A re-examination of the social basis of Buddhism in late Chosŏn Korea

According to the standard explanation, the advent of Neo-Confucianism in the Choson period heralded a steady decline of Buddhism in almost all respects, institutionally, doctrinally, morally and socially. Deprived of elite support, Buddhism inexorably sank down, so the narrative goes, to the level of the superstitious shamanic cults of the lower echelons of society, particularly in the second half of the Choson period. The evidence of this is still supposed to be with us in certain places, as in the little shrines devoted to Ch'ilson (the Seven Stars of the Big Dipper, also widely worshipped by shamans) in modern temple complexes. Stagnation, regression, and contraction are terms that have been used to describe the fate of Buddhism in this period. This negative view of late Choson Buddhism is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the relative scholarly neglect it has suffered, particularly on the part of scholars who are primarily interested in the history of doctrine per se (although in this period in Korea, like in the whole of East Asia, practice was arguably more important than doctrine), rather than historians who want to understand the role of religion and doctrine in history....
Admittedly Buddhism and Shamanism were considered as heterodox elements in the Chosŏn society, but they were not repressed, except in particular circumstances. In other words, unlike Ming-Qing China, Chosŏn Korea never really developed a strong and systematic legislation dedicated to the repression of heretical sects before the late eighteenth century. It is thus possible to provide an overview of the state action as seen from the angle of legal history on the basis of these documents. PENAL LAWS AND CATHOLICISM Explicit references to the Great Ming Code in Catholic-related judicial cases appeared for the first time during the well-known Chinsan incident (珍山事件), in 1791.