

# Acceptance and Transformation of Korean Narratives for Buddhist Images:

Focusing on Coastal Drifting and Waterbend Emergence

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## 1. Introduction

Yun sacheom 尹思瞻, who was *Saeng-won* 生員(a government student) of the *Sung-kyunkwan* 成均館 (the foremost educational institution in Korea during the Joseon Dynasty), wrote *Baekyulsa Jungsu-ki* 栢栗寺重修記 on the basis of stories and literature passed down orally through time in 1416. He wrote the history of *Baekyulsa* 栢栗寺, including how Yun Hyang 尹向, following the work of his father Yun Seungsun 尹承順 who was a military officer towards the end of Goryeo dynasty, restored Baekyulsa. Among these are the following paragraphs:

昔新羅三十二神文之世有木自東海而來入于開雲浦東流七日于時這有唐人僧理來入國中改名率居盡物生靈信向者眾矣王命率居奉詔往見而納言曰梅檀香木從佛土而來第一無價寶也於是大王以其木又命率居作觀音三像而剏立三寺一曰栢栗二曰眾生三曰敏藏三像安。<sup>1)</sup>

According to *Baekyulsa Jungsu-ki* Buddha statues were made with wood obtained from the sea. The stories of enshrining religious relics from the sea — such as Buddha statues and pagodas — in one region and setting up a temple there, are widely distributed around the Korean Peninsula, primarily across coastal areas.

These narratives can be divided into two types based on their motifs. One is “the story of the relics cast away or drifted ashore,” and the other is “the story of the relics that emerged from the sea.” Here, the phrase “emerged from the sea” refers not to the Buddhist relics or material that drifted ashore, but those discovered by the seaside, caught by fishermen's nets or in other ways. Moreover, most of the “relics cast away or drifted ashore” are based on “the story of the relics cast away while being carried by ship.”

## 2. Types of the story of Buddha's relics being washed ashore

It is believed that some of them were offloaded from a ship that had crossed the seas; these were then enshrined in certain places accompanied by the construction of Buddhist temples. The temples that narrate such stories are *the Mihwangsa Temple* 美黃寺,<sup>2)</sup> *Kwaneumsa* 觀音寺,<sup>3)</sup> *Tongch'uksa* 東竺寺,<sup>4)</sup> *Yujömsa* 楡岾寺,<sup>5)</sup> *Jinbulam* 眞佛庵,<sup>6)</sup> *Baengnyulsa* 栢栗寺,<sup>7)</sup> *Simboksas* 深福寺,<sup>8)</sup> *Bomunsa* 普門寺, *Munsusa of Odae Mountain* 五臺山 文殊寺 etc.

The original and common motif of this narrative is the element of "discovery of the Buddhist relic or its material from water." This story is divided into three parts.

(1) Washing ashore of the Buddha's relics – the Buddha's relics travel across the seas and are washed ashore on the coast. (2) Reception of the Buddha's relics – these Buddha's relics are received by the coastal communities. (3) Enshrinement of the Buddha's relics and building temples – Temples are built and the Buddha's relics enshrined in them.

### (1) Washing ashore of Buddha's relics

While some of the Buddha's relics were brought in by ships, other Buddha's relics were found floating on the sea by fishermen, who brought them in. Sometimes the Buddha's relics were supposedly loaded on *Seokju* 石舟 (a ship made of stone) and *Seokjong* 石鍾 (a bell made of stone).<sup>9)</sup> Their provenance was probably the Kingdom of *Ujeon* 于闐, *Cheonchuk* 天竺, *Wolji* 月氏, or *Bulguk* 佛國 (Buddhakṣetra), which referred to India or west.

The article of *Hwangryongsa jangryuk* 皇龍寺丈六 (six-foot statue of Buddha in Hwangryongsa Temple) is referred to in a record from the story of *Seokju* 石舟, on which was loaded the Buddhist statue, pagodas, and scripts from India and that reached the Korean Peninsula as described in *Samgukyusa* 三國遺事.<sup>10)</sup> The *Silla* 新羅 people believed that the Buddha's relics, which crossed the seas had come from India because India was Buddha-land, and the land had seven temple sites<sup>11)</sup> for the Buddha even before the Sakyamuni came down to earth. It was thought that seven holy places in Silla might have already been set up as the bases of Buddhism. Since their land had ties to Buddhism, the Silla felt proud of being able to create the Buddhist statue, which could not be completed even in India. This is also recorded in *Samgukyusa*. The folktale of Buddhist temple in which the Buddha's relics had crossed the seas is believed to contain Buddha-land thought.

