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Yuan Buddhist Centers as the Hub of Monastic Certification: Travels by Korean Monks to China and Some Underlying Reasons

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Abstract: Notably during the Yuan period of Chinese history, Korean Buddhists had a curious custom of making arduous trips to Buddhist centers in mainland China, by sea or overland. To the extent that monks made this trip despite the possible dangers of this long journey, Yuan Buddhism in the practice of Korean Buddhism was conceived as an important hub of monastic certification and the source of new Buddhist developments. In addition, the Chinese masters were seen as essential figures in the monastic careers of the Korean monks. Although there would have been qualified masters in Korea to lead the practice of *kanhua chan* and to verify the enlightened states of the Korean monks, traveling to China continued up to the end of the Koryŏ period. This continued because the Korean monks obtained obvious benefits after having traveled to China and received their certification of enlightenment 印可. On their return, these monks were given recognition for their spiritual attainment and assigned to high positions in the samgha bureaucracy, in many cases, as either a royal or state preceptor. This custom of visiting China was all the more heightened due to Yuan's domination over Koryŏ from the late-13th to the mid-14th centuries.

Keywords: Koryŏ Buddhism; Yuan Buddhism; Hangzhou region; mind-seal; *kanhua chan*; Yuan domination period

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1. Introduction

There was a curious Korean Buddhist custom, noticeably during the latter part of the Koryŏ (918–1392) dynasty that saw Korean monks make the arduous trip to the Buddhist centers on the mainland by sea and overland. Why did so many monks undertake this journey despite the dangers of such a long and daunting trip? Can this phenomenon be understood as a form of "seeking the dharma" that has been on-going in the early history of the transmission of Buddhism to the Korean peninsula?[1] Can this be the continuation of the mind-to-mind transmission of the enlightened mind of the Buddha as claimed by the meditational school? Or can there be other reasons?

Previous to the late Koryŏ period, the main reasons for visiting the mainland may well have been to learn and to transmit the teachings of the famous Chinese masters, who would have been the leaders of new Buddhist developments and movements, and to gather books that were newly published in China.[2] Often, China was described as a source, or as a "homeland" of Buddhism. Indeed, Buddhists in the East Asian region perceived China as a source of Buddhist tradition, wherein its lineages, doctrines, and teachings were traced to the "Hangzhou regional Buddhist institutions" (Welter 2022, p. 36).

However, the trips made by the monastics in the late Koryŏ period were under unique historical and political circumstances. In addition to being a source of new developments, the Hangzhou region and other Chinese Buddhist centers were also conceived as centers for certification of enlightened monks. In fact, it became a popular practice, especially from the late-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth century, wherein Korean monks traveled to China to have their spiritual attainment verified, and certified, by the Chinese masters. This

practice was based on the greater adoption of *kanhua chan* (Kr. *kanhwa sŏn*看話禪) practice, also known as "Sŏn/Chan of observing the critical phrase," where the enlightened states of practitioners were verified through a face-to-face "encounter dialogue" (Kr. *sŏnmundap*, Ch. *chanwenda* 禪問答). Upon verification by a master, a mind-seal (Kr. *in'ga*, Ch. *yinke* 印可) was then bestowed on the practitioner as a certification of an enlightened mind.[3]

Nevertheless, we must not forget the historical context that also deeply shaped Korean Buddhism at the time. This practice of Korean monks visiting Chinese Chan masters continued and flourished up to the end of the Koryŏ period, which closely corresponds with the period of Yuan domination over Korea, which began in 1270 and lasted to 1356. It was a time when Koryŏ state affairs were essentially controlled by the Yuan rulers who resided in what is now Beijing. While the Koryŏ court and its bureaucracy continued to function, the Koryŏ state, in reality, was an appendage of the Yuan state. As part of the vast Yuan empire, Korean royal families, officials, scholars, including monks, traveled and resided in Beijing. It was a way to take advantage of the opportunities that were present in the new cosmopolitan setting of Beijing, for political and social advancement (Seth 2016, pp. 120–21).

One of the arguments of this article is that the intentions of such visiting monks to seek social or political advancement were closely related to the certification visits made by the monks, though such visits were mostly explained, as noted in the above, as a form of gaining recognition for one's spiritual levels of advancement. In addition to the religious significance of being recognized as "enlightened" monks, social and even political implications were closely entwined that have not been given attention but which may have been perhaps the greater driver of the reason for the monks to make such arduous trips. This was most evident on their return to Korea, when such certified monks were recognized as worthy of patronage and high positions in the monastic bureaucracy were conferred on them by the rulers. Also, these monks would have been sought by the Koryŏ rulers for their knowledge of and connections to the Yuan polity, and such status would have resulted in the monastics wielding prestige, privilege, and power.

Given the religio-historical background of the period of Yuan domination, this article will provide more context and shed light on the reasons the Korean monks traveled to China. The two monks, Naong Hyegŭn 懶翁惠勤 (1320–1376, hereafter Naong) and T'aego Pou 太古普愚 (1301–1382, hereafter T'aego), among the last of the Koryŏ monks to visit Yuan China, came to be important figures in the Korean Buddhist tradition. Some 300 years after their visits to China, they are bolstered as representative monks of the Chosŏn monastic community. In the case of T'aego, he was championed as the patriarch of the Korean Sŏn tradition, through whom the identity of the late-Chosŏn monastic community came to be established and which continues into the modern era.[4]

2. Travels by Korean Monks to China

The Koryŏ dynasty from its beginning initiated active Buddhist exchanges with China, but from the year 972, fifty-four years after its founding, no record of any Korean monk travelling to China is found, with the exception of Ŭich'ŏn 義天 (1055–1101), who travelled to China in 1085. It was only after the start of the Yuan dynasty (1264–1368) and after Koryŏ was subjugated by various invasions by the Yuan forces that active exchange between the two countries began (Vermeersch 2018, p. 280). The start of the exchange and travel of monks in 1275 coincides with the start of the period of Yuan domination of Koryŏ, during when there was also much cross-border activities including commerce and cultural exchanges.

