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# Human Images in a Tumultuous World: Images of Eminent Monks as Strategies of Legitimation During the Late Joseon Period

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## 1) Introduction: Buddhist Steles and Formation of Images and Identities

Images of ideal Buddhist monks are best gleaned in the biographies of eminent monks such as the often referenced *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, which has come to establish a model for biographical writing for later generations. When its author, Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), composed the biographies of the outstanding Buddhist monks, his intent was to record the lives of those monks who could be idealized and remembered as model figures for future generations.<sup>1</sup>

Similar format and purpose would apply to the memorial steles of eminent monks in Korea since in most cases the biographies carved onto the stele is usually the same biographies published in the collected works of the eminent monks. The tradition of steles of eminent monks goes back to the beginnings of Buddhism in Korea and its prominence reached its peak during the Goryeo period (918-1392) as Buddhism became the state ideology. Specifically, memorial steles were erected to commemorate the eminent monks who were bestowed the title of national preceptor or royal preceptor.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, memorial steles of eminent monks, being an integral part of the tradition of state and royal preceptorship, were central in not only promulgating the esteem and prestige of Buddhism but also in forming the image and identity of the eminent monks during the Goryeo time.<sup>3</sup>

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1. See, Hamar (2010).

2. In the case of the state preceptor Taego Pou (太古普愚, 1301-1382), he went to China in 1347 and received the mind seal from the 18<sup>th</sup> patriarch of the Linchi line, Seokok Chonggong (石屋 清珙, ?-1352). However, in another case of the royal preceptor Muhak (無學, 1327-1405), there is no mention of a genealogical connection all the way to an orthodox line but his position as a disciple of the eminent monk Na-ong Haegeun (懶翁 惠勤, 1320-1376) was surely emphasized. Muhak's succession of Na-ong and their master-disciple encounters that verify this was all the more important. In other words, there was an inconsistent reference made to the orthodox transmission rhetoric. Also the lineage is not listed in a complete form but makes reference to only the previous master. For Taego Pou's stele text, see "Taego sawonjeung guksatapbi 태고사원증국사탑비" in Yi (2000a, 450-474).

3. Though, I take the tradition of state preceptor and royal preceptor to represent Korean Buddhism as represented by the sangha. Nevertheless, there must have been competing identities which is also worthy of attention. This is an important topic of research since there had been uprisings during the Joseon period that involved Buddhist monks or movement leaders who claimed to be monks. For example, see Choi (2010).

This privilege came to an end in the beginning of the Joseon period (1392-1910). After the ensuing 200 years of systematic suppression of the samgha, the tradition of steles of eminent monks was transformed. Despite Buddhism's fall from grace, the tradition of steles for eminent monks was continued without any state affiliation and solely by the samgha.

The newly established identity and image of the samgha rather than being based on its relationship to the state as preceptor was instead focused on the traditional Buddhist notion of legitimacy, the transmission of the lamp, initially developed in China some 600-700 years earlier. The lineage in the transmission of the lamp of Seon (Jpn. Zen; Ch. Chan) masters was more than just a record of its enlightened patriarchs. It provided the fundamental basis for identity and image of legitimacy for Joseon Buddhism.

It was most likely due to the recognized participation of the samgha in the Imjin war of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century (1592-1598) that the Buddhist samgha was able to become re-established as an independent and self-standing tradition which had previously been patronized and even organized by the state for its own legitimation. The samgha began to re-establish itself and built its identity and legitimacy through two means: 1) reformulating and reviving the idea of genealogical transmission (法統說) and, 2) capitalizing on the recognition for the fervent participation of the Buddhist righteous army in the Imjin war.

