

The Dragon in the Buddhist Korean Temples

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The dragon is a case of a remarkable integration of Buddhism in different cultures. In the Indian Buddhism, we find nāgas instead of dragons. The nāga is considered as the symbol of the renewal of life and fecundity. And Śākyamuni reached enlightenment at Bodhgaya, Nāga King became the first creature to receive the Buddha's teaching. When Buddhism reached China, the nāga were replaced with the dragons. All these gave to the dragon the status of a superior authority in the Chinese culture. Afterwards, the Buddhist dragon followed his own way in Asian countries. Such is the case in Korea where the belief in the dragon flourished in the spiritual, artistic and literary fields. After the adoption of Buddhism, the dragon became the most important divinity of Korea and the object of popular belief all along its history. The Korean temples do show the important role the dragon plays in the Korean Buddhist faith. We can find that kind of believe in Korean temples. First feature is as guardian of the temple. Second feature is the dragon as the protector of the Buddha and the Dharma. The Buddhist dragon attained great

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success, and this proves that the Korean people has a profound sensitivity and great faith into this deity.

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Introduction

Since its origin, the Dragon has never ceased to fascinate people, in the East as in the West, and “to look intensely” is precisely what *drakôn*¹ means in Greek. In the West, the Dragon is considered as the incarnation of evil defeated by the Archangel Michael, whereas in the East he is the most splendid, the most beneficent, the best protector of all beings.

In fact, according to the Chinese tradition, the Dragon dates back to the beginnings of the civilization of China. A Horse-Dragon sprang out of the Yellow River with a pattern on his back, from which originated the eight trigrams of the *Yi-jing*, *the Book of Changes*. Fuxi himself, who - according to the legend - received the Book, was looking like a Dragon.² Thanks to this legendary animal, Yu the Great established the Chinese civilization by way of the “Nine Articles of his Great Rule,” which can be found in the *Shu-jing*, *the Classic of Documents*. Thus the Dragon is the symbol of the imperial power and, according to his influence over raining and human destiny, it is also

1 “That is the meaning of its Greek name *drakôn*, present participle of the verb *derkomai*, ‘I stare fixedly’ constructed from the Indo-European root *derk*, ‘to shine’” (Li: 5).

2 “Lauded by the upholders of the *Yi-jing*, Fuxi was pushed to the forefront of the founders of the civilization; he invented the system of the tied knots and divination by using yarrow stocks, which were both among the first methods of government. His birth was considered as miraculous; some say his mother was conceived by way of a floating stick; others say (it is the standard version) that he was born in a swamp, well known to be haunted by dragons. He looked like a Dragon ... Therefore, according to the most popular tradition, it is to him, and not to Yu, the founder of the tripod, that a Dragon offered the Hot’ou ... ” (Granet: 154).

the symbol of abundance and prosperity. All these features of the Chinese Dragon were part of ancient Korea, before the arrival of Buddhism.

When Buddhism spread through China, from the 1st century, together with the Indian religious beliefs, it did not suppress the various roles the Dragon plays. On the contrary, not only it acknowledged them but also added some of new values suitable to this religion of salvation, unknown up to that age. In Korea, these new values went through a greater development than in the neighboring countries thanks to worship, literature and building of temples consecrated to Dragons. In a famous book, *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, written by the monk Iryōn (1206-1289) during the Koryō Dynasty (918-1392) - one of the major sources of the ancient history of Korea - the anecdotes concerning Dragons are in greater number than those related to other Buddhist deities, i.e. twenty-seven against about ten. The Korean temples are a living testimony of this ancient belief; they do show the important role the Dragon plays in the Korean Buddhist faith. Dragons are always present, stage-by-stage, in the course of the spiritual search undertaken by believers.

I. From the Indian Nāga to the Chinese Dragon

If one of the main features of Buddhism is its diversity, it is due to its tolerance and its adaptation to different cultures of the countries it settled in. The Dragon is one of the most remarkable examples.

