonders, such as the appearance of the Buddha or the dividing of śarīra in Wŏn'gaksa Temple, Sangwŏnsa Temple, are believed to have occurred approximately 40 times. The perception that King Sejo's merits led to the manifestation of wonder and that his subsequent gifts generated new merits for him likely served to increase his authority and strengthen his political power. Officials hardly resisted Sejo's use of Buddhism, and as a result, the phenomenon of Buddhist wonder and related royal pardons occurred during his reign more than any other reign period during Chosŏn. The Buddhist wonders, along with large-scale pardons and gifts, allowed King Sejo to portray himself as a monarch with great benevolence and authority and also to use as a public tactic to comfort his people. Therefore, Buddhism served as a religion that helped the king create an ideal public image for himself, and with this Buddhism, the king could increase his royal authority.



Citation: Ch'oe, Kyŏng-hwan. 2024. Buddhist Yŏnghŏm (Wonder) and Royal Power in Early Chosŏn Korea: The Political Use of Buddhism during the Reign of King Sejo. *Religions* 15: 912. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080912>

Academic Editor: Seong Uk Kim

Received: 1 June 2024

Revised: 24 July 2024

Accepted: 25 July 2024

Published: 27 July 2024

Keywords: King Sejo (世祖); the Buddhist wonder (靈應); the appearance of tathāgatas and bodhisattvas; the division of śarīra; Wŏn'gaksa Temple (圓覺寺); Sangwŏnsa Temple (上院寺)



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1. Introduction

In most of the Koryŏ period, Confucianism and Buddhism played distinct roles, with the former influencing politics and the latter guiding religious practices. This symbiotic relationship was a key feature of state governance and social integration at the time (P. Ch'oe 2012, p. 6). However, the situation changed in late Koryŏ, introducing a complex interplay of socioeconomic issues regarding Buddhism. The unproductivity of monks, the excessive government support, and the subsequent strain on the state's finances all came to the forefront. The importation of the Cheng-Zhu learning from China further complicated matters, providing an ideological basis for the anti-Buddhist movement. However, criticisms of

Buddhism, primarily centered on its socioeconomic problems, were driven by the practical need to stabilize state finances. With the exception of Chǒng Tojǒn 鄭道傳 (1342–1398), these criticisms were not ideological but political or economic in nature.

The Chosǒn dynasty, established by the Confucian literati, marked a significant shift in governance. It adopted the Cheng-Zhu learning¹ as its official ruling ideology, and the Confucian literati, driven by the ideals of this learning, actively participated in governance. They sought to establish a bureaucracy aligned with Confucian ideology. Consequently, the anti-Buddhist policy was enforced after the dynasty's founding, leading to a gradual loss of Buddhism's role in the public sphere. This change was sweeping and radical, reflecting the dominance of Confucianism at the time (Nam 2013, p. 143).

Yet, the suppression of a previous religion or idea, or the abolition or alteration of its associated institutions within a short period of time, was a formidable challenge, entangled with practical interests (To 2004, pp. 19–22). Buddhism, having long held a significant role as a religion for the royal family, the scholar-officials, and the general public, could not be erased from the social fabric overnight. While the Confucian literati, in their quest to establish a Confucian state, championed Confucian ideals in official social and political spheres, Buddhism continued to thrive in various other domains, including religious rituals (Buswell 1999, pp. 135–40). Until at least the 15th century, Buddhism remained a vital practice and enduring tradition for the royal family, the general public, and even some Confucian literati (Y. Kim 2018, p. 248). Many of the ceremonial rituals, festivals, and seasonal customs were conducted in a Buddhist manner, underscoring the lasting influence of Buddhism.

Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that differences in attitudes toward Buddhism would emerge depending on who was in power. Unlike the Confucian literati, who sought to establish a political system based on the ideology of the Cheng-Zhu learning, some kings and the royal family during early Chosǒn took a favorable stance toward Buddhism, which caused the conflict between them and the Confucian officials (S. Kim 2020, pp. 79–80). The royal family's stance on Buddhism and the reasons for their beliefs cannot be explained simply by personal religious preferences, but rather by a combination of factors. They could not easily ignore the influence of Buddhism when seeking to strengthen royal power, along with the contribution of the religion to the maintenance of the ruling system. In terms of the actual relationship between state power and religion, Buddhism had been closely associated with the king since the time of the Buddha in India, and in China, it was especially directly connected to the emperor, promoting the idea that the "king is the Buddha." In Korea, Buddhism had been directly linked to the royal family of ancient kingdoms from the beginning, contributing to the development of the state and the strengthening of royal power. In Koryǒ, in particular, the Buddhist order was incorporated into the state system, making important contributions to the establishment of royal legitimacy and social integration. This relationship between the king and Buddhism can be seen to have continued in part until the early Chosǒn dynasty (K. Ch'oe 2021, pp. 1–3).

