

# An Investigation of Two Buddhist Tomb-Inscriptions from 12th Century Koryŏ

*Henrik H. Sørensen*

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## Abstract

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*This paper is an investigation into the epitaphs for the tombs of two Korean Buddhist monk-officials from 12th century Koryŏ. Both epitaphs are written in the format of tomb-contracts according to which the dead person “owns” the plot of land on which the tomb is located so as not to have one’s final resting place disturbed after burial. These after-life contracts reflect an ancient Chinese practice that can be traced back to the Han dynasty. The Koryŏ examples follow the traditional Chinese format for such contracts.*

Key words: Koryŏ Buddhism, Cremation, Burial practices,  
Tomb contracts, Daoism.

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Henrik H. Sørensen, PhD, Director of the Seminar for Buddhist Studies, independent scholar.

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## I. Introduction

While burial in the context of all of the East Asian cultures encompass a wide range of beliefs and associated lore, a common denominator is ancestor worship. And although these beliefs to a large extent reflect what we normally understand as being within the province of traditional Confucian concerns, they are to a large extent free of a fixed ideological foundation. During the medieval periods of China and Korea mortuary rites and lore were constructed around a variety of religious beliefs, and rather than belonging to one particular tradition such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, they featured elements of them all. Hence, they can be seen as having formed a kind of trans-cultural template shared by people from all walks of life in China, Korea and to a lesser degree Japan.

While cremation was the norm for Buddhist monks in India, in both China and Korea burials are also known to have taken place. As far as the burial of Buddhist monks go there can be little doubt that Confucian-based ancestral practices in one form or the other lay at their foundation. However, as we shall presently see, the situation was considerably more complex and intricate. In the case of Koryō we may at least partly explain the burial of Buddhist monks as having been related to their social status.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it may turn out that it was their family background and/ or their capacity as government officials, i.e. as servants of the Koryō kingdom, which made it possible for them to have a secular-style burial rather than the usual cremation on a funeral pyre as ascribed by Buddhist orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup>

This presentation is devoted to a discussion of two dated tomb-inscriptions or epitaphs from the mid-12th century raised over two important Buddhist monk-functionaries. The investigation into these epigraphical sources will touch on issues such as tomb contracts for the afterlife, the indigenization of Sinitic cultural norms, the adaptability of Koryō Buddhism to

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1 A survey of the extant Buddhist stele inscriptions from the period in question reveal that most of these monks hailed from prominent families including both the nobility as well as the royal family. For a general outline see, Lee (1993, 384-86).

2 See Sem Vermeersch (2001).

non-Buddhist elements etc. However, it is also important to note that the two epitaphs do not represent the standard type of tomb-inscription raised over Koryŏ monks.<sup>3</sup> While both share the same structural and ideological features, they are in fact special in the way they have been conceived and their contents presented. In other words, we are here looking at a rather unique and highly interesting material which I believe will throw new light on one aspect of burial practice within the context of Koryŏ Buddhism.

## II. Ch'ŏnsang's epitaph

The first epitaph to concern us here is the *Ch'ŏnsang myojimyŏng* 闡祥墓誌銘 [The tomb inscription of Ch'ŏnsang] (*KMC*, 72, pl. 15). Most of the Buddhist tomb inscriptions from the Koryŏ at our disposal are without name headings, hence the titles given here have been constructed for practical referencing.

This inscription dates from 1141 CE, which places us in the final years of the reign of King Injong (r. 1122–1146), one of the most active, Buddhist rulers of the Koryŏ dynasty. The text of the inscription reads:

On the 28th day of *chŏng'yu* in the 2nd month—the 1st day of which is *kyŏng'o*—in this year of *shinyu* (i.e. 1141 CE), Ch'ŏnsang, the former abbot and Monks Overseer of the Hyŏnhwa Temple, passed away. The deceased person begs not to suffer an early end. He [hereby] orders the use of ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety strings of cash to purchase the deed for one plot of tomb land. On the south reaching to the Red Rooster, and on the north reaching to Xuanwu.<sup>4</sup> Protector of men Zhang Shenggu make sure [the deed] is entered into [the heavenly registers]. And Li Dingdu [make sure] that the deceased will not transmigrate later [in *saṃhāra*] and if there are somebody who seeks to appropriate it, or if there

