Maitreya Cult in Early Shilla: 
Focusing on Hwarang as Maitreya-incarnate 

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Michael Strickmann prefaced one of his papers with a bold assertion that Chinese Buddhism remained "a largely unknown subject." He argued that an integrated perspective of Chinese Buddhism was possible only when the myth of Buddhism as "a pure entity" constituted by "the great translators" and the "orderly transmission of orthodox teaching" was debunked, and "orthodoxy-obsessed" texts composed by monastic elites were studied in conjunction with "the actual practice of Buddhism." 1 Strickman’s warning is equally applicable to the field of Korean Buddhism. Despite tremendous contribution that Korean scholarship has made in the recent decades towards the advancement of our knowledge of Korean Buddhism, a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist ideas and institutions in early Korea has yet to emerge. Failure of the existing scholarship to provide an integrated perspective is owed primarily to its

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reluctance to rigorously examine the character of Chinese Buddhism (during the corresponding period), with which early Korean Buddhism was bound with an umbilical cord.

A number of papers have been written by Korean, Japanese and Western scholars on the cult of Maitreya in early Korea, but most scholars have approached the subject parochially — their examination of the Chinese antecedents of the cult ignores Taoism and popular cults with which the boundaries of Buddhism were becoming increasingly blurred during the Six Dynasties Period. Some scholars have made strenuous efforts to fit the imported ideology within the matrix of the native system of belief. Two influential scholars of ancient Korea, Kim Ch'ŏl-jun and Yi Ki-baek, developed their approaches at the intersection of Buddhist studies and historical research, but their focus on Buddhist texts to the exclusion of Buddhist art and Taoist and popular religions for an understanding of Buddhism in contemporary China somewhat limited their range of

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inquiry into the subject.

Professor Kim’s equation of rulers with Buddha on the Northern Wei model reflects his uncritical reading of Monk Faguo’s statement, ignoring iconographic evidence which suggest that the rulers of the Northern Wei compared themselves with Maitreya and their ancestors with Buddha. Yi Ki-baek’s pairing of Shilla royalty and aristocracy as Cakravartin and Maitreya respectively is also problematic, grounded as it is solely in the doctrinal position of early Pali texts. Buddhist practices during the Six Dynasties Period had advanced much further beyond the early canonical enunciations. The paper aims at questioning the validity of the existing paradigms by testing the hypothesis that the Hwarang order was founded not on the Maitreya cult espoused by the monastic elites but on the one patronised by the commoners. This plebian Maitreya which combined Buddhist and Taoist elements was triggered by apocalyptic apprehensions of the end-of-the-dharma (mofa, Kor. malpŏp) age, and was popular amongst the lower sections of Chinese society. It is obvious, therefore, that in order to understand the process in which the Maitreya cult in Shilla spread and gained influence, we need to examine its antecedent in China from the angles of both Buddhist clergy and popular eschatological belief.

MAITREYA CULT IN CHINA

Early Buddhist texts state that Maitreya, the Future Buddha, will descend to earth and preach under a Nagapuspa tree (Kor. Yonghwasu) when a cakravartin king (cosmic sovereign) rules. Frank Reynolds has argued in the context of the Theravadin tradition that "the association is later developed in such a way that the two figures are often merged into one in which the Buddha elements and the cakravartin elements are inseparable."\(^4\) Identification of the notion of cakravartin with the Mahayana concept of Maitreya (as a saviour) is more clearly illustrated in the "Silk Road Buddhism"\(^5\) that spread from the central Asian states to the northern kingdoms of pre-Sui China and further to the Korean kingdoms of Koguryo and Shilla. It is interesting to note that Vijayasambhava and Vijayavirya, two rulers of Khotan in the first Century C.E., were considered to be incarnations of Maitreya.\(^6\) Popularity of the Maitreya cult is also evident in the cave paintings of Kizil in present-day Xinjiang, dating from the fourth to mid-seventh centuries.\(^7\) The Maitreya cult spread

