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**The Founding of the Royal Dragon Monastery**

translated, with annotations, from Iryon’s *SAMGUK YUSA* by David H. McClung

When Iryon took up his brush in the latter half of the 13th century to write the Samguk Yusa, his project had a special urgency; the preceding century had seen the widespread and savage destruction of Korea’s cultural heritage at the hands of wave after wave of barbaric Mongol invaders. The losses were inestimable, and Iryon, an eminent Buddhist religious leader who spent most of his life among the halls and pavilions of Korea’s fine old monasteries, constantly surrounded by rich libraries, graceful pagodas and exquisite sculpture, was in a position to be acutely aware of those losses. But, however much he must have been afflicted by the horrors that he saw, he turned his grief to action and, drawing upon the myths, legends, oral traditions and early historical and literary writings of which he seems to have had such an encyclopedic knowledge, began the compilation of a collection of stories and bits and pieces of information about his nation’s early history.

His collection, when finished, he titled the *Samguk Yusa*, and in it he has preserved for us more information on that glorious period of Korean culture that was so brutally ended by the Mongol invasions than is to be found in any other source still extant. Although the book purports to be a history of Koguryo, Paekche and Silla, the Three Kingdoms which shared the Korean peninsula from the 1st century B.C. until their unification under the latter in 668 A.D., fully half the work is devoted to the introduction, rise and flourishing of Buddhism in the Korea of the 4th through 13th centuries―an essentially Buddhist nation―and a substantial portion of the work also deals with clearly non-historical mythical and legendary material which Iryon is content to treat as just such, without any attempt at historical authentication.

Herein lies the major difference between the *Samguk Yusa* and Kim Pu-sik’s *Samguk Sagi*, another history of the Three Kingdoms compiled a century earlier than Iryon’s work. Although unquestionably more scholarly in form and content than Iryon’s volume, as well as a much richer source of information on the political and military history of the Three Kingdoms, the *Samguk Sagi* suffers from having been written by a Confucian scholar under the patronage of the royal court. Imitation of [page 70] Chinese historiographical forms was unfortunately allowed to influence the content; myths and legends were forced into the guise of sober historical fact, and religion, the arts, and the more intimate aspects of the life of the period were slighted.

Iryon, on the other hand, as a Buddhist monk who undertook his work as a purely personal project with neither official sanction nor rigid historiographical notions, was free to preserve much spiritually and psychologically revealing material which had had to suffer violence to be fitted into Kim’s work, or else be rejected altogether as fantastic nonsense. Thus the two works have rightly come to be considered complementary companion volumes, and together constitute the near totality of all the written sources we have of information on the Three Kingdoms period of Korea.

The *Samguk Yusa* met with varying fortunes through the centuries from its completion shortly before Iryon’s death in 1289 down to the present day. More than once nearly disappearing, only to be rediscovered at the last moment, it was most recently rediscovered in the early 20th century in a private library in Japan, and copies of that nearly intact text were published shortly thereafter in 1921 by Tokyo Imperial University. All of the several editions which have been made since then are based on that Tokyo Imperial University text, the particular one used in preparing the present translation being that of the *Chosen Shigaku Kai*, published in Tokyo in 1928. It has also recently come to my attention that the *Samguk Yusa* has had the good fortune to be translated in its entirety, and is now accessible to the English reader through the efforts of Ha Tae-hung, Grafton K. Mintz and the Yonsei University Press. I look forward to examining their work in the near future.

The passage here translated is taken from the fourth section of the work— “Pagodas and Images”―and deals in particular with the founding and early development of the Royal Dragon Monastery. When built, this temple was probably situated within the precincts of the capital, but its site is now to the southeast of the modern town of Kyongju, on the north side of the railway to Pusan.

Although the savage flames of the invading Mongol warriors have long since consumed the greatness of this lore-steeped monastery, still whatever may yet remain of it beneath the earth will soon be known, as its site is just now being excavated by the Office of Preservation of Cultural Properties under the Ministry of Culture and Information. We await the publication of their final report as we await the realization of Iryon’s greatest ideal―the flourishing of great cultures in a world at peace.