3 For such examples, see *KMC* (31-32, 50-51, 68, 69, 73-74 etc.).

4 Xuanwu 玄武 or Zhenwu 真武 the Black Warrior, is the god of the north according to Daoism. In contrast to the other directional animals, he is the only one of them who is being personified here. This is also proof that the cult of this important deity had entered Koryŏ from China by the early 12th century.

are former dwellers of the platform,<sup>5</sup> that they be sent far away a thousand *yi* from it. ...<sup>6</sup> Quickly, quickly in accordance with the statue of the law (*KMCC*, 72, pl. 15).<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 1. Ch'ŏnsang's epitaph.

Although the factual data concerning Ch'ŏnsang's life in the epitaph are scanty, enough information is given for us to establish that he served in the capacity of *sūng'ong* 僧統 or Saṅgha Overseer, an official position similar to that of a medieval Christian bishop. This position was bestowed on important Buddhist clerics and included monks from the entire sectarian spectrum during

5 This may originally have referred to the platform upon which the coffin rests, but the meaning here is the plot of land—including the underground—where the tomb is situated.

6 Three characters missing at the end of the epitaph.

7 1) 維歲次辛酉二月朔庚  
 2) 午二十八日丁酉前玄化  
 3) 寺住持僧統闡祥亡過人  
 4) 乞不幸早終今用錢九万  
 5) 九千九百九十貫文買墓  
 6) 地一段東至青龍西至白  
 7) 虎南至朱雀北至玄武保  
 8) 人張堅固見入李定度之  
 9) 後不得轉有侵奪先有居  
 10) 臺遠避千里之口口口  
 11) 急急如律令勅

the period in question.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore the epitaph informs us that Ch'önsang hailed from Hyönhwa Temple 玄化寺, one of the important temples situated in Kaesöng, the Koryö capital. Since its founding this temple is known to have been under the control of the Chaün/Pöpsang School.<sup>9</sup> We are in other words dealing with a high-ranking scholar monk, who served as Saṅgha Overseer during the closing years of King Injong's reign. The fact that Ch'önsang was entombed rather than cremated may be because he was of royal or nobility descent.

Let us now turn to the more ritual and symbolic elements in the epitaph. The large sum for purchasing the plot of land with the tomb is of course a symbolical number consisting of many times nine, the number for supreme *yang*. What is interesting to note here, is that this symbolic sum of money most likely was matched by the burning of paper money, bruning being the time-honoured way of transferring documents between the human sphere and that of heavenly beings. This may very well be one of the earliest recorded instances in Korea where this practice is recorded.

The four directional spirits, i.e. the white tiger, thevermillion rooster, the blue dragon and the tortoise and snake (here indicated by Zhenwu) are of course standard to tomb lore in the Korean cultural context since the period of the Han Commanderies. In the present case they are invoked to render protection and inviolability of the tomb and its inhabitant, and as such function as land-markers of the actual plot on which the tomb is placed.

The two protecting divinities invoked towards the end of the text, i.e. Zhang Shenggu 張堅固 and Li Dingdu 李定度, are protecting spirits. Their function is to ensure that the transaction of the land deed for the tomb is correctly implemented, that the tomb is being protected from this- and other-worldly encroachment and that the spirit of inhabitant of the tomb is escorted safely to "the other side."<sup>10</sup>

8 A discussion of the monk officials under the Koryö can be found in Hō Hōngsik (1986, 316-89).

9 For a solid treatment of this Buddhist denomination and the Hyönhwa Temple during the period under discussion, see Ch'oe (1986, 99-129).

