


**Why did Kungye claim to be the
Buddha Maitreya?: The Maitreya
Cult and Royal Power in the Silla-
Koryŏ Transition**

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Why did Kungye claim to be the Buddha Maitreya?: The Maitreya Cult and Royal Power in the Silla-Koryŏ Transition

This paper addresses the reasons why Kungye—an illegitimate Silla prince, Buddhist monk, anti-Silla rebel, and founder of the Later Koguryŏ polity—claimed to be the Buddha Maitreya. It first analyzes modern Korean scholars' research on the topic and their solutions to the question. Setting aside megalomania and madness, it seeks a more nuanced answer for Kungye's actions. It demonstrates that Kungye's deployment of Maitreya symbolism was neither canonically based nor consistent with what is known about Maitreya worship in the late Silla period (780-935). The sparse evidence suggests that Kungye followed the example of the usurper Tang Empress Wu (r. 690-705) in deploying Maitreya cult symbolism, that he made overtures toward connecting himself to Maitreya by his choices of names for his state, and that symbolically he needed to be Maitreya in order to attempt to assimilate the people of Later Paekche, Silla, and, perhaps, other peoples in Northeast Asia.

**Why did Kungye claim to be the Buddha Maitreya?:
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Kungye 弓裔 (d. 918), rebel and founder of what scholars for convenience's sake call Later Koguryŏ 後高句麗 (901-18), renamed his kingdom T'aebong 泰封 in 911, proclaimed himself to be the future buddha Maitreya (Mirŭk pul 彌勒佛), and named his sons the bodhisattvas "Green Light" (Chŏnggwang posal 青光菩薩) and "Divine Light" (Sin'gwang posal 神光菩薩). Kungye wore a peaked gold hood on his head and a square robe on his body like a monk and when he went out he always rode a white horse whose mane and tail were adorned with silk ornaments. Mimicking Buddhist ritual processions he had young boys and girls lead the way before him carrying banners and parasols, purifying the air with incense and flowers. He also had more than two hundred Buddhist monks follow his train chanting Buddhist hymns in Sanskrit (*pŏmp'ae* 梵唄). Kungye is also said to have composed more than twenty rolls of Buddhist scripture. The veracity of these works was denounced by the monk Sŏkch'ong 釋聰, but he was bludgeoned to death with an iron mallet for it. In 918, when Kungye's wife Lady Kang 康氏 reprimanded him for conducting many improper activities he accused her of illicit relations with other men, declaring that he knew this through his supernormal power which he termed "Maitreya's method of observing the mind" (*Mirŭk kwansim pŏp* 彌勒觀心法). As a result, in his rage he killed his wife and sons for her insolence. This was the last straw for his comrades-in-arms who had observed his suspicions and wanton treachery toward his subordinates increase steadily. As is well known, they convinced Wang Kŏn 王建 (877-943), Kungye's most successful general and

founder of the Koryŏ dynasty 高麗 (918-1392), to become their new king and rose in revolt. Kungye fled the capital in disguise but was later killed by the people of Puyang 斧壤 (present-day Pyŏnggang 平康 in Kangwŏn province), one of the areas that suffered the most due to Kungye's excesses (*Samguk sagi* 50:453-54; *Koryŏ-sa* 1:1a-8a).

The madness of Kungye and his assertion that he was Maitreya is well known to Koreans and Koreanists, but what is not understood is why he would need to be the future Buddha. If the biographical information contained in the *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (History of the Three Kingdoms) and *Koryŏ-sa* 高麗史 (History of Koryŏ) is reliable, he had become the de facto overlord of much of present-day Kangwŏn and Kyŏnggi provinces by 891 and, after his subordinate Wang Kŏn subdued the major cities in the present-day North and South Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces, he declared himself king in 901 and named his kingdom Majin 摩震 in 904. Having been established as a ruler over a wide area, why did he declare himself Maitreya? Why was being Maitreya a necessary part of Kungye's plan to forge another unified state on the Korean peninsula? In this paper I will provide a more nuanced answer to the question posed by the title by fleshing out hitherto unemphasized aspects of the Maitreya cult in the Silla-Koryŏ transition. After treating previous scholars' conclusions and some basic contextual issues, I will demonstrate relevant aspects of the cult from the Korean states of Silla 新羅 and Paekche 百濟 and more especially Chinese historical and Buddhist influences that indicate reasons why Kungye deployed Maitreya symbolism for political purposes.

Scholarly Views on Kungye's connections to Maitreya

Over the years Korean scholars have offered many interpretations in an attempt to comprehend Kungye's actions. Kim Ch'ŏlchun and Ch'oe Pyŏnghŏn explain it as the deployment of popular superstition (Kim Ch'ŏlchun 1975, 260; Ch'oe Pyŏnghŏn 1975, 25). Kim Tujin suggests it was a blatant misappropriation of Buddhist symbolism by a tyrannical ruler. Before he became king, Kim Tujin reasons, Kungye must have acquired some ground-

ing in Buddhist teachings when he became a monk named Sŏnjong 善宗 at Sedal Monastery 世達寺 in Myŏngju 溟州, in present-day Kyŏnggi province. His desire to be Maitreya incarnate was due to his knowledge of the respect garnered by Maitreya in Mahāyāna Buddhist culture, more than merely popular superstitions. Kim also argues that Kungye would have known that Maitreya was the main object of worship in the Yogācāra exegetical tradition (Kor. Pöpsang-jong, Ch. Faxiang zong 法相宗), renowned for his establishment of an ideal world in the future; and that he naturally utilized this knowledge of the Maitreya cult to delude the people and to bring to fruition his dream of establishing a new state and society out of the chaos of the late Silla period (Kim Tujin 1983, 116-117). Cho Insŏng suggests that Kungye's claim to be Maitreya is connected to Chinp'yo's 眞表 (fl. eighth century) cult of Maitreya in Myŏngju and that Kungye's institution of the Assembly of the Eight Prohibitions (*p'algwanhoe* 八關會), in the eleventh lunar month of 898 (*Samguk sagi* 50:452), was an attempt to call forth the prophesy of Maitreya's "dragon flower world" (*yonghwa segye* 龍華世界). Cho advocates that it highlights the importance of "last days'consciousness" (*malbŏp* 末法) in popular beliefs of the time and Kungye's looking forward to Maitreya's birth and the salvation of beings. Cho also proposes that the Buddhist monasteries in Myŏngju, such as Sedal-sa, were Hwaŏm 華嚴 in orientation and emphasizes that the worship of Maitreya in the late Silla period was perpetuated in Hwaŏm monasteries (Cho 2002).

