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# Religious Syncretism in the Shilla Period: The Relationship between Esoteric Buddhism and Korean Primeval Religion

By

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## INTRODUCTION

Religious syncretism, the mixture of folk religion with one of the religions from the so-called "great traditions," is an important element in the development of Buddhism in the ancient states of Korea. As we shall demonstrate in the course of this study, syncretism was from the very beginning the process by which Buddhism gained acceptance in the Korean states, and the influence of this syncretic Buddhism may be found in even the most sophisticated relics of high Buddhist culture and art.

In spite of its great importance, however, studies of ancient Korean Buddhism seldom make reference to the syncretism which was typical of that period. Usually one is left with the impression that Buddhism in the ancient period was unaffected, unadulterated by the indigenous religion and that the two religions existed side by side in two separate worlds (Han 1970: 99-102). This paper, then, will illustrate the development of syncretic Buddhism in Korea by considering the stages of the growth of Buddhism in the kingdom of Shilla.

Because Shilla 新羅 defeated its rivals for supremacy on the Korean peninsula, the kingdoms of Koguryō 高句麗 and Paekche 百濟, in the mid-seventh century, the historical records for this state are comparatively greater, and consequently it will be easier to show the development of syncretism through the course of Shilla history. In this paper, it will be shown that there are four essential stages: a period of contact, a period of accommodation, a period of maturation, and a period of a sophisticated synthesis. Each successive stage built on the stage before

it with the final result being a form of Buddhism perfectly acclimated to Korean culture.

Before we may discuss the development of syncretism, however, we must first examine some of the characteristics of the indigenous religion, Korean primeval religion, to which we now turn.

#### KOREAN PRIMEVAL RELIGION

The first point to note about the primeval religion of Korea is that it derives from the traditions of Northeast Asia and Siberia and not from China. The Korean people are the product of the union of various Neo-Siberian tribes, principally the Tungus, and the several Palaeo-Siberian tribes which had inhabited the peninsula since the Upper Palaeolithic period. The racial union of these groups was completed some time after 600 B.C. in the north and by 200 B.C. in the south.

Following this period of racial mixture, incipient tribal states began to emerge during the final quarter of the first millennium B.C. Among the most important of these were the states of Ancient Chosŏn 古朝鮮, Puyŏ 夫余, Koguryŏ, and Paekche. Shilla did not emerge as a state until much later, perhaps the fifth century A.D. By the term "primeval religion of Korea," I mean the religion which was characteristic of these early tribal states. Although itself derived from earlier, prehistoric traditions, by the advent of Buddhism, this primeval religion had undergone a process of maturation which had adapted it to the settled nature of the society of a state (Grayson 1979: 59-61).

The second point to make about the primeval religion of Korea is that it belongs to that broad family of religious traditions which anthropologists call shamanism. Modern Korean folk religion, Korean primeval religion, and modern Siberian shamanism all have their origins in the most ancient traditions of Northeast Asian shamanism.

In the ancient period, there were in Korea religious figures called *ch'ŏn'gun* (天君, "Prince of Heaven") who acted as intercessors for their people at certain great yearly ceremonies. These figures inherited their positions and were in many cases the political rulers of their people. There were also lesser figures who were concerned with the curing of disease and the dispatch of the souls of the dead to the next world. These three primary concerns of the primeval religion, namely intercession, curing and the dispatch of the souls of the dead, likewise remain the principal concerns of modern Korean folk religion (Yu 1975: 345-346).

The great shamans held important ceremonies either at hilltop shrines or in sacred groves called *sodo* 蘇塗 in which they resided. The sacred character of these groves is indicated by the fact that criminals

fleeing from justice could find refuge within their precincts in the same way that in medieval times in Europe outlaws sought asylum within the sanctity of a church.

Most of the ancient states had important rites connected with the agricultural cycle at which the *ch'ŏn'gun* officiated. The Puyŏ had the harvest festival called Yŏnggo 迎鼓, the Koguryŏ, the Tongmaeng 東盟 Festival, the Tongnye, the Much'ŏn 舞天 Festival, and the Han tribes in the south, Suritnal and Sangdal held in the fifth and tenth lunar months respectively. These ceremonies were addressed to the high god called Hanŭlnim or Ch'ŏnshin 天神, the Lord of Heaven. The shamanistic character of these rites is indicated by the words used to describe them. The character for drum, *go* 鼓, appears in the word *yŏnggo* and the word *much'ŏn* means dancing before Heaven. Drumming and dancing are two means by which the shaman enters an ecstatic state in order that his soul might journey to Heaven, or by which he might draw down a spirit into his body. *Suritnal* means the day of the eagle. Ornithological motifs are common shamanistic symbols as they represent the flight of the shaman's soul (Grayson 1979: 41-48).