10 A burial document concerning a deceased Buddhist nun from Gaochang in Turfan dating from 548 CE mentions both Zhang Shengu and Li Dingdu in the roles as otherworldly witnesses testifying to the

### III. Sehyŏn's epitaph

The second source to concern us here is the *Sehyŏn myojimyŏng* 世賢墓誌銘 [The tomb inscription of Sehyŏn] (*KMC*, 78, pl.16). This epitaph dates from 1143 CE, making it more or less contemporaneous with that of Ch'ŏnsang discussed above. However the template of the tomb contract differs slightly. The text of the epitaph reads:

On the 7th day of *kyehae* in the 5th month—the 1st day of which is *chŏngsa*—in this 3rd year (*kyehae*) of the Koryŏ Kingdom (i.e. 1143 CE), the resident abbot of wondrous ability, Sehyŏn, Great Master of the Third Rank of Songchŏn<sup>11</sup> temple near to Hŭng'wang<sup>12</sup> temple, passed away. Therefore the deceased person entreated people before [his death] to put forward ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety strings of cash for the deed asking permission from the Imperial Father of Heaven and the Imperial Mother of the Earth and the gods of the soil of the twelve divisions [of the year] to purchase one plot for a frontal tomb surrounded by fields. On the east reaching to the Green Dragon, on the west reaching to the White Tiger, on the south reaching to the Red Rooster, and on the north reaching to Xuanwu. Above reaching to the Azure Heaven and below reaching to the Yellow Springs.<sup>13</sup> The four [boundaries of the tomb land] are clearly distinguished, and on this day money and property have been shared. The spirits of heaven and earth have understood. Guarantors are Zhang Lu and Li Dingdu. Witnesses are Dongwanggong and Xiwangmu. Writer of the contract is Shi Qiecao. Reader of the contract is Jin Zhubu. The writer of the contract has flown [with it] to heaven,<sup>14</sup> while the reader of the contract has gone to the Yellow Springs [to report].<sup>15</sup> Quickly, quickly in accordance with the statute of the law (*KMC*, 78, pl.16).<sup>16</sup>

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accuracy of the burial document. Hence their appearance in the context of Buddhist burial practice is of a relative early date in the Chinese cultural sphere. See *Tulufan chutu wenshu* (1981, 62-63). For additional information on Buddhist burials with Daoistic symbols, confer Albert E. Dien (1995, 41-58).

11 I have been unable to identify this temple. Probably it changed name in the course of history and may be known under another name today.

12 (*HPSS*, 673a-74a).

13 This refers to the subterranean world of ancient China where the bo soul is said to live after death.

14 In order to have the contract entered into the registers of the heavenly bureaucracy.

15 In order to enter the other half of the contract into the registers of the underworld bureaucracy.



Fig. 2. Sehyōn's epitaph.

In comparison with Ch'ōnsang's epitaph, the inscription for Sehyōn is both lengthier and more detailed. However, the details do not really concern the latter's life, but are formulaic and ritualistic in nature. One may say that the epitaph is more strongly informed by Chinese mythology and lore than that of the former.

The epitaph informs us that his main temple was the Hūng'wang Temple 興王寺,<sup>17</sup> a large and important monastery associated with the history

16 1) 維皇統三年癸亥歲五月朔丁巳七日癸亥高麗國

2) 興王寺接松川寺住持妙能三重大師世賢

3) 歿故亡人乞人前一萬九千九百九十文就

4) 皇天父后土母社稷十二邊買得前件墓

5) 田周流一頃東至青龍南至朱崔西至

6) 白虎北至玄武上至蒼天下至黃泉四至分

7) 明日錢財分付天地神明了保人張陸

8) 李定度知見人東王公西王母書契人石

9) 切曹讀契人金主簿書契人飛上

10) 天讀契人入黃泉急急如律令勅

(Every other line is upside-down in the original inscription. See Fig. 2. I do not know whether this anomaly should merely be seen as a stylistic feature, or whether it actually reflects an influence from talismanic writing in which characters may sometimes be partly inverted.)

