



What Makes Cheontae Cheontae? A New Buddhist Movement and the Reinterpretation of the Cheontae Tradition in Contemporary Korea

Yohong ROH

Abstract

The Korean Cheontae order presents an apparent tension: though founded as a new Buddhist movement in the post-liberation period, it has successfully established itself as the legitimate heir to the historical Tiantai/Cheontae tradition. This article examines how the order navigated this tension by constructing historical legitimacy through transnational exchange with Chinese and Japanese Tiantai communities, reinterpreting its central practice of Guanyin prayer in light of Tiantai doctrine and practice, and re-transmitting its tradition to China. The Korean Cheontae order is one of the most successful new Buddhist movements to emerge following Korean independence in 1945. This study analyzes how the order appropriated the name “Cheontae” by defining its relationship to that tradition and specifying which elements of Tiantai thought and practice it claims to inherit, even as discrepancies between the order’s official narrative and internal sources complicate that claim. The findings reveal how a postcolonial Korean Buddhist organization has adapted and transformed Chinese Buddhist traditions through importation, reinterpretation, and re-transmission, shedding light on what, according to the order itself, makes this movement meaningfully “Cheontae.”

Keywords: Cheontae order, new Buddhist movements, postcolonial Buddhism, Guanyin prayer, *zhiguan* practice, transnational Buddhism

Introduction

New Buddhist groups emerged in Korea during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), and additional organizations arose in the post-independence era, amid complex sociopolitical changes.¹ The Korean Cheontae (Tiantai in Chinese, Tendai in Japanese) order is one of the most successful new Buddhist movements to appear after the independence of Korea in 1945. This order, which first emerged in 1945, was officially founded by Sangwol 上月 (1911–1974) in 1967. The original Tiantai school is an eminent school of medieval Chinese Buddhism, which developed a pan-East Asian identity. The Chinese Tiantai school was established by its *de facto* founder Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597). In Korea, Uicheon 義天 (1055–1101), an eminent monk of the Goryeo period (918–1392), established the Goryeo Cheontae order in 1097. The Japanese Tendai school had by then already been established by Saichō 最澄 (767–822), who introduced the Tiantai teachings from China in the early 9th century. While Saichō's dharma transmission has been handed down to the present day in Japan, the monastic institutions of Uicheon's Cheontae order declined following his death in 1101.² It was not until some centuries later that another Korean monk, Yose 了世 (1163–1245), attempted once again to institute a Cheontae school. However, he did so without any connection whatsoever to Uicheon. The Buddhist order created by Yose again disappeared from history during the 15th century with the rise of the Neo-Confucian rule of the Joseon court (1392–1897).

In 1970, Sangwol officially changed the name of his community to Daehan bulgyo cheontaejong (Cheontae Order of Korean Buddhism), and laid claim to this tradition and presented his new form of Buddhism as successor to the Goryeo Cheontae order. After the 1970s, the Cheontae order maintained continuous interaction with Japanese Tendai and Chinese

1. It has been confirmed that there were eighteen Buddhist groups in existence in Korea prior to 1988. See Cha (2018, 303).

2. Uicheon's Cheontae order was successful enough to attract around a thousand monks from other schools, however it declined after his death in 1101. In Sem Vermeersch's analysis, the reason for this decline was that Uicheon's Cheontae had failed to establish "clear structure, ideology, or training course" (Vermeersch 2019, 217).

Buddhism. Specifically, Korean Cheontae has sought its roots and identity in the Chinese Tiantai tradition while benchmarking philosophical and organizational approaches from Japanese Tendai history. Drawing on the order's internal newspapers, official publications, and field research, this article illuminates the process by which a new Buddhist group that arose in the postcolonial period came to reconstitute itself as a traditional Tiantai order, and examines how it has reinterpreted the Tiantai tradition in its practical dimensions, subsequently reintroducing it to China, the very homeland from which that tradition originated.

The “Recovery of Forgotten Truth” Narrative of the Cheontae Order

Selection of the Name Cheontae

The question that naturally follows, then, is why Sangwol and his followers chose the Cheontae order as the tradition with which to stake his historical roots. Upon adopting the name “Cheontae” in 1967, Sangwol's following rapidly increased. In 1967, there were about twenty Cheontae Buddhist temples in Korea and their congregations were by and large very small. By 1972, some eighty monks lived in the head Guinsa monastery alone, while the number of practitioners who came daily to worship at Guinsa numbered around one hundred (B. Ko 2013, 2). By 2012, the number of Cheontae temples had increased to 350, with a total of 400 active monks in the order, and as many as two and a half million lay Cheontae followers (B. Ko 2014, 139). Since its official founding in 1967, the Cheontae order has grown remarkably, and today ranks as the third largest Buddhist order in Korea, behind only the Jogye and Taego orders. Key to that expansion was the adoption of the historically prominent name, “Cheontae” (B. Ko 2014, 140–141). How did that choice come about?

The modern Cheontae order claims that Sangwol's founding vision had been planned. The book *Sangwol daejosa bucheonim-euro bureugo sipeun im* (The Great Patriarch Sangwol: An Individual Aspiring to Address as Buddha; hereafter *Sangwol daejosa*) provides a valuable insider perspective

on the formation of modern Cheontae.³ According to the *Sangwol daejosa*, Sangwol was deeply inspired by Uicheon's aspiration to establish the Korean version of Cheontae Buddhism for social benefit. Sangwol is described as having always practiced with the aim of founding Cheontae in mind. For instance, the biography states that Sangwol was moved by the Lotus Sutra, believing Cheontae Buddhism suited the contemporary era. It also asserts that restoring distinct sectarian Buddhist traditions such as Cheontae constitutes the proper restoration of Korean Buddhism, whereas the unified approach of subsuming all Korean Buddhism under the single Jogye order is deemed incomplete (Wongak bulgyo sasang yeonguwon 2013, 287–290).

