Keynote Addresses
Korean Buddhist Journeys to Lands
Worldly and Otherworldly

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ABSTRACT
This address explores Korean Buddhist travel for religious training, missionary propagation, and devotional pilgrimage. Simultaneous with continued travel overseas to the Chinese mainland and the Buddhist homeland of India, Koreans were also bringing those sites home through a wholesale remapping of the domestic landscape. As local geography became universalized, there would have then been less need for the long, dangerous journeys overseas to Buddhist sacred sites: instead, the geography of Buddhism became implicit within the indigenous landscape, turning Korea into the Buddha-land itself. Once this “relocalization” of Buddhism had occurred, Korean Buddhists were able to travel through the sacred geography of Buddhism from the (relative) comfort of their own locale.

Travel for religious training, missionary propagation, and devotional pilgrimage has been an integral part of the Buddhist tradition since its inception—and Korean Buddhism has been no exception. Soon after the start of the Buddha’s dispensation in the sixth or fifth century B.C.E., the Buddha formally enjoined his monks to “wander forth for the welfare and weal of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, welfare, and weal of gods and men.” This command initiated one of the greatest missionary movements in world religious history, and the travel impulse became an integral part of Buddhism’s self-identity. Buddhist propagators, accompanying trading caravans that carried goods across Asia, arrived in China by at least the beginning of the first millennium C.E. and the Korean peninsula within another three centuries.

Travel on pilgrimage soon became an integral part of Buddhist practice in India and beyond. In the mainstream recension of the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra, for example, the Buddha tells his attendant Ānanda that the laity should be encouraged to make pilgrimages to the four sites (mahāsthāna) most closely associated with the Buddha’s career,

1) his birth at the Lumbinī grove near the city of Kapilavastu;
2) his enlightenment at Bodhgayā near Magadha,
3) his first teaching, or “turning of the wheel of the Law” (dharmacakra-pravartana), at Rśivadana near Benares; and
4) his final parinirvāṇa at Kuśinagara.

Still today, Korean Buddhist monks recite a litany of these four places at the beginning of every midday meal, keeping alive in the present the memory of these traditional, and long-neglected, pilgrimage sites. Pilgrimage became deeply engrained in Buddhist practice by at least the third century B.C.E., after King Asoka was said to have established 84,000 reliquary shrines for the Buddha’s relics (śarīra; sari) throughout his realm. These shrines became focal points of pilgrimage and cultic practice. This sponsorship led to massive
movements of Buddhist pilgrims across the Indian subcontinent, following what became well-developed pilgrimage routes. Wide-ranging and well-supported pilgrimage networks leading to important stūpas existed throughout the subcontinent, networks in which East Asian monks, including Koreans, eventually participated.

1. Travel Overseas

Korean monks also went forth to propagate their religion, including monks from the early Three Kingdoms. In the fifth century C.E., Paekche monks were among the first to introduce Buddhism to the Japanese isles and monks from the Koguryŏ kingdom were probably the initial propagators of Buddhism in the Silla region of the southeastern Korean peninsula. Korean monks sojourning in China played active roles in the development of the indigenous schools of Chinese Buddhism as well.

The stories surrounding the travels of the eminent Silla scholiasts Wŏnhyo (1158-1210) and Úisang are emblematic of how deeply engrained travel for study and propagation comes to be in Korean Buddhist monasticism. After several years of training in Korea, both monks tried to leave for China in order to study with their counterparts in the mecca of the mainland. Arrested for espionage by guards at the Koguryŏ border and arrested as spies—a role that itinerant monks not infrequently played, in fact—they were imprisoned for several weeks before being repatriated to Silla. On a supposed second trip, they intended to travel via sea from Paekche, but ultimately Úisang made the trip alone (as on the slide) and eventually arrived in China. Úisang studied there for ten years with the early Huayan exegete Zhiyan (602-668) and became his successor, before returning to his Silla homeland to help forestall an impending Tang invasion of the peninsula. Wŏnhyo’s own enlightenment experience is said to have occurred while he was on the road with Úisang. Taking refuge at night from a severe storm, at first light they discovered that the sanctuary they thought had sheltered them was actually a tomb littered with skulls. Wŏnhyo is said to have realized from this experience that the mind could turn something offensive into something agreeable and that all things were therefore merely projections of mind. He knew then that he did not need to continue on to China in order to continue his Buddhist training but could live a salutary and productive Buddhist life on the peninsula. (This story becomes increasingly embellished over time. According to the most elaborate retelling of the legend, in Juefan Huihong’s (1071-1128) Linjian lu, when Wŏnhyo took sanctuary that evening, he drank what he thought was sweet water in a gourd, only to discover at daylight that what he had actually quaffed was offal rotting in a skull. There was a predictably gruesome rendition of this story in a TV mini-series about Wŏnhyo.)