17 For an earlier attempt at a translation of this inscription together with some comments, see the excellent and highly informative article by Ina Asim (1994, 350-52). The problem with Asim's study of the inscription in question—which she wrongly identifies as belonging to the Jin—is not only that she fails to realize that she is dealing with a Korean text, she also misunderstands the religious context in which it was produced. Hence, although she correctly identifies the inscription as a land

of the Hwaŏm School 華嚴宗 of Buddhism, the most important of the doctrinal schools of Korean Buddhism. During the late 11th century it was one of the temples from which the famous patriarch Ŭich'ŏn 義天 (1055–1101) launched his “new” school, the Ch'ŏnt'ae 天台. In Sehyŏn's days it was in all likelihood still under the control of the latter school, which means that he was probably belonging to this Buddhist tradition. It is of course also possible that he belonged to the Hwaŏm School. Sehyŏn is referred to as a “Great Master of the Third Rank” (*samjung taesa* 三重大師), which is one of the highest titles held by a Buddhist functionary during the Koryŏ. It was used exclusively for monks belonging to one of the doctrinal schools of Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

The spirit Zhang Lu 張陸, mentioned in the text as one of the two guarantors of the tomb can only refer to Zhang Lu 張魯 (fl. 2nd century), the de-facto founder of the early Daoist movement of the Wudoumi 五斗米 (Five pecks of rice),<sup>19</sup> while Li Dingdu is an old acquaintance from Ch'ŏnsang's epitaph. I consider the appearance in Sehyŏn's epitaph of the founder of the tradition of the Wudoumi (later of the Heavenly Masters tradition 天師法 and in the Korean context probably a Song import) as a sign of Sinitic cultural convention, similar to the well-known Xiwangmu 西王母 and Dongwanggong 東王公, rather than as evidence of a direct Daoist influence. But of course the Daoist origin of the deified Zhang Lu is indisputable.

As for the two other spirits connected with the making of the tomb contract and its transference, i.e. Shi Qiecao 石切曹 and Jin Zhubu 金主簿, the origin(s) of their names have eluded me. However, the respective characters of their professed family names, i.e. “shi” 石 and “jin” 金, point to symbolic meanings behind their names. It will be remembered that writings of

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deed for the afterlife, she is unable to see its significance as an example of Korean Buddhist beliefs in connection with burial practice of the mid-Koryŏ.

18 Despite extensive and systematic research into the ranks and functions of important Buddhist clerics during the Koryŏ, nobody have so far been able to identify Ch'ŏnsang. The best attempt at identifying the important Koryŏ clerics is still to be found in Hŏ (1986, 316-55).

19 For his role in thaumaturgy and burial practices of the late Han, see Rolf A. Stein (1979, 53-81).



memorial function for epitaphs, such as the one we have here, were engraved on stone and metal in order to preserve them for posterity (which is exactly the idea behind a tomb contract for the afterlife). Hence, the names of these two characters have foremostly symbolic meanings indicating certainty and permanence. Moreover the text of the epitaph identifies them as spirit-messengers entrusted with informing the heavenly and the subterranean bureaucracies with the details of the tomb contract. This two-fold arrangement is of course a reflection of the dual quality of the spirit of the deceased in accordance with traditional Chinese belief, namely the *hun* 魂 and *bo* 魄 parts which separate after death to find their final resting places in heaven and the netherworld respectively.

#### **IV. What the two epitaphs tell us about mid-Koryŏ Buddhism**

Most importantly the data provided by the two inscriptions, reveals that the custom of buying land deeds for the tombs of the deceased was also practised under the Koryŏ. Moreover and significantly, it took place in a Buddhist context. Comparison with epigraphical material from Song China makes it clear that the Koreans had evidently had taken it over from their great neighbour to the west, i.e. China or perhaps from the states of Liao or Jin. Exactly when this took place is not clear, however.

Here it is interesting to note that the over-all format or template for the tomb contracts under discussion can be documented as having circulated in Tang China during the mid-8th century. This information is based on a contract found at Astana in Turfan and dating from 769 CE. However, it may have existed in this or a similar form even earlier.<sup>20</sup> As a cultural phenomena tomb contracts of the dead can of course be traced all the way back to the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) (Asim 1994, 311–26).<sup>21</sup> This means that it was a time-honoured practice based on a well-established template which the

<sup>20</sup> See *Tuluofan chutu wenshu* (1988, 6–7). A translation of this contract together with a detailed discussion can be found in Valerie Hansen (1995, 62–63).