Additionally, *Cheontae jongbo*, the official newspaper of the Cheontae order, states that Sangwol was first introduced to Cheontae Buddhism as a child (*Cheontae jongbo*, July 1, 1993). The text relates that Sangwol self-ordained at the age of 15 and studied the Lotus Sutra and Cheontae traditions under the guidance of a monk named Beobeun. After independence in 1945, Sangwol is said to have continued to immerse himself in traditional Cheontae practices (*Cheontae jongbo*, July 1, 1993).⁴ In other words, hagiographic sources portray Sangwol as having trained in Lotus Sutra-based Cheontae Buddhism from childhood, framing the eventual founding of Cheontae as the natural outcome of his spiritual path rather than an accidental occurrence.

Discrepancies in Internal Sources of the Order

However, given inconsistencies across internal Cheontae sources, the order's reconstruction does not appear to have been a premeditated event, despite official claims otherwise. Insight into the most plausible explanation can be found in a sermon by Undeok, who served as executive director of the

3. This book was published in 2013 by modern Cheontae by collecting Sangwol's biography, teachings, and thoughts from the order's internal data.

4. The traditional Tiantai practices mentioned in the article are Zhiyi's famous four kinds of *samādhi*, which are four ways to achieve *samādhi*: constantly-sitting, constantly-walking, both-walking-and-sitting, and neither-walking-nor-sitting *samādhi*.

Cheontae administration from 1981 to 2006.⁵ According to Undeok, the order originally intended to register under the name of the Maitreya (Mireuk 彌勒) order, considering Sangwol to be Maitreya, but selected the name Cheontae as an alternative since another group had already registered under Maitreya.⁶ Notably, modern Cheontae was so named due to the prior existence of the Maitreya order, suggesting the adoption of the Cheontae identity was unplanned. By taking on the Cheontae designation, the order subsequently organized itself in alignment with Cheontae/Tiantai doctrine and history. In other words, the fortuitous naming first gave them the Cheontae title, which provided access to the rich history and legitimacy of the Cheontae/Tiantai tradition of China and Korea. The growth of the Cheontae order might have been different if the order had been registered under the name Mireuk. As Byron H. Earhart (1989, 237) has indicated, crucial factors in the development of new religious movements include “the historical momentum of the religious heritage and the creative work of the founder (and his followers).” Similarly, the selection of the name Cheontae and the adaptation of the spiritual practices and teachings associated with that name played a vital role in the formation and development of modern Cheontae.

After undergoing a confluence of circumstances, modern Cheontae adopted the name Cheontae. While it appears they initially considered other names and only chose “Cheontae” later, modern Cheontae recasts its founding through the narrative strategy of the recovery of forgotten truth, as if Sangwol had planned it from long ago. Can this organization, then, be regarded as a legitimate heir to historical Cheontae Buddhism? It is, of course, clearly a new Buddhist movement that emerged in the postcolonial period. Nevertheless, in this article, the term “new Buddhist movement”

5. This is drawn from a sermon delivered by Undeok on December 21, 2011, the recording of which was provided to the author by a nun of the Cheontae order.

6. The Maitreya order is not originally derived from Buddhism, but rather started as a folk religious group named Mugyo 戊教. Mugyo was founded in 1942 by Kim Gye-ju 金桂朱 after receiving a revelation from Jeungsan 甌山 (1871–1909), a late-19th-century religious activist. In 1959, Kim Hong-hyeon 金洪玄 took over leadership of the group, and in 1964, the group was registered as the Maitreya order of Korean Buddhism. See Kim (1975, 162).

does not imply a complete break from historical traditions. Given Lorne Dawson's classifications,⁷ new Buddhist movements refer to new religious groups that are formed based on earlier Buddhist doctrines, but that add new, often modernist, ideas, symbols, and practices. The Cheontae order therefore represents a case in which a modern Buddhist movement constructs its legitimacy through the revival and reinterpretation of an earlier doctrinal tradition. In doing so, it exemplifies a new Buddhist movement that transforms itself into a mainstream religious institution that seems grounded in tradition by utilizing the past Cheontae tradition. The efforts of the modern Cheontae order to align itself as successor to a historical Tiantai/Cheontae tradition can be approached in two ways: (1) through transnational exchange, and (2) through the study of its doctrinal teachings and the practices derived therefrom.

Transnational Exchange

After the 1970s, the Cheontae order continuously interacted with Japanese Tendai and Chinese Buddhism, seeking roots and strengthening identity. First, Park Hyeong-cheol, Sangwol's lay disciple, was sent to study the Tiantai doctrines at Taishō University in Japan in 1972 (*Cheontae jongbo*, July 1, 1980).⁸ Later, Sekiguchi Shindai 關口真大 (1907–1986), a Japanese Tendai monk and eminent Tiantai researcher, visited the Cheontae order in 1976 and stayed at Guinsa for five days. Upon his return, he introduced Korean Cheontae Buddhism to Japan through an article about the Korean Cheontae order published in 1977 (Sekiguchi 1977). Starting with the invitation of Sekiguchi, modern Cheontae began to actively interact with the Japanese Tendai school. Additionally, in 1989, Korean Cheontae began to engage with Chinese Buddhism. When the supreme patriarch visited the

7. Lorne Dawson classifies new religious movements into five groups that were formed based on five different traditions: East Asian and Southeast Asian religious traditions, the Human Potential Movement in psychology, pre- and neo-Christian traditions, Abrahamic religious traditions, and UFO- or alien-related groups. See Dawson (2006, 372).