## 2) Strategies in the Image of Legitimacy

### 2.1) Image Based on Transmission Lineage

Having lost state patronage and no longer under the auspices of the state, the Joseon samgha had to turn to a different identity and rebuild an image of legitimacy; this came to be spelled out in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century memorial steles of eminent monks. The question of image of legitimacy became all the more crucial given that Buddhism was no longer recognized as the state ideology and furthermore that it had come to be deemed a heretical tradition. Therefore, determining the orthodoxy and legitimacy became all the more important and the image similar to that of the state and royal preceptor was used strategically to regain social legitimation. Here the rhetoric of lineal transmission was essential.

Firstly, determining the orthodoxy and its legitimacy seemed to be the main goal as indicated in the stele, and in order to do this the samgha turned to the tradition of lineal transmission. The first stele that was raised after the hiatus of more than 200 years was in 1612 for the famous monk Yujeong (惟政, 1544-1610) who was recognized by the state for his contributions during the Imjin war and after.<sup>4</sup>

Different from the preceding early Joseon memorial steles for eminent monks, there was a start of a clear delineation of a genealogy which moved away from the previous focus on the authority

4. See, "Haeinsa Samyeongdaesaseokjangbi-mun" 海印寺 四溟大師石藏碑文 (Yi 2000).

of the state and royal preceptors. Instead it attempted to build legitimacy by bringing together various major lineages in the history of Korean Buddhism without focusing on any specific school. The point was to trace the past tradition of Korean Buddhism down to Yujeong and his master Hyujeong.<sup>5</sup>

Different from the previous steles, lineage played a prominent role within the whole of the narrative where Yujeong's stele traces a lineage that reached far back to the Song monk and forged a connection to the two most prominent monks, Hyujeong and his disciple Yujeong. The conceptualization of lineage for the purpose of building an image of legitimacy was in a formative stage where legitimizing lineage consisted of a combination of several prominent lineages and based on more general, and at time tenuous, connections. In the second stele that was raised after the Imjin war, the notion of lineage becomes based more specifically on lineal connections and established on the principle of genealogical exclusivity.<sup>6</sup>

It was in the year 1630, eighteen years later after Yujeong's stele was erected that the second stele was raised for Hyujeong who can be referred to as the patriarch of modern Korean Buddhism. Here a prominent genealogical claim is made in the text that traces Hyujeong in a singular line back to the 18<sup>th</sup> patriarch of the Linchi sect. Rarely seen in the previous steles of eminent monks, it states, while making reference to the transmission of the lamp, that the "mysterious mind of nirvana" was transmitted from the Sakyamuni Buddha all the way to Korea (三韓). It claims that this transmission was relayed through a monk named Yong ming (永明) of the Song and onto the 14<sup>th</sup> century Korean royal preceptor, Na-ong Haegeun (懶翁 惠勤, 1320-1376). It goes on to state that among the later disciples, Hyujeong's line is the most outstanding and that among Hyujeong's disciples, Yujeong was the most eminent.<sup>7</sup> It further claimed that,

Our Taego of the East (Korea) had travelled to Mount Xiawu of China and received the transmission of the dharma from Shiwu (石屋) and has returned. After returning, Taego transmitted the dharma to Hwan-am (幻庵) and Hwan-am to Gu-gok (龜谷) and from Gu-gok to Jeongsim (正心). From Jeongsim the dharma was then passed onto Ji-eom (智儼) and from Ji-eom to Yeong-gwan (靈觀) and Yeong-gwan to Hyujeong. This lineage is the true orthodox line. That is why Hyujeong is the sole transmitter of the true line of Linchi.<sup>8</sup>

5. Heogyun (許筠, 1569-1618), the author of the stele claimed the following: "At present who can it be other than our master Yujeong who transmits the lineage of the Way of masters Jinul (牧牛子) and Na-ong... The dharma seal that has been transmitted to Na-ong from Yongming Yanshou [永明 延壽, Song monk] and then to the later generations, it is Seosan [Hyujeong] who has received it, among all others." See, "Samyeongdang Yujeongbi" 四溟堂惟政碑, (HBJ 8, 77).

6. As McRae puts it, it is the "string of pearls" lineage where the connection was exclusive and based on passing of the enlightenment seal. See McRae's (20013) arguments.