The relationship between kingship and Buddhism was the strongest during the reign of Sejo² (r. 1455–1468), Chosǒn's seventh king. While the anti-Buddhist policy was being implemented, Sejo took various measures to protect monks and temples, and he also rebuilt and constructed a number of temples. Since he came to power by killing his own flesh and blood through a coup, it was difficult to secure the legitimacy of his ascension to the throne with Confucianism. In particular, the death of the six martyred ministers who had been loyal to the previous king created a social milieu to promote loyalty in Chosǒn society and became a social excuse to criticize the unfairness of King Sejo's regime. Under these circumstances, the king maintained a favorable stance toward Buddhism and promoted the strengthening of the king's authority. There are several studies on his Buddhist beliefs and Buddhist policies, most of which treat him as a Buddhist monarch.³

This article seeks to understand the phenomena of Buddhist wonder that occurred during the 14-year reign of King Sejo in relation to political issues. The power of Buddhist wonder stories in a Buddhist-oriented society, such as Koryǒ, was evident, and kings of this

period left a number of records and artifacts, presenting themselves as a representation of the ideal Buddhist King or attributing important political meaning to wondrous Buddhist phenomena, such as the manifestation of bodhisattvas (Yang 2022, pp. 2–3). In the end, this was linked to the tactic of strengthening royal power. From this vantage point, this article will examine the meanings and characteristics of Buddhist wonders during the reign of King Sejo. And this article seeks to understand the relationship of Buddhist wonder to political issues during King Sejo's 14-year reign.

2. King Sejo's State Governance and Buddhism

The fourth king of Chosŏn, Sejong (r. 1418–1450), stabilized and strengthened the royal power and greatly overhauled and developed the social, cultural, political, and economic institutes. However, in the second half of his reign, due to his deteriorating health, it became difficult for King Sejong to directly control the six-ministry system that concentrated the governing duty on the king, so in the 18th year of his reign (1436), a shift was made to expand the participation of the state council.⁴ King Sejong allowed the council to control the six ministries, which eventually eased his burden. However, around the 25th year of his reign (1443), the king's health deteriorated further, making it almost impossible for him to directly supervise state affairs himself, so he had the crown prince act on his behalf.

King Munjong (r. 1450–1452) favored the scholars and showed the promise of great governance skills with the knowledge and experience he had as the regent crown prince for his father king, Sejong. However, King Munjong was physically weak and often sick,⁵ and eventually died of illness after only two years in power.⁶ As the throne was passed on to the young Tanjong (r. 1452–1455) under the weakened royal authority of Munjong, Tanjong's political power was bound to be even more fragile. Therefore, some officials emerged as a royal advisory group, such as Hwangbo In 皇甫仁 (1387–1453) and Kim Chongsŏ 金宗瑞 (1383–1453), who had received King Munjong's deathbed order, and these officials and the state council handled the state affairs (S. Ch'oe 1998, pp. 9–11). In the 1st year of Tanjong (1452), after he ascended the throne, he issued 24 articles through the royal edict, the core of which was intended to strengthen the state council's power.⁷ If you examine the content, you will see that the essential power of state governance was concentrated in the council.

This situation led to a backlash from the royal family such as Prince Suyang 首陽, the would-be King Sejo, and the confrontation and conflict between the royal family and the state council intensified. The power rivalry between Prince Suyang and Prince Anp'yŏng 安平大君 (1418–1353) also took place, and even the bureaucrats were divided into two sides that supported each of the two princes, which resulted in serious political tensions. In the end, the Prince Suyang group overpowered and eliminated the opposition in October of the 1st year of King Tanjong (1453), including Kim Chongsŏ and Hwangbo In, who were obstacles to their seizing of power.⁸ Afterward, Prince Suyang took over the throne, and in an effort to secure the legitimacy of his usurpation, he implemented various policies to strengthen the royal power and stabilize the ruling system; for example, he initiated the compilation of *the National Code* (*Kyŏngguk taejŏn*) 經國大典, the national law code that was completed after his death, to provide a crucial legal foundation for state governance. On the other hand, King Sejo's rule was characterized by confrontations and conflicts among the ruling class, bringing a significant change in political power groups. In order to weaken the power of the state council, which was the central body of the existing governance system, and the ministers, who represented the bureaucrats, as well as to enhance the royal authority, King Sejo consolidated his relationship with those who had assisted him to rise to the throne. He employed them to run the state affairs, and these people became firmly established as the upper ruling class, providing great support for the king's governance.