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7. Junghhe Lee, "The Origins and Development of the Pensive Bodhisattva Images of
to the Dunhuang area and further to the non-Han states of north China whose rulers invoked the ideal of the mythical cakravartin in order to emphasize their sacrality and divine status. They also arrogated to themselves the figurative significance of Maitreya and added a Messianic dimension to the institution of kingship.8

Numerous epigraphic, literary and other material evidence suggest that the Maitreya cult was richly interwoven into the religious fabric of northern China from the fourth to sixth centuries. The political upheaval of the times caused by incessant warfare between various northern tribes and between northern and southern states made human life precarious. Rulers turned to Maitreya in order to emphasise their significance as a cakravartin ruler (whose domain is identified with Maitreya and rewarded with peace and prosperity).9 The close affinity between a cakravartin and Maitreya was evident even in the early Buddhist texts, but in China the suggestion became abundantly clear.10 It also deserves to be noted that Foshuo yueshang

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10 For example, the Cakkavatti sutta says that the given name of Maitreya is Ajita (unconquerable) and since the cakravartin is also unconquerable, there is definitely an attempt to establish a solid commonality between the two; also see Seng-chao (383-414) notes in his commentary on the Saddharma-pundarsa sutra as quoted in Yu Min Lee, "The Maitreya Cult and Its Art in Early China," unpublished PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 1983, Yŏ Ik-gu, Mirŏkk'yŏng-ŭi segye, Seoul: Chyangsa, 1986, pp. 70-71, 124-125.
nu jing, translated by Jnanagupta in the latter half of the sixth century, modified the details of Maitreya’s rebirth in a way which erased the shifting boundaries between Maitreya and the Cakravartin. This text says that Maitreya will be born into the family of Cakravartin Sankha. The interface between royalty and the Maitreya cult is more convincingly evidenced in the contemporary iconographical and epigraphical data. A votary inscription engraved on a Maitreya statue (dated 443) in north China reads that it was made with the prayer that the Crown prince, his (benefactor’s) parents and all sentient beings may take part in the Three Assemblies of Maitreya when he descends to earth. The nuanced political symbolism of the Maitreya cult is identifiable even in the cave temples of Longmen and Yungang. It is apparent that the significance of the cult of Maitreya was manipulated by rulers in central Asian states along the Silk Road and in north China with a view to bolstering their claim of sacrality and emphasizing their role as redeemers.

The period witnessing the rise of the Maitreya-cult in China was also the age when an eschatological belief in the "end of the dharma" (mofa, Kor., malpōp) embedded itself in the popular consciousness;

11 Ibid., p. 111.
12. Ibid., p 96.
both trends, perhaps, dialectically interpenetrating and influencing each other. The idea of the "end of the dharma" was based on several theoretical formulations, including the Theory of the Three Ages which divided history into three distinct chronological periods - True Dharma (chongpöp), Semblance or Shadow Dharma (Sangpöp) and End of the Dharma (malpöp). It was generally believed that after the parinirvana of the Shakyamuni Buddha the age of True Dharma will progressively degenerate into the ages of Semblance Dharma and the End of the Dharma. Learned Buddhist monks made many painstaking calculations on the dates of the End of the Dharma based on Zhou yishu (Records of Miracles in the Zhou Dynasty) which noted that Buddha attained his parinirvana in 949 BCE. Monk Jingwan wrote in 628 that already seventy-five years had passed from the time the world entered the Last Dharma Age. As the great mass of people in China in pre-modern China were unfamiliar with numbers, they likely interpreted political crises, wars and monastic corruption as millennial nightmares. The persecution of Buddhism in the fifth century could well have lent further credence to eschatological fears.

In this period of social convulsion, as Anna Sædal has pointed out, the dividing line between Buddhism and Taoism became increasingly faint, and the Taoist belief in the appearance of a "divine redeemer" and the Buddhist vision of a messiah converged. According to her, those who propagated Buddhism among the masses linked their belief in the End of the Dharma with the notion of apocalyptic

apprehensions at the end of the cyclical period (kalpa). The two notions, one may recall, were mutually independent in the original doctrine. The process led to another significant phenomenon. Character of the future Buddha Maitreya who was originally to descend in the domain of a cakravartin marking "the peaceful golden age of the next kalpa's apogee" was now recast as an "apocalyptic hero." Apparently, Maitreya was now envisioned as a saviour who would make his advent in the period of chaos and cataclysm, and "initiate" to quote Anna Seidel again, "the creation of a new and perfect world of Great Peace." 14 It was this Buddhist-Taoist synthesis and confluence of messianic expectations and apocalyptic fears that led the popular imagination to create a new Bodhisattva, Yueguang tongzi.