[page 71] THE MEDITATION STONE OF KASYAPA BUDDHA

*The Jade Dragon Collection, the Biography of Chajang, and the Comprehensive Biographies* all record that there existed in the Kingdom of Silla, to the east of Wolsong Castle and to the south of the Dragon Palace, a stone on which Kasyapa Buddha1 used to sit while meditating. The site of the stone bore traces of an ancient monastery dating back to pre-Buddhist times, and was in modern times the location of the Royal Dragon Monastery―one of the Seven Monasteries.2 It is written in the *Samguk Sagi* that in the spring of 553, when King Chinhung was to build a new royal palace on the east side of Wolsong Castle, a royal dragon appeared on the construction site. Wondering at this omen, the King changed his plans for a palace and founded the Royal Dragon Monastery instead.

The meditation stone was behind the Hall of Buddha; I once had the privilege of beholding it there. It was some five or six feet in height, and three armspans could scarcely have encircled it. Flat-topped, it stood beneath its own separate pavilion.

Although after King Chinhung built the monastery there were two disastrous fires which caused the stone to crack and split in places, still the monks who dwelt there repaired and preserved the stone by fastening iron to it.

There is even a song in praise of this stone:

“Through countless years the light of Buddha waxed and waned

While only his meditation stone stayed ever the same.

How often have the mulberry groves turned to open sea?

While lofty and forlorn, the stone steadfastly still remains.”

In the end, though, after the great battle on the Western Hill, during which the halls and pagoda of the Royal Dragon Monastery were reduced to ashes,3 this stone, too, disappeared beneath the debris. But it is still there, the top of it just level with the surface of the soil.

THE SIXTEEN-FOOT BUDDHA OF THE ROYAL DRAGON MONASTERY

In the spring of 553 King Chinhung, the twenty-fourth monarch of the Kingdom of Silla, was about to build a new royal palace to the south of his Dragon Palace when a royal dragon4 appeared on the site. The King thereupon altered his plans and instead built a Buddhist temple which he [page 72] named the Royal Dragon Monastery. The galleries surrounding the courtyard were not finished until 569,5 the entire complex therefore requiring seventeen years to complete.

Not long afterward there appeared off the south coast a great ship which drifted ashore at Sap’o Harbor in Hagok county.6 On investigation the ship was seen to contain a tablet which bore the following inscription:

“King Asoka7 of India gathered 57,000 pounds of iron and 30,000 ounces of gold; with these metals he tried to cast a Sakyamuni Trinity.8 But, as he was unsuccessful, he has loaded the metals into a ship and is setting them adrift on the sea with this prayer: ‘May they reach the land favored by destiny where they may become a sixteen-foot Buddha image!’9 He has also placed models inside the ship—one figure of the Buddha, and two of bodhisattvas.”

The officials of the county wrote a report on the matter and sent the news to the King, who in turn issued a royal command that a sunny and well- drained site to the east of the county town be chosen by divination, that a temple to be called the Tongch’uk Temple be built on that site, and that the three models be placed inside the temple for safe-keeping. Meanwhile, the gold and iron were to be transported to the capital.10

In the summer of 574 the casting of the metals into a sixteen-foot image of the Buddha was successfully completed on the first attempt. It weighed 35,700 pounds and was covered with 10,198 ounces of gold. Each of the bodhisattvas contained 12,000 pounds of iron and was covered with 10,136 ounces of gold. All three images were placed in the Royal Dragon Monastery. The following year the statue shed tears which ran all the way down to its heels and soaked the ground for a foot all around,11 a marvel which portended the imminent death of the great King.

Elsewhere it is recorded that these images were completed in the time of King Chinp’yong (r. 579-632), but this is incorrect.

In another text it says that King Asoka was born in India’s Great Fragrant Flower State within one hundred years of the lifetime of the Buddha.12 In his great zeal to serve the True Buddha he had a certain amount of gold and iron melted down and tried three times to cast an image, but each time the result was unsatisfactory. During this time the King’s eldest son alone failed to show any enthusiasm for the project. When the King had him questioned on the matter, the Crown Prince sent this reply to the throne: “The efforts of a single nation cannot achieve [page 73] success; as I have known this from the beginning I have not joined in your endeavor.” The King, realizing that his son was right, loaded the metals into a ship and set them adrift on the sea. In India alone the ship reached sixteen large states, five hundred medium-sized states, and ten thousand small states. Altogether it drifted ashore eighty thousand times. There was no land to which it did not find its way; all tried to cast the image, but none succeeded. Finally the ship reached the Kingdom of Silla where King Chinhung cast the metals at Muning’s Grove.13 When unmoulded, his statue proved perfect in every detail, and from that point on King Asoka was referred to as the “King without Grief.”