In the Indian Buddhism, we find *nāgas* instead of dragons. They belong to the Indian folk belief, prior to Buddhism. They were represented with the cobra hood (often with seven heads) and belong to the core of the Indian cosmogony. The *nāga* is coiled around Mount Meru, the mythic place which is the abode of Brahmā and other deities such as Viūhṇu, creator of all things, who is taking a rest by laying on this *nāga*, symbol of the cosmos and of the eternal time without

beginning and end. Because of its sloughing and its close relationship to water, the *nāga* is considered as the symbol of the renewal of life and fecundity; because also of the sacred place it lives in, it is known as guardian of the hidden treasures.³

Buddhism takes inspiration from this belief in the *nāga* and uses it as its servant. Lowell Bloss, in a special study on “The Buddha and the Nāga : A study in Buddhist folk religiosity, thinks the Buddhists purposely made Buddha “identify or subsume” the Indian folk deity *nāga* in order to make Buddhism a powerful religion.⁴ In fact, the *nāga* are among the Eight Classes of Deities⁵ who were converted by Buddha Śākyamuni and becomes his guardian and defender of his Law. In this manner, the guardian of the treasures turns into the guardian of the Buddhist writings he has been entrusted with by the Buddha himself. According to the *Buddhacarita saṃgraha sūtra* (T.3.800a), when Śākyamuni reached enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree at Bodhgayā, the black-colored Nāga King Gara came to greet Buddha, who then asked him to visit his palace, as did the three Buddhas in the past. The Buddha accepted his request and stayed with folded legs in the Nāga King’s palace during seven days. Finally he told his royal host: “You will receive from me the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Saṃgha) and my Five Precepts⁶ which lead to the great peace.” Therefore the Nāga King became the first creature to receive the Buddha’s teaching and his first pious follower, before the gods and humankind. After him, the Nāga King Mucilinda visited the Buddha who has won his spiritual

3 “Nagas, The Serpent Powers” (Mercater: 55-65).

4 “The Buddha and the Nāga: A study in Buddhist folk religiosity”, “This folk perspective sees the Buddha as a superior power who directs the activities of the *nāga* and similar folk deities within a limited territory. In ordering and harmonizing these parochial deities, who represent the ambiguous forces of nature, the Buddha possessed the great appeal within the purview of the common people” (Bloss: 51).

5 Eight Classes of Indian deities are: *deva*, *nāga*, *yakūa*, *gandharva*, *asura*, *garuōa*, *kinnara* and *mahoraga*.

6 The Five Precepts are: 1) to refrain from taking life, 2) to refrain from taking which is not given, 3) to refrain from sexual misbehaviour, 4) to refrain from lying, and 5) to refrain from intoxicants which induce heedlessness.

battle over Māra, the Tempter. From the tree of enlightenment, the Buddha moves to a succession of three trees, still meditating. The last tree belongs to the Nāga King Mucilinda. A violent storm blows up. The Nāga King glides down his tree and sheltered the Buddha from the rain, the cold and insects with his protective coils; he spreads his crown of hoods. While the Buddha stayed down the tree during seven days and seven nights with folded legs, the rain was pouring. As it ebbs, the Nāga King Micilinda asked him also to stay in his palace and he too was given the Three Jewels and the Five Precepts, and became a pious follower (T.3.800a).

According to another tradition, when the Buddha used to teach the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) on the Vulture's Peak, the books were entrusted upon the nāga. This is perhaps the reason why important Buddhist scriptures were originally stored in the Nāga King's palace, and then were handed down to the famous monks invited by them. This procedure is used doubtless to justify the authenticity of the Buddha teachings and their sacred nature. The legend says that one of the most important Buddhist authors, Nāgārjuna (2nd-3rd century), whose name includes the word *nāga* and who was venerated in Asia as the founder *Mādhyamika*, the largest school of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, noticed that two of his disciples vanished into the ground after his sermons. These two young men were actually *nāga*, who invited him to their palace and gave him seven volumes of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*. When he came back to earth, he revealed them to humankind and commented on its essence.⁷

When Buddhism reached China in the 1st century and brought along its writings, the *nāga* were replaced with the Dragons in the