The third point to make about the primeval religion of Korea is that in addition to a rich cosmology of gods, spirits and daemons, there was a belief in a high god, the Ch'ŏnshin, from whom the royal family was descended. From the area of the state of Ancient Chosŏn, there is a stele dated to 85 A.D. which is dedicated to the Lord of Heaven and which contains a petition for a bountiful harvest. The connection of the ruling family to the Lord of Heaven is attested by the myth of Tan'gun (檀君, Lord of the Sandalwood Tree), which is recorded in the *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事, "Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms"). Order in social relationships, civilization, and the state are created in this myth when the Son of the Lord of Heaven descends to earth on top of Paektu-san 白頭山. His son Tan'gun, the offspring of a bear, becomes the founder of the first ruling house of a Korean state.

The myth of Tan'gun contains two important elements. In the first place, the descent of the Son of the Lord of Heaven and his subsequent marriage with the Earth Spirit symbolizes the union of Heaven and Earth. In the second place, the offspring of this union founds a family which becomes the intermediary between the heavenly and earthly spheres. The royal houses are in effect families of hereditary shamans which Yu calls *shinin* (神人, "divine men"; Yu 1975: 33-45).

Recent excavations in Kyŏngju 慶州, the capital of Shilla, have shown not only the splendor of that ancient kingdom but also have given us a better idea of the shamanistic role of the early kings. Among the many objects recovered from the royal tumuli are the magnificent golden

crowns and belts worn by the kings of ancient Shilla. The crowns are formed of uprights of beaten gold sheets in the shape of antlers and trees from which dangle various golden ornaments and curved pieces of jade called *kogok* 曲玉. Tree and deer motifs are common shamanistic symbols, and the *kogok* resemble bear or tiger claws, used by modern shamans on their clothing for their animistic power. The splendid gold belts are likewise full of many dangling objects, such as the *kogok*, fish, and gold plates. Covered with brilliant, dangling objects, the kings of ancient Shilla must have appeared to the ordinary people as radiant god-like beings (Grayson 1979: 113–119).

#### THE TRANSMISSION OF BUDDHISM INTO EAST ASIA

As Buddhism traveled eastward through Central Asia toward China, it acquired various characteristics which were markedly different from the Buddhism which existed in India. Mahāyāna Buddhism developed to a remarkable degree the ability to accommodate itself to the customs, rites, and patterns of belief of the societies to which it was transmitted. Surprisingly, the development of this syncretic form of Buddhism aided in the acceptance of Buddhism in northern China following the collapse of the state of Western Jin (西晉, 265–315).

The demise of this universal empire led to the creation in north China of a series of ephemeral states ruled by various barbarian tribal chieftains who proved to be particularly susceptible to the persuasive techniques used by Buddhist missionaries arriving from Central Asia. These missionaries came from countries where the mixing of Buddhism and the native religion had already taken place, and hence they knew how to appeal to the barbarian rulers to win them over to their point of view. Magic and occult practices were the principal means used.

One of the greatest practitioners of these occult techniques was Fo-tu-deng 佛圖澄, who arrived in northern China in 310 and served at the court of Later Zhao (後趙, 319–352). Fo-tu-deng claimed control of various spirits as his personal messengers, and was said to have performed such feats of magic as creating a lotus out of a bowl of water, finding water in a dry well, and predicting rain. Lest we think of him as a charlatan pretending to be a magician, however, he did speak forthrightly about the essence of Buddhism. When asked by the king what was the principal ethic of Buddhism, Fo-tu-deng replied that it was the prohibition against killing any living thing (Ch'en 1964: 78–80). This syncretic form of Buddhism became established in northern China during the fourth century and was transmitted to the Korean states by the latter part of the same century.