A little over a generation after Wŏnhyo, we have the first record of Korean monks who undertook the even more arduous pilgrimage to the Buddhist homeland of India. The Unified Silla monk Hyech’o (d.u.; ca. 704-780) left a travelogue of his journey, Wang o Ch’ŏnch’ukkuk chŏn (Memoir of a Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India), which is one of the few pieces of Korean Buddhist travel literature that has been the object of extensive scholarly study in the West. After traveling from Korea to China, Hyech’o spent about three years on the mainland before departing in 724 via the southern sea route for India (the Ch’ŏnch’ukkuk of his title). After landing along India’s eastern seacoast, he subsequently traveled for another three years or so, visiting many of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites in north-central India, including Bodhgayā and Kuśinagara, before making his way to the south and west of the subcontinent. Departing from India via the northwest Buddhist strongholds of Kashmir and Gandhāra, he made his way overland back to China via the Silk Roads of the Takla Makan Desert in Inner Asia. After his return, Hyech’o wrote an account of his journey, where he describes in rather prosaic
fashion geography and climate, along with comments on the economies and agriculture, the dress, customs, and religious practices, of the regions he visited. Since his account was written at the Tang government’s behest, his memoir at times sounds more like a reconnaissance report than a travelogue. (He shows inordinate curiosity, for example, in the size of the local cavalries and the height of ramparts around cities).

Although his account is closely beholden to the similar travelogues of Faxian (ca. 399/337-422), Xuanzang (ca. 600-664), and Yijing (635-713) written many decades before, Hyech’o’s memoir is valuable for offering a detailed contemporary record of the geographical extent of different schools of Buddhism in the regions he visited, as well as the decrepit condition in which he found some of the important Buddhist reliquaries and monasteries. Especially notable in his memoirs is the evidence he provides of the inroads Arabs and Turks were beginning to make into traditionally Buddhist regions and his testimony that, by the early eighth century, Buddhism had still not yet been transplanted into the Tibetan plateau. Hyech’o spent the rest of his life in China, collaborating with the Indian Tantric master Amoghavajra (705-774) and perhaps Vajrabodhi (671-741) in translating Esoteric Buddhist materials into Chinese, before passing away at the Chinese pilgrimage site of Wutaishan (about which more later). We have contemporary records of seven other Korean monks (and forty-nine Chinese) who traveled to India prior to the middle of the seventh century, so as grueling as the journey was, many successfully completed it.

Although travel to India stopped with the demise of Buddhism on the subcontinent, Korean monks continued through the Koryŏ period to live in China for extended periods. During the Koryŏ dynasty, Úich’ŏn (1055-1101), the fourth son of the Koryŏ king Munjong (r. 1047-1083), sojourned in Song-dynasty China for fourteen months between 1085 and 1087. As a learned scholar-monk, Úich’ŏn sought to test his knowledge against the best minds in contemporary Chinese Buddhism. During his travels, Úich’ŏn visited with some fifty monks, including leading specialists in the Tiantai, Vinaya, Chan and Huayan schools. A well-known bibliophile, Úich’ŏn also collected hundreds of volumes of books during his travels, which he took back to Korea with him. He later dispatched agents all throughout China, Japan, and the Khitan Liao regions of Northeast Asia seeking out other indigenous East Asian writings. All these he eventually compiled into his renowned Sŏkchanggyŏng, or Supplement to the [Buddhist] Canon. The flow of Korean monks into China continued unabated until the Ming-dynasty proscription against foreigners traveling to the mainland, a prohibition that started in the seventeenth century.

