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In *Buddhas and Ancestors*, Juhn Y. Ahn tackles one of the thorniest questions in medieval Korean history: why did the attitudes of Korea’s scholar-officials/social elite change from general approbation of religious piety and lavish patronage of the Buddhist institution to questioning the validity of such pious activity and the adoption of what Ahn calls “classicist” (*yu* 儒) ideals in the late Koryŏ period (918–1392)? More simply, he seeks to problematize the conventional explanation of the rejection of Buddhism and the adoption of Neo-Confucian social culture in Korea in the late Koryŏ period as the inexorable advance of Neo-Confucian social reform driven by ideology. Although I use the term “Neo-Confucianism” in this review, Ahn rarely uses this term or even the word “Confucianism” in the book. Instead, one of Ahn’s strategies is to disassociate the ideals of the social elite from these terms, which he obviously views as problematic but does not fully explain why, and renames them generally as “classicism” (pp. 18, 89, 110, 122, 125).

Ahn analyzes the problematic issue of the “Confucianization of Korea”—not from the standpoint of ideology or thought, as have earlier scholars, but from the perspective of how social elites utilized their wealth to manage death. His fundamental argument, as I understand it, is that wealth and merit had become “incommensurables” (pp. 8, 16, 81) to the class of *sa* 士 (scholar-officials). Although social elites previously manifested their status and insured blessings and benefits for themselves and their families in a Buddhist mode by founding and/or refurbishing votive temples in the preceding Silla (ca. 300–935) and early Koryŏ periods, to some elites and officials in the late Koryŏ period wealth and merit were “not proportional or obviously related” (p. 8). By labeling traditional Buddhism funerary practices as a “dark and mysterious way” (*myŏngmyŏng* 冥冥), these scholar-officials/social elites could question the efficacy of using wealth to insure blessings in the netherworld or next life (pp. 35–58). These elites wanted to separate what we would call religion and promises of salvation after death from the display of wealth. Instead of simply attributing this to the rise in Neo-Confucian-style education and the inexorable adoption of procedures encouraged in Zhu Xi’s (1130–1200) *Family Ritual*, the primary thrust of *Buddhas and Ancestors* is to engage in an extended rumination on and problematization of the efficacy of Buddhist funerary practices in the late Koryŏ world.

Another way that Ahn frames the challenging issue of “Confucianization” in Koryŏ is to emphasize the growing concern or difference in Koryŏ society between what Ahn describes as *sejok* 世族 (hereditary elites) customs and *sajok* 士族 (fami-
lies of scholars) credentials or ideals (p. 122). He uses these terms almost as heuristic devices in chapters 1, 2, 3, and 5 of the book, attempting to show how certain individuals (typically parvenus, social climbers, and low-born favorites of Koryŏ kings in the period of Mongol influence [roughly 1259–1368]) aped the traditional, Buddhist-inspired customs of Koryŏ’s hereditary elites, and how these customs were increasingly questioned by scholar-officials using a moral compass based on the writings of Zhu Xi in the fourteenth century. To Ahn’s credit, he successfully maintains an evenhanded appraisal of the respective (and ideologically shifting/evolving) positions of the Koryŏ king, the regular bureaucracy, and court favorites in Koryŏ’s power politics. The downside of this is that it is often hard for the reader to gauge where the author’s intellectual sympathies lie. In other words, does Ahn support and validate kingly attempts to foster royal authority, or does he identify with the scholar-officials who would prefer a docile king who is influenced and controlled easily by the officialdom?

Chapter 4, “All the King’s Men,” is a detailed account of the complex relations between the Koryŏ and Mongol courts and families of officials roughly between Koryŏ’s submission to Mongol rule in 1259 and the end of the Koryŏ. It has the most nuanced description available in English of Koryŏ kings’ son-in-law relationship with Mongol emperors—particularly Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–94) —and also the complex court politics, schemes, enthronement and dethronement machinations, and legitimacy issues surrounding the reigns of the “loyal” kings Ch’ungnyŏl (r. 1274–1308), Ch’ungsŏn (r. 1298, 1308–13), Ch’ungsuk (r. 1313–30, 1332–39), Ch’unghe (r. 1330–32, 1339–44), Ch’ungmok (r. 1344–48), and Ch’ungjong (r. 1348–51). This chapter provides the political context, and in this reviewer’s opinion it is the most interesting chapter in the book. A weakness of this chapter, and of the book on the whole, unfortunately, is that the meaning and significance of most Mongol administrative terms are not explained in the text (e.g., darughachi [p. 93], qorchi [p. 95]). The same may also be said of certain Koryŏ-period governmental terms, such as chaech’u宰樞 (pp. 93, 95–96, 102). An explanation of the Korean terms can usually be found in the index, but the Mongol terms are usually not explained anywhere in the book. Thus, the subtle nuances that Ahn rightly suggests regarding the relations between Mongol lords and Koryŏ elites are often difficult to clearly understand. For this reason, the audience of Buddhas and Ancestors is limited to specialists and graduate students.