⁷ This tradition continues in Korea: it is in the palace of Dragon King where famous monks initiated themselves the secret Law and were receiving writings they passed on to men. The greatest Korean bonze of the 7th century, Wōnhyo, was invited to the palace of the Dragon King, who presented him with his book. "According to the order given by the Sea Dragon, he received *Buddha Dhyana Samadhisagara Sutra*, of which he made the commentary" (*Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book IV, The interpretation of Meaning, Wōnhyo, the Unbridled Monk). "The bonze Myōngnang visited the palace of the Dragon King, where he learnt the Esoteric Law" (*Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book II, Wonder 2, King Munho Pōpmin).

Chinese translation. The *Da-ban-nie-pan-jing*, the Chinese translation of *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* by the Indian monk Dharmarākṣa, says (in fascicle 34): “the *Tathāgata* is called ‘da-xiang-wang’ [great elephant king], and also ‘da-long-wang’ [great dragon king].” Here, “xiang-wang” and “long-wang” are the Chinese translation of the Indian term *nāgarāja*. In the *Da-bao-ji-jing*, the Chinese translation of *Mahāratnakūṇa sūtra* by the Indian monk Narendrayāśas, says (in fascicle 61): “The *Tathāgata* is the Dragon King who gives rainfall.” Another version of *Mahāratnakūṇa sūtra* translated by the Indian monk Bodhiruci says (in fascicle 19) that the Buddha “has attained liberation thanks to his wisdom, and attained freedom without hindrance like a great dragon.” In all these translations, the word “dragon” is the rendering of Sanskrit *nāga* (Tan: 210-211).

All these attempts gave to the dragon the status of a superior authority in the Chinese culture. For example, the *Journey to the West in the Great Tang Dynasty (Da-tang-xi-yu-ji)*, completed by the famous Xuanzang (602-664), plays the role of pioneer in the Chinese literature by advertising the power of the dragon. This book marks the first appearance of the ‘Dragon lake’ (*long-chi* in Chinese), the ‘Dragon palace’ (*long-gong*), ‘Dragon King’ (*long-wang*) and ‘Dragon King’s daughter’ in Chinese literature (Tan: 211). Afterwards, the Buddhist Dragon followed his own way in Asian countries, according to his own values. Such is the case in Korea where the belief in the Dragon flourished in the spiritual, artistic and literary fields.

II. The importance of the Dragon in Korea

Under the influence of the Chinese civilization, the Dragon was subjected to a cult particularly important and the faith in this deity was more developed than in the neighbours, China or Japan. Since antiquity, one can find Dragons in the frescoes of the Koguryō (37 av. J.C.-668) tumulus; this fact proves that the belief was ancient, whereas

Dragons were seldom found in China in the same period. In the *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, the Dragon appears amongst the founders of the first kingdoms and becomes the emblem of royalty.⁸ The founder of Puyŏ, Haemosu, who came to the earth from heaven in order to establish the kingdom, appeared riding five Dragons.⁹ The spouse of Hyŏkkŏse, the founder of the Silla Kingdom, appeared from the belly of a Dragon.¹⁰ As for the fourth king of Silla, T'alhae (57-80), who came from the Dragon country: he was the son of a Dragon King.¹¹ This tradition went on until the founder of the last dynasty, Chosŏn (1392-1910).¹²

After the adoption of Buddhism by the Korean kingdoms in the 4th century, the Dragon became the most important divinity of Korea, not only during the Three Kingdoms period, as mentioned, but all along its history. Under the Koryŏ Dynasty (918-1392), when Buddhism was still the official religion, the Dragon goes on being actively worshiped. The *History of Koryŏ* relates the construction of a great number of halls dedicated to the Dragon in the palace, as well as to the conception of kings. During the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910), which took up Confucianism as state ideology and persecuted Buddhism, the belief in the Dragon did not disappear. Probably his Buddhist roles diminished,

8 "He heads the hierarchy because he became the ruler's symbol. Perhaps the dragon's greatest honor came with his adoption as symbol in both China and Korea - the royal male symbol. (...) The main seat of the emperor of China and the king of Korea was referred to as 'The Dragon Throne' or 'The Dragon Seat.' In other words, the dragon was associated with the highest authority, and his presence lent authenticity to whatever mortal man sat thereupon" (Covell: 42-43).