I would suggest that trying to link Kungye's deployment of the Maitreya cult to either the Silla Yogācāra tradition or the monk Chinp'yo's Maitreya veneration is a red herring. There is no evidence that Kungye deployed mainstream canonical Buddhist material, and the Yogācāra exegetical tradition in both Silla and Tang China was among the most conservative intellectual approaches to the Buddhadharmā. With respect to Chinp'yo, the three major accounts of his life all differ as to exact dates and details, though the major events in his religious career appear to have taken place between 740 and 766.¹

1 The four major accounts are (1)*Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳14, T 2061.793c29-794c14; (2)*Samguk yusa* 4:200-202; T 2039.49.1007b-1008a; and (3)*Samguk yusa* 4:202-205; T 2039.49.1008a-1009a, which is based on an extant damaged stele inscription, see *Samguk Silla sidae Pulgyo kümsŏngmun kojŭng* 93-10.

Chinp'yo, who was raised and pursued much of his monastic vocation in what is present-day North Ch'olla province, desired to see Maitreya after having received the monastic precepts from the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha in a vision. Through austere repentance practices performed in conjunction with a divination ritual,² he ultimately received a prophesy of his future buddhahood from Maitreya in 760 (or 752). Afterwards he rebuilt Kūmsan Monastery 金山寺 and commissioned an image of Maitreya, which was cast in 764 and enshrined at the site in 766 (*Samguk yusa* 4:202-205; T 2039, 49.1008a-1009a).³ Then, with his disciples, he went to Mount Songni 俗離山 in present-day North Ch'ungch'ong province and then on to Mount Kūmgang 金剛山 in Myōngju (present-day Kangwŏn province) where, tradition suggests, he and his followers continued to spread belief in Maitreya. While Chinp'yo's activities obviously demonstrate the strength of the Maitreya cult in old Paekche territory, a topic to which we will return below, there is little evidence that Kungye deployed the belief in Maitreya the same way. In other words, the focus of Chinp'yo's Maitreya worship seems to be for the more mainstream devotional purposes of divining the relative strength of one's position in getting rid of defilements and unwholesome karma. There is no evidence that Chinp'yo was interested in deploying Maitreya symbolism for political power.

Some scholars have explained Kungye's claiming the identity of Maitreya as a nefarious deployment of popular superstition due to the widespread belief in Maitreya present on the Korean peninsula in late Silla and during the Later Three Kingdoms period. Others, such as Yi Yōngja, have seen it as an arrogant complex born of several overlaying religio-political themes they postulate are apparent in Kungye's rule: (1) the institution of the assembly of eight prohibitions (*p'algwanhoe*) to invoke the blessings of worshiping Maitreya and to prepare the people for Maitreya's future rule (T

2 The ritual was apparently based upon the *Zhancha shane yebao jing* 占察善惡業報經 (Book of Divining the Requital of Wholesome and Unwholesome Action, T 93); however, unlike the method of spinning 189 top explained in this apocryphal sūtra, Chinp'yo's biographies explain a process of casting wooden divination sticks that represent the 108 defilements. See Lai 1990; T 939, 17.905b-906

3 Kim Samyong is mistaken in suggesting that he received the prophesy of his future buddhahood in 766. See Kim Samyong 1983, 150-5

452, 14.420a15; T 453, 14.422c27; T 456, 14.432a8-9) and (2) the mimicking of the charitable actions of a universal ruler (cakravartin, Kor. *chölllyunwang* 轉輪王), such as the future Saṅkha (Sanggŏ, Ch. Shangqu 壤法), the ruler when Maitreya comes according to Buddhist scripture (Yi Yŏngja 1987, 136). These serve as background to their simple argument that Kungye's claiming to be a true manifestation of Maitreya himself demonstrates the vanity and extreme pride of a tyrant. While the evidence these scholars have garnered is impressive, it is limited by presuming that the only influences on Kungye's decision to become Maitreya are local to Korea and derive from the combination of misappropriated local beliefs and the misuse of Buddhist scriptural literature dealing with Maitreya. It is tantamount to suggesting that Kungye was a merely deeply disturbed individual and his appropriation of Maitreya symbolism highlights the growing suspicions and dementia of a megalomaniac. While one cannot deny the possibility that Kungye suffered from increasingly destructive delusions of grandeur toward the end of his reign, the mere spectacle of his actions suggest that there may be greater web of underlying reasons.

Basic Contextual Considerations

Kungye's time is characterized by the breakdown of the highly-stratified aristocratic structure of Silla society, the rise of warlords and local strongmen, and widespread dissatisfaction with Silla rule, as demonstrated by the 822 revolt of Kim Hŏnch'ang 金憲昌 in Ungju 熊州 (present-day Kongju), Chang Pogo's 張保臯 revolt and attempt at controlling the Silla royal family 839-846, and the 889 peasant revolt in Sangju 尙州 in the very heartland of Silla and people's leaving their homes to avoid the dual oppressions of taxation by a weak central government and the extortions of local strongmen. Although still putatively a Buddhist monk, Kungye joined various bandit groups that over time came to control much of the northern lands of Silla. From the year 891 forward Kungye controlled a sizeable population and began to intimate royal pretensions. It was during this time that Wang Kŏn assumed his father's position and became a governor under the jurisdiction

of Kungye. Wang Kŏn rose in rank due to his success in following Kungye's orders to subdue and pacify many cities in the central area of Korea, mainly in the present-day Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces and reaching as far south as Kwangju.

