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Syncretism, Harmonization, and Mutual Appropriation between Buddhism and Confucianism in Pre-Joseon Korea

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Abstract: Following the introduction of Buddhism to China, various strategies of accommodation with Chinese culture were developed, all amounting to some form of syncretism with Chinese religions, mainly Confucianism. Buddhism in pre-modern Korea displayed similar forms of interaction with Confucianism. This article aims to critique the notion that such interactions were merely forms of “harmonization”, finding common ground between the traditions. If one religion borrows from another or adopts the message of another religion, it will be affected to some degree, which is why the concept of syncretism is a better tool of analysis. This article concludes that there was a strong official support in Goryeo Korea towards the genuine convergence of Confucianism and Buddhism. Since Buddhism, as a result, took on many of the tasks carried out by Confucianism in China, the reaction against Buddhism by a reinvigorated Confucianism from the late fourteenth century onward was much stronger than in China.

Keywords: Buddhism; Confucianism; syncretism; harmonization (*hoetong*); Unified Silla (668–935); Goryeo (918–1392)

1. Introduction

The question of how Buddhism changed after it was transmitted to China, and how it in turn affected Chinese society, has been hotly debated among scholars of Buddhism. A glance at the titles of the most influential works on this question illustrates the widely diverging views: While Zürcher emphasizes the Buddhist “conquest” of China (Zürcher [1959] 1972), Kenneth Ch’en looks at how Buddhism transformed China (Ch’en 1973). A middle position is taken by Sharf, who points out that the question “who transforms whom” is misleading: since there was, in fact, no neat “transmission” of Buddhism from India to China; Chinese Buddhism should be treated on its own terms from the beginning, as a Chinese phenomenon rather than as a derivative of Indian culture (Sharf 2002).

To some degree of course the different positions of these three scholars are the result of the different time periods they were active in. While Zürcher and Ch’en sought to establish historical facts through a rigorous analysis of the source material, under the influence of the post-modern turn of the late twentieth century, Sharf was more attuned to the assumptions and rhetorical modes employed by historians when arguing their case. However, even though Sharf is arguing strongly against any comparison between Chinese and Indian Buddhism, the core of his argument is in fact the sinification of Indian Buddhist concepts: his work shows how standard Indian concepts such as the three bodies of Buddha (*trikāya*) were reinterpreted from a binary *ti-yong* 體用 (essence–function) perspective, to conform with Chinese Indigenous ways of reasoning.

Thus, all three works can be said to describe, from various angles, how the confrontation between Buddhism and Chinese culture, and in particular with Confucianism, played out. While Zürcher focuses on the early political history (until the fourth century AD), Ch’en looks at various points

of interaction, from politics to social customs, focusing especially on how Buddhism adapted itself to Chinese politics and society. Sharf finally looks at the realm of ideas: his work deals with a Taoist-Buddhist work, but rather than the syncretism between Taoism and Buddhism, the real topic is the persistence of traditional Chinese frameworks of interpretation. As such, these works form a convenient hook for the present study: by the seventh century, when the Korean peninsula achieved political unification, it had thoroughly absorbed both sinified Buddhism and Confucianism. Of course, it had its own indigenous religious culture, but this left barely any imprint on the written record. Since both Buddhism and Confucianism were imported systems/ideologies, their dynamic of interaction was somewhat different from China, yet also informed by their relative positions in China.

For one, there is no evidence of any strong antagonism between these traditions in Korea before the fourteenth century; once in a while, a Confucianized intellectual such as Choe Seungno (927–989) criticized Buddhism, yet at least in part this criticism formed part of the posturing of what a Confucian state in the Chinese mold ought to look like, and is not necessarily a reflection of wider trends.¹ In fact, during the Unified Silla (668–935) and Goryeo (918–1392) periods, Buddhism and Confucianism were mostly spoken of in terms of their complementarity, as mutually harmonious systems. This harmonization will be the main focus of this paper; yet, even in the absence of overt conflict, a close reading of discourses of harmonization reveals underlying tensions and problems.

Methodologically, I will try to apply the concept of syncretism, for the following reasons: 1. Despite the vagueness and problematic nature of the term for religious studies, a nuanced definition can add to the discussion, because 2. within Korean Studies, the concept of harmonization is mostly applied uncritically, failing to disentangle rhetoric strategy and factuality; therefore, 3. describing the process of interaction between Buddhism and Confucianism as syncretic can disestablish the unproblematic notion of Buddhism and Confucianism as being “in harmony” and uncover the purpose behind discourses of harmonization.

The second section will necessarily try to clarify the use of the concept of syncretism, primarily through the work of Timothy Brook, who has written extensively on the problem of syncretism between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in Chinese history. Here, I will also contrast this with extant scholarship on Korean language and its achievements and limitations. The third section will deal mainly with the intellectual legacy of Choe Chiweon (b. 857), the first in Korean history to theorize the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism. Since Choe lived at the end of the Unified Silla period, his ideas could not fully be implemented during his lifetime, so the fourth section will look at strategies of syncretization between Confucianism and Buddhism during the Goryeo period, and ascertain the agendas behind this, as well as the implications for each side.

