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Sung-Eun Thomas Kim

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The Chosŏn Gentry Sponsorship of Buddhist Temple Works: Insights from the Records of Late-Chosŏn Donor Ledgers

Sung-Eun Thomas Kim

Abstract

Much has been written about the Chosŏn scholar-officials and the gentry but very little is known about their private affairs, such as their religious activities. To date, socio-political elite males of the Chosŏn period are accepted to have been averse to heterodox traditions, especially heterodox rituals. Despite the overall lack of research on their private lives, it seems this group of men did leave behind clear records of their activities and involvement with Buddhist temples. Indeed, these Chosŏn elites took part in Buddhist events and temple works more than has been realized. This article focuses on the donor ledgers for temple works, which reveal a trove of evidence of the intimate relationship that existed in the Chosŏn period between the Buddhist temples and wealthy gentry women and men. Not much different from the Koryŏ period, during the succeeding Chosŏn period sponsorship by the wealthy and powerful was a lifeline for Buddhism. Despite the five centuries under Confucian rule and anti-Buddhist state policies, during the Chosŏn dynasty the monastic community was able to continue its relationship not only with the masses but also with the socio-political elites. We are aware that beyond the polemical relationship between the Confucian elite and Buddhism, there existed a cultural framework where Buddhism provided to the societal elites not only religious meaning, but socio-cultural significance, practices, and identity.

Keywords: Chosŏn Buddhism, temple works, donor ledger, nectar ritual paintings, Buddhist memorial steles, socio-political elites, Confucianization, temple culture

Sung-Eun Thomas Kim is an assistant professor in the Institute for Buddhist Cultural Studies 佛教文化研究院 at Dongguk University, Seoul. Some of his recent publications include “Silencing the Culture of Chosŏn Buddhism: The Ideology of Exclusion of the Chosŏn Sillok” (2019) and “Korean Buddhist Adoption of Shamanic Religious Ethos: Healing, Fortune Seeking, and the Afterlife” (2018).

Correspondence: tsghim@gmail.com

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“One of the problems, though, is that we are often still looking at systems or religions and not at individuals and the highly contextualized spaces in which they practice.”

(Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, 228)

Introduction: Sponsorship of Buddhism by Societal Elites

For its sustenance and operations, Buddhism has depended on the donations of wealthy and powerful patrons. This has been true from the beginning of the community of Buddhist monks in ancient India starting from the time of its founder, the Buddha.¹ These patrons have usually been the kings of states or wealthy and powerful families, including members of the royal family. Such cases abounded also throughout the history of Korean Buddhism in the ancient and medieval periods of Silla and Koryŏ. However, the situation of Buddhism is unclear during the Chosŏn period, a time when the state under the rule of Confucian kings and court officials promulgated anti-Buddhist policies in line with the polemical attacks on Buddhism by neo-Confucian scholars-officials.

The fact of the matter is there is no clear understanding of how Buddhism survived, especially through the late Chosŏn period, and where it obtained its support while under the rule of a Confucian royal court, other than through the support of the masses and women. The political and social situation of the Chosŏn period is known to have been quite different from the previous dynasties because Buddhism and its institutions came to exist under the policies of a Confucian state and in an increasingly Confucianized society. The consensus thus far is that during the Chosŏn period, Buddhism—far from being the state ideology of former times when its institutions were supported by state patronage—was considered no different than popular cultic practices.²

Nevertheless, despite the lack of definitive research, particularly on the latter half of the Chosŏn period, it has been generally accepted that Buddhism, in an attempt to survive the loss of state patronage and the effects of anti-Buddhist state policies, became popularized and dwelled mostly among the

masses and catering to their needs. This, apparently, is how Buddhism was sustained to the end of the Chosŏn period. A corresponding part of this narrative, little discussed but benignly accepted, is that the relationship of patronage that Buddhism once enjoyed with the wealthy and the powerful, that funded the elaborate culture of Koryŏ Buddhism, was somehow lost during the Chosŏn period. Studies on Chosŏn Buddhism have followed this line of discourse and thus have focused on how the monastic community survived through various alternative methods, such as self-sufficiency, but was nevertheless isolated from mainstream Chosŏn society.³

Past research methodologies based on the usual historical sources such as the official historical records, and the myopic focus on Buddhism viewed primarily through its relations with the state and royal family, have led to the same conclusions, namely that Buddhism became a popular religion that relied on the masses and women as its main clientele. However, this paper is an attempt at an alternative approach, one that relies on materials and sources previously ignored or under-utilized by Buddhologists and historians of Korean Buddhism. This article will be based on the sponsor ledgers for nectar ritual paintings and Buddhist memorial steles.⁴ These alternative sources indicate that in fact a stable relationship persisted between Buddhism and the wealthy donors who provided the bulwark of support for Chosŏn Buddhism. This relationship of wealthy donors with Buddhism as a model of support for Buddhism seems to differ little from the situation in earlier dynasties that took a more favorable stance towards Buddhism.

A further implication of the revelation of the active participation of wealthy families, and even scholar-officials, in the various temple works (*pulsa* 佛事),⁵ is the need to nuance the Confucianization model such that it is based less on a dichotomous interpretive framework predicated on conflict, that is, either a pro-Confucian or pro-Buddhist stance. Rather, when taking account of the sponsorship of temple works by the Confucian gentry, the Confucianization model needs to be based on the idea of a symbiotic relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism. More fitting would be to envision a world where the people of Chosŏn Korea, including the male gentry, freely took part in non-Confucian events and practices, such as *fengshui* (K. *p'ungsu*) or shamanism,

rather than a world characterized by a rigid model of Confucianism that applied to every facet of society.⁶

From this approach, the late Chosŏn period can be seen as continuing the long relationship between Buddhism and its wealthy and powerful donors, a relationship that included donations for temple works, such as the printing of Buddhist texts⁷ and production of Buddhist paintings.⁸

Chosŏn Elites and Buddhist Temple Works

Much has been written about the Chosŏn scholar-officials and male gentry, but very little is known about their private lives, such as their religious activities. Indeed, their private lives have generally been considered irrelevant relative to their intellectual views and official lives. Despite such a lack of interest, it seems this group of men did leave behind clear records of some of their activities and involvement with Buddhist temples. As a matter of fact, Chosŏn elites took part in Buddhist events and temple works more than has been thus far realized—the materials to be discussed here explicitly reveal this fact. I now turn to the nectar ritual paintings through which we are able to situate these societal elites within the Buddhist events depicted in these paintings.

