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CONTENTS

1  In search of Erlang
   Carmelita (Carma) Hinton

33 Treated as Treasures: the Circulation of Sutras in
    Maritime Northeast Asia, from 1388 to the Mid-Sixteenth Century
   Kenneth R. Robinson

55 Wu T'ai-po in Early Tokugawa Thought: Imperial Ancestor
    or Chinese Sage?
   Wai-ming Ng

65 Liang Qichao in Australia: a Sojourn of No Significance?
   Gloria Davies

111 La Maison d'Or — the Sumptuous World of Shao Xunmei
    Jonathan Hutt

143 Preserving the Remnants of Empire in Taiwan: the Case of Hamaxing
    Jeremy E. Taylor

165 Cumulative Index, East Asian History Issues 1–20
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TREATED AS TREASURES: THE CIRCULATION OF SUTRAS IN MARITIME NORTHEAST ASIA FROM 1388 TO THE MID-SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Kenneth R. Robinson

The Koryŏ and Chosŏn courts made Buddhist sutras unique to their kingdoms available to Japanese and Ryukyuan élites from the late fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. These royal grants or bestowals included copies of the Koryŏ Tripitaka (K. Koryŏtaejanggyŏng), which was the largest collection of Chinese-language sutras. While Korean officials and their kings increasingly devoted their efforts to fostering a Confucian social order and diminishing the presence and influence of Buddhism in Chosŏn, at the same time in Japan the popularization of Buddhism and the proliferation of temples continued unabated. Similarly, from the mid-fifteenth century in the kingdom of Ryukyu royal support for Buddhism led to the building of new temples and the amassing of votive objects, including sutras from Japan, China and Chosŏn.

Prompted in part by local concerns and the Chosŏn court’s releases of scriptures, Japanese élites and Ryukyuan kings approached Korean kings with requests for Buddhist sutras approximately one hundred times between 1388 and the mid-sixteenth century. The Ashikaga 足利 family of shoguns and retired shoguns were responsible for about one-fourth of those requests. Most of the rest came from monarchs in Ryukyu and from central government officials, regional officials, provincial governors, and local élites in Japan. Korean monarchs granted about one-half of these petitions.

The Chosŏn court dispensed scriptures as part of an anti-piracy program in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Historians have seen these particular acts as an appeasement of pirates, as “rewards” for the repatriation of Koreans taken by pirates, and as “lures” to entice pirates to trade.\(^1\) Complementing this attention to raiding, other studies have concentrated on

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the questions of who requested sutras and where those texts went. However, scholars have not treated sutras subsequently released by the Chosŏn court as media, like Buddha relics in Chosŏn and in Japan, that could convey values, intentions, purposes, and policies.\(^2\)

In Chosŏn, Japan, and Ryukyu, sutras were “intricately tied up with critical social messages” being conveyed to audiences in multiple communities and were “responsive to political manipulation at the societal level.”\(^3\) Varying combinations of diplomatic, political, religious, personal, familial, economic or other agendas animated each cycle of envoy dispatch, request, release (or refusal), and distribution. Such converging interests point to certain regimes of value inscribed into sutras by both seekers and donors. Further, at each stage in a sutra’s career, the object assumed new meanings.\(^4\) Requests for the Koryŏ Tripitaka carried varying agendas that informed the desire of individuals or institutions for these objects of Buddhist devotion and practice.\(^5\)

At the same time, the requests, the releases, and the placements in religious institutions were not isolated from social currents or expressions of power, including patronage relationships.\(^6\) Releases and refusals not only delivered messages to foreigners; the former in particular figured in the contest over the Confucian transformation of Korean society and the exercise of monarchical power. In this respect, releases often accentuated forms of support for the religion in Chosŏn.

As the Chosŏn court’s promotion of peaceful interaction proved successful and maritime piracy declined in the 1410s and 1420s, Korean kings and officials selected recipients of temple objects for other, often related reasons. By the late 1420s, they had limited eligibility for release to rulers and to individuals and families capable of providing special forms of assistance. From the mid-1450s, eligibility was also derived from the diplomatic status that the court assigned each Japanese contact. The restriction of suitability to individuals or families possessing appropriate qualifications made the chances of acquisition virtually predictable. Accordingly, the Chosŏn court’s patterns of release and refusal shaped the patterns of request.

Data available for reconstructing the life-courses of tripitaka sets and individual texts makes it difficult to write the biography of a single sutra or set of sutras used by Koreans and later passed to Japanese or Ryukyuans, or indeed to write a social history of sutras scattered overseas. But I will attempt to trace this circulation from Chosŏn to Japan and to Ryukyu, introduce the contexts of transfer, and suggest various meanings attached to sutras by Korean, Japanese, and Ryukyuan élites.\(^7\) Episodes from the social lives of a few tripitaka sets and scriptures placed in religious institutions in Japan will further help to identify agendas and values that informed the passage from one holder to another.

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\(^{4}\) Ibid., pp. 4, 14–15, 33.

\(^{5}\) The title “Koryŏ taejanggyŏng” apparently was not contemporaneous. Korean and Japanese élites typically referred to the collection as “taejanggyong” or “daizokyo,” in the respective readings. This title in English translation will be used for simplicity.


Requests for Sutras

Requests from Japanese

By one count, Japanese pirates from the “three islands” (K. samdo 三島) of Tsushima 対馬, Iki 老岐, and the Matsura 松浦 area of north-western Honshu (and Koreans, too8) raided villages, towns, storehouses, temples, and other sites in the peninsula 387 times between 1350 and 1392.9 Seeking to suppress the attacks and encourage peaceful interaction, the Koryŏ and Chosŏn courts turned away from the ineffectual Muromachi 室町 bakufu and worked instead with elites in western Japan. Into the early fifteenth century, these governments bestowed sutras on some Japanese elites as a way of promoting trade.

The mobilization of sutras and other temple goods requested by Japanese elites and institutions, such as bells and construction materials, also reflected personal beliefs and other policy programs in Chosŏn.10 Confucian legislators moved quickly to debilitate Buddhism politically and economically. The early monarchs accepted the arguments of court officials for reducing the Buddhist establishment’s influence and power in the government and in the broader society more willingly than they did the officials’ criticisms of Buddhist doctrine and the place of the religion in Korean society.11

Measures that removed Buddhist monks and institutions from political involvement included the confiscation of temple lands, the closure of temples, prohibitions against the construction of new temples, and the return of monks to secular life. The court also enforced the displacement by claiming and exercising monarchical authority to appropriate and distribute temple holdings.12 For some officials, each dispersal, or disposal, abroad of sutras or other temple objects may have both further diminished the religion’s role in Chosŏn society and aided foreign policy programs. Perhaps some even thought Buddhist scriptures to be more useful in Japan than in Chosŏn.