2. Methodological Issues: Why Syncretism?

Before dealing with syncretism and related concepts, it is also necessary to define what we mean by “Confucianism” and “Buddhism”. While Buddhism is more straightforward in that it will easily fit most definitions of what constitutes a religion, Confucianism defies such easy categorization. Rodney Taylor (Taylor 1990) and others have made a convincing case for treating Confucianism as a religion, but it should also be acknowledged that some aspects remain decidedly in the realm of the secular: the guardians of Confucianism were the scholar-bureaucrats who governed the country, and though they also oversaw the ritual and cultic aspects, for the most part they were concerned with politics and the management of the population.

More importantly, however, Confucianism is problematic because it has developed into a blanket term with very porous borders. In particular, the assumption that it is somehow identical with Chinese culture should be disabused from the beginning. Although it emerged in the Sinitic cultural sphere, its values were universalist. In fact, before the systematization of Confucianism into what is known

¹ For Choe Seungno’s criticism of Buddhism in his 28-point policy critique, see (Lee 1993), pp. 273, 276, 278–79, 285, 289–92.

in the West as Neo-Confucianism, usually attributed to the efforts of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), there was little in the way of Confucian orthodoxy. The supposed exemplars of the tradition, the scholar-officials (Ch. *Ru* 儒, *shi* 士), were eclectic and non-exclusive in their worldview, often freely embracing other traditions, including Buddhism and Taoism. Even the Confucian canon includes works that were retroactively ascribed to Confucian sages or mythical emperors, but were actually of uncertain origin. A case in point is the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*, which can be read either as a book of prognostication or a cosmological primer.

In this paper, the Confucianism that will be discussed is mostly the idealized form as it existed in the minds of certain scholars, the Confucianism-as-it ought to be; and the same goes for Buddhism. Hence, I will talk about the teachings rather than religions, since the latter ought to embrace what people actually practiced, but due to lack of sources, this will mostly remain outside my purview. However, while there was thus a kind of “imagined Buddhism” and “imagined Confucianism” that was current throughout the East Asian Sinosphere, at the same time, there were regional variations, often tied to the situation on the ground, and to the degree that the sources allow us to do so, this will also be discussed.

One of the aims of this study is to bridge East Asian and Western scholarship on the topic at hand. The role of the conceptual toolbox employed by scholars is usually taken for granted; yet despite the globalization of research, it is often overlooked that countries or regions may use different conceptual frameworks that do not fully overlap. Yet, there are not many studies that compare terminological impasses in East Asian humanities studies. An interesting study that goes to the heart of the matter is Ross King’s work on the concept of diglossia, as applied in Korean literature studies. King shows how the term, which originates in linguistics to denote a situation where there are two language codes, the vernacular (with all its various dialects) and an elite, mainly written, language, gradually started to be employed from the 1990s in the work of Korean literature scholars. However, there, it developed a decidedly negative connotation, as the situation up until the nineteenth century where authors used the elite Literary Sinitic for official communication and vernacular Korean for private communication was interpreted as an obstacle to the full development of the Korean language (King 2015). To get out of the quandary of such idiosyncratic local usage of globalized academic English, King boldly proposes to make Literary Sinitic (Hanmun) terms the standard koine rather than English, because of the greater transparency of the compound terms.²

A similar tension can be observed between the Western term syncretism and East Asian cognates, such as *hoetong* 會通. Just as the major monotheistic religions shun the idea of syncretism as a kind of “incest revulsion” (Fischer 2012, p. 3), Buddhist and Confucian scholars generally do not use the Korean dictionary translation of syncretism, *honhapjuui* 混合主義. Instead, whenever the interaction of Buddhism and Confucianism is discussed, it is predominantly in terms of harmonization; the term *hoetong* can best be understood as an attitude of accommodation and harmonization, looking for what connects and communes rather than what separates.³ However, the term seems to have emerged in modern Korean academic circles through the work of Choe Namseon (1890–1957), who in 1930, first proposed the term *tong Bulgyo* 通佛敎 (syncretic Buddhism) as one of the defining characteristics of Korean Buddhism, and by extension also of Korean culture (Shim 1989). Choe Namseon derived the term from his study of the works of Weonhyo (617–686), who sought to reconcile various apparently contradictory Buddhist ideas by reinterpreting them through his own dialectic framework. Whereas it is therefore based on a framework that is indeed syncretic in that it integrates several disparate

² (King 2015, p. 13). “Eonmun goeri” is one of the alternative terms he suggests.

³ A search of the terms “yugyo” (Confucianism) and “hoetong” in academic articles on riss.kr, the representative South Korean database for academic research, yields 165 returns, while a search for “yugyo” and “honhapjuui” has only 22 returns; “singkeurijeum” yields no results. Virtually, the only article to use “honhapjuui” for the pre-modern period is (Choi 2007). Search results retrieved on 26 March 2020. For Buddhism and *hoetong* the research results are similar (447 and 26, respectively). Other terms are also used in Korean scholarship, notably *seuphap*. However, to all of these negative connotations cling (Choi 2007, p. 40).

Buddhist ideas in a new system, the term becomes problematic when applied to virtually all religious and philosophical phenomena (Cho 2004). Moreover, it is very vague; usually, authors use the term to illustrate the genius of a particular author in managing to reconcile apparently conflicting notions, but methodologically, it lacks the rigor to analyze, for example, how specifically this “harmonization” worked and what the religious implications were for the traditions being harmonized.