2. Travel to Worlds Beyond

Buddhist travel need not, however, be limited to the confines of this physical world. Deeply engrained in Buddhist cosmology is the notion that profound meditative absorption and spiritual insight could offer advanced adepts access to realms of existence that would otherwise be beyond the ken, from the deepest depths of the hells (where East Asian Buddhism claims Mahāmāudgalyāyana, one of the Buddha’s two chief disciples, traveled in order save his mother), to the highest reaches of the heavens (where the Buddha himself traveled to teach his deceased mother Māyā, to all lands in between. In addition, massive scriptural anthologies offer virtually a Buddhist Pilgrim’s Progress of the spiritual journeys of Buddhist adepts, as for example in the Gaṇḍavyūha, which relates the seeker Sudhana’s travels throughout the world to seek out fifty-three teachers in his quest for enlightenment.

The undersea palace of the Dragon King protector of Buddhism had long been an recurrent object of mythic travel in many Buddhist traditions, but especially in Korea’s.
The scriptures of the Mahāyāna school in India were said to have been a product of the Indian exegete Nāgārjuna’s (fl. ca. 150 C.E.) journey to the Dragon King’s palace. These texts were said to have been stored away there for safekeeping until human beings’ understanding had matured enough to appreciate them. From that point on, most Buddhists would seek to establish an explicit connection between the Dragon King’s palace and themselves as a way of introducing their traditions into broader Buddhist macroculture. Korea was no exception. Paekche and Silla’s nautical prowess, and the role these kingdoms played as the virtual Phoenicia of northeast Asian maritime travel, ensured that Korea’s connection to the undersea Dragon King would be especially deep.

One of the best known of these stories is that of a Silla envoy described in the biography of Wŏnhyo, who is waylaid while on his way to Tang to find medicine for the Silla queen-consort and escorted under the sea for an audience with the Dragon King. Upon arriving at the palace, the envoy is told that the queen’s illness had simply been a pretext to allow the Dragon King to transmit a previously unknown scripture, the Vajrasamādhisūtra (Kŭmgang sammaegyŏng), to Korea, where it was to be edited by the theurgist Taean (d.u.) and commented upon by the leading Korean scholiast, Wŏnhyo.

By demonstrating Korea’s many and varied contacts with this palace, peninsular Buddhist civilization was seeking to define itself, at least partially, in terms of mainstream continental beliefs. Indeed, myths are often created as a way of “escaping” from geographical or cultural isolation and this seems an obvious reason for these exuberantly told tales of Korea’s connection to this undersea bastion of Buddhist culture.

Travel to the Buddhist meccas of India and China, as well as to the mythic undersea bastion of the faith, played a crucial role in connecting Korea to the broader Buddhist cultural sphere. By sojourning in such regions, Koreans were demonstrating their associations with the wider world of Buddhist culture, whether that world be terrestrial, subterranean, or celestial. The Korean pilgrims who left the peninsula for China or India were part of the cultural elite of Korea and pilgrimage would serve as a sort of cultural insignia, indicating that Korea too was now an integral part of pan-Asian Buddhist macroculture. The ability to engage in pilgrimage would have required, first, extensive networks of patronage in order to fund such a journey; and, second, a sophisticated knowledge of, and cultural familiarity with, Buddhist cosmology and myth in the case of travel to cosmological realms. Hence, the capability of mounting such journeys would also help to validate the achievements and understanding of indigenous Korean Buddhist culture.

In a very real sense, since pilgrimage was something Buddhists in established Buddhist cultures like India and China did, engaging in pilgrimage would therefore help to make Korea an established Buddhist culture. In making these efforts to connect their tradition to the wider Asian tradition of Buddhism, Korean Buddhists were also exhibiting a sense of homogeneous time and space, which allowed them to be active participants in a religious tradition whose origins were distant both geographically and temporally from their own. Travel to Buddhist imaginaries then also helped to break down the spatial and temporal barriers separating Korea from mainstream Buddhism in much the same way as did overseas travel.

3. REMAPPING THE KOREAN LANDSCAPE

Simultaneous with their continued travel overseas to major Buddhist sites, Koreans were also bringing those sites homes through a wholesale remapping of the domestic landscape. Often, the very same pilgrims who made the arduous journey overseas were most
influential in domesticating the dharma and harnessing the numinous power of its cosmology for their compatriots.

With the development of centralized political institutions and the advent of organized religion—which for Korea first means Buddhism—the telluric landscape of the peninsula had to be decoupled from earlier religious cults so that it could be remapped with the sacred geography of the newly-imported religion. This remapping process imposed new significance on the indigenous landscape, endowing it now with the sacred power of Buddhism.

