

# The Uses of Buddhist and Shamanistic Symbolism in the Empowerment of Queen Söndök

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## I . Introduction

It is generally believed that Buddhism succeeded in expanding its influence and appeal in far-distant lands due to its universalistic ethics and royal patronage. The history of Buddhism in Silla is its ideal illustration, because soon after its arrival it forged inseparable links with the Silla royalty. It is indeed remarkable that the Silla ruler who officially recognized the faith in 527 arrogated to himself the title of Pöphŭng (The Rise of Dharma), and his successor, Chinhŭng, (r. 540-576) invoked the Buddhist notion of Cakravartin (ideal ruler). King Chinpyöng (r. 779-632), Queen Söndök (r. 632-647) and Queen Chindök (r. 647-654) inherited and carried forward King Chinhŭng's interpretation of the Buddhist concepts to conform to their aggressive monarchical agendas. It is also interesting to note that the Buddhist beliefs and practices were assimilated into the existing political matrix of the shaman-king and the Kolpum (bone-rank)-based social structure so as

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to maintain continuity and consistency with the unique Sillan tradition.

In this paper I wish to take the monarchical practice of Queen Sōndōk for discussion and attempt to suggest that although she relied heavily on the versatile repertoire of Buddhist symbolism in order to legitimise her political imagination, she did not completely ignore the existing resources of Shamanism. Indeed, she drew on a diverse source of legitimacy symbolism, and her Buddhist policies were also adjusted to some extent to suit the indigenous values and tastes. This paper is, therefore a critique of the extant scholarship on early Korean Buddhism which generally describes early Silla rulers as devout Buddhists, and the entire trajectory of Korean Buddhism as an expression of the "nation-protecting" spirit, and thus ignores the important aspect of the syncretic religious symbolism used by the Silla royalty.

## **II. The Employment of Buddhist Symbolism by the Early Silla Royalty**

It has already been suggested that Silla rulers of the sixth and early seventh centuries sought to appropriate the spiritual significance of Buddhism by establishing close proximity to the Buddha, Buddhist deities and Buddhist monks. King Chipyōng sought to establish his identity with the Buddha by assuming the title of Paekchōng (translation of Suddodhana in Chinese, the other Chinese rendering of the name being Chōngban) and calling his wife Maya puin (Maya Devi). Buddhism also became significant during the period as an instrument of diplomacy with the powerful Sui and Tang dynasties. However, in order to form a balanced perspective of this important theme in early Korean history, it is important to refer briefly to of the political reality of Silla in the late sixth and early seventh century. This historical context will also enable us to properly understand such related issues as the political roles of the monks Wōngwang and Chajang, the creation of the distinct royal lineage of *Sōnggol* (Sage Bone) for the ruling family, the establishment of the Nine-Storied Pagoda and the position of shamanism vis á vis Buddhism.

The ascension of King Chinpyŏng stabilised the political situation, but resentment of some disgruntled aristocratic officials against increasingly institutionalised monarchical power continued to simmer. The hostility of the aristocracy manifested itself in a conspiracy against the throne hatched by Yichan Chilsuk and Achan Sŏkpum. The plot was revealed in 631, and Chilsuk's entire family and relatives to the ninth degree were executed. A glimpse of conflict between the royalty and the aristocracy is also given in the biography of Kim Hu-jik who headed the Ministry of Military Affairs during the reign of King Chinpyong (*Samguk sagi* 45, yŏljŏn, Kim Hu-jik, 420).<sup>1</sup>

The end of the Sŏngol (Sage Bone) male line after the death of King Chinpyŏng created a further crisis. Influential members of the Chingol could now legitimately hope to ascend the throne. Queen Sŏndŏk, daughter of King Chinpyŏng and a female member of the Sŏngol line, was installed on the throne but resentment against her rule surfaced in the form of Pidam's rebellion. Pidam had been sangdaedŭng for two years before he decided to launch a rebellion against what he believed to be the impropriety of a woman assuming power. According to the *Samguk sagi*:

In the Sixteenth year of Queen Sŏndŏk, also the first year of Queen Chindŏk(647), the Ministers Pidam and Yŏmjŏng declared that a female ruler could not govern a state well. They raised their forces and wanted to overthrow her. The queen confined herself to the palace. Pidam and his forces stationed themselves at the Myŏnghwalsŏng, while the government forces were deployed at Wŏlsŏng (*Samguk sagi* 41, yŏljŏn, Kim Yu-sin chŏn, 396).

chong Chung-hwan has suggested that in his attempt to force Queen Sŏndŏk to abdicate, Pidam was representing the interests of the old guard of the Silla aristocracy and his rebellion brought into sharp focus the fundamental dichotomy between the two rival factions into which the aristocracy was now sharply divided (Chong, Chung-huan,

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<sup>1</sup> Also see its discussion in Yi Myong-sik, "Silla chunggogi-ŭi wanggwŏn kanghwa kwajŏng", *Yoksa kyoyuk nonjib*, 113-14, (1990), p. 327.