9 "Ch'ŏnje, the 'King of Heaven,' landed on earth with a chariot pulled by five dragons, and he established a city named 'Puyŏ of the North' and called himself Haemosu" (*Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book I, Wonder 1, Puyŏ of the North).

10 *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book I, Wonder 1, King Hyŏkkŏse, the founder of Silla.

11 *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book I, Wonder 1, King T'alhae.

12 The founder of the Koryŏ dynasty, Wanggŏn, was born from a son born of the union of the daughter of the Dragon King and Chak Che-gŏn (*Histoire de Koryŏ*, The genealogy of Koryŏ), concerning the six ancestors of the Chosŏn Dynasty, Yi Sŏng-gye (1335-1408), was born out of a dream made by a dragon. This dragon had been helped once by Yi Sŏng-gye's great-great-grandfather, and thus promised to him to help in turn one of his descendant.

but he was endowed with his ancient powers, connected with rain, royalty and human destiny. Thus rites devoted to the Dragon never ceased at the Royal Court, either related to the rain or protection of kingship.

Dragons became also the object of popular belief; some fishermen villages, for instance, set up shaman ceremonies dedicated to the Dragon King who ruled over water. The aquatic palace of the Dragon King was believed by common people to be an ideal world or a paradise, and became one of the important literary themes of the time. Among the most important and the most famous works, the following can be selected: *New tales of Mount Kŭmo* (*Kŭmo sinhwa*), by Kim Si-sŭp (1435-1493); *Dream of Nine Clouds* (*Kuun mong*), by Kim Man-jung (1637-1692); *The biography of Sim Ch'ŏng* (*Sim Ch'ŏng chŏn*) and *The biography of the Hare* (*Pyŏljubu-chŏn*).

The reasons why the Dragon played a more important role in Korea compared to other Asian countries are multiple. One reason is that Korea is a peninsula surrounded by the sea and filled with mountains, which occupy more than seventy per cent of the land, and can easily shelter streams, brooks and rivers where Dragons and their palaces could reside. Another reason of the importance of the Dragon King in popular belief may be the result of the ban on the worship of Heaven by the Chinese Empire during the last five centuries of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) as well as of the influence of the Confucianism, which was the state ideology and above all a social and political moral code.

Thus the majority of common people used to believe to this fabulous Dragon King whose powers fascinated them. Finally, the role of the Dragon as guardian of Buddhism may have intensified because of the geographic location of Korea, between China and Japan, two countries that have often invaded the kingdom. Quite naturally the Dragon, reputed to be the guardian of the Three Jewels, became the guardian of Korea, a country believed to become the true Buddha Land.

Evidence of this fact abounds in the course of Korean history. King Munmu (661-680) of Silla, while dying, wished to be buried beneath a rock of the East Sea and vowed to become a Dragon in order to protect the kingdom against the invasion of Japanese pirates.¹³ Regarding the building of temples and pagodas, it was mostly related to the apparition of Dragons. Hence, the country became Buddhist thanks to the participation of Dragons, and the development of the country depended on the flourishing of Buddhism (Kim: 138).

III. The Dragon in Korean temples

The location and the architecture of the Korean temple, considered to be the Buddha's Land on earth, illustrate the spiritual progression leading the sentient beings to the Pure Land of *Sukhāvātī*, Ultimate Bliss (*Kūknak*), the name given to the Western Paradise of *Amitabha* (Infinite Light), the most popular Buddha in Korea after Buddha *Śākyamuni*. And in this case, the Dragon plays a crucial role.

