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The Buddhist Faith and Ideology of King Chinhung of Silla

by Kim, Young-tae

King Chinhung, the 24th monarch of the Silla Dynasty, was an able king who turned Silla, the weakest of the three dynasties in the Korean peninsula, into the strongest one. He succeeded in overcoming numerous geographical handicaps of the dynasty such as its location at the southeastern tip of the peninsula surrounded by hostile powers on all sides. The king indeed laid the foundation which made the unification of the three kingdoms possible.

Gifted with superior ability in military and political affairs, King Chinhung demonstrated thorough-going devotion to the Buddhist faith and enriched the culture of the dynasty by means of Buddhism, thereby stimulating the growth of national ideological identity and contributing to the overall culture of the Korean nation.

He served and cherished Buddhism single-mindedly from the time he was enthroned as a child and to the time of his death; he was a devoted Buddhist king who in his old age became a Śramaṇa (沙門). The dedicated Buddhist king took advantage of and applied the utilitarian ideology of Buddhism to the promotion of a national ideology. Thus he stimulated Buddhist activities while at the same time providing the basis upon which the nascent religion of the dynasty might develop soundly.

Especially, it was King Chinhung's aspiration to establish an ideal kingdom once he had succeeded in achieving national unity with ideologies of the Maitreya and the Cakravartin (轉輪聖王) of Buddhism. His Buddhistic ideologies and views of the nation and the government may be gleaned from available records and from the extant monuments erected at the time of his local inspection.

King Chinhung sought to ensure the welfare of people by means of honest government and his personal inspection tours. Such political views no doubt had grown out of the ideologies of the Cakravartin (轉輪聖王) after whom the king named his own sons. The ideological basis of the Maitreya was instrumental in bringing about

the Hwarang-do, a youth self-cultivation corps which played an important role in materializing King Chinhung's ideal kingdom.

An attempt was made in this paper to inquire into the relationship between King Chinhung and Buddhism, into his Buddhistic achievements, his Buddhist ideologies, his views of the nation and his Buddhistic thoughts in general.