In contrast, before the late-thirteenth century, Buddhist exchanges took place mostly through epistolary means. In fact, the Korean monk Manhang, under whom a newer brand of *kanhua chan* was adopted in Korea, did not visit Yuan and never met the Chinese master Mengshan Deyi 夢山德異 (1231–1308, hereafter Mengshan) but instead corresponded with him. In the same way, Mengshan corresponded actively with other Korean monastics, by which his thoughts and writings were made accessible to the Korean monks, effectively

playing a role in shaping the development of *kanhua chan* in the late-thirteenth century (Kang 2000, pp. 42–43).

It would have been in the later years of Mengshan's life that Korean monks began to make visits to the mainland. One of the reasons the monks traveled to the Chinese centers was, as noted in the above, due to a popularized practice of certifying the practitioner's spiritual attainment, also known as "dharma seal after awakening" (Kr. *ohu in'ga*, Ch. *wuhou yinke* 悟後印可). As a case in point, in 1295, when Mengshan was in his senior years, a group of eight people including a respected elder monk Yoam Wŏnmyŏng 了庵元明 (d.u.) and monastics Kagwŏn 覺圓 (d.u.) and Kagsŏng 覺性 (d.u.) visited Mengshan in China. In another visit two years later in 1297, senior Sŏn master Hon'gu 混丘 (d.u.), together with the princesses of King Ch'ungnyŏl 忠烈 (1274–1308) and officials traveled to China to meet with Mengshan at this residence. In this way, not only monastics but also royal families and officials made the trip to China and met with famous Chinese masters (Kang 2000, pp. 40–41).

While Korean monks traveling to China would have superseded the number of Chinese monks visiting Korea, visiting Chinese monks to Korea played an important role as ambassadors for Chinese Buddhism. In the case of the Chinese master Tieshan Shaoqiong 鐵山紹瓊 (d.u.), a disciple of Mengshan, he was invited by Sŏlbong Chunggam 雪峯冲鑑 (1274–1338) to Korea and visited in 1304 for three years. This was a time when Mengshan's thoughts were further propagated into the Korean Buddhist tradition, with Tieshan Shaoqiong playing a central role (Hwang 2006, p. 85).[5]

Aside from Mengshan's tradition, another branch, still of the Yangqi Fanghui 楊岐方會 (992–1049) line of Linji 臨濟 Chan, is Xuean Zuxin's 雪庵祖欽 (d.u.) tradition of *kanhua chan*, whose disciple is the famous Gaofeng Yuanmiao 高峰原妙 (1238–1295). Xuean Zuxin's tradition became popular later in the Koryŏ period after Mengshan's influences became widespread. In the mid-fourteenth century, at a time when Yuan's domination of Korea was at its peak, Xuean Zuxin's ideas were being widely adopted (Hwang 2006, pp. 105–6).

For instance, Paegun Kyŏnghan白雲景閑 (1299–1374, hereafter Paegun), who is representative of the late Koryŏ Buddhism, is known to have emphasized "*huatou* of no-words" 無字話頭. Paegun went to meet with Chinese masters after gaining awakening to obtain certification from them. Based on his visit, the practice of gaining enlightenment and then afterwards receiving the seal (Kr. *ohu in'ga* 悟後印可) is evident. He travelled to Yuan China in 1351, and we can observe from the *Recorded Sayings of Master Paegun* (*Paegun hwasang ŏrok* 白雲和尙語錄),[6] that Paegun traveled to Mount Xiawu in Huzhou and met with Shiwu Qinggong 石屋淸珙 (1272–1352, hereafter Shiwu), who was of the Xuean Zuxin lineal branch.[7] Paegun did not stay for too long in China but returned to Koryŏ only after a year, in 1352. Paegun belonged to the community at Mount Kaji 迦智山, one of the two representative Buddhist communities in the late Koryŏ period, the other being located at Susŏnsa monastery.[8] Both monastic communities adopted the new form of Linji Chan of Shiwu and Pingshan Chulin 平山處林 (d.u.), both direct descendants of Xuean Zuxin (Hwang 2006).

In a tabular form, the following include the late Koryŏ monks who traveled to China and transmitted the Linji line and their Chinese masters who conferred the monastic certification. The monastics are divided into the A) Mengshan and B) Xuean Zuxin lineages.[9]

(A). Mengshan Deyi lineage:
Master—Mengshan Deyi 夢山德異 (1231–1308)
(1) Hyegam Manhang 慧鑑萬恒 (1249–1319)
(2) Pogam Hon'gu 寶鑑混丘 (1251–1322)
Master—Tieshan Shaoqiong 鐵山紹瓊 (d.u.)
(3) Sŏlbong Ch'unggam 雪峯冲鑑 (1274–1338)

(B). Xuean Zuxin lineage:
Master—Shiwu Qinggong 石屋淸珙 (1272–1352)

(4) Paegun Kyŏnghan 白雲景閑 (1299–1374)
(5) T'aego Pou 太古普愚 (1301–1382)