Significance of this new Bodhisattva needs to be understood from another angle. Anthropologist Edmund Leach has studied the process of incorporation of Pulleyar, originally a Hindu deity, into the pantheon of Sinhalese Buddhism. 15 He has argued that human society needs mediating figures (saints in Christianity and local dieties in Hinduism) to approach God which strikes it as infinitely remote and inaccessible. Leach's study has provided yet another insight. He points out that the trickster god Pulleyar was incorporated by Sinhalese Buddhism, because he is supposed to possess certain


attributes which Buddha is believed to lack — Pulleyar’s ecstasy as opposed to Buddha’s asceticism.

Like Pulleyar in Sri Lanka, Yueguang bridged the gap between the mundane world and the Tusita Heaven by becoming Maitreya-incarnate, a visible and immediately accessible symbol of Messianic power. In the sixth century when the cult of Yueguang was widespread in China, many popular disturbances and uprisings sought to manipulate its symbolic significance. Soon the popular base of its appeal compelled the monastic elites to acknowledge its value for the establishment. A prophesy was inserted in one of the translated sutras in 583 that Yueguang will be reincarnated as a powerful ruler of the Great Sui and propagate Buddhism.\textsuperscript{16}

**HWARANG ORDER AND MAITREYA-YUEGUANG SYMBOLISM**

Before making an attempt to delineate the process of dissemination of Maitreya/Yueguang symbolism into Shilla and its role in shaping the content and character of the Hwarang order, it seems appropriate to provide a brief description of the initial phase of Shilla Buddhism. There is a consensus amongst scholars that official recognition of Buddhism in Shilla during the reign of King Pôphûng was inalienably linked with the political imperative to strengthen centralized monarchical institution.\textsuperscript{17} In the early sixth century when King


\textsuperscript{17} I have discussed this point in detail in the second chapter of my PhD thesis
Chujung ascended the throne, he took many steps in the direction of centralization. This important theme of the development of Buddhism in Shilla under the patronage of royalty and its significance as an ideological underpinning of a unitary state on the Chinese model has been studied by several scholars. The specific themes which need to be examined more rigorously are how the early Shilla rulers understood the significance of Buddhism primarily as a component of the Chinese cultural ensemble. Buddhist monks in early Shilla were harbingers of Chinese ideas and institutions (of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian provenance). Chinese ideas and institutions were crucial to the process of evolution of the centralised government on the Chinese model and the detribalisation of the consciousness of the people of Shilla. It is within this framework that an inquiry into the character of Hwarang can best be pursued.

I have discussed elsewhere how King Chinhung's invocation of the concept of cakravartin and development of a framework of sangha-state relations were intimately interwoven into his agenda of aggressive monarchy. King Chinhung projected himself as a cakravartin, as is attested in his association with a curious Asokan legend, and naming his sons Bronze-wheel cakravartin and Gold-wheel cakravartin. He also perceived himself as a bodhisattva, as is evident in his arrogation of the Buddhist title Pābun (Dharmamegha), the ninth stage in the bodhisattvabhumi. As a cakravartin and a bodhisattva he presided over both the sacred and profane domains of

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his kingdom. His reorganisation of the order of Hwarang into a
design that established compatibility with advanced continental ideas
(which the Shilla monarchy enthusiastically shared) was also related
to his political strategy of further reinforcement of the monarchical
authority.