The stories having the same motif, as well as content, in which fishermen find and bring out the Buddha's relics from the sea can be found in the folklore of Buddhist temple, in-

cluding *Simboksa* 深福寺 and *Bomunsa* 普門寺. If the story of the Buddha's relics refers to a ship having brought the relics over, the folktale of building temples is probably attributed to a nobleman or a king. These stories, however, is mainly characterized by common people who are the main characters that complete the foundation.

## (2) Reception of Buddha's relics

When the Buddha's relics came ashore, the inhabitants of the coast welcomed the ship and the Buddha's relics. The following people played the main role in the story in which the Buddha's relics are carried across the seas by a ship.

In this folktale people who receives the Buddha's relics are as follows:

*Mihwangsa* 美黃寺: *Ouijo* 義照 (Buddhist Monk), *Jangun* 張雲 and *Jangsun* 張善 (two Sramaneras),  
*Ugam* 于甘 (village chief), 100 people of Buddhist associations called *Hyangdo* 香徒  
*Hwangryongsa jangryuk* 皇龍寺丈六: Administrators of Prefecture  
*Yujömsa* 楡岾寺: *Nochun* 盧春 (Administrator of *Anchang* 安昌 Prefecture)  
*Baengnyulsa* 栢栗寺: Monk from the *Tang* 唐 Dynasty

The king was the main agent responsible for the construction of the Buddhist temple when the monk or an administrator of the Prefecture receives news of the Buddha's relics and informs the king. However, when the stone image of Buddha is found washed on the sea, the fishermen from the coast take the responsibility for building the temple. This reveals a difference in social status of these characters in the story.

In the case of *Yujömsa* 楡岾寺 in Mt. *Kumgang* 金剛山, the name of the place was chosen during the journey in which *Nochun* 盧春, the administrator of the Prefecture, attempts to trace the genesis of fifty-three Buddhas.

*Gebang* 憩房 – The place where 53 Buddhas rested at the foot of the mountain  
*Munsu-chon* 文殊村 – The village where Manjusri appeared, incarnated as a bhikkhuni  
*Niyuam* 泥遊巖 – The rock where Nochun asked the bhikkhuni about the whereabouts of the fifty-three Buddhas  
*Guryeong* 狗嶺 – The hill where a white dog wagging its tail led the way in front of Nochun  
*Hwanhuiyeong* 歡喜嶺 – The hill where Nochun was pleased to hear the sound of the iron bell containing Buddha's relics

Since the process of Nochun searching for the origin of 53 Buddhas, was chosen as the name of a place, one can see that the evidence is secure and the transmission is strengthened in Yujömsa's folktale of building temples. This proves that the Buddhist influence of

Yujōmsa Temple was powerful. There various kinds of Buddha's relics on the ships are also listed.

*Mihwangsa* 美黃寺: gold box, The Avatamsaka Sūtra made of gold and jade, 7 sets of The Lotus Sūtra, portraits of 16 arahants, a gold bracelet etc.

*Hwangryongsa jangryuk* 皇龍寺丈六: gold 30,000 poon, poplar 57,000 geun, and three sacred images of Buddha.

Hence, the Buddha's relics from India are resplendent and their decorative aspect evokes the richness and splendor of Buddha-land. On the contrary, the stone Buddha raised from the sea by the fishermen looks initially like a simple stone that prevents them from catching fish, so they throw it back to the sea at first or try to break it with an ax.

### (3) Enshrinement of Buddha's relics and building temples

The story of the Buddha's relics being enshrined and temples built for them are described in three steps: Manifestation of the place in a dream or vision — Blessing the place for enshrinement — Constructing the temple.

Manifesting a dream refers to how the person who receives the Buddha's relics learns about the place for its enshrinement. In the story of *Mihwangsa* 美黃寺, Gold person (金人) appears in Monk *Ouijo* 義照's dream and informs him to place the Buddha's relics on a cow's back and enshrine the relics wherever the cow lies down. This part is perceived to be more important in the story of the fishermen raising the stone Buddha. Since the fishermen do not know the significance of the stone Buddha, the old Buddhist monk appears in their dream, invokes the mercy of the Buddha, and leads them to find the place for enshrinement.