In the case of the term “syncretism”, by contrast, there exists a vast repository of critical research; if anything, there is too much available, making it impossible to summarize. Fundamentally, of course, the concept is easy: it refers to the borrowing by one religion of elements from another, or in the fashioning of a new religion on the basis of (fragments of) other religions. What makes the matter complex, however, is the fact that the concept makes both theologians and religious studies scholars wary: ⁴ it unsettles the unspoken assumption that religions are *sui generis* entities, because it entails the idea of impurity. Merely contemplating the possibility of syncretism is regarded as an admission that one’s religion is not self-sufficient and neatly bounded (Leopold and Jensen 2004, p. 3). Thus, theologians resist the idea, while religious studies scholars tend to over-complexify it, sometimes to the point of unintelligibility.⁵

The difficulty seems to lie especially in distinguishing whether parallel elements in two traditions are the result of conscious attempts at borrowing, or merely accidental similarities, or “natural results of interaction”. Leopold and Jensen suggest that the unconscious mode of syncretism “would rarely be registered as an innovation but rather be considered an adaptation, amalgamation, or assimilation” (Leopold and Jensen 2004, p. 4). However, how would we then discern conscious from unconscious rapprochement? If a Chinese Buddhist emphasizes that his religion is very filial, how do we know whether or not he realizes that “filial piety” is not originally a Buddhist concept? Then there is also the possibility of dissimulation: when a Buddhist says his values are really the same as Confucianism, how do we know that he is not simply “donning a tolerant posture”, as William Chu puts it (Chu 2006, p. 65)? Because of this suspicion regarding motives, Chu regards syncretism as mere posturing, and uses the term “synthesis” for a conscious, sincere amalgamation of various elements.

Perhaps it is only anthropologists who feel truly comfortable in using the term straightforwardly, and although their models, being based on fieldwork, are not necessarily useful for this text-based study, they do offer some firmer models. In particular, research on the so-called “cargo cults”, which emerge when a hitherto fairly closed-off religion undergoes the influence of a dominant culture from which it takes over especially the material aspects, should be mentioned. An interesting application of this model of dominant vs. subordinate religion is found in James Grayson’s article on the interaction between Buddhism and Shamanism in Korea. Defining Buddhism as a missionary religion and Shamanism as a “religion indigenous to a particular people”, Grayson discerns two major forms of syncretism, which he calls high syncretism and low syncretism. Low syncretism occurs when the world religion adopts external elements of the local religion, but retains its fundamental values; the examples he gives are those of Korean Buddhist temples incorporating shrines for the mountain god (Grayson 1992, pp. 202–6). High syncretism by contrast occurs when the native religion adopts elements of the world religion, “without altering its essential character” (Grayson 1992, p. 206). Because it runs counter to the normal process of syncretism, he also refers to it as “reverse syncretism”. While not without its problems,⁶ Grayson’s theory is useful for bringing into focus the power relations in the process of religious exchange.

⁴ See, for example, the following: “Syncretism in religious contexts is the bringing together of elements from different religions, belief systems, or symbol systems. Concern about syncretism generally stems from the idea that it is bound to create a new ‘religion’ that belongs authentically to neither tradition. It is fair to say that syncretism is a dirty word for most Christian writers on interreligious relations.” In (Muers and Highton 2012, p. 340).

⁵ For a good overview of various theories see (Choi 2007, pp. 40–50).

⁶ For instance, the phenomenon of building shrines to mountain spirits in temple compounds is historically a late phenomenon, as it emerges only in the nineteenth century (Choi 2007, p. 42).

The term syncretism is indeed laden with negative connotations and has many other drawbacks, yet at the same time there is no good alternative. Taking into account the state of the source material for this study—mainly brief official statements that reflect the consensus of an elite group—we simply cannot employ a very precise definition; all that can be done is to stay attuned to some of the problems outlined above, e.g., discerning conscious efforts vs posing. In the end, for my own research framework, I found the research by Timothy Brook most helpful. His research focuses mainly on the Ming period (1368–1644), where numerous movements to actively achieve a synthesis of the three religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) were taking place, mainly from the part of Buddhist monks. Both in terms of source material and in terms of strategies, this is the most similar to the material found in Korea.

Timothy Brook offers four cognate terms that are often mistaken for syncretism: ecumenism, inclusivism, compartmentalism, and eclecticism. Ecumenism rests on the understanding that truth is universal, and that different religions are permitted their own way of accessing that truth; hence, ecumenism does not necessarily imply syncretism. Inclusivism explains difference away by admitting it as a partial revelation of truth or an inferior method; thus, it amounts to a distortion of another religion from the perspective of the dominant religion's version of truth. Compartmentalism, then, recognizes that different religions have their own fields of specialization, which are mutually not overlapping. Eclecticism, finally, is the willing adoption by one religion of elements from another religion that it finds useful. Since these elements may be brought in without an actual blending from the different traditions, Brook seems to differentiate it from syncretism (Brook 1993a, pp. 14–15). However, if those four phenomena are not syncretism, then what is? This is not explained clearly by Brook. In my view, any of these four categories could actually be seen as distinct forms of syncretism, and therefore, I want to retain them as useful tools of analysis for this paper.