Conceptual constructs of Hwarang are polarised between the
Japanese scholars during the colonial era and the nationalist historians
during the colonial and post colonial eras. Japanese historians,
influenced, perhaps, by their own tradition of bushido and Shintoism
(which they employed to emphasize Japan's cultural racial identity
against Korea and other racial groups in Manchuria), focused on the
martial spirit and shamanic lineage of Hwarang. Mishina Akihide
(Shoei) produced the most exhaustive study on the topic and
described it as analogous to the bands of youth that prevailed in
early Melanesian or Polynesian societies as well as in the Ryukyu
islands, and whose religious beliefs were anchored in shamanism.¹⁹
Korea's nationalist historiography made strenuous attempts to
assimilate Hwarang within the nativist matrix and manipulate its
significance to create what Eric Hobsbawm calls an "invented
tradition." Sin Ch'ae-ho believed that Hwarang gave substance and
specificity to the racial spirit of the Korean people. He interpreted
Hwarang as adherents of an ancient Korean tradition of "nangga"
which resisted Confucianization of the peninsula. He interpreted
"nang" to mean a shamanic cult such as "sodo" and argued that
Hwarang drew basically on the "nang" belief-system for its ideological
sustenance.²⁰ Sin's line of interpretation was inherited by several

¹⁹ Mishina Akihide (Shoei), Shin'ei karo no kenkyu, Tokyo: Heibon sha, 1973 (Reprint)
prominent historians in the post-colonial era, and as a result, the institution of Hwarang was romanticised and its real character warped under the weight of a nationalist agenda.

The only detailed study on the subject in English was done by Richard Rutt who mostly followed the lead of Mishina’s research. Nonetheless, it provided some new insights by seeking to solve semantic puzzles of the various terms associated with the organization such as Hwarang, Kuksŏn, P'ungnyu, p'ungwŏl and hyangdo, and to find parallels in the lands contiguous to Korea.

Although this paper is concerned primarily with an exploration of Maitreyan elements in the ideological content of the Hwarang order, we need to first examine and define some of the key terms associated with the order. In the preface to the Nallang Pi, Ch’oe Ch’i-wŏn (857-?), who possessed an extensive cultural experience of Tang China, described Hwarang as "P’ungnyu", a wonderful and mysterious way of the country and an amalgam of the Three teachings, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. In defining the elite corp of Shilla, Ch’oe may perhaps have been influenced by the example of the Chinese gentry which emphasized the fundamental unity of the Three Faiths (sanjiao). However, his suggestion of the

20 Sin Ch’ae-ho, "Chosŏn yŏksa-sang chel taesagŏn" in his Chosŏn sanggo munhwaesa (annotation and modern Korean translation by Yi Man-yŏl), Seoul: Tanjae Sin Ch’ae-ho sŏnsaeng khyŏm saŏphoe, 1993, pp. 336-340 In another essay "Tangun cho-ŭi ópchŏk-kwa kongdŏk", included in the same book he develops a thesis of Hwarang of Shilla and Sŏnin of Koguryŏ to be analogous institutions and components of the "sannang" cult (pp. 113-119).


22. Sun Zhuo (310-390 A.D.) was perhaps one of the first few thinkers to recognise the mutual complimentarity of the Three Doctrines. His definition of the integrated
imported cultural and religious values serving as the normative principle of Hwarang is highly meaningful.

The appellations "P'ungwoildo" "P'unghyudo" and the suffix "nang" used for Hwarang members indicate the urbane character of the organisation. The words P'ungwol and P'ungnyu seem to denote cultured taste and aesthetic ideals of the Chinese gentry. When these Chinese ideas were transplanted on Korean and Japanese soils, they acquired a new layer of cultural significance, but they did not lose the original meaning of urban/urbane spirit. In Japan, as Rajyashree Pandey notes, the equivalent Japanese word of the term was found in Miyabi, meaning "of the court" or "court-like," an antonym of hinabi or inakabi, meaning "boorish" or "rustic." Cultural finesse and social standing of the Hwarang members is also evident in the employment of words "hwa," meaning flower and the suffix