8. Park played an important role in the development of the early Cheontae order and served as the first editor of the order's newspaper, *Cheontae jongbo*.

Chinese Buddhist Association in Beijing in September 1989, it was the first contact with Chinese Buddhism by a postcolonial Korean Buddhist group (*Cheontae jongbo*, November 1, 1989).

On May 15, 1996, Korea-China-Japan Tiantai Buddhists gathered to commemorate the 1400th anniversary of Zhiyi's death (*Cheontaejong gyojeon ganhaeng wiwonhoe* 2000, 313).⁹ Memorial services were held in three different countries, the first at the Guoqingsi monastery 國清寺, the head temple of the Tiantai tradition, in China. The second was held on October 1, 1996, at Enryakuji 延暦寺, the head temple of the Tendai school in Japan, and the third was held on June 10, 1997, at Guinsa monastery (*Cheontaejong gyojeon ganhaeng wiwonhoe* 2000, 314–316). Korean Cheontae's commemoration of Zhiyi's death alongside the Chinese and Japanese Tiantai traditions was an event that consolidated modern Cheontae's identity as Tiantai Buddhism, both internally and externally.

In June 1993, a Cheontae delegation attended the inauguration ceremony of the abbot of Guoqingsi monastery. Here, for the first time representatives of the Korean, Chinese, and Japanese Tiantai schools were united. They decided to build the Chinese-Korean Tiantai Patriarch Memorial Hall (Jung-Han cheontaejong josa ginyeomdang 中韓天台宗祖師記念堂) at Guoqingsi (*Cheontae jongbo*, July 1, 1993). The establishment of the memorial hall can be considered a pivotal event that solidified the Korean Cheontae order's authenticity. The statues of Zhiyi, Uicheon, and Sangwol were enshrined in the hall in 1995. Two-thirds of the construction costs were funded by the Cheontae order and one-third by Chinese Buddhism (*Cheontae jongbo*, July 1, 1995).¹⁰ In this way, although Sangwol

9. The *Bulmyeol-ui deungmyeong* (Unextinguishable Lamp), authored by the Cheontae order and published in 2000, serves as a significant primary source, offering a comprehensive and chronological narrative of Sangwol's life. It provides detailed accounts into Sangwol's life, his teachings, and the development of the Cheontae order after Sangwol's death.

10. It is likely that the Guoqingsi monastery benefited from the continued financial support of the Korean Cheontae order. Interestingly, during the celebration of the 1400th anniversary of the construction of Guoqingsi monastery in October 1997, Undeok gave US\$5,000 to the abbot of Guoqingsi to gilt three statues in the Chinese-Korean Tiantai Patriarch Memorial Hall. See *Cheontae jongbo* (November 1, 1997).

and the Goryeo Cheontae tradition did not have any direct historical connection, modern Cheontae positioned itself as the legitimate heir to the Goryeo version of the school, thereby endowing itself with historical authority. Thus, despite being a new religious movement, it was able to secure a sense of historical legitimacy.

Reinterpreting the Cheontae Tradition in Doctrinal Terms: Representing Korean Cheontae to China

How, then, has modern Cheontae reinterpreted the Cheontae tradition in doctrinal and practical terms? This article will now explore what makes this movement meaningfully “Cheontae” in its teachings and practice. To this end, it is instructive to examine how the order has introduced its version of Cheontae to China, the very source of that tradition. In 2007, Korean Cheontae agreed to deliver 5,000 copies of the Chinese version of *Cheontaejong seongjeon* 天台宗聖典 (Holy Scripture of the Cheontae Order; hereafter *Seongjeon*) with the Zhonghua zongjiao wenhua jiaoliu xiehui 中華宗教文化交流協會 (Chinese Religious and Cultural Exchange Association), and to distribute them to Chinese temples and university libraries (*Geumgang sinmun*, October 16, 2007).¹¹ The *Seongjeon* was first published in 1971, and serves as a compilation of foundational sutras, doctrines, practices, and rituals, along with a general history of the Chinese, Korean, and modern Cheontae orders.¹² Based on the 1971 *Seongjeon*, the Chinese

11. The official newspaper of the Cheontae order changed its name from *Cheontae jongbo* to *Geumgang bulgyo sinmun* on November 1, 2005, and began publishing more pan-Buddhist articles. It changed its name again in May 2007 to *Geumgang sinmun*.

12. Korean Cheontae's official catechism exists in three editions: the first was published in 1971, followed by a Chinese edition in 2007, and the most recent edition in 2017. While the 1971 and 2007 Chinese editions share the same basic contents, including the Lotus Sutra, Tiantai doctrine, and the histories of Chinese and Korean Cheontae, they differ in significant ways. The 1971 edition contains no material relating to Guanyin prayer, and rather than being a translation of an earlier text, it was written anew. Published at a time when the doctrinal framework of modern Korean Cheontae had not yet been fully established, it omits teachings that were not adopted into contemporary Korean Cheontae practice. The 2017 edition represents a further development of the 2007 edition and is

edition was revised and republished in 2007 under the title *Hanguo tiantaizong shengdian* 韩国天台宗圣典 (Holy Scripture of the Korean Cheontae Order).¹³ While focusing on historical aspects, particularly the dharma lineage and historical connections between Chinese Tiantai and Korean Cheontae Buddhism, it also incorporates Korean Cheontae's various characteristics, thereby emphasizing how Korean Cheontae has practiced and realized the tradition in Korea.

