

The Birth of Korean Buddhist Tradition through Legends of *Samguk yusa*

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Introduction

The uninterrupted history of Korean Buddhism spreads over sixteen centuries. Its beginning, i.e. formal introduction and acceptance, is dated by the year 372 for Koguryō and 384 for Paekche, where the introduction is presented as a formal acceptance of the religion upon a visit of a missionary. The narrative for Silla is depicted as a process of trial and error, and struggle between the royal power and nobility with the introduction happening between years 527-535.

The period covered in *Samguk yusa*¹ is a period of formation of various institutions, teachings, religious practices and cults. The stories are both descriptive and prescriptive, as they not only describe the birth of the tradition, but they have been source of the tradition until today. The places discussed throughout this essay are significant religious centres in contemporary South Korea as well. The essay is an attempt to shed light on foundations of Korean Buddhist tradition. I am particularly focusing on the establishing of Korea as Buddha's land.

On the chronicle

Samguk yusa has been understood as an unofficial chronicle² of the Three Kingdom period compiled in the Koryō era. From closer look at the structure of the book we see that it goes far beyond the scope of a standard East Asian chronicle. *Samguk yusa*, despite often translated as a "chronicle", is a colourful collection of various texts including historical records, founding myths, biographies of kings and monks, stories of beginnings of Buddhism in all Three Kingdoms, legends of Buddhist buildings and structures, etc.³

The crucial trend we can see behind many of those stories is an attempt to define Korean identity vis-à-vis surrounding nations of East Asia, which apparently is an eternal issue for Koreans in any period. Buddhist legends constitute a significant part of the book.

It seems that in late seventh and early eighth century, Silla royalty and aristocracy cooperated on dissemination of the theory⁴, that Silla is a country with strong karmic relation to Buddhism and that Korea was a Buddhist country already during the mythical era of Buddha Kāśyapa, the

¹ For English translation see Ilyon, *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1972).

² Irjon, *Samguk jusa: nepominutelné události Tří království*, trans. Miriam Löwensteinová and Marek Zemánek (Praha: NLN, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2012), 10.

³ Richard D. McBride II, "Preserving the Lore of Korean Antiquity: An Introduction to Native and Local Sources in Iryōn's *Samguk Yusa*," *Acta Koreana* 10, no. 2 (July 2007): 1–38.

⁴ For a detailed analysis see Richard D. McBride, *Domesticating the Dharma: Buddhist Cults and the Hwaōm Synthesis in Silla Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

mythical predecessor of Buddha Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha of our era. Hence, Silla was portrayed as a Buddha's land where also the future Buddha will be born. Narratives of *Samguk yusa* have double significance.

The role of Buddhism in Silla's worldview

The rise of Buddhism in Silla is connected to the political struggle between Silla royalty and aristocracy during the sixth century. Buddhism, along with other symbols of East Asian kingship, was adopted and supported by Silla kings "to enhance their power, prestige and authority."⁵ Silla kings followed the model of Northern Chinese dynasties⁶ in connecting the royal authority with the Buddhist religion. When the aristocracy accepted the leading role of the royalty, they started to participate in propagation of Buddhism too.

Buddhism enabled the people of Silla to accept the culture of China and India and see their country as a part of a broader cosmopolitan Buddhist cultural sphere. Silla was deeply influenced by the diverse Buddhist culture. The religious life of Korea, at least of the higher classes, beginning from the middle 6th century was dominated by Buddhism.

Research on early Korean Buddhism still focuses mostly on the development of Buddhist philosophy and the scholarship tends to emphasize the development of particular Buddhist schools, let us say an intellectual history. However, the myths in *Samguk yusa* reveal the mythology and cultic practices of that era so we can better understand the living side of the religion.

Spatial gap

"Tradition is not something waiting out there, always over one's shoulder. It is rather plucked, created, and shaped to present needs and aspirations. Men refer to aspects of the past as tradition in grounding their present actions in some legitimating principle. In this fashion, tradition becomes an ideology, a program of action in which it functions as a goal or as a justificatory base."⁷ Buddhism, as a religion, draws its sources not only from history as a profane phenomenon, but primarily grounds its traditions in the transcendent and ultimate.