As his domain increased in size Kungye began to despise the Silla state more openly. In 901 Kungye called himself "king" (*wang* 王) and drew upon the latent remnant of Koguryŏ sentiment in the region by declaring that Silla's alliance with Tang China to defeat Koguryŏ must be avenged. In 904, the *kapcha* year, the beginning of the newest sixty-year cycle, Kungye named his kingdom Majin. From this time forward he became increasingly hostile toward Silla, killing anyone who came from it. In 911, however, he changed the name of his kingdom again to T'aebong and dispatched Wang Kŏn to make more direct assaults on the Silla capital. It was at this time that Kungye, who still went by the monastic name Sŏnjong, proclaimed himself to be the Buddha Maitreya. I will assess the significance of the names he chose for his state later in the paper.

Kungye's Maitreya symbolism is difficult to trace because he appears to have conscientiously avoided traditional Buddhist canonical materials. For instance, the names given to his two sons who functioned as his attendant bodhisattvas, Green Light and Divine Light, are problematic. While the compounds "green light" and "divine light" are found commonly in many sūtras, they are never used as actual names of bodhisattvas in any sūtras, let alone as the names of bodhisattvas who attended Maitreya. Also, "Maitreya's method for observing the mind" is not found in any canonical Buddhist literature; although the compound "practice/method of observing the mind" is found a scattered in exegetical literature but it refers to mainstream meditation practices and not what amounts to the "mind reading" claimed by Kungye (T 1716, 33.696a14-17). Nevertheless, mainstream Buddhist doctrine does support the idea that extra-sensory discernment is a by-product of meditation. The ability to discern others' thoughts was generally believed to be one of the five or six supernormal powers or spiritual penetrations (*sint'ong*, Ch. *shentong* 神通) acquired through advanced absorption (T 1545, 27.728b12-24, 727b22-24; T 1545, 27.530a18-b10; T 1509, 25.264a-266b; T 1911, 46.14a-b; Lamotte 1976, 4 : 1809-1838).

Kungye obviously had a knack for understanding the power of religious spectacles. As a disfranchised scion of the Silla royal family, who was an illegitimate son of either Silla king Hŏnan 憲安 (r. 857-861) or Kyŏngmun 景文 (r. 861-875), he would have understood the need for many types of propaganda to provide legitimacy. Outside of the processions embellished with elaborate costumes (the gold peaked hood) and symbols of purity (the white horses, flowers, and children as attendants), the rolls of sūtras he composed would provide “authority” While the pomp and circumstance of his processions must have derived from things he had seen as a youth and as a monk, and were probably shared throughout East Asia, his forging of sūtras personally is far more direct than anything done in China, as we will see below. That the monk Sŏkch’ong criticized him openly for composing these sūtras suggests that he did not enjoy the approval of most learned monks. However, since hundreds of monks were said to participate in his processions, this indicates that at least some were nominally supportive of his claim to be Maitreya. At worst one may conclude that he coerced the monastic community into quiet complicity through such acts as the brutal execution of his monastic denouncer.

Worship of Maitreya in Late Silla

In the late Silla period (780-935), the connection between the cult of Maitreya and royal Silla authority was complicated by the strained relations between the royal family and the powerful hereditary aristocracy. There is little contemporary evidence of the commissioning of images of Maitreya by the Silla elite, as compared to the eighth century. A damaged inscription remains from the year 830, suggesting that a standing image of the Buddha Maitreya was carved on a flat stone surface (maebul 磨崖佛) in present-day North Ch’ungch’ŏng province when the region was still under Silla rule, but there is no evidence that it was executed by the court (*Samguk Silla sidae Pulgyo kŏmsŏngmun kojŏng* 137; *Han’guk kŏmsŏk chŏnmun* 1:165).

By this time the symbolic ties between the aristocratic *hwarang* 花郎 (flower boys) and the bodhisattva Maitreya, which are so pronounced in the

narratives and anecdotes preserved in Iryŏn's 一然 (1206-89) *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) had deteriorated. The stories must have persisted since many were attached to monasteries and icons of Maitreya in the greater domain of Silla and particularly in the Silla heartland surrounding present-day Kyŏngju in North Kyŏngsang province, but also reaching north into present-day Kangwŏn province. While new forms of Buddhist practice—specifically those evolving Chinese Chan 禪 traditions of the post-An Lushan rebellion 安祿山亂 period (755-763) in the late eighth and ninth centuries—were being transplanted onto the Korean peninsula, eventually developing into the Korean Nine Mountains of Sŏn 九山禪門, the cult of Maitreya in Silla was gradually being subsumed into the expansive Hwaŏm approach to conceptualizing the Buddhist universe (Cho 2002, 43-50; McBride 2001, 278-374). Veneration of Maitreya must have continued among Koreans in all areas, but there not much anecdotal evidence from which to derive an image of how it was practiced as compared to earlier times.