The ideal political picture, as King Sejo envisioned through the series of policies that he had adopted, was one in which the state policies were formulated and carried out under the leadership of an outstanding monarch, and the object of obedience was only that monarch. It was not acceptable to follow and obey the orders of a crown prince⁹ or even

the opinions of sage scholars, such as Zhu Xi.¹⁰ King Sejo, in particular, tried to utilize various traditions without being bound by the Cheng-Zhu ideology. He could not easily forgo Buddhism, which had a long tradition of contributing to the strengthening of royal power. Therefore, in addition to his personal faith in Buddhism, he used Buddhist influence in policy as needed while legitimizing his authority. Just like the previous Chosŏn kings, he reorganized the Confucian political framework as the basis for his rule, but he also took a tolerant stance toward Buddhism and even criticized the attitude of Confucian officials who slandered Buddhism.¹¹

In King Sejo's references to Buddhism, we can see the emphasis on comforting people, which was often cited as one of the rationales for the Buddhist policies he had implemented, along with "a conventional practice since the time of the ancestral kings." In fact, many of the royal and state Buddhist events in early Chosŏn were conducted under these rationales, i.e., for the comfort of the people in times of disaster or illness or for the postmortem welfare of the deceased king and royal family member. For example, in the 1st year of King Munjong (1451), when an endemic circulated in Kyŏnggi province and thus a water-and-land ritual was performed, the king responded to the request of the Inspector-General Office to prohibit the ritual by saying, "This is only to comfort the people according to their wishes. Sickness is caused by the heart, so the sickness will sometimes cease if the heart is comforted."¹² It is in this vein that King Sejo told his son, "You should not necessarily imitate all that your father did in worshipping the Buddha...When you see clothes, consider the difficulty of a woman's work. When you see food, think of farmers' hard work,"¹³ emphasizing the need for a pro-Buddhist policy.

In the end, when King Sejo sought to strengthen his royal power, he could not abandon the usefulness of various ideologies and religions, especially, the influence of Buddhism on people and its contribution to the maintenance of the ruling system. King Sejo's strong political power enabled him to subdue the opposition of the Confucian officials, which presented the basis for the implementation of the pro-Buddhist policy in Chosŏn that had promoted the Cheng-Zhu learning as the state ideology.¹⁴

As part of this policy, various measures were taken to protect monks and temples, and these measures were to be put into *the National Code (Kyŏngguk taejŏn)*. Not only could no officials or students enter the temple without permission, but even in the case of monks who committed a crime, officials were required to report to the king before arresting and interrogating them, and officials' access to the temple was restricted by requiring prior permission to search the temple.

Along with these efforts, the king also exempted temples from diverse state duties.¹⁵ In addition to the administrative and legal measures for the protection of monks and temples, King Sejo's particular contributions to the Buddhist community were in the patronage of temples and the publication of Buddhist texts.

First, he offered financial support for the construction of a number of pagodas and temples. For example, in the 3th year of his reign (1457), he reconstructed Chŏngŏbwŏn 淨業院, which had been closed since the 30th year of King Sejong (1448), and granted it 100 *kyŏl* of land and 30 slaves; in the following year (1458), he rebuilt Chŏnginsa Temple 正因寺 in honor of the late Prince Ŭigyŏng 懿敬 (1438–1457); in the 9th year of his reign (1463), he built Changŭisa Temple 壯義寺 and Suryuksa Temple 水陸社; and in the 10th year (1464), he ordered the Chŏlla provincial governor to assist the reconstruction of To-gapsa Temple 道岬寺. In the 10th year (1464), he began the construction of Wŏn'gaksa Temple 圓覺寺 on the site of Hŭngboksa 興福寺 and completed it the following year.