We may assume that being located at the end of the Asian continent, Korean Buddhists must have been especially concerned with the geographical distance which separated Korea from India, the homeland of Buddhism and also the relative separation from Buddhism's second homeland, China. We know from the historical resources that pilgrimage and seeking-dharma (*kubōp*) was an important part and hardly-achieved goal of old Korean Buddhists. On the other hand, the narratives of *Samguk yusa* assure us that Buddhism was not a religion understood as an alien element implanted into Korean culture or simply imported, but it was a living system of beliefs and practices interconnected with the Korean soil and manifested all over the Korean peninsula. The legends are overflowing of actual presence of Buddhist deities on the peninsula. Hence, we are not dealing with a religion that would just come to Korea, but which was believed to be immanently present there. However, such belief is in contradiction with the historiographical knowledge the people of the Three Kingdoms period had. They knew that Buddhism came from a country far away and that the scriptural and intellectual source of the

⁵ McBride, 28.

⁶ Cf. Kenneth K. S Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

⁷ Joseph R. Gusfield, "Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change," *American Journal of Sociology*, no. 4 (1967): 358.

religion was there. I am convinced that it was the narratives which were later recorded in the *Samguk yusa* that allowed reception and domestication of Buddhism.

The first symbolic strategy I want to talk about is an overcoming of this spatial gap. The Book III and IV of *Samguk yusa* introduce several stories symbolically connecting Korea with India. In chapter named “The Sixteen-foot Buddha Statue at Hwangnyongsa (皇龍寺丈六)”, we read a narrative explaining the mythical origin of this statue:

(...) A large ship appeared on the sea from the south and anchored at Sapo in Hagok Prefecture (*present-day Gokpo in Ulju*). On examination a dispatch (*cheommun*) was found on which was written, “King Aśoka of India (*Seocheonchuk*) (...) intended to cast a statue of Śākyamuni Buddha with two attendant Buddhas but he was unable to complete it, so he loaded everything onto a boat and set it adrift praying that it would reach a country with a karmic affinity and become a sixteen-foot Buddha image, and he also included models for a statue of Buddha and two bodhisattvas.” The district official took the document and reported to the king, who ordered the selection of a piece of high and clear ground on the eastern side of the district fortress and the construction of *Dongchuk* Monastery where the Buddha triad could be enshrined and attended. The gold and iron were sent to the capital and in the third month of the sixth year, gapja, of the Taijian era (...) cast a one-*jang*-six-*cheok* statue of Buddha, successfully accomplishing it at the first attempt.⁸⁹

This story introduces Korea as a country with the best karmic conditions in the world for building a large statue of the Buddha, even more suitable than India, the home of Buddhism. Another symbolic play is the name of the temple. The ship was sent from *Söch'uk* 西竺 “Western India”, in response to the arrival of the ship the *Tongch'uksa* 東竺寺 “Eastern India Temple”. Hence, we can assume that Korea was considered a ‘new India’, new true home of Buddhism. Another intriguing example I am going to talk about also later is a story about monk Nangji who was riding the clouds¹⁰. In this story the Vulture Peak, *Gr̥dhrakūṭa-parvata* of India is identified with *Yōngch'wisān* 靈鷲山 in today's *Kyōngsang* province. The same strategy is used in the series of narratives related to *Odaesan* mountain, where *Odaesan* is symbolically connected with the Chinese *Wutaishan* Mountain. The same strategy can be found in the story in Part 4 Chapter 18 “The Buddha's Shadow on Mt. Ŏ” 魚山佛影.

An old record (*gogi*) states: “Long ago Mt. Maneo was [known as] Mt. Jaseong, or Mt. Ayasa (*this should be Mayasa, which means 'fish'*). Next to it was the Gara Kingdom. Long ago an egg descended from the sky by the King Suro. The Jade Pool [Okji] was within its borders at that time and in that pool there lived a venomous dragon. On Mt. Maneo there were five female demons, which went back and forth and became familiar [with the dragon] causing lightning and rain to fall for four years so that the five grains never ripened. The king intended to put a stop to this by means of sorcery, but because he was unable to do so, he bowed his head to the Buddha and requested him to give a sermon on the dharma so that subsequently the female demons received the five precepts after which there was no more mischief. Because of this the fish and dragons in the East Sea were transformed and became rocks filling the valley, each one giving off the sound of [temple] bells and hand bells (*gyeongsoe*).”¹¹

⁸ Roderick Whitfield, ed., *Korean Buddhist culture: Accounts of a pilgrimage, monuments, and eminent monks*, Collected Works of Korean Buddhism 10 (Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012), 207–16.