In a literary document composed in the early tenth century, for instance, the scholar Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn 崔致遠 (b. 857) recorded the history surrounding the building an eight-sided lamp tower at the State Protection Fortress in Such'ang commandery 壽昌郡 (in present-day Susŏng-gu 壽城區 in Taegu 大邱, North Kyŏngsang province). The lamp tower was erected by a local official named Ijae 異才, a *chungalch'an* 重關案 (the lowest head rank six title), in supplication for a happy event for the country and to remove the sins and excesses of warfare. According to Ch'oe, Ijae was a "householder bodhisattva" and the loyal servant of the state who maintained peace in the region for ten years. On the night of the *kyŏngsin* -day of the sixth month of the *mujin*-year (7 July 908), he had a dream while spending the night at Majŏnggye Monastery 摩頂溪寺, which was located on the northern side of Talbul Fortress 達佛城. Ijae dreamt that he saw a Buddha image seated on a lotus throne reaching high into the heavens and on its left side he saw an attendant bodhisattva of similar height. Walking to the south he encountered a brook where he saw a woman to whom he asked the reason for the Buddha image. This woman was a lay believer, *anāupāsik*, who said the area occupied by the fortress had been designated as sacred space.

In vision Ijae saw seven images of Maitreya stacked one on top of the other on Buddha Mountain (Pul-san 佛山) on the south side of the fortress. They stood facing northward, their feet standing on shoulders; their height like a pillar soaring into the sky. Days later he dreamt of arhats on the east side of the fortress on Deer Mountain (Chang-san 獐山). Ijae built the lamp tower because of these dreams. Work on the tower began immediately and was carried out during the tenth month of the same year (28 October–26 November 908; *Tongmunsŏn* 64:10b-13a, esp. 12a; Ch'oe Yŏngsŏng 1998 99, 2:295-306).

Ijae's vision of seven Maitreyas stacked one atop the other suggests that Maitreya was still important in late Silla Buddhism. However, it is obvious that direct veneration of Maitreya is not the focus of this dream story. The appearance of the Maitreya images merely serves to demonstrate that the land where the lamp tower was built manifests Buddhist traces. While there are no anecdotes dealing with how Silla Buddhists venerated Maitreya during this period, we can surmise that there must have been some continuation of the practices of the eighth century. Some lay people, monks, and nuns probably continued chanting the bodhisattva's name and making vows in hopes of being reborn among Maitreya's retinue in Tuṣṭita heaven or later among the three assemblies who attend the preaching of the Dharma under the nāgapuṣpa, or "dragon flower tree" (*yonghwasu* 龍華樹) in the distant future; and some monks continued to make offerings of tea to the bodhisattva on sacred mountains on important holidays or as part of royal Buddhist assemblies, perpetuating the belief that Maitreya would incarnate among the Silla people as a hwarang and protect the state from its enemies (McBride 2001, 278-374).

Despite the deeply seeded connection between the Silla people and Maitreya, which stretches back to the beginnings of Buddhism in that country, Silla was not the only state on the Korean peninsula that deployed what we would call "politically motivated religious propaganda" suggesting that its current rulers or their families fulfilled prophesy linked to Maitreya.

Influences from Political Maitreya Symbolism in Paekche

An illuminating anecdote is preserved in a short text titled “The Old Traces of Haein Monastery on Mount Kaya” (*Kaya-san Haein-sakojök* 伽倻山海印寺古蹟). It may have been composed originally as early as the tenth century because the colophon says “[The compiler] completed the record relying on printing blocks during the tenth month of the *kyemyo* 癸卯 year, the eighth year of the Tianfu 天福 reign period (943) [of the Later Jin 後晉]” but it was certainly written sometime during the Koryŏ period since it refers to Wang Kŏn, the founder of the Koryŏ state as “our T’aejo.”

At the end of Silla, the monk overseer Hiran 希朗 (fl. 875-927) was the head monk at this monastery and obtained the “samādhi of the divine assembly of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*” (*Hwaŏm sinjung sammae* 華嚴神衆三昧). At that time our [king] T’aejo fought with Wŏlgwang 月光, a prince of Paekche. Wŏlgwang held Mount Misung 美崇山 with plenty of provisions and stout soldiers. [However,] his opponent [T’aejo] was like a god and, due to T’aejo’s power, he was unable to be restrained. [T’aejo] entered into Haein Monastery and received instruction from Lord [Hŭi]rang. The master dispatched a large army of intrepid [divine] troops to assist him. When Wŏlgwang saw their golden armor filling the sky he knew that they were divine soldiers and surrendered forthwith. For this reason, T’aejo respected and served Hŭirang, he donated 500 kyŏl 結 of fields, and he rebuilt the [buildings] of the old mountain [monastery] (*Chōsen jisatsu shiryō* 1:495-96).

The thrust of the story praises the spiritual power of the Hwaŏm master Hŭirang over the divine armies of the gods enumerated in the *Avatamsaka sūtra* and the good ends to which they were deployed to aid Wang Kŏn in defeating the armies of Paekche. Furthermore, the story explains why this royal protector of the Hwaŏm tradition made a generous donation to Haein Monastery. However, the detail that is vital to our discussion is that a Paekche prince is named Wŏlgwang 月光, “Prince Moonlight,” and that he was dispatched to subdue lands previously under the jurisdiction of Silla,

but which had recently come under the protection of Wang Kŏn. Although the *Samguk sagi*, *Samguk yusa*, and *Koryŏ-sa* do not mention a son of Kyŏnhwŏn 甄萱 (r. 892-936) with such a designation, we must not think that it is by chance or by mistake that he is called “Prince Moonlight.” “Prince Moonlight” is an allusion to an interesting bodhisattva treated in a series of intriguing and, some at least, apocryphal sūtras that reached their peak in the mid-sixth century: the main themes of which are (1) the battle between good and evil, (2) the descent of Maitreya, and (3) the renewal of the world.⁴ These sūtras have been studied in detail by Erik Zürcher, who has demonstrated that millenarian Buddhist concepts and messianic Daoist scriptural elements are combined in a powerful and compelling manner to provide legitimacy and a course of action to someone attempting to establish a new state (Zürcher 1982). It suggests what may be termed as “realized” eschatology: “the notion that the radical transformation of the world expected to occur at the end of time has already taken place” (Nattier 1988, 31). While it is impossible for us to be certain whether a prince of Later Paekche actually acted under that pseudonym in his martial capacity, it does suggest that writers of the Koryŏ period understood the struggle between the Later Paekche, Koryŏ, and Silla, retrospectively at least, in terms loaded with problematic symbolism indicative of messianic expectations not supported in any canonical Buddhist text.