It is important to note, though, that this relocalizing process was not necessarily static. In Korea, mountains and other sacred sites were successively remapped as the sites were dominated by different religions, or even different schools within the same religion. But because these remappings were not necessarily totalizing, these sites could also become loci of religious contestation, as vestiges of the different overlays survived the latest remapping.

At least by the ninth century, Korea had been thoroughly remapped in terms of Buddhism, with a replication on the peninsula of both the imaginary geography of Buddhist cosmology as well as Indian and Chinese historical landscapes. Because of this Buddhization of the Korean landscape, relatively few traces of the indigenous pre-Buddhistic names remain. The Buddhist sites now ranged from Yŏngch’uksan (Mt. Grdrakūṭa, or Vulture Peak, the site in India where many Mahāyāna sūtras were preached), to Kūmgangsan (the Diamond Mountains, from the Avatāṃsakasūtra), to Odaesan (the Korean analogue of the Chinese Wutaishan, the abode of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in China).

As local geography became universalized, there would also have been less need for the long, dangerous journeys overseas to Buddhist sacred sites. Instead, the universal geography of Buddhism was now implicit within the indigenous landscape, turning Korea into the Buddha-land itself. This remapping even extended back in time to previous buddhas, whose dispensations were located on Silla territory and commemorated through the establishment of new monasteries. For example, Buddhists discovered near the Silla capital the “meditation stone” of Kāśyapa—a buddha of antiquity who gave Śākyamuni the prediction of his future buddhahood—and established the major doctrinal center of Hwangnyongsa on the site. Once the decoupling of the local geography from indigenous cults and their preliterate interpretations had occurred, the “relocalization” of Buddhism on that environment enabled Korean Buddhists to travel through the sacred geography of Buddhism from the (relative) comfort of their own locale. The Buddhization of the landscape thus allowed domestic travel to stand in for pilgrimage to either foreign lands or otherworldly realms. This process was certainly speeded by geopolitical changes in Asia, such as the demise of Buddhism and its pilgrimage networks in India and the Ming dynasty’s prohibition against foreigners traveling to Chinese mainland. Eventually, then, rather than writing only about dangerous journeys to the distant lands of India or China, Koreans were freed to write travel documents concerning trips within their own Korean sacred Buddhist geography.

4. MOUNTAINS AS PILGRIMAGE SITES

One of the major loci of pilgrimage activity in Korea, as elsewhere across Asia, was mountains. Mountains were often viewed as the abodes of important sacred beings, such as bodhisattvas, but also as the sites where those beings’ most spiritually efficacious activities occurred. The Tibetan pilgrimage cult surrounding Mt. Kailash is probably best
known in the West, but China and Korea both have sacred mountains that traditionally were conceived of as being similarly powerful. Standing as close to heaven as one could come on earth and located in some of the most isolated of terrestrial regions, mountains were ideal locations for the “liminoid phenomenon” that is pilgrimage.

The translation of Indian Buddhist sacred literature into Chinese provided the initial impetus for localizing the Indian subcontinent’s sacred geography in East Asia. With the accompanying Buddhicization of the East Asian landscape, most of the major mountain sites where pilgrimage was performed were given Buddhist names and often came to be associated with various of the bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism. One of the most interesting tales of the relocalization of a Buddhist cult to Korea involves Chajang (d.u., ca. mid-seventh century), an important early figure in the Korean Vinaya and Huayan traditions. During a five- to seven-year sojourn in China between 636/638 and 643, Chajang’s first stop was at the major Chinese pilgrimage site of Wutaishan (Five-Terraces Mountain). There, after seven days of supplication before an image of Mañjuśrī that was supposedly cast in heaven at the behest of the King of the Gods Indra himself, he had a vision in a dream of the great bodhisattva. Among various instructions the bodhisattva gave Chajang, Mañjuśrī ordered the monk to go to a mountain in the northeastern part of the Korean peninsula, where he would find a Five-Terraces Mountain with ten-thousand Mañjuśrīs in residence.