7. See, "Haenam Daeheungsa Chongheodang Hyujeongdaesabi-mun" 海南大興寺清虛堂休靜大師碑文 (1647), (Yi 2000, 61).

8. "吾東方太古和尚 入中國霞霧山嗣石屋 而傳之幻庵 幻庵傳之龜谷 龜谷傳之正心 正心傳之智儼 智儼傳之靈觀 靈觀傳之西山 此實臨濟之正派而惟西山獨得." "Haenam Daeheungsa Chongheodang Hyujeongdaesabi-mun" 海南大興寺清虛堂休靜大師碑文 (1647), (Yi 2000, 61)

Here the more fully developed iteration of the patriarchs in a “string of pearls,” became the defining basis of orthodox lineage. The purpose of noting the monk’s genealogy was to prove orthodoxy of his lineage which obviously had implications for the disciples as well. It meant the verification of the orthodoxy of disciple’s lineage and therefore their legitimation.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the samgha at a critical point in their revival used the steles to claim the legitimacy of Buddhism and possibly with the hope of reclaiming, if even only to imitate, its past greatness.

Such images of legitimation based on the orthodox lineage seem to subside into the latter part of the late Joseon period. It seems that it was in the beginning of the later Joseon period that the image of legitimacy was all the more important with the growing need and opportunity to re-establish itself. Thus, towards the latter part of the later Joseon, lineages orthodoxy become secondary in importance.

Legitimation is not built on lineal heterodoxy alone. Part of this strategy of legitimating image is mundane claims. Though paradoxical, secular claims enhanced the significance of its religious orthodoxy. The claims of genealogical orthodoxy was enhanced by the recognition of the merits gained by the Buddhist monks from their heavy involvement and successful campaigns in the Imjin war. The opportunity to take advantage of these merits could not be passed especially after losing their status as the state ideology and in turn being cast as a heresy.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2) Image based on Mundane Claims

Interestingly, the method of constructing ideal images was by way of secular claims such as highlighting the official titles bestowed by the state or the great deeds in service of the state. The images of these monks were also the result of adopting the current ideal Confucian images and virtues. The repertoire of secular claims included official titles bestowed to the master by the king and other references of connections to the royal court or the king such as in the form of gifts received or correspondences.

For instance in Hyujeong’s stele, as with all other memorial steles of eminent monks of this era, the beginning lines present the official title that was handed to him by the king, and in this case by king Seonjo (1552-1608). At the top of the stele is engraved the “Great National Seon Master Chief Overseer of the Meditation and Scholastic Sects Custodian of Sects and Edifier Comprehensive Protector and Superior Worthy.”<sup>11</sup> Further on in the text, there are records of correspondences with the king, and at one point the king requests Hyujeong to raise an army of monks to which Hyujeong

9. In the case of Shenhui’s (668-760) attempts to have his own master Huineng (638-713) become the 6<sup>th</sup> patriarch after Hongren (601-674) and displace Shenxiu (?-706) who had been widely recognized as the 7<sup>th</sup> patriarch, was essentially an attempt to become, if not the 7<sup>th</sup> patriarch himself, part of the orthodox lineage. See, McRae (2004) chapter 3.

10. This seems all the more true when during the previous Goryeo dynasty, Buddhism was held in high esteem. For a insightful description of the position that the Buddhist institution was in and its drastic decline towards the end of the Goryeo dynasty see, Kim (2004).

11. Hyujeong’s title is a long one. “Gugildo daesonsa Seon-Gyo dochongseop bujong sugyo boje deunggye jonja” 國一都大禪師 禪教都總攝 扶宗樹教 普濟登階尊者. Yi (2000, 222).

replies in tears that he will even sacrifice himself to follow the king's wishes.<sup>12</sup>

The beginning of the 17 century was a period immediately after the Imjin war and the army of soldier monks had been recognized for their heroic contributions against the Japanese army.<sup>13</sup> Hyujeong and Yujeong were two monks who were the most well-known as having gained the most recognition for their war efforts and recognized by the state and it is no surprise that such merits made up an important aspect of their steles.