However, Buddhism continued to be a feature of private life at the palace and elsewhere, for members of the royal family and other Koreans believed that the religion remained important throughout the life cycle of the individual.13 The first king, Taejo 太祖 (r. 1392–98), his grandson King Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418–50), and Sejong’s son King Sejo 世祖 (r. 1455–68) were all devout Buddhists, and Taejo’s son King Taejong 太宗 (r. 1400–18) displayed an increased interest in Buddhism as he grew older. Arguing in 1414 why the Shogun should be given the printing blocks for the Koryŏ Tripitaka, Taejong stated that Japanese would respect the blocks more than would Koreans.14 Two decades later, Sejong stated that the Shogun treated sutras with honor and thus requested scriptures, and that “our country” (K. aguk 我國) also treats sutras with respect and provides them to the Shogun.15 Made during discussions of foreign affairs, these comments, which also criticized Confucian legislators, exposed the competing religious, social

10 For requests and releases of bells see Taejong shillok, 16:6a [1408/8/1]; Taejong shillok 28:7b [1414/7/23]; Sejong shillok, 1:12a [1418/8/25]. (All mentions of “shillok” in Korean sources refer to The veritable records of the Chosŏn court.)
12 Taejong shillok 28:3b–4b [1414/7/11]; Taejong shillok 32:12b [1416/8/20]; Munjong shillok, 5:10b [1450/12/13].
14 Taejong shillok 28:3b–4b [1414/7/11].
15 Sejong shillok 63:25b [1434/3/5].
and political values that Korean elites placed on Buddhist religious objects. The availability in Chosŏn of scriptures was thus connected with domestic politics, as well as with strategies for stopping piracy. These included concerns about foreign policy, financial matters, commitment to rapid and sweeping social transformation, personal religious beliefs and practices, contestation between the throne and officials over the role of the King, rivalries over decision-making power, and no doubt other factors.

In Japan, Buddhism spread among the samurai and commoners from the late twelfth century as monks, breaking from the religion’s moorings in elite Heian society, established new sects and simplified paths to salvation. The significance of the sutras brought from Koryŏ and Chosŏn to religious practice in Japan (and Ryukyu) requires further study. Nevertheless, the possibility of obtaining an immense collection of scriptures that were now suddenly available became widely known among Japanese elites. Petitioners sought the Koryŏ Tripitaka almost certainly because full sets were uncommon in Japan and Ryukyu. Perhaps they also knew it to be the largest collection of Chinese-language scriptures in the Buddhist world. That rarity magnified the significance of such acquisitions and of their conferral upon a local recipient, which no doubt assisted the donor both politically and socially. For temples, distinction, patronage and wealth might accrue from such valuable possessions.

Interest abroad grew not merely because of the tripitaka’s value(s) and the expense of copying all the texts or of carving a complete set of printing blocks. The Chosŏn court’s management of maritime interaction also prompted petitions as kings and their officials granted contact privileges to all Japanese who sent trade missions during the government’s first decades. In Ming China, however, the Chinese government limited sanctioned contact by Japanese to shogunal tribute missions. As a result, Japanese elites in western provinces could not seek sanctioned trade, much less sutras, in China unless they participated in a shogunal embassy. The sets were available a short distance away in Chosŏn, and the Japanese could negotiate with the Chosŏn court without first obtaining shogunal sponsorship.

The tripitaka obtained were printed from either of two sets of carvings made during the Koryŏ period. The first Koryŏ edition, completed in the late eleventh century, was based upon a printing in China from the late tenth century. Containing a larger number of scriptures than the earlier Chinese edition, the first Korean set exceeded 6,000 volumes. During the Mongol attacks of the early thirteenth century, the Koryŏ court initiated a second carving in 1236, or four years after the printing blocks were burned. Finished in 1251, the second edition of the Koryŏ Tripitaka today totals 1,516 texts in 6,815 volumes printed from 81,258 blocks. These blocks are preserved at Haeinsa 海印寺, a temple near Taegu where the Chosŏn government placed them in the 1390s.16

The Chosŏn court distinguished temple items from other types of items released to Japanese and Ryukyuans. Kings and officials did not commodify

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sutures and other religious objects in the sense that these objects were to be appraised for exchange at proximate values with items brought by Japanese and Ryukyuan officials. That is, the court did not treat temple objects as items to be traded for material objects. On the other hand, the Chosŏn court did not render sutras priceless.\(^{17}\)

Japanese and Ryukyuans placed the request for sutras in a letter of introduction (J. shokei 書契; K. sōgye) which the envoy submitted to the court. As they did not attach to the request objects to be offered in exchange, the sutras were monetarily inexpensive and thus all the more attractive to the seeker. The announcement of the King’s decision and the release of sutras occurred during one or more of the encounters scheduled in the calendar of diplomatic rites.\(^{18}\) That is, court officials altered the performance text(s) when they added such announcements and releases to the proceedings of a meeting or meetings designed for and conducted over other diplomatic matters. In other words, the ritualized sequence of request followed by refusal or release differed from the ritualized sequence of exchanges, although both were activated when the King ordered that an embassy or mission be received.\(^{19}\) The language of market exchange that is often used to describe sutra procurement in modern scholarship, such as “powerful capital” (J. kyōryoku na sbihon 強力な資本), “trade” (K. muyōk 貿易; J. bōeki), “export goods”(K. suchūpum 輸出品), and “import” (J. yunyū 輸入) thus does not adequately convey the notion of transfer within the context of Korean diplomatic ritual.\(^{20}\) The rejection of an appeal, on the other hand, had little impact on the court, because tribute trade and supplementary trade were the priority in any diplomatic exchange.

To whom, then, did the Chosŏn court release sutras? Murai Shōsuke 村井章介 has shown that in the second half of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century kings provided sutras to Japanese and Ryukyuan officials who had high political status.\(^{21}\) This pattern developed in the first decades of the Chosŏn government, and established precedents and practices that Murai has identified. Between 1388 and 1428, court elites considered more than fifty requests presented by approximately twenty-six individuals and one temple. These numbers reflect the economics of request. They also show that royal release had replaced looting as the mode of movement of sutras from the peninsula into the archipelago.\(^{22}\) The economics informing petitions from temples to shoguns or provincial governors for assistance must have been more complex, but although an important subject, this feature of patronage relations and interpersonal networks is not discussed in the present paper.

The Chosŏn court favored the Ōuchi 大内 family, the Sō 宗 family, and the Ashikaga. The Ōuchi, who were provincial governors (J. shugo 守護) based in western Honshu and who expanded into northern Kyushu several times, and the Sō, who were the governors of Tsushima, each benefited from their contributions to the court’s foreign policy. Stated differently, the “price” “asked” of Japanese elites living in western provinces in exchange for the sutras was the suppression of pirate attacks, the promotion of peaceful

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\(^{21}\) Murai, Ajia no naka no chūsei Nihon, pp.338, 392 n.9.