It must have been one summer during the reign of King Chŏngjo 正祖 (r. 1776–1800), a time known as an era of cultural renaissance, when Buddhism seems to have also gone through a renaissance of its own. According to the depiction of this event in the 1790 Yongjusa Nectar Ritual Painting, the scholar-officials are prominently portrayed as watching and attending the “guiding the souls ritual” (*ch’ŏndo chae* 薦度齋) taking place at the center of the painting (Kang and Kim 1995, 170–171). On the far-right side of the painting are depicted two groups of scholar-officials gathered together as if they were attending the ceremony as an organized group. The members’ facial expressions and body postures are those of interested audience members no different from other groups of observers in the painting, including many Buddhist figures and a nearby group of well-dressed women, most likely court ladies. What is intriguing about the depiction of these two groups of scholar-officials is that such figures are normally understood to be staunch opponents of Buddhism,

yet they are included here no differently from other regular participants in such events, such as the wealthy women and court ladies who are well known as core supporters of Buddhism and Buddhist activities (Yu 2019, 23–27).

The immediate question that comes to mind is why would such figures, who are known to have opposed Buddhism, be given a legitimate presence in these paintings, especially during the late Chosŏn (1600–1910), a period of widely entrenched Confucianization when Buddhism remained suppressed? Assuming that the inclusion of these figures was not wishful thinking by the monastics for a better relationship with the socio-political elites, the reason seems quite simply that they were an integral group in the life of the temples as the sponsors of temple works. This begs another question, namely, why would they sponsor the work of a heterodox tradition that is often spoken in Confucian terms as deceptive and misleading the people?

In addressing the above questions, our understanding of the relationship between Confucian scholar-officials of the Chosŏn period and Buddhism has often been determined by the chauvinistic and deep-seated idea that scholar-officials and the male gentry were, in both public and private, averse to Buddhist rituals. This attitude toward Buddhism would be no different than that toward shamanic practices, since such “immoral” practices went against Confucian sensibilities. Scholarship on the social history of the relationship between the socio-political elites and Buddhism has not progressed much from what was formulated in early modern Korean academe. It can be summarized in the following claim about the *yangban*, who “alone identified fully with this public order in which ‘immoral worship’ (*ūmsa*) had no place” (Walraven 1999, 169). Further, “male acquiescence to mudang rituals in the women’s quarters may also be explained from the point of view of status maintenance. To maintain elite status, it was vital to adhere punctiliously to Confucian standards” (Walraven 1999, 185).

These ideas above depict the public actions of societally elite males, however, it appears these men may have acted entirely differently in private. It follows that to apply how they behaved in public to all aspects of their lives would be sorely misleading. Judging from the incidences of elite patronage of Buddhist works evidenced in the colophons and the cases of congenial personal relationships between monks and Confucian elites, the relationship is more complex, to

say the least.⁹ This proves to be all the more true in the late Chosŏn if we extend our source materials to the records of sponsorship of Buddhist works, such as the printing of scriptures,¹⁰ Buddhist paintings, and Buddhist memorial steles, that are complete with full lists of all sponsors. These sponsor ledgers invariably included the names of gentry males, and on various occasions even high-standing Confucian scholar-officials who in public took an anti-Buddhist stance and urged the Chosŏn monarch to stay the anti-Buddhist course.¹¹

The Sponsor Ledger of Buddhist Works

Buddhist artifacts such as scriptures, paintings, and memorial steles invariably include a colophon delineating the reasons for the work, the place of production, and the people involved in its production, to include the names of the composers and donors. With Buddhist paintings, the names are either recorded on the back of the paintings or on the bottom. Curiously enough, upon examining such ledgers of sponsors, it is found that the sponsorship of temple works throughout the Chosŏn period was intimately related to the socio-political elites, the monastics, and at times members of the royal family.

There are rich implications that can be drawn from the recorded donor ledgers of the socio-political elites regarding the preservation and the development of the Chosŏn Buddhist tradition. Furthermore, we cannot forget the role of other wealthy donors, such as women from affluent families or court ladies. Evidently, the relationship between Buddhism and the Chosŏn gentry does not lend itself so easily to a simple conflict model based on the relationship between orthodox and heterodox traditions. What appears instead is an extensively complex and multifaceted relationship wherein Buddhist cultural elements came to be adopted by Chosŏn elites.¹²

The Sponsors of Nectar Ritual Paintings

The nectar ritual paintings (*kamnot'aeng* or *kamnodo*) are significant in two ways: first, as the inception of a new form of ritual expression in the late Chosŏn, and which initially appeared in the late sixteenth century; second, as

the pictorial depiction of the participants, including the sponsors.¹³ The purpose of these paintings was for use as the backdrop to ritual performances,¹⁴ rituals that were in fact depicted in these paintings. These rituals were the universal salvation rites, including the Rites of the Forty-nine Days, Festival of Hungry Ghosts, Water-Land Assembly, and the Spirit Vulture Peak Rites, all of which involved filial piety as their core ethos (Kang 1994, 89–90).¹⁵ Our interest here is in the painted depictions of ritual performances, which in most cases show Chosŏn elites, alongside other donors such as wealthy women and court ladies and the monastics themselves.¹⁶

One of the particularities of the ledgers of early nectar ritual paintings is their lists of the names of sponsors rendered as couples. For example, the “Hong Kiltong couple,” where Hong Kiltong is the man’s name.¹⁷ For instance, in the Yaksŏnsa Temple Nectar Ritual Painting (1589), which was completed just three years before the onset of the Imjin Wars (1592–1598) and is currently held at the Gakusenji Temple in Japan, almost all the listed donors are lay couples. In total there are 64 names on the ledger, of which 55 are donors and the remaining nine are the artist-monks, such as Puho 仅浩 and Yusŏng 惟性, along with the names of other supporting artists and organizers. Among the 55 named donors, four are monks¹⁸ while the remaining 51 are couples. If we naturally calculate each couple as consisting of two people, it brings the total number of lay sponsors to 102 (Kang and Kim 1995, 422).

