

Millenarian Dreams



The prophets say that a time will come when all people have forgotten the Dharma. Violence will be everywhere, and the world will be without teachers, morality, or enlightenment. At that time, Maitreya will appear, and he will bring the new Dharma. Maitreya is the next Buddha, who resides in Heaven but who hears the prayers of people in their meditations and their dreams. The coming of Maitreya heralds a golden age of miracles and peace on Earth, and no person will be left behind.

— *The Story of Maitreya*¹



Beyond Gaegyeong's internecine court struggles for position and power, there was the broader world of Korean society, filled with those who looked to Yi Seong-gye as a source of social change more than as an avenue to personal power. In the workaday streets and fields, Yi Seong-gye represented hopes that perhaps a new Goryeo might emerge with more just social arrangements. Famine might disappear, taxes and magistrates could be less oppressive, constant wars and invasions might end. For the scholars of Sungkyunkwan as well, Yi Seong-gye represented an opportunity to advance the Confucian dream of the Great Learning whereby families, communities, and entire kingdoms could become stabilized by a harmonized commitment to learning, propriety and virtue. And for some Buddhists, Yi Seong-gye represented an opportunity to transcend the corruption of old Goryeo and find purification in an impending utopia, waiting to be born. All these hopes and dreams of a new world to be achieved, somewhere beyond all the sorry bloodshed of the doomed Wang kings, wrapped themselves around the personality that was Yi Seong-gye at the time of Late Goryeo's collapse.

THE GENERAL OF GORYEO

Echoes of those millenarian hopes of late Goryeo dreamers were discovered more than 500 years later, in 1932, by a woodland crew building firebreaks on Mt. Geumgang near Korea's eastern coast. This modern crew unearthed a stone casket containing an inscribed reliquary set holding several Buddhist relics (*Sarira*). The reliquary set included nine well-crafted bowls and containers made of silver, bronze, and white porcelain. Among the items was a thin cylinder of silver and glass, which was placed inside an egg-shaped pagoda of silver and gold and featuring images of the Buddha. This small pagoda was placed inside an octagonal house made of silver and bronze, which was then placed into a white ceramic bowl. On the thin glass cylinder was inscribed the names of General Yi Seong-gye and his wife, Lady Kang. On the other objects were inscribed the names of many of their associates: "noblewomen, monks, high-ranking officials, and the person who is believed to have overseen the production of the reliquary set."²

The whole collection was buried more than 500 years previously and appears nowhere in the remaining public records of the time. It appears that the collection had been buried in something of a hidden ritual—open to many true believers but possessed of a dangerous inner meaning that couldn't be fully expressed at the time. The artistry and location of these items, together with the inscriptions on them, reveal that these relics were all produced by Korea's Jogye order of Buddhism, a group of meditative monks dedicated at the time to a Maitreya self-purification movement featuring transcendental dreams and prayers about a better world to come, through revolutionary upheaval and washing away of all the world's wicked people.³ It was this same millenarian philosophy of violent rebirth through the coming of the Maitreya Buddha that had inspired much of the Red Turban movement in China, through the teachings of the "White Lotus" society.

In the 1370s and 1380s, Yi Seong-gye spent a lot of time with the monks of this Maitreya movement. Yi had long been quite devoted to Buddhism and had once went out of his way

to save a copy of the *Koreana Tripitaka** from being destroyed in conflicts with Japanese pirates.⁴ Once in power as King, he commonly asked monks to read him sutras from the Tripitaka, he had a pagoda built to preserve the Tripitaka, he ordered prayers composed for its publication, and he made special trips to observe thousands of soldiers transporting wood block carvings of the Tripitaka to new monasteries.⁵

Before he became King, Yi Seong-gye visited with Buddhist spiritualists in meditative retreats several times in temples, mountains, and caves across the peninsula. In his meditations, Yi Seong-gye had many strange dreams in these late Goryeo days. His dreams were most vivid when he stayed in the caves or temples of Jogye Buddhism, which at that very time had become infused with all sorts of dreams about the reappearance of a heavenly deity who would soon arrive to purify and save this corrupt world. This moment of Korean Maitreya Buddhism held that the corrupt old world was ready to slough off and a new purified world was on its way. The Maitreyan Buddhists prayed for the arrival of the “future Buddha,” who would soon arrive to revolutionize the world and save all its suffering souls.