Some time after the casting of the images, the great monk Chajang14 travelled westward to study at China’s Wutai Mountain.15 There he was visited by an incarnation of the bodhisattva Manjusri who instructed him in the mysteries of his religion, then explained to him: “Your nation’s Royal Dragon Monastery is built upon the very spot where Sakyamuni Buddha and Kasyapa Buddha used to teach. For this reason India’s King without Grief gathered together a certain amount of iron and set it adrift on the sea. And for this reason, after the passing of more than one thousand three hundred years, it finally reached your nation where it was cast into an image, then placed in that very monastery. All this has come about because awesome destiny has caused it to be so!”

After the completion of the statues, the three models in the Tong-ch’uk Temple were transferred and also placed in the Royal Dragon Monastery. The records of the monastery say that the Golden Hall was completed in 584, and that Prince T’anhui, a monk, was appointed the first superior of the monastery when Queen Sondok (r. 632-646) ascended the throne. The second superior was Chajang, the National Patriarch, who was succeeded by the National Patriarch Hyehun, who was in turn succeeded by Sangnyul, a monk, and so on.

But now the soldiers have come with their flames; the sixteen-foot Buddha and the two bodhisattvas have melted and disappeared. There is, however, a small image of Sakyamuni still remaining among the ruins. A song of praise says:

“Which is not his true home, of all the myriad places?

And yet immutable destiny has favored our land;

It was not because King Asoka was unequal to his plan

That Buddha came to Wolsong seeking his old traces.”

[page 74] THE NINE-STORY PAGODA OF THE ROYAL DRAGON MONASTERY

In 636, during the reign of Queen Sondok, the twenty-seventh monarch of the Kingdom of Silla, the great monk Chajang travelled westward to study in China. While at Wutai Mountain he received instruction in the law of the Buddha from the bodhisattva Manjusri. Afterward, Manjusri also spoke to him in these terms: “Your nation’s Queen is a monarch who derives from the Ksatriya caste16 of India; she long ago received the mark of the Buddha. Therefore a special fate awaits your nation, one which will not resemble that of the Gong-gongs17 and the other tribes of eastern barbarians. However, because your nation’s mountains are steep and its streams fraught with boiling rapids, your people tend to be coarse and perverse. Many of them believe in pagan spirits, and so at times the gods in heaven send down misfortune upon them. But if there were wise mendicant monks throughout the land, then the Queen and her officers could flourish in security, and peace would reign among the common people.” When he had spoken these words the bodhisattva disappeared, and Chajang, knowing that a transmutation had swept over the great saint, wept tears of blood and withdrew.

Later, in the course of his travels through China, Chajang was passing by the Pool of Great Peace. Suddenly, a divine being rose up out of the water and demanded of him, “Foreigner, why have you come to this place?”

“I have come seeking enlightenment,” Chajang replied.

Thereupon the divine being bowed ceremoniously and questioned him further, “What persisting difficulties hinder the fortunes of your nation?”

“In the north my country shares a border with the Malgal,18 and in the south it extends as far as the isles of the Japanese; Koguryo and Paekche are both repeatedly violating our frontiers. Our neighbors are invading on all sides! This is the thorn in the side of my people.”

The being spoke, “Recently your nation took a woman and made her King. Although she is filled with virtue, she is powerless to inspire fear in her enemies. This is why the neighboring countries are plotting against her. You should return quickly to your country.”

“And what good might I do by returning home?”