Many scholars, most notably Kim Samyong, have emphasized the role of the Maitreya cult in Paekche culture. The most compelling evidence of the link between the cult of Maitreya and Paekche kings is the construction of the Mirŭk Monastery 彌勒寺 at Iksan 益山 in 600. Though presently in ruins, this once majestic complex probably served much the same function as the massive Hwangnyong Monastery 皇龍寺 in Silla’s capital: the locus of Buddhist rituals performed on behalf of the royal family and for the protection of the state and as a center of Buddhist learning. Kim strongly suggests that it was in such a place that the Paekche royalty would demonstrate their

4 These sūtras are the *Yueguang tongzi jing* 月光童子經 (T 534), trans. by Dharmarakṣa; the *Shenri jing* 申日經 (T 535), probably a fifth-century translation; the *Shenri er ben jing* 申日兒本經 (T 536), trans. by Guṇabhadra around 440 CE; and the *Dehu changzhe jing* 德護長者經 (T 545), trans. by Narendraya as in 583 CE.

desire to be reborn among the three great assemblies who hear the Buddhadharmā preached after Maitreya's enlightenment under the *nāgapuṣpa*, the "dragon flower tree." He also suggests that in naming the monastery after Maitreya, King Pōp 法 (r. 599-600), whose name literally means "king of the Dharma," demonstrates his expectation of the imminent arrival of the dragon-flower world system (*yonghwa segye* 龍華世界), the buddha-field of Maitreya (Kim Samyong 1983, 83, 142-47).⁵

Mirūk-sa must have been in use during the Unified Silla period since earthenware dating to the year 858 (Dazhong 大中 12) has been discovered (Kim Samyong 1983, 150 n. 1). In the summer of 922, Kyōnhwōn attempted to resurrect the worship of Maitreya at this site by building a pagoda and participating in other activities (Hō 1986, 586, 592).

Furthermore, Paekche artists were responsible for some of the most impressive examples of Maitreya statues in the seated, pensive pose (*pan'ga sayusang*, Jap. *hankashiyui-zō* 半跏思惟象) dating from the Three Kingdoms period (Lee 1984; Best 1976, 130-32, 200-01; Best 1987). Also, at least one Buddhist narrative preserved in the *Samguk yusa*, the anecdote regarding the monk Chinja's 眞慈 (fl. 576-579) meeting an incarnation of Maitreya, the so-called "Maitreya sylph flower" (Mirūk sōnhwa 彌勒仙花) in Ungch'ōn 熊川, present-day Kongju in South Ch'ungch'ōng province, suggests a connection between Paekche territory and the depiction of a *hwarang* of Silla as an incarnation of Maitreya (*Samguk yusa* 3:153-155; T 2039, 49.994c-995b; McBride 2003, 25-27). We should also remember that in 584, Japanese emissaries returned from Paekche with a stone statue of Maitreya and another image. Later, Soga no Umako 蘇我馬子 (d. 626) acquired these two images, enshrined the image of Maitreya in a Buddha hall, and commanded nuns to make offerings to it (*Nihon shoki* 20:149; Aston 1972, 2:101).

5 A note in the *Samguk yusa's* account of the building of Mirūk Monastery hints that there is some confusion between Wanghūng Monastery 王興 and Mirūk Monastery: It says that they are the same. See *Samguk yusa* 2:93; T 2039, 49.978a. This is supported by the *Samguk sagi* dates. The first is for the beginning of Wanghūng Monastery in 600 and the second is for the completion of it in 634, during the reign of King Mu (600-641). No mention is made of Mirūk Monastery. See *Samguk sagi* 27:240, 241 (Pōp 2, Mu 35)

Although documentary evidence is sparse, Kim Samyong implies that the importance of Maitreya in the old Paekche territory continued despite the Tang-Silla conquest and Silla's brutal hegemony, only to reemerge during the Later Three Kingdoms period. He supports his view by demonstrating that there is much more evidence of the propitiation and worship of Maitreya during the Koryŏ period, particularly the physical remains of cult sites and anecdotes preserved in gazetteers and works on geography dating from the Chosŏn 朝鮮 period (1392-1910) (Kim Samyong 1983, 155-68).

Influences from Chinese Historical and Buddhist Sources

We know that we are not dealing with purely canonical interpretations of Maitreya because scriptures that presume to foretell the date of Maitreya's coming place it far into the distant future despite the widespread belief that Buddhists of the time were living in the period of the Final Dharma. The conceptualization of a tripartite understanding of the rise and fall of the Buddhist teaching and that the world was entering the age of the decline of the Buddhadharmā (*mofa* 末法, *famie* 法滅) was neither alluded to clearly in sūtras nor fully described by Sinitic Buddhist thinkers until the second half of the sixth century (Nattier 1991, 114). After persecutions of the religion under the Northern Wei 北魏 in 446 and the Northern Zhou 北周 between 574 and 577, Buddhists in China generally felt that the final Dharma age began the world around year 600, and some Buddhists prepared to preserve the scriptures by making a lithic canon on Fangshan (*Fangshan shijing* 房山石經) (Hayami 1971, 142-47; Ledderose 1990). The Huichang 會昌 suppression of 845 conducted by Tang Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840-845) probably served as evidence to some Buddhists that the time of the Final Dharma had arrived. The Sinitic socio-historical context is unavoidable and indispensable in imagining what is transpiring on the ground in the Korean kingdoms because there is no evidence that the Buddhist church in Silla was ever repressed by the royalty and aristocracy.