3. Choe Chiweon's Theory of the Mutual Unity of Buddhism and Confucianism

The late-Silla intellectual and statesman Choe Chiweon (b. 857) was the first to formulate a theory of the fundamental unity of the “Three Teachings” (*samgyo ilche* 三教一體) (Choe 1990, p. 62) in Korea. This is most clearly expressed in a passage from a now lost stele, cited in the twelfth-century history of Korea, the *Samguk sagi* (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms):

In [our] country there is a wonderful way called “pungnyu”. The origins of instituting this teaching can be found in the history of the immortals. In fact it comprises the three teachings, which are fused to edify all beings. Thus when entering [the home] being filial to your family, and when going out being loyal to the country, these are the instructions of the Minister of Justice of Lu [Confucius]. Dealing with affairs through non-action, and implementing the teaching of non-speech, this is the school of the Archivist of Zhou [Laozi]. Not doing any evil deeds, and upholding only what is good, this is what the prince from India [Buddha] taught.⁷

This is a famous passage that has been parsed in different ways in Korean scholarship; notably the term *pungnyu* 風流, and whether or not it denotes a native religious tradition, has been the subject of controversy.⁸ However, it should be clear that Choe is here claiming that his country had a system that combined the three teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Since, however, he gives examples of the different specialties of each, it seems to be close to what Brook has described as

⁷ (Kim [1145] 1512), book 4: 37th year of King Jinheung. The original stele, the *Nangnang-pi*, has not been preserved.

⁸ The term was originally associated with a group of Chinese literati from the third century AD who rejected conventional life and sought refuge in poetry, drinking, and aesthetic witticisms. *Fengliu*, literally “wind and streams” denotes their free-flowing, Taoism-inspired lifestyle. Many Korean scholars have argued that the term, as used by Choe Chiweon, denotes a native religious tradition, but there is very little evidence to back this up.

compartmentalism—where each has its own field of specialization without much overlap or interchange (Brook 1993a, p. 15).

Perhaps this might best be regarded as Choe's own ideal of a kind of condominium of the three teachings, to borrow Brook's terminology again, where each is treated as equally important. However, in the inscriptions he wrote for Buddhist monks and temples (the so-called *sasanbi*), we find something different, namely ideas that are derived from Chinese Buddhist apologetics, i.e., strategies to defend Buddhism against Confucianism. We find, in fact, very little evidence for the existence of Taoism as a practice-oriented tradition in Korea, lending further evidence to my assertion that in advocating the combination of the three teachings; Choe is not describing the actual situation in Korea, but rather his own ideals.

Thus, in the stele inscription for the monk Hyeso (774–850), the *Jingam seonsa bi* (887), we find the following passage:

Therefore master Huiyuan from Mt. Lu argued “Although the origin and development of the Buddha [on the one hand] and the Duke of Zhou and Confucius [on the other] is different, they return to the same principle.” Those who fail to completely realize this at the same time, can therefore not grasp these two [teachings] simultaneously.⁹

Borrowing the words of the famous Chinese Buddhist apologete Huiyuan (334–416), and more specifically words from his famous tract “Monks do not pay respects to the ruler”, Choe seeks to argue that though Buddhism and Confucianism are different, they work towards the same goals. Here, we approach the kind of ecumenism that typifies Choe, and that would also recur throughout the Goryeo period. Huiyuan wrote his essay at a time when the place of Buddhism in Chinese society was heavily debated; whereas the emperor argued that monks were subjects of the emperor like anybody else, Huiyuan successfully pleaded that Buddhist monks, having left society, are loyal only to the Buddha, and hence should not pay obeisance to the temporal ruler. However, while Huiyuan may have had the upper hand in this debate, in general, Buddhism was in a weaker position vis-à-vis the state and its officials, so mostly Buddhist apologetics tried to justify its existence on Chinese soil by emphasizing its fundamental similarity with Confucianism (Kaplan 2019). Differences were only superficial; the basic principles and values upon which they were based, it was claimed, were the same.

That this strand of apologetics was also espoused by Choe is clear from the following selections from his work. In the biographic stele for the monk Muyeom (799–888), the *Nanghye hwasang bi*, he writes as follows:

King T'aebu (=K. Heongang, r. 875–885) saw this and told his younger brother, the officer of the Southern Palace [Minister of Rites]: “The [Confucian] Three Things to be in Awe of [Heaven's mandate, the words of great people, and the words of the wise] can be compared to the [Buddhist] Triple Refuge [in the Buddha, dharma, and sangha]. The [Confucian] five constants [humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trust] are equal to the [Buddhist] five precepts [not taking life, not stealing, not engaging in licentiousness, not lying, not taking intoxicants]. The capable performance of the kingly way lies in matching the Buddha's mind, the great master's words are right!”¹⁰

Choe is here basically putting words in the mouth of King Heongang. Matching the fundamental Confucian virtues with Buddhist precepts might seem far-fetched, but this was a common strategy since at least the fifth century. The apocryphal scripture *Sutra of Trapuṣa and Bhallika* already claimed that the five Buddhist precepts match the five Confucian virtues (Ch'en 1973; DDB). For example, the precept

⁹ “Ssanggye-sa Chingam seonsa bi”, (Yi Jigwan 1994a, p. 129); (Choe 1926), 2.18b. This text is based on Huijiao's (*Liang*) *Gaoseng zhuan* (Lives of eminent Monks (from the Liang Dynasty)) (T. 2059.50.361a7), which in turn is based on Huiyuan's essay “Shamen bu jing wangzhe lun” (monks do not pay respects to the ruler) (T. 2012.52.29c-31c).

¹⁰ “Seongju-sa Nanghye hwasang bi”, (Yi Jigwan 1994a, p. 162); (Choe 1926), 2.11b-12a.

of “not taking life” can be interpreted as the fundamental aspect of humanity; not stealing is the most basic part of righteousness, and so forth.¹¹ Although it came forth from the need to match Buddhism with native Chinese, especially Confucian, concepts, and thus reduce the alien nature of Buddhism,¹² it was widely employed, even by prominent Buddhist scholiasts. Thus, the Tiantai founder Zhiyi (538–597) also referred to it in his works, which are not of an apologetic nature (Ch'en 1973, p. 57).