Often there were political or diplomatic reasons for the transmission

of Buddhism into Korea. Although there is good evidence to show that there must have been a Buddhist presence in Koguryō by the middle of the fourth century, formally it was introduced through the agency of the emperor of one of the barbarian states of northern China. The Emperor Fu-qian (苻堅, 357–383) of Former Jin (前秦, 351–394) sent a Buddhist monk and his entourage to the court of King So-su-rim (小獸林王, 371–383) of Koguryō in 372. In his message to the king, the emperor stressed the efficacy of Buddhism as a means of protecting the state from both internal and external danger (Lee 1969: 30–31). This is one clue to the fact that the Buddhism which was transmitted initially to Korea was a syncretic type with shamanistic overtones. Though practiced first only as a cult of the court, Buddhism eventually became firmly established in Koguryō society. From the first part of the fifth century, missionaries from Koguryō armed with an understanding of Buddhist syncretism moved south and began to spread this sophisticated doctrine into the territory of the incipient state of Shilla.

#### BUDDHIST DEVELOPMENT IN SHILLA PRIOR TO OFFICIAL ACCEPTANCE

Buddhism was present in Shilla nearly a hundred years before it was officially recognized. Most of the evidence for the existence of Buddhism prior to the reign of King Pöp-hŭng (法興王, 514–539) is contained in a record from the Koryō Dynasty (高麗, 936–1392), the *Haedong kosŭng chön* (海東高僧傳, *Lives of Eminent Korean Monks*). This book gives us the names of four missionaries from the fifth century and of the martyr whose death was the alleged reason for the official sanction of Buddhism. The four Buddhist missionaries of that period are given as Myöl-gu-bi 滅垢毗, Chöng-bang 正方, Huk-ho-ja 黑胡子, and A-do 阿道.

We know nothing of the first two other than the fact that their martyrdom was revealed by a secret believer to a later missionary, Huk-ho-ja. This indicates not only that their work had been effective, but that local officials must have been concerned about the importation of a foreign religion which might undermine traditional practices. At a later date, however, Huk-ho-ja whose presence had come to the attention of the court was called to the royal palace to cure the daughter of King Nul-chi (訥祇王, 417–457). The cure was effected by burning incense and incanting a charm. A similar experience is recorded at a later time for A-do (Lee 1969: 51–52). These incidents show that the king and his court must have viewed the Buddhists as powerful shamanistic practitioners of occult arts. The fact that Huk-ho-ja and A-do did perform these rituals indicates that they, like Fo-tu-deng, were not adverse to using these techniques to gain a hearing for Buddhism.

This evidence would indicate that Buddhism was practised as a

private cult at the court of Shilla from the time of King Nul-chi. By the early sixth century, King Pöp-hŭng was ready to proclaim Buddhism as the state religion, but hesitated to do so for fear of aristocratic opposition. In desperation, the king and a young Buddhist aristocrat named I-ch'a-don 異次頓 secretly schemed to create an incident which would result in the martyrdom of the aristocrat for the sake of Buddhism.

This plot involved I-ch'a-don a minor official at court, using his office to authorize the construction of a Buddhist temple. It was hoped that this usurpation of royal prerogative would result in the conservative aristocracy being roused to demand his execution. The king and I-ch'a-don both expected that the martyrdom of the young aristocrat would result in a miracle which would provide a pretext for sanctioning the official acceptance of Buddhism.

According to the *Haedong kosŭng chŏn*, the ruse worked and I-ch'a-don was condemned to death. Before his execution he predicted the occurrence of two miracles, namely the transformation of his blood into milk and the flight of his severed head to the top of a mountain. Later generations believed that the occurrence of these two events so awed those present at the execution that opposition to the formal acceptance of Buddhism collapsed.

The *Haedong kosŭng chŏn* also mentions the institution of an annual memorial service to appease the spirit of I-ch'a-don (Lee 1969: 57-61). The official acceptance of Buddhism in Shilla was thus not due to an appreciation of its superior doctrine, but to an awareness that within Buddhist practices there was powerful occult magic. The success of the missionaries of the fifth century and of I-ch'a-don must be attributed to these occult practices, practices which were similar to the shamanism indigenous to Shilla. Occult Buddhism must have been understood by the people of Shilla as a superior form of shamanism.