Perhaps it is best at this point to unpack some more of Kungye's royal deeds that point toward his deployment of Maitreya symbolism to legitimate his rule. Nevertheless, in doing this I shall work backwards. In 911, just

before Kungye claimed to be Maitreya, he changed the name of his kingdom from Majin to T'aebong 泰封. The name "T'aebong," which may be translated roughly as "Enfeoffed of/on [Mount] Tai," appears to be an allusion to the obtaining of the imperial realm as evidenced by the *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪 sacrifices performed on Mount Tai 泰山, such as those observed by the First August Emperor of the Qin dynasty in 219 BCE, by which he declared the pacification of all of China and proclaimed this accomplishment before Heaven (*Guanzi* 16, *Shiji* 6:242). In other words, naming his kingdom T'aebong was a symbolic way of claiming that Heaven has sanctioned his rule and will bestow peace and prosperity. Thus, for Kungye to claim that he is Maitreya after declaring such a name for his state suggests that he claimed for himself and his kingdom the mandate of heaven and that a new era had opened. It must be no coincidence that he made this change after the demise of the Tang in 907 and during the beginning of the chaos that characterized the post-Tang period and while the Khitans were consolidating their power in Manchuria (Mote 1999, 3-48). While this may appear startling, it is merely a natural progression when seen in context of the symbolism associated with the title he first selected for his domain.

Kungye originally named his kingdom Majin in 904. Majin 摩震 is an abbreviated form of Mahācīnasthāna (Mahajindan, Ch. Mohezhenan 摩訶震旦), the Indian name for "China," the great country in the eastern region (Yi Yōngja 1987, 129). Kungye's giving such a name to his kingdom cannot be without reason and certainly is not lacking in symbolic baggage. What better way to adduce legitimacy to your kingdom than to ascribe to it an Indian name well-known among the literate elites. But he may have had deeper aspirations beyond merely assuming a grandiose name for his new domain. Kungye may have been familiar with the *Ratnamegha Sūtra* (*Baoyu jing* 寶雨經), for in this sūtra it is prophesied that the previously mentioned "Prince Moonlight" will be reborn in the final period of the Dharma in Mahācīna, in the northeastern region of Jambudvīpa, as a powerful female monarch who will rule in wisdom and kindness, support the Buddhist church, and so forth. After enjoying a long life, that ruler will ultimately be reborn in Tuṣita heaven and join the entourage of Maitreya in that heavenly abode (T 660, 16.284a-c; Zürcher 1982, 26-27). A similar message is con-

tained in the *Great Cloud Sūtra* (*Dayun jing* 大雲經, Skt. **Mahāmegha Sūtra*), an important commentary to which was deployed by supporters of the Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 to make the case that she was a true bodhisattva in order to legitimate her rule when she established her Zhou 周 dynasty during the brief Tang interregnum (690-705). Many copies were made of this sūtra and its accompanying commentary by the Empress Wu and her supporters; perhaps a few copies in circulation made their way to Silla (Weinstein 1987, 41-43, 162-64 n. 15-30; Forte 1976, 125-36). However, the main problem with these sūtras is that they say that the ruler of Mahācīna will be a female monarch.

Empress Wu's imperial adoption of Maitreya cult imagery in the form of a title the Chinese translation of Maitreya, "Benevolent One" (Cishi 慈氏) to legitimate her rule lasted only for three and a half months (694-695), probably due to pressure from the majority of the Chinese monastic intelligentsia. Antonino Forte has demonstrated that several influential "official" monks, including the Silla ex-patriot and Yogācāra monk Wōnch'ūk 圓測 (613-696), must have tacitly approved of the change of dynasty due to their support of the conventional association of Maitreya with the Empress Wu because they approved the translation of the sūtra.⁶

Regardless, the Empress Wu was not the first usurper to deploy Maitreya-cult symbolism in her bid for legitimacy. Evidence of rebels claiming to be messianic figures similar to Maitreya stretches back to the great Chinese interregnum of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. Shigematsu Shunshō and Tsukamoto Zenryū have studied numerous monk-led uprisings beginning as early as the fifth-century. For example, in 515, a Hebei 河北 monk named Faqing 法慶 and a layman named Li Guibai 李歸伯 led a bloody rebellion against the Northern Wei 北魏 (386-534). Faqing proclaimed himself to be "The Mahācīna Buddha" (Dashengfo

6 The Silla monk Wōnch'ūk served as a "checker of meaning" (*zhengyi* 正義) on the sūtra translation project and was merely one of ten other non-Chinese monks and twenty Chinese monks associated with the project; see *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄 9, T 2154, 55.570a17-21. Antonino Forte makes an interesting case arguing that the point of the sūtra was not to say that the Empress Wu was Maitreya but instead to demonstrate that she is a bodhisattva. The commentary deploys the Madhyamaka dialectic of the two truths to accomplish this point: the conventional or vulgar truth is that Wu is Maitreya, while the absolute or real truth is that Wu is a bodhisattva. See Forte 1976, 153-7

大乘佛) and Li, "Tenth Stage Bodhisattva" (Shizhu pusa 十住菩薩), among other titles. Although they did not use the name Maitreya, both figures draw upon his imagery since Maitreya is a bodhisattva of the tenth stage. In the year 516 the monk Faquan 法權 claimed that a nine-year old boy was the bodhisattva Prince Moonlight (Yueguang pusa 月光菩薩), which we have treated previously, and led a revolt in Shanxi 山西 province. Although both of these rebellions were soon quelled, they set the stage for rebellions linked directly to Maitreya in the violent Sui-Tang transition (Shigematsu 1931, 74-75; Tsukamoto 1942, 248, 256, 259-260, 265-266; Overmyer 1976, 80-88).

