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## An Early Korean Version of the Buddha's Biography

Sem Vermeersch

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The *Sökka Yörae haengjök song* (Ode on the acts of the Tathāgata Śākyamuni) was written by the Korean Ch'önt'ae (Ch. Tiantai) monk Mugi in 1328. It is a biography of the Buddha in verse form, which in character somewhat resembles a seventh-century biography by the Chinese official Wang Bo. Both are based on Chinese renditions of the Buddha's life story, but while Wang's work is a terse adaptation tailored to the tastes of a literati audience, in Mugi's work the terse verse format functions as a framework to contain extensive commentaries. The commentaries discuss Tiantai doctrinal points as well as issues that confronted both lay and monastic practitioners of the time. Mugi's foremost concern seems to have been to use the life of the Buddha as an inspiration to counter lax interpretations of the precepts among his fellow monks and inspire them to have more respect for lay donors.

### Introduction

Scholarship on the biography of the Buddha has traditionally focused on discovering the real person behind the myths, and as such many studies dealing with the Buddha's life have been based almost exclusively on the earliest Indian sources. Although the past two decades or so have witnessed a move away from the obsession with Buddhist origins, the vast body of Chinese texts that describe the life of Śākyamuni has been virtually ignored following the pioneering work of Samuel Beal in the late nineteenth century. In this paper, I intend to use a fourteenth-century Korean work – the *Sökka Yörae haengjök song* (Ode on the acts of the Tathāgata Śākyamuni) by Mugi – as a starting point to reflect on the role of the

Buddha's life story in the religious life of medieval Korea. The work is derived from earlier Chinese biographies, and will allow us to see how the biography was understood, how it developed, and how it appealed to religious sensibilities in Koryŏ Korea (918-1392). About a century after it was composed, one of the first works to be written in the newly created Korean alphabet was a biography of the Buddha called *Sŏkpo sangjŏl* 釋譜詳節 (*Detailed record of the Buddha's life*, 1447), followed by a poetic version, the *Wŏrin chŏngang chi kok* 月印千江之曲 (*Songs of [the Buddha's] moon reflected in a thousand rivers*, 1449; see Olof). Although better known, these works have not been amply studied either. To understand the Korean contribution to the development of the biography, we would need a systematic comparison between the *Sŏkka Yŏrae haengjŏk song* and Chinese biographies on the one hand, and later Korean biographies on the other. Given the present state of scholarship this is not yet feasible; thus this paper will limit itself to situating the work in the long tradition of writing the life story of the Buddha and to teasing out aspects of its religious agenda.

To provide some context, I will first try to sketch the history and development of the biography of the Buddha as a genre of Buddhist literature, to show Mugi's indebtedness to the Chinese redactions of this genre. Next, I will summarize all our current knowledge about Mugi and his work; and finally, I will try to assess the significance of the sectarian and other religious agendas that are clearly present in this work.

### Development of the biography in East Asia

Ironically, despite the obvious importance of the figure of Śākyamuni in the Buddhist religion, Western scholars have paid comparatively little attention to his biographies. More precisely, they have paid little attention to the religious function of his biography. Instead, since the end of the 19th century, the focus has been almost entirely on recovering the "real Siddhartha," the historical figure behind the myths; as a result, most biographies composed in Asia over the past two millennia were rejected out of hand as hagiography, and instead scholars focused on finding the most reliable elements in the earliest textual strata, the Pali texts. With the realization that this representation of Buddhism is a form of "protestant Buddhism" spawned in the context of colonialism, the study of Buddhism has undergone a sea change in recent decades, but with as yet comparatively little attention to the traditional representation of the Buddha's life; an exception is John Powers' recent *A Bull of a Man*, but for studies of the East Asian tradition, the pickings are still

meager. Following the pioneering translations of Samuel Beal, there are only the abridged translation of an early Chinese version by Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky and a few partial studies, most of them focusing, however, on the art-historical aspects of the story (Lesbre, Murray).