Master—Wanfeng Shiwei 萬峰時蔚 (1303–1381)

(6) Sŏlsan Ch'ŏnhŭi 雪山千熙 (1307–1382)

Master—Pingahan Chŭlín 平山處林 (d.u.) / Zhikong 指空 (d. 1363)

(7) Naong Hyegŭn 懶翁惠勤 (1320–1376)[10]

3. The Entrenchment of Kanhua Chan in Late-Koryŏ Buddhist Practices

The active exchanges between Yuan China (1264–1368) and Koryŏ, including the trips made by the Korean monks to Yuan China, cease with the coming to power of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).[11] However, during the period of Yuan domination, there was undeniably a significant impact on Koryŏ Buddhism. Moreover, effects of the influences, despite the replacement of Yuan by the Ming dynasty, reverberated throughout the Chosŏn period (1392–1910) and into modern times.[12] These influences can be traced back to the widespread adoption of Mengshan's teachings of *kanhua chan*.[13]

In particular, the adoption and development of Yuan-period *kanhua chan* in Korea was led by the famous late-thirteenth century Korean monk Manhang 萬恒 (1249–1319), also known as state preceptor Hyegam 慧鑑國師.[14] This phase was then followed by the concluding period of adoption of *kanhua chan* in the mid-fourteenth century, when the Sŏn/Chan of observing the critical phrase became more firmly entrenched in the Korean Buddhist praxis. This was under the tenure of the eminent monks of the late-Koryŏ period, Paegun, Naong, and T'aego, who will be discussed further below.[15]

In the Sŏn/Chan school, the transmission of the enlightened mind of the Buddha from the master to the disciple (Kr. *isim chŏnsim*, Ch. *yixin chuanxin* 以心傳心) is one of the core doctrines and the foundation of the *kanhua* practice. Typically, students are given a *k'ung-an* (Kr. *kongan* 公案) by their master to meditate on. They are stories of instructions of the early masters that were transmitted and drawn upon as teaching devices by the later masters.[16] These practices take place in a face-to-face "question-and-answer" format commonly referred to as encounter dialogue, also known as *sŏnmuntap* (Ch. *chanwenda* 禪問答), or literally, "Sŏn/Chan of question-and-answer". In these meetings, mentoring, instructions, and verification of the practitioner by the master take place. Verification of the student's enlightened state by the master is taken as a proof of the disciple's spiritual attainment. As a sign of the master's recognition, and proof of the student's enlightened state, the master presents the student with a seal of certification, often by a bestowing an alms bowl or a *kāṣāya* (Kr. *kasa*, Ch. *jiasha* 袈裟).

During the time of Yuan domination, the Chinese brand of Mengshan's *kanhua chan* that was widely adopted emphasized the practices of "*huatou* of no-words" and "dharma seal after awakening". Especially with Koryŏ in a tributary relationship with an overpowering Yuan, contemporary Chinese Buddhist thought and practices were adopted by Koryŏ Buddhism. For instance, monks such as T'aego and Naong traveled to Yuan to receive teachings and transmit the lineages of the leading Chinese masters. In the case of T'aego, he received teachings and transmission from Shiwu and thereafter promoted a near-exclusive emphasis on *kanhua chan* as the main method of practice. The previously popular eclectic practice method of combining doctrinal study with meditation popularized by the famous twelfth-century Korean monk Chinul 知訥 (1158–1210) was eclipsed by a more dogmatic adherence to *kanhua*-focused practice.[17]

Indeed, greater emphasis of *kanhua chan* would have been a significant reason for many monks to start to visit China. However, the increased influence of Yuan over Koryŏ, politically and culturally, would also have contributed to the rise in visits. It was because of the dominating position of Yuan China that visiting the capital of Yuan was also a way of procuring opportunities for political and social advancement. Records indicate that upon returning to Korea, those monks who visited Chinese masters were afforded

patronage and privileges. In other words, we need to give attention to such immediate benefits that underly the reasons for traveling to China and receiving certification. As a result of the recognition, these monks were offered high-ranking monastic offices such as an abbotship, an over-seer of Buddhist schools, or even a state or royal preceptorship. As will be discussed below, these reasons are evident in the records of the trips of the eminent Korean monks.

In the cases below, I will focus on the two figures Naong and T'aego, using their memorial steles, collected works (Kr. *munjip* 文集), and recorded sayings (Kr. *ŏrok* 語錄). These two eminent masters are important figures in Korean Buddhism because they become the central figures based on whom the identity of the Chosŏn monastic community is established.

4. Eminent Monks Naong and T'aego and Their Travels to Yuan

4.1. Naong Hyegŭn (1320–1376)

Between the two prominent Buddhist communities at the time, one at Susŏnsa monastery and the other at Mount Kaji, Naong belonged to neither but represented the monastics who were closely aligned with the sovereign and also closely associated with the politically powerful families. Naong was later appointed a royal preceptor as the personal advisor to King Kongmin (r. 1351–1374). Naong's lineage is continued by the famous royal preceptor Muhak 無學 (1327–1405). It is recorded in the *Biographies of Korean Masters* (Kr. *Dongsa yeoljeon* 東師列傳)[18] that Naong traveled in 1347 to Yuan China, where he received a dharma transmission from an Indian monk known as Zhikong 指空 (d. 1363).[19] Some details of his travels to China and meeting with his dharma master are described as follows:

> [Naong] persevered in his practice for four years and had a desire to travel to China. In the year of *chŏnghaen* 丁亥 (1347), in the eleventh month, he began walking towards the north. [In 1348] on the thirteenth day of the third month, he arrived in the capital [of Yuan], at Fayuansi monastery. It was the first-time giving greetings to the Indian venerable Zhikong 指空. (HPC vol. 10, 1005a16-19)[20]

After Naong offers a greeting of prostration, Zhikong asks questions, leading to back-and-forth questions and answers like an encounter dialogue, including responses with poetry. Afterwards, Zhikong, convinced of the advanced spiritual level of Naong, accepts and allows him to join the other monks who were practicing under his instructions. During his stay in China, Naong even gains the attention of the emperor of Yuan, who honors him with gifts. The emperor sends an official to present a gold-thread-embroidered *kāṣāya* and other ceremonial gifts (HPC vol. 10, 1005b20).