Among its chapters, that which best articulates the practical dimension of Korean Cheontae is the "Practice" chapter. This chapter presents one of the goals of Korean Cheontae as building a participatory Buddhism that integrates monastics and laity in joint practice (*Hanguo tiantaizong zongwuyuan* 2007, 229–230). The text also identifies one of the primary tasks of Korean Buddhism as reforming practice systems and methods to enable broad social participation, adapting as much as possible to the capacities, circumstances, and environment of the contemporary Korean people (*Hanguo tiantaizong zongwuyuan* 2007, 233). As an example of this reform, the text discusses Guanyin chanting (*Guanyin zhousong* 观音咒颂), a practice widely known within Korean Cheontae as Guanyin prayer.¹⁴ This practice, which does not appear in the original 1971 edition, is introduced as the central practice of Korean Cheontae (*Hanguo tiantaizong zongwuyuan* 2007, 236). The core of this practice involves practitioners vocally reciting the five syllables "*Gwan se eum bo sal*" aloud for hours on end. The text subsequently explains why practitioners must recite the name of Guanyin and the efficacy of such recitation, drawing on the "Universal Gateway"

expanded and revised. It adds detail absent from the 2007 edition and devotes substantial attention to connecting classical Tiantai practices, particularly the twenty-five preparatory means and the practice of calming and contemplation, to Guanyin prayer.

13. Since the Chinese edition reveals how Korean Cheontae presented its reinterpretation of the tradition to the Chinese Buddhist community and what aspects of Korean Cheontae it chose to emphasize at that time, this article draws primarily on the Chinese edition, while turning to the 2017 Korean edition when examining the doctrinal connection between Guanyin prayer and calming and contemplation practice.
14. Although called "prayer," it is actually a mantra consisting of the five syllables "*Gwan se eum bo sal*." Thus, the Guanyin prayer is not a petitionary prayer in the Christian sense.

chapter ('Gwanseeum bosal bomun pum' 觀世音菩薩普門品) of the Lotus Sutra and the Surangama Sutra.¹⁵

Can Guanyin Prayer Be Said to Be a Traditional Tiantai Practice?

Guanyin prayer was not from the outset the central practice of Korean Cheontae. The order's earliest publication, *Cheontaejong yakjeon* 天台宗略典 (Abridged Compendium of the Cheontae Order; hereafter *Yakjeon*) published in 1970, recommends the recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha instead.¹⁶ In 1970, Sangwol's group attempted to link the recitation of the name of Amitābha with the threefold truths of the classical Tiantai tradition: emptiness, conventional reality, and the middle.¹⁷ However, as the Chinese edition of the *Seongjeon* indicates, the central practice espoused to followers of the modern Cheontae order today is the practice of ritually intoning the name of Bodhisattva Guanyin. Contemporary Cheontae publications and scholarship routinely insist that adoption of the practice of invoking Guanyin's name is proof that Sangwol and his Cheontae order were rightful successors to the Chinese Tiantai tradition. To substantiate this claim, they also make a deliberate effort to trace the doctrinal basis of Guanyin recitation to the Lotus Sutra. The *Cheontae sinhaeng-ui cheot georeum* (First Step for a Cheontae Buddhist, hereafter *Cheot georeum*), a

15. The "Universal Gateway" chapter, also known as the *Guanyin Sutra* (*Gwaneum gyeong* 觀音經), is a chapter of the Lotus Sutra that explains the powers of Guanyin and how to be saved by bodhisattva's supernatural power.

16. Appearing in 1970, *Yakjeon* is the first publication of the Cheontae order. As the inaugural text published by the order following its foundation in 1967, the *Yakjeon* carries substantial historical weight. It contains how to practice Cheontae Buddhism, scriptures for rites, and the doctrines and history of Tiantai Buddhism in China and Korea.

17. By 1970, Sangwol's group had already adopted the identity as the Cheontae order. The threefold truths are the core concept of the classical Tiantai school. According to the *Yakjeon*, recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha (Amitabul 阿彌陀佛) is the way to contemplate emptiness, conventional reality, and the middle way. Here "A" stands for emptiness, "mi" for conventional reality, and "ta" for the middle way between these. See *Cheontaejong gyojeon pyeonchanhoe* (1970, 43).

primer that all Cheontae Buddhists are required to read, claims that modern Cheontae's Guanyin prayer is based on the "Universal Gateway" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.¹⁸ Modern Cheontae always emphasizes the belief in Guanyin from the "Universal Gateway" chapter, revealing that the chapter is the foundation of the Guanyin prayer (Wongak bulgyo sasang yeonguwon 2013, 373). The first official publication emphasizing the "Universal Gateway" chapter is the 1979 edition of the *Yakjeon*. The Lotus Sutra had been, of course, included in the publications of modern Cheontae from the beginning, but it was not until 1979 that the *Yakjeon* included the "Universal Gateway" chapter as a doctrinal basis for the Guanyin prayer. Since then, various publications and newspapers of modern Cheontae have continued to emphasize the "Universal Gateway" chapter.