\(^{22}\) See Appadurai, “Commodities and the politics of value,” pp.23–4.
The earliest recorded petitions arrived in 1388. Yoshimitsu and the Kyushu Deputy (J. *Kyūshū tanda* 鹿児島探題) Imagawa Ryōshun 今川了俊, appear to have failed, however, in their suit. Working from his position as the bakufu's representative in Kyushu and based in the Hakata 博多 area, Imagawa became an important figure in the suppression of piracy. He helped
effect the return of at least 1,777 Koreans who had been captured by pirates. 28 Only upon his third request for sutras, one month before Yoshimitsu removed him in 1395 for growing too independent and successful in his dealings with Korean governments, did Imagawa succeed. 29

Before the next Kyushu Deputy could settle into his assignment, Ōuchi Yoshihiro 大内義弘 began promoting himself as a friend of the Choson court and an enemy of the brigands. He sent a mission to Choson a few months after Imagawa’s departure and, in addition to conducting sanctioned trade, received sutras. 30 Through 1399, Yoshihiro constantly updated the court on his moves against the raiders, repatriated Koreans, and repeatedly asked for the Koryo Tripitaka. 31 He and his successors provided more than an antidote to piracy. They also acted as intermediaries between the Choson court and the Muromachi bakufu, escorts of Korean officials traveling through the pirate-infested Inland Sea, and traders able to acquire southeast Asian goods. Over the next 150 years, the Ōuchi sought sutras more times than any other family except the Ashikaga, and only the Ashikaga received sutras more often. Factors beyond a personal desire to accumulate merit occasionally motivated their appeals. Like the Ashikaga, for example, the Ōuchi, from the mid-fifteenth century, also presented requests on behalf of temples.

The Sō, too, formed a policy of cooperation with the Choson court as they directed attention away from piracy. Their assistance was vital to Korean elites, who considered Tsushima the worst of the “three islands.” As numerous scholars have noted already, for his efforts in bringing peace and predictability to contact with Tsushima islanders, Sō Sadashige 宗貞茂 twice received copies of the Koryo Tripitaka. 32 Tʻaejong was so grateful for this assistance that he sent condolences upon Sadashige’s death in 1418. 33

Sadashige’s successor, Sadamori 貞盛, helped the court consolidate the Japanese supervision of the maritime passage to the open ports in Kyongsang Province. Beginning with him, the Governor of Tsushima, acting on behalf of the King of Choson, issued the travel permit (K. munin 文引) which the court required Japanese to present at the open port. Sadamori’s interest in sutras, or the petitions that he represented, concentrated on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra and the Lotus Sutra. 34 Although the court did not grant every request, he seems to have succeeded at least six times. 35

Such contributions to state-level diplomacy and to the transformation of Japanese interactions distinguished Imagawa, the Ōuchi, and the Sō from others in western Japan. Moreover, the repatriation of Koreans deepened the trust that Imagawa and the Ōuchi enjoyed. Yet, while repatriation helped many people in western provinces initiate diplomatic relations in the 1390s, 36 the Choson court treated this act as being insufficient for the bestowal of sutras.

For example, Minamoto Ryōki 源良兼, who was identified as a hereditary official (K. segwan 世官; J. sekun) on Iki, tried to ‘trade’ acts of repatriation for sutras. He returned small numbers of Koreans on at least seven occasions, but the court refused each of his three, and possibly four, requests for sutras. 37
Ryōki lacked the kind of geographical and political resources that were available to the Ōuchi and the Sō, and his administrative position on Iki was ineffectual. Apart from repatriation, the Chosŏn court gained little from Ryōki.

Meanwhile, the Kyushu deputies gradually proved themselves incapable of administering northern Kyushu. The several refusals between 1396 and 1423 suggest that Korean officials also knew of the ineffectiveness of both the position and its incumbent. The deputyship, which was a regional-level office and thus superior to provincial governorships, was no guarantee of eligibility. By the late 1420s, then, the Chosŏn court had established granting patterns that discouraged requests from Japanese other than the Ōuchi, the Sō, and the Ashikaga.

There were, however, exceptions. Four Japanese who had sutras bestowed on them between 1427 and 1450, after these repatriations had ceased, offered more than peaceful contact. In 1427, Sejong bestowed upon Shisa Shigeru 志佐重, who was an administrator of Iki, a personal seal (K. tosō 圖書) and the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra. At this time, a personal seal was a mark of special recognition and a guarantee of sanctioned trade; Shigeru was only the fifth to be provided with one. That the court provided him with both the seal and the sutra strongly suggests that officials had reasons to maintain good relations with Shigeru, such as his close association with an island that was a potential home for pirates.38

Two years later, in 1429, Ōtomo Mochinao 大友持直 sought diplomatic relations with the King of Chosŏn. An introduction by Sō Kin 宗金, who was a trader, an escort of royal envoys, a personal seal recipient, and a trusted diplomatic intermediary, combined with the advantages of Ōtomo’s presence in the port city of Hakata, where the King’s envoys stopped en route to and from Kyoto, probably enhanced Mochinao’s appeal to the court.39 Sō Kin himself also obtained sutras. In 1450, near the end of his long career, he received an incomplete set of the Koryō Tripitaka.40 The circumstances of the fourth grant, in 1445, to “Yobuko-dono” 呼子殿, whose family was also associated with the administration of Iki, are vaguer, but the recent retaliatory seizure of Iki islanders for attacking Chosŏn government ships and killing Korean officials may have influenced the decision to bestow sutras.41

These royal grants did not translate into inheritable eligibility, as was the case with the shoguns, for the Sō and the Ōuchi. The lack of continuity suggests that the court intended these releases as an exceptional form of recognition and a tangible sign that there was an expectation of continued cooperation. From the mid-1450s, the court lengthened the list of eligible Japanese and other elites to include the King of Ryukyu and Muromachi bakufu officials. In these cases, the Chosŏn court included them for their political position and diplomatic status rather than on account of their past and future dependability.
Requests from Japanese and Ryukyuan Rulers

Japan’s shoguns and retired shoguns, as well as the kings of Ryukyu, obtained sutras and other temple materials nearly every time they requested them. As far as the Ashikaga were concerned, the Choson court did not entirely ignore the matter of piracy. On the other hand, raids were not a factor in dealings with the King of Ryukyu. More relevant to the monarch’s relations with these shoguns and kings was the proper conduct of diplomacy with his status peers, conduct that seems to have included granting requests that were not too unreasonable. The release of temple materials was one expression of this parity in status. In Kyoto, however, concern for propriety was less acute.

The observance of diplomatic propriety toward the King of Japan withstood, and probably was enhanced by, the realization that the Ashikaga and the Muromachi bakufu did not abide by the same norms of diplomacy. The Ashikaga were remarkably consistent: seemingly every embassy carried requests for sutras or other temple materials, a priority that became bluntly obvious in 1443. Sejong had dispatched an embassy to Japan and asked his counterpart to reply with a Reciprocal Envoy (K. boeyesa 回礼使; J. kaireisbi). Bakufu officials told the guests, however, that shoguns had never sent a Reciprocal Envoy to Choson and that the (new) shogun would abide by that practice. He would instead send a Sutra Request Envoy (J. setkyōshi 請經使). For Korean kings and court officials, the dispatch of a Reciprocal Envoy, who in this instance would deliver the Shogun’s thanks for the embassy, completed the pair of embassies initiated by the earlier dispatch. The Sutra Request Envoy, as a seeker of objects, did not fit into their scheme of international protocol. This dispatch reinforced what court elites already knew: that what the Shogun was particularly interested in was exchange. Yet, despite their displeasure with the attitude displayed by shoguns, perhaps performing the rituals of status peer diplomacy as understood at the Choson court, Korean kings throughout the fifteenth century released sutras and other items nearly every time the Ashikaga presented a request.