Interestingly, instead of remorse for causing harm the tone of the stele texts is almost boastful and without any signs of attempting to give a rationalization for an undesirable deed. For instance it states in Yujeong's stele text that, "Having killed a great many enemies or taking them as prisoners, the king considered it a great deed."<sup>14</sup> The stele goes on to say that Hyujeong "earned great merit of conquering the enemy and saving the country."<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the virtue of loyalty or *chung* 忠 seems to be a consistent theme. In response to king Seonjo's urging for assistance, Hyujeong responds by saying he will have the old and the sick monks pray for the protection of the state and with all the able bodied monks, Hyujeong promises to do their utmost to fulfill their loyalty.<sup>16</sup> Such themes of protecting the state 護國 and dedication to the state 忠 were clearly evident in the summarizing gāthā at the end of the stele text. We can further notice the effort to harmonize between the ideal images of Buddhism and the worldly merits, in this case allegiance towards the state and the king. The gāthā relays this balance in the following:

[Hyujeong's] Seon poems written during rests from meditation  
The fame of the poems spread widely and to the court [king]  
King Seonjo exclaimed in admiration of the poems  
The praise graced [on the poems] brightened the way.

Though cultivating the body in the mountains  
The sense of loyalty [towards the king] has never left the king's side  
Having being summoned, the state in crisis  
The righteous army was gathered in throngs like clouds.

The young [monks] entered war and fought the enemy  
And older monks beseeched the Buddha for his powers

12. Yi (2000, 229).

13. Throughout the war there had been spontaneous formation of righteous monk armies across Korea. Though the monk armies have won some major battles, they were mainly used by the state as forced support labour including transporting of supplies to the frontline or repairing fortress walls and guarding them. An (1983, 336-345).

14. "頗多殺獲上嘉之." See stele text, "Haeinsa Samyeongdaesaseokjangbi-mun" 海印寺 四溟大師石藏碑文 (1612). Yi (2003, 105).

15. See the stele text, "Haenam Daeheungsa Chongheodang Hyujeongdaesabi-mun 海南大興寺清虛堂休靜大師碑文 (1647). Yi (2003, 246-250).

16. "Hoeyang Pyohunsa Baekhwaamchongheodaesabi-mun" 淮陽 表訓寺 白華庵 清虛堂休靜大師碑 (1632). Yi (2000, 229).

The trash like Japanese invaders were vanquished  
And the state and the people are made safe and fortunate.

Coming out of the mountain and having saved the people  
His name has become famous even outside Joseon...<sup>17</sup>

From this *gāthā*, the elements of Buddhist ideals of practicing meditation were mixed with the ardent duty of loyalty 忠, and moreover, the role of protecting the nation 護國 was overtly referenced. This reminiscence amounts to attempting to revive the past role of Buddhism of protecting the state and bringing peace and fortune to the people. These strategies are aimed to revive and refashion the past images of Buddhism and therefore its rightful place in society as a legitimate tradition.

Despite possible paradoxes, mundane elements may be indicative of the socio-historical conditions of 17<sup>th</sup> century Joseon. The *saṃgha* was ardently attempting to revive itself after two centuries of suppression. Given its state of decline and the memory of its past greatness, Imjin war presented an opportunity and the basis on which to pull itself out of its disadvantaged position. Different from the Goryeo period, steles were part of an effort to claim its newly found confidence and legitimacy.

The need to use mundane merits to claim its legitimacy seems inherent in steles together with ideal religious claims. In this sense, participation in the Imjin war seems to be fused as part of the image of Korean Buddhism, even in modern times. Buddhism for the protection of the state and the people is a narrative that has continued throughout in the steles and this has been all the more useful during the late Joseon period.