1977:26-27). Such officials as Kim Chun-chu, Kim So-Hyon and his son Kim Yu-sin who were loyal to the queen constituted the new faction within the aristocracy. The weakness of the old faction is evident in its complete inability to influence the course of contemporary politics. Despite their loud slogan of "a female ruler cannot govern well", the new aristocratic faction succeeded in installing yet another female member of the royalty on the throne. Chong's hypothesis of a divided aristocracy and bitter struggle for political supremacy by rival groups seems to be correct, but other historians have correctly reminded us that the spark of resentment against the administration of Queen Söndök was fanned when Emperor Taizong of the Tang expressed a similar view. Several years earlier the Chinese Emperor had said that Silla faced severe military threats from its neighbours because it was under a woman ruler who was quite naturally perceived to lack assertiveness and strength (Chu, Po-don, 1979:209-211).

### III. The Political Imperatives

The reigns of these three rulers were also characterised by intense conflicts with Koguryö and Paekche. An increasingly stronger Paekche-Yamato solidarity and a growing political understanding between Koguryö and Yamato further aggravated the political crisis of Silla. The unification of China under the Sui had changed the balance of power in East Asia, and the impact of change in China was most acutely felt on the Korean peninsula. Koguryö started diversifying its political and diplomatic linkages by sending monks and technicians to Yamato. Yamato in return attempted to apply pressure on Silla (Joseph Wong, 1984:24-28). The *Nihon shoki* records that in 591 Yamato dispatched over 20,000 troops across the strait to Tsukushi (ie. Hakata in Northern Kyushu), and that they remained there for four years. The *Nihon shoki* refers to yet another Yamato military expedition to Silla in 600 which, it claims, resulted in the former occupying six Silla castles. While a recent work takes the record at its face value (Pan Yihong, 1997:124), Joseph Wong in his well-researched doctoral dissertation

underlines the flawed character of Silla-related accounts of the *Nihon shoki* and points out that the claim of an easy, albeit temporary, seizure of Silla castles in 600 is "wrongly dated" or "a complete fabrication." (Joseph Wong, 1984:27). The biased nature of the accounts of the *Nihon shoki* notwithstanding, it is very likely that Yamato dispatched its warships across the strait in order to intimidate Silla and thereby cement its ties with its new ally, Koguryŏ.

During this period (spanning the reigns of King Chinpyŏng, Queen Sŏndŏk and Queen Chindŏk) Koguryŏ and Paekche launched increasingly aggressive campaigns against Silla. In the last three decades of the sixth century, Silla enjoyed a relatively peaceful border with Koguryŏ. In 603, however, Koguryŏ renewed its hostility against Silla. In 608 Koguryŏ launched a more sustained attack, resulting in the death of 8,000 Sillans and the capture of one Silla castle. Silla faced Koguryŏ invasion again in the seventh year of Queen Sŏndŏk (638). While the *Samguk sagi* portrays Silla generally as a victim of Koguryŏ's military ambition, the battle of 629 has been shown to be initiated by Silla. In this battle Koguryŏ lost the fort of Nyang along with more than five thousand souls.

As regards Paekche, perhaps, due to its crippling defeat in the battles with Silla during the reign of King Chinhŭng, it did not make any incursions across the Silla border for about half a century. However, it reopened its hostility in the seventh century. It fought small-scale battles with Silla in 611 and 618. Subsequent battles between Silla and Paekche forces were fought in 624, 626, 627, 633, 636, and 642 with disastrous consequences for Silla. In 643, however, the tide turned against Paekche when the Silla army under the command of General Kim Yu-sin captured seven Paekche forts (*Samguk sagi*, Kim Yu-sin chŏn, p. 397). The two kingdoms continued to fight sporadic battles until 663 when the joint Silla-Tang forces erased Paekche from the map of the peninsula.

The Silla court attempted to meet these challenges by expanding coercive power and bureaucratic apparatus. Elaborate officialdom and rich military resources are doubtless essential constituents of a centralised

state, but these features are insufficient *per se* in confirming and consolidating monarchical authority. The ruling strata needs to justify its authority and the rules of heredity and hierarchy governing access and exclusion to the key resources of the state within the framework of shared beliefs and ideology. A framework of common ideology and system of belief provides moral sanction to the authority of the ruling elite over the subordinate class (David Beetham, 1991:69-70).