#### THE SIXTH CENTURY: THE OFFICIAL ACCEPTANCE OF BUDDHISM

With the martyrdom of I-ch'a-don, Buddhism became established in Shilla. King Pöp-hŭng personally propagated the religion for ten years after this martyrdom, then he and his queen retired to separate monastic quarters to spend the remainder of their days. Following Pöp-hŭng's retirement, his nephew Chin-hŭng (眞興王, 539-575) ascended the throne. Although Buddhism became established under Pöp-hŭng's reign, it is in Chin-hŭng's reign that we notice the first signs of the development of a uniquely Korean form of syncretic Buddhism.

As we have seen, the kings of the ancient states acted as intercessors for their people in the great state ceremonies, imploring the protection of Heaven, and that the Emperor Fu-qian recommended Buddhism to

the King of Koguryŏ because of the divine protection which it gave the state. In Chin-hŭng's reign, we see the first performance of Buddhist rites for the protection of the state.

In 551, the first *paekchwa-hoe* (百座會, Assembly of One Hundred Seats) was held for the purpose of reading one of two esoteric scriptures, the *Jin Guang-ming Jing* 金光明經 and the *Ren-wang Jing* 仁王經. These sutras contain a vow made in the first instance by the Four Heavenly Kings and in the second instance by Buddha to protect the person or the state offering the ceremony. Likewise, prayers for national safety and the dispatch of the souls of fallen warriors were offered in 551 and 572 in a similar ceremony called a *p'alghan-hoe* (八關會, Assembly of the Eight Commandments; Lee 1969: 64–67). Both the *paekchwa-hoe* and the *p'alghan-hoe* have a distinctly shamanistic flavor about them in that they feature intercession on behalf of the people and propitiation of the dead.

This assimilation took place on other levels as well. For example, in 553 Chin-hŭng ordered the construction of a detached palace, but work was stopped upon the discovery of a yellow dragon living in that area. Later, construction was completed but the building was dedicated as a Buddhist temple called the Hwangnyong-sa (黃龍寺, Temple of the Yellow Dragon). During the ancient period, propitiation of local spirits and the dedication of shrines to them was a common practice, but now we see these spirits becoming transferred to the Buddhist pantheon, and the shrines which would have been dedicated to them becoming temples and monasteries. The core beliefs and practices still derive from Korean shamanism, but they now begin to appear in a Buddhist guise.

King Pŏp-hŭng and his successor Chin-hŭng viewed themselves as Buddhist monarchs but not in the sense of being mere patrons of the new religion. They were *cakravartī-rāja* or *wangsŏn* 王仙, divine rulers akin to the *bodhisattvas*. Pŏp-hŭng's reign name means the "Advancement of the *Dharma*" and that of Chin-hŭng means "the Advancement of Truth" (Grayson 1979: 152–158). Just as the royal ancestors stood as intermediaries between Heaven and Earth, so too their Buddhist successors mediated between the new gods and their people. By the close of the sixth century, traditional rites, practices and nomenclature had assumed a Buddhist guise.

#### THE SEVENTH CENTURY: THE FORMATION OF A KOREAN SYNCRETIC BUDDHISM

The continued development of a Korean syncretic Buddhism is best illustrated by the life and work of three monks from the early and mid-

seventh century, namely Wŏn-gwang 圓光, Cha-jang 慈藏, and Myŏng-nang 明朗. The first two of these are generally recognized for their contributions to orthodox Buddhism and scholarship, while the latter monk is the best known figure of the esoteric school of the seventh century. Wŏn-gwang is most renowned for his role in the foundation of the Hwarang Troop 花郎徒, an elite group of aristocratic youth trained in warfare and Buddhist philosophy. Many of the *hwarang*, such as Kim Yu-shin 金庾信 and Prince Ch'un-ch'u 春秋公, later became leaders in the wars to unify the Korean peninsula under the rule of Shilla.

Wŏn-gwang was not only a great scholar and organizer, he was an adept of the esoteric practices of Buddhism. The *Samguk yusa* records that he performed a *paekchwa-hoe* in 613 and that on another occasion he cured the illness of King Chin-p'yŏng (眞平王, 579-631) by reciting certain sutras (Lee 1969: 7881). The practice of making cures by reciting portions of certain sutras is a tradition which goes back at least to the time of King Nul-chi. The use of the sutras in the *paekchwa-hoe* and in the curative rites indicates that there was a strong belief in the magical power locked up within the sacred words.