Of the 51 named couples, the first 14 have a specific title in front of the name while the other 20 have none. For example, the first couple on the list has the title, “great donor of funds” (*kip’o taesiju* 基布大施主), while the second simply has “donor of funds” (*kip’o siju* 基布施主). Others among the first 14 names have other titles, such as, “donor of offerings” (*kongyang siju* 供養施主) or “great donor of offerings” (*kongyang taesiju* 供養大施主). In other words, the first 14 couples must have been recognizably higher donors among the entire 55, meaning they would have been from wealthy or at least well-off families.

The practice of listing donors to paintings as couples continues up to the mid-eighteenth century but becomes rare thereafter. Given that donations are listed under the names of couples makes such events a family matter, while also indicating the purpose for such donations as earning merit, possibly for

immediate benefits or for a future time when merit will be needed, such as at death.¹⁹ In this regard, it makes sense that the couple is mentioned even though it's the man's name that is listed followed by the word "couple," without the name of the woman. I would imagine the listing of couples followed a similar protocol to listings in family registries (*chokpo* 族譜), where the woman's name is also absent—an indication of the male-centered Chosŏn society. However, the decrease in general of male names in the ledgers of these paintings indicates a social shift, with sponsorship becoming women-centered, at least in the listing of temple donors. In other words, in the first half of late Chosŏn period, couples were listed with the name of the man representing the couple, whereas towards the latter half of the late Chosŏn period, women's names were listed as representing the couple, but without the sinograph for "couple" that previously followed the name, as mentioned above.²⁰ Addressing this complex matter will take another full-length study, which will be left for another time. For now, let us move on to a brief discussion of women's support of Buddhist activities.

In terms of their portrayal in these ritual paintings, women share equal prominence with men. They are sometimes depicted together amongst figures of scholar-officials or as separate groups on their own. For example, in the T'ongdosa Nectar Ritual Painting (1786) there is a group of five women on the far right side of the painting and just below several largely drawn officials (Kang and Kim 1995, 163). The style of their hair and their ornate clothing reveal them to be a group of wealthy women who may be the wives of officials (and the female half of the listed couples) or as women from wealthy families who were individual sponsors and listed in the ledgers with their names followed by the honorific suffix "*ssi*" 氏 reserved for women of the upper class. In the case of the Suguksa Nectar Ritual Painting (1832), the sponsor ledger lists all 27 donors with the honorific title *ssi*. Among these 27 women, three are court ladies while the remaining 24 women held no official title (Kang and Kim 1995, 431). This is both an overt indication of the listing of women as the sponsors of temple works and the disappearance of men from the ledgers of nectar ritual paintings. This does not mean that men ceased sponsoring temple works, since they appear to remain prominent in the memorial stele donor ledgers, which will be discussed in a later section.

Another similarly unique and active group listed in the ledgers of these paintings are the court ladies, recognized by the title *sanggung* 尙宮. Women of this group have been noted as some of the main supporters of nectar ritual paintings,²¹ and also generally known to be devoted supporters of Buddhism. For instance, in the donor ledger for the Kyŏngguksa Nectar Ritual Painting (1887), the donors consist of five women, of which four are court ladies (Kang and Kim 1995, 431). In another example, in the Pongŭnsa Nectar Ritual Painting (1892), we can see at the bottom of the painting a colophon with words of invocation firstly for a certain woman named Mun for a long life. There appears another invocation for a couple, which is then followed by the list of the donors for this painting, starting with a court lady Sin *ssi* 尙宮申氏 and followed by seven more donors of which three are gentry women (Kang and Kim 1995, 248–249, 432).

Finally, the gentry men, sometimes as officials, also appear as prevalent figures in the ritual performance scenes depicted in the nectar ritual paintings. It is quite fortunate that these Chosŏn elites are depicted at all in these ritual paintings because most historical records indicate the opposite—that these elite men were averse to being associated with any form of ritual practice associated with heretical teachings.²² These paintings indicate that elite men played an equally integral part in the Buddhist ritual practice of sending off souls. However, in the donor ledger, with the continual decrease in the use of the couple notation, men appear less prominently in the latter half of the late Chosŏn period. Perhaps these two characteristics may be an indication that gentry males or scholar-officials simply ceased having their names recorded, or perhaps they actually became less directly involved in the funding and organization of the production of the paintings. Either way, this phenomenon lends some support to the idea that elite Chosŏn men were careful not to participate, or at least not to appear as participating, in Buddhist rituals. However, based on their continued depiction in the paintings, it appears their participation in the Buddhist rituals, at least as attendants, must have continued.

For example, in the ledger of a mid-eighteenth-century painting, the Yŏch'ŏn Hŭngguksa Nectar Ritual Painting (1741), we can see the listing of official titles starting with the first name, that of Yun Ch'wii 尹就二, who had been a fourth-rank military officer, and the second name, Yi Sŏngghan 李成漢,

who had served as a fifth-rank judicial cleric (*p'angwan* 判官) (Kang and Kim 1995, 426). Most of the other lay donors were also listed with their official titles.²³ Such listing of men is a clear indication that the donors hailed from wealthy families of the local region, and thus a confirmation of the support of Buddhism by well-to-do families. It is nevertheless true that after this painting it is only rarely that men's names appear in the donor ledgers of the nectar ritual paintings.

Such involvement of donors who can at least be determined to be of the gentry class in the region concerned is a pattern repeated in other temple works, including works that were geared more towards construction and less related directly to religious activities. We now turn to the case of memorial steles for eminent monks.