#### IV. The Channelisation of the Wisdom of Monk Chajang

Monk Chajang, one of the most distinguished leaders of early Silla Buddhism and the patriarch of the Buddhist church during the reign of Queen Söndök, advised the Queen to build a nine-story pagoda at the Hwangnyong temple, supposedly as a symbolic conquest over the nine contiguous states, including China and Japan (*Samguk yusa* 3, Hwangnyongsa kuchŏng tap, 139).<sup>2</sup> Iryön's grandiose interpretation seems to be less credible than the near contemporary *Hwangnyong sa kuchŏng moktap chalju ki* (Record [inscribed on a Pillar] of the Nine-storied Wooden Stupa of the Hwangnyong Temple) which attributes the idea to Dhyana Master Yuanxiang of Nansan who is believed to have said (to Chajang), "If a nine-storied stupa is constructed in (the precincts of) the Hwangnyong Monastery in your country, the entire Haedong (East of the Sea, a term representing the Korean peninsula) will surrender to your kingdom (Hwang, Su-yong, 1997:168-175).<sup>3</sup> Chajang is also credited with having proclaimed that the contemporary ruler of Silla belonged to the Ksatriya caste, the warrior caste of India to which Buddha himself belonged. In an age of great internal turmoil and external threat, employment of Buddhist elements to further enhance the sanctity and sacredness of Queen Söndök's lineage by tracing it to the clan of Buddha had an obvious political dimension.

It is also recorded in the Chinese text that *Xù gāosēng zhuàn* at

2 The expression "ku Han" used in the text usually means "all the Han people, or people on the Korean peninsula". In ancient Chinese usage Nine implied the concept of totality.

3 For the original Chinese text of the Record see pages 172-175.

the advice of Chajang Queen Söndök effected a change in Silla's dress code to conform to the Chinese standard. Kim Jong-Myung argues that the account of the *Samguk sagi* which credits Kim Chun-chu (who later ruled as King Muyöŏl) for the change of Silla's official dress to the Chinese model is more credible. The relevant account of the *Samguk sagi* is in agreement with the Chinese sources, the *Jiu Tang shu*, the *Xin Tang shu* and the *Zizhi tongjian*, which state that during his audience with Emperor Taizong in 648, Kim Chun-chu requested that Silla be allowed to change its official dress so as to accord with the Tang system, whereupon the emperor had precious clothes brought out from the palace and presented to him.<sup>4</sup>

As has been suggested earlier, compilation of the *Samguk sagi* was governed by Kim Pu-sik's Confucian values, and his omission of materials on Buddhism was a deliberate strategy to undermine the role of Buddhism in early state-formation. One may illustrate this point by pointing out that despite the evident significance of Chajang in the political history of seventh century Silla, Kim Pu-sik recorded only three facts about him, and mostly "sinocentric facts" at that—his journey to China in the fifth year of Queen Söndök, his return from China in the twelfth year and finally, the construction of the stupa at the Hwangnyong monastery on his advice. Therefore, official as it may be, *Samguk sagi* has to be subjected to the same scrutiny and scepticism as records affiliated with Buddhism. First let's see what *Xù gāosēng zhuàn* (the source with which Iryöŏn accords and on which he doubtless drew for his data) has to say about Chajang's role in the Sinicisation of Silla institutions:

".... There were differences between the Chinese and barbarians in customs and clothing. Chajang revered only the true tradition. How could his loyalty be divided? After this matter (Chajang's proposal) was discussed (at court), Silla

<sup>4</sup> *Samguk sagi* 5, Silla pongi Chindökwang, Ibid 33 Chapji 2, pp. 50-51

*Xin Tangshu* 10, Fac. 220, (Dongyi zhuan, Xinluo) p. 6203 op cit

An English translation of the *Samguk sagi*'s text about Kim Chun-chu's mission to the court of Taizong is given in John Jamieson, *The Samguk sagi and the Unification Wars*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1969, pp. 38-39.

changed its frontier clothing and took Tang norms as standard" (*Xù gāosēng zhuàn*(續高僧傳), 24, in Taisho 50).