On his return to Korea, news of Naong's greatness must have spread. King Kongmin, on finding out about Naong's return, sends an official to escort Naong on a palatial horse to the palace, and later asks Naong to give a personal teaching at the royal court. Naong's audience is also sought by the queen, who gifts him lavishly (HPC vol. 10, 1005c06-10). Then, in 1371, Naong is appointed as the royal preceptor, as follows:

> In the year *sinhae* (1371), in the eighth month and twenty-sixth day, the king sent the minister Chang Chaon of the Ministry of Works to deliver and present a letter and a seal together with a gold-thread-embroidered *kāṣāya*, an inner and outer court dress, and an alms bowl. [Naong was also] presented with the [title] of Royal Preceptor, Great Master of Chogye Order, Overseer of the Meditative and Doctrinal Schools, Practitioner and Original Wisdom, Patriarchal Wind of Renewed Tradition, Merit of the Country and Supporter of the World, August Savior of All. (HPC vol. 10, 1006a12-a16)[21]

The continued high regard which he was afforded by the Chinese royal court, even after his return to Korea, can be noted from the visit he received from Duke Darui 達睿 from the Yuan court. This is recorded in the *Recorded Sayings of Master Naong* as follows:

> In the third month of the year of *gengxu* 庚戌 of emperor Hongwu's 洪武 reign (1370), Duke Darui 達睿 came to Hoeamsa monastery with the funerary *sari* of venerable Zhikong. In the third month the master (Naong) went to the mountains in order to perform a ritual with [Zhikong's] *sari*. King Kongmin sent his minister Kim Wŏnbu to send regards to the venerable [on the news of Zhikong's death]. After completing the ritual with the *sari*, [the venerable] went into the walled city to spend the summer retreat at Kwangmyŏngsa monastery. (HPC vol. 10, 1006a02-06)[22]

Though any explicit description of passing of a seal of certification from Zhikong to Naong was not specifically mentioned in the initial encounter between the two, the above scene of passing of the *sari* symbolizes a transmission of the lineage from Zhikong to Naong, at least as one of the privileged disciples to have received the master's *sari*. That Duke Darui was sent by the Chinese royal court gives the transmission an official authority, adding to the validity of the transmission and Naong's recognition as a transmitter of Zhikong's lineage.

We can gather from the case of Naong that traveling to China to study under the leading Chinese masters and receiving their recognition must have had much to do with the generous reception of Naong by both the Chinese and Korean rulers. In other words, the trip to China to receive certification must be closely related to the high status and privilege that Naong comes to enjoy. When Naong received the gold-thread-embroidered *kāṣāya* and other ceremonial gifts from the Yuan emperor, one can be sure that he was even recognized within Yuan China.[23] The pattern of Naong's experiences in China and on his return to Korea is repeated in T'aego's case, which we turn to next.

4.2. T'ago Pou (1301–1382)

A memorial stupa raised for T'aego included information on his travels to China to seek the audience of Shiwu, the eighteenth patriarch of the Chinese Linji line. Through the meeting, T'aego's enlightened mind was verified and he was in the end conferred a mind-seal. In the inscription of the State Preceptor Wŏnjŭng Memorial Stupa of T'aegosa Monastery (T'aegosa Wŏnjŭng kuksa t'appi 太古寺圓證國師塔碑), published in his *Recorded Sayings of Venerable T'aego* (Kr. *T'aego hwasŏng ŏrok* 太古和尙語錄, hereafter *Recorded Sayings*) of 1385, the encounter and the conferral of the seal is described in detail as follows:

> In the *bingxu* 丙戌 year of the emperor Zhizheng's 至正 reign (1346) when venerable [T'aego] was forty-six years of age, he traveled to the Yuan [capital] Yanjing 燕京. T'aego heard of Chan master Zhuyuan Yongsheng 竺源永盛 and went to Nanchao, his residence, to meet him, but Zhuyuan Yongsheng had earlier passed away. He then went to Mount Hamu in Huzhou and met with the Chan master Shiwu Qinggong and shared in detail [the insights] he had attained and also presented his [composition] "Songs of T'aego Hermitage". (HPC vol. 6, 700c08-12)[24]

It was recorded in the stupa inscription that Shiwu, on receiving T'aego's composition, was deeply moved and bestowed a *kāṣāya* to indicate Shiwu's certification of T'aego's enlightened state as follows:

> The master was deeply moved and considered him (T'aego) to be a vessel [of the dharma]. He asked him on all matters and T'aego responded to them all. Then, T'aego asked, "Is there other matters you would share?" The master responded, "It is as if the respected monk [has awakened] like all the buddhas of the past, present, and the future". The master then gave [his] *kāṣāya* as sign of certification and said, "Now I can sleep with my legs fully stretched". Shiwu was the eighteenth dharma descendent of Linji. (HPC vol. 6, 700c12-16)[25]

The description of the transmission can be clearly discerned. This aspect of T'aego's transmission verified by the seal of certification plays a significant role in T'aego being recognized as the legitimate transmitter of the Chinese orthodox Linji lineage. Similar to Naong, T'aego on his return to Korea was lavished with gifts from the royal family. It

was further described that the king, the officials, and the wives of the gentry paid a visit to T'aego, whereupon they honored him with prostrations.[26] In the following we have an example of such privileged treatment of T'aego, both by the Yuan emperor and the Koryŏ king, as described in the *Biographies of Korean Masters*.