⁹ I am quoting translations of Book III and IV by Michael Finch and Sem Vermeersch published in the 10th volume of Collected Works of Korean Buddhism without altering the content incl. Romanization.

¹⁰ Book V, Part 8, Ch. 1

¹¹ Whitfield, *Korean Buddhist culture: Accounts of a pilgrimage, monuments, and eminent monks*, 372–87.

This story not only connects a place in Korea with one in India, but also relates a story from Kaya with a similar one from India or even introduces a Buddhist narrative from India to Korean setting. We can understand the story in terms of a new religion being introduced to a new territory where the taming of the daemons represents the subjugation of indigenous spirits.

There are three mysterious traces in this mountain, which are analogous to the shadow of the Buddha in Nagarahāra in Northern India. The first is that in a place close to the mountain on the border of Yangju, there is a jade pool, which is the place where a venomous dragon resides. The second is that occasionally a cloud issues from the river and rises to the top of the mountain, and the sound of music comes from within the cloud. The third is that northwest of the shadow there is a rock, where the water is clear and never ceases [to flow]. This is said to be the place where the Buddha washed his robe.¹²

Temporal gap

As the hundreds and thousands of kilometres separated Korea from the homeland of Buddhism so more than a millennium passed from the time of the Buddha to the time when the legends were created. A common feature of the narratives is revealing of the Buddhist mythical past of Korea. Many of the founding myths of important sacred places such as temples and sacred mountains trace their origins back to important periods of Buddhist history and mythology. The most important references go to i) mythical past, i.e. time of previous buddhas, ii) time of the historical buddha, iii) time of King Aśoka.

Since we are talking about time and about temporal setting of the stories, we should ask in which cosmological system Iryōn was actually thinking, i.e. how he dealt with the discrepancy among the various stories. I believe we should understand *Samguk yusa* as one coherent text because of Iryōn's historiographical efforts when he employs the extensive system of 'footnotes' and comments by which he confirms the historicity of the events. That proves that Iryōn considered the stories as historical facts. The stories are not happening in *illo tempore* but Iryōn states the dates of the events usually using the reigns of Chinese emperors.

But in such case it would be natural to presume that the facts happen in a chain of events with a beginning and certain development over the period of time. In my introduction I stated I tend to see *Samguk yusa* in the same way as we work with the Bible, Edda or Iliad, i.e. a text which contains both history and mythology of a nation. These texts work in a single cosmological system. The stories in *yusa* on the other hand belong to several different cosmological systems. Buddhist cosmology meets here with the Chinese and indigenous Korean. In the Book III Part 4 Chapter 5 we read:

If we look at the *Āgama Sūtra (Ahamgyeong)*, it is said that Kāśyapa, the third Buddha of the "Wisdom Kalpa", appeared on earth when [the length of] human life was 20,000 years. In evidence of this if we calculate according to the law of increase and reduction (*jeunggambeop*), in the Formation Kalpa (*seonggeop*) the length of everyone's life is limitless and then gradually decreases until at the age of 80,000 years, when the Residing Kalpa (*jugeop*) begins. From this time onwards human lifespan is reduced by one year every 100 years until it is just 10 years, a time period of one reduction (*ilgam*). [...] Each of the four Buddhas appeared during the ninth period of reduction. [Going back] from world-honored Śākyamuni when [human lifespan is] 100 years to the time of Kāśyapa Buddha [when it was] 20,000 years is more than 2,000,000 years. [...] How many more years must there be between the time of Krakucchanda Buddha and the beginning of time (*geopcho*)

¹² Ibid.

when life spans were without limit? As 2,230 years have already elapsed since the time of the world-honored Śākyamuni until now, the eighteenth year, *sinsa*, of the Zhiyuan reign (1281); since the time of Krakucchanda Buddha and Kāśyapa Buddha until now, several tens of thousands of years have passed.¹³

Iryōn apparently favours the Buddhist cosmology as a primary framework of his book. In the quotation above, he employs an Indian theory of *kalpas* and attempts to approximate the age of the ‘stone seat’ of Kāśyapa. He also accepts other cosmological systems.