King Sejo also sponsored the repair and reconstruction of Haainsa Temple 海印寺, Sang-wŏnsa Temple 上院寺, Ch'ŏngamsa Temple 靑巖寺, Hoeamsa Temple 檜巖寺, Sillŭksa Temple 神勒寺, and Ssangbongsas Temple 雙峰寺 and visited and made offerings to Pokch'ŏnsa Temple 福泉寺, Wŏlchŏngsa Temple 月精寺, Yujŏmsa Temple 楡岾寺, and Naksansa Temple 洛山寺 throughout the peninsula. The king also granted land and cloth to many temples and even ordered a ban on entering some temple precincts for protection, for example, in the case of Naksansa Temple (P. Yi 2015, pp. 393–94). In addition, King Sejo established

Kan'gyōng Togam 刊經都監, the state office for the publication of Buddhist texts. A subsequent large-scale publication of Buddhist texts on a state level, led by this office, reflected his strong royal power.¹⁶

3. Buddhist Wonders during King Sejo's Reign and Their Meanings

King Sejo was interested in Buddhism from his time as a prince and even expressed his faith in Buddhism. It is said that he even said, "There is as much difference between Buddhism and Confucianism as that between heaven and earth" to the question of which is higher between the ways of Confucius and Śākyamuni.¹⁷ Due to the illegitimacy of his ascension to the throne in terms of the Confucian standard, he decided to use Buddhism—in particular, Buddhist wonders—to solve his political problems.

Buddhist wonders refer to supernatural religious experiences based on the Buddhist belief system, which attribute meaning to mysterious Buddhist phenomena such as flower rains or unusual scents. Due to the great influence and power of these Buddhist wonders, although the role of Buddhism in the public sphere was reduced by the adoption of the Cheng-Zhu learning as the official ruling ideology in the Chosŏn dynasty, King Sejo could use Buddhist wonders on his behalf, providing political meanings to these phenomena.

In the *Sejo sillok*, the records of Buddhist wonders appear from the 8th year of his reign (1462), but other records show that these phenomena began to appear even before. By the time of his death in 1468, the Buddhist phenomena of wonder had appeared about 40 times, and several royal pardons were issued afterward. The Table 1 below summarizes them:¹⁸

Table 1. Buddhist wonder and pardon during Sejo's reign.

Date (Reign Year. Month. Day)	Place	Wonder	Pardon
6. 5. n/a	Unknown	śārīra division	
7. 4. n/a	Palace garden	sweet dew	
7. 5. 13	Hoeamsa Temple	śārīra division	
7. 5. 13	Gwangdeoksa Temple	śārīra division	Celebration offered
7. 5. 17	Hamwon Hall, Palace	śārīra division	
8. 11. 5	Sangwonsa Temple	Avalokiteśvara appearance	Celebration offered, pardon issued
9. 6. 15	Tongdosa Temple	śārīra division	Celebration offered, pardon issued for those who committed less serious crimes than robbery and thefts
9. 6. 18	Jeongeobwon	śārīra	Celebration offered, pardon issued for those who committed less serious crimes than robbery and thefts
9. 7. 2	Janguisa Temple	śārīra, colorful dew	Celebration offered
10. 5. 2	Hoeamsa Temple	tathāgata appearance, sweet dew, wonder monks	Celebration offered, pardon issued for those who committed less serious crimes than robbery and thefts
10. 5. 10	Hoeamsa Temple	śārīra	Pardon incarcerated officials
10. 6. 13	Won'gaksa Temple	flower rain, unusual scents	Celebration offered, pardon issued, gifts granted
10. 9. 11	Won'gaksa Temple	auspicious aura	Celebration offered
10. 9. 25	Won'gaksa Temple	auspicious aura	Celebration offered, pardon issued

Table 1. Cont.