23 Richard Rutt The Flower Boys of Shilla, pp. 11-12.


rang/lang which in China (through the successive Chinese dynasties in the early and medieval times) was used as "a generic term for gentlemen/court attendants." Other terms which historians in traditional Korea employed to indicate Hwarang are Kuksŏn and sŏllang. Scholars of Buddhism have generally interpreted these terms as Buddhist in their implications and import. However, one may cite several pieces of evidence to suggest that they are not exclusively Buddhist terms, and can best be described as resonant of a Buddhist-Taoist synthesis. It is interesting to note that the book which Ch'oe Ch'ı-wŏn mentions as carrying a detailed history of Hwarang was called Sŏnsa (The History of Immortals). The term "sŏn" naturally evokes a Taoist image. It also needs to be mentioned that in the Koryŏ period four eminent Hwarang leaders, sasŏndong (Four Immortal Youths) were deified as Taoist immortals. "Hwanggwŏn," another term associated with Hwarang, also echoes the influence of the early Buddhist-Taoist cult. According to the Samguk yusa, when Hwarang Hose withdrew from the order, his name was struck off the Hwanggwŏn (SGYS 4, Yi hye tongjin). At another place, the Samguk yusa notes that during the reign of King Hyoso (692-702) Tŭk'o (also called Tŭkkok) was enrolled in the P'ungnyu Hwanggwŏn. Though the character "gwŏn" was used in the

25. http://hwarangdo.com/hwarang.htm (The Hwarangdo Homepage) has diligently collected all the relevant information and made it a click away (or close) to the net-users.


Huang-Lao (Taoist) tradition to mean a guarantee or contract — Lord Lao would ensure health and longevity to those members of the sect who pledged not to commit any sins — this usage is unorthodox. The medieval secular and historical Chinese texts such as Shishuo xinyu (SSXY) and Xin Tangshu use this term to mean books or registers made of yellow paper. Look at its usage in the SSXY: "The sages and the worthies lie ready in the Yellow Texts. What will you gain by staying here?" Taoists also used this term to mean some sort of census register. Since members of the Hwarang order were wise and the worthy, their census register was likely given the name Hwanggwon.

The scholars who have sought to establish a connection between Maitreya and Hwarang have cited the Samguk yusa's records as their major evidence. According to the Samguk yusa, a monk of Húngnyunsa, named Chinja, was a devout follower of Maitreya. He spent his day worshipping the image of Maitreya and prayed that if Maitreya was reborn as one of the Hwarang youths, he would serve him. An old man appeared in his dream and instructed the monk to visit a certain monastery. The old man said that there he would find an incarnation of Maitreya. The monk traveled to the said monastery and was greeted by a youth at the gate. He failed to recognise that the youth was Maitreya born on earth, but the mountain-deity, manifesting himself in the form of a white-haired old man, told him

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28 This Celestial Master Sect invented the use of Talismans (fu) for driving away demons of illness, and this seal was considered as documents guaranteeing the contract into which the gods had entered with the community. See Anna Seidel, "Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments," Michael Struckmann, ed., Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R. A. Stein, Vol II, Bruxelles: Melanges Chinois et Bouddhiques, 1983, p. 315.
that the youth he encountered at the gate was none other than the Maitreya. Chinja went back to the monastery and asked the handsome youth to tell him about himself. The youth replied that his name was Miri (phonetically close to Mirūk, the Korean word for Maitreya). He was taken to the royal palace and appointed leader of Hwarang.\textsuperscript{29} The fact that the band of Hwarang under Kim Yu-sin's leadership was called the Yonghwae hyangdo, the Society of the Nagapuspa or Dragon flower tree (an obvious reference to the belief that Maitreya will preach under the Dragon Flower Tree) is also cited as evidence of the influence of the Maitreya cult on Hwarang.\textsuperscript{30}

I do not intend to dispute the association of Maitreya with Hwarang — I just wish to provide a more nuanced understanding by suggesting that the early inspiration of Hwarang was not the Maitreya of the orthodox Buddhist circle, but Yueguang, the messiah, the saviour and intermediary of the distant Maitreya in the Tusita Heaven. And the fact that many important Buddhist projects and policies of King Chinhŭng were initiated and implemented in 551-552, the year when the End of the Dharma had just commenced further confirms the assumption that eschatological concerns and the attendant Yueguang symbolism formed the inspirational mooring of the Hwarang order. King Chinhŭng came of age and assumed power in his own hands (from the regent) in the twelfth year of his reign.