Moreover, for the Guanyin prayer to be considered a traditional Tiantai practice, it was essential for modern Cheontae to show how Zhiyi's calming and contemplation practice is connected to the Guanyin prayer in addition to the doctrinal foundation of the prayer. Only then can the Guanyin prayer in modern Cheontae be said to be in line with the larger East Asian Tiantai tradition. Zhiyi's practice of calming and contemplation is the most important practice in the Tiantai tradition.¹⁹ This section will shed light on the connection between Guanyin prayer and the practice of calming and contemplation and reveal its validity and limitations through various accounts published by modern Cheontae.

How does the modern Cheontae order define the practice of calming and contemplation, and can recitation of the name of Guanyin be regarded as the traditional Tiantai practice of calming and contemplation? It is in its 2017 edition that the *Seongjeon* formally advances the claim that Guanyin

18. It contains the "Universal Gateway" chapter translated into Korean. See Daehan bulgyo cheontaejong chongmuwon (2011, 44, 47).

19. "Calming and contemplation" is the English translation of the Chinese term *zhiguan* 止觀. As in the word *zhi* 止 or calming, the practitioner stops thinking and concentrates through the practice of cessation. The term can also refer to the calm state achievable through such practice. The practice of contemplation refers to concentrating or contemplating and the insight gained therefrom. Therefore, *guan* 觀 can be translated as contemplation or insight. See Paul L. Swanson's translation (2018, 1:424).

prayer is equivalent to the practice of calming and contemplation (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 599).

The Modern Cheontae's Guanyin Prayer as a Practice of Calming and Contemplation

The modern Cheontae order asserts that the Guanyin prayer is a practice method that inherited the traditional Tiantai practice based on Zhiyi's two great works: *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 (The Great Calming and Contemplation) and *Xiuxi zhiguan zuochan fayao* 修習止觀坐禪法要 (The Essential Method for Practicing Cessation-and Contemplation by Sitting in Meditation), also known as *Xiao zhiguan* 小止觀 (The Lesser Calming and Contemplation).²⁰ The *Mohe zhiguan* consists of ten chapters in addition to the introduction by Guanding 灌頂 (561–632), the second patriarch of the Tiantai tradition and a disciple of Zhiyi.²¹ First of all, the 2017 edition of the *Seongjeon* introduces Zhiyi's three modes of calming and contemplation (*samjong jigwan* 三種止觀) and explains how they are connected with the Guanyin prayer. According to the introduction by Guanding in the *Mohe zhiguan*, there are three types of calming and contemplation practices: gradual and successive (*jeomcha jigwan* 漸次止觀), variable (*bujeong jigwan* 不定止觀), and perfect and sudden calming and contemplation (*wondon jigwan* 圓頓止觀) (Swanson 2018, 1:93).²² Gradual and successive calming

20. The *Xiao zhiguan* is not only an important text throughout the history of Tiantai, but it is a frequently lectured on at the lay Buddhist college for practitioners of the Cheontae order.

21. In chapter one "Synopsis," Zhiyi talks about the famous four forms of *samādhi*. Chapter six talks about the twenty-five preparatory means, and chapter seven, "Contemplation Proper," which talks about ten objects and ten modes of contemplation, is a particularly important chapter, equivalent to two-thirds of the *Mohe zhiguan*. Chapter six and seven deal with practical aspects necessary for practice, and modern Cheontae focuses on chapter six and seven. In addition to chapter one, six, and seven, chapter three, "Features of the Essence," is theoretically important. As the title of this chapter explains, it is a very important chapter describing the essence that a meditator can realize when practicing. See Swanson (2018, 1:127, 129).

22. The *Seongjeon* explains how those practices work in detail utilizing Zhiyi's writings. See Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon (2017, 414–452).

and contemplation is a practice method that progresses from a low level to an advanced level (Swanson 2018, 1:94). Variable calming and contemplation is the practice that varies depending on the time and place of the meditator, and perfect and sudden calming and contemplation is to contemplate the actual reality of the phenomenon immediately (Swanson 2018, 1:99). The *Mohe zhiguan* does not provide a detailed explanation of the gradual and successive calming and contemplation, but citing the *Shi chan boluomi cidi famen* 釋禪波羅蜜次第法門 (Gradual Method for the Perfection of Dhyāna Meditation), another famous work of Zhiyi on meditation, the *Seongjeon* explains the four *dhyāna* stages (*saseon* 四禪)²³ that occur during the gradual and successive calming and contemplation practice as a phenomenon that occurs during the Guanyin prayer (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 414–428).

According to the *Seongjeon*, a meditator does not need to systematically cultivate the gradual and successive calming and contemplation, but as the practice deepens, sometimes the practices cultivated in previous lives may be revealed, so it is good to know about the gradual and successive calming and contemplation (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 428). In particular, most practitioners who achieve *samādhi* experience the four stages of *dhyāna*.²⁴ If the *samādhi* deepens during the Guanyin prayer, the practitioner stops chanting and experiences all fourth stage of the four *dhyāna* stages, which is an immovable concentration (*budongjeong* 不動定). In this fourth stage, the practitioner stops breathing (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 428).²⁵ As such, the *Seongjeon* describes that the Cheontae Buddhists can practice the gradual and successive calming and

23. The four *dhyāna* stages refer to the four stages of phenomena that occur during meditation practice. See Swanson (2018, 3:1968–1969).