The best starting point for an overview of the complex biographical tradition is still Lamotte's treatment of the "deified Buddha". Despite sharing his contemporaries' skepticism regarding the value of the "legend", at least he takes the material seriously. Lamotte discerns five stages in the development of this legend (Lamotte 1986, 648):

1. biographical fragments found in *sūtras*
2. biographical fragments found in *Vinayas*
3. autonomous but incomplete "lives"
4. complete lives of the Buddha
5. The Sinhalese compilations

One can of course argue about the agenda of this scheme, which supposes a gradual progression towards more sophisticated (and more mythologizing) biographies, but it remains a useful starting point. What interests me for the purposes of this article is especially sections 3 and 4; what he terms "incomplete" biographies are those that focus only on part of the Buddha's career, typically from birth to enlightenment (excluding his ministry and death). Although a few Sanskrit texts remain, notably the *Buddhacarita*, *Lalitavistara* and *Mahāvastu*, the bulk of the material is in Chinese; Volumes 3 and 4 of the Taishō edition of the East Asian canon contain numerous biographical scriptures, the oldest one translated in 197 AD. How closely these texts follow Indian source texts is not clear, though comparison with the remaining Sanskrit texts shows a high degree of faithfulness.

But there is another category of texts, not discussed by Lamotte, that it is also very useful to consider: completely new renditions made in China.<sup>1</sup> From the sixth century onwards, a number of texts appear that were composed by Chinese monks:

1. *Shijia pu* 釋迦譜 (*Genealogy of the Śākyas*), T 2040; K 1047; Compiled by Sengyou (445-518) of the Liang (502-557)

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<sup>1</sup> As far as I am aware, no studies have yet been made of these texts; Arthur Link wrote a very interesting article on Sengyou's life and works, yet among his works focuses almost exclusively on the *Chu sanzang jing*, devoting only a few lines to the *Shijia pu* (Link, 26). The work is also briefly mentioned in Sonya Lee's *Surviving Nirvana* (Lee 94-96).

2. *Shijia shipu* 釋迦氏譜 (*Clan genealogy of the Śākyas*), T 2041; K 1049; Compiled either by Sengyou of the Liang or [more likely] by Daoxuan (596-667) of the Tang in 665
3. *Shijia fangzhi* 釋迦方志 (*Gazetteer of the Śākyas*), T 2088; K 1048; Compiled by Daoxuan of the Tang in 650.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously these were compiled because it was felt that the Indian biographies lacked something, so it can be surmised that these biographies address specifically Chinese concerns: indeed, one finds that they introduce elements of Chinese Buddhist tradition, such as the dating of the Buddha's life according to events described in Chinese records.<sup>3</sup> The first two, as can be seen from the titles, are essentially "genealogies," studies of the Buddha's ancestors, both historically – from the first ancestor to his father – and mythically/spiritually, i.e., his relation to other Buddhas and the succession to his teachings by his disciples. An interesting aspect of these works is that they were written by monks with a keen interest in the *vinaya*.

In what appears to be a next step, these sinicized biographies were popularized (or rewritten for a different audience); the earliest such example I have found is Wang Bo's *Shijia rulai chengdao yinghua shiji ji* 釋迦如來成道[應化事蹟]記 (*Record of the Tathāgata Śākyamuni's enlightenment (and factual accounts of his miraculous transformation)*). As the title indicates, it is also a short biography of the Buddha, in 2034 characters (Lesbre, 70). Not much can be ascertained about the author or the text. The meager biographical details about Wang Bo 王勃 reveal that he was a very talented literatus who fell afoul of Emperor Gaozong (r. 649-683) after writing a satirical piece about the princes, and died early, aged 28 or 29.<sup>4</sup> His exact relation to Buddhism is not clear, but like many Tang scholars he may well have been a Buddhist in private. In any case, he wrote several pieces for Buddhist monasteries, mainly in Sichuan.<sup>5</sup> According to one tradition, this record

<sup>2</sup>Information based on Lancaster and Park. T stands for the Taishō Tripitaka compiled in Japan in the early twentieth century, and K for the Tripitaka Koreana, compiled in 1237-1248.

<sup>3</sup>For example, Daoxuan works the persecution of Buddhism in China into his account to illustrate the idea that the dharma was in its last phase. See Chen, 20. (citing T. 2088.51.973c).

<sup>4</sup>See the biographies collected in Lin Hetian, 285-289; according to the biographical essay by He Lintian in the preface, Wang's dates are 650-684.