These two records of *Samguk sagi* and *Samguk yusa*, corroborated by Chinese Confucian and Buddhist records respectively, are neither mutually exclusive nor dichotomous. The Buddhist records state that soon after Chajang returned from Tang China, he proposed to the Silla court to standardise ideas and political institutions of the state in conformity with the Chinese ones, and that his proposal was endorsed. However, Silla still needed to follow the standard procedure of forwarding its petition through a proper diplomatic channel and receiving the approval of the Tang emperor. The Silla court entrusted this task to Kim Chun-chu, noted for his "diplomatic savoir-faire" (John Jamieson, 1969:38). No doubt Chajang was merely an adviser to the court and Kim Chun-chu a pivotal figure in the word of diplomacy and politics. His contribution far outweighed the role of Chajang in the Sinicisation of Silla's traditions and institutions. Kim Chun-chu's seminal significance in this respect is evident from another work *Nihon shoki*, written by a Koguryō monk, Tohyōn. Though it is now lost, *Nihon shoki* has preserved the relevant text. Aston's translation does not bring out the real meaning of the passage: "Chhyun-chhyu-chi, of Silla..... Thereupon he again served Thang(sic), and, putting off the national garb, made a fawning appeal to the Son of Heaven, with the object of bringing disaster on a neighbouring kingdom." (p. 266). The text originally means that Kim Chun-chu of Silla undertook a diplomatic mission to Tang, discarded the native customs and codes of dress and caps, and grovellingly petitioned to the Son of Heaven to invade a neighbouring country (Koguryō).<sup>5</sup>

5 *Nihon shoki* Vol. 2, Fac. 26, Saimei. Aston's translation does not bring out the real meaning of the passage: "Chhyun-chhyu-chi, of Silla.....Thereupon he again served Thang(sic), and, putting off the national garb, made a fawning appeal to the Son of Heaven, with the object of bringing disaster on a neighbouring kingdom." (p. 266). The text originally means that Kim Chun-chu of Silla undertook a diplomatic mission to Tang, discarded the native customs and codes of dress and caps, and grovellingly petitioned to the Son of Heaven to invade a neighbouring country (Koguryō). For the original text see *Nihon shoki*, edited and annotated by Inoue Mitsusada, Tokyo: Chuo Koron, 1987, p. 256.



## V. Manipulation of Shamanic Beliefs

Even after a century of fervent patronage and propagation of Buddhism by the royalty, beliefs and practices centering on shamanism<sup>6</sup> constituted a significant ritual system in early Silla. It has been suggested earlier that soon after its official recognition Buddhism started absorbing shamanic symbolism and performing many ritual functions that had hitherto been fulfilled by shamans. But Buddhism could not succeed in exercising complete control of the religious sensibility and beliefs of the Silla people. Buddhism and Shamanism had to share the sacred space. Notwithstanding their Sinocentric ideological orientation, Silla rulers of the late sixth and the first half of the seventh century could not afford to ignore the political significance that shamanic symbols held for them. It was the age when the spiritual message and moral precepts of Buddhism had yet to spread to the lower echelons of the Silla society. Shamanism still defined their world view. It is also significant to remember that the Silla rulers of this period sought to redress what they reckoned as a faultline in the traditional concept of statecraft—the intervention of the aristocratic group in the political process—and to establish a direct linkage with their subjects. Their strategies of political legitimation, therefore, embodied symbols which the common people recognised and held as sacred.

King Chinpyŏng's repertoire of legitimatory instruments included a Jade Belt, reckoned as one of the Three Precious Treasures of Silla.<sup>7</sup> And his successor, Queen Sŏndŏk's identification with shamanism is expressed in her reported ability to foresee future events. It conformed to the ancient Silla tradition of female shamans presiding over state rituals and communicating with the world of spirits. The *Samguk yusa* relates a story that one winter day a number of frogs were seen at Yongmyo temple by the Ongmun chi (Jade Gate Pond). When the

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6 It needs to be remembered that I have invested the word shamanism with a broader meaning than is usually attributed. All forms of indigenous belief, including animism, the autochthonous spirit cult, and magic have been subsumed under its rubric.

7 Kim Sang-hyon has related invention of the so-called Three Jewels with the precarious political position of the Silla monarchy, particularly in the wake of overthrow of King Chinji. See his "Silla sambo-ŭi sŏngnip-kwa kŭ ūiŭi", *Tongguk sahak*, 14 (1980).

queen heard about it, she ordered her generals to rush to Yŏgŭn Kok ("Women Root Valley") at the western outskirts of the capital with two thousand troops. Evidently, the queen interpreted this omen as a warning of an invasion by Paekche forces through the western frontier of the kingdom. Later she explained that the frogs at Ongmun chi gave her grounds to anticipate a Paekche invasion, because she took the mysterious appearance of the frogs to mean the sudden appearance of enemy soldiers. The name *Ongmun chi* or Jade Gate Pond led her to think of another place name resonant of human anatomy, and she came up with the answer, Yŏgun. 'Ongmun' as name of the pond also gave her a reason to imagine of the western frontier, because both women and the western direction have white as their colour symbols (*Samguk yusa* 1, *Sŏndŏkwang chigi samsa*, 58-59).

