

“YEONGSANJAE” AS A RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL RITUAL, EXERCISED BY BUDDHIST MONKS IN KOREA

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Abstract: “Yeongsanjae” is a form of Korean Buddhist culture in which philosophical and spiritual messages are expressed. Preserved chiefly by the Taego Order of Korean Buddhism, it is observed in temples throughout the country to assist all beings to enter the world of truth by worshipping the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). It also serves as a space for transfer of values and art forms and for meditation, training and enlightenment. However, there are hidden political voices among all participants, particularly monks who perform the ceremony due to their active interest in the nation’s historic wars, such as the Mongol and Japanese invasions in the 13th to 16th centuries. This paper underlines the significance of Yeongsanjae from the viewpoint of religious and political ritual in hopes of a Unified Korea.

Keywords: Yeongsanjae Buddhist ritual, Intangible cultural heritage, Goryeo dynasty

Yeongsanjae: Korean Intangible Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritages are the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society through generations, preserved in the present and maintained for the benefit of future generations. Intangible heritage denotes the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces related therewith, that communities identify as part of their cultural heritage. It has been transmitted through generations and re-created by communities according to their environment and history, endowing them with a sense of identity and continuity and enhancing respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

UNESCO’s 2003 Convention categorises intangible cultural heritage into five domains: (i) oral traditions and expressions, including language as the vehicle, (ii) performing arts, (iii) social practices, rituals and festive events, (iv) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and (v) traditional craftsmanship.

In the case of Korea, “Yeongsanjae” was entered on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. Being a component of Korean Buddhist tradition, it is a re-enactment of Buddha’s delivery of the Lotus Sutra on the Vulture Peak in India, through which philosophical and spiritual messages of Buddhism are expressed and believers improve self-discipline through participation.

Yeongsanjae begins with a ritual reception for all the saints and spirits of heaven and earth, and ends with a farewell ritual representing manners of the ethereal realm of Buddha. It includes singing, ceremonial embellishment, and diverse ritual dances—the cymbal dance, the drum dance and the ceremonial robe dance.

The other elements of Yeongsanjae includes a ritual cleansing, a tea ceremony, the devotion of a rice meal to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, a sermon inviting the audience to the door of truth, and a ritual meal for the dead to congratulate them on their entry into heaven.

Yeongsanjae satisfies the following requirements for inclusion in the UNESCO List:

- R.1: Yeongsanjae is a cherished expression of the identity of its practitioners who have passed it on from generation to generation;
- R.2: Its inscription on the Representative List would contribute to ensuring the visibility of intangible cultural heritage at the local, national and international levels, thereby reflecting cultural diversity and human creativity;
- R.3: The nomination presents the national system of safeguarding measures and describes the commitment of the Yeongsanjae Preservation Association to enhancing awareness and transmission of the element;
- R.4: The element is designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage by the Intangible Cultural Heritage Division of the Cultural Heritage Administration in Korea.

Generally speaking, ritual cultures are important among Koreans, regardless of their individual faiths. In fact, in 2008, “Royal ancestral ritual in the Jongmyo shrine and its music” was included in the UNESCO List. This is the Confucian ritual which is dedicated to the ancestors of the Joseon dynasty (14-19 c.) with song, dance and music. This annual ceremony takes place on the first Sunday in May, organized by the royal family’s descendants. As a unique Confucian ritual, the tradition was inspired by classical Chinese texts explaining the cult of ancestors and the notion of filial piety. The ritual also involves a prayer for the eternal peace of the ancestors’ spirits in a shrine imagined to be their spiritual resting place, which is related to shamanism.

Korean shamanism is a deeply rooted folk belief in good and evil spirits, which can only be cured by the shaman (called “Mudang”). Through dance, the shaman communicates directly with the spirits as an intermediary between man and the supernatural, speaking for the humans to deliver their wishes and for the spirits to reveal their will.

As the owner of transcendental capabilities, the shaman may have four characteristics: (i) experiencing the spirits’ torture by resisting being chosen for the vocation, manifested in the form of illness; (ii) officiating at rites in which they can communicate with the spirits; (iii) gaining recognition as a religious leader to satisfy the spiritual demands of the community; and (iv) serving and assisting specific spirits.