Date (Reign Year. Month. Day)	Place	Wonder	Pardon
10. 9. 30	Won'gaksa Temple	śārīra division	
10. 10. 1	Geunjeongjeon, Gangnyeongjeon Palace	śārīra, auspicious aura	Celebration offered, pardon issued
10. 10. 23	Won'gaksa Temple	unusual scents auspicious aura	Celebration offered
11. 3. 1	Won'gaksa Temple	śārīra	Celebration offered
11. 4. 4		śārīra, auspicious aura	Celebration offered, pardon issued
11. 4. 8		sweet dew, flower rain	Celebration offered, pardon issued
11. 4. 11		śārīra,	Celebration offered, pardon issued, gifts granted
11. 4. 13		sweet dew (sutami 須陀味)	Celebration offered
11. 5. 6	Won'gaksa Temple	śārīra, flower rain	Celebration offered, pardon issued
11. 7. 26	Janguisa Temple	śārīra, auspicious aura	Celebration offered
11. 12. 24	Won'gaksa Temple	śārīra, auspicious aura	Celebration offered
12. 1. 23		śārīra	Celebration offered, pardon issued
12. 3. 21	Jangansa Temple Jeongyangsa Temple Pyohunsa Temple	sweet dew, flower rain, auspicious aura, earthquake, unusual scents śārīra, etc.	Celebration offered, pardon issued
12. 3. 29	P'yohunsa Temple	auspicious clouds, auspicious aura, flower rain	Celebration offered, pardon issued, gifts granted
12. 3. 17	Sangwonsa Temple	śārīra	Pardon issued
12. 3. 27		śārīra	Celebration offered, pardon issued
12. 4. 12	Won'gaksa Temple	śārīra, sweet dew	Celebration offered
12. 7. 15	Won'gaksa Temple	light radiation	Celebration offered
12. 10. 16	Won'gaksa Temple	śārīra, auspicious aura	Celebration offered
13. 4. 7	Won'gaksa Temple Garden at Gyeongbok Palac	sweet dew śārīra	Celebration offered, pardon issued
13. 4. 11	Won'gaksa Temple	śārīra, flower rain, auspicious aura	Celebration offered, pardon issued
14. 1. 24		śārīra	Celebration offered, pardon issued
14. 5. 14	Hamwon Hall	śārīra	Celebration offered, pardon issued
14. 5. 16	Palace garden	sweet dew	Ordered to pick them up and showed them to people

The types of Buddhist wonders during King Sejo's reign can be roughly divided into the following categories: (1) the appearance of tathāgatas and bodhisattvas; (2) the division of śārīra¹⁹; (3) flower rains; (4) sweet dew and sutami 須陀味; (5) the radiation of the light; (6) weather anomalies, such as five-colored clouds and fog; (7) auspicious signs through animals; (8) earthquake; and (9) auspicious aura without specific explanation. The most common wonder that occurred during the king's reign was the division of śārīra, which refers to the phenomenon that the śārīra of the Buddha or a renowned monk, an object of worship, was created and spontaneously divided into pieces, and so many people could enshrine and worship them (Seyōn Pak 2011, p. 39). In addition, there appeared auspicious aura, flower rains, sweet dew, and even the Buddha. These Buddhist wonders often

took place together, and on more than half of the occasions, there was śarīra division as a main phenomenon with one or more other wonders happening simultaneously. The most frequent place where a Buddhist wonder appeared was in Temple Wŏn'gaksa Temple, and the foundation of this temple and the Buddhist wonders in it can be found in the *Sejo sillok* 世祖實錄 and Kim Suon's 金守溫 (1410–1481) *Sigujip* 拭疣集:

Prince Hyoryŏng 孝寧 built a stone bell on the hill east of Hermitage Hoeam, enshrined Śākyamuni Buddha's śarīra, and held a dharma assembly where the *Wŏn'gak sudara yoŭigyŏng* 圓覺修多羅了義經 was preached. In the evening of the same day, the tathāgata appeared in the sky, a mysterious monk walked on the altar, auspicious aura overflowed, the rays of the light shone, the sweet spring gushed out, and the śarīra was divided into 800 pieces. On the tiger day of May, when the śarīra was offered, the king and the queen worshipped the Buddha at Hamwon Hall, and the śarīra was once more divided into 400 pieces. Then, all the officials offered a poem to the king together and celebrated the occasion. The king issued a pardon and ordered the state council, saying, "I translated a phrase [of the *Wŏn'gak sudara yoŭigyŏng*] and was about to disseminate it, following its meaning. Uncle Prince Hyoryŏng held a dharma assembly, and all buddhas and tathāgatas appeared. Since this is an uncommon occurrence in the defiled world, why don't we reconstruct the old temple Hŭngboksa Temple and name it Wŏn'gaksa Temple (Perfect Enlightenment), and add righteousness to the supreme dharma phrase?" All officials bowed their heads and put their hands together, saying, "How dare we not honor the king's beautiful order?"²⁰