> When [T'aego] returned to Yanjing 燕京, the emperor of Yuan hearing [of T'aego] invited him to Yongmingsi monastery. He asked him to initiate the opening of the hall and to give a dharma talk, and conferred on him a gold-thread-embroidered *kāṣāya*, a fragrant tree, and ceremonial gifts.
>
> [T'aego] returned to Koryŏ in the spring of *muja* year (1348) and went to [a monastery in] Mount Sosŏl in the district of Miwŏn. In the year *imjin* (1352), King Kongmin sent an official to ask [in place of the king] to be T'aego's disciple. In the year *pyŏngsin* (1356), the king went [to T'aego] and invested the position of royal preceptor. (HPC vol. 10, 1007c14-19)[27]

No differently from Naong, T'aego was invited by the Yuan emperor to the capital to give a dharma teaching. We can surmise that an obvious reason for the monks to travel to China for the certificate was the increase in one's social standing and the patronages and privileges that followed. In particular, if a Korean monastic were to be invited to the Yuan court, he or she would indeed be a highly sought person by the Koryŏ royal court, especially given the tributary relationship between the two countries.

Though T'aego's trip to China is briefly described in his biography, we are able to gather more information from the epistolary exchanges with Shiwu while T'aego was stationed at the capital of Yuan. It starts with Shiwu's mail to T'aego after he departed Shiwu on the seventh month. In Shiwu's letter, he wishes that T'aego will keep himself well and that he will show the people by example not to follow evil ways. Shiwu then enquires on whether T'aego has departed for his homeland of Korea or not and asks to respect the "great dharma". T'aego responses to Shiwu's mail and writes about his appointment to the abbotship by the Yuan emperor and then the honor bestowed on him when he gave a dharma teaching on the occasion of Taizi's birthday. T'aego writes, as recorded in his *Recorded Sayings*:

> On the fifteenth day of the tenth month, I returned to the capital. Great monks from all the mountains and high-ranking officials from the royal court, having noticed a tiny bit of excellence [from me], reported it to the king. [As a result], by the will of his Highness, I became the abbot of the Yongningchansi monastery. (HPC vol. 6, 694c01-c04)[28]
>
> On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, on the occasion of Taizi's birthday, a gold-thread-embroidered *kāṣāya*, a fly whisk, and incense were bestowed [on me]. On the strong orders of heavenly messengers, the four groups of the monastic community[29] gathered, numbering about 10,000 people. They beat drums and surrounded [me], and I could not help but ascend to the [high] seat [to give a dharma teaching]. (HPC vol. 6, 694c04-c06)[30]

In the case of T'aego, the answer seems obvious to the question of why he made a trip to China—being courted by the Yuan emperor and being lavishly gifted by the royal family on returning to Korea and then later made a royal or state preceptor. Especially in the case of T'aego, the descriptions on the transmission and the privileges he received were clearly evident in the sources for us to conclude that such trips to China may have been well worth the possible difficulties and dangers.

5. Reasons for Traveling to China: Certification and Political Benefits

The trips made by the monastics, despite being worth the trouble and possible costs, need to be further explicated to frame this practice within the greater cultural and historical factors. I now discuss related reasons other than the direct benefits as to why monks made the trip. Then, I will close the paper with the extended implications of the trips made

by Naong and T'aego for the Korean monastic community later in the late-seventeenth century when the reemergence of Korean Buddhism took place.[31] In summary, the practice of seeking Chinese masters by the aspiring Korean monks is significantly determined by other underlying cultural and historical elements that were prevalent in the late Koryŏ—the privileges of the upper-class Korean monastics and the notion of China as the center of the Buddhist tradition.

5.1. Buddhist Culture of the Upper Class Koryŏ Monks

It was the custom of the elite class of Korean monks to travel to China; the implication is that only a certain class of monks had the privilege and the means. Once the monks returned from such visits, they were given special recognition and appointments in the monastic bureaucracy. For a monk to be bestowed a monastic office in the late-Koryŏ period, one would have to first pass the samgha examination and rise through the monastic hierarchy. Of course, it would help that a monk was well connected societally and within the Korean monastic community. However, having made a trip to China, obtaining an enlightenment certification, and having personal connections with the Yuan monastics and possibly even with the Yuan ruling elites, would be the utmost qualification for the highest monastic posts in Chosŏn Korea.[32] In the case of both Naong and T'aego, records indicate that they had all the requirements. From simply a practical point of view, as the monastic bureaucracy grew and became incorporated into the state structure, monastic ranks would have been part of a rise in a monastic career.[33]

To illustrate this point, if we take the above list of the seven monks who visited the Chinese masters of Yuan China in the late-Koryŏ period, five were appointed either as a royal or a state preceptor, and one was appointed posthumously as a state preceptor. Only one was appointed as an abbot.