During the chaos that ensued as the Sui dynasty came apart at the seams—as well as during the rise of the Tang-Buddhist monks and laymen justified some of their rebellions by drawing upon the imagery and beliefs common to the cult of Maitreya (Kegasawa 1981). In the year 613 alone, two unsuccessful uprisings were led by men who claimed to be Maitreya incarnate. The first was led by Song Zixian 宋子賢, a reputed thaumaturge, who claimed to be an incarnation of Maitreya and planned to recruit Buddhist laymen at religious services for an attack on the emperor. However, when the plot leaked and was discovered by the authorities, he was killed along with many of his followers. The second was led by a monk, Xiang Haiming 向海明, who also claimed to be an earthly manifestation of Maitreya. Attracting several tens of thousands of adherents, the sources say, he declared himself emperor before being exterminated by the imperial forces (*Zizhi tongjian* 182:5686-87; Weinstein 1987, 154-55 n. 1). Followers of the messianic Maitreya rebelled frequently through the Song 宋 period (960-1279) and rebels drew upon Maitreya cult imagery to lend authority and religious fervor to their uprisings (Kanaoka 1979, 38). It is conceivable that Kungye read of these rebels in the *Weishu* 魏書 (History of the Wei), which was compiled by Wei Shou 魏收 (506-572) between 551-554; the *Suishu* 隋書 (History of the Sui), which was compiled by Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643) et al., between 629-636; and the *Beishi* 北史 (History of the Northern Dynasties), which was compiled by Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. 618-676) et al., between 630-650. However it is more likely Kungye drew upon more popular Buddhist lore and oral narratives circulating in northeast

Asia during his time because the accounts in the traditional dynastic histories neither paint a positive picture of individuals who claimed to be Maitreya nor suggest that the outcome of their actions was particularly successful. I should also note here that the now ubiquitous pot-bellied version of Maitreya, also known as the Hemp-bag Bortze, is not related to our messianic Maitreya figure, though this is around the time period that scholars suggest his image emerged. This version of Maitreya was believed to have manifested as the jolly monk Budai 布袋, a native of Zhejiang, who lived in the tenth century. His cult flourished mainly in southern China during the Five Dynasties and Song period (907-1279), though references to him have been found as far north as Hebei province (Lessing 1942, 37; Edwards 1984).

The fundamental difference between Kungye and these earlier Chinese rebels is that Kungye was the ruler of an established state. Nevertheless, he followed the example of the Chinese rebels and usurpers, such as Empress Wu, who needed the symbolic power and legitimacy that would accrue to them from claiming the mantle of Maitreya. Why would an established ruler need to draw upon Maitreya symbolism? One would think that it would not be necessary in his case. However, from the standpoint of the names Kungye selected for his state, Majin and T'aebong, the limited evidence suggests that he had more grandiose plans of expansion into Manchuria and northern China and that he envisioned his domain growing to be a dominant power in northeast Asia. Since popular or non-canonical Buddhist discourse of the time linked Maitreya with Mahācīna, Kungye may have been connecting himself to Maitreya symbolically long before he proclaimed himself to be the future buddha. As there is no further documentary or archeological evidence to support the idea that Kungye sought to expand his domain into Manchuria this interpretation remains conjectural.

Wang Kŏn and the Cult of Maitreya in Early Koryŏ

Even though Kungye turned out to be a vengeful Maitreya who was ultimately despised, deposed, and disposed of by people who had suffered

under his rule, this did not lead to a rejection of Maitreya-cult symbolism in the fledgling Koryŏ state. In fact, the most prominent evidence of the importance of Maitreya worship by the Koryŏ ruling family comes at the very beginning of the dynasty.

Wang Kŏn became the “ruler” of the Koryŏ state in 918 and eventually “reunified” the Three Kingdoms and expanded the domain of Koryŏ, but de facto power remained in the hands of local and regional strongmen. Wang Kŏn deployed many policies, such as marriage alliances and the dismantling of Silla’s bone-rank system, in an attempt to centralize his authority. He also promoted Buddhism to increase royal power and continued the traditional rituals of state-protection Buddhism, such as the Assembly of Eight Prohibitions and the Lantern Festival, deployed previously by the Silla state and which had also been adopted by Kungye (Kim Jongmyung 1994). The Koryŏ founder began building several monasteries in the twelfth month of 936 when he had finally achieved peace on the peninsula. The most relevant new monastery to our study is the Mirŭk Monastery 彌勒寺 he constructed in his capital, present-day Kaesŏng (*Koryŏ-sa* 2:12b). That he would build a monastery with this name suggests that Maitreya occupied a symbolic role at the time in the early Koryŏ court. Obviously Wang and his political and religious advisors felt he had much to gain from demonstrating a link to the future buddha by constructing a physical structure in his honor. However, the court’s adoption of Maitreya imagery should be seen instead as one aspect of its deployment of Hwaŏm symbolism to provide the new court with legitimacy. A detailed explanation is beyond the scope of this article (Kim Tujin 1983; Cho 2002). Mirŭk-sa was never among the most important monasteries to the Koryŏ royal family, though it contained a hall for the propitiation of the merit subjects, served as a site for special vegetarian feasts and assemblies to pray for victory over the Khitans, and later served as a place where Yogācāra monks of Koryŏ sat for their monkal exams (Han 1998, 40-48, 311; Hŏ 1986, 75, 85, 94, 220, 300; Yi Chŏng 1996, 179). I suspect Wang built it in recognition of the future buddha’s prominence among the Hwaŏm divine assembly of buddhas, bodhisattva, and gods, which symbolically had enabled him to restore peace among the peoples of the Korean peninsula.