“The dragon who guards the sanctity of Buddha at the Royal Dragon Monastery is my eldest son; he received the command of Brahma19 to go [page 75] protect that monastery. When you have returned to your country, build a nine-story pagoda within the monastery compound; the neighboring countries will surrender and submit, the nine tribes of Korea will pay tribute to your Queen, and her royal dignity will be secure forever. After the pagoda has been built, proclaim the Rite of the Eight Gates20 and grant amnesty to offenders; then the foreign invaders will no longer be able to harm you. And finally, you must build a shrine for me on the south bank of the stream in the capital district. If you will all entrust yourselves to my protection, then I will certainly reward your piety.” With these words the divine being brought forth a jade in his hands, presented it to Chajang, then suddenly disappeared and was no longer to be seen.

Early in the spring of 643 Chajang gathered up the scriptures, images, priestly robes, and presents of silk that the Tang emperor had conferred upon him and returned to his country. There he made known to his Queen his mission to build a pagoda. Queen Sondok discussed the matter with an assembly of her officials; the officials declared that only if the master-builder were engaged in Paekche could they give their consent to the project. An architect was accordingly sought in that country, where a builder named Abiji, richly paid in treasures and silks, accepted the appointment and came to Silla to undertake the preparation of the wood and stone. Igan21 Yongch’un oversaw the entire project, directing the efforts of some two hundred artisans.

However, on the day that the erection of the pagoda’s columns was to begin, Abiji saw Paekche, his native country, being destroyed in a dream. Suspicious, he halted construction. Suddenly a great quake began to shake the earth, and in the ensuing darkness and confusion an aged monk and a powerfully built young man came forth from the doorway of the Golden Hall, together erected the columns, then both disappeared and were no longer to be seen. On beholding this marvel the master-builder repented and brought the construction of the pagoda to its completion.

In the records regarding the temple’s columns it is written: “The pagoda measured forty-two feet in height above the iron plate,22 and one hundred and eighty-three feet in height below it.”

Chajang divided into three parts the one hundred ashes from the cremated body of the Buddha which he had received at Wutai Mountain. He placed some of them inside the columns of the pagoda, some of them inside the altar where the novices received their commandments at Tongdo Monastery, and some of them in the pagoda of the Temple of Great Peace, all in order to fulfill the requests of the dragon spirit he had seen by the pool.

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After the pagoda was built, heaven and. earth poured forth their riches upon the people of Silla, and the Three Kingdoms of Korea were united under the rule of its sovereign. How could this not have been the result of the pagoda’s magical protection?

Later, when the generals of the King of Koryo were plotting to attack Silla, their King chided them, “Silla possesses three treasures; it cannot be attacked.”

“And what are these three treasures?’

“The Royal Dragon Monastery’s sixteen-foot Buddha and nine-story pagoda, and the jade belt which heaven bestowed on King Chinp’yong.”23 And so the King put an end to their plotting. This case is similar to the one in China where the men of Chu dared not look greedily northward at the lands of Zhou as long as the latter state was in possession of the nine sacred vessels.

A song of praise to the pagoda says:

 “With spirits guarding and gods supporting

it suppresses the emperors in their capitals;

 Shining, glittering, painted blue and gold,

its rafters seem to fly.

 When the queen ascends its lofty heights

why would only the nine tribes bow?

 And she will begin to sense the peace

of this special place in the universe.”

We find the same story in the History of the Founding of the Eastern Capital which was compiled by the famous Korean worthy. An Hong: “At the twenty-seventh succession to the throne of Silla a queen was made ruler of the nation. Although she trod the path of virtue she was unable to inspire fear in the neighboring princes, and so the nine tribes of Korea encroached on her territory and troubled her people. If, however, she were to build a nine-story pagoda at the Royal Dragon Monastery which was to the south of her Dragon Palace, then the scourges of the neighboring countries might be warded off. The first story represented Japan, the second China, the third Wu and Yue,24 the fourth the Taknas,25 the fifth the Ungyus,26 the sixth the Malgals, the seventh the Ji-dan Tartars, the eighth the Nu-zhen Tartars, and the ninth the Yemaeks.27

