

Sacred Signs and Sacred Labor: Childbirth Talismans in Chosŏn Korea

Sujung Kim

Religious Studies, DePauw University

Childbirth was perilous in the premodern era. Among various ways to facilitate a safe and easy delivery, talismans were one of the most popularly applied methods in premodern Korea. By examining childbirth talismans and associated rituals found in the Buddhist *Sūtra of the Heart of the Buddha Crown [Uṣṇiṣa] of Avalokiteśvara* (Ch. Foding xin Guanshiyin jing 佛頂心觀世音經), my paper explores how a rich talismanic culture and traditions of healing from Chinese Buddhism constantly shaped and reshaped the practice of safe delivery in Chosŏn (1392–1910) Korea, and how the dangers and difficulties of childbirth were negotiated with “Buddhist” talismans in the Neo-Confucian society. My paper argues that long-standing therapeutic knowledge of the Buddhist tradition created a unique position for Buddhist talismans to be accepted and thrive in Chosŏn, Korea.