In the pantheon of shamans, a variety of spirits are worshiped: the mountain spirit, the seven star spirit, the earth spirit and the dragon spirit in nature, along with those of historical figures such as kings, generals and ministers.

Shamanic rites are performed to escort the soul of a dead person to heaven because their souls, personified, are believed to be formless and invisible but omnipotent, floating around freely in the void with no barriers of time and space.

As an essential religious expression in Korea, shaman rites were performed ranging from the royal household down to remote villages. Historical records say that the court of the Goryeo Dynasty built ten state shrines to perform rites to invoke peace and prosperity for the nation. When dangerous epidemics spread, the royal court invited shamans to conduct rites to expel the evil spirits.

Yeongsanje Rituals: Sequence Ritual and Meal Offering

Yeongsanje has two parts: Sequence Ritual Order Event and Meal Offering Order Event. The Sequence Ritual has twelve processes in order: (1) Tajong, Shiryon (2) Kwaebul Iwoon (3) Bokcheonggye (4) Cheonsu Bara (5) Doryanggye (6) Bopgo (7) Keobul (8) Hyanghwagye (9) Hyangsu (10) Sadarani (11) Gajigye and (12) Gongdeokgye, in a combination of music and dance.

Tajong, Shiryon (Bell and Processional): The huge bell is rung to indicate the beginning of the ceremony, in which the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, gods, devas, guardians and other spirits are beseeched to descend from the heavens to participate in the ceremony, to guard the grounds, and to make the ceremony successful. Bodhisattva Innowang leads the spirits from outside the temple grounds to the ceremony site in a processional, with the palanquin symbolically carrying the spirits.

Kwaebul Iwoon (Transfer and Raising of the Tangka Painting): Although various types of huge outdoor Kwaebul (Tangka) paintings for a variety of temple rituals exist, the most common in Korean Buddhism is the Lotus Sutra Sermon Tangka. The Tangka, describing the Buddha Sakyamuni, is carried to the ceremonial site and raised. This represents the appearance of the Buddha at the ceremony.

Bokcheonggye (Incantation to Avalokitesvara Deity): The monks chant the mystical Dharani to Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, to ease sentient beings from their various sufferings and torments.

Cheonsu Bara (Thousand-Hand Bara Cymbals Dance): Monks perform the Bara or Cymbals Dance to the chanting of the 1,000-Hand Sutra to Avalokitesvara. The dance is a joyful and masculine one, in gratitude for the blessings acquired through the chant.

Doryanggye (Purification of the Ritual Area): The grounds are cleansed. Chants implore the Triple Gem (Buddha, his laws and monks) and dragons to attend, and participants ask through chanting to bless with compassion all those

gathered at the ceremony. The feminine Butterfly Dance is executed with dancers wearing long-sleeved white robes and pagoda-shaped hats, reflecting religious exhilaration from receiving the teachings of the Buddha, as the spirits of the deceased all gather at the site.

Bopgo (Dharma Drum Dance): The huge drum is played in hopes that the sound will awaken all living beings to the Dharma or Buddhist Law; thus they may be eased from suffering. A monk plays the drum, while another dances.

Keobul (Entreating the Buddha and Bodhisattvas): The attendees entreat and take refuge in the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, and one can sense the message of the Lotus Sutra unfolding. Prayers are additionally offered for the deceased to enter Paradise.

Hyanghwagye (Incense and Flower Offerings): Incense and flowers, symbols of the infinite world of Buddhism and the Buddha, are offered as gestures for vowing to transform oneself, upon receiving the powers of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, in order to lead all sentient beings out of suffering and into enlightenment as soon as possible.

Hyangsu Nayol (Offering Chants): Offerings are made to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, hoping to receive their blessings and powers so as to liberate sufferers, and all take protection in the Triple Gem.

Sadarani (Four Dharani Chants): The Bara Dance is done again to the accompaniment of four Dharani chants in hopes of supplying the finest in food offerings for all to share.

Gajigye (The Food Offering): Whereas the meaning and methods of food offerings were expressed in the food offering chants, and the quality and quantity of food supplied through the four Dharani chants, the various foods are now offered at the altar with accompanied chanting.

Gongdeokgye (Transfer of Merit): The merit taken from conducting the Yongsanjae is transmitted to the monks, followers and spirits who have joined the ceremony, and prayers are offered that all suffering living ones may reach the shores of Nirvana. The Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods and guardians are sent off, and the spirits of the deceased are sent to Paradise.