Confucian Scholars as Sponsors of Stele Construction

Compared to nectar ritual paintings, the creation of steles for eminent monks is significantly more labor intensive and the process much more complicated since it involves transporting heavy monoliths over long distances, which involved the labor of thousands of people. In the end, it was undoubtedly far costlier to construct and raise a memorial stele than to produce a ritual painting. Due to the cost of production and the nature of the media, there were also differences in purpose between the two works. Whereas the nectar ritual painting was closely connected to ritual practices and large gatherings, a memorial stele was closely related to the prestige and status of the temple and its associated monastics.²⁴ Thus, a stele's erection would have been undertaken by the wealthier and more prominent temples, simply due to the higher costs involved and the need for the participation of scholar-officials or prominent literati to compose the eminent monk biographies, a tradition that has been continued from the previous dynasties.²⁵

There are of course similarities between the two media; they both contain colophons where the names of the donors and the reasons for the work were clearly recorded. However, for the late Chosŏn-period steles, one senses a high degree of support by socio-political elite men for the temple works.²⁶ Of the total of 51 seventeenth-century memorial steles raised for eminent monks there

are ten steles with surviving donor ledgers with clear records of all the donor names. Within these ten stele sponsor ledgers, there is a pattern of significantly less involvement by gentry women and court ladies and the abundance of male donors.²⁷

Among the seventeenth-century stele, one also cannot help but note the uniqueness of the recorded ledger in the colophon of one of the grandest stele of the Chosŏn period, a stele raised in 1653 for the eminent monks, State Preceptor Tosŏn 道詵國師 (827–898) and Royal Preceptor Sumi 守眉王師 (ca. 1407–ca. 1473), the Togapsa Tosŏn Sumi yangdaesa pi 道岬寺 道詵守眉兩大師碑 (hereafter, Togapsa Stele).²⁸ Several aspects of this stele make it by far one of the most magnificent stele of the Chosŏn period.²⁹ The etching of the names of the royal family members and court officials in the donor ledger indicates a significant relationship between Togapsa Temple and the royal family, no less than with the socio-political elites.³⁰

Equally impressive is the listing of high-ranking court officials, with all levels of the royal court represented as donors to the project. The listed composers, calligraphers, and sponsors point to a situation quite skewed from our conventional understanding of the Buddhist-Confucian relationship in the Chosŏn period. Given the timing of the stele, it was part of the greater temple renovations that occurred contemporaneously.³¹

Aside from the larger context of stele construction, the looming question remains, why the involvement of so many scholar-officials? One obvious reason is for the purposes of gaining merit, for the betterment of the donor's own situation or that of their loved ones.³² However, beyond the immediate need of turning to Buddhism for obtaining the assistance of the Buddha or the Buddhist gods, could there have been other reasons? Going back to the temple renovation work, what may have induced scholar-officials and members of the royal family to sponsor Buddhist events may very well have been the greater temple culture in which these sponsors took active part.³³ Furthermore, the sponsorship of temple works seems to have taken place as part of membership in temple associations. We now turn to these other possible motives to elucidate the involvement of scholar-officials in temple works.

As noted above, one of the unique aspects of the Togapsa Stele is its extant list of donors.³⁴ The list stands out relative to other steles because it includes

the names of royal family members along with court officials, which are then followed by the names of regional officials and monastics. The implication of this donor ledger is quite remarkable, and deserves to be described in detail. The first section starts with two members of the royal family, Prince Inpyŏng 麟坪大君 (1622–1658) and Hong Juwon 洪柱元 (1606–1672), who was the son-in-law of the previous king, Sŏnjo 宣祖 (r. 1567–1608). This is then followed by a list of the names arranged in the following tiers: members of, a) the State Council (Ŭijŏngbu 議政府), b) the Six Ministries (Yukcho 六曹), and c) the Three Offices (Samsa 三司), which correspond to the organization of the central government in Seoul. The final list of donors is titled “Those of Great Merit” (大功徳住), which consists of the local area government officials, Sŏn masters, and other monastics.³⁵

It is surprising that following the first two members of the royal family, the top six offices of the state council—Chief State Councilor (Ŭijŏngbu yŏngŭijŏng 議政府領議政), Left State Councilor (Ŭijŏngbu chwaŭijŏng 議政府左議政), and Right State Councilor (Ŭijŏngbu uŭijŏng 議政府右議政)—were even recorded in the ledger. It is indeed remarkable that all levels of the court in Seoul were represented during a time generally known as a period of “Confucianization.” This betrays the dissonance between what has been understood to be the general narrative and what actually happened in the “unofficial” spheres, in this case a temple.

Another interesting point concerns the two figures, Chief Scholar (Taejaehak 大提學) Ch’ae Yuhu 蔡裕後 and Deputy Chief Scholar (Pujehak 副提學) Sin Ch’ŏnik 愼天翊, who were from the Office of Special Advisors (Hongmun’gwan 弘文館). It is difficult not to notice the irony in this: the Office of Special Advisors was an office for the exposition and study of the Confucian tradition and teachings, for overseeing the royal library, and for the Confucian education of the king, and as such it held royal tutorials. In this sense, it was the unquestionable center for determining the official doctrine of Confucianism, the center of Confucian orthodoxy. It is truly ironic that the names of the Chief Scholar and the Deputy Chief Scholar of this office were listed as sponsors on this stele in what is widely understood as the most orthodox Confucian society in East Asia.

Though the singularity of the Togapsa Stele's inclusion of all levels of the court in its sponsor ledger would seem to deviate fundamentally from what is understood to have been an official state policy of "expulsion of heresy," such involvement by the socio-political elite in temple works may not be such an anomaly given the relationship that existed between Buddhism and the elite during that time. In other words, the relationship revealed by the Togapsa Stele may not be so surprising if we consider the possibility that temple culture was more widely accepted than generally thought. Furthermore, this broad acceptance may be an indication of a shared culture among the Chosŏn elite. Though the listing of central court officials as sponsors is an unquestionable indication of their patronage of Buddhism, the real significance of the ledger is its collective nature, that is, it reveals the collective sponsorship of the highest officialdom and thus implies a cultural practice by political elites.

This then leads us to the reason behind the collective sponsorship of temple works. As will be explained, such sponsorship cannot be understood solely as a private religious affair.³⁶ Rather, the sponsorship list reflects the religio-cultural involvement of scholar-officials that formed part of the tradition of gentry temple activities. For instance, lay temple associations were formed for such purposes as sponsoring temple works. There were other similar traditions, such as temple fraternities (*sach'al kye* 寺刹契), in which there is a prominent religio-cultural element evident in such events as collective sponsorship.

With this in mind, I will now discuss two models of Buddhist temple sponsorship in order to shed further light on the question of why late Chosŏn elites donated to temple works or joined such temple associations.