<sup>5</sup>Mainly in the Zizhou and Yizhou circuits. The connection with Sichuan is not clear, but the following can be gleaned:

(1) According to Chen Huaiyu, p. 50 n. 70:

This footnote deals with Wang Bo's inscriptions for monasteries, notably two in Sichuan; e.g.

of the Buddha's life was composed for the Lingguang temple 靈光寺 when he was military attaché in Guozhou – it was carved on stone in the temple compound. However, this record is full of inconsistencies and cannot be taken at face value (He Lintian, 264, 267 n. 2). Also, it is very different in nature from the pieces he wrote for other temples.

Even though the piece's origin is not clear (e.g. whether it was commissioned or whether he wrote it for himself), there is some evidence about how it gained traction. In one edition of this text, very detailed annotations are added by the monk Daocheng 道誠.<sup>6</sup> The text by Wang Bo is an extremely terse overview of the Buddha's career; some events are described merely by the name of the locality where they took place. Therefore, Daocheng's comments (he lived ca. 1019), are very useful in helping to decipher Wang Bo's record.

Wang Bo's record together with Daocheng's commentary ultimately contributed to one of the most influential Chinese biographies of the Buddha, the *Shishi yuanliu* 釋氏源流 (*The origins and development of the Śākyas*). This was apparently the work of a monk called Baocheng 寶成, originally from the Ningbo region and working at the Baoen-si in Nanjing around 1425, when the work was published. All this can be gleaned from a short colophon found at the end of the first part of this edition (Ch'oe); no other information is available about this monk or his work. However, it can probably be explained against the background of the rapidly developing publishing world in this part of China; around the same time, illustrated books about Confucius' life appeared (Murray), so that there was clearly a demand for didactic, comprehensive works that could be read by a wider audience. The connection with Wang Bo's record is clear both from the fact that it is reprinted in editions of the *Shishi yuanliu*, and from the fact that the latter uses many phrases from Daocheng's commentary.

But the main feature of the *Shishi yuanliu* is that it neatly divides the narrative into 200 sections, with illustrations, each of a key event; the text consists mainly of citations from the earliest biographic scriptures. In a second edition of the text in 1486 the material is expanded to 400 sections: roughly half deal with the Buddha's life, and the other half with key people and events in the later history of Buddhism,

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“Yizhou Mianzhuxian Wudushan Jinghi [sic; should be Jinghui] si bei,” in *Wang Zìan jì zhu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 1995), 461-474. His dates are given as 650-676.

(2) Timothy Wai Keung Chan gives some more background but no information on his attitude to Buddhism (his research does mention Wang Bo's visit to Sichuan, where he visited some monasteries).

<sup>6</sup>Wang Bo, 147-173. This is most likely based on the Zokuzō edition.

mainly in China.<sup>7</sup> This work thus represents the culmination of biographies of the Buddha in China, preserving the main themes of the life story as developed from the first “incomplete” biographies in India, but integrating Chinese themes and expanding the narrative so that Chinese (and even Korean: this work also includes biographies of the Korean monks Ŭisang (625-702) and Wŏnhyo (617-686)) Buddhist history is also included. Korean attempts at creating a biography of the Buddha can best be understood against this sinitic background, but also show their own creative development.

### The earliest Korean biography: author and background

The *Sŏkka yŏrae haengjŏk song* 釋迦如來行蹟頌 (*Ode to the Acts of the Tathāgata Śākya[muni]*) was authored by the Koryŏ monk Mugi 無寄 around 1328. Unfortunately virtually nothing is known about this monk; all the information we have is to be found in the editions of this work, notably in the supplementary material such as forewords, postscripts and colophons. All editions first of all contain an introduction (sŏ 序) by the official Yi Suk-ki 李叔琪, a drafter of royal correspondence and official of the senior third rank in the Royal Secretariat.<sup>8</sup> This introduction, dated 1330, has the following to say about the work’s author:

Now Mr. Muk, a person from Mt Sihŭng,<sup>9</sup> whose personal name is Mugi, is a rustic person not given to ostentation, and this appearance is a reflection of his mind. In his younger days he traveled to Mt. Tiantai [Korean: Chŏnt’ae], concentrating his energies on vacuity. He personally drafted the *Acts of Tathāgata*, composing it in five-syllable [couplets], followed by comments.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>On the histories of these editions, see Chŏe Yŏnsik’s article.