### 3) The Mutuality of Religious and Mundane Claims

Being located at temples and having been raised in honor of eminent Buddhist monks, memorial steles are without doubt part of the Buddhist tradition but its historical use and the explicitly mundane contents of the text indicate that these objects bridge the Buddhist ideals with the given pragmatic elements. As strategic tools, they interface with the world surrounding Buddhism.

The historical situation was that many temples were either damaged or destroyed during the Imjin war thus needing the help and support of the society.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the *saṃgha* could not ignore the public debate that had consumed the Joseon society. The idea of orthodoxy and

17. “Hoeyang Pyohunsa Baekhwaamchongheodaesabi-mun” 淮陽 表訓寺 白華庵 清虛堂休靜大師碑 (1632). Yi (2000, 237-238).

18. After the Imjin war, the temples went through a period of active rebuilding, a process through which the *saṃgha* was able to boost its revival. For an in-depth discussion of the rebuilding of temple buildings see Lee (1994) especially chapter 4. For a discussion of building of the statues of Buddha and bodhisattva during the 17<sup>th</sup> cen. Korea see Song (2007).

heterodoxy at that time was all the more significant since this debate had pulled the court and Confucian scholars into a heated debate over the orthodoxy of the ruling king.<sup>19</sup> In such historical setting, being recognized as orthodox carried that much more weight for legitimacy and the notion of orthodox lineage was also an important test of authenticity and legitimacy.<sup>20</sup>

Undoubtedly, being recognized as an orthodox lineage increased religious authority while its recognition as such was closely related to secular authority. In our case, claims of orthodoxy carried more weight with increased mundane merits and prestige or connections to secular authority as reflected in the official titles that are mentioned in the steles and the associations with the state or the kings.

In the case of Hyujeong, on his stele was engraved newly claimed genealogies while also claims of how he routed the Japanese army and other secular claims.<sup>21</sup> These mundane claims were integral in having the claims of a new orthodox lineage more likely to be accepted. It was mostly through the help of the war merits that claims of a new identity had been successfully recognized.

Further adding to the authority of the claims of Hyujeong's stele is the prestige of the composer of the stele text, Yi Jeonggu (1564-1630). In this sense, having prominent Confucian literati or scholar-officials compose the stele text decisively increased the validity and authority of the stele, and its content.

#### 4) Legitimation by the Confucian literati and Scholar Officials

Another paradoxical element of the steles is the involvement of Confucian literati in the composition of the texts.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the tradition of having a famous literati or high ranking officials, and not monks, compose the epitaph continued on from the Shilla and Goryeo to the Joseon period. Heo-gyun (許筠, 1568-1618) and Yi Jeonggu (李廷龜, 1564-1635) who composed

19. Kim-Haboush argues that with the demise of Ming by the Manchu, the source of legitimation of the Confucian world disappeared that forced Koreans to reconsider the idea of orthodoxy. This led to a redefinition of the world order, the "conceptual mapping of the boundaries between civilization and barbarity and between self and others." This had a direct impact on the political and cultural identity of the state itself and further lead to the implication of legitimacy regarding other traditions. Authentic line of descent was politically and societally important basis of defining orthodoxy and the question of legitimacy trickled down from the king to the legitimacy of Confucian sects and religious sects. See, Kim-Haboush (1999, 51, 67).

20. It arose from the will of the Neo-Confucians to gain prominence as the state ideology. In the opposite sense, it meant those in opposition to the teaching of neo-confucianism were labelled as heterodox or heresy. Jin (2005,150-156).

21. From a general understanding of Buddhism and the values that it espouses, especially against the killing of not only human lives but also the lives of all sentient beings, such boastful words are hard to believe that it was on the stele of an eminent monk. How can such antithetical views be carved together on the same stele, not to mention that it was of a highly regarded monk.