According to this report, in April of the 10th year of King Sejo (1464), the king's uncle, Prince Hyoryŏng 孝寧, erected a stone bell on a hermitage, enshrined the Buddha's śarīra, and had the *Wŏn'gak sudara yoŭigyŏng* preached. Afterward, there were wonders: the Buddha appeared, and the śarīra was divided. King Sejo, with his queen, took a piece of the śarīra and paid respect to the Buddha. He issued pardons, saying that the *Wŏn'gak sudara yoŭigyŏng* alone had shown the fruit of the ultimate level among all scriptures. When he suggested the plan to reconstruct Hŭngboksa Temple and rename it Wŏn'gaksa Temple, all officials agreed to the plan. Since Wŏn'gaksa Temple was built in a prime location, more than 200 surrounding houses were demolished and compensated at three times their original values, so it can be assumed that the cost of cleaning up the area to build the temple was enormous.²¹ It is said that the process of rebuilding Wŏn'gaksa Temple required 80,000 pieces of blue roof tiles to cover the main hall.²² Furthermore, some of the lumber for the reconstruction was cut down in the Chungcheong province, and when an official in charge of the project caused inconvenience to people because of his ambition to impress the king, King Sejo ordered the project to be finished without any harm to the people.²³ After many twists and turns, including casualties during the project,²⁴ it was completed in the 11th year of King Sejo (1465). The *Sejo sillok* reports:

The construction of Wŏn'gaksa Temple was completed. There were 128 monks who attended the celebration, and the king read the *Wŏn'gak sudara yoŭigyŏng* with *Kugyŏl* (Korean markers) on it, and he granted food to 20,000 monks. On this day Sejo visited Wŏn'gaksa Temple.

After the celebration, a series of pardons that released criminals or reduced taxes were issued because the śarīra of Wŏn'gaksa Temple displayed a wonder several more times. Interpreting that a Buddhist wonder happened thanks to the king's merits and the king's granting of gifts made new merits for him apparently served to increase the king's authority and strengthen his political foundation. The officials offered little resistance to King Sejo's measures that utilized Buddhist wonders, and almost all of the Buddhist wonders and the related royal pardons that occurred during the five hundred years of the Chosŏn dynasty were concentrated in King Sejo's reign.

Next, the Buddhist wonders that occurred on the occasion of the reconstruction of Sangwŏnsa Temple in Yangpyeong are well documented in "Sangwŏnsa chungch'anggi"

上院寺重創記 and the *Kwanŭm hyŏnsanggi* 觀音現相記. According to “Sangwŏnsa chungch’anggi,” written by Kim Suon, the reconstruction began as part of King Sejo’s search for a place to pray to cure his illness, and in April 1457 (3rd year of his reign), when the king was ill for ten days, he sent his most trusted court eunuch to Sinmi 信眉 (?–?) and Hagyoŭl 學悅 (?–?) to find a place to build a temple. Sinmi and others, at the king’s order, recommended that Sangwŏnsa Temple, which had been burned down at the time, was a place of Buddhist wonders with numinous geomantic power. As such, the reconstruction was carried out.²⁵ After the reconstruction, the king granted 500 *seok* 石 of rice and 1000 rolls of cloth and held a large celebration with 52 renowned scholar monks.²⁶ In addition, it was later found out that the king had put his outer and inner robes made of silk, along with Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Lotus Sutra*, into the statue of Mañjuśrī at the temple. Inside the statue, there was also found a vow of Princess Ŭisuk 懿淑 (1441–1478), in which she and her husband prayed in the 12th year of King Sejo (1466) for the longevity of the king, the queen, and the crown prince, while offering to the temple the statues of Śākyamuni, Bhaisajyaguru, Samantabhadra, Maitreya, and Kwanŭm (Avalokiteśvara).²⁷ Through this process, Sangwŏnsa Temple became the center of attention in Chosŏn as a place of prayer for King Sejo’s illness. The *Gwanŭm hyŏnsanggi*, written by Ch’oe Hang 崔恒 (1409–1474) in 1462 (8th year of King Sejo) at the royal order, provides a detailed account of the Buddhist wonders that occurred after the temple’s founding, as well as people’s reactions and the royal pardons and gifts.