However, the Choson court steadfastly refused shogunal requests for the printing blocks of the Koryo Tripitaka on three occasions. For example, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu sought them in 1399, soon after the court had made this set of sutras available to Japanese élitists. King Chongjong 定宗 replied that there had been two sets in the past, but one had been damaged by pirates. He undertook, however, to assemble a set of printed texts. Such a set was never passed on.

More demanding than Yoshimitsu was his son Yoshimochi 義持. When they were denied printing blocks in 1423, Yoshimochi’s envoys responded that they would be punished should they return without the blocks. When that ploy failed, they staged a hunger strike at the Korean court. Eventually, the monks sailed back to Japan with the promise that Sejong, Chongjong’s...

42 For an occasion when Koreans clearly considered the question of piracy in their calculations, see Taejong shillok 28:3b–4b [1414/7/11].
44 Sejong shillok 102:6b–8a [1443/10/13]. Earlier, the envoys and the bakufu officials had disagreed over the hierarchies of seating at an official gathering to be presided over by Japanese officials.
46 The first two instances will be discussed below. The, or a, third request occurred in 1499 (Nikkan shokei [hennen koryaku] [Documents on Japanese-Korean relations (Chronology)], no.8 [Historiographical Institute, University of Tokyo collection], 16a).
47 Chongjong shillok 2:3b [1399/7/21]. Also note the undated comment that the Shogun requests the printing blocks each time he sends an envoy (Kim Chongjik, “Haein hwap’an sangun yo kukki tongbu” [Collected writings of Ch’omp’i1jae Kim Chongjik], in Ch’omp’i1jae chip, in Hanguk munjip ch’onggan, no.12 [Seoul: Kyungin Munhwasa, 1988], 14:7a–b).
successor, would send sutras. Seeking to mollify the Shogun, Sejong collected a large number of texts and entrusted these to his Reciprocal Envoy. Yoshimochi, however, stood fast, and refused to accept them; he waited stubbornly for the printing blocks.48 But Sejong never parted with the remaining set of printing blocks of the Koryô Tripitaka. The very fact that they were regarded as too valuable to give away is an indication of their continuing religious, political, and diplomatic importance in Chosôn.

Possessing printing blocks would have endowed Yoshimitsu or Yoshimochi (and their successors) with the means to print and distribute sutras.49 More fundamentally, they would have provided Japanese rulers and their advisers with the power to decide for what reasons to print, for whom to print, when to print, which sutras to print, how many copies to print, and whether or not to print the complete set. For example, the rapidity with which Yoshimitsu had approached the King of Chosôn for the blocks suggests that he may have intended to use printings as a tool for boosting the authority of the shogun and the bakufu in Kyoto and elsewhere in Japan.50 Korean kings would then have become dependent upon the shoguns for new printings of the sutras. Access in Japan to the Tripitaka had the potential to become still another area where religious, political, and other interests could mingle, with overlapping and differing ends.

Several institutions associated with the gozan五山 system approached the Ashikaga and others for assistance in obtaining sutras from Chosôn. After capturing Kyoto during the war with the Southern Court in the mid-fourteenth century, the Ashikaga endeavored to strengthen their new government, gain supporters, and enhance the bakufu’s power in the provinces. They made use of Buddhism in this broad project, especially through patronage relationships with Rinzai Zen 林済禅 temples. Raising monasteries in Kyoto to the peak of the hierarchy, the Ashikaga also extended this network, which favored temples associated with the Musô lineage 夢窗派, into the provinces. There, large provincial temples (J. jissatsu 十刹) in the gozan system occupied the highest ranks. Two additional layers completed the structure. The bakufu recognized one temple per province as an Ankokuji 安国寺 monastery and ascribed numerous temples to shozan 諸山 status. Political and economic as well religious considerations lay behind the bakufu’s creation of this nationwide institutional network, which provided another means for consolidating their power.51

The Ashikaga’s relationships with monks extended to their interactions with Korean kings. They depended upon Rinzai Zen monks associated with Shôkokuji 祖国寺, their family temple as well as a Kyoto gozan temple, to compose letters of state addressed to the King of Chosôn.52 In this exercise, the Ashikaga deployed Shôkokuji in the capacity of an “adjunct of state,” which allowed them to summon monks to prepare letters requiring felicitous phrasing.53 However, the background to their early requests for sutras, such as the source of the idea, the shogun’s relationship with the petitioner, or the shogun’s relationship with the recipient, is not known. It is thus difficult to
gauge the influence of Shōkoku-ji monks in the decisions to request and to bestow sutras. From the mid-fifteenth century, the Ashikaga usually represented temples that had sought shogunal sponsorship, often making the acquisition of sutras the embassy’s overarching purpose, if this was not already the case in earlier embassies.\footnote{See Seki, “Muromachi bakufu no Chōsen gaikō,” pp.146–7; Kang, Diplomacy and ideology in Japanese–Korean relations, p.52.}

From the late 1440s and especially from 1456, or early in Sejo’s rule, in addition to providing scriptures, Korean kings helped Japanese temples with renovation projects, with rebuilding following fire, or with the repair of damage sustained during the Ōnin War 結の乱 (1467–77). The 1447–48 embassy received the Koryō Tripiṭaka for Nanzenji 南禅寺, which was from 1386 the highest-ranking monastery in the gozan system. The bakufu coordinated this request with the collection of materials from several provinces for the repair of the temple.\footnote{Sejong shillok 120:11a–b [1448/4/27]; for the domestic campaign during just 1447 and 1448, see the documents dated from 1447/10 to 1448/11 and arranged between pages 311 and 342 in vol.1 of Nanzenji monjo [Documents relating to Nanzenji], ed. Sakurai Kageo and Fujii Manabu (Kyoto: Nanzenji shōmu honjo, 1973).} During his tenures as shogun (1456–72) and retired shogun (1472–89), Yoshimasa 義政, who, like Sejo, was deeply religious, dispatched eleven embassies, seven of them during Sejo’s thirteen-year reign. Of those seven, three sailed on behalf of Kenninji 建仁寺 and Tenryū-ji 天竜寺, both gozan temples in Kyoto. Another form of shogunal embassy, the temple support ships (J. kanjisen 勧進船), sought construction materials, presumably stupas, pagodas, and other objects, for monasteries. Most of these institutions were in the Kyoto area. The Ashikaga turned to the Korean king, most likely after having been approached by or on behalf of the temple, for assistance with strengthening these nodes in political, religious, and social networks.\footnote{Takeuchi Rizō, “Chūsei jiin to gaikoku bōeki, ge” [Medieval temples and foreign trade, part 2], Rekishi chiri 72.2 (1938): 32–5.} As with the distribution of sutras, the furnishing of temples provided shoguns (and provincial governors, too) with another “occasion for a show of strength, affluence, and benevolence.”\footnote{Collcutt, Fire mountains, p.106.} These displays took advantage of decades of success at the Chosŏn court.