(1) Hyegam Manhang 慧鑑萬恒 (1249–1319)—state preceptor
(2) Pogam Hon'gu 寶鑑混丘 (1251–1322)—state preceptor
(3) Sŏlbong Ch'unggam 雪峯冲鑑 (1274–1338)—state preceptor, posthumously appointed
(4) Paegun Kyŏnghan 白雲景閑 (1299–1374)—abbot
(5) T'aego Pou 太古普愚 (1301–1382)—state preceptor
(6) Sŏlsan Ch'ŏnhŭi 雪山千熙 (1307–1382)—state preceptor
(7) Naong Hyegŭn 懶翁惠勤 (1320–1376)—royal preceptor

It is not surprising that many of the royal and state preceptors had made the trip to China earlier in their monastic career. Then, with what resources would these monks be able to make the trip? I would suspect that even before the trip to China, the monastic would most likely have come from a class of privilege. Simply, it would have been impossible for an average monk to make such a trip. The monk would have had either the means personally or the connections to those who could give assistance for the trip. Either way, the monk before the trip itself would have been from a wealthy background or from a well-connected family or was himself well connected.

For example, in the case of Naong, his father was a state official in the Sŏn'gwansŏ 膳官署 office, and T'aego's father was a Supreme Supervisor of Rites.[34] Although the title was posthumously given for T'aego's father, it would be safe to assume he was a high-ranking official to be given such a long posthumous title. T'aego's mother was Lady Chŏng, and was also awarded a posthumous title of Grand Royal Consort of the Three Han Countries (Jorgensen 2012, p. 424).

In a study by Hŏ Hŭngsik, it is revealed that in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries nearly all the preceptors were the princes of the royal family or the royal in-law families. In the rest of the years up to the late-fourteenth century, similarly to Naong and T'aego, the preceptors were either from families of wealth and power or aristocratic families (Hŏ 1975, pp. 29–31). This gives support, though indirect, to the intimate connection between

traveling to China to obtain a certificate and royal or state preceptorship and the family background of the preceptors.

5.2. China as Center of Tradition and Prestige, and the Historical Context

The conception of China as *zhonghua* (Kr. *chonghwa* 中華)—the center of culture and civilization—has been a long-held ideology and which has existed in the Buddhist world most likely since the time that Buddhism was transmitted to Korea. Such notions spilled out into public debates, such as when the newly crowned Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368–1398) of Ming refused to instate investiture on the Chosŏn state and demeaned Chosŏn by referring to it as a barbarian state (Wang 2023, p. 3). That the conception of China as the source of culture and civilization was a pervasive societal narrative during the time is important in understanding why the monks did what they did—travel to China for a certificate.

This was a continuation of a tradition within the China–Korea relationship, of an older brother–younger brother relational framework. Seth, a historian of premodern Korea, concurs that "The Mongol rulers of China took on the role of Chinese emperors and assumed the big brother role that China often took toward Korea. When Korean kings paid homage to the Yuan rulers they were continuing a practice of seeking legitimacy by having their positions confirmed by the Celestial (Chinese) emperor" (Seth 2016, pp. 121–22).

Inherent in this notion is the "doctrine of the civilized and the barbarian" (Kr. *hwa'i ron*, Ch. *huayi lun* 華夷論), a Sino-centric ideology that positioned China as the center of civilization and hence the source of culture, in opposition to the uncivilized barbarians. When this rhetoric was applied to the Buddhist tradition, T'aego and Naong's direct connection to the Chinese tradition was the basis for claims of legitimacy of the teachings and the lineages they transmitted (Kim 2020, pp. 112–13).

Undoubtedly, because China is seen as the original source of the tradition, and therefore the orthodox tradition, there were benefits to be had by the visiting monks, such as learning and keeping up with new doctrinal and praxial developments in the Chinese Buddhist traditions. For instance, in many cases the visiting Korean monks would gather and bring back new Buddhist commentaries or possibly even newly discovered scriptures that were in circulation in China.[35]

Given that Yuan was the suzerain state, such ideas of China as the source of the Buddhist tradition would have been more prevalent, enforcing the notion of China as the center for verification or certification, especially from the late-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries. This would have been all the more the reason for the monks to travel to the source of orthodoxy. Furthermore, being certified in Yuan China by a Chinese master would have added to the legitimacy of the school and lineage one belonged to, and therefore an increase in the monastic's status. Given that the period was of Yuan domination, culturally and politically, having close ties with Yuan Buddhism would have surely helped the monastic.

6. Political Implications of Lineal Legitimacy

The transition period between the end of the Koryŏ dynasty and the beginning of a new Chosŏn dynasty marked a critical shift in the political sphere which hugely impacted the situation of the Korean monastic community. This period is often understood as the start of anti-Buddhist state policies. It also coincided with the beginning of a new Ming dynasty when its enacted restrictions on travels between China and Korea effectively ended the once-thriving Buddhist exchange. Because the Koryŏ–Yuan exchanges had ended, the legacy and impact on Buddhism of the last of the monastics who made the trip to China were all the more significant.

This is noted when Naong and T'aego, based on their visits to China, and having received transmission from Chinese masters, were revived some 300 years later in tandem with the reemergence of Buddhism in the early seventeenth century, when Naong and T'aego became the representative figures in the formation of a Buddhist identity of a burgeoning monastic community. Initially, Naong was considered by the Chosŏn monastics

as the more important figure in the formation of the Buddhist identity. However, T'aego eventually replaces Naong as the more favored figure and T'aego goes on to become the representative figure of Korean Chan/Sŏn orthodoxy (Kim 2023, pp. 105–12).