Thus, Choe's assertion is not new, yet, he gives it a twist by also linking the five precepts and the five constants to the five directions. Strictly speaking, this too is not new, since this kind of correlations between numbered sets has deep roots in China, and can also be found in the above-mentioned *Sutra of Trapuṣa and Bhallika*. However, Choe tries to bring his homeland, Silla, into the equation, as is evident from the following passage in the stele for Doheon (824–882), the *Jijeung daesabi*:

The introduction states: If we divide the five constants according to the directions, then the eastern direction is said to be the “humane mind”. Among the three teachings, the one that sets up its name as the pure land is “Buddha”. The humane mind is nothing but Buddha, and this is why Buddha is called “the one capable of humanity”. The way flourishes among the Eastern Barbarians [ie Silla, Korea], whose soft and compliant character has its origins in Kapilavastu; the teaching of compassion is settled here as naturally as a stone thrown into water, or as the rain gathers the sand. Thus it goes without saying that apart from the governors of this eastern land, none upholds the teaching as much as we do. The spirit of this land takes loving life as its basis, and the customs are all about yielding to others.”¹³

So, not only is “non-killing” paired with “humanity”, it is also paired with the east: the direction where the sun rises is associated with spring and the renewal of life. Since Silla is to the east of China, it is often referred to simply as the Eastern Country (Dongbang, Dongguk), and Choe adroitly uses this to suggest his country is thereby the country of “humanity” (i.e., the Confucian virtue of *ren* (Ch)/in (K.) 仁) par excellence, as can be seen in the soft and yielding nature of its people. This trope likely predates Choe, since Silla was referred to as the “country of gentlemen” (*gunja ji hyang* 君子之鄉) in China since at least the seventh century, but Choe is the first to give this religio-spiritual explanation.

As an émigré who left his country aged twelve to take the civil service examination in China, only returning to his home country after almost twenty years, it is not clear in how far Choe's thought is representative of his country's elites. The idea that Korea was the country of humanity par excellence seems to have found some resonance in China, since it chimed with an ancient legend that if Confucius' teachings one day disappeared from China, they could later be retrieved from a country in the East (Jorgensen 2005). In general, the end of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) was a period of both chaos and intellectual ferment. In particular, in the period before the founding of the Song Dynasty (N. Song, 960–1127), many of the states that emerged from the debris of the Tang were eclectic in their religious support. In particular, the state of Wu-Yue (907–978), located in the area of modern Zhejiang province, gave lavish support to Buddhism, especially schools of Buddhism that were eclectic in using many elements of different Buddhist schools.

Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to unravel all the possible strands in Chinese religious life of the ninth-tenth centuries, but it is certain that they exerted great influence on Korea, where a new dynasty was just emerging (Vermeersch 2018, p. 280). It is indeed a distinct possibility that some of the religious trends fostered in Wu-Yue were denied by the Song dynasty when it reunited

¹¹ The origins and logic of matching the “three things to be in awe of” with the triple refuge are not clear to me.

¹² Uri Kaplan also points out the existence of other interpretations, notably that this could also be seen as a mark of superiority of Buddhism: since the five precepts belong to Hinayana Buddhism, matching Confucian virtues with the inferior Hinayana teachings would then also serve to downgrade Confucianism from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism as the self-proclaimed superior teaching. However, I find this doubtful, since the Five Precepts are fundamental to all Buddhism. By fitting Buddhism into a Confucian paradigm, it actually implies Buddhist subservience to Confucianism (Kaplan 2019, p. 48).

¹³ “Seongju-sa Nanghye hwasang bi”, (Yi Jigwan 1994a, p. 162); (Choe 1926), 3.14b.

China (Welter 1999), but were continued in Goryeo. An interesting example of this could be the so-called Fayen 法眼 (Dharma-eye) school of Chan. Not only did it advocate the joint practice of various strands of Buddhism, such as Chan (J. Zen, K. Seon) Buddhism and Pure Land practice, but one of its main protagonists, Yongming Yanshou (904–975), in some of his works also advocated the unity of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, albeit from a position of Buddhist superiority (Kim 2011, pp. 39–40).¹⁴ The Fayen school was indeed also popular in early Goryeo (Vermeersch 2018, p. 279) and may have formed an important impetus for Goryeo to espouse the joint origin of Buddhism and Confucianism as official ideology.¹⁵ That the Fayen remained an important force in Goryeo, where it was known as Beoban, is seen in a rare description of a Beoban text by the Chinese visitor Xu Jing, who saw it in 1123. The text describes the fundamental Chan tenet that truth cannot be expressed in words, but justifies it through references to the Chinese classics, including the *Book of Odes*, part of the Confucian canon (Vermeersch 2016, p. 142).