\textsuperscript{30} A number of scholars have written on the relationship between Hwarang and Maitreya. See endnote 2. All these works raise important points (and in some cases identical issues) in relation to the connection between Hwarang and Maitreya.
(551 CE). In the years 551-552 the king ordered the construction of Hwangnyong Temple which served for centuries as a palladium of the state. He also organized a Renwang assembly in which Renwangjing (The Benevolent King Sutra), which discusses "mofa"-related theme of the five turbulent eras and assures protection of the nation, was recited. The king also established an epocacy or an organ to control the sangha. According to canonical formulations, the last days of the dharma are characterized chiefly by fights and factionalism within the sangha, and it was important for the ruler to set in place an officialdom to keep the monastic community under check. It was also the time when political crises in Koguryo had intensified and Shilla was inescapably embroiled in a peninsular war. In 546, Sye and Chu factions in Koguryo fought bitterly, resulting in the defeat of Sye and the subsequent slaughter of over two thousand members of its clan. This internal weakness of Koguryo resulted in the forging of an alliance between Paekje and Shilla and their joint attack on Koguryo in 551. In 553, Shilla turned its military machinery against its erstwhile ally Paekje, and wrested the priceless valleys of Han and Imjin rivers. It is also important to remember that it was during this era of political crisis and eschatological nightmare that Paekje sent a monk to Yamato to spread the teachings of Buddha in the year 552. The conditions under which Hwarang was organised were likely similar—a time of "rapid change, invalidated tradition and mass insecurity."32


32. Carmen Blacker cites these reasons as fertile ground for the rise of Chalastic
Kim Pu-sik in his *Samguk sagi* inserted the details of the establishment of Hwarang in the last year of the reign of King Chinhŭng (576). But the *Samguk sagi*’s date of the foundation of Hwarang has been justifiably questioned by several scholars. The same source records the valuable military contribution of Sadaham and his nangdo (band of Hwarang followers) in Shilla’s annexation of Tae Kaya in 562. It is generally believed that the historian Kim Pu-sik inserted the details of Hwarang in the year 576, the last year of King Chinhŭng’s reign, because his sources did not unambiguously indicate the date of its foundation. It was likely established soon after the End-of-the-Dharma age commenced.

There are striking resemblances between members of the Hwarang and Yueguang. Members of the Hwarang order were dongzi (dongja) or young boys like Yueguang. And in conformity with the symbolic significance of Yueguang, they gave reassurance and hope to the

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33. It is also remarkable that a member of the Shilla aristocracy bore a Buddhist name, Sadaham (Chinese Chü Tu-hwan, transliteration of Sanskrit, sakrādagamam). It is evidence of the recognition of Buddhism by the aristocracy which was initially opposed to it only a few decades earlier.

34. *Samguk sagi*, Ch. 44, Yŏlchŏn, Sadaham.
people of Shilla. A Chinese traveler to Shilla, Ling Hu-ch'eng noted that the order of Hwarang was constituted of "beautiful aristocratic youth, who were elegantly decorated" and "whom the countrymen respected and served." Applying Leach's theoretical model one may say that Hwarang played an important function of mediation between the common people and the Maitreya. Unlike Buddhist monks who shaved their heads and wore dull cassocks, members of the Hwarang order dressed exquisitely, and sang and danced in a state of shamanic ecstasy. They made the beauty, grace and power of Yueguang (Maitreya) visible to the common people.