24. *Samādhi* refers to the phenomenon of religious concentration or ecstasy that accompanies a variety of experiences.

25. According to Zhiyi, when one reaches an immovable concentration stage, one is not bound by suffering or bliss. At that stage, the following phenomena occur; “The concentration is calm and tranquil, and there is no inhaling or exhaling of breath, no suffering, no bliss, and its constituents are liberation, mindfulness, purity, and singlemindedness.” See Swanson’s translation (2018, 2:1438).

contemplation through the recitation of the name of Guanyin.

Lastly, the *Seongjeon* reveals how Zhiyi's "perfect and sudden calming and contemplation" is realized through the practice of the Guanyin prayer. First, the *Mohe zhiguan* introduces the four kinds of *samādhi* as the way to achieve perfect and sudden calming and contemplation. Zhiyi's famous four kinds of *samādhi* are four ways to achieve *samādhi*: constantly-sitting, constantly-walking, both-walking-and-sitting, and neither-walking-nor-sitting *samādhi* (Swanson 2018, 1:244). According to the *Seongjeon*, it is possible to practice the Guanyin prayer through the four kinds of *samādhi*. For example, a practitioner can continue to sit and recite the name of Guanyin, and if the practitioner recites the name of Guanyin during a normal time, it can be said to be neither-walking-nor-sitting *samādhi* (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 451).

Likewise, the *Seongjeon* shows that the four kinds of *samādhi* are practiced through the recitation of the name of Guanyin. However, in fact, each of the four kinds of *samādhi* has a fixed period of practice or scriptures for each *samādhi*, so only the outward form is applied in the modern Cheontae order. Rather, the *Seongjeon* states that the four kinds of *samādhi* are only external methods, and the bottom line of the calming and contemplation practice is the ten objects and the ten modes of contemplations (*sipgyeong sipseung gwanbeop* 十境十乘觀法) discussed in chapter seven of the *Mohe zhiguan* (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 448–452). These ten objects of contemplation refer to the ten objects that a meditator must contemplate, and the ten modes of contemplation is "a meditative technique" that can be applied when encountering the ten objects (Donner and Stevenson 2018, 19).²⁶ Modern Cheontae theoretically

26. The ten objects of contemplation include (1) the sense fields; (2) the passionate afflictions; (3) disease; (4) karmic marks; (5) demonic forces; (6) *dhyāna* concentration; (7) mistaken views; (8) overweening pride or arrogance; (9) the two vehicles [of *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha*]; (10) *bodhisattvahood*. The ten modes of contemplation are (1) contemplating objects as inconceivable; (2) arousing compassionate thoughts; (3) skillful means for a peaceful mind through cessation-and-contemplation; (4) the universal deconstruction of *dharma*s; (5) knowing what penetrates and what obstructs; (6) cultivating the steps on the path; (7) controlling and healing through auxiliary methods;

elaborated in the *Seongjeon* how such practices might be applied to Guanyin prayer. Additionally, Choe Gi-pyo (2017, 307) assimilates the Guanyin prayer with these ten objects of contemplation. For example, when a meditator recites the name of Guanyin, one experiences contemplation of ten objects, such as karmic marks, *dhyāna* concentration, disease, and demonic forces. These elements may make the meditator painful or break the *samādhi*, but the meditator must contemplate them as they are. In this way, it is said that through the Guanyin prayer, the Cheontae Buddhists practice the perfect and sudden calming and contemplation, which contemplates the true form of the dharma (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 452).

Reduction of the Importance of the Four Kinds of Samādhi

However, despite modern Cheontae's efforts to ground Guanyin prayer in the theories of the *Mohe zhiguan* and the *Xiao zhiguan*, and its conviction that the Korean Cheontae order stands as a legitimate successor to the calming and contemplation practices of the Tiantai tradition, certain limitations remain. Regarding cultivation practices, modern Cheontae diminished emphasis on the four kinds of *samādhi*. As mentioned above, in modern Cheontae, the four kinds of *samādhi* are reduced to an external form, and only ten objects and ten modes of contemplation, which can directly apply the Guanyin prayer, are considered important in terms of practice. However, Daniel Stevenson (1986, 48–49) says that in the Tiantai tradition, *samādhi* can be interpreted to mean a way to practice. Therefore, the four kinds of *samādhi* are not simply external methods but refer to the four ways to achieve *samādhi* in the Tiantai tradition.

The four kinds of *samādhi* are still considered important in the modern day Tendai Buddhism in Japan. Although a few of the four kinds of *samādhi* were forgotten or replaced in medieval Japan, the ninety days constantly-walking *samādhi* was revived in Japan in the early 1970s (Groner 2022, 319).

(8) knowing the stages [of attainment]; (9) resting in patient forbearance; (10) avoiding passionate attachment to dharmas. See Swanson (2018, 2:754, 792).

Becoming an abbot of a subtemple on Mount Hiei, the home mountain of the Japanese Tendai school, requires three years of practice, and one of the three years requires constantly-sitting and/or constantly-walking *samādhi*, or meditation (Groner 2022, 318–319). As for the constantly-sitting *samādhi*, since 1964, the monk Horizawa Shomon and others have completed the constantly-sitting *samādhi* for ninety days. In this practice, except for going to the bathroom twice a day and a little walking, the meditator sits constantly (Stevens 1988, 43). In the case of the “constantly-walking *samādhi*,” the practitioner is given only time to eat, two hours to sleep, and a short time to use the bathroom and tidy up one’s clothes. Otherwise, the practitioner circles the Jōgyō-dō Hall 常行堂 for ninety days and continues reciting *Namu Amida Butsu* meaning “Praised be Amida Buddha” (Stevens 1988, 43–44).