The other Order Event is the Meal Offering (Shikdang Jakbeop). It is the meal arranged for monks at a monastery for their efforts in conducting Dharma events such as ceremonies. Unlike common meals, this Meal Offering is accompanied by music, chanting, dancing and drumming. It is a highly complex meal ritual, and the participants take the opportunity to dwell on whether they are worthy of receiving the offering, and to renew their zeal to practice the teachings of the Buddha. All are done in expectations of gaining Bodhisattvahood to actualize the teachings and compassion of the Buddha.

Goryeo Tripitaka: The Mongol Invasion During the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392)

As Yeongsanjae is held among monks, some backgrounds of Korean Buddhism need to be explained. Buddhism accounts for a purpose in life, explaining injustice and inequality around the world and providing a code of practice or way of life which leads to happiness. Buddhism is a spiritual tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of deep insight into the true nature of life. It teaches that compassion is natural and important because all life is interconnected. The Buddhist path is summed up as (i) to lead a moral life, (ii) to be mindful and aware of thoughts and actions, and (iii) to develop wisdom and understanding.

When Buddhism was introduced from China to Korea in 372 AD, it combined with indigenous shamanism. During the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC-935 AD), Buddhism slowly developed, but after its golden age in the Unified Shilla (668-935), it was followed by the ritualistic Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392).

As a result of Goryeo's strengthening diplomatic relations with China, the first 200 years of the Goryeo period was marked by relative peace and prosperity. Power was centralized in the king, and the administration was composed of bureaucrats and scholars who had achieved their positions by examination. Unlike United tribal Shilla, the Goryeo system included people from the whole peninsula to create a unified national identity.

Land was given to Buddhist temples and monasteries, and Buddhist monks were involved in power. The Son (Zen) sect of Buddhism became the predominant order, as seen in religious art.

However, excessive focus was increasingly placed on Buddhist rituals, creating an unfavourable atmosphere for spiritual growth. In an attempt to purify and renew the spiritual aspect of Buddhism, several monks struggled against this ritualistic tendency. One of them was Master Ui-chon (1055-1101), son of King Munjong. He collected about 4,000 volumes of Buddhist texts during his study in China, and from these texts, the Goryeo Tripitaka was produced. This respected Goryeo monk underlined the significance of bringing Contemplative Son (Zen) and Textual (Avatamsaka) traditions together under the Chinese Tiantai school. The formation of this school gave new life to Goryeo Buddhism.

In the meantime, the Mongols arose as a nomadic herding people in the steppe region of north-central Asia. The wealth produced by the agricultural peoples to their south had aroused their acquisitive desires, and the Goryeo became prime targets of Mongol invasions, starting in 1231. The Goryeo resolved to resist the Mongols, moving the capital to Kanghai the next year (1232), an action calculated to exploit the Mongol fear of the sea. While the ruling class entered Kanghai, despite a treaty signed with the Mongols later, the populace was protected in mountain fortresses or on islands off the coast. Goryeo's decision to resist the Mongols provoked six invasions (1231-73) in total.

During these struggles, no less significant was the invention of the world's first movable metal type in 1234, which preceded the Gutenberg Bible of Germany by two centuries. The publication of Goryeo Tripitaka on 80,000 wooden blocks was intended to invoke the influence of Buddha for the repulsion of the Mongol invaders. The government also offered up anxious prayers to the deities of heaven and earth. It was in such an emotional atmosphere that the desire for peace with the Mongols arose among the king and the civil officials. Now stored at Haeinsa Temple, this monumental project became a national undertaking.

Buddhism remained the leading intellectual influence for spiritual inspiration and religious fulfilment, while Confucianism continued its importance in politics, ethics and daily affairs. Although Confucianism, introduced to the peninsula at the same time as Buddhism, had not yet gained much popularity, at the end of the dynasty, Buddhist monks had to keep a low profile when General Yi Seonggye was forced to eject Buddhism. He needed the support of Neo-Confucian scholars and officials in order to become King Taejo of the new Joseon dynasty in 1392. Persecution of Buddhists ran high in the Joseon period as Neo-Confucianism gained the favour of the ruling families.