<sup>21</sup> For additional information, see Anna Seidel (1985, 161–84) and Peter Nikerson (2002, 58–77).

Koreans took over. Furthermore, the American scholar Valerie Hansen mentions that the template under discussion occurs in what she calls “a manual for siting tombs,” the *Dili xinshu* 地理新書 (*New book of earth patterns*) which was first published in 1071 CE (Hansen 1995, 63). It is not unlikely that this work, essentially a *p’ungsu* 風水 manual, was known to the Koreans of Koryŏ by the 12th century. And if so may have provided them with the orthodox Chinese template for Ch’ŏnsang’s tomb contract.

Information to the fact that both Ch’ŏnsang and Sehyŏn were important Buddhist functionaries with official titles point to a close connection between them and the Kaesŏng court. Furthermore the two epitaphs also confirm the important roles played by the Hyŏnhwa and Hŭng’wang temples during the 12th century.

While the Daoist or more properly Daoistic beliefs reflected in the two epitaphs may be taken as indication of a syncretic tendency in the mortuary practices of Koryŏ Buddhism, I would caution against overstating of this. Although it is evident that elements such as the appearance of the Daoist patriarch Zhang Lu, Zhenwu, the Dark Warrior, and the magical formular “Quickly, quickly in accordance with the statute of the law,” the latter often encountered in connection with talismanic writings, have direct Daoist associations, they should not necessarily be understood as such on the functional level. By the 12th century such elements were basic to Chinese culture and as such also formed an integrated part of Buddhist practice and belief. Hence, when these elements were transmitted to the Korean Peninsula, they chiefly occur as examples of Korean borrowings of Sinitic cultural elements without necessarily having a specific religious or sectarian address. What we have seen are essentially examples of literary and ritualistic conventions related to Chinese burial practices transferred to and adapted to the reality of Koryŏ culture. Even to consider them particular to Koryŏ Buddhism is to miss the point, as we should remember that no similar contracts for monks’ tombs have so far been identified in the Korean primary sources.

When this has been said, we must also acknowledge that Koryŏ

Buddhism was both complex and multifarious in its practices. Perhaps more so than hitherto thought. It is evident that many Sinitic elements relating to religion and ritual were adopted by the Koryŏ people and we do indeed encounter quite a number of practices and beliefs which had their roots in Chinese Daoism as well.<sup>22</sup>

Here it would also be in order to recall that the reign of King Injong had witnessed the rise and fall of the thaumaturge Myoch'ŏng 妙清 (d. 1136), a Buddhist monk whose influence and power was chiefly gained through his mastery of geomancy, a system of belief—although usually presented in the guise of Esoteric Buddhism (*milgyo* 密教)—was deeply indebted to traditional Chinese philosophy and religious Daoist lore. A survey of the beliefs which Myoch'ŏng promoted shows that it did indeed contain many such elements, in particular *yin-yang* philosophy, five elements theory and of course *p'ungsu* pronostication, hence—given the relatively great impact of this monk on Koryŏ society and religion during the first half of the 12th century—may explain why Daoist beliefs and practices had crept into Buddhist mortuary practices during that time.<sup>23</sup> After all the two inscriptions in question were composed less than a decade after Myoch'ŏng's movement and subsequent uprising collapsed.

## V. Conclusion

To the extent that we can trust the surviving epigraphical material, it would appear that the entombment of Buddhist monks only took place occasionally during the the Koryŏ, and that it was mostly—if not exclusively—done for clerics of nobility or royal descent. The earliest dated monk's funerary epitaph we have is from 1066 CE (*KMC*, 24–25), while the last we

22 A survey of the *Koryŏsa* 高麗史 (*History of the Koryŏ Dynasty*) for indication of the prevalence of Daoist practices at the royal court reveals that it was mainly from the 12th century that they become more noticeable. A note on Daoism under the Koryŏ from the 11th century can be found in Xu Jing's 徐兢 (1091–1159) celebrated *Gaoli tujing* 高麗圖經 (*Illustrated Book on the Koryŏ*). Confer Xu (1983, 93–94).