Two Models of Sponsorship: Field of Merit and Temple Societies

The Symbiotic Model of Field of Merit

In both the nectar ritual painting and the memorial stele the relationship between Buddhism and lay donors is premised on mutual benefit, wherein the monastics provide the means of attaining merit by providing a ritual service and the lay people in return provide the economic means of sustaining the

monastic community. This seems to clearly underlie the messages of the nectar ritual paintings conveyed pictorially in bright colors and through the narrative of suffering of punishment in hell and the salvation offered by the ritual-performing monastics. The colophon of the Pongŭnsa Nectar Ritual Painting (1892) summarizes succinctly and particularly well the wishes related to these paintings, as follows:

An invocation for Min Tuho, born in the year *kich'ung*, for many years of long life and for attaining a first-rank [office] and the wage of a thousand blessings.

An invocation for the couple of Lady Mun, born in the year *musul*, that they live safely and happily and to surely be reborn in the Pure Land to meet the Buddha and to hear the dharma of sudden awakening.³⁷

By the act of sponsoring a ritual painting, it was expected that Min Tuho would enjoy a long life and become an official, while for the couple of Lady Mun, it was expected they would have a good life and after death be reborn in the Pure Land to meet the Buddha. This was an expectation in exchange for the offering given to the temple. Here, the traditional notion of Buddhism is as a field of merit through which a sponsor will receive what has been invoked. In this sense, temples were locations where the sponsors of Buddhist works received their merits for either immediate use in the form of good fortune or by transferring the gained merit to a soul that needed urgent help in transmigrating to a comfortable place, such as the Western Paradise. The accrued merit could also be banked for use at a time when it might be needed, such as at the time of one's death.

The standard Chosŏn example of patronage of Buddhism is the royal patronage of Buddhist votive temples.³⁸ One of the main functions of the votive temple was as a place for performing memorial rituals for the wellbeing of the ancestors of the patrons. Sponsorship of votive temples was also not uncommon among the Chosŏn elite (Pak 1996, 360–361). Likewise, as we have witnessed with the donor ledgers of nectar ritual paintings, the class of the wealthy gentry were well connected with the sponsorship of temple works

or other Buddhist-related events. This meeting between the Chosŏn socio-political elite and Buddhism, in our case in the sponsorship of temple works, can be better understood within the context of temple activities geared towards both this-world needs and next-world desires.

Temples for their part tried to maintain this relationship of support by making sure their monastic community was seen as a rich source of merit by ensuring its purity, or at the least its image of purity. According to Clarke (2014), the larger community's perception of the *saṃghā* as a pure field of merit was crucially important to the monastics, and one of the functions of the Vinaya was specifically to create the image that the monastics followed pure monastic codes—an important criteria in being a field of merit. This was the reason the laity gave alms to the pure assembly, which was based on the idea that the purer the assembly to which the lay adherents donated, the more merit would be received in return for the alms. Though Clarke's argument is based on early Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent, it cannot be denied that such notions have been generally accepted by both monastics and laity throughout history in East Asia. Thus, in East Asia more generally, and Chosŏn Korea specifically, the construction and operation of temples was heavily, if not entirely, dependent on the alms of kings and wealthy donors. Clarke explains,

... Buddhist monasticisms relied on the generosity of the almsgiving public. The kind of financial support that made possible the construction of many of the finest monasteries ever erected on Indian soil was, most probably, predicated on a perception of the monastic community as offering a good rate of karmic return on investments. Monks and nuns were considered to be a good "field of merit," but the fertility of the field in which donors would reap their rewards varied according to the virtue—real or perceived—of the renunciants. (Clarke 2014, 155)

If the members of the *saṃghā* violated the precepts and were no longer perceived as a source of merit, then one of the main reasons for lay persons going to the temples to gain merit would be nullified. This in turn would seriously jeopardize the basis for the support from the laity. Abiding by the precepts, on the other hand, was fundamental to earning the trust of the laity and gaining moral

authority, which were necessary for the saṃghā maintaining its legitimate place and purpose in society and earning that society's support.³⁹

Sponsorship, especially that of wealthy donors, would have been crucial to monastic communities as they were left to their own devices to sustain themselves. Obvious in the donor ledger of the ritual paintings was the role of the "greater" donors, the wealthy families on which the possibility of carrying on a temple's works would have been dependent. It makes sense for the monastics to have ensured these wealthy donors were satisfied to keep them coming back.

Another important clientele for the production of nectar ritual paintings consisted of women. This was evidenced by the prominence of women both in the ledgers and the paintings themselves. Though more research is needed on the role of women in the operation and support of temples, their appearance in the ledgers and paintings makes it clear they had a crucial and prominent role in the continued sustenance of the temples in the Chosŏn period. In fact, the relationship of women to temples and the monastic community cannot be fully explained through the field-of-merit model, the reason being that women's roles in the temples extended far beyond that of donors. If the operation of temples three hundred years ago was anything like the operation of modern temples, women's involvement was crucial.⁴⁰

Furthermore, temples were not only spaces for exchanging merit for economic support; they had other socio-cultural functions as places of refuge and play for women in a male-dominated society. And temples were clearly more than places for religious services; they had various socio-economic functions, such as providing education and producing goods such as paper and oil. They were also places of "rest cure" (*chōngyang* 靜養), acting as the equivalent of modern-day hospitals. Moreover, they were places of leisure and festive events for women, and invariably for men.

Here I would like to continue my analysis of the relationship of temples with male socio-political elite. Records indicate that temples were places of respite and play, where wine drinking and poetry recitation took place. That temples were a meeting place for cultural activities is also attested to by the ledger of sponsors to temple works. The point is that support by gentry males implies important reasons for their involvement, such as particular services or uses the temples offered to the sponsoring men, as was the case for women.