Yoshimasa may not have been aware that the Korean royal family had already been promoting the renovation and support of Korean temples for several years.\footnote{Han Ugn, Yi gyǒ ch'öngbi e wa pulgyo, pp.198–219, 280–98.} Perhaps the repair programs in Chosŏn also influenced their decisions to make materials available to the Japanese supplicants. Whether or not Yoshimasa knew about that project, the arrival of four embassies during Sejo’s first five years on the throne suggests that he had learned of this man’s devotion to Buddhism.

The kings of Ryukyu began seeking sutras at the same time that Yoshimasa was busy requesting temple objects. They most likely learned of these possibilities from the Japanese. A Japanese Rinzai monk, Ka’in Shōko 芥陰承暦, began teaching Buddhism in the Okinawa countryside from about 1450, and attracted the attention of King Shō Taikyū 尚泰久. Lacking strong political support, the King turned to giving his patronage to Buddhism and Shinto, in part as a means of extending and deepening monarchical power. He established several temples in the capital and elsewhere and bestowed bells upon some eighteen monasteries. Also during his reign, the court erected monuments that “portrayed Ryukyu’s kings as paragons of Buddhist virtue and as avatars.”\footnote{Sekino Kenzō, Nisshō kōshō shiwa [The history of Japanese–Korean relations] (Tokyo: Naigai shoseki kabushiki gaisha, 1935), pp.162–3; Miyagi Eishō, Okinawa no rekishi [The history of Okinawa] (Tokyo: Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, 1968), pp.58–9; Gregory Smits, “Ambiguous boundaries: redefining royal authority in the kingdom of Ryukyu,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 60.1 (June 2000): 100.} Economic conditions in the mid-fifteenth century made this
florescence possible. The Ryukyuan government, as is well known, forwarded Southeast Asian spices, dyes, medicinals, and other goods to China and Japan, and traded with Japanese merchants who visited Naha. Japanese ships bound for Chosŏn also carried Southeast Asian goods acquired through Ryukyuan elites. Like the shoguns, Ryukyuan kings were consistently successful in their petitions, especially during Sejo's reign when conditions in Ryukyu and Chosŏn merged with Korean patterns of sutra-giving.

Selecting as his envoy a monk from Hakata, the busiest port city in western Japan, Shō Taikyū presented his first request soon after Sejo's enthronement in 1455. The Korean king granted this and later wishes, often lavishly. In a display of royal power in 1462, he presented King Shō Toku尚德 with one set of the Koryŏ Tripitaka and two copies each of many other scriptures. He also bestowed eighteen different texts upon a monk serving in the embassy. The sutras presented to the King of Ryukyu were to be stored at Tenkaiji 天界寺, which was located in the capital and was the most important of the temples constructed by Shō Taikyū. Sejo responded similarly in 1467, this time providing Shō Toku with two copies each of thirty-four texts. While Ryukyuan kings requested and distributed sutras as part of their political and religious projects, Sejo released scriptures for his own reasons and purposes.

Sejo reconfigured the decision-making process at the highest levels of the government and worked directly with the ministries rather than with the incumbents of the highest-ranking posts. In this way he significantly strengthened the power of the monarch. Further, he blended foreign relations and Buddhism in his official emphasis on monarchical and Buddhist priorities and on personal and royal generosity. Using diplomacy as a stage, Sejo projected the throne's power to domestic audiences, including his critics, as well as to foreign audiences.

Sejo had been involved in disseminating Buddhism since the mid-1440s. As king, he continued to support the religion in many ways and to many ends, including the enhancement of monarchical power. He established a government office for the printing of sutras in 1460, placed new printings of the Koryŏ Tripitaka and other scriptures in temples around the country, and had Buddhist texts translated and printed in the Korean vernacular script bangıl. Further, he permitted the number of priests to be increased, refurbished existing temples, and built new monasteries. Wongaksa 圓覺寺, the temple that became the centerpiece for his promotion of Buddhism and that was located conveniently close to the palace, was one such addition to his assertion of Buddhist practice, royal patronage, and royal power.

Petitions for sutras and temple materials delivered in the name of the King of Ryukyu to the court of Sŏnjong between 1471 and 1493, however, pose problems for scholars in identifying the sources of the letters and the missions. The standard view, with which I agree, is that Japanese based in the western provinces of Japan fitted out the embassies received by the Korean king during this period. A recent rebuttal argues instead that all of
these missions should be attributed to the King of Ryukyu. More important here than the question of the authenticity of these missions is the Choson court’s treatment of the envoys as representatives of the King of Ryukyu.

Among the representations made by the seven embassies received, sutras were involved in at least four cases. In two of these, the court appears not to have responded as was hoped. If so, in these instances, the diplomatic status of the King, the history of consistent approvals, and the repatriation of Koreans whose ships had run aground in Ryukyu could hardly have given sufficient cause for rejection. The fact was that in all of these encounters, Japanese elites preyed upon the court’s inadequate knowledge of Ryukyuan affairs.

The last royal envoys from Ryukyu to reach Choson, in 1500, clearly represented King Shō Shin, who endowed Enkakuji 圓覺寺 with the sutras granted by the Korean ruler. Shō Shin had established that temple in 1494 in the capital and named Kaiin Shōko as the founding Abbot. However, the temple’s repository was destroyed by the Shimazu 島津 family’s attack on Ryukyu in 1609 and the sutras were severely damaged. By placing the scriptures acquired abroad in temples closely associated with the monarch, the Ryukyuan kings melded personal belief, patronage, and governance. Moreover, as in Japan, these rare sutras were tools of royal power, as well as the expression of spiritual pursuits. The returns do seem to have been considered worth the cost of sending embassies so far.

Requests by Imposter Identities

The coupling of eligibility for sutras with political status did not go unnoticed by elites in Tsushima and/or Hakata. To take advantage of the exchange and sutra privileges not available to individuals of lower diplomatic status, they assumed imposter identities and then sent trade missions under these names. When seeking sutras and other temple materials, they preferred to pose as Muromachi bakufu officials, kings of Ryukyu, and kings of non-existent countries. Under these titles, sponsors prepared letters that included petitions for sutras and other temple objects. However, these forms of imposter identity aimed at sanctioned trade because the court permitted kings and bakufu officials to deal in a greater quantity of goods than people of lower diplomatic status such as themselves. When they were successful in obtaining temple objects, the sutras and other materials were distributed under the real names of living elites in Tsushima or elsewhere.

The highest level of diplomatic status was accorded to those rulers other than the Chinese emperor who were received by the King of Choson. The court originally designed the next level of diplomatic status for the Ōuchi, but added bakufu officials after imposter missions began arriving in 1455. The issuing of sutras in 1460 and to imposters from the Hatakeyama 深山 and Yamana 山名 families in the 1470s extended eligibility to these status equals
of the Ōuchi within the court’s reception system. That is, to be received at the same diplomatic status as the Ōuchi made bakufu officials eligible to be granted copies of sutras. Who manipulated these imposter identities and to what end, why they sought religious objects, and what they did with the bestowals, are questions that cannot yet be answered.

Hatakeyama Yoshikatsu 畠山義勝, for example, was claimed to be the Shogun Deputy, which was the highest appointed post in the Muromachi bakufu. Although a member of a different family occupied this office at the time, however, Yoshikatsu nevertheless received the Koryō Tripitaka on his first mission, in 1470. A few years later, he sought construction supplies for “Tentokuji” 天徳寺, a temple in “Noto 能登 Province.” However, there is no record of such a temple in Noto Province in the 1470s, nor anyone among the living Hatakeyama named Yoshikatsu.