Two fundamental aspects—orthodoxy based on Chinese origins and legitimacy based on lineal orthodoxy—were important criteria that became important marks of the legitimacy of Buddhism in the late Chosŏn period. As the ideology of Sino-centric orthodoxy exerted greater influence in the early seventeenth century, previously prominent Koryŏ monastic figures were replaced in the newly formed lineages. Koryŏ figures identified as not belonging to the orthodox Linji line were deleted, such as the Sŏn master Chinul and the royal preceptor Naong. This was part of a movement in establishing the identity of the Chosŏn monastic community based on the orthodox Linji lineage, established through the lineal connection of T'aego to Shiwu.

Though both Naong and T'aego made the arduous journey to China and received certification, emphasis on Linji orthodoxy based on Chinese origins in the seventeenth century favored T'aego. As a consequence of the movement, the Linji lineage became synonymous with Buddhist orthodoxy, and even today, this point of reference has come to be generally accepted as the basis of the modern-day identity of the Korean monastics (Kim 2023, pp. 105–6).

7. Closing Remarks

Despite the fact that during the Koryŏ period there would have been qualified masters to lead the tradition of *kanhua chan* and to verify the enlightened states of Korean monks, traveling to China came to be interwoven into the late-Koryŏ period Buddhist practice, for several reasons. One reason was that Chinese Buddhist centers became places for verification or certification of Korean eminent monks. It became a conventional custom, especially from the late-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries, for Korean monks to travel to China to have their spiritual attainment certified by the Chinese masters.

This practice, however, was not only related to the past tradition of seeking the dharma but was connected to other historically specific reasons. One was the timing, in that the late-thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries coincided with the Yuan domination of Koryŏ. This resulted in the close adoption of the Mengshan's emphasis on the practice of "*huatou* of no-words" and "dharma seal after awakening". Another reason, and perhaps the greater driver, was that traveling to China and receiving a certification was a path to becoming appointed as a high-ranking monastic such as a Sŏn master, an abbot, or even a royal or state preceptor. A further reason was the perception of China as source of the Buddhist tradition and orthodoxy, which all the more added to the custom of visiting China for verification and certification. In essence, traveling to China to gain experience and to meet with a well-known Chinese master was a custom of the elite Koryŏ monks. The result of a successful trip to China led to being recognized as worthy of patronage and privileges, and with these came prestige and power.

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Abbreviations

HPC = *Han'guk pulgyo chŏnsŏ* (韓國佛教全書).

Notes

1 Vermeersch (2018, p. 259) also points to this phenomenon, otherwise known as *kubŏp* 求法, in the early history of the transmission of Buddhism from China during the three kingdoms period and asserts that though it would be difficult to determine just how many Koguryŏ, Paekche or Silla monks travelled to China, he surmises the number would have been significant.

2 A well-known example is of the famous Korean monk Ŭisang 義湘 (625–702) who is known to have brought the Vinaya tradition to Korea after learning from the Tang Vinaya master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667). See Cawley (2023, pp. 4–5).

3 The most iconic story of passing-on of the mind-seal is of Hui-neng who was quietly called by the fifth patriarch of the Chinese Chan school Hongren one evening into his room and gave his robe and alms bowl to Hui-neng as a sign of being transmitted the mind-seal.

4 On the webpage of the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism (n.d.), it is claimed that, "In the latter period of the Koryŏ Dynasty in Korea, Master T'aego Pou awakened to the essence of Sŏn and traveled to China and visited Chan Master Shiwu Qinggong 石屋清珙. He received the Dharma transmission and became the fifty-seventh patriarch in the lineage of the Buddha and the first Patriarch in Korea". See the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism (n.d.) website, http://www.buddhism.or.kr/jongdan/sub1/sub1-1-t3.php (accessed on 15 June 2023).

5 Kang also lists five monks who were active in Korea from the early- to the mid-fourteenth centuries starting in 1303: Wu chanshi 無禪師 (fl. 1303), Tieshan Shaoqiong 鐵山紹瓊 (fl. 1304–1306), Fushan 福山 (fl. 1339), Wuji 無極 (fl. 1339), and Gutan Jizahao Xuanming 古潭 (寂照玄明) (1357, 1360) (Kang 2000, p. 48, fn. 177).

6 *Paegunhwasangŏrok* 白雲和尙語錄卷 is available at HPC no. 101 vol. 6.

7 Xuean Zuxin in turn belongs to the Yangqi Fanghui line. Paegun is known to have also met with the Indian master Zhikong 指空 (d. 1363) and received his teachings.

8 Susŏnsa monastery was founded by the famous monk Chinul 知訥 (1158–1210), from where a total of sixteen state preceptors came.

9 This list is adopted from the figure of lineages connecting Koryŏ monks to their Chinese masters (Choe 1986, p. 102). Here, Ch'ŏnhŭi 千熙 (1307–1382) and Chonghwŏn 宗烜 (d.u.) were Hwaom monks, not Sŏn, but they nevertheless transmitted the Linji lineage to Korea.

10 In Korean academia, it is accepted that Naong Hyegŭn on gaining enlightenment in 1347 went to China and met with an Indian monk Zhikong指空 (Kr. Chigong) and received his teachings. However, in 1350, Naong while on a pilgrimage met Chan master Pingshan Chulin 平山處林 (1279–1361) and received his transmission as well.