<sup>8</sup>No biographical information about him is available: his name does not even appear in the *Koryŏsa* (*History of the Koryŏ dynasty*, 1451). He is known however as the author of three inscriptions, all dated to the period 1325-1330s. Two are short epitaphs for other officials, Cho Yŏn-su (1278-1325) and Kim Sŭng-yong (1268-1329), most likely composed in the years of their death, and one is a stele for the Yogacāra monk Misu (state preceptor Chajŏng, 1240-1327), erected in 1342 at Pŏpchu-sa. From this we know that Yi Suk-ki must have been regarded as one of the leading literati in the period 1325-1330.

<sup>9</sup>Sihŭng 始興: the only locality with this name I could find is a satellite city of Seoul, about 10 km. south of the city. But I have not been able to find any information confirming either that there is a mountain of this name; or that the locality had the same name in Koryŏ.

<sup>10</sup>From the edition in the *Han’guk Pulgyo chŏnsŏ* (Seoul: Tongguk taehakkyo, 1990), 6.484b12-15 [hereinafter HPC].

This introduction is followed by another introduction, this one by Mugi, who identifies himself as “Mugi, a Ch’ont’ae scholar in the final [days of the law] from Puam [hermitage]”. This introduction is dated 1328, which we can take as the year he finished this work. It is a postscript, however, that contains the most detailed information and ties together the few snippets from the introductions. The postscript (*pal* 跋) was written by the “śramana Ki from Paengnyön-sa on Mandök-san, on the eighth of the second month, [1330].” On Mugi, he writes:

Now the elder Mugi from Puam took refuge with a disciple of the fourth patriarch of Paengnyön-sa, Ch’önch’aek (state preceptor Chin-jöng, ca. 1206-1293), named Ian ... He tonsured his head and donned the monastic robes, and took Unmuk 雲默 as his dharma name. He mastered all the writings of his school, and passed the monastic exam with the top rank. He gained in reputation as abbot of Kuram [temple], and walked high up the road of fame. One morning [however] he spat it all out, discarding [fame] like an old shoe. He traveled to famous mountains such as Küm-gang and Odae-san, and finally arrived at Sihüng-san, where he built himself a hermitage to dwell. Till late he intoned the *Lotus sūtra*, invoked Amitābha, painted Buddhas and copied scriptures; this was his daily activity, and thus he spent twenty years. With his remaining energy he searched through the Buddhist scriptures and the writings of the patriarchs, and composed his *Odes on the Acts* with notes.<sup>11</sup>

Thus we know that, although mostly identified as Mugi, his monastic name was actually Unmuk (abbreviated as “Muk” by Yi Suk-ki). Although one author identifies him as a “monk of the Tiantai school, active in the Hangzhou region,”<sup>12</sup> he was clearly Korean. Possibly he went to China, which was certainly possible in this era, when Koryō was dominated by the Mongol Yuan dynasty, and many people could travel from Koryō to other places in the Yuan empire. Most importantly, he was part of the Korean Ch’ont’ae school, founded by Ŭich’ön (1055-1101), but especially the tradition started by Yose at Mandök-san.

<sup>11</sup>HPC 6.539c15-24.

<sup>12</sup>Lesbre, p. 70. The confusion probably stems from Yi Sukki’s intro, which says he traveled to Mt. Tiantai, not too far from Hangzhou; yet the author of this article also claims the introduction was written in 1278, but I could not find any evidence for such a date. The reference is to the *Shijia rulai xingji song* (*Dai Nihon zokuzōkyō*, 1-2 *yi* -3-2, pp. 104-122), clearly the same text as the one discussed here.

Yose 了世 (1163-1245), also known under his posthumous title Wönmyo kuksa, is especially famous as the founder of the “White Lotus Society” (Paengnyön kyōlsa 白蓮結社) at Mandök-san (near Kangjin, South Chōlla). Although he had become a monk in the Korean Chōnt’ae school, during the turmoil of the Military Period (1170-1256) he seems to have become swept up in Chinul’s reform movement, based on the formation of societies for the practice of *prajñā* and *samādhi*, but mainly under a Sōn (Zen) umbrella. After a while, however, he returned to a Chōnt’ae temple, and in 1208, during a retreat in a hermitage at Wölch’ul-san, he had a realization to the effect that only through a profound understanding of the Tiantai teachings could one get rid of the manifold afflictions (“diseases,” karmic actions). From then on he started to lay the foundations of a devotional movement based mainly on Tiantai traditions: in 1216 he organized the White Lotus Society at Mandök-san with the help of local lay supporters, and in 1221 another White Lotus Society at Namwön; in 1232 he launched the Samantabhadra ritual (普賢道場), which was to become the main focus of devotional practice. (Ch’ae 1991)