Iironies abound in this bestowal of the Koryō Tripitaka to Yoshikatsu. It has been shown, for example, that the tripitaka compiled by Koreans included apocryphal texts, that is, scriptural forgeries written centuries earlier by Chinese that had since “entered the mainstream of the Chinese Buddhist textual transmission.” Korean officials did not know that they were releasing fake sutras to an imposter whose envoy had delivered fraudulent documentation. As for the Japanese sponsors of the mission, they could not have known that their imposter envoy had been granted bogus sutras.

Yoshikatsu’s younger cousin also interacted with the Chosön court. Similarly introduced as the Shogun Deputy, this cousin, by the name of Hatakeyama Yoshinari 畠山義就, sent several missions to Chosön between 1460 and 1474. In 1474, he asked for assistance in rebuilding Tokuhonji 徳本寺, a temple which, it was said, had been constructed for his grandfather but which had recently burned down. Tokuhon 徳本 was the religious name taken upon retirement by Hatakeyama Mochikuni 畠山持国, one of the most powerful men in Japan in the mid-fifteenth century. Mochikuni did have a son named Yoshinari, but this son never served as Shogun Deputy. Like Yoshikatsu and Tentokuji, Yoshinari the Shogun Deputy and Tokuhonji almost certainly did not exist.

The Yamana, another powerful family in Japan, also became a conduit for sutra requests. In 1486, the Governor of Tsushima, Sō Sadakuni 宗貞国, forwarded an imaginative petition on behalf of Yamana Noritoyo 山名典豊, who was said to be seeking fourteen fascicles (J. satsu 冊) from the Koryō Tripitaka. Sadakuni informed the court that these volumes had been damaged. Explaining why Noritoyo had not sent an envoy, Sadakuni stated that he had been approached because Noritoyo did not want to put the Chosön government to the expense of receiving someone of his diplomatic status. Yamana Noritoyo had, however, died nineteen years earlier, in 1467.

Sadakuni’s explanation revealed a thorough knowledge of the Chosön court’s tribute system and reception policies. In 1486, it was all but impossible for the envoy of a Yamana imposter to obtain an audience with the King of Chosön. Since 1474, King Sŏngjong 成宗 had required the envoys of bakufu
officials to present an ivory tally from among those that he had entrusted with
Yoshimasa. Knowing that an ivory tally could not be obtained for Yamana
Noritoyo, Sadakuni was posing as the intermediary for this (imposter) bakufu
official.

The volumes that Sadakuni sought on behalf of Noritoyo also expose his
role. Sixteen years earlier, in 1470, an imposter calling himself Yamana
Noritoyo had received the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra. Not surprisingly,
it is difficult to ascertain just when the texts mentioned by Sadakuni were
damaged, if indeed they were. Was the Governor of Tsushima actually
attempting to replace damaged volumes obtained earlier, or was he hoping
to acquire volumes missing from another release or from loot taken still
earlier by pirates? Whatever the answer may be, these sponsors, too, took
advantage of the insufficient information about Japanese politics that guided
the Chosôn court’s management of maritime relations.

Japanese in the western provinces also kept a watchful eye on the
bestowal of sutras to both the authentic and the imposter rulers of Japan and
Ryukyu. Between 1478 and 1482, three embassies from the “King of Jiubian”
久邊 and one from the “King of Ezogachishima” 夷千島 reached Chosôn. Whether formed in Tsushima or in Hakata, or by a corporation of people in
both locations, the sponsors used the title of sovereign to initiate diplomatic
relations and exchange. Sutras were included on the grounds of Japanese and
Ryukyuan rulers being eligible.

To convince the Chosôn court of the existence of Jiubian, which was said
to be near Ryukyu, and of Ezogachishima, described as being north of Japan,
proved to be beyond the abilities of the sponsors and their envoys. The
Chosôn court did not extend diplomatic recognition to these “kings” and did
not receive them as equals to the King of Chosôn in diplomatic status. Rather,
Sŏngjong received them only after the court decided to accord them a lower
diplomatic status. The Chosôn court used this tactic as a way of indicating that
the mission was considered fraudulent. Such exposure and diminished status
also rendered these envoys ineligible for scriptures.

The refusals to “kings” which the court did not treat diplomatically as such
suggests that there were other values that Korean elites placed on the sutras.
In accordance with established diplomatic protocol, Sŏngjong presented the
envoys with return gifts for the “kings” of Jiubian and Ezogachishima,
confident that the gifts would reach neither “country.” The items prepared for
the King of Jiubian in 1478 were meager in quantity, while the cotton and hemp
presented to the King of Ezogachishima in 1482 equaled a mere one percent
of the same goods presented to Ashikaga Yoshimasa at the same time.

The presentation of return gifts distinguished sutras from other items made
available for transfer. The confidence that the envoys would hand the sutras
to someone other than the King of Jiubian or the King of Ezogachishima
without doubt also influenced the refusals. Recognition, and thus reception, at
the level of diplomatic status at which the envoy introduced himself to the King
of Chosôn became another condition that had to be met to become eligible to

76 Sŏngjong shillok 50:7b-8b [1474/12/15].
77 Sŏngjong shillok 7:25b [1470/9/19].
78 The next three paragraphs are from Kenneth R. Robinson, “The Jiubian and
Ezogachishima embassies to Chosôn, 1478–1482,” Chosenshi kenkyûkai ronbunshû 35
acquire sutras. In other words, the Chosŏn court did not consider it appropriate for sutras to be bestowed upon people who sought to deceive the King.

Sponsors designed these various styles of imposter identity purely for the purpose of exchange. Further, as they well knew, only by having their envoys possess supposedly high diplomatic status was there any possibility of securing the release of sutras. As the Sŏ and the Ōuchi among the likely participants were also eligible, these requests may also have been intended for people or temples not on the short-list of recipients. The adoption of imposter identities was thus a useful vehicle for the acquisition of Buddhist texts by those who would otherwise have been excluded.

**Following Sutras into Japan**

Of the sutra-releases to Japanese that are noted in Korean sources, many cannot readily be linked to surviving sutras in Japan. Any number of these extant texts probably reached the islands as loot carried off by pirates or by Japanese armies in the 1590s.⁹⁷ Regarding scriptures whose transfer was recorded in Chosŏn or in Japan, the religious and political networks, the underlying motivations, and the various meanings invested in scriptures may be deduced from their release and placement in religious institutions. Of course, sutras absorbed new significance with each new placement during their careers.