To give a brief summary of the record, the weather, which had previously been dark and dreary, cleared up as King Sejo and his entourage approached the temple. The sound of a Buddhist song was heard from the temple where no one was present. The king himself heard the loud song on the way up to the temple and thought that Prince Hyoryŏng had already called the monks of the temple to hold a dharma assembly, but when he arrived at the temple, there was no one there.²⁸ In addition, a white-robed Kwanŭm, wearing a circle around his neck, with his robe open and radiating light from his body, appeared in the clouds above the temple. The king in the temple saw the phenomenon first, and the soldiers outside the temple were at first confused as to the reason for the glow until they climbed the mountain and realized it was Kwanŭm. Afterward, the king pardoned all but the most heinous crimes of treason and murder, commemorating such divine phenomena that he had encountered in the temple.²⁹

In Buddhism, since Bodhisattva Kwanŭm represents compassion, guiding sentient beings to the Pure Land, bringing fortune to them, and also dispelling calamities, the appearance of the bodhisattva before King Sejo in the record could be interpreted as an auspicious sign that Chosŏn would be protected by the bodhisattva. In these accounts, the king is also portrayed as possessing the virtues of the Buddha and being in communication with the Buddha, an image that would help the king present himself as a divine being who could meet the Bodhisattva himself in the Buddha Land. In the end, it can be said that the king could strengthen his authority by relying on the Buddhist wonders.

King Sejo issued pardons and granted gifts to commemorate the Buddhist wonders that took place during his reign. As mentioned, pardons were for people who had committed common crimes, not felonies, and these pardons were often accompanied by gifts. For example, in April 1465 (11th year of his reign), King Sejo exempted some state taxes, such as past-due land tax, and rewarded all officials by adding one grade to their salaries, and in March 1466 (12th year of his reign), when he traveled to Mt. Kŭmgang and experienced a wonder, he granted various gifts. These pardons and gifts increased towards the end of his reign, when people’s opposition was also increasing to his policy to strengthen the royal power.³⁰ It can be said that King Sejo’s use of Buddhist wonders and subsequent issuing of pardons and gifts, therefore, had political intentions to reduce people’s discontent and to create his image as an authoritative but compassionate monarch.

4. Concluding Remarks

With the establishment of Chosŏn, the adoption of the Cheng-Zhu learning as its official ruling ideology led to the suppression of Buddhism, and the role of Buddhism in the public domain gradually diminished. However, the importance and influence of Buddhism in both thought and faith since the period of the Three Kingdoms were so great that it was very difficult to reduce them in a short period of time. Moreover, the state policy regarding Buddhism was a very complicated issue, involving the practical interests of the political powers of early Chosŏn. As a result, for a period of time after the foundation of the new dynasty, Buddhism still remained rather influential in many areas, not only as an ideology but also as a religion, and the differences in positions toward Buddhism between the king and the Confucian literati sometimes led to tensions and conflicts.

Under these circumstances, Sejo, the seventh king of Chosŏn, came to power through a coup, purging many officials, as well as his own blood relatives. Consequently, it was difficult for him to legitimize his kingship through Confucianism, which emphasizes socioethical values. Although the official role of Buddhism in the state was diminished, King Sejo sought to capitalize on its sociocultural influence, especially by endowing the phenomena of Buddhist wonder with political significance and using them as a means to enhance his authority. During his 14-year reign, Buddhist wonders, such as the appearance of the Buddha or the dividing of śāra, are believed to have occurred approximately 40 times. The perception that King Sejo's merits led to the manifestation of wonder and that his subsequent gifts generated new merits for him likely served to increase his authority and strengthen his political power. Officials hardly resisted Sejo's use of Buddhism, and as a result, the phenomenon of Buddhist wonder and related royal pardons occurred during his reign more than any other reign period during Chosŏn.

The Buddhist wonders, along with large-scale pardons and gifts, allowed King Sejo to portray himself as a monarch with great benevolence and authority and also to use as a public tactic to comfort his people. Therefore, Buddhism served as a religion that helped the king create an ideal public image for himself, and with this Buddhism, the king could increase his royal authority.

Funding: This work was supported by the Fostering a New Wave of K-Academics Program of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service (KSPS) at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-KDA-1250007).