One may also cite a Dunhuang text named Shouluo biqiu Yueguang tongzi jing (dated to the sixth century according to E. Zurcher) which appears to reflect in a subtle way the religious developments in Shilla in relation to Hwarang. The opening episode of the text takes place at T'aining monastery located in "junzi guo" (Kor. Kunja kuk), the Land of Gentlemen, and shows a meeting between a Buddhist monk named Shouluo biqiu (Kor. Sura piku: Monk Sura) and a Great Immortal (Daxian, Kor. Taesön) and his retinue of five hundred Immortal followers (Xianren, Kor. Sönin). They are on their way to the abode of Yueguang in the Minzi Cave in the mountains of P'englai. The Great Immortal and his group halt briefly at the monastery and discuss with Monk Sura the approaching terminus of the universe and the various alternatives. The Great Immortal also tells him that Yueguang will soon make his advent in the world and assume kingship of the Han area (wang zai han jing, Kor. wang chae Hangyong), located south of the Weak Water and north of the Long River (Yellow river). In the following section of the text, King of the Land of Gentleman arrives with his large entourage of ministers and
officials and having learnt about the purpose of the Great Immortal’s travel, he joins him in his journey to the abode of Yueguang. Yueguang discusses imminent deluge and various scourges and epidemics which would spread, but assures that those living in such select places as Yangzhou, Xuant’u (Kor. Hyŏndo commandery), Gudu, and Liucheng might be able to escape the crisis. He will order a great Dagon king (Dalongwang, Kor. Taeryongwang) to save the virtuous and devout followers of the faith. They will be finally transported to the beautiful "Flowery City" (Huacheng, Kor. Hwasŏng).35 When the group returns, people see in their visions a Bodhisattva seated under the Nagapuspa tree (Longhua shu) and a monk (daoren) expounding this Yueguang scripture.

Some of the terms and place-names appearing in the text demonstrate its author’s awareness and affinity with the world of Buddhism in Shilla. Take, for instance, the term "Junziguo" (Land of Gentlemen). Based on the interpretation of the Lunyu passages in which Confucius talks about his desire to "live among the nine Yi" (IX-14), Chinese people in the post-Han era perceived the nine southern tribes on the Korean peninsula as "gentlemen."36 Koreans

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35 Zurcher translates it as Magic City, arguing that adding grass radical to the character "hua" (meaning change, magic) was probably erroneous. There is a description of a Magic City in the seventh section of the Lotus Sutra, and the name (though not the description of the city) is derived from this source. He also notes that confusion between "hua" (flower), and "hua" (magic) is common in Dunhuang manuscripts. See Eric Zurcher, "Prince Moonlight: Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Buddhism," Tsoung-Pao, 68 (1982), p. 42.

36 According to IX-14 passage of the Lunyu, when Confucius expressed his desire to live among the Nine Yi someone reminded him of their uncouth ways and wondered how could he put up with their crudeness. The Master replied, "If a gentleman dwelt..."
took from various references in the early Chinese texts (those of Yi tribe as kunja) to adopt the name Kunja hyang (Homeland of the kunja for Shilla.

The geographical location of the territory where Yueguang is to appear in a human form as a king points towards the northeastern part of China, ruled by Koguryŏ in the sixth century. Chinese sources mention the Ruo Shui river in identifying the location of Puyŏ: "To its north flows the Weak River (Bei you ruo shui)." 37 It corresponds with the present-day river Heilongjiang. 38 It is important that Yueguang does not appear in "Junzi guo," that is, Shilla, the Abode of Gentlemen (Kunjahyang). Only the Great Immortal along with his band of Five Hundred Immortals (prototype of Hwarang) appear there. Choice of the name Sura (Ch. Shouluo biqiu) for a Buddhist monk sounds highly curious and unusual. It seems more reasonable to assume that the two characters "Su" and "ra" were used either to transliterate Shilla or as a word-play on Shilla. It is also interesting to note that the site where Yueguang was to make his advent was not within the Shilla border. Yueguang's role as a messiah and saviour was most urgently required in the hostile territory of Koguryŏ (with which Shilla fought a bitter war in 551). 39 Identification of this area


37 Peng Jusong and Kim Chae-son, Wonmun Tong-i-jon, Seoul: Somin munhwasa, 2000, p. 49, p 61, p. 75

38 Inoue Hideo, Tonja man'yokusha, p. 43. I found this reference in Kim Song-gu, edited, Chongguk chongsa Chose'n yoku kyokon, Vol. 2, Seoul: Tongmunson publishers, p. 70.

39 Sanguk sagi, IV, Chinhung wang
as "Hanjing" or the territory of Han can be interpreted to mean the area of former Han commanderies. Inclusion of Hyŏndo (of which Koguryŏ hyŏn originally formed part) in the list of select places where people could escape apocalyptic cataclysm is also meaningful. It was, after all, a place where Yueguang's power would prevail and a thorough cathartic process would start.