4. Theories of the Fundamental Unity of Confucianism and Buddhism in the Goryeo Period

Previous research has already suggested that Choe Chiwon's intellectual heritage helped to lay the ideological foundations of the subsequent Goryeo Period (918–1392). The eight stelae for Buddhist monks erected by dynastic founder Wang Geon (r. 918–943, posthumously styled Taejo) between unification in 936 and his death in 943 reveal this particularly well. Even though there is little explicit mention of the relation between Confucianism and Buddhism, we see a lot of the same themes and discursive strategies appearing in these eulogies for Seon monks. For example, the fact that Buddhism is a legitimate tool of governance (see above: "The capable performance of the kingly way lies in matching the Buddha's mind")—normally the domain of Confucianism—is found in the stele inscription for Ieom (870–936), Wang Geon's first royal preceptor, where the king puts a pertinent question to the monk:

"Your reverence did not consider ten thousand leagues too far to come and convert the Three Han [Korea]; to save us from the raging fire [of war] that is spread across all the hills and mountains, I await your instruction" [Ieom] replied: "The way is found in the mind, not in external affairs; dharma likewise comes from oneself, not from others. [The dharma] practiced by emperors and kings may be different from what ordinary people practice, but even though a king may command an army [into battle], he will always take pity on the people. How so? A king is someone who takes [the area between] the four oceans as his home, and the myriad people as his children. He does not kill the innocent yet punishes those who are guilty. Thereby he practices all the virtuous deeds and widely saves the people."¹⁶

It should be emphasized that this is not a record of an actual dialogue that took place, but rather a representation of the desired role of Buddhism. We know this because the dialogue is actually taken almost verbatim from a Chinese biography of monks from the early sixth century (Vermeersch 2020, pp. 28–29). As such, it can be taken to be the official ideology of how Buddhism should operate. Buddhism is employed here to legitimate Wang Geon's violent means of achieving unification. This has antecedents in ancient India, where a theory of the "two wheels of dharma" was formulated to explain how a king's actions should be judged differently from those of ordinary people. Operating in the secular world, the king's "dharma wheel" merely carries out what was ordained by the laws of karma (Gokhale 1966, p. 22).

¹⁴ It should also be kept in mind that Chan Buddhism itself is the form of Buddhism that is most adapted to the Chinese cultural climate, so a case could be made for the syncretic aspects of Chan Buddhism itself.

¹⁵ As Albert Welter has argued, the early Song dynasty did not follow the advice of Zanning (919–1001), a monk from Wu-Yue, to include Buddhism as an equal to Confucianism in the Song civilizational project. (Welter 1999, p. 42). See also (Welter 2016) for a more nuanced view of Zanning's influence on the Song court, which retained some of his proposals.

¹⁶ "Gwangjo-sa Jincheol daesa bi", (Yi Jigwan 1994b, pp. 21–22).

Thus, while monks may be seen to take an advisory role, this does not mean that the king's policies were thereby Buddhism-inspired. Other texts make it clear that the royal way and the Buddhist way were considered different yet complementary, and that the royal way was based on Confucianism. This is clear from a text composed by the official Min Ji (1248–1326) at the occasion of the consecration of a new statue at Gukcheong temple:

There are no two paths of kingship. Yet the Rites and Music under the Five Emperors and Three Kings [of Chinese antiquity] differed depending on the times being orderly or confused ... As for a king of the people and a king of the dharma [i.e., a Buddha], although the way of the former is secular and the way of the latter is transcendent, there is no real divergence: it is just that by uniting [the aggregates] into one, one becomes king, whereas by returning to the one, one becomes Buddha.¹⁷

It is typical of this material to take examples from Chinese antiquity to justify the need for Buddhism in the state apparatus, using the edifying/didactic aspect of Confucianism to argue, for example, for the need of a Buddhist preceptor to edify the king and the officials. During the Goryeo period, every king appointed a royal preceptor (K. *wangsa*). Their concrete role is not known, but they played a very important part in legitimating the role of the king, acting as ritual or ethical complement and corrector to the king.¹⁸

This should not be taken too literally as an actual spiritual preceptor, but rather as a philosophical/ideological argument for the ideal relation between Buddhism and Confucianism, which were regarded as two sides of the same coin. At the same time, that this was not just a mere ideal but an actual division of different spheres of influence can also be seen in the fact that there was an expectation of officials to cultivate Buddhism at home. Thus, a common theme is often that a certain official was Confucian at court but Buddhist at home: "For the country he was a loyal official, at home he was a Buddhist disciple; in praising Confucius he was like [Confucius' favorite disciple] Yan Yuan, in serving Buddha he was in the same class as Ānanda".¹⁹ That this was also societal custom can be seen in the fact that official historiography praises the official Yun Eonhui (1090–1149) as the "Confucius of Korea", yet his epitaph, a private burial document, refers to him as "layman Vajra".²⁰

This kind of juxtaposition of very different ideals might seem strained, yet it is clear that in the Goryeo worldview these were not mutually exclusive positions; from a universalist position, Buddhism and Confucianism were seen simply as different roads to arrive at the same truths. Traditionally, this has been explained through the "pluralist" worldview (Breuker 2010; Park 2017) of Goryeo, which did not favor one tradition over the other. However, seeing this only in terms of tolerance misses an important dimension: that there were attempts at rationalizing this mutual interchangeability shows that there were efforts at reducing the dissonance engendered by such multiple worldviews.

The strongest statement to this effect can be found in the stele erected at Hyeonhwa Temple in 1022. The temple was founded by King Hyeonjong (r. 1009–1031) as a memorial temple for his deceased parents. Having survived devastating invasions by the Khitans between 1010 and 1019, after 1020, he sought to rebuild the country and his legitimacy. The Ten Injunctions of the founder Taejo were rediscovered during his reign (and were probably redacted to suit his circumstances: See Breuker 2008), and in many ways this was a second start for the country. Although nominally dedicated to

¹⁷ "Gukcheong-sa geumdang jubul Seokga yeorae sari yeong-i gi", (Seo [1478] 1994), book 68. This translation was adapted from (Vermeersch 2008, p. 138).