It is impossible here to unravel all the aspects of this movement; suffice it to say that though the name and soteriological framework were derived from Huiyuan’s famous White Lotus Society, more direct influences were Siming Zhili (960-1028) and Yongming Yanshou (d. 975); the actual Samantabhadra ritual combined Tiantai theology, *Lotus Sūtra* devotion, Pure Land incantation, and confession/penitence rites. It was continued after Yose’s death in 1245 by his disciple Chōnin (1205-1248), and after his premature death by another disciple, Chōnch’aek (1206-1293?). Chōnch’aek was known as the fourth patriarch of Mandök-san, and it was through one of his disciples, Ian 而安, that Mugi was connected to this tradition.<sup>13</sup> However, since we know so little about his life, we cannot exclude the influences of other traditions, although he was undoubtedly a committed Chōnt’ae monk, as will become clear when we look at his work.

## Acts of the Buddha

As already described in the introduction of Yi Suk-ki, the *Sōkka yōrae haengjōk song* is a narrative poem, interspersed with comments by the author. To be pre-

<sup>13</sup> Although we are relatively well informed about Yose, Chōnin, and Chōnch’aek, the first, second and fourth patriarchs, virtually nothing is known about the third patriarch, or about Mugi’s master Ian. For a brief overview of the problem of the Mandök-sa patriarchate, see Hō 1986, 277-78.

cise, it consists of 776 verses,<sup>14</sup> and refers to more than 90 sources (Yi 1977). The poem is regularly interrupted by blocks of commentary; since comments (or notes) usually pick up on a particular theme,<sup>15</sup> these interruptions can also be interpreted as marking subdivisions of the text, and thus we can divide it into 66 separate sections. If we look at the main themes of fascicle 1 (which deals with the Buddha's life), we have the following outline:

- Sections 1-12: cosmology; 11-12 deal with the creation of the world, and finish with the emphasis on how rare it is for a Buddha to come into this world
- Sections 13-15: The Buddha's family, his birth
- Sections 16-17: death of his mother, prowess in youth
- Sections 18-21: four encounters, vow to leave household
- Sections 22-25: escape from palace, years of arduous practice
- Sections 26-36: enlightenment, beginning of ministry, five periods of teaching, marvelous efficacy of supreme teaching
- Sections 37-44: final teachings, *nirvāṇa*, cremation, distribution of relics, King Aśoka
- Sections 45-47: continuation and future of the teachings

This is the content of fasc. 1, which deals with the Buddha's life; fasc. 2 covers themes such as the transmission to China, the end-of-dharma timeframe, the need for meritorious action, pure land teachings, and what constitutes correct practice for monks.

Thus it is immediately obvious that the story of the Buddha's life occupies only a very small portion of this work: for example, the part from his family to the four encounters only occupies 50 verses. This excerpt illustrates how terse the narrative is:

Seven days after giving birth,  
                   his mother died and was reborn in Trayastriṃśaḥ.  
 His aunt greatly loved the Way,

---

<sup>14</sup>According to Mugi's own statement: HPC 6.485b3. I counted only 642 five-character verse lines; no rhyme seems to be used.

<sup>15</sup>"If in the verses the meaning is not apparent, then I have added a note in the main text below the verse." HPC 6.485b3.

she brought him up without sparing any effort.  
 At the age of seven his knowledge surpassed that of all men,  
     and among the various arts there was none he did not master.  
 Then they gathered all the maidens of the Śākya clan,  
     And chose one among the myriad candidates.  
 Her name was Yaśodharā,  
     And she was perfect and peerless in every respect.  
 But the prince, although betrothed to her,  
     Had no worldly thoughts whatsoever.  
 One day he announced to his father the king  
     That he wanted to see what was outside the four gates.  
 On the road he saw four kinds of scenes;  
     These are life, old age, sickness and death.