In this way, the four types of *samādhi* are a central practice of Tiantai, and they are still practiced in modern Japanese Tendai. However, modern Cheontae considers the four *samādhis* only external methods of practice,²⁷ being replaced by the Guanyin prayer. From the outset, modern Cheontae did not completely disregard the four kinds of *samādhi*. They are mentioned in both the *Seongjeon* and the *Yakjeon* from the early days of the order’s establishment.²⁸ However, as the tradition of the Guanyin prayer became entrenched, there was a growing tendency to rely exclusively on the Guanyin prayer. For example, an article in the January 1985 edition of *Cheontae jongbo* states that the Cheontae Buddhists may practice the Guanyin prayer and sometimes practice it while not sleeping during the winter retreat held for one month from December 24, 1984 to January 2, 1985. The article states

27. The *Seongjeon* characterizes the four types of *samādhi* as external methods of practice (*oehyeongjeok haengbeop* 外形の行法). See Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon (2017, 452).

28. In the *Yakjeon*, the four forms of *samādhi* are suggested as a way to practice threefold contemplation (*samgwanbeop* 三觀法). Interestingly, the section that explains the four forms of *samādhi* in Jo Myeong-gi’s book was paraphrased and copied into the *Yakjeon* as it is, which means the Cheontae order relied heavily on the research of Jo Myeong-gi, the most authoritative scholar on Uicheon at the time. See Jo (1964, 250–251); Cheontaejong gyojeon pyeonchanhoe (1970, 37–38).

that the Guanyin prayer was invented by Sangwol because other traditional Tiantai practices, such as perfect and sudden calming and contemplation and the ten modes of contemplation, were too difficult to practice for people in these “latter days” even though these are the methods of the highest vehicle (*choe sangseung beop* 最上乘法). In other words, the 1985 article distinguished the Guanyin prayer from the perfect-sudden calming and contemplation of Zhiyi, and argued that the Guanyin prayer was the most suitable practice for the latter days of dharma. Today, the *Cheot georeum*, the order’s introductory guide for beginners, makes no mention of the four *samādhis*. In this way, given the fact that the early Tiantai tradition emphasized the four *samādhis*, can the modern Cheontae order’s exclusive emphasis on the Guanyin prayer be considered truly inherited practice of the historical Tiantai tradition? Therefore, it remains questionable whether the Guanyin prayer is a quintessential practice of the Tiantai tradition because the quintessence of the Tiantai practice is not the absoluteness of any one practice, but its diversity.²⁹

The Cheontae Order’s Retreats

Notwithstanding these limitations, the Cheontae order presented Guanyin prayer to China as a Korean reinterpretation of the traditional Tiantai practice. The article now turns to examine how Guanyin prayer is actually performed within the context of modern Korean Cheontae, adapted to contemporary society and accessible to practitioners of varying capacities.

The first characteristic of Cheontae Buddhism pursued by Sangwol and Cheontae is the adjustment of recitation practices to make them accessible to all. Modern Cheontae’s recitation practice of the Guanyin prayer provides

29. If the Cheontae order pursues the historical authenticity of the Guanyin, it would be a good idea to utilize Zhili and his dharma-brother Ciyun Zunshi (964–1032), two great revivers of Tiantai Buddhism in the Song period after the Huichang persecution (842–845). According to Stevenson (1999, 340, 358), Zhunshi emphasized the recitation of Guanyin to cure illness and protect the practitioner from demonic disturbances, all of which are key features of the Guanyin prayer of the modern Cheontae order.

a more popularly accessible discipline than orthodox meditation. In facilitating this Guanyin prayer, modern Cheontae has made the practice accessible for all to perform with ease at one's convenience. The temples remain open 24 hours a day, allowing members to chant at any time. One devotee I interviewed was drawn to the order because she could pray on her own schedule.³⁰ Whenever I passed through towns in Korea, I stopped by the local Cheontae temple. Even at small temples, I found one or two lay practitioners inside reciting the name of Guanyin.

This recitative practice is intensified during the order's retreats undertaken by both monastic and lay practitioners. The modern Cheontae order commenced its retreats in 1961 at Guinsa monastery, the order's headquarters, preceding its official establishment (*Geumgang sinmun*, January 1, 2011). A two-week inaugural retreat was held prior to the naming of Cheontae Buddhism, then extended to one-month durations following the order's official establishment (Cheontaejong gyojeon ganhaeng wiwonhoe 2000, 178). These retreats follow an intensive schedule starting at 6:00 a.m. with morning chanting from 9:00–11:30 a.m., afternoon work periods for making items like cushions and quilts, as well as preparing meals and washing dishes, 2:30–5:30 p.m. chanting, evening rest, and late night chanting from 10:00 p.m.–3:30 a.m. (*Geumgang sinmun*, January 2017, 98; *Geumgang sinmun*, January 19, 2010). Male and female devotees congregate separately at designated times to recite guided prayers by monks in the various dharma halls. During these recitations, each devotee prays by finding their own rhythm.³¹ Participants operate on just two and half hours of sleep in this extreme practice. For month-long retreats, cell phones are permitted only outside designated prayer times, while leaving the temple requires approval.³² Participants lodge together based on factors like gender,

30. Cheontae practitioner, interview by author, Daegwangsa monastery, July 23, 2022.

31. Cheontae practitioner, interview by author, Kakao Talk, January 26, 2024. However, according to another practitioner, chanting the name of Guanyin aloud together is ultimately more effective. When an individual who has been practicing for a long time initiates a loud chant, others tend to join in, resulting in superior effects. Cheontae practitioner, interview by author, Daegwangsa monastery, July 23, 2022.