Cha-jang, a monk of royal blood, is often regarded as the greatest of the scholastic monks of the seventh century. He is remembered for his efforts to centralize the organization of Korean Buddhism, to regularize ordination rites and monastic rules, and to purify the Buddhist clergy. His deep interest in the occult practices of esoteric Buddhism is often overlooked. In the year 636, Cha-jang made a trip to Wu-tai Shan 五台山 in China in order to have an experience of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, an important figure in the esoteric cult. After much difficulty, Cha-jang did have this experience and received some secret, occult information from the bodhisattva. On his return to Shilla, Cha-jang duplicated his experience of Mañjuśrī at Odae-san 五台山. This type of ecstatic experience is wholly shamanistic in form and it is worth pointing out in this context that Cha-jang was a member of the royal family, whose antecedents were shamans.

Cha-jang is the first person known to have renamed one of the sacred mountains of Korea (Yi 1975: 122-125). He called the mountain on which he had his experience of Mañjuśrī Odae-san after Wu-tai Shan in China.

The names of two neighboring mountain ranges, Kūmgang-san 金剛山 and Sōrak-san 雪岳山, likewise reflect Buddhist influence. *Kūmgang* refers to *vajra* or diamond, an element important in Buddhist thought, and to a ritual implement used by priests and exorcists of the esoteric cults. *Sōrak* is a reference to the Himalaya Mountains and to their guardian deity (Soothill 1937: 220, 366).

Myōng-nang is a lesser known and more mysterious figure than either Wōn-gwang or Cha-jang. Because his mother was a sister of Cha-jang, Myōng-nang was a collateral member of the royal family. He was in China from 632–638 studying the doctrines of esoteric Buddhism. This was at the same time Cha-jang was residing in Tang, and in fact the nephew preceded his uncle in pursuing studies of esoteric Buddhism. Myōng-nang was particularly interested in the use of the occult speech (*mantra*) and the mystic diagrams (*mandala*), which formed important parts of the rituals of the occult sects. After his return to Shilla, he founded the Shinin Sect 神印宗, which emphasized the use of the *mandala*. In 668, during the peninsular wars for unification, when it seemed that Tang would invade Shilla, he was asked to use his powers to avert an impending disaster. Myōng-nang's first thought was to create a giant mandala in the form of temple, but as there was not enough time, he gathered together twelve other practitioners of occult Buddhism and performed a rite called *munduru pimilbop* 文豆婁秘密法, that is, a secret *mandala* rite. Exactly what scriptures were recited and what invocations chanted are not known, but the *Samguk yusa* does claim that the Tang navy was sunk. This occult rite was repeated in 669.

Ten years later, in 679, the Sach'ōnwang-sa (四天王寺, Temple of the Four Heavenly Kings) was built according to Myōng-nang's instructions (Yi 1975: 55–57). It was a giant *mandala*, a cosmic diagram of great power to defend the state. As a portion of sacred space, it was comparable to the ancient *sodo*. The Four Heavenly Kings for whom the temple is named are the guardians of the four cardinal points of the universe and important figures in the worship of occult Buddhism. One who could control the *mandala* / temple and the rites which were performed there would have been seen as a powerful intercessor between this world and the world of the spirits.

There were other practitioners of occult Buddhism. Mil-bon 密本 was noted for the cure of Queen Sōn-dōk (善德女王, 632–646) and her prime minister (Yi 1975: 153–155). Hye-t'ong 惠道 was renowned for the cure of the daughter of the emperor Gao-zong (高宗, 649–683) of Tang and of the daughter of King Hyo-so (孝昭王, 692–701) of Shilla. According to a legend, when soldiers came to arrest Hye-t'ong for some offense, he climbed up on his house roof holding a bottle. He painted a red circle around the neck of the bottle and instantly a red line appeared around the neck of every soldier. Hye-t'ong then threatened to break the neck of the bottle and thus was able to secure his safety (Yi 1974: 154–155). By the end of the seventh century, occult Buddhist practice had supplanted traditional shamanistic rites. The aims and purposes of these foreign rituals were much the same as those of the

indigenous ones, but were more sophisticated and complex.