While Wang Bo's *Shijia rulai chengdao ji* is similarly brief in its treatment of key events,<sup>16</sup> at least the whole poem is about the Buddha; here only about 130 verses, from sections 13 to 27, deal exclusively with events in the Buddha's life, and are similar to themes found in other biographies. The introduction, on the other hand, deals with Buddhist cosmology, and after the enlightenment of the Buddha, the author basically turns to an extended discussion of the *panjiao* 判教 (classification of the doctrines) theory, explaining his ministry through the Chinese sectarian theory that the Buddha's ministry developed along five distinct stages of increasing sophistication, culminating in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the main text of the Tiantai/Ch'ont'ae school. Thus, although sections 28-36 deal with the Buddha's ministry, they do so through a heavy sectarian lens, focusing on Chinese scholastic concerns rather than an actual reconstruction of this part of the Buddha's life. Sections 37-44 shift the focus back to the figure of the Buddha for an account of his final *nirvāṇa*. The second fascicle starts with a brief account of the history of Buddhism in China, but soon veers into a discussion of certain points that were

<sup>16</sup>Comparison with Wang Bo's biographical poem shows very little overlap; the corresponding section of the Buddha's life is given as follows:

Sometimes he acted like a child, sometimes he practiced the five bright studies.  
 As for his training in the martial arts, the arrow pagoda and the arrow well still exist.  
 As for his penetrating power, the elephant traces and the elephant pit are still there.  
 He received the pleasure of [carnal] desire for ten years.  
 Presently he went sightseeing outside the four gates, and took pleasure in [the sight of]  
     a *śrāmaṇera*, but loathed [the sight of] an old person, a diseased person and a dead body.

obviously of special interest to Mugi, such as the importance of meritorious actions and correct behavior and practice in the end-of-dharma age.

Most developments that we see here can be said to be further elaborations on themes already introduced in previous works – for example, the cosmology part is also present in Daoxuan's biography of the Buddha, as are elements of sectarian agendas. Though Mugi provides extensive notes that discuss problems in the biography, most of these are not original, but fairly standard explanations of problems such as the long gap between the dates of Rāhula's conception and birth. A detailed analysis of the biographical motifs selected and Mugi's notes would undoubtedly prove valuable for a study of the development of the Buddha's biography in East Asia, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. What can be ascertained from this superficial look at the structure and contents of Mugi's work, however, is that obviously he had other concerns besides the mere recounting of the biography. Those other concerns, from Tiantai theology to methods of practice for lay people, are so prominent that one can wonder why he uses the biography of the Buddha as a vehicle rather than setting them out in a treatise. Obviously it was important to convey these through the vehicle of the Buddha's life story, but why?

The most obvious place to look for reasons is in Mugi's own statements regarding his motivations. In his introduction, he emphasizes human beings' inability to realize their oneness with the Buddha, and the extreme charity of the Buddha's decision to take on a human form to help them realize it. Despite the fact that the Buddha lived "2030 years" before his own time,<sup>17</sup> in a place "68,000 leagues" removed from Korea, yet the Buddha's life still made its impact felt. But the traces were too faint, and "not having personally listened to the sermons in India ... having been born in the calamitous latter days [of the law], many keep the appearance of a monk yet in conduct go completely against the precepts. Thus, to correct these deviations, one has to learn the doctrine and understand the Buddha's conversions, penetrate to the heart and insides of the Buddha." Just as a secular person has to know where his parents come from, a follower of the Buddha has to know all the facts about the Buddha's life.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Since this was written ca. 1328, Mugi thus supposed the Buddha lived around 702 BC. More conventionally, Chinese and Korean Buddhists of his time held that Buddha was born in the 24th year of King Zhao of Zhou (958 BC). See Zürcher, 272-3.

<sup>18</sup>Paraphrased from the introduction, HPC 6.484c5-485b9.

At the end of the work, he takes up this thread again, lamenting his own failings and lashing out at all the abuses perpetrated by fellow monks:

Now as for Mugi, although he dabbles in the monastic vocation, and proceeds with its practice, his vocation to keep the precepts is deficient, his meditation is deficient... How can [I] not be ashamed before Buddha and Heaven! [However,] Vimalakīrti says, ‘One cannot save oneself from one’s own disease, but one can save others from their diseases.’<sup>19</sup>

Despite his surprising self-criticism, this confession seems to be aimed at diverting others’ criticisms, for he insists (somewhat disingenuously) that despite his own shortcomings, he can still “save” others. In fact, he continues with a stringent castigation of monastic malpractice in his time:

...on the pretext of Buddhist rituals, in groups they descend on villages and households, begging everywhere, but their only desire is to acquire much; how would they have the thought of benefiting others! When they have amassed for themselves, they indulge together without degree, and call it ‘managing good things.’ [note:] This is the karma for becoming a hungry ghost.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, in one edition of this work,<sup>21</sup> the final part is added on in an expanded version as an “Admonition” (*Kyōngch’aek* 警策), which further underlines the purpose of this work as a warning to his fellow monks. Two aspects in particular stand out in this: first, the literal interpretation of the precepts and the emphasis on retribution (including rebirth in hell), and second, the emphasis on the benefactors, the laity: donations accepted or solicited out of greed are a very serious breach of morality, which will lead to many evil rebirths.