III-1) The Dragon as Guardian of the temple

a) The "Other Shore Bridge"

Since the Dragon heard the teaching of the Buddha and protected him, he went on by being his guardian and the one of the Law and the Community. Therefore his first task is to be the guardian of the temple, where the Three Jewels are deposited. Usually, a Korean temple is located at the far end of valleys and is composed of several, if not many separate buildings, with a brook flowing in the vicinity. Not far from the temple, and above the crystal-clear water, rises a bridge called "Other Shore Bridge" (*P'ian-gyo*). According to the Buddhist symbolism, this bridge separates the Buddha's Pure Land, represented by the temple, from the ocean of suffering which is our own existence, for it

¹³ *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book II, Wonder 2, King Munho Pōpmin.



Fig. 1. Dragonheads on the parapet of the “Cleanse Mind Bridge” (*Sesim-gyo*) at the Temple Sinhŭng in Mt. Söllak.

is subjected to *samsāra* - the cyclical birth and death, a consequence of our attachment to existence and mundane world. To cross this bridge means to make the first step towards liberation and the other shore where “Land of the Ultimate Bliss” is said to exist. On the parapet or the balustrade of the bridge are carved heads of dragons holding in their mouth the *cintāmani*, the magic pearl, which can fulfil all wishes. This is the case of the bridge located near the temple Hwaŏm on Mount Kŭmgang, in the province of Kangwŏn. This recently built bridge, in form of an arch of stone, bears the engraved inscription “Cleanse Mind Bridge” (*Sesim-gyo*), as though dragons, the first pious followers of the Buddha, are inviting the sentient beings to purify their minds sullied by all sorts of attachments with crystal-clear water (Fig. 1).

Sometimes the Dragon heads are carved under the bridge and are reflected by water in a spot where one cannot easily see them. This fact means also that the Dragon is acting as guardian of the temple and prevents malevolent spirits from coming in. Such a carved head is hidden under a bridge called “Ascending Immortal Bridge” (*Sūngsŏn-gyo*), at the entrance of the Sŏnam temple, in the southern province of Chŏlla. Another Dragon head can be found under the “Three Purities Bridge” (*Samch’ŏng-gyo*), in the Songgwang temple of the same region. The names of these bridges clearly indicate that the Dragon, here and there, is fighting not only against the enemies of the Three Jewels, but also fight off the impurities of the mind, which prevent from reaching the Buddha’s Pure Land.

b) The Gates

Most of Korea’s large temples have three gates. The outer-most entrance is the One-pillar Gate; the one in the middle, the Four Heavenly Kings’ Gate; and innermost Non-duality Gate which leads to the halls of worship.

After having crossed the bridge, one comes to a gate called One-pillar Gate (*Ilju-mun*), which means literally pillars lined up in one file; it is the symbol of the one mind needed to empty oneself of all passions and attachments to the world, the only way to give oneself fully to the salvation proposed par Buddha. Certain *Mahāyāna* texts discuss the “teaching of the single vehicle,” a Dharma door for entry into the Buddha realm, and this is said to be the best way among the diverse teachings. In this way, the one-pillar symbolize the immutable truth. Usually, one Dragon head is carved on each side of the gate, and sometimes, behind it, are the bodies and tails (Fig. 2).

After going through, one reach the Four Heavenly Kings’ Gate (*Sach’ŏnwang-mun*) which enshrines Four Celestial deities with terrifying looks. And Dragons are carved either on the roof of the gate or on the



Fig. 2. Dragonheads on the pillars of the “One-pillar Gate” at the temple Kapsa.

eaves. According to the Buddhist cosmogony, these four kings are dwelling in the middle of Mt. Sumeru, the centre of the universe, and each of whom rules over one cardinal direction. They serve the great deva Śakra residing in the Palace of Correct Views, in *Trayastrimśa* (Heaven of the Thirty-three devas) at the summit of the Mountain, and they are watching over the good and the evil being done by humankind, while protecting the Buddhist Law. Their ferocious aspect is intended to scare away the enemies of Buddhism and to encourage the minds of temple visitors to demonstrate goodness.¹⁴ The Western

¹⁴ The Eastern Heavenly King, Dhṛtarāṣṭra (*Chiguk*) means “Heavenly King who maintains the state,” and he protects the country and gives peace to the people. His symbol varies, but he usually carries a Pip’a. The Southern Heavenly King is Virūhaka (*Chūngjang*), which means “Heavenly King who enlarges,” and he guards the Buddha’s Land, with a sword in his hand. The Western Heavenly King is Virūpakūa (*Kwangmok*), which means “Broad eye.” He prevents theft of Jewels by the dragon his hand holds. The Northern Heavenly King, Vaiśravaṇa (*Tamun*) means “Many hearing Heavenly King,” and he struggles against evil spirits and the foreigners. He holds a pagoda or stupa in his hand.