At the same time he founded Mirŭk-sa, in the old Paekche territory, Wang began work on Kaet'ae Monastery 開泰寺 in Yŏnsan 連山 (present-day South Ch'ungch'ong province); it was completed in 940 (*Koryŏ-sa* 2:12b, 14a; *Sinjŭng Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* 18:16a-b). Kaet'ae Monastery contained a "Hwaŏm Enlightenment Site" (Hwaŏm toryang 華嚴道場) and a "Maitreya Enlightenment Site" (Mirŭk toryang 彌勒道場). The importance of Kaet'ae Monastery is that it was built in an area that had been under the control of Later Paekche's ruler Kyŏnhwŏn. We have noted above the importance of Maitreya symbolism in the old Paekche heartland and the possibility that Later Paekche princes may have assumed names that allude to seminal characters in apocryphal Buddhist sūtras. The two special halls built at this monastery suggest that the Buddhist deities associated with the *Avataṃ-saka Sūtra* and Maitreya were propitiated with their own rituals in the early Koryŏ period; or that Maitreya held a special place in the Hwaŏm divine assembly (Han 1998, 40-48; Hō 1986, 14-15, 298, 301). Another monastery was constructed in present-day South Ch'ungch'ŏng province in the early Koryŏ period that indicates that Maitreya continued to be an important symbol of royal power. The monk Hyemyŏng 慧明 founded Kwanch'ok Monastery 灌燭寺 on Mount Panya 般若山 in 968. Two years later, in 970, Hyemyŏng, with the support of the Koryŏ king Kwangjong 光宗 (r. 949-975), commissioned work on a large stone image of Maitreya, approximately 50 feet (*ch'ŏk* 尺) in height, which was finally completed in 1006 (*Sinjŭng Tongguk yŏji sŭngnam* 18:7b-8a; Kim Samyong 1983, 148-54; Hō 1986, 592, 605; Yi Chŏng 1996, 61).

This evidence suggests that Wang Kŏn and other early rulers were also interested in Maitreya, but not in the same way as Kungye. Their method of invoking Maitreya symbolism through the commissioning of monasteries and images was far more conventional than the course Kungye pursued and was subsumed in the larger discourse of the Hwaŏm divine assembly of Buddhist deities. However, the fact remains that they found it necessary to acknowledge the legitimizing role of Maitreya during the critical time period in which they were establishing the dynasty and consolidating their political power.

Concluding Remarks

Let us now sort out many of the various threads that we have touched on in this paper in an attempt to answer the question posed by the title of this paper: Why did Kungye claim to be the Buddha Maitreya? He did not declare himself to be Maitreya because of any particular connection to the Maitreya cult espoused by the Yogācāra tradition and purportedly spread by Chinp'yo because there is no evidence of the divination practices and repentance rituals that were central to the monk's faith. Although Kungye may be placed in the vicinity at Sedal Monastery, it is not compelling enough by itself. What little evidence remains suggests that Maitreya was worshiped widely throughout the Korean peninsula.

Kungye's claim to be Maitreya suggests a local adaptation of the Chinese millenarian Maitreya cult, rife with all the pomp and circumstance that must have attended Buddhist ceremonies and festivals of the time. He definitely deployed a selective reading of Buddhist scriptures since neither of the designations for his two bodhisattva sons nor his "Maitreya's method of observing the mind" is found in mainstream Mahāyāna sūtras. Furthermore, he buttressed his position by writing his own apocryphal scriptures. Although the composing of such writings is a time-honored tradition in East Asia, deployed most notably by the Empress Wu's supporters prior to her claiming to be Maitreya, Kungye's actions were apparently extremely blatant and conspicuous. Serious monks, such as Sökch'ong, opposed him openly but they were silenced by force.

Kungye definitely drew upon the symbolism of the millenarian Maitreya, which was based on apocryphal sūtras and deployed by usurpers and rebels in China. However, Kungye only claimed to be Maitreya years after proclaiming names for his domain Majin and T'aebong that advocated a presumed greatness for the state he founded and hope that it would become the most viable power in northeast Asia. He needed to be Maitreya to draw upon the future buddha's symbolic legitimacy in order to forge consensus and to gain popular support among the peoples of the states of Silla and Later Paekche and probably beyond in the old Koguryō lands in Manchuria.

The popularity of Maitreya in the old Paekche territory is also a fundamental reason why Kungye had to be Maitreya. Paekche kings had linked themselves to Maitreya through commissioning at least one great monastery in his honor. This area was suppressed most harshly after the Silla conquest, which probably strengthened the hope for a better world actualized in the figure of Maitreya. Kyŏnhwŏn's Later Paekche was the most difficult area to subdue and pacify, but it might be possible if a ruler proved to be the Maitreya for whom its people had hoped. A ruler already in power for a decade would stand a better chance than a rebel who claimed such status before revolting. Furthermore, the scant evidence remaining suggests that some Buddhist writers of the early Koryŏ period remembered and recorded the battles between the Koryŏ founder and Later Paekche princes with symbolism indicative of Maitreya's descent.

Even after Kungye's demise and the establishment of Koryŏ, Wang Kŏn built royally sponsored Maitreya monasteries to deploy the Maitreya cult in his favor, to demonstrate that he had Maitreya's blessing and to assuage the people. He commissioned Maitreya monasteries throughout the country to project royal grandeur. This suggests that Maitreya symbolism was a tool deployed by the early Koryŏ kings to provide legitimacy for the dynasty, although it was done within the larger context of Hwaŏm symbolism. Kungye's claim to be Maitreya had not despoiled the significance of the future buddha among the Korean people and the Korean Buddhist church and strongly indicates during the Silla-Koryŏ transition the Maitreya cult was inexorably linked to political power.

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