ESOTERIC BUDDHISM IN KOREA
Introduction

Although Esoteric Buddhism as such only played a truly major role in the history of Korean Buddhism during the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), it has always been part and parcel of the ritual practices of mainstream Buddhism on the Korean Peninsula, a fact that can even be observed in the Buddhist temples today. Whereas Esoteric Buddhism, both in its early forms as well as in the later institutionalized and systemic incarnations of the late medieval period, played much more pronounced and evidential roles in the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions, its role in Korean Buddhism has always been somewhat circumspect and hard to evaluate mainly due to the nature of the written sources. Our sources for the practice of early Esoteric Buddhism in Korea consist of a motley collection of occasional, scattered historical references, ritual manuals, and random examples from material culture. Bona fide doctrinal works on Esoteric Buddhism are very few and essentially limited to a few commentaries from the period of the Unified Silla (668–918).

Myths Relating to Esoteric Buddhism in Old Silla

Before entering a discussion of the history and practices of Esoteric Buddhism on the Korean Peninsula, let us first take a brief look at the traditional myths concerning Esoteric Buddhist practice during the Three Kingdoms period (ca. 300–668) and the early Unified Silla, the period roughly covering a century and a half from ca. 600–750 C.E. These myths have exercised a continued influence on contemporary Korean scholarship, which has persistently treated them as historical events, thereby seriously distorting the issue and preventing us from reaching a more balanced picture of the actual events.¹ For this

¹ A classic example of this inability to distinguish historical fact from fiction can be found in Sŏ Yun’gil (Suh Yoon-kil) 1994a, 257–306, esp. 259–267. See also Sŏ