22. The Confucian literati included a range of figures including those who held government posts. However, these authors all were highly regarded for their composition skills. For example a prolific writer of steles, Yi Gyeongseok (李景奭, 1595-1671), wrote a total of eight steles, the most number of steles for eminent monks during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was a well-known composer and a poet of the Joseon period and has written steles for prominent Confucian scholars as well. He was also a high state official. Among the 51 steles raised for eminent monks during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, 47 steles had clearly noted authors. Among these steles, a total of 40 steles, or almost 4 out of every 5 steles were authored by scholar-officials or Confucian literati while a total of 7 were authored by monks.

the steles of Yujeong and Hyujeong, respectively, are examples of famous and highly regarded literary figures who composed stele texts for eminent monks. For example, Heo-gyun was the famous literatus who was at the height of his official career when he composed the stele text and Yi Jeonggu was not only an illustrious official but was one of the best known literary composers of classical Chinese during his time.<sup>23</sup>

The participation of the literati and the scholar-officials in the stele text composition can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it can be a reflection of the dependence of the *saṃgha* on the Confucian literati in presenting the authenticity of their own identity. In Hyujeong's stele, his disciples went to a prominent Confucian literati and even took an intimidating tone when they warned that they will not leave until he, the composer, writes the stele text for them.<sup>24</sup> This presents an interesting point where the role of Confucian literati was highly sought after portraying their essential role in steles and in constructing the identity of the eminent monks and Buddhism in general. It is obvious that the authority and the skills of these Confucian literati were borrowed.

Secondly, participation of the Confucian literati can also be understood as a continuation of a tradition that had previously existed during the Shilla and the Goryeo period. Therefore its revival during the Joseon period is merely an imitation of a long continued tradition. In other words, the legitimacy of the stele tradition and the newly claimed image was borrowed from the precedent of a long held tradition.

The assistance gained through these two points was greatly needed especially given the dire position of Buddhism at the time. In the end it is an illustration of the extent to which the Buddhist world and its legitimacy was heavily dependent on the outer Confucian world in the 17th century. Even the forming of its Buddhist identity came to be to an extent reliant on the authority of the Confucian literati and scholar-officials.

## 5) Concluding Remarks

Raising memorial steles was a highly purposeful act full of not only religious but clearly mundane intentions. As the socio-political landscape was turned up-side-down, steles proved to be an important medium when the *saṃgha* had to turn more to its tradition of the transmission of the lamp to assert its claims of identity and its image of legitimacy. To enhance their orthodox claims, they also turned to their worldly merits. The tradition of memorial steles was effectively used by the *saṃgha* to legitimate their claims of orthodoxy. Even the tradition of inviting prominent literati and scholar-officials to compose the stele text was preserved to further the validity of the claims carved into the stones.

23. Yi Jeonggi is considered one among the four most recognized literati of the mid-Joseon period. His official life is decorated with high government posts who has been recognized by even the king. See Kim (2012, 58-63).

24. See stele text, "Hoeyang Pyohunsa Baekhwaamchongheodaesabi-mun" 淮陽 表訓寺 白華庵 清虛大師碑文(1630). Yi (2003, 214-221).

Claims of late Joseon steles of Korean eminent monks regarding Buddhist notions of transmission of Buddha's original mind took place at the boundaries of ideals and practical reality. Mundane claims were an integral part of the steles that gave support to their ideal narratives. This illustrates the extent to which the Buddhist image and its legitimacy were heavily dependent on the outer Confucian world.

It goes to highlight that the claims of orthodoxy was a discourse that had meaning not only within the Buddhist world but also and possibly more so at the secular level. It was intended to gain the status of orthodoxy perhaps more in the secular than within the Buddhist religious world. It was for this reason that the support of the Confucian literati through their composition of the stele text was critical.

Though the importance of lineal orthodoxy in the image of Buddhism seems to be more concentrated towards the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the mundane claims of Buddhism as the protector of the state and people seem to be a timeless image of Buddhism. Thus the mundane claims regarding soldier monks fit this rhetoric and self-image which continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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