11 Its rulers enact restrictions on travels between Korea and China which heavily curtailed Koreans from entering China. It is not until the nineteenth century that monks once again started traveling to China, while in between, it was a time of internal developments. See Lee (2021) on the start of travels by Korean monks to China.

12 It is quite telling when the present Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism (n.d.) explicitly claims that its Sŏn/Chan tradition is the continuation of the Chinese Linji tradition and prides on a direct transmission which supposedly took place during the time of Yuan domination. The importance of the Linji tradition also in the identity of modern Chogye Order is quite evident. See Kim (2023, pp. 105–6).

13 Kang (2000, pp. 42–43), a modern-day scholar, describes that towards the end of thirteenth century there was active correspondence followed by visits of the Korean monastics to Mengshan, through which Mengshan's thoughts rapidly spread in Korea.

14 Hyegam was the tenth preceptor from Susŏnsa monastery.

15 Kim (2005, pp. 40–42) describes three stages but argues that the seminal stages were the first and the second, and the third stage was simply a continuation of the *kanhwa Sŏn* that was fully established by the second stage.

16 This became a core method used within the Linji school and came to be collected into large anthologies called "public case records". Simply, meditation on the *k'ung-an* is performed by focusing on the *huatou* 話頭, the critical phrase, which literally means the head of speech. These critical phrases were used to incite and lead the students beyond the tethers of conceptual thought (Buswell 1983, p. 67).

17 Buswell (1998, p. 87) claims that later when Chosŏn shifted its allegiance away from the Mongol Yuan to the new Ming dynasty, Korean Buddhists began to turn away from the imported Linji forms to a more indigenous traditions, Hwaom and Sŏn, methods espoused by Chinul.

18 This compilation of biographies of Korean monastics was by Pŏmhae Kag'an 梵海覺岸 (1820–1896) and published in 1894.

19 Their encounter is described in Naong's biography. See Pŏmhae ([1894] 2015, pp. 113–17). In the Korean academia, it is accepted that Naong Hyegŭn on gaining enlightenment in 1347 went to China and met an Indian monk Zhikong指空 (Kr. Chigong) and received his teachings. However, in 1350, Naong while on a pilgrimage met Chan master Pingshan Chulin 平山處林 (1279–1361) and received his transmission as well.

20 勤修四載, 欲往中國, 丁亥十一月, 發足向北, 戊三月十三日, 至大都法源寺, 初叅西天指空和尙.

21 辛亥八月二十六日, 遣工部尙書張子 溫, 賚書降印, 幷賜金襴袈裟內外法服 鉢盂, 封爲王師大曺溪宗師禪敎都摠攝勤修本智重興祖風福國祐世普濟尊者.

22 洪武 庚戌三月, 朝司徒睿, 奉指空靈骨 舍利, 到檜巖, 三月, 師因禮骨出山, 上 遣近臣金元冨迎之, 禮骨已, 入城結夏 於廣明寺.

[23] Whether the high social status preceded Naong's reception of his enlightenment certification, which is a possibility, cannot be answered for certain at this point.

[24] 至正丙戌, 師年四十六, 遊燕都, 聞竺源盛禪師, 在南巢, 往見之則已逝矣, 至湖州霞霧山, 見石屋珙禪師, 具陳所得, 且獻太古庵歌.

[25] 石屋深器之, 問日用事, 師答訖, 徐又啓曰, 未審此外, 還更有事否, 石屋云, 老僧亦如是, 三世佛祖亦如是, 遂以袈裟, 表信曰, 老僧今日, 展脚睡矣, 屋臨濟十八代孫也.

[26] See T'aegosa Monastery State Preceptor Wŏnjŭng Memorial Stupa (T'aegosa Wŏnjŭng kuksa t'appi 太古寺圓證國師塔碑) (1385) in Yi (2000, pp. 451–56).

[27] 回至燕都, 天子聞之, 請開堂於永明寺, 賜 金襴袈裟沈香拂子, 戊子春, 東歸, 入迷 源小雪山, 十二月二十四日, 說偈而 逝, 壬辰, 玄陵恭愍王, 遣使請益, 丙申, 玄陵親臨, 封爲王師.

[28] 十月十五日, 回大都, 囊錐稍露, 諸山碩德, 朝廷大臣, 奏聞聖旨, 住持永寧禪寺.

[29] The four groups include monks, nuns, male and female lay devotees.

[30] 十一月廿四日, 太子千秋令晨, 賜金襴拂子若香. 天使令嚴, 諸方四衆, 僅百千萬人. 擊皷圍繞, 不得已陞座.

[31] I argue in a different paper the significance of the reemergence of Chosŏn Buddhism in the seventeenth century in the formation of modern Korean Buddhism. See Kim (2019, 2022).

[32] In some ways this is similar to the current situation of studying abroad for post-graduate studies to gain a PhD degree, as a verification of one's erudition. Depending on the department, in some cases such as Seoul National University, more than half of the faculty have gained their PhD from American universities.

[33] Vermeersch (2008, p. 256) also describes the ranks as part of the monastic career.

[34] The full title is Supreme Supervisor of Rites, Supreme Pillar of State, Director of the Chancellery, Supervisor of the Bureau of Military Personnel, and Duke of Hongyang 贈開府儀同三司 上柱國 門下侍中 判吏兵部事 洪陽公. See Jorgensen (2012, p. 424).

[35] This would have been similarly the case for new developments in Neo-Confucianism in China and the eagerness of the Korean Confucian literati and scholar-officials would not have been much different. See Kalton (2019), for a discussion of the development of Neo-Confucianism from the initial stages of development in Korea in the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty.

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