It is written as well in the Samguk Sagi and in old records that were [page 77] in the monastery’s library that King Chinhung founded the monastery in 553, and that the pagoda was later completed in 645 during the reign of Queen Sondok. In the summer of 698 the seventh year of the reign of King Hyoso, the pagoda was damaged by lightning,28 but was restored to its original condition in 720 under King Songdok. It was again struck by lightning in the summer of 868 during the reign of King Kyongmun, and was restored a second time in the same reign. Under the present dynasty,29 it was damaged by lightning in the autumn of 953, the fifth30 year of the reign of King Kwangjong, and was repaired a third time in 1021 under King Hyonjong. Again it was struck in 103531 in the time of King Chong-jong, and again it was restored in 1064 under King Munjong. Struck once more in 109532 under King Honjong, it was restored for the fifth time in 1096 under King Sukchong before invading soldiers in the winter of 1238, the twenty-sixth year of King Kojong, set fires on the Western Hill; the pagoda, the sixteen-foot Buddha, the halls and the galleries all being totally destroyed.

THE BELL OF THE ROYAL DRAGON MONASTERY

In 754, during the reign of the great King Kyongdok, the thirty-fifth monarch of the Kingdom of Silla, a bell was cast for the Royal Dragon Monastery. It was ten feet three inches high, nine inches thick, and weighed 497,581 pounds. It was donated by the King’s consort, Lady Sammo,33 and was the work of a slave of the Isang family. In 756, the year that Su-zong ascended the throne of the Tang empire in China, a new bell—six feet eight inches high—was cast.

NOTES

1. A Buddha of the past. According to the doctrine of some sects of Buddhism, there has been a succession of seven Buddhas who lived at different times. The seventh and most recent of these was Sakyamuni, the historical founder of Buddhism; Kasyapa was the sixth Buddha in the succession.

2. Iryon records that the monk Ado, who introduced Buddhism to Silla, was told by his mother that there were seven places in and around the capital of that kingdom which had been monastery sites in times prior to historical Buddhism, and which would be again when a wise king once again caused Buddhism to flourish in the land.

3. The entire monastery complex was burnt to the ground by invading Mongols in the winter of 1238.

[page 78] 4. At this point the text uses the,expression “yellow dragon,” a term which in Chinese and Korean is identical in pronunciation to “royal dragon.” Although the two terms can be used interchangeably in referring to the monastery and to the dragon for which it was named, the second one predominates, and so I have chosen for the sake of clarity to use it consistently throughout the translation.

5. The Samguk Sagi gives 566 as the date of completion.

6. The modern name is Kokp’o in Ulsan County, on the southeastern coast of Korea.

7. Emperor of India c. 274-232 B.C., Asoka was the first powerful patron of Buddhism and did much to spread its influence beyond the borders of his own empire.

8. A group of three statues, the larger, central one being of Sakyamuni and the two smaller, flanking ones being usually of bodhisattvas. A bodhisattva is a person who has attained buddhahood, but who decides to forego the state of eternal bliss in order to remain on earth to help others―a sort of Buddhist saint.

9. A sixteen foot tall statue of the Buddha. Tradition has it that during the lifetime of Sakyamuni the average Indian was eight feet tall; out of respect, later generations made their images of the Buddha twice that tall. This size was also believed to have the most supernatural power.

10. Commonly called both Kimsong and the Eastern Capital, and dominated by Wolsong Castle, the capital of Silla occupied a site very near that of the present day city of Kyongju.

11. The same incident is related in the Samguk Sagi.

12. The traditional dates for the lifetime of the Buddha are 563-483 B.C. They are subject to dispute.

13. The exact location of this place is no longer known.

14. Clerical name of Kim Sonjong, a monk who went to China in 636 and returned to Korea in 643. He was eventually appointed National Patriarch, a title bestowed by Silla monarchs on the Kingdom’s foremost monk.

15. Located in northeastern Shanxi province, it is one of the four mountains of China which are sacred to Buddhism, and has more than one hundred and fifty monasteries. Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, is its patron saint.

16. The second, or warrior and ruling caste, of the four main castes of India. It is the caste to which Sakyamuni belonged.

17. A legendary race of barbarians who lived to the northwest of China. With human faces, hands and feet, they had the bodies of snakes and hair like that of pigs, and were considered to be corrupt and stupid.