23 See Ch'a Chuhwan (1978, 181–218) and Yannick Brunetton (9–15).

have dates from 1222 CE (*KMC*, 339-40). This period spans the reigns of kings Munjong (r. 1046–1083) up to and including that of Kjong (r. 1213–1259), i.e. it roughly covers the entire mid-Koryŏ period. As far as I am aware we have no monks' epitaphs for tombs from the Unified Silla nor the early Koryŏ. This is not to say that they did not exist, actually it is highly likely that they did, but if such was the case, we have no direct and solid proof of it. When compared with China, the situation was very different there. Entombment of monks occurred relatively often and grave contracts have been documented as far back as the Nanbeichao period (386–581). Exactly why the practice of entombing monks came about relatively late in the Koryŏ, and was again discontinued—as no material is extant from the second half of the dynasty—is not known. It is possible, as already stated, that under the Koryŏ it was evidently only monks with royal background or high nobility blood-line who were buried, but the exact reasons behind this practice, or why it was discontinued, is not known. In any case the practice of burial was (and still is) a civil ritual despite whatever religious “packing” it comes in. Here it must suffice to say that the monks who were entombed, were all important figures in the Koryŏ Buddhist hierarchy, and it is possible that their burials were done as an expression of combined civil and official concerns? Moreover, most of them hailed from the great temples located in or around the capital of Kaesŏng, something which may be taken as indication of a close link with the ruling classes. It should be noted, however, that during the same period the absolute majority of monks, famous ones as well as ordinary members of the monastic community, were cremated in accordance with traditional Buddhist custom.

Tomb contracts for the dead may have been more common under the Koryŏ than the sources at present allow us to know. However, the fact that we find them in connection with the burials of important monks and that burials are essentially not part of orthodox Buddhist practice, could be taken as indicators that similar contracts of the dead were also used in civil burials.

**Glossary of Chinese Terms**

(K=Korean, C=Chinese)

- Bo (C) 魄  
 Chǒngsa (K) 丁巳  
 Chǒng'yu (K) 丁酉  
 Ch'ōnsang myojimyǒng (K) 闡祥墓誌銘  
 Dili xinshu (C) 地理新書  
 Dongwanggong (C) 東王公  
 Gaoli tujing (C) 高麗圖經  
 Han (C) 漢  
 Hun (C) 魂  
 Hūng'wang Temple 興王寺  
 Hwaǒm (K) 華嚴  
 Hyǒnhwa (K) 玄化  
 Jin (C) 金  
 Jin Zhubu (C) 金主簿  
 Kaesǒng (K) 開城  
 Koryǒsa (K) 高麗史  
 Kyehae (K) 癸亥  
 Kyǒng'o (K) 庚午  
 Li Dingdu (C) 李定度  
 Liao (C) 遼  
 Milgyo (K) 密教  
 Nanbeichao (C) 南北朝  
 Samchung taesa (K) 三重大師  
 Sehyǒn myojimyǒng (K) 世賢墓誌銘  
 Shi Qiecao (C) 石切曹  
 Shinyu (K) 辛酉  
 Sūngt'ong (K) 僧統  
 Tang (C) 唐  
 Ŭich'ǒn (K) 義天

Xiwangmu (C) 西王母  
Xu Jing (C) 徐兢  
Xuanwu (C) 玄武  
Yang (K) 陽  
Yi (C) 理  
Yin-yang (C) 陰陽  
Zhang Lu (C) 張陸  
Zhang Shenggu (C) 張堅固  
Zhenwu (C) 真武

## Abbreviations

- HPSS* *Han'guk pulgyo sach'al sajon* 韓國佛教寺刹辭典 (Dictionary of Korean Buddhist Temples), ed. Yichong 李政. Seoul: Pulgyo sidaesa. 1996.
- KMC* *Koryŏ myochimyŏng chipsŏng* 高麗墓誌銘集成 (*A complete collection of tomb inscriptions from the Koryŏ*), comp. Kim, Yŏngsŏn 金龍善. Hallim taehakkyo Asia munhwa yŏn'guso charyo chongsŏ, vol. 10. Ch'unch'ŏn: Hallim taehakkyo Asia munhwa yŏn'guso. 1993.

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