#### THE EIGHTH CENTURY: A SOPHISTICATED SYNTHESIS

From the end of the seventh century through to the end of the eighth century, the classical schools of orthodox Buddhism, called the *Ogyo* 五教 or Five Sects, flourished in Shilla. Parallel to this development was the growth of formalized schools of esoteric Buddhism. We have already observed the foundation of the Shinin Sect by Myōng-nang. The monk Chin-p'yo 眞表 came under the influence of the esoteric teachings of the Fa-xiang School 法相宗 founded by the peripatetic monk Xuan-zang 玄奘, who had drunk deeply of these doctrines at their source in India. Chin-p'yo subsequently had an ecstatic vision of the Bodhisattva Maitrēya, an important figure in occult Buddhist ritual. He is said to have received from the bodhisattva a copy of a book of divination called the *Zhan-zha Jing* 占察經 and 189 divination sticks. He later initiated an annual service of divination and helped found the *yogācāra* school in Shilla (Yi 1975: 145-147).

Myōng-hyo 明曉 was another figure important in the establishment of formalized esoteric Buddhism. He came under the influence of the Indian esoteric Vajrabodhi, founder of the Zhen-yan Sect 眞言宗, who was resident in Tang during the first quarter of the eighth century. Myōng-hyo paid special reverence to the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* which lauded the Dhyani Buddha Vairocana as the Great Sun. The mixture of occult rituals and the cult of the sun would have accorded well with the primeval religion of Shilla (Yi 1975: 425-428).

Probably the best known figure of eighth century Buddhism is Hye-ch'o 慧超. He went to China to study esoteric Buddhisms under Vajrabodhi and his Indian disciple Amogha. These Indians were responsible for founding the Zhen-yan School, which believed in the compulsive power of certain sutras, in particular the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, and of certain occult chants and ritual formulae. The sacred diagram or *mandala* was much used. Hye-ch'o so impressed his teachers that they sent him on to India to study the esoteric doctrines more fully there. He travelled widely in India and left a record of his travels, the *Wang och'onch'ukguk chōn* 往五天竺國傳. Although Hye-ch'o is usually remembered for this valuable record of his sojourn on the subcontinent, it is not often recognized that he was an active propagator of occult Buddhism. Upon his return to China, he helped Amogha in Changan to translate an esoteric sutra devoted to the occult figure Mañjuśrī. It may be supposed that he had a tremendous effect on the Buddhism of his day in Shilla (Yi 1973: v. 41, 1729).

Without question, the greatest artistic treasure of the eighth century



Fig. 1. View of the entrance to the grotto chamber of the Sökkur-am showing the central Buddha figure. (Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of Korea, Kyöngju Branch)

is the magnificent Sökkur-am grotto (石窟庵, Stone Cave Hermitage) located at the top of T'oham-san 吐含山 near Kyöngju, the capital of Shilla (Fig. 1). This splendid grotto and its sculptures are in my opinion the most outstanding existing monument to the unique syncretic Buddhism which had emerged by the end of the seventh century. Overlooking the Sea of Japan, this grotto is an entirely artificial creation. It is not a natural cave, nor is it a man-made cave hewn out of solid rock. Rather it is made entirely of a series of rock slabs fitted together to form a domed chamber and covered with turf to form a mound. The form of construction would indicate that extraordinary care must have been taken in selecting the site and the structure of this grotto.

Said to have been begun in the tenth year of the reign of King Kyöng-dök (景德王, 742-764), the grotto is divided into three chambers:

an entrance hall, a connecting corridor, and the grotto chamber itself. Each of three chambers represents a part of the progression from the profane world to the sacred world. The outer chamber has eight sculptures of the *p'albushin* 八部神 or eight guardian deities on the left and right walls. On the walls flanking the entrance to the connecting corridor are two carvings of the muscular *vajrapāni*, superior guardian figures. The connecting corridor, representing an intermediate area between the fully profane and fully sacred spheres, is composed of four stone panels with images of the Four Heavenly Kings, the guardians of the four cardinal points of the universe to whom the *vajrapāni* and *p'albushin* are subordinate. The division between the sacred and profane is clearly marked by a gate between the connecting corridor and the grotto proper, which bears a striking resemblance to the gates at the Great Stupa at Sanchi in India.