Sutras obtained on the peninsula were subsequently frequently moved within Japan. On occasion, powerful political élites ordered their transfer from one religious institution to another. In the early seventeenth century, for example, the Mōri 毛利 family, which in the mid-sixteenth century had gained control of provinces previously held by the Ōuchi, delivered sutras that the Ōuchi had obtained to Tokugawa Ieyasu 德川家康. Ieyasu then placed the texts in institutions of his own choice, thus utilizing the moving and reassignment of Buddhist objects as another means of asserting the new government’s authority and power.⁸⁰

The Koryŏ Tripitaka that was brought to Japan in 1482 by an elderly monk from Enjōji 円城寺 in Yamato 大和 Province, through Yoshimasa’s sponsorship, came via a different route into Ieyasu’s possession. Replenishing Enjōji with sutras obtained in Chosŏn had been simply one gesture of assistance towards the rebuilding of the temple following its devastation by fire in 1466. That the temple should have approached Yoshimasa over this demonstrates how personal, religious, and political connections operated in political and religious hierarchies—links that were probably not unlike those employed by other temples that desired religious objects from Chosŏn. Enjōji held the sutras until they were appropriated by Ieyasu, who then deposited the collection in Zōjōji 増城寺, the Tokugawa family temple in Edo, in 1613. He also seized copies of the tripitaka that had been printed in Song and Yuan China. Placing these too in the family temple, he entrusted it with one copy of each of the Chinese-language tripitaka sets then available.⁸¹


TREATED AS TREASURES

As noted earlier, from the mid-fifteenth century, requests for sutras often originated in temples that then asked shoguns and provincial governors for help with construction and reconstruction projects. Among the embassies from Yoshimasa, that of 1456 highlights the benefits to be gained from such political and religious interests. Hoping to procure sutras for Jokokuji, a Rinzai Zen temple recently constructed in Mino Province that was of shozan status, the Governor of Mino, a member of the Toki family, approached the Shogun for assistance. The founding abbot of Jokokuji had, earlier in his career, been the founding abbot of a monastery attached to Kenninji. The Toki had built both of the institutions to which the founding abbots had been appointed. Furthermore, that abbot, and in all likelihood the two monks who traveled to Choson to request the copies of the sutras, now belonged to the Kezō school in the Muso lineage. The Governor enjoyed access to the Shogun because his family had supported the Ashikaga since the early years of the war between the Southern and Northern courts.

Several powerful networks converged in the outfitting of this embassy, including the Toki’s patronage of Rinzai Zen monasteries and monks of the Muso lineage, the Toki’s relationship with the Ashikaga, and the Ashikaga’s support of that same lineage.

In 1487, Yoshimasa, now the retired shogun but still the “King of Japan,” obtained sutras for a hermitage at Ankokuji in Echigo Province. The possibility of obtaining the Koryō Tripitaka through shogunal sponsorship became another of the “advantages of a direct tie with the Ashikaga.” The monk who served as the envoy in this instance probably belonged to the same school within the Muso lineage as those who had earlier represented Jōkokuji, for while in Tsushima he called upon a Kezō-school monk who was active there. Again, relationships between monks and samurai elites contributed to the preparation of this embassy. The subsequent “life history” of the texts, however, cannot (yet) be traced any further.

While that shogunal embassy was in Choson, Ōuchi Masahiro, the governor of Nagato and Suō provinces in western Honshu and head of this powerful family, was waiting to send a mission on behalf of Hasedera, a temple in Yamato Province that had been severely damaged by fire in 1469. Since that catastrophe, monks had been reconstructing the temple buildings and the pagoda, and the Koryō Tripitaka that Masahiro had managed to obtain in Choson along with its new depository comprised part of that project. Less than ten years after being placed at Hasedera, however, the texts and the depository were destroyed by another conflagration, leaving us without answers to such questions as to what ritual and other purposes did the monks put the sutras, and was usage restricted to selected visitors?

By the time of the Ōuchi’s assistance to the Hasedera, the family’s record of successful patronage had stretched over nearly ninety years. In the early fifteenth century, Ōuchi Morimi approached the Korean king Taejong for sutras almost annually between the years 1407 and 1417. That Morimi bestowed the sutras obtained by the 1407 and 1409 missions on local temples suggests the reasons that may have prompted the sutra requests.
Petitions for sutras originated in part from the family's position in Suō Province and their low social status in élite Kyoto society. In Suō, Morimi succeeded in distancing the shogunate from direct administration in the province as he further strengthened the Ōuchi's governance there. The requests were linked to personal and familial matters, too: Morimi wanted to care for deceased relatives, accumulate merit, and deepen ties with Buddhist—especially Tendai—institutions in the province. He also wanted to commemorate and publicize the family's genealogy in Kyoto, as well as in Suō. Sutras thus assumed broader significance as the Ōuchi promoted their genealogy, their support of Buddhism, their relations with the Chosōn court, and their standing among the courtiers and samurai in the capital.

Genealogy distinguished the Ōuchi from their contemporaries among the samurai élite. Unlike the Ashikaga and other samurai families, the Ōuchi were not descended from a branch of the imperial family. At best, they appear to have originated as a clan (uji) named Tatara 多多羅 that settled in the Suō area in the seventh century. They served subsequently as provincial government officials, and became hereditary governors of Suō Province as a reward for assistance rendered to Ashikaga Takauji 足利尊氏 in 1336. By 1389, if not earlier, the Ōuchi were linking their family's origin to a Korean monarch of many centuries earlier.

The Ōuchi claimed that their progenitor was a prince from Paekche named Imsŏng 琳聖. According to the family history related in an account of Yoshimitsu's shogunal progress in 1389, Prince Imsŏng, the third son of King Sŏngmyŏng 聖明 (r. 523–53), crossed over to Japan to meet Prince Šōtoku. The Japanese prince was impressed by his guest, and granted Imsŏng lands in the Suō area near where his ship had made landfall. Imsŏng's son later took the family name Tatara, which still later became the clan name of the Ōuchi.

In 1399, when Ōuchi Yoshihiro forwarded Yoshimitsu's request for the tripitaka's printing blocks, he used the occasion to seek recognition of the Ōuchi's royal origins and to ask for land not merely in Chosōn but in former Paekche territory. Yoshihiro informed the court that the Japanese did not know of his family's provenance in the Paekche royal family and asked to be provided with proof. Had the court granted this request, the Ōuchi could have used its royal acknowledgement as verification of their high birth. Meanwhile, after studying the ancient historical records, Korean officials reported that information was lacking about the royal line. They merely stated that it was possible that the Ōuchi may have been descended from the Ko 高 of Onjo 温祚, who were the founding family of Paekche. Clearly, Yoshihiro was seeking evidence that would support the family's assertions of a relationship with the Kyoto élites.

This claim to a royal origin was frequently mentioned by both Korean officials and Japanese. The fullest account in Korean sources dates from 1453. During that mission, the King of Chosōn bestowed upon Ōuchi Norihiro 大内教弘 a split-tally seal (K. tongshin-pu 通信符). This special
The Tatara family came to Japan, and for this reason we are Japanese. A certain Ōmuraji raised an army and sought to destroy the Buddhist law. Prince Shōtoku, the son of our King [J. kokutō], revered and respected the Buddhist law. There was a battle. At this time, the King of Paekche ordered Prince Imsŏng to punish Ōmuraji [大連]. Imsŏng thus became Lord Ōuchi. Shōtoku rewarded Imsŏng for his meritorious deeds and presented him with provinces and counties. From that time, Imsŏng took the name of that area and became Lord Ōuchi. Are there not relatives of the Ōuchi in Chosŏn?