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The Cheng-Zhu learning is a branch of Neo-Confucianism that was born out of a sense of criticism about the formalized and uniformed Confucianism in response to Buddhism during the Song Dynasty. It is based on the ideas of the Neo-Confucian philosophers Ch'eng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).
- ² King Sejo was the seventh king of Chosŏn, killing the sixth King Tanjong and usurping the throne by force. In this process, the six martyred ministers or Sayuksin (死六臣) incident, which attempted to kill King Sejo and restore King Tanjong, occurred, but failed.
- ³ See (Kwŏn 1993; C. Yi 2006; Chin 2007; C. Kim 2010; Pak 2011; P. Yi 2015; Yang 2022).
- ⁴ *Sejong sillok* 72, Musin 戊申 of the 4th month of the 18th year of Sejong.
- ⁵ *Munjong sillok* 10, Sinhae 辛亥 of the 10th month of the 1st year of Munjong.
- ⁶ *Munjong sillok* 13, Kabo 甲午 of the 5th month of the 2nd year of Munjong.
- ⁷ *Tanjong sillok* 1, Kyŏngsul 庚戌 of the 5th month of the 1st year of Tanjong.
- ⁸ *Tanjong sillok* 8, kyesa 癸巳 of the 10th month of the ascending year of Tanjong.
- ⁹ *Sejo sillok* 32, Pyŏngin 丙寅 of the 3rd month of the 10th year of Sejo.
- ¹⁰ *Sejo sillok* 39, Chŏnggo 丁午 of the 9th month of the 12th year of Sejo; *Sejo sillok* 39, Mujin 戊辰 of the 8th month of the 12th year of Sejo.

- 11 *Sejo sillok* 5, Kyöngjin 庚辰 of the 11th month of the 2nd year of Sejo; *Sejo sillok* 7, Pyöngsul 丙戌 of the 3rd month of the 3rd year of Sejo.
- 12 *Munjong sillok* 9, Kyech'uk 癸丑 of the 9th month of the 1st year of Munjong.
- 13 *Sejo sillok* 31, Pyöngsin 丙申 of the 10th month of the 9th year of Sejo.
- 14 After King Sejo took the throne, it was such a coercive situation that King Sejo himself admitted that the Confucian officials could not finish what they wanted to say. In particular, when the Confucian official criticized Buddhism to Sejo, Sejo often got angry. In this situation, Confucian officials' criticism of Buddhism mainly arose from financial problems. For example, in the process of creating a Buddha statuette in Sangwönsa Temple in the 9th year of King Sejo (1463), there was opposition from Yejo's (禮曹), but Sejo suppressed and supported it. (*Sejo sillok* 31, Kyemi 癸未 of the 9th month of the 9th year of Sejo)
- 15 *Sejo sillok* 7, Pyöngsul 丙戌 of the 3rd month of the 3rd year of Sejo.
- 16 In the course of national policy promoted by the repressive policy in the early Chosön Dynasty, King Sejo's policy of non-recession can be evaluated as a very unique example. In understanding the reign of King Sejo, the fact that King Sejo is a devout believer and a monarch who attempted to conceive and realize the state's ruling system are factors that must be considered when evaluating the Buddhism policy of the King Sejo period.
- 17 *Sejong sillok* 122, Chöngsa 丁巳 of the 12th month of the 30th year of Sejong.
- 18 Based on (Kwön 1993; C. Yi 2006; Pak 2011).
- 19 Śāriira is commonly used to refer to bead-shaped objects, such as pearls and crystals, which are known to be found on the cremated remains of Buddhist spiritual teachers. These objects are considered important artifacts by many sects of Buddhism because they are believed to embody the spiritual knowledge, teaching, enlightenment, or living essence of a spiritual teacher.
- 20 "Tae Myöng Chosön kuk tae Wön'gaksa pimyoŋg" 大明朝鮮國大圓覺寺碑銘, *Sigujip* 拭疣集 yubo 補遺.
- 21 *Sejo sillok* 33, Chöngyu 丁酉 of the 6th month of the 10th year of Sejo.
- 22 *Sejo sillok* 33, Kabo 甲午 of the 6th month of the 10th year of Sejo.
- 23 *Sejo sillok* 34, Ŭryu 乙酉 of the 8th month of the 10th year of Sejo.
- 24 *Sejo sillok* 34, Imjin 壬辰 of the 8th month of the 10th year of Sejo; *Sejo sillok* 35, Kapchin 甲辰 of the 2nd month of the 11th year of Sejo.
- 25 "Record of the Restoration of Sangwönsa Temple" (Sangwönsa chungch'anggi 上院寺重創記), *Sigujip* 拭疣集 2.
- 26 See note 25.
- 27 See (Wölichöngsa söngbo pangmulgwan 2000, pp. 45–67).
- 28 *Kwanüm hyönsanggi*, 觀音現相記; (Yang 2022, pp. 22–23).
- 29 *Kwanüm hyönsanggi*, 觀音現相記.
- 30 See (Pak 2011, p. 45).

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Kwanüm hyönsanggi 觀音現相記
Munjong sillok 文宗實錄
Sejo sillok 世祖實錄
Sejong sillok 世宗實錄
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