Heavenly King is holding a writhing dragon in his right hand it symbolise that he directs the dragons.

In the bigger temples, there is a third gate, the last one before getting access to the Buddha Halls; it is called “Non-duality Gate” (*Puri-mun*), meaning that seeming opposites such as leaving the secular world and entering religion, the cycle of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are actually only one, and that every human being is endowed with the Buddha’s nature. Hence its second name: “The gate of Liberation.” Through this last gate, one can at last reach the summit of Mount Sumeru, where the Buddha has made his abode. Sometimes, Dragon heads stick out the roof of the gate and this is the case of the temple Hyuhyuam à Yangyang in the province of Kangwŏn.

III-2) The Dragon and Four instruments: the salvation of sentient beings

In the courtyard, in front of the Buddha hall, is erected a small pavilion open on each side, where are enshrined the Brahmā bell, Dharma drum, a carved “wooden fish” and a gong, “cloud-plate.”

The bell is hung by a hook, known as “dragon hook,” for it bears a carved dragon. The origin of the presence of a dragon is recounted in the “Dragon Begets Nine Offspring Tale” :

Among the nine sons of a Dragon King, the third was P’oroe; he had a shrill voice and he was afraid of whales. If any came close to him, he screamed with all his might. Hence the dragon-shaped hook, without the *cintāmani*, so that the Dragon P’oroe could scream freely, and the striker was traditionally carved in the shape of whale.

The Korean bell changed through the ages. During the Silla and Koryŏ dynasties, the Korean original style was flagrant, but during the Chosŏn dynasty, the influence was Chinese. Nowadays, the bell is back to the Silla style.

As a matter of fact, the Korean bell has a distinctive feature



Fig. 3. Dragon hook on the top of the bell at the temple Kimyong in Mt. Undal.

compared to the Chinese and Japanese ones. The Korean bell is decorated with a single dragon, which carries on his back a musical pipe in shape of a bamboo, as a reminder of the “Flute to Calm Ten Thousand Waves.” The story is found in *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*: When the King Munmu died and became a sea-dragon, a dragon presented his son King Sinmun (681-692) with the bamboo from which he made a flute. According the book, when this flute was played, attacking enemies fled, spreading plagues receded, sweet rains came after drought, the bright sun shone in the downpour, the wind was mild and the sea was calm.¹⁵ Chinese and Japanese bells do not have such a musical bamboo-shaped tube, and their hooks are decorated with two dragons face to face (An: 194-197), (Fig. 3).

The sound of the bell is used to save human beings. According to

¹⁵ *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book II, Wonder 2, Flute to Calm Ten Thousand Waves.

the *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, the dragon figure, P'oroe, was carved atop the bells and the striker was in the shape of a whale. And bonzes prostrated themselves while listening to a temple bell and recited the name of Buddha.¹⁶

The Dharma drum is used to save terrestrial animals and a Dragon is painted on it. As one may recall, the Dragon lives not only in water but also on earth and in heaven, and he is the first pious believer. In the Prologue of the *Lotus Sūtra* are mentioned the eight Dragon Kings, with many followers, who assembled at Eagle Peak to hear the sermon expounded by the Buddha Śākyamuni ; then, according to the Devadatta chapter, an eight year old Dragon Princess achieved enlightenment. In the *Flower Garland Sūtra*, III, the ten Dragon Kings are considered as the symbols of the Ten Pāramitā¹⁷ that a Bodhisattva cultivates life after life to attain enlightenment. Therefore, the Dragon is a model that can stimulate the enlightenment of animals which are reborn as such because of bad deeds during a previous life, one of the three evil paths.