¹⁸ The office of *wangsa* (royal preceptor) and *guksa* (state preceptor) were justified by reference to ancient Chinese classics, which mention the existence of the *shibao* as a scholar of high moral integrity and learning to edify the king and keep him on the right moral path. See, for example, the stele for the monk Geungyang (878–965). When King Gwangjong (r. 949–975) wanted to appoint him as royal preceptor, he justified this by referring to the example of ancient Chinese sage kings, who existed long before the advent of Buddhism. "Bongam-sa Jinjeong daesa bi", (Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe 1996, p. 271). See also (Vermeersch 2002).

¹⁹ "Jeongto-sa Beopgyeong daesa bi", (Yi Jigwan 1994b, p. 216).

²⁰ (Jeong [1453] 1990), 96.32a; (Kim 1997), p. 115.

his parents' merits, the stele actually emphasizes the filial devotion of Hyeonjong, and the heavenly responses this generated. In the correlative thinking characteristic for pre-modern Sinitic culture, the universe was thought to respond to human actions: kings and emperors therefore often performed abstinence or rituals of forgiveness to counter natural or human calamities. The reverse inscription of the stele, written by the official Chae Chungsun, is a wonderful expression of the syncretic attitude towards Buddhism and Confucianism in Goryeo:

Thus I heard: As for the utmost mirror for a worthy man, the Confucian books contain the purpose for diligent cultivation, so as to make politics and education flourish; the Buddhist dharma lies in humble reverence of the mind, so that fortunate causes may be obtained. What is meant with the statement that there are three teachings in name, but that they have the same source, is that the true principle is fused from within, and transformed to manifest [itself] outwardly. Therefore in Confucianism nothing is more important than benevolence and filial piety. Thus the kings of yore said "filial piety is the root of virtue, and that through which the teaching is established". Thus the kings of yore ordered the universe through filial piety. Their teaching is accomplished without pomp, their government organized without adornment, and the universe made peaceful and disasters prevented. In Buddhism too similar instructions are found in the *Sutra on the Importance of Parental Grace*, so it is not necessary to elaborate this further here. We can say that the two ways, Confucianism and Buddhism, both stem from filial piety; if filial piety is optimized, virtue then expands.²¹

Again, we see a very ecumenic statement, based on a shared understanding of the cosmos. William Chu interprets similar statements of syncretism in the Chinese context, as a conscious or unconscious working towards a middle ground in the course of mutual interactions between Buddhism and Confucianism. However, while "donning a tolerant posture" towards the other, he argues, the point of such syncretistic efforts is really to prove the superiority of one over the other, or to strengthen one's religion in areas where it is weaker compared to the other (Chu 2006, p. 65). This also goes for theories of a common origin: Chu gives the example of the common origin of Taoism and Buddhism, which are actually subtle (or not so subtle) struggles for determining "who was first". (Chu 2006, pp. 68–69). Yet, in the case of Goryeo, the common origin theory is based on common values and ends, rather than a shared origin.

Arguably the biggest difference with China is that the terms "Confucian" and "Buddhist" do not make much sense for Goryeo. While Chae Chungsun was an official, unlike China, there does not seem to have been any sense that the public persona of an official was "Confucian". Since filial piety had been appropriated by Buddhism from the earliest stages of interaction with Chinese society, Chae was actually justified in claiming a common origin, and is not necessarily trying to put a Confucian gloss on Buddhism. Of course, both were systems originating outside Korea, and it was only after Joseon that Buddhism would be labelled "foreign" and become the target of exclusion.

Goryeo people were fully aware of the history of Confucianism and Buddhism in China, including the fact that Buddhism entered China later, and was often the object of attacks by Confucianism. However, they seem to have been genuinely convinced of the necessity of the complementary roles played by each, and did not find Buddhism in any way inferior because it entered China in a later stage and was of "barbarian" origin:

Thus our Confucius, when the Zhou order decayed, established his teaching through Benevolence and Righteousness. After this the teachings of Yangzi, Mozi, the Yellow Emperor, and Laozi emerged one after the other, with their strange words and extravagant arts. They branched out everywhere, and their harmful ways remained till the Qin and Han

²¹ "Hyeonhwa-sa bi" (eumgi), (Heo 1984), pp. 447–48. Note that there are some difficulties in the edition of this text leading to slightly different readings.

dynasties, there was nowhere they did not reach; it was insufferable. Then the teachings of Śākyamuni reached China, teaching people that purity of mind comes first, and then also taught them compassionate ways so as to save the people, something that did not come one moment too soon. Therefore Liuzi thought that the teachings of Buddha were no different from the way of Confucius. He also said, “the dharma seal of the true vehicle [i.e., the tripitaka] should be used together with the Confucian canon, and then the people will know the right direction [for their life].” If then they are put together and mixed up, the two teachings of Confucianism and Buddhism will achieve the same goals.²²

Interestingly, this passage suggests that Buddhism came just at the right time, because China had been led astray by the speculative teachings of Yang Zhu (440–360 BC), Mohism, internal alchemy, and Taoism. Bringing people back to their senses, it matched Confucianism perfectly. In other words, without Buddhism, it is implied, Confucianism would not have been able to implement its moral teachings in China.

