FROM APOLOGETICS TO SUBVERSION:
SOME INITIAL OBSERVATIONS ON
SÖLCHAM’S 雪岑
CHODONG OWI YOHAE 報洞五位要解

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While Literati Sŏn was imported from China to the Korean peninsula already during the Koryŏ Dynasty, in the wake of the gradual repression of Buddhism in Chosŏn from the 15th century onwards Buddhist exegetes authored several apologetic treatises which sought to demonstrate nothing less than the ultimate unity of Buddhism and Confucianism. The Chodong owi yohae (Essential explanations on the five positions of the Tsao t'ung [lineage]), written by the monk Sŏlcham (1435–1493, better known as Confucian literate Maewŏltang Kim Sisup), equates Sŏn Buddhist and Neo-Confucian thought in a most radical fashion. The text provides a bold integration of the well-known Chán/Sŏn dialectical scheme of the Five Positions (wǔwèi) and Zhōu Dūnyi’s (1017–1073) ‘Tàijí tú,’ as well as Zhū Xī’s commentary. Perhaps even more intriguing than the argumentative basis underlying this equation are the subversive rhetorical techniques applied.

1. Introduction

When it comes to the relations between Buddhism and Confucianism from the late 14th to the late 15th century, among the first terms coming to one’s mind would be ‘repression’ or ‘conflict.’ Thus, under the influence of the anti-Buddhist polemics of Neo-Confucian scholars like Yi Saek 李碞 (Mogŭn 牧隱, 1328–1396) and Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (Sambong 三峰, 1342–1398), the new ruling house soon would issue a series of repressive measures against the Buddhists.

Under the rule of T’aegong 太宗 (r. 1400–1418) the number of temples and tradition lineages were drastically reduced and Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418–1450) further reduced the remaining seven tradition lineages to just two. Only after the death of his beloved queen, did he seek consolation in Buddhism and attempted to transfer merit by
publishing the vernacular lives of the Buddha. The usurper Sejo 世祖 (r. 1455–1468), by contrast, was overtly favorable towards Buddhism and even established the Kan’gyōng to’gam 削經都監, a court office responsible for the publication of Buddhist texts. His successor Sŏngjong 成宗 (r. 1470–1490), however, abolished this institution and the tyrant Yŏnsan’gun 燕山君 (r. 1454–1506) had the headquarters of the two remaining tradition lines closed down. After a short period of detente, Chungjong 中宗 (r. 1506–1544) in 1508 went so far as to wipe out the monastic examination system. Chosŏn 朝鮮 Buddhism did not recover from this series of blows and found itself marginalized within the mountains until the late 19th century.

While, from the institutional point of view, this textbook narrative of repression, restoration and ultimate abolishment may give a rough account of the general trends during the 15th century, more recently it has been subject to criticism because the historical processes were more complex (cf., e.g., Kim Jongmyung 2007; Plassen forthcoming). For one, the individual rulers’ actions were not consistently pro- or anti-Buddhist. To raise but one example, King T’aejong followed the Confucian and early Neo-Confucian scholars’ stereotype that the monastic system harms the state as it leads to tax evasion and, as mentioned above during the 6th year of his reign, he reduced the number of monasteries. This, however, did not prevent the same ruler from promoting the printing of Buddhist scriptures. In 1413, he had the governor of Kyŏngsang-do 慶尚道 send paper manufactured in three provinces to the monastery of Haeinsa 海印寺 in order to facilitate a reprint of the Buddhist canon. For another, the textbook account focuses exclusively on the role of the king, evoking the impression of a static antagonism between two monolithic blocks, Neo-Confucian officials on the one side and Buddhist monks on the other. Evidently, even before the rise of the zealous Sarimp’a faction, influential Neo-Confucian ideologists, such as Chŏng Tojŏn or Sejong’s ‘pain in the neck’ Ch’oe Malli 崔萬理 (?–1445), harbored a fiendish attitude towards Buddhism. And yet, the case of the early Neo-Confucian Yi Saek (1328–1396), who already in the middle of the 14th century (1352) lamented about a too high number of monasteries and monks from a fiscal point of view but also considered Buddhism ideologically compatible with a Confucian state (Chung Chai-sik 1985; T’oege ye chŏnsŏ 退溪全書: 1157b–1158b), entails that