Of course one cannot reduce the whole work to these themes: as indicated, it elaborates on Tiantai doctrine, but besides these doctrinal themes it is also a vast compendium of Buddhist knowledge and lore, elaborating on countless issues that undoubtedly were important to both monks and laity of the time (and are still relevant). Yet the recurring theme of upholding the precepts and retribution is unmistakable, starting with the beginning of the biography, which emphasizes

<sup>19</sup>HPC 6.538c22-539a4.

<sup>20</sup>HPC 6.539a12-15.

<sup>21</sup>Edition privately owned by Min Yōnggyu, no date. See HPC 6.541c, note 1.

the rarity of a Buddha coming into the world; elsewhere the difficulty of gaining a human rebirth is emphasized.<sup>22</sup> The message behind this is clear: don’t squander such rare opportunities through greed and selfishness! Not surprisingly, the part of the commentary which deals with a section on donations and meritorious action is the longest.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper is based on an as yet superficial reading of the text, not an in-depth textual analysis. The exact “lineage” for the text should be examined in greater detail; its basic material is obviously indebted to the Chinese renditions/translations of Indian biographies such as the *Buddhacarita*, though its indebtedness to the works by Sengyou and Daoxuan should also be acknowledged.<sup>24</sup> Most of the research on this work that I am aware of deals with its Ch’ont’ae ideology (Yi 1977), its ideology of reconciliation with Sön (Yi 2000), or its relation to the later Han’gŭl biographies (Sin). Yet apart from its sectarian/scholastic agenda, it clearly has a deep concern with the precepts that transcends Mugi’s school and seems closer in spirit to the “Vinaya school” monks Sengyou and Daoxuan, in whose works we find adumbrations of his favorite themes.

We might also look closer to his environment for inspiration: undoubtedly the actual corruption of monks in his time may have been a direct cause, though we should be cautious with stock allegations of corruption. During his time, the phrase “silk prior, gauze master” circulated to criticize corruption in the procuring of promotion; and pressure was mounting from a gradually reinvigorated Confucian elite. At the same time, the emphasis on retribution and the use of the phrase “retribution of good and evil deeds” (善惡業報, HPC 6.539b) also reminds one of the *Sutra on divining the retribution of good and evil actions* (*Zhancha shan’e yebao jing* 占察善惡業報經, T 839), a book which was introduced to Korea shortly after its creation in the late 6th century, and was quite influential, notably in the southwest region of Korea around Kŭmsan-sa, where the key figure in its practice was the monk Chin’yo (fl. 8th century). Though we do not find the same strong emphasis on expiation in Mugi’s work, which rather emphasizes virtues such as giving and frugality, yet I think we cannot discount the influence of the tradition of maintaining the “pure precepts” that was passed on in the area

<sup>22</sup>HPC 6.518c.

<sup>23</sup>HPC 522b-529b. Various kinds of meritorious actions and actors are described in great detail.

<sup>24</sup>And perhaps also the *Fozu tongji*; see Ch’ong.

around Kūmsan-sa in the southwest.<sup>25</sup> Also, it is perhaps no coincidence that two years before this work was written, in 1326, the Indian monk Zhikong 指空 (Śūnyādīśya) came to Koryō, where one of his most notable legacies was the conferral of precepts and instruction on upholding them (Hō 1997, 46, 77-89, Waley).

Thus this work is much more than a biography of the Buddha; but while using the biography for its own agenda, it is also important for reminding us of the perennial inspiration of the Buddha's life story and its centrality as a call to action for all believers.

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<sup>25</sup>Note that Yi Suk-ki, who wrote the introduction to this work, also wrote an inscription for a monk at Pōpchu-sa, which belonged to the same tradition (Yogācāra) as nearby Kūmsan-sa. See Puggioni, 88; for the spirit of penitence that marked this school, see Puggioni, 101-103.

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