



" The Political Significance of the Benevolent King Sutra (Renwang jing) in Early Silla "

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The Benevolent King Sutra, believed to be one of the three great 'nation-protecting' Sutras together with the Lotus Sutra and the Golden Light Sutra, played an important role in the process of mutual empowerment of the royalty and the sangha in the various states of East Asia. Assemblies to recite the Renwang Jing were held throughout East Asia, but it was the early Korean state of Silla that first invoked the authority of this apocryphal canon for the sacralisation of power and the authentication of its political objectives.

The paper accepts the general understanding about early Korean Buddhism that it arrogated to itself some of the functions of Shamanism, and that Buddhism and state mutually interpenetrated and forged a commonality of interest. However, my study also constitutes a critique of the paradigm of understanding the history of Korean Buddhism within the framework of a 'nation protecting' tradition. It reveals the areas of asymmetry and tension that were generated at the intersection of the two autonomous forces, kingship and religion, and argues that the sutra's legitimation of the secular goals of the royalty was not absolute. It invested the ruling monarchs with the symbolism of cakravartin and Bodhisattva, but it also repudiated state interference in monastic order and admonished monarchs against establishing institutions to control monastic activities. By looking at these issues closely the paper intends to provide a nuanced understanding of the character of Silla Buddhism in its formative phase.