This movement was strongest in spiritual epicenters like mystical Geumgang mountain, where divine spirits were thought to mingle with mortals, and which was often frequented by General Yi Seong-gye.⁶

In between his military campaigns, and near the time of his rise in the late 1380s, Yi Seong-gye would often visit this coastal mountain, attending temple and participating in the monk’s meditative traditions. On Mt. Geumgang, General Yi spent many days and nights talking with monks like Naong (some reliquary inscriptions call Yi a disciple of Naong), Heung Yeongtong (who stayed near Yi Seong-gye for decades and died in 1395 when falling from a horse riding home from Yi’s

* The *Koreana Tripitaka* is a Korean collection of the *Tripitaka*—the Buddhist Canon—carved onto thousands of wood blocks and stored at various Korean monasteries over the years. The copy of the *Tripitaka* that is stored today at Korea’s Haeinsa temple is the world’s oldest complete collection of the *Tripitaka* and has been inscribed on UNESCO’s Historical Memory of the World Register.

birthday party), Park Ja-cheong (who helped craft the Sarira reliquary discovered in 1932 and who would one day craft the stone guardians at Yi Seong-gye's burial mound), and Monk Muhak (who would become Yi Seong-gye's royal preceptor and helped Yi select Hanyang as the new capital when he finally became king). For years, Yi Seong-gye visited with these monks of Geumgansan.⁷ He learned about other-worldly Maitreya Buddhism and pondered what it could mean in the here and now.

Yi also told the monks about his own strange dreams. He dreamed of flowers drifting from the sky. That seems to portend ripe fruit, ready to be picked, the monks said. He dreamed of a broken mirror falling to the ground. That is like a flash of beautiful sunshine, even though things break, the monks said.⁸ He had dreams of a beautiful Phoenix rising up amid rainbows—a suggestion of royalty in Goryeo's land of the Phoenix Throne.⁹

In the 1370s, when meditating on Mt Geumgang, Yi Seong-gye once asked Muhak to interpret a particularly vivid dream of his. In the dream, Yi was running out of a burning house, carrying three rafters on his back. Monk Muhak said it must be a dream that Yi was living in a collapsing world (the burning house) but that he would save things by becoming a King (the three rafters represent holding up the house, while also representing the three strokes in the Chinese character for king).

This was a portentous dream to experience, right here at the epicenter of Maitreya millenarianism. Dreams like this, as interpreted by respected spiritualists like Muhak, could not be dismissed as mere dog dreams or meaningless banter for the dinner table. No, a dream like this, occurring at a time of national crisis and coming to a great general, is the stuff of legend and collective hope. A dream like this, interpreted by monks and whispered in evening candlelight by the people, becomes reinterpreted as a collective dream, spread through oral tradition as a public hope for a new world to come, expressing itself in the august dreams of the great hero.¹⁰

In 1391, following Yi Seong-gye's return from Wihwado, these dreams began to take flight as never before. This is the meaning of the Sarira reliquary discovered in 1932. According

to inscriptions found on that reliquary, it was buried in a ceremony of Maitreya Buddhism. This ceremony was prominently attended by Yi Seong-gye and Lady Kang, who placed their names upon the central cylinder in the collection. In May of 1391, just months after the Goryeo land records had been burned in the square and anxious King Gongyang had decamped to Hanyang, “10,000 people” gathered at temple to pray for the arrival of a new world.¹¹ This was a Maitreya ritual, and though “ten thousand people” were surely not present, a good number of close associates of the family Yi were there.¹² It was on this occasion, at the auspicious Mt. Geumgang, that the Sarira reliquary set was sanctified and buried in a votive offering. On one of the porcelain bowls was inscribed this text, calling for a new world:

*More than 2,400 years have passed since the Nirvana of the Buddha...[Today] Yi Seong-gye and ten thousand people together make a vow, wishing to deposit [this] together in Mt. Geumgang, awaiting the appearance of Maitreya in the world to the people, to aid and propagate the true transformation and together attain the Buddha dharma. That this wish is firm, the Buddhas and patriarchs vouchsafe.*¹³

It was signed by General Yi himself, his wife Lady Kang, prominent Buddhist monks, several officials, and many women of noble families.¹⁴ They all promised the same: “I will wait for the world of virtue to come, and I will open it again, and worship the Buddha.”¹⁵ The votive was placed into its many layered container of silver, gold, bronze and porcelain, put in a stone casket, and buried with a most sincere hope for a future revolution.

The reliquary wasn’t discovered for 541 years, but its hopes worked their way into the world long before that. Occurring in the midst of late Goryeo’s dynastic collapse, these prayers and dreams were as much political as religious. We see in this event the dreams of a new world—a new dynasty—taking flight in the Yi Seong-gye faction, together with the

growing political will to make it be.¹⁶ The revolutionary implications of the Maitreya movement were well understood by established authorities in both Yuan and Goryeo and Maitreya ceremonies were often banned in both countries,¹⁷ which may be why Yi Seong-gye's Maitreya event may have been hidden from his contemporaries, and appears in no remaining historical records.

The low political world of Goryeo court politics may have been filled with crass intrigues of all those seeking power without purpose, but there was something else happening in the mountains among the Maitreya monks. Here, Yi Seong-gye's mind could take flight and was filled with visions of the generous and virtuous Buddha who promised to redeem the broken world of politics without soul, power without purpose. Here General Yi could dream of building a new and better world, and he could dream together with the ten thousand people. As celebrated in Yi Seong-gye's posthumous lyric myth—*Songs of the Dragons*—"Ah! Our kings gather the minds of thousands before they reach the throne...so we can see in advance that there is no limit to all things that are everlasting and supported by Heaven's will."¹⁸