Buddhist Monks' Army: The Japanese Invasion in the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897)

In the late 16th century, during the Japanese invasion by the armies of Hideyoshi, Buddhism came to the country's rescue. Master Seosan (1520-1604) and his disciple Samyong (1544- 1610) led a band of Buddhist monks against the invasion.

To begin with Seosan Daesa, little is known of his early life. Before becoming a military commander, Seosan was a supreme Son master and the author of a number of important religious texts such as "Seongaguigam", a guide to Son practice studied by Korean monks even today.

In Japan, Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi made preparations for a large-scale invasion of Joseon after stabilising Japan from its warring states in the 1590s. Joseon was unaware of the Japanese situation and was unprepared for its aggression. In 1592, when Joseon rebuffed Japan's request for assistance in conquering China, about 200,000 Japanese soldiers invaded the country and the "Japanese War" broke out.

At its beginning, King Seonjo fled the capital, leaving a weak army to defend the country. In desperation, he called on Master Seosan to organise monks into guerrilla units. Even at 72 years of age, Master Seosan managed to recruit and deploy some 5,000 of these warrior monks, who gained some success in fights with Japanese soldiers.

The presence of the Seosan monks' army, operating out of the Heungguksa temple deep in the area of Yeongchisan mountain, was a critical factor in the eventual expulsion of the Japanese invaders in 1593 and again in 1598. Seosan's

disciple, Samyeongdang, known by his Buddhist name Yujeong, was recommended to be the head of the Son order in 1575. He refused and instead travelled to Myohyangsan mountain, where he was instructed by preceptor Seosan Daesa.

With the outbreak of Japanese invasions in 1592, Yujeong joined his teacher Seosan’s righteous army of monks. After Seosan retired due to his age, Yujeong took over the leadership of the monks’ army, leading the army into battles at Pyongyang and Uiryeong and setting up mountain fortresses through Gyeongsang. He also joined in battle again at Ulsan and Suncheon.

In 1604, after the defeat of the Hideyoshi invasion, Yujeong travelled to Japan on King Seonjo’s orders to forge a peace accord with Tokugawa Ieyas, and returned with 3,500 Korean prisoners. His diplomatic missions established a resilient foundation for a series of major Joseon missions to Japan. Even long after his death, he is remembered with numerous statues and other memorials around Korea in modern times.

In short, monks’ political awareness—directly or indirectly, visibly or invisibly—was of vital importance in the history of Korea, regardless of their royal status. These influences reflect the diversity of monks in society, and their ritual activities were the best means for serving the nation’s safety and welfare, as well as exercising their own hopes.

Conclusion

In the text of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Article 2 – Definitions), social practices, rituals and festive events are habitual activities which form the lives of communities, shared by their members. They reaffirm the identity of those who practise them as a group, either in public or private, whether small or large in size, but linked to important events, such as the passing of the season’s or a person’s stage of life.

Rituals and festive events often take place at special times and places and remind a community of its worldview and history. Access to some rituals (initiation rites, burial ceremonies) may be restricted to the community, while some festive events (carnivals, New Year celebrations) are open to all as a key part of public life. Reinforcing a sense of identity and continuity with the past through cultural expressions, songs or dances, special food and clothing, animal sacrifice, etc. are given priority. Social practices, rituals and festive events are strongly affected by the changes which communities undergo, as they are dependent on the participation of practitioners in the communities themselves.

A question arises: “How can all these important rituals be remembered in the turmoil of rapid changes in modern society?”

One answer is memory, an asset of intangible cultural heritage. As a matter of fact, in medieval Europe, memory was regarded as a treasury of knowledge. Hugh of St. Victor (c.1096-1141) framed his discourse on the art of memory

in terms of material wealth in his “The Three Best Memory-Aids for Learning History”:

My child, knowledge is a treasury and your heart is its strongbox. As you study all of knowledge, you store up for yourselves good treasures, immortal treasures, incorruptible treasures, which never decay nor lose the beauty of their brightness. In the treasure-house of wisdom are various sorts of wealth, and many filing-places in the store-house of your heart... The orderly arrangement is clarity of knowledge. Dispose and separate each single thing into its own place... Confusion is the mother of ignorance and forgetfulness, but orderly arrangement illuminates the intelligence and secures memory.¹

He then adopted the metaphor of the money-changer, an almost disreputable image since biblical times, in order to explain the need of storing information systematically in the memory. Like money, memories need to be exchanged for disseminating the culture.