The “wooden fish” is connected with all fishes. Made in a long hollowed log sculptured in the shape of a carp, it is adorned however with the head of dragon, with the *cintāmaṇi* in its mouth. Its shape is due to a legend, which says how a carp succeeded to swim through a seemingly impassable water current and then changed into a dragon. Therefore the sound of the “wooden fish” is used to recall that sentient beings can change for the better through efforts of their own. And as the eyes of a fish never close, the instrument is meant to remind people to always keep their minds awake and to not slack off in their self-cultivation practice (Heo: 251).

The copper ‘cloud-plate’ gong gets its name from the cloud motif on its surface, and its two sides often are adorned of dragons flying in

16 *Antiquities of the Three Kingdoms*, Book III, Pagodas and Buddhist images, The Four-Buddha Mountain, the Buddha-Digging Mountain and the Ten-Thousand-Buddha Mountain.

17 Ten Pāramitā are: generosity, morality, patience, effort, concentration, wisdom, skilful means, vow, spiritual power and knowledge.

a cloud. The gong is struck to bring salvation to the birds and the spirits that roam the earth. Those souls in the atmosphere can hear the sound of the gong and be led to *nirvāṇa*. Some say that the instrument was originally struck to signal mealtimes in the kitchen, but today it is used for the morning and evening worship ceremonies.

The ‘Brahmā Bell’, the ‘Dharma Drum’, the ‘wooden fish’ and the ‘cloud-plate’ do show how compassionate is the Buddha and how important is the Dragon’s service for the salvation of sentient beings.

III-3) The Dragon as the Protector of the Buddha and the Dharma

a) **The “Wisdom Dragon Ship”**

and the crossing of the “Sea” of *samsāra*

After passing through the bridge and the gates, one reach at last the courtyard where stand pagodas and halls dedicated to the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas.

In many places one can find dragons. Dragon heads are carved on each side of the balustrades, along the steps leading to the sanctuary. Some more are found on each side of the entrance door, while their tails appear inside the hall. Quite often the dragons are either carved or painted on the ceiling of the Buddha Hall, and their tails follow on the back of the far end wall. In this case, the Dragon is regarded as a Wisdom Boat, which carries human beings from one shore of the Ocean of Suffering to the Pure Land of *Sukhāvātī*. In fact, the Buddha Hall as a whole is believed to be a large boat, carried by the Dragon, whose heads, at the entrance, represents the prow. Sometimes, one can find frescoes depicting a boat which carries the blessed, escorted by the Guide King Bodhisattva and Earth Store Bodhisattva, Kūitigarbha, who helps the beings thrown into the Six Destinies until the advent of Buddha. This is the case of the halls of the Pure Land of the Ultimate Bliss in the temple T’ongdo in Yangsan or the temple Pong’ūn in Seoul.



Fig. 4. Earth Store Bodhisattva ride the “Wisdom Dragon Ship” leading sentient beings to the “Land of the Ultimate Bliss” at the Temple Pong’un.

The fresco of the later temple is contemporary and does indicate that tradition still flourish in the Korean temples of today (Fig. 4.).

According to the Buddhist iconography, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara, who takes care of all the complaints of the world, is sometimes represented standing on the dragon, which sails on the ocean waves, sometimes accompanied by his server, “The Dragon King of the Sea.” In this case also, the Dragon helps to cross the Ocean of *saṃsāra*. Inside the hall dedicated to Avalokitesvara, in the temple Hyuhyuam located facing the East Sea, Bodhisattva is carved on the back of a blue dragon. In addition, the alter dedicated to the Dragon King was recently built on top of a rock, in front of the same temple, on the sea shore; this again another evidence that the belief in dragons is still alive in Korea.