32. Cheontae practitioner, interview by author, Kakao Talk, October 5, 2023.

experience, age, and health, with monks guiding practice (*Geumgang sinmun*, July 21, 2015). While the full month-long retreat at Guinsa is encouraged, accommodations are made for those unable to fully participate, allowing partial or local temple-based practice.

Cheontae retreat data demonstrates the order's success engaging large numbers of laity in intensive practice. A 1979 article reported over 45,000 attendees from across Korea at the summer retreat that year, with over 1,000 completing one-month retreats at Guinsa monastery (*Cheontae jongbo*, October 1, 1979). The winter 1979 retreat also saw over 500 laity practicing for a month at Guinsa (*Cheontae jongbo*, March 1, 1980). According to a February 1, 1982, article in *Cheontae jongbo*, approximately 20,000 individuals participated in the winter retreat at Guinsa monastery that year. That article notes that 460 people attended the entire month-long retreat, while nationwide the total participants in the winter meditation period reached 100,000 (*Cheontae jongbo*, February 1, 1982). In the period 2001–2010, Cheontae consistently facilitated over 1,000 lay participants in month-long retreats annually, with totals ranging from around 1,000 to 1,300 (U. Ko 2012, 331). These figures illustrate the order's achievement of enabling meaningful large-scale lay involvement in disciplines. The *Seongjeon* cites the inclusive retreat system as a distinguishing feature that catalyzed rapid growth in a short period of time (Cheontae bulgyo munhwa yeonguwon 2017, 531). Transforming solitary practice into intensive collective chanting increases effectiveness, as interviews note group recitation is inherently more powerful.³³ The retreats amplify impact by bringing lay devotees together for concentrated unified chanting.

Conclusion

This article has examined how modern Korean Cheontae, itself a new Buddhist movement, has reinterpreted the Tiantai/Cheontae traditions, introduced a renewed form of Cheontae to China, and demonstrated how

33. Cheontae practitioner, interview by author, Daegwangsa monastery, July 23, 2022.

this reinterpretation is practiced within the contemporary order. Published by the Cheontae order in 1983, *Bulgyo pogyojip* 佛教布教集 (Compendium on Spreading Buddhist Teachings), provided the explanation as to why Sangwol picked the name “Cheontae.” Sangwol is said to have believed that the Cheontae school was the epitome of the Buddha’s teaching and the Buddhist tradition best suited to reforming a corrupted and divisive Korean Buddhism and restoring the stability of Korea as a country in turmoil (Daehan bulgyo cheontaejong gyohwawon 1983, 244–245).

However, as the tensions between internal sources and official publications reveal, the choice of the name Cheontae was not as deliberate as those publications suggest. Nevertheless, the order subsequently refined itself in accordance with Cheontae thought both historically and doctrinally. From the 1970s onward, through transnational exchange with Chinese and Japanese Tendai, modern Cheontae established its identity within the broader Tiantai tradition, cultivating public recognition of itself as a legitimate Cheontae institution. Since its founding, the order has continuously developed its doctrinal framework, demonstrating how Guanyin prayer and its core teachings are a Korean reinterpretation of Tiantai practice. Modern Cheontae places great emphasis on the Guanyin prayer, insisting that the prayer is the best way to attain Buddhahood in modern times, and claims that this is a practice that fully contains calming and contemplation practice of the Tiantai tradition. The theory supporting this is that the Tiantai tradition is the teaching that values the Lotus Sutra the most, especially the “Universal Gateway” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, and that Zhiyi also had Guanyin belief and recited the name of Guanyin. Furthermore, in present day Korea, the entrances to major monasteries of modern Cheontae have placards that are inscribed with the cardinal Cheontae/Tiantai phrase, “integral realization of the three truths of emptiness, provisional existence, and the middle in a single instant of thought” (*ilsim samgwan* 一心三觀).

Likewise, through the practice of intoning the name of Guanyin and promoting core Tiantai sutras and Zhiyi’s writings as the foundational scriptures of the school, the Korean Cheontae order has actively sought to establish its identity as heir to both Zhiyi and Uicheon. We can conclude

from such evidence that the modern Cheontae school has strategically drawn on the historical authority of Chinese and Japanese Tendai, along with related forms of symbolic expression, and constructed a lineage narrative linking Zhiyi, Uicheon, and Sangwol, as a means of strengthening public perception of its authenticity and viability as the Cheontae Buddhist order in contemporary Korea. In doing so, this article has shown how Tiantai doctrines are not simply absorbed but, as the order itself claims, reinterpreted and reshaped to meet the needs and capacities of people in contemporary society, most visibly in the practices of Guanyin prayer and participatory Buddhism.

This participatory orientation is evident in features such as biannual month-long lay retreats. The intensive retreats, which gather over 1,000 participants annually to recite together in groups, serve as an indicator of the order's strong commitment to engaged, communal practice. Notably, Cheontae Buddhists take pride in recognizing that their order has realized a lay Buddhist model centered on Guanyin prayer.

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