Our well-known Goryeo man of letters O Semun has written in the *Yeokdaegi* that going back more than 49,600 years from the seventh year, *kimyo* of the Zhenyou reign in the Jin dynasty (1219), is the *muin* year when Pangu created heaven and earth. Also Gim Huiryeong, the Yeonhui Palace Recorder, has stated in the *Daelyeokbeop* (大一曆法) that 1,937,641 years elapsed between the time of the creation of heaven and earth in the *sangwon gapja* year and the *gapja* year of the Yuanfeng era (1084). Furthermore, the *Zuangutu* (纂古圖) states that from the time of the creation of the universe (*kaebyeok* 開闢) until the time of “the capture of the *lin*” (477 BCE) was 2,760,000 years. If we consult various Buddhist texts, we find that the age of this meditation rock dates from the time of Kāśyapa Buddha until today, yet in relation to the time that has passed since the original creation of heaven and earth, its age is barely that of a little child. As the time periods given in the accounts of these three authors do not even amount to the age of this ‘infant rock,’ their tales of the creation of heaven and earth must be extremely inaccurate.¹⁴

Korea as a sacred land

Now, I would like to move one step forward and show how the legends I mentioned above worked in creating Korea as a sacred land, as a Buddha’s Land. The events I talked about did not exist separately and independently but were interconnected and founded a sacred geography of Korea.

Generally speaking, myths and their symbolism have important existential value because they give meaning to human existence. People all over the world find themselves thrown into a nameless and senseless primordial land. It is a myth what enables man to inhabit such primordial land and allows him to relate himself to it. Through myth man expresses symbolical systems he created and which give meaning to that land. Such symbols are not arbitrary creations but function according to their own logical principles.

In ancient cultures, religious symbols play the most important role, because life of ancient man is utterly religious and all symbolic systems he lives in, are religious or interconnected with religion. According to Eliade, for religious man, space is not homogenous. There are interruptions in it and some parts of space are qualitatively different from the rest.¹⁵ Sacred places are founded by *hierophany*, the revelation of the sacred. In the context of this essay, the *hierophany* is represented by manifestation of buddhas, bodhisattvas and various Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist deities. The sacred manifestation “ontologically founds the world.” The religious experience of these places precedes all experience of the world. These spots become the fixed points of the universe. Every microcosm has a “centre”. Because such place is “sacred” space, not a normal “geometrical space” there is no contradiction in existence of multiple

¹³ Whitfield, *Korean Buddhist culture: Accounts of a pilgrimage, monuments, and eminent monks*, 183–86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 186ff.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego; London: Harcourt Inc., 1987), 20.

“centres.” The centre functions as a platform for communication between the heaven and earth. The typical example is a sacred mountain, where the gods or other representatives of the supernatural appear and communication between the human and superhuman takes place.

Hence in virtually all cultures sacred mountains play an important role in creation of the inhabited space. They function as symbolical centres of the universe and important communication channel between the man and the supernatural powers. Due to the mountainous character of Korean landscape, the role of mountains had been absolutely crucial for establishing of Korean microcosm. The mountains worked as a grid that gave meaning to the initially senseless land. Even outside the Buddhist context, *hierophany* takes place almost exclusively on or at the mountains.

We can assume and textual resources show that the mountains in Korea had certain symbolical meaning before Buddhism became an organic part of the Korean culture. The myth of Tangun depicting Hwanŭng’s descent on T’aebaeksan or the role of Five Peaks *oak* and Three Mountain Spirits *samsin* would be the examples of the importance of mountains.

Many of the stories in *Samguk yusa* contain a common *topos*, when remains and ruins of former temples and statues are discovered and revealed on important spots, including mountains. This is another form of *hierophany* and such places became religious centres of Silla.

These include the Hwangnyongsa Temple, the national temple of Silla, Yŏngt’apsa, a Temple in Koguryŏ, the temples at the Sabulsan and Kulbulsan¹⁶ mountains were founded at spots where Buddhist structures were found in the ground, dug out and enshrined.

I have mentioned above, that it is an innate feature of human symbolic thinking to create “centres”, and among them sacred mountains. The Korean myths use this feature and symbolically link places in Korea with significant places in China and India and thus overcome the spatial and temporal remoteness.

India as a homeland of Buddhism is a natural source of symbolical verification of Silla as a Land of the Buddha. There are at two significant stories that connect Korean mountains with mountains in India. First of them is the legend about Buddha’s Shadow of the Fish Mountain. A narrative about king Suro of Karak who defeats an evil dragon and demons with spiritual help of Buddha is aligned and compared with a story about Buddha Śākyamuni again defeating a dragon and demons.