A Religio-Cultural Model of Temple Societies

What is intriguing is that temples located in the mountains were possibly bastions of elite culture. That these socio-political elites were the major sponsors of such temple works as stele construction supports this view. We may start this discussion with the temple societies (*kyŏlsa* 結社) that were commonly formed for devotional or meditational practices. This draws on the religious and cultural practices that took place at temples. Past research on the sponsorship of Buddhist works have mainly discussed this in the religious framework (Pu 2011). However, I make the argument that participation in temple works was overlaid with social and cultural meaning and that the sponsors harbored mundane intentions that included leisure, cultural activity, and even membership to an association, in addition to the religious reasons discussed in the previous section.⁴¹

It was not uncommon for laity to be involved in both religious temple societies and the more financially focused temple fraternities. The premise here is that the collective nature of stele construction or temple works sponsorship seems no different from the sponsorship of lay temple societies as found in the temple records (*sagi* 寺記). I will note two similar examples; the first is the record of sponsors of a lay temple society from Yŏnhwasa 蓮華寺 Temple, whose listed members' profiles are quite similar to those of the sponsors of the Togapsa Stele. From this example we can infer that the elite profiles of the sponsors listed on the Togapsa Stele were perhaps not uncommon even during the late Chosŏn period. The temple society of Yŏnhwasa Temple dates to the nineteenth century and its listed patrons include the Chief State Councilor, Kim Chwagŭn 金左根 (1797–1869) and other central government officials. Furthermore, this group of men were involved in expanding and developing the temple itself, with records indicating these members even donated funds and land to the temple (Pak 1996, 365). Needless to say, such societies formed by the wealthy were invaluable in procuring resources and assistance in the maintenance and support of temple operations.

In another example of a temple society, that of Yujŏmsa Temple, the list of patrons from the records of temple works includes Prince Hyoryŏng 孝寧大君

(1396–1486), the second son of King Taejong (r. 1400–1418) and 24 government officials. Records of the ledger show that the sponsors were wealthy and powerful to say the least since the donations included money, land, and various assets, and even exemption from corvée labor, presumably for the temple's resident monks. An additional important aspect of this roster was that it was a record of the lay temple society, or *kyōlsa*.⁴² These societies had numerous purposes ranging from religious devotion to fund-raising, or even to acting as a literary association.⁴³

Such variation in the intent of lay societies and the interconnections between religious and mundane objectives are well elucidated in a similar case from Ming China, where Timothy Brook has noted how the gentry defined the purpose of the temple associations “on terms that were sympathetic to Buddhism,” but furthermore, and more importantly, the purposes of the associations were “drawn from their own cultural preoccupations.” Brook explains that Buddhist devotion provided the “context within which the gentry could gather to engage in a range of favored cultural practices,” which were not necessarily religious (Brook 1993, 105).⁴⁴

These examples highlight the complex nature of temple participation, wherein such involvements was intermingled with cultural intentions and practices. Needless to say, temple activities consisted of more than devotional activities, and in some cases clearly took on a leisurely or social aspect. This argument and the notion that the Chosŏn gentry coopted temple culture as their own, gains much support if we consider the relationship between Buddhist temples and Chosŏn gentry males from the point of view of their activities as related to Buddhist temples. The broader cultural implications of Buddhist temples emerge if we consider that temples and mountains were part of the gentry culture of respite, cultivation, and aesthetics of nature.⁴⁵ Buddhist temples were viewed by the Chosŏn elite as scenic and idyllic places to visit that were removed from the trappings of bustling urban spaces. For instance, Yujōmsa Temple was an ancient temple situated in the Kūmgang Mountains and was famously known as a popular destination for Chosŏn elites for touring and respite.⁴⁶

Lee Kyungsoon explains that travels to the mountains held special meaning for the intellectuals not only of Chosŏn Korea but in broader East Asia of

the period. He explains how the “mountain was viewed in the Confucian tradition as a place for cultivating Confucian virtues and honing one’s literary skills” (2014, 120). Invariably, mountains were closely tied to the aesthetic sensibilities of nature and the notion of self-cultivation that were important aspects of the retreats taken by Chosŏn elites (Chŏng 2013). It was customary for scholar-officials to go on retreats to temples, where poetry and drinking wine were a long-practiced culture of gentry men.⁴⁷

In considering the above, a more astute understanding of the significance of Buddhist temples in the lives of the Chosŏn elite takes form. In addition, the extent of involvement of scholar-officials in the temple works through temple societies and associations reveals the significance of temple culture to gentry males. At variance with the official rhetoric, and despite the state’s anti-Buddhist policies, there existed a close and multilayered relationship between Buddhism and the Chosŏn elite.⁴⁸ Travelling to the temples in mountainous regions, the appreciation of mountainous features, *fengshui*, cultivational traditions, and literary culture, were integral to the cultural practices and leisure activities of the male gentry, whose associations and societies considered temples as one of their cultural centers. These gatherings attracted a certain class and type, that of the gentry male, and were invariably tied to the identity of such a specific social group.⁴⁹

Conclusion: Buddhist Temples as Places of Merit and Culture

The sponsor ledgers of temple works provide a trove of evidence of the commitments and intimate relationship between Buddhist temples and wealthy gentry men and women during the Chosŏn period. Patronage by the wealthy and powerful was a lifeline for Buddhism in Chosŏn Korea, as it has been through Buddhism’s long existence throughout Asia. Despite five centuries of rule by the Confucian Chosŏn state, and that state’s anti-Buddhist policies, the monastic community was able to continue their relationship with not only the masses but also with the socio-political elite. The cases of the donor ledgers of temple works throw a wrench into the still widely accepted narrative of the Confucian domination of Buddhism and societal “Confucianization.” The

relationship between the Chosŏn state and its elite and Buddhism, which has been perceived through a reductionist framework of dichotomy and conflict, is in reality more complex, with the two sides interrelated and possibly even reconciled, such as in the case elucidated here of the male gentry's support of temple works and temple practices.

Extant Buddhist records suggest that a more accurate relationship between the male gentry of Chosŏn and Buddhism was one of amalgamation, where temple activities occupied a socially and culturally meaningful place in the lives of the Chosŏn elite. This setting provided a medium for the synthesis of cultural practices through which patronage by Chosŏn elites was structured and maintained. We are aware that beyond the polemical relationship between Confucian elites and Buddhism, there existed a cultural framework where Buddhism provided the elite with not only religious meaning, but socio-cultural significance, practices, and identity.