During the period of Mongol domination (ca. 1270–1356), Goryeo started interacting proactively with Chinese culture again, and one of the results of this was the introduction of a militant Neo-Confucianism that unsettled this understanding of mutual reliance and common origins and goals. The exact reasons for this are outside the scope of this paper; but, as Choi Jong-Seong has pointed out, the important result was an anti-syncretistic reaction: in other words, the vehemence of the Confucian reaction was due in large part because of the commonalities with Buddhism and were an explicit rejection of this earlier syncretism (Choi 2007).

It was thus about reclaiming territory occupied by Buddhists, and it was arguably because Buddhism had occupied the moral high ground that so much invective was aimed at the supposed moral corruption of Buddhism rather than at its metaphysics. One of the most famous critics, Jeong Dojeon (1342–1398) thus wrote essays denouncing Buddhism in almost caricatural terms (translated in Muller 2015). Whereas the founding father of Neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi, had still taken the trouble of reading actual Buddhist sutras and criticizing them on their contents (Kaplan 2019, p. 18), Jeong Dojeon simply rallies at what he regards as the absurdity of Buddhism.

But despite some sharp attacks starting in the late fourteenth century, many officials remained in the traditional Goryeo mold, valuing Buddhism and Confucianism equally, with Buddhism often being preferred for moral cultivation. This can be seen in the following statement by the famous statesman Yi Saek (1328–1396):

Human nature is originally quiescent and unmoving, pure and untainted, embracing the fulness of the five constants. This nature is what I should cultivate, and for this end there is not the slightest difference between Confucianism and Buddhism.²³

For this, he was heavily criticized by the new generation of Neo-Confucian scholars, even though many had been his disciples. After the founding of the Joseon dynasty, no Confucian scholar could afford to make similar statements again.

Buddhists for their part, even in Joseon, maintained that their religion was fundamentally the same as Confucianism, or working to achieve the same ends. In the early Joseon period, the defense by the monk Gihwa (Hamheo Deukteong, 1376–1433) is the most noteworthy. In fact, it is the first systematic treatise setting out the arguments for the defense of Buddhism in Korean history. Although

²² Im Chun, “Sorim-sa jungsugi”, (Seo [1478] 1994), book 65.

²³ (Jeong 2015, pp. 239–40). According to John Goulde, Yi Saek also considered filial piety to be common to Confucianism and Buddhism, but it is not clear on which sources he bases himself: “... [Yi Saek’s] view that Buddhism and Confucianism were the same, especially with regard to filial piety, earned him the scorn and condemnation of later Confucian exclusivists.” (Goulde 1985, p. 180). Although he refers to sources such as the *Goryeosa* and *Taejong sillok*, I could not trace it there. Perhaps he is relying on an article by An Gye-hyon mentioned on the same pages (An Gye-hyeon, Yi Saek ui Bulgyogwan, *Bulgyo sahak nonjeok* (Seoul: 1975), 99–127), which I could not trace.

it is principally written in response to Jeong Dojeon's essay *Bulssi japbyeon* (various arguments against the Buddha), it is also still grounded in the Goryeo worldview of Buddhist-Confucian complementarity, where Buddhism is, however, superior in cultivating people morally.²⁴

5. Conclusions

One of the biggest differences in debates about the syncretism of Buddhism and Confucianism between China and Korea is that they peaked earlier in Korea, i.e., during the Goryeo period of Korea vs. the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) in China. Moreover, while in both cases, we can ascertain what Brook refers to as a “division of labor”, whereas in China Buddhism specialized in the metaphysical and Confucianism in the ethical,²⁵ in Goryeo, Buddhism embraced far more than the metaphysical. Besides the metaphysical, Buddhism was also considered more suited to ethical cultivation, effectively relegating Confucianism to the political domain only.

The arguments for the fundamental equivalence of Buddhism and Confucianism in Goryeo as analyzed in this paper do not suggest that there was an actual syncretism (in most senses of the term) taking place. At the same time, simply characterizing this process as harmonization also does not do full justice to what was taking place. The basic arguments for the similarity of Buddhism to Confucianism started from a tradition of apologetics that revealed Buddhism's weaker hand: Buddhism had to prove its similarity to Confucian values, not the other way around. We see this in the discourse built up by Choe Chiwon. Yet, it appears that in Goryeo Buddhism encroached on the domain of Confucianism, to the point that it was thought essential to the cultivation of human nature, i.e., ethical cultivation. Thus, we have a kind of ecumenism in which Buddhism and Confucianism are seen as complementary systems that point to the same universal truths, but also with inklings of inclusivism, as Buddhism takes over quintessentially Confucian elements, while claiming to be better at them. The genuine convergence of Buddhism and Confucianism was perhaps not put into practice, but was definitely conceived of among the elites of Goryeo.

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Abbreviations

DDB: Digital Dictionary of Buddhism; <http://buddhism.dict.net/ddb/>; T. Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaikyoku ed. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* [Newly corrected edition of the Buddhist canon from the Taishō era]. Tokyo: Daizōkyōkai, 1924–35.

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²⁴ See e.g., (Muller 2012, pp. 456–57), where Gihwa skillfully uses Confucian texts to show that Buddhism is superior in giving moral guidance to people.

²⁵ (Brook 1993b, p. 15); at least until the Song there was this balance, Brook argues, but with the rise of Neo-Confucianism this division of tasks was challenged.

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