Samguk yusa on several places mentions Yŏngch’wisan 靈鷲山, in today’s Ulju-gun in Kyŏngnam, which is Korean pronunciation of Chinese rendering of the Vulture Peak, the mountain near Rājagṛha in Maghada where Buddha delivered several sutras, the *Lotus Sutra*¹⁷ and the *Sutra of Limitless Life*¹⁸ for instance. Among the Legends of Hermits¹⁹ we meet Master Nangji, who flew to China on a cloud. There he is asked to present a plant from his home. He does so and the symbolical link between the Korean and Indian mountain is verified.

Chajang, one of the monks who went to China to study in the first half of 7th century, met bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in Wutaishan, mountains believed to be the abode of bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. After his return to Korea, Chajang went to today’s Kangwŏndo, to Odaesan. Odaesan (五臺山) again, is an emulation of Chinese Wutaishan (五臺山). The connecting point here is the cult of Mañjuśrī. Both mountains are said to be home of this bodhisattva. Odaesan is to become one of the most important religious sites of Silla.

¹⁶ Book III, Part 4

¹⁷ Bunno Kato and Yoshiro Tamura, *The Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Kosei Publishing Co, 1989).

¹⁸ *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, Rev. 2nd ed, BDK English Tripitaka 12–II, III, IV (Berkeley, Calif: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2003).

¹⁹ Book V, Part 8

According to Eliade's theory, temples and other sacred structures are assimilated to a sacred mountain and hence become the "centre." This is very true in case of Hwangnyongsa, the central temple of Silla. All above mentioned symbolical "verification" i.e. symbolical link with India, China and previous Buddha took places in this case. *Samguk yusa* introduces several stories related to the foundation of the temple and building of its main structures. Some of them I have already introduced.

First, a legend talks about a stone seat of Buddha Kāśyapa discovered on the spot. This stands for the past Buddha. Second story introduces ii) sixteen-foot golden statue of Buddha which is said to be built from gold sent by king Asoka on a ship which was brought to the coast of Silla by karmic conditions. Here we see that the spatial as well as temporal gap between the reign of King Asoka in the second century BCE and sixth century Korea is overcome. Third, a nine storey pagoda of the temple was built upon an advice master Chajang received from Mañjuśrī in China. Mañjuśrī also says that Hwangnyongsa is a place where Buddha Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni preached.

Hierophany on Korean Mountains

We have seen some examples where Korean mountains receive their sacred nature through symbolical connection with their counterparts in India or China or when there were unearthed remains from the past. Unsurprisingly the most frequent and the most natural way of *Samguk yusa* presents examples of *hierophany* on Korean mountains. The most significant is Ŭisang's encounter of Kwanūm, i.e. bodhisattva Avalokitēśvara. This story is a foundation myth of the Naksansa Temple located until present day in Yangyang-gun in Kangwŏn-do. The name is derived from Potalaka a mythical mountain, an abode of Avalokitēśvara bodhisattva. The temple became an important pilgrimage site.

Odaesan, mountain or rather mountains that I have mentioned above, is also a very important place of hierophany. The legend recorded in *yusa* enlists ten thousands of Buddhas and bodhisattvas who manifested themselves on the plateaux of the mountains. The mountains were later turned into one vast religious complex consisting of several temples and shrines. Each of them was dedicated to certain buddhas and bodhisattvas and where designated ritual practices were performed. Odaesan was a centre of *Avatamsaka* or Huayan ritual. Which was a combination of esoteric and *Avatamsaka* practices. The whole mountains were practically turned into a mandala. The rituals performed there were supposed to ensure the wellbeing of a king and harmony in the country.

Conclusion

Samguk yusa is a treasury of historiographical and legendary material. In my essay I worked mostly with the Books III, IV and V which contain various narratives, mostly related to Buddhism. I have tried to show that there are several trends in how the stories depict Korea's position in time and space connecting Korea with important places in India and China and important periods of Buddhist history and that these strategies are employed in founding the sacred geography of Korea.

Legends in *Samguk yusa* created an image of Korea as a civilized country vis-à-vis the other, 'barbaric', nations of the East Asia, depict Korea as an originally Buddha's Land which is being rediscovered in the legends and picture Korea's position in the relation to China and India. The important revelations featuring such statements are often presented on mountains; it is at mountain when religious objects from the mythical past are discovered; naming of mountains

connects Korea with China and India and symbolically recreates the actual sacred places of Buddhism in Korea (e.g. Odaesan-Wutaishan, Yōngch'wisan-Gṛdhrakūṭa, Naksan-Potalaka etc.).

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