This relationship of amalgamation and patronage was a formative element of Chosŏn Buddhism. There are telltale indicators of flourishing developments, especially through the later Chosŏn period when the number of paintings increased and the erection of stele reached its peak in the late eighteenth century. It follows that the patronage of the Chosŏn elite must have peaked as well at this time, and through this relationship defining changes must have occurred that molded Buddhism as it catered to its elite patrons and their religio-cultural needs. Thus, societal elites were a significant element in the flourishing activities of the Buddhist temples of the late Chosŏn. They were not only sponsors but collaborators in the creation of the temple culture of Chosŏn Buddhism.

Notes

- 1 Among some of the wealthy donors of the Buddha are the royal patrons King Bimbisara and King Pasenadi Kosala, who gave generously to the Buddha. See chapter 11, "The Buddha's Royal Patrons," in Narada (2006, 122–132).
- 2 To the persisting question of how Buddhism was sustained through the period of state oppression during the Chosŏn dynasty, Nam Hŭisuk (2012) maintains that

Buddhism, by becoming a religion of the masses, was able to gain desperately needed support from the lower echelons of society. Nam maintains that, "... although Chosŏn era Buddhism could not deepen or develop its efforts in the scholarly arena, the rapid expansion of Buddhism on a popular level and its concentration on the common populace, in contrast to its prior focus on the aristocracy, carries great significance" (2012, 10).

- 3 Han Sanggil (2006; 2012) was one of the pioneering scholars to use fraternity-pact agreements to bring to light inter-temple economic support by which Chosŏn Buddhism sustained its communities.
- 4 Furthermore, using the two different forms of materials is an attempt to turn away from traditional Buddhist studies and towards incorporating materials considered non-mainstream, where information is inferred and drawn from evidence by "reading into" the given source materials. In other words, the socio-economic and cultural implications will be gathered from the sponsor ledgers from the two main source materials, nectar ritual paintings and memorial steles.
- 5 Though the exact translation would be "Buddhist works," *pulsa* generally refers to projects or events that took place at temples.
- 6 The questioning of the Confucianization model appears to have been initiated by Boudewijn Walraven in the introduction to a special issue of the *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* titled "Beyond 'Confucianization'" (2007). The latest article on this issue by Walraven appeared in 2012 under the title, "Buddhist Accommodation and Appropriation and the Limits of Confucianization."
- 7 See Son (2018) where he also discusses the printing of Buddhist texts over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by temples, something made possible through private donations.
- 8 Otherwise, one of the most significant changes in the pattern of support is the discontinuation of state patronage of Buddhism with the start of the Chosŏn period.
- 9 I have addressed this complex issue in an earlier article mainly by re-envisioning the notion of *sa* (private) and *kong* (public) (Kim 2019a, 300–304).
- 10 An examination of the sponsor ledgers for the publication of a comprehensive compilation of Chosŏn period Buddhist ritual texts reveals extensive lists of names. For example in the sponsor ledger of the woodblock for *Yŏngwol's Compilation of Dhāraṇī* (*Yŏngwol p'yŏn chinŏn chip* 映月編 眞言集), we notice similarities to the sponsor ledgers of nectar ritual paintings. This ledger starts with a list of six court ladies followed by a mix of names of women and couples.

- 11 See for example the section “The Paradoxes of Suppression and Adoption of Buddhism” in Kim (2019a, 297–300).
- 12 The prevailing narrative of state oppression of heterodoxy, such as Buddhism and shamanism, has been the basis for the rhetoric of Confucian domination and the state oppression of Buddhism. Lee Kyungsoon’s 2014 article, “The Confucian Transformation of Mountain Space: Travels by Late-Chosŏn Confucian Scholars and the Attempted Confucianization of Mountains,” is a good example of the persistence of this narrative in current Chosŏn historiography.
- 13 Although there is a likelihood that earlier nectar ritual paintings may have been produced, currently the earliest known nectar ritual painting is the 1598 nectar ritual painting now located at Gakusenji 薬仙寺 Temple in Japan (Kang and Kim 1995, 22–28). Nonetheless, based on the extant nectar ritual paintings, their production peaked during the eighteenth century, which would have had significant implications for the popularization of Buddhist ritual practices.
- 14 Kim Chŏnghŭi (2016, 159–161) also discusses the ritual basis upon which the paintings emerged in the late Chosŏn period.
- 15 Sung-Eun T. Kim (2014, 197–199) also describes the depicted scene in the painting, wherein a Buddhist funerary ritual is taking place to send merit, most likely to the dead soul of the parent, which indicates a Buddhist expression of filial piety. Kim’s article argues that Buddhism’s adoption of filial piety in the performances of its own funerary rituals was an attempt by Buddhism to compete with Confucianism in the world of spirits and rituals.
- 16 Though the monastics were also key sponsors of and participants in the rituals, this will need to be addressed in a separate article.
- 17 The couples are listed by a name followed by *yangju* 兩主, meaning “couple.” For example, in the Yaksŏnsa Nectar Ritual Painting (1589), the donor ledger’s first listed couple is “Yi P’ilrye *yangju*” 李匹禮 兩主 (Kang and Kim 1995, 422).
- 18 The listed monks or nuns can be recognized by the title *pigu* 比丘 or *piguni* 比丘尼, respectively, that is attached to their monastic name, which consists of two sinographs (or four when they have two monastic names).
- 19 This can be thought of as a form of assurance, what in modern times is referred to as life insurance provided by the insurance companies.
- 20 Academic discussion seems to be lacking on the phenomenon of the decrease in listing over time of gentry males and the increased representation of couples (seen by the use of the woman’s name) on donor ledgers of the Chosŏn period. However, from my conversations with other scholars of Chosŏn-period Buddhism, it is

conjectured that *yangban* status became highly prized, noticeably starting from the eighteenth century, and actions that might tarnish one's status as a *yangban* may have been avoided. Therefore, temple works were increasingly sponsored through wives. Of course, this cannot simply be generalized to the entire late Chosŏn period and to all regions since there will be variations to the degree such perceptions were accepted and applied.