In the accumulated culture of societies, three types of memory – personal memory, cognitive memory and habit memory – are identified in “How Societies Remember”.² Personal memory is a recollection of a particular past happening in an individual’s life. Cognitive memory is knowledge and understanding shared by the whole community, while habit memory entails the acquisition of intuitive rather than learned skills, such as rowing, riding or reading. The culture of any society is fed by all these types of memory.

If we agree with these, Yeongsansje lies in a safe place to be remembered. Why so? As a large part of the Buddhist practice of austerities, the Buddhist rituals that originated in the period of the Three Kingdoms (57 BC-935 AD) have been handed down to the present day. Formally, ‘The Yeongsanjae Preservation Association’ attempts to protect and advance Korea and plays a role in publicizing the nation’s excellence and the law of Buddha across the globe. Its official ritual is annually held at Bongwonsa temple whose signboard was inscribed by King Yongjo the Great during the Joseon Dynasty in 1749.

However, Yeongsanjae is observed with slight differences depending on the different localities nowadays. In some regions, the Yeongsanjae Rite is experienced on the 49th Day of the Passage of a person, which is regarded as a favourable day for guiding the deceased souls into Paradise. The rite is also observed for the security and property of the state and the long life of the Military Good Luck.

In my view, Yeongsanjae is an indirect form of political ritual through non-political Buddhist monks. It can purify our corrupted minds and souls for a better society, as well as provide a means for future communication between two modern Koreas. Even North Koreans venerate the historical courageous monks,

1 Cited in CARRUTHERS, 2008. 339.

2 CONNERTON, 1989. 22-32.

and with this common tradition and the same past, we can make Yeongsanjae helpful for the unification of Korea.

Korean Buddhism has undergone a renewal since the liberation of the country (1945) from thirty-six years of Japanese occupation. Many new temples and centres have opened in the towns. And people of all ages take part in chanting, studying, all-night meditation classes and social gatherings. Although Koreans do not consider themselves genuine Buddhists, they behave in a Buddhist way through inherited traditions.

What do all these mean in terms of political rituals? After the Korean War (1950-53), Korea was divided and there arose political turmoil. Now people have freedom to demonstrate outdoors, but from my personal view, prayers through Buddhist rituals can influence the society more strongly for a lengthy term.

Before closing this paper, it is worth introducing a message, delivered by Venerable Chief Abbot Hyangdeok of Cheonmansa Buddhist temple and Chairman of the Yeongsanjae Buddhist Rite who underlined the importance of Yeongsanjae. The ceremony on 25 October 2009 in Ulsan, Kyongsang Namdo Province was intended to enhance World Peace and Security of People:

I express my heartfelt gratitude to the distinguished guests... the leaders of all segments of society from Seoul and the different localities... to attend this Grand Yeongsanjae Rite where prayers are offered for the sake of peace and blessings for the world and Korea... The mankind is working toward achieving an everlasting peace and prosperity. In spite of such an effort, however, the people are far from extricating themselves from endless conflicts and confrontations due to their unreserved selfishness and pursuit of personal gains... Peace is what everyone seeks, but all the same it is an elusive one and we do not have a complete peace. This is why I humbly state that I have prepared this Yeongsanjae Rite to contribute to attaining peace in the world and, in particular, work toward achieving a new turn for durable peace in the society of mankind and the Buddhist world... All of us are brethren to one another and members of the same family. We are seeking a cease to all conflicts and we are seeking to have a new hope. Through the Yeongsanjae Rite, I am praying and seeking to help the deceased souls still wandering in the Nether World to find their way into the Heaven, for peace to return to the world and for blessings and security to come to Korea.³

³ Yeongsan-jae Buddhist rite relieves people of worldly worries, helps the deceased find their way into the Paradise. *The Korea Post*. 5 October 2009.

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Fig. 1. Yeongsanjae ritual processes
(photo: National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, Korea 2003)



Fig. 2. Yeongsanjae ritual processes
(photo: National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, Korea 2003)



Fig. 3. Yeongsanjae ritual processes
(photo: National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, Korea 2003)



Fig. 4. Goryeo Tripitaka stored at Haeinsa Temple, the World Heritage by UNESCO
(photo: Zwegers 2006)



Fig. 5. Yeongsanjae festival
(photo: Korea Post 2009)