Indeed, temples devoted to the Dragon King are often found close

to the sea. Another example is the temple Tŭngmyŏng Nakka, situated along the East Sea, in Kangnŭng; it owns a magnificent painting representing the Dragon King, in full regalia, in his water palace. The legend says about this temple that, during the Chosŏn dynasty, the Dragon King of the East Sea was not happy about the dirty water thrown away after the rinsing of rice and it made the eyes of a monarch sick. This proves again how much powerful the belief in the Dragon King was (Fig. 5).

b) The Dragon in the Pure Land of the Ultimate Bliss

Generally, the Dharma Halls bears the different names of Buddha, including “The Great Victory” (*Taeung*), who is able to win victory over the evils of all temptations. Inside the hall, the Buddha is seated on



Fig. 5. Dragon King in the Three Holies Shrine at the Temple Tŭmyŏngnakka.

the alter, called both the “Alter of Buddha” (*puldan*) and the “Alter of Sumeru” (*sumidan*), the axis of the Buddhist universe, which is represented in miniature and decorated with all kinds of animals, human beings as well as deities who are living in the sacred place. Above the throne for each Buddha statue is installed a sort of small wooden canopy, called *datjip* in Korean, which refers “a separate house built inside a house” and resembles “a miniature, magnificent palace.”¹⁸ Another name for *datjip* is the ‘celestial canopy’ (*ch’ŏn’gae*), which indicates that the roof-shaped structure remains suspended in the air. The canopy is an old remnant of the Indian parasol, the upper corners of which are usually decorated with dragon heads, and, occasionally, with birds of paradise, lotuses, *apsaras* and other exotic figures. This is a reminder of the protection of Buddha by the Nāga King under the Bodhi tree, as well as the Pure Land of the Ultimate Bliss where dragons that achieved enlightenment and phoenixes, among others, have made their abode.

c) The Dragon as Fountain of Healing and Protector of Believers

In a Korean temple, facing the Buddha Hall, one can often find a small dragon head-shaped fountain. From it gushes forth spring water, coming from the depth of a mountain and renowned for its healing power. No Korean visitor would pass by the fountain without stopping and drinking its water. Koreans believe that such water given by the Dragon will bring to them spiritual and physical healing, and they will be protected from evil spirits (Fig. 6).

In an ancient temple, one can usually find a space where are stored reliquaries of former monks, which testify to its long history. In Buddhism, whenever a great bonze dies, his ashes are piously gathered,

¹⁸ “This structure is called *datjip* in Korean, a term that comes from the old Korean word *dat* for ‘separate’” (Heo: 163).



Fig. 6. Dragon head-shaped fountain in front of the “Thousand Buddhas Hall” at the temple Taehŭng in Mt. Turyun.

and then the relic (“*sari*”) is put into a reliquary made of stone, upon which is engraved an epitaph praising his life and his merits. Sometimes the Dragon carries the reliquary and the epitaph on his back. This Dragon, according to the “Dragon Begets Nine Offspring Tale,” is one of the Dragon King’s sons; he is known to be fond of carrying everything heavy. In this instance, the Dragon is carrying to the Pure Land of *Sukhāvātī* his heavy load of the monks and nuns after their death.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Dragon is a case of a remarkable integration of Buddhism in different cultures. The metamorphosis of the Indian *Nāga* into the

¹⁹ According to the *Buddhacarita saṅgraha sūtra*, the dragons protect not only the Buddha but also the Audience, Arhat, deva and saints (T.13.193b-294b).

Chinese dragon stresses the Buddhist unbridled dynamism in the salvation process of all sentient beings. In Korea, the Buddhist Dragon, particularly the Dragon King, attained great success, and this proves that the Korean people has a profound sensitivity and great faith into this deity.

The great development of Korean technology and science does not abolish the presence of the Dragon in the Korean culture and Buddhism. On the contrary, the protector of Buddha is always present in Korean temples and plays different roles, even if it is not always clear for the today Koreans. However, the continuing presence of dragons indicates that dragons are more than a mere decoration. They bear witness of the continuation of the Korean popular tradition throughout the twists and turns of History.

Abbreviation

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經: Japanese Edition of the Buddhist Canon). Ed. by Takakasu-Junjirō (高楠順次郎) et al. Tokyo: Taishō-Issaikyō-Kankōkai, 1924-1935.

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