- 21 For a discussion on the support by the court ladies of nectar ritual paintings see Yu (2019, 23–26).
- 22 Walraven (1999) gives an insightful description of this phenomenon. Sung-Eun T. Kim (2019a) highlights the oft-used historical source, the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* (*Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty*), which is in general full of polemical arguments by court officials against Buddhism.
- 23 It can be noted that there were second- and third-rank official titles, *kasŏn* 嘉善 and *t'ongjŏng* 通政, respectively. However, in the later period of the Chosŏn dynasty many official titles were sold for profit by the state. Though in our case it would be difficult to verify if these titles were purchased, we can be assured that those who were listed with official titles were at least well off enough to be able to purchase the titles.
- 24 Sung-Eun T. Kim (2020) argues that the erection of the eminent monk stele starting from the early seventeenth century was part of an effort at identity formation based on the creation of a genealogy, while also claiming societal legitimacy. This is succinctly explained in the introduction to the aforementioned paper (207–209).
- 25 For a description of the various aspects involved in the erecting of steles, from the procurement of the monolith to obtaining the literary assistance of the scholar-officials, see Sung-Eun T. Kim (2019b, 226–234).
- 26 Seventeenth-century stele were used as the point of discussion in this article for two reasons: it was during this century that the first wave of stele in the Chosŏn period were raised, and it is also this period that the author has continually examined as a time when various new forms of Buddhist practices and institutions became established.
- 27 The phenomenon of few women being visible in stele donor ledgers needs further examination. Though there still are women listed in the stele ledgers, they are significantly fewer relative to ritual painting ledgers (Kim 2012a, 141–148 [Appendix III]).
- 28 For the full text of the stele, see Yi et al. (1999).
- 29 For a description of this stele see Sung-Eun T. Kim (2019b, 227–229).

- 30 There was some connection between Togapsa Temple and the royal family. Among other records of patronage of Togapsa Temple by the royal family during the Chosŏn period, in 1464, King Sejo directed a local official to provide support to Togapsa Temple for its renovations. In 1597, a donation was made by Queen Dowager Kongŭi that consisted of the series of paintings, “Thirty-two Transformations of Kwanŭm,” which were kept in the main hall to garner merit for the soul of King Injong (Yi 2009, 175–176).
- 31 Temple records indicate that the time between 1633 and 1682 was a busy period for temple works. Within the span of 50 years beginning from 1633, various large-scale projects were undertaken at Togapsa Temple, which included, among others, the construction of various stele and the carving of printing blocks for the *Lotus Sūtra*. See Ch’oe (2004, 282).
- 32 For example, Nam Hŭisuk argues that based on the type of Buddhist texts that were published between the late sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Buddhism during that time was characterized by prayers for good fortune and the placation of wronged souls (2012, 23–24). See also, Baker (2015, 156–157).
- 33 There are examples of societal elites who took interest in Buddhism not for religious needs but for the aesthetics and ideals exemplified by the reclusive lifestyle of the monks (Yi 2006, 26–27).
- 34 Though in other stele the sponsors are listed under a separate section titled “sponsors” (施主秩), in the case of the Togapsa Stele, such a section does not exist and the list of sponsors is simply registered at the end of the epitaph.
- 35 See Kim (2012a, 144–145 [Appendix III]).
- 36 Here, I depart from the argument made by Baker (2014) that Buddhism was maintained through the Chosŏn period through a process of privatization, meaning that it was practiced as a “private” religion.
- 37 乾命己丑生 閔公斗鎬 延年益壽 位高一品 祿有千鍾現. 坤命戊戌生 文氏兩位 前安樂當往淨土 見佛聞法 頓悟法 (Kang and Kim 1995, 432).
- 38 Throughout the Chosŏn period there was a consistent relationship of patronage by the royal family of votive temples (*wŏndang* 願堂). In this relationship, the designated *wŏndang* catered to the needs of the patron family. In return, the patron family sponsored the operation and maintenance of the temple (Pak 2009, 53–98).
- 39 Kaplan makes this argument as a reason for adhering to monastic rules and also as part of the conditions for being a religious organization (2016, 254).
- 40 I am referring here not only to the donations from temple-going women, but also the operations of small and mid-sized temples. Unlike at large monasteries, at

the smaller or mid-sized temples it was mostly women who took on the tasks of receiving donations or keeping stock of supplies, as well as other necessary work like preparing meals and cleaning.

- 41 See also Yao and Zhao (2010), who challenge the “religion” paradigm when describing Chinese religions. Yao and Zhao have argued that religious practices invariably lead to cultural and political aims and cannot be observed independently from their socio-political connections.
- 42 This information is contained in a section titled “Yujōmsa Temple Register of Sponsors” (Yujōmsa taegongdōk sijurok 楡岾寺大功德施主錄) of the temple records, *Yujōmsa ponmal sagi* 楡岾寺本末寺記 (1977, 142–147).
- 43 Sung-Eun T. Kim (2015, 71–73) describes a poetry society of Confucian literati called the Chimnyudae haksa 枕流臺學士 that met at temples to enjoy poetry and wine drinking together with monk poets.
- 44 Timothy Brook also points out that temple societies and associations constituted the base on which a wide range of common-interest groups developed, and how these associations directed their activities toward public life outside the monastery (1993, 105).
- 45 Chōng Chiyōng (2013) explains how, as part of their travel to mountains and temples, gentry men of the Chosŏn period took part in various activities, including poetry composition, reading, debates, socializing, and leisure.
- 46 Pak Sedang 朴世堂 (1629–1703), a prominent Chosŏn scholar-official, describes his trips to various places in his travelogue. Pak maintained contact with at least 27 individual monks he had met on his travels to numerous temples, including to Kūmgang Mountain (Yi 2006, 19, 26).
- 47 There are records of King Sejong’s time that describe officials who were sent on sabbatical to temples where drinking and poetry recitation took place. See Sung-Eun T. Kim (2015n24).
- 48 Kim Yōngmi (2006, 110–112) discusses the close relationship that existed between gentry men with the monks of local regions. Despite the official policy of “suppress heresy,” Confucian officials interacted with or practiced Buddhism, *fengshui*, and even *musok* (shamanism).
- 49 Diverse social groups were associated with the sponsorship of temple works and membership to temple lay societies. These various social groups that gathered would have led to the formation of identifies together with its members. A good example would be an association of progressive-minded societal elite, such as the aforementioned Chimnyudae haksa, whose members took interest in other “heretical” traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism (Ko 1994, 144–145).

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