The text reveals so many aspects of the political and religious history of Shilla in the sixth century that it seems difficult to dismiss them as accidental. The indigenous apocryphal sutras not just reflected the major developments of the faith but in fact "catalyzed and sustained" them,40 and particularly in the Six Dynasties Period they incorporated such themes as eschatological concerns and close relations between Buddhism and the states as to make Buddhism accessible to the common people.41 The Shoulou biqiu Yueguang jing illustrates this point. It was composed in response to the eschatological angst and political needs of Shilla where Buddhism was in its infancy and required a catalyst and sustenance. By reflecting the contemporary political reality of Shilla, the text provides the state with some themes to follow. Originality and political adroitness of the King's Buddhist policies lay in recognising the significance of the popular Maitreya cult centered on Yueguang and manipulating and adapting the Buddhist themes provided by the text


to suit the interest of the state. It is apparent that his policies to create the order of Hwarang youth (Immortals) and appoint Buddhist monks as their leaders (National Immortal) were inspired by the belief that the Yueguang cult needed to be domesticated and its apocalyptic and subversive potential to be divested. The conversion of Hwarang to the Maitreya-cult illustrates another point that the royalty wished to establish, the rhythmic ideological bonds between the young aristocrats and royalty. The interpretation of Hwarang as an organisation tailored to the ideology of the monarchy conforms to most of the relevant data available to us. It is reflected in Kim Pu-sik's quotation from Hwarang Segi which refers to the order's production of "wise ministers and loyal subjects" and "able generals and brave soldiers," or Kakhun's statement in his Haedong kosung ch'on that "Hwarang facilitated the king's government."

CONCLUSION

In this paper I made an attempt to demonstrate that the orthodox concept of cakravartin and Maitreya bodhisattva during the reign of King Chinhŭng served as an ideological underpinning of the consolidation of royal power and supported his ambitious campaigns of peninsular conquest. However, the royalty recognised the potential negative influence of the heretical Maityryane sect centered on Yueguang symbolism, and as a result, took resolute measures to domesticate it. Shilla kings of the sixth century promoted the cult

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42. Sanguk sagi, Shilla pon'gi, Chinhŭngwang, p 40
43. Ibid.
amongst the Shilla youth under their supervision, because it was the surest way to blunt its millenarian edge and harness its appeal as a force of unity and stability. By nourishing the sensibilities of the Shilla youth on the Buddhist-Taoist cult of Yueguang-Maitreyanism, the state projected them as agents of regeneration who would help the masses overcome the crisis of the End-of-the-Dharma age. In short, promotion of the aesthetic and religio-political ideals of China amongst members of the Hwarang advanced the cause of the Shilla royalty, because the inculcation of the Chinese ideas and aesthetics invariably led to repression of their particularistic tribal affiliation by universalistic values and virtues.
Maitreya Cult in Early Shilla:
Focusing on Hwarang as Maitreya-incarnate

Pankaj N. Mohan

This paper attempts to look at the political significance of the cult of Maitreya in early Shilla and the limitations of its modern interpretations. A number of Korean and Western scholars have written on the subject, and have correctly pointed out that the order of Hwarang represented the process of indigenization of Maitreya in Shilla. A more systematic and nuanced study, however, requires an understanding of the import and implications of the idiom of ‘mofa’ (malpŏp) in the mid-sixth century China and the related development of the manifestation of Maitreya as Yueguang tongzi (Prince Moonlight). This approach is important also because ‘Shouluo biqu jing,’ a Dunhuang text on Yueguang tongzi, is set against the background of ‘junzi guo’ or Country of Gentlemen, an epithet which has been used for the Korean peninsula since the Later Han period. Based on the new data and a novel interpretation of the available sources, the paper sets forth the hypothesis that the attempt by the Shilla royalty to promote Maitreya cult amongst aristocracy under its supervision was a political strategy aimed at blunting its millenarian edge and harnessing its appeal as a force of national unity.