18. A powerful race of Tungusic peoples who inhabited the area immediately north of Koguryo.

19. The first person of the Brahmanical Trinity, regarded as a minor saint by Buddhists.

20. Originally, and probably still at this time, a Buddhist rite intended to rid the people of the “eight sins” by closing the “eight gates through which temptation might enter them. A festival of the same name flourished under the Koryo dynasty as a winter festival honoring the spirits of nature.

[page 79] 21. A title given to members of the second highest of the eighteen ranks in the Silla aristocracy.

22. The iron plate marks the division between the lower, more substantial levels of a pagoda and its more ornate spire.

23. There exists a legend that when King Chinp’yong ascended the throne of Silla an angel descended into his throneroom and presented him with a jade belt which was the gift of the Heavenly Emperor.

24. Eastern seaboard states of China.

25. The inhabitants of Cheju island.

26. The identity of this tribe seems to have been lost.

27. A tribe which inhabited an area of east-central Korea between Koguryo in the north and Silla in the south.

28. This incident is not recorded in the Samguk Sagi.

29. A change of dynasty occurred in 936, the Silla dynasty being replaced by the Koryo dynasty. But none of the incidents given here as having occurred under the Koryo dynasty, save the pagoda’s final destruction in 1238, is recorded in the Koryo-sa, the official history of the period.

30. In fact it was the fourth year of his reign.

31. The Koryo-sa does mention strong earthquakes for the Kyongju area in this year.

32. The Koryo-sa records an order for the repair of the pagoda rather than a lightning strike for this year.

33. The text is not clear at this point. Four characters — 孝貞伊王 ―, the meaning of which has yet to be satisfactorily explained, appear before the name of Lady Sammo. There may be some corruption in the text.

***See the following page for a glossary of Chinese characters.***

[page 80] GLOSSARY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

corresponding to proper nouns in the text

Abiji 阿非知 Rite of the Eight Gates

Ado 我 道 (P’algwan Hoe) 八關會

An Hong 安 弘 Royal Dragon Monastery 皇龍寺

Biography of Chajang 慈藏傳 Sakyamuni Buddha 釋迦佛

Chinhung, King 眞興王 Samguk Sagi 二國史記

Chinp’yong, King 眞平王 Samguk Yusa 二國遺事

Chongjong, King 靖宗王 Sammo, Lady 三毛夫人

Chosen Shigaku Kai 朝鮮史學會 Sangnyul 廂 律

Chu (Ch’u) 楚 Sap’o Harbor 絲 浦

Comprehensive Biographies 諸家傳紀 Shanxi (Shensi) 山 西

Gong-gongs 共 工 Silla 新 羅

Hagok County 可曲縣 Songdok, King 聖德王

History of the Founding of the Sondok, Queen 善德王

Eastern Capital 東都成立記 Su Zong (Su Tsung) 肅 宗

Honjong, King 獻宗(憲宗) Sukchong, King 肅 宗

Hyehun 惠 訓 Taknas 托 羅

Hyonjong, King 顯宗(現宗) Tang (T’ang) 唐

Hyoso, King 孝昭王 T’anhui, Prince 眞骨歡喜

Iryon 一 然 Tongch’uk Temple 東竺寺

Isang 里 上 Tongdo Monastery 通度寺

Jade Dragon Collection 玉龍集 Ulsan County 蔚山郡

Ji-dan (Khitan) Tartars (契) 丹 Ungyus 鷹 遊

Kasyapa Buddha 迦葉佛 Wolsong Castle 月 城

Kim Pu-sik 金富軾 Wu 吳

Kim Sonjong 金善宗 Wutai Mountain 五臺山

Kimsong 金 城 Yemaeks 穢 貊

Koguryo 高(句) 麗 Yongch’un, Igan 伊于龍春

Kojong, King 高 宗 Yue (Yueh) 越

Kokp’o 谷 浦 Zhou (Chou) 周

Koryo 高 麗

Koryo-sa 高麗史

Kwanjong, King 光宗

Kyongdok, King 景德王

Kyongmun, King 景文王

Malgal 靺 鞨

Manjusri 文 殊

Muning’s Grove 文仍林

Munjong, King 文 宗

National Patriarch 國 統

Nu-zhen (Nu-chen) Tartars 女狄(女眞)

Paekche 百 濟

“Pagodas and Images” 塔 像