It is known that the wisdom of seniors is passed to princely men and is visible in one's lineage. At the time Ōmuraji raised his army it was Kyŏtŏ 4 [581] in Japan. In Sui China, it was Kaihuang 1 [581]. From Kyŏtŏ 4 to Keitai 4 [1453] approximately 873 years have passed. Your country must have records of Prince Imsŏng's move to Japan. In the lands governed by the Ōuchi the records have been lost because of the many battles over the generations. That which has been recorded now has been passed down orally by elders in our country.93

This rendition, considerably more inflated than that of 1389, invites explanation, and a brief review will help to explain the connection between genealogy, the Koryŏ Tripitaka, and Prince Shōtoku. Mononobe-no-Moriya Ōmuraji 物部守屋大連, whose family opposed the spread of Buddhism in Japan, raised armies three times during the fifth month of 587. That same month, envoys from Paekche arrived at the capital. The Soga and Mononobe families had disagreed about the role of Buddhism in Japan, and Soga no Umako 蘇我馬子 led an attack on Moriya two months later. During the fighting Moriya was killed by Tomi-no-Obito Ichihī 追見首赤穂. The battle resulted in the defeat of this opponent of Buddhism. Of course, the war was not fought solely over Buddhism. A constellation of issues, including the royal succession and power struggles, also influenced the conflict. At this time Shōtoku was fourteen years old and participated only peripherally in the fighting.95

According to the mythology that enshrouded Shōtoku after his death, he was said to have assumed the leadership of the forces arrayed against the Mononobe and shot the arrow that killed Moriya.96 The Ōuchi family-origin story told in 1453 reflects both accretions to Shōtoku's deeds and enhancements of the contributions of Imsŏng, and thus of the Ōuchi, to Japanese history. First, it relocates the defeat of the anti-Buddhist forces from 587, as recorded in the Nibon sboki, to 581, when the historical Shōtoku was eight years old. Second, Shōtoku is presented as a powerful official in the government in 581 and a supporter of Buddhism. Third, Imsŏng's arrival is dated to the King of Paekche's support of pro-Buddhist forces in Japan, although no military assistance is recorded in extant Japanese and Korean materials.

This history connected Imsŏng's appearance in Japan to an order of the
Figure 1

Approach to the supposed burial site of Imsŏng at Jōfukuji, Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan (photograph by Takahashi Kimiaki)
Shōtoku as described in the 1389 account. Personal effects also are said to have been stored here. Morimi endowed Eikōji 永興寺, another Tendai temple, with the sutra-release of 1407. This monastery held a Buddhist statute that Imsŏng had brought from Paekche until it too was transferred, probably by Ieyasu, to another temple in the early seventeenth century. Thus Imsŏng was attributed with having played an important role in the spread of Buddhism to Suŏ, and by extension to Japan.

The family also emphasized their founder in other ways. In 1414, Morimi attempted to build a shrine in Imsŏng’s memory at the place where he had performed Buddhist prayers according to the 1389 account. They remembered him in death, too. He is said to be buried at Jōfukuji 乗福寺, a Rinzai Zen temple that served from the 1360s as Suŏ Province’s pagoda center (j. rishō 利生). Nearby rests the temple’s founder, Morimi’s great-great-grandfather. In addition, that temple even has a wooden statue of Imsŏng.

Through Imsŏng, the Ōuchi could stand with the Ashikaga and other families in tracing their genealogy to ancient rulers. If earlier versions of the founding had not already done so, the Ōuchi highlighted the founder’s relationship with Prince Shōtoku. In the variation presented to the King of Chosŏn, which probably did not circulate in Japan given the availability of the Nihon shoki and other ancient texts, the family emphasized the importance of Paekche élites, and by implication their ancestors, to the presence of Buddhism in Japanese society. Dating their origins to the late sixth century and the early seventh century adroitly rendered the Ōuchi hundreds of years older than samurai families founded by imperial progeny. They used the history of Buddhism in Paekche and in Japan not only to construct a royal genealogy, but also to distinguish their support from both that given by aristocratic families in the past and that provided by their contemporaries. In the pursuit of greater prestige and social standing, the Ōuchi inflated their significance in Japanese history. Through the 1389, 1399, 1407, 1409, and 1453 references to Imsŏng, the Ōuchi hoped to realize their desire for provincial, central, and foreign recognition of their prominence by employing strategies that made use of genealogy, history, and Buddhism. The acquisition and distribution of sutras offered the ideal culturally-constituted means to that end.
Still other samurai families, such as the Ochi 越, dated their origins to relatives of earlier (mythical) emperors (Ochi keizu, in Gunsho keizu-bu [The Ochi genealogy] [Tokyo: Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, 1985], vol.6, p.136).

**Conclusion**

The release of Buddhist scriptures assisted people in varying communities. As Confucian legislators transformed Korean society, they removed religious items from temple inventories and thus from ritual practice. Elites based overseas strove to obtain these rare, invaluable, foreign objects and, with a broader application in mind, entrusted them to religious institutions. Of course, the messages and meanings carried by the sutras differed from request to request, from release to release, and from endowment to endowment, as well as over time.

In Chosŏn, releases also could express a monarch's discomfort with the extent of social change being demanded or legislated by court officials. Japanese and Ryukyuan were the willing beneficiaries of these disagreements over the relevance of Buddhism in Korean society and over the power of the king. Moreover, as we have observed, some Japanese élites skilfully accommodated themselves to Korean court politics, patterns of granting, and royal generosity by making requests through imposter identities that fitted the models required for release or bestowal. In other words, élites in western Japan made use of their insights into the Korean reception system, the narrow channels of eligibility, and the court's limited knowledge of Japanese and Ryukyuan politics to gain more frequent access to temple items.

Sejo magnified the political visibility of the release of sutras, and thus the connotations that could be read from and into his statements, just as he made use of diplomacy in his patronage of Buddhism. His actions revealed his interest in moving Chosŏn from a China-centered Confucian cosmopolitanism to a Buddhist one emanating from Chosŏn and supporting the religion in Japan and Ryukyu. In this latter context, Sejo shared a common interest in Buddhist teachings and technologies with foreign rulers and others who turned to him, as the King of Chosŏn, for assistance. This stance appealed to both Japanese and Ryukyuan, as can be seen from their frequent requests, benefiting variously, as they did, from Sejo's projects.

One question remains, however. Why was the Chosŏn court still providing Buddhist scriptures decades after piracy had abated? Or, put differently, why was this tool still available to Sejo? The precedent of practice and the practice of precedent both suggest answers. It was most likely an ongoing concern on the part of the Chosŏn court that the Japanese in the western provinces might revert to piracy that underlay their maintenance of the practice. In the case of the Ōuchi and the Sō, the initial linkage, in the bestowal of sutras to them, of cooperation against pirates was probably never lost. Other answers may be found if we consider the ongoing contestation over Buddhism's place in Chosŏn society and monarchical power. The careers of these sutras often intersected with multifarious interests, coalitions, and issues in Chosŏn, Japan, and Ryukyu. As vehicles through which meaning was imparted to others, sutras acquired complex layers of inscribed values as they circulated as cultural treasures.