Although I generally concur that Buddhas and Ancestors represents a “nuanced treatment of the changing relationship between social elites and Buddhism throughout the Koryŏ period” (blurb by John B. Duncan on back cover), I am not fully persuaded by Ahn’s thesis because he conveniently renames Neo-Confucianism as “classicism,” which I find problematic because it conceals the aspect of social reform and self-cultivation heralded in much of Song Confucianism, and he does not factor into his narrative and critical analysis the sociopolitical and sociocultural consequences of the arrival of Zhu Xi’s commentaries in Koryŏ and their acceptance as the standard commentaries used for passing the examination system—as they were in Yuan China beginning in 1313. Ahn refers to several Koryŏ scholars who passed the civil service exam in either Koryŏ or Yuan, but there is no contextual information in the narrative to explain the sociopolitical and sociocultural changes going on in Yuan China. Although it is perhaps unfair to emphasize this shortcoming, Koryŏ elites participated in a shared cultural world with their colleagues in Yuan China, and Chinese social elites had made a similar evolution toward Neo-Confucian values which would not have been lost on Koryŏ elites like Yi Kok (1298–1351) and his son Yi Saek (1328–96), to name a few.[1]

Certainly, the book demonstrates that there is sufficient reason to question the conventional the-
ory that the rise of Neo-Confucianism was inevitable in Korea, but its limited focus on the use of wealth for dealing with death and willful obscuring of the social impact and application of Neo-Confucian learning does not advance a fully formed alternative theory. The primary strength of *Buddhas and Ancestors* is its unpacking of the complex relationship between the Mongol and Koryŏ court. In this connection, Ahn’s key point is that intellectual and social culture and identity of the *sajok* (families of scholars)—the emerging literati class or regular bureaucracy (p. 111)—was evolving away from Buddhism and the traditional customs of the *sejok* (hereditary elites), but he does not satisfactorily explain away how Neo-Confucian ideology and the social reforms advocated in Zhu Xi’s writings and Song Confucianism, as a whole, were not the root cause of questioning the efficacy of Buddhist funerary practices.

To be sure, the separation of wealth from the “true” or “pure” practice of religion made it possible for some social elites/scholar-officials to speak of “corruption” and “decay” within the Buddhist establishment (p. 138). This critical appraisal of the worldliness of the tradition existed to a certain extent within the East Asian Buddhist institution itself in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (e.g., Hōnen [1133–1212] and Shinran [1173–1263] in Japan), leading such figures as Chinul (1158–1210) to eschew the great monasteries of the Koryŏ capital to organize religious groups, such as his Samādhi and Prajñā Community, in a remote region in Korea’s southwest. But I question Ahn’s assessment that the Buddhist establishment was a “private corporation” (pp. 138–39). Although Koryŏ’s Buddhist church was wealthy enough to do many things on its own—due primarily to generous patronage of royalty, hereditary elites, and others who, in part, wished to acquire benefits for their deceased, as well as display their wealth in an appropriate manner—it also had a complex relationship with the Koryŏ state as well, which attempted to shape and exert control over it, and was successful in doing so in numerous ways.

Ahn’s book itself and the research of other scholars, particularly Sem Vermeersch, demonstrate this complex relationship well, so I am confused by his final appraisal of the Buddhist institution as “private.”[2] In the end, the relevance of “Neo-Confucian” rhetoric in most written sources is obvious.

On the whole, *Buddhas and Ancestors* contains few errors of fact for a book of its complexity. One minor error of fact I would correct, because it has bearing on the relationship between the Buddhist church and the state is that Kukch’ŏng Monastery (Koryŏ’s Guoqingsi) was not built by Úich’ŏn (1055–1101) as Ahn reports (p. 67). According to Úich’ŏn, its construction was the result of a vow made by Úich’ŏn’s mother, Queen Dowager Inye (d. 1092), who had a personal interest in Tiantai (Ch’ŏnt’ae in Korean) penance practices. This vow was fulfilled by his elder brother King Sukchong (r. 1095–1105). Commissioned by the royal court, the monastery functioned as her votive temple. Úich’ŏn was merely asked to serve as its first abbot in 1097, while concurrently serving as abbot of Hŭngwang Monastery, his father, King Munjong’s (r. 1046–83) votive temple.

*Buddhas and Ancestors* is a welcome addition to the growing library of secondary studies on medieval Korea and should stimulate debate among specialists and graduate students for whom this book is accessible.

Notes

[1]. For more on these issues see David Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2009). Incidentally, Ahn lists the book in his bibliography.

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