The grotto chamber itself consists of a wall of fifteen panels of various Buddhist figures and is surmounted by a series of ten niches containing statues of various beings. Above this level rises the dome of the chamber, which consists of five layers of ten stones each, each layer of carved stones being progressively smaller than the layer beneath it. In the center of the dome is a massive stone in the shape of a lotus which is the cap which locks the pieces of the dome in place. The grotto illustrates a very high degree of mathematical complexity. For example, the width of the entrance is equal to the radius of the plan circle. The height of the wall and the radius are also identical. A circle drawn from the head of the great central Buddha figure will describe the dome. This is a mathematically perfect world, and in the center of this perfect universe sits a figure of Buddha of indescribable beauty (Jeon 1974: 220–223).

This Buddha is surrounded by fifteen panels of various figures symbolizing the sacred character of the universe. From the entrance toward the back there are seven pairs of matched panels and one panel directly behind the great figure of Buddha. The first pair of panels depicts the gods Brahma and Indra, the second the Bodhisattvas Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī, and the remaining five pairs depict the ten principal disciples of Gautama Buddha. The central rear panel is of the esoteric Buddhist figure Avalokiteśvara as Ekādaśamukha.

The grotto is a great cosmic diagram, a *mandala* of immense power. Brahma is the creator and ruler of all worlds while Indra is the lord of the spirits. The Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra are both connected with cults of the esoteric school of Buddhism and usually form part of a triad of figures along with the Dhyani Buddha Vairocana. The ten disciples, although supposedly historic figures, all have stories

connected with them about their return to earth as Bodhisattvas. The use of a figure of Ekadaśamukha, an important personage in the pantheon of esoteric savior beings, also conforms to a magical interpretation of the grotto. Because of the presence of these cult figures of esoteric Buddhism, in particular Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra, I believe that the great figure in the center of the grotto must be the Dhyani Buddha Vairocana, the supreme Buddha from whom the universe emanates. Many Korean scholars feel that the statue might be Amitābha sitting in the Western paradise. Either interpretation gives credence to the idea that this great artistic monument cannot be understood solely on aesthetic or doctrinal grounds, but that it must be thought of as a cosmic diagram, a *mandala*. The Sökkur-am is not the first instance of the creation of such a giant diagram; we have seen an earlier example in the construction of the Sach'önwang-sa by Myōng-nang. Sacred space was essentially a shamanistic concept, as was the idea that it was possible to implore or coerce the forces of the universe through the use of the correct esoteric words and rituals. It is therefore not surprising that great Buddhist monuments should have been created to help control or intercede with the powers of the universe. In early times, there were shamans residing in their *sodo*; later the intercessors became monks living in great *mandala* / temples.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The development of a uniquely Korean syncretic Buddhism took place in four stages. In the fifth century missionaries coming from the north made contact with Shilla, gaining the acceptance of its people through a demonstration of the greater power of Buddhist occult rites over similar traditional practices. In the second stage, after Buddhism had been officially sanctioned by the king, the rulers drew analogies between themselves and various traditional rites on the one hand and the bodhisattvas and Buddhist occult rituals on the other. It was during this time that the concept of the *wangson* developed, and the *paekchwa-hoe* and *p'algwan-hoe* rituals were first instituted.

In the third phase, the great leaders of the Buddhist church were noted as much for their proficiency in the esoteric rituals as for their knowledge of orthodox Buddhist doctrine. Cha-jang not only helped to reorganize Shilla Buddhism, he also introduced the cult of Mañjuśrī.

By the eighth century, Buddhism in Shilla had entered a fourth stage, in which the sophisticated synthesis of traditional beliefs and practices with esoteric Buddhism found expression in some of the most important artistic remains of the period, such as the Sökkur-am. Although scholastic and doctrinal Buddhism had their place in the

Buddhist world of the kingdom of Shilla, esoteric Buddhism was the dominant mode of Buddhism in that ancient state. Even to the great thinkers of that time, esoteric Buddhism with its occult rites had a greater appeal than doctrinal Buddhism, because of its similarity to the primeval religion of the nation. The occult form of Buddhism found greater acceptance than any other form and remained throughout the history of Shilla the essential form of Buddhism. Thus, although the external form of Buddhism appeared to be imported from elsewhere, the essential nature and character of Shilla Buddhism were influenced by and grounded in the primeval religion.

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