### 3. The meaning of the folktale of Buddha's relics being washed ashore

The story of Buddha's relics being washed ashore on the Korean coast was a strong indication of the foreign origin of Buddhism in the Peninsula. It also emphasizes the marvel of cultural relics and its various roles, suggesting the rapid spread of Buddhism. In other words, this marvel led the ruling class and the public to accept the possibility of going beyond their existing faith because, according to Buddhism, its precepts allow the ruling class to gain more authority and keep its vested rights even in the afterlife. At the same time, it offers psychological comfort to the common man to endure the pains of this world and seek afterlife blessings.

The folktale of founding temples can be divided into two major categories based on the relationship between Buddhism and society: the one that is socially accepted and the other that is not. In a society where the Buddhist value system is socially generalized, the story of Buddha statues that crossed the sea corresponds to the former. In these cases, the temple is built with all the conditions of its foundation in place; in the Buddhist sense, the narrative develops in a completely Buddhist atmosphere.

This type of the folktale has the intention of implementing Buddha's land concept in the most dramatic and narrative context. Here, economics is not regarded as a problem among religious faithfulness, economics, and sociality. Moreover, faithfulness and sociality are in conflict with each other.

In the meantime, the various stories about the washing ashore of these relics imply that the routes through which Buddhist culture traveled from India or the western regions to the Korean peninsula were open. Most of the stories are the folktale of founding temples with the washing ashore of Buddha's relics, but some of them are related to the Buddhist service activity performed near the ship as well. This implies that diverse Buddhist service activities were performed and that Buddhist cultural relics were passed down after Buddhism took root in the Korean peninsula.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In Buddhist folktales, in some cases, the place for enshrining Buddha statues appears supernaturally, and in others, the material of the Buddha statues supernaturally indicates the enshrining place.

Although they are in reality mere 'materials' created by human beings, the Buddha statues in Buddhist myths are perceived as the Buddha himself who does miracles. At the same time, however, the statues also tend to display the physical characteristics of humans to send messages to humans. Various traditions related to the Buddha statues consist of elements such as the unusual and supernatural events associated with the discovery of the statue and its material, the making and the maker of the statue, the designation of the place to enshrine, and the miracles. The first three elements showcase the theme that the community was able to enshrine the statues for the first time by obtaining external power. Furthermore, the legends of the statues and their miracles indicate that the spiritual power of a statue extends beyond the scope of the community that managed it. In other words, the ex-

ternality of the statue was told as a legend.

- 1) “*Baengnulsu Jungsu-ki* 栢栗寺重修記 (Revised the Historical Records of the Baengnyulsa)” The Proctorate of Joseon 朝鮮總督府 ed., *Chosôn sach'al saryo* 朝鮮寺刹史料 (*Historical Sources on Korean Temples*), Seoul; Han'guk munhwa kaebalsa 韓國文化開發社, 1972, pp. 420–421.
- 2) Source material: *Stele for the Construction of Mihwangsa Temple* 美黃寺 事蹟碑.
- 3) Source material: Baekmae sônso 白梅禪師, *Okgwa Hyeon Seongduk mountain Kwaneumsa Temple's History* 玉果縣聖德山觀音寺事蹟, published 7th Reign year of Yongzheng (1729, 5th reign year of King Yeongjo) ; Kwon Sangro 權相老 ed., *Han'guk sachal jeonseo* 韓國寺刹全書, Seoul: Dongguk daehakgyo chulpanbu 東國大學校出版部, 1979.
- 4) Source material: *Samgukyusa* 三國遺事 3, section “the pagoda and statue 塔像” (T 49.990b).
- 5) Source material: *The Historical Records of the Yujömsa Temple in Mount Kungang* (The Kumgang-san Yujöm-sa Sachöki-ki 楡岾寺事蹟記).
- 6) Source material: *The Historical Records of the Daedumsa Temple* 大屯寺誌.
- 7) The Proctorate of Joseon (朝鮮總督府) ed., Loc. cit.
- 8) Source material: Korean Language Society ed., *A Survey of Korean Geographical Names* 韓國地名總覽, Vol. 18, Seoul: Korean Language Society, 1984, p. 394.
- 9) In the case of Kwaneumsa Temple, Mihwangsa Temple and Daechamsa Temple in Mount Seonun.
- 10) T 49.990b.
- 11) 天鏡林 興輪寺, 三川岐 永興寺, 龍宮南 皇龍寺, 龍宮北 芬皇寺, 沙川末 靈妙寺, 神遊林 天王寺, 婿請田 曇巖寺.

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