Records about Queen Sŏndŏk in both the *Samguk sagi* and the *Samguk yusa* give an impression that she possessed great intelligence. According to an anecdote, Emperor Tang Taizong sent King Chinpyŏng peony seeds, accompanied by a painting of the flower. Sŏndŏk, who was seven at the time, looked at the painting and said that the flower would be beautiful, but would lack fragrance. She pointed to the painting which did not have bees and butterflies hovering around the flower. An index of intelligence or knowledge in traditional societies was the ability to anticipate future events.<sup>8</sup> The Jade Gate Pond story appears to be part of Silla's folklore, based on a popular belief in her considerable intellectual gift and aimed at justifying her "kingship" on the grounds of her supranormal, shamanic power.

It is evident that though the Silla rulers borrowed Chinese ideas and institutions and appropriated myths and motifs of Buddhism for legitimacy functions, they were not oblivious to the meaning of indigenous symbols of power which the common people of Silla recognised and understood.

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8 Kang Chae-chŏl has argued that the tale was deliberately manufactured in order to shore up the monarchical authority of Queen Sŏndŏk. See his essay "Sŏndŏk yŏwang chigi sŏrhwa-ui yŏngu, Tongyanghak 21 (1991) pp. 77-79".

## VI. Conclusion

It is apparent from the above discussion that Queen Söndök inherited and carried forward the tradition of King Chinhŭng and King Chinpyöng by employing Buddhist rhetoric and rituals for the peace and prosperity of the kingdom. The period of her reign was marked by political tremors caused by latent tension between the royalty and aristocracy. The continued enhancement of monarchical power meant erosion of the traditional prerogatives of the aristocracy. She harnessed the knowledge and prestige of Monk Chajang to achieve secular objectives of the state and mould the national consciousness in the way that served monarchical interests. Chajang's role in construction of the Nine-story stupa illustrates this point. Chajang's political use of Buddhist rhetoric is also evident in his apotheosis of Queen Söndök as a ksatriya, a caste of valour and virtue in Buddhist literature.

It is also important to note that Queen Söndök and Chindök's name Tökman and referred to specific personages in the Buddhist literature. The name Söndök represents a cakravarti and/or Buddhahood symbolism. Apparently, the unified cakravartin-Bodhisattva symbolism continued from King Chinhŭng down to Queen Chindök, although the forms in which they were manifested were different.

## Glossary

Chajang 慈藏

Chindök yöwang 眞德女王代 (Queen Chindök, 647-654)

Chingol 眞骨 (True Bone)

Chinhŭngwang 眞興王 (King Chinhŭng)

Chinpyöngwang 眞平王 (King Chinpyöng)

Chollyunsöngwang 轉輪聖王 (Cakravartin)

Dào xuān 道宣

Dongyi chön 東夷傳 (An Account of the Eastern Barbarians)

Haedong Kosŭng chön 海東高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Korean Monks)

Hwangnyong sa 黃龍寺 (皇龍寺 (Yellow/ Imperial Dragon Temple))

Hwangnyong sa kuchŭng moktap chaljuponki 黃龍寺九層木塔剎柱本紀  
 (Record [inscribed on a Pillar] of the Nine-storied  
 Wooden Stupa of the Hwangnyong Temple)

Iryŏn 一然

Jin Shu 晉書

Jiu Tang shu 舊唐書

Kakhun 覺訓

Kim Ch'un-ch'u 金春秋

Kim Pu-sik 金富軾

Kim Shu-hyon 金舒玄

Kim Yu-sin 金庾信

Koguryŏ 高句麗

Kokpan 斛飯 (Dronodana)

Kolpum che 骨品制 (Bone rank system)

Maya Puin 摩耶婦人

Nihon shoki 日本書紀

Ongmun chi 玉門池 (Jade Gate Pond)

Paekche 百濟

Paekpan 伯飯 (Shuklodana)

Pitam 毗曇

Pŏphŭng wang 法興王 (King Pŏphŭng)

Samguk sagi 三國史記 (A History of Three Kingdoms)

Samguk yusa 三國遺事 (Memorabilia of Three Ancient Kingdoms)

Silla 新羅

Sŏndŏk yŏwang 善德女王 (Queen Sŏndŏk, 632-647)

Sŏnggol 聖骨 (Sacred / Holy Bone)

Tang 唐

Tang Taizong 唐太宗

Xin Tang shu 新唐書

Xù gāosēng zhuàn 續高僧傳

Yŏgŭn Kok 女根谷 (Women Root Valley)

Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑

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