The Chinese Wutaishan became a major pilgrimage center of East Asian and, eventually Tibetan, Buddhism starting at least by the Northern Wei dynasty (424-532); it soon came to be recognized as the abode of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom, an identification that prompted Chajang’s journey to the mountain. Upon his return to the Korean peninsula, Chajang traveled to the mountain Mañjuśrī had identified as also being a Five-Terraces Mountain, where he fashioned a small hut and awaited a vision of these myriad Mañjuśrīs. Chajang’s faith inspired subsequent aspirants to travel to this Korean Odaesan, where their visionary experiences revealed the presence of massive populations of Buddhist sacred beings on its five separate peaks. This Korean remapping of Odaesan served to relocate the universal pantheon of the Avataṃsakasūtra (Hwaomgyōng) to the specific local site and helped build up Odaesan as a major pilgrimage center dedicated to the cult of Mañjuśrī.

The Korean Buddhist pilgrimage site par excellence has long been the Diamond Mountains (Kŭmgangsan), which until recently drew annually thousands of well-heeled tourists (and probably at least a few pilgrims) to the Hyundai-run tourist center in North Korea. The Kŭmgangsan site in Kangwŏndo in present-day North Korea became sacralized in connection with the establishment of the Hwaom school on the peninsula, where the mountain was said to be the abode of Pŏpki posal (Dharmogata Bodhisattva). The later translation of the Avataṃsakasūtra (often called the Xin, or “New,” Huayanjing), made by Śikṣānanda’s translation team (which included the Korean scholiast Wŏnch’ŏk), includes an early reference in Buddhist literature to a Kŭmgangsan (supposedly located in the middle of the sea) and notes that Dharmogata Bodhisattva is in residence there. Úisang’s contemporary in the Huayan school, Fazang (643-712), makes one of the first explicit connections known in East Asian literature between the Diamond Mountains mentioned in the Avataṃsakasūtra and the Kŭmgangsan of Korea. According to Minji’s (1248-1326) fourteenth-century account in the Kŭmgangsan Yajōmsa sajŏkki, Úisang himself made a visit to this Diamond Mountains, where Dharmogata Bodhisattva appeared and told him that even people who do not practice can become enlightened at Kŭmgangsan, whereas only religious cultivators can achieve liberation on Odaesan. For all these reasons, Pŏpki posal is considered to be the patron bodhisattva of Kŭmgangsan.
A Hwaŏm monastery was established on Kŭmgangsan at least by the time of P’yohun (d.u.; ca. early eighth century), a disciple of Üisang, forever cementing its connections to the sacred geography of the *Avatamsakasūtra* (*Hwaŏmyŏng*). The Diamond Mountains continued to draw monks to its sacred peaks and isolated monasteries at least through the mid-twentieth century, when the Cold-War division of the peninsula and its location near to the De-Militarized Zone effectively cut the mountain off from Buddhist pilgrimage networks in Korea.

5. THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF TRAVEL

Travel has been institutionalized in Korean Buddhist monasticism since at least the seventeenth century and probably long before. The annual schedule followed by monasteries belonging to the Chogye Order, which constitute the overwhelming majority of Korean temples, still today is divided between alternating three-month periods of “binding rule” (*kyŏlche*) during the summer and winter retreats and “slackened rule” (*haeje*) during the fall and spring free seasons. During the retreat periods of “binding rule,” monks are required to remain in residence at the monastery where they have given their formal introduction or “room request” (*pangbu*), which constitutes their official acceptance into the monastic community. Residence requires that they commit as well to a specific monastic position for the duration of the retreat period, such as training in the meditation hall. During the free seasons of relaxed rule in spring and fall, however, monks are permitted to travel at will among the monasteries, and travel they do, with sometimes gleeful abandon. Monks call their travels *haenggak* (“itinerancy,” lit. “walking on foot”) or *manhaeng* (lit. “traveling everywhere”), both terms emphasizing the journey of spiritual discovery, not the destination of “pilgrimage” (*sullye*). Indeed, “traveling everywhere” is exactly how many monks will spend much of their three months’ break from rigidly structured practice and meditation. At the major training monasteries, on the first day of the free season, the number of monks in formal residence may drop as much as eighty percent, as monks depart in droves on the first bus out of the local village to follow their itinerant impulses. All major monasteries have a separate guest quarters (*kaeksil*) near the kitchen area, where these itinerant monks are allowed to stay for up to three days, before either moving on to their next destination or giving their lodging request and joining that monastic community. Thus, as has been the case throughout history, travel remains still today an integral part of what it means to be a Buddhist monk in Korea.