

KOREAN BUDDHISM¹

By Frederick Starr

I am to speak to you this morning on the subject of Korean Buddhism. My reason for speaking on this subject is that little is known in regard to it anywhere. I therefore bring something that at least has the merit of being new to most of you.

Korea is always named as one of the Buddhistic countries of the world; it has been so for many, many years. We may divide the history of Korea into three very well marked periods of time. There is, first a period known as the era of the Three Kingdoms; it ended with the year 918, a date easy to remember because exactly one thousand years ago. The second period of Korean history is known as that of the Koryu dynasty. It began with the year 918 and came to an end in 1392, a year equally easy to remember because precisely a century before the discovery of America by Columbus. The third period of Korean history, commonly known as the period of the Yi dynasty, began with 1392 and continued until 1910, when the independent history of Korea ended with its absorption by Japan.

The history of Buddhism in Korea is divided into the same three periods because the things which led to these breaks in the national history were landmarks in the history of the national religion. The early period was called the era of the Three Kingdoms because at that time the peninsula was divided among three different nations. In the north was the kingdom of Koguryu, sometimes called Koma. It occupied more than half of the peninsula. Its capital city was P'yeng-Yang, still a city of importance. The second kingdom was small; in the southwest of the peninsula, known by the name of Pakche, it was also called

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Kudara. The third kingdom occupied the southeastern section of the peninsula. It was larger than Pakche but smaller than Koguryu and was called Silla or Shiragi. Such, then, were the three kingdoms, which existed through a period of hundreds of years.

Buddhism first came to Koma. It was introduced in the year 369, and its introduction was the result of foreign missionary effort. In those days there was an empire of China, but there were also various small Chinese kingdoms on the northern border of the Korean peninsula. The first Buddhism that entered Korea came from one of those little Chinese kingdoms and it came naturally to the northernmost of the three kingdoms—to Koma. The king of that little Chinese kingdom sent the message by the hands of a priest named Sundo, who brought images and sacred texts. He was well received on his appearance in P'yeng-Yang. In fact, the king of the country put him in charge of the education of his son, the crown prince. In a few years the new religion made great headway, and, just as everywhere where Buddhism went, it carried with it education and art, and Koma became a center of culture and advancement.

Within a short time, Sundo was aided by a new priest sent from the same Chinese kingdom,—a man named Ado, who came in 374, when Sundo had been in the country about five years. The immediate effect of Ado's coming was that two great monasteries were built in P'yeng-Yang, over one of which Ado was placed, while Sundo was in charge of the other. These two monasteries were not only centers of religion; they were full-fledged universities, according to the idea of universities of those days. Buddhism spread rapidly, so that in 392 it became the recognized and official religion of the kingdom of Koma.

We are told that in the year 375, as the result of the coming of these foreign priests, the capital city of P'yeng-Yang was laid out as a great ship. That sounds strange to us,—that a city should be laid out as a great ship. Although it is not an integral part of Buddhism, this idea of laying out the city of P'yeng-Yang as a great ship came from the Chinese teaching, and I want to say something about

the strange attitude of mind represented in it. The city of P'yeng-Yang was really *regarded* as a great ship, and a mighty mast was erected in the city in order that the sails of prosperity might waft the city to good fortune and success.

Even today one may see great masts scattered over the Korean peninsula, some in the most out-of-the-way places. These masts rise to a great height. They are built of metal, with a center of timber. They still evidence that ancient notion that a city or a valley or an entire district was considered as a ship.

Still stranger ideas, however, affected the people of those times, and the evidence of them may still be seen in Korea. For instance, I recall clearly one spot near the great temple of Tsudoji, where the whole mass of country is a great cow. The different parts were pointed out to me. Here was the snout; here was an iron ring, to which the earth cow was supposed to be tied; here was a hollow in the rock, a foot or so in diameter, regarded as the nostril of the creature, which stretched out in the direction indicated to me, for many yards.

In another section, near Riri, I saw a mountain or hill which was thought to be a running horse; because there was danger from running horses in the older time, two pillars of rock had been raised (in accordance with the advice of the wise men of the day) in order to stop the horse from running into the fields and destroying the crops. Such notions seem to us extraordinary or strange, but they were part of the science of the day in P'yeng-Yang in those long ago times.

The little kingdom of Kudara received its Buddhism fifteen years later, in the year 384. Koma had been a center of missionary effort; the religion had been sent *there* from outside, unsolicited. But Kudara begged for the gospel and sent its messengers not to the little kingdoms on the north, but to the empire of China itself. They said: "Send us the great priest Marananda. We want Marananda to come and teach the people."

I forgot to tell you that Sundo was a Tibetan, born in the great mountain mass north of India; traveling from there eastward, first to China and afterwards to Korea, he carried his gospel. Marananda was a Hindu. He had great fame in the empire of the Chinese, and the people in Kudara wanted his ministry; Marananda came to the capital city of Kudara or Pakche, and the gospel was received with great willingness by the people.

He was himself housed in the king's palace; he was treated with great respect. Soon ten other priests came from China and the religion had no trouble in making headway throughout the kingdom of Kudara and it increased rapidly. It was from Kudara, in the year 552, that Buddhism was sent for the first time, by the king of that country, into Japan. And with it, he sent figures and texts and a letter telling the emperor of Japan, Kimmei, that it was a good religion and he hoped that the people would accept it.

The third of the three kingdoms, Shiragi, was the last to receive the Buddhist teaching, which came about 424. It came, I suppose, from the capital city of P'yeng-Yang, and they say that the priest who brought it was called Mukocha. They speak of him as "the black man,"—"the negro." Was this dark man truly a negro—or an Indian, or some other dark racial type? Mukocha went by boat; down the river Taidong to the sea and then around the peninsula and up to the east coast in order to reach the kingdom of Shiragi.

There seems to have been some mystery about his arrival. He hired himself out to a farmer and extraordinary things are told in regard to his life as a plowman, for he plowed for the farmer, who hid him in a cave. They said that when he was hidden in this cave, it frequently shone with glory. It is said that he was fond of art, and desired that his cave be carved with Buddhist carvings. He cured the daughter of the king, and because of that cure gained influence in the kingdom. The religion he brought was early Buddhism, called today Hinayana, or "the little vehicle."

This cave of Mukocha was a place of wonders. It is said that outside of it was a peach tree that blossomed with flowers of five different colors; in winter, when snow drifted around the cavern, plants of great beauty pushed their way up through the snow and blossomed and bore fruit. There are many strange and miraculous things told about this black monk, but there is no doubt about the beauty of the cave he left behind him. After he established the religion firmly in the country, he sent for artists to decorate that cave-temple. I have been in it; it is one of the fine things in art of the East. Situated near the summit of a hill, it looks down over the eastern sea; in the midst of the cavern-chapel is seated a stone Buddha of extraordinary beauty, carved from a single block of stone, some 11 or 12 feet in height. That figure has seen the sun rise through almost fifteen hundred years; beautiful in its silent, pensive attitude, it is surrounded by rock hewn figures, for the walls of the cave are decorated with carvings made by the artists who were sent to the black monk.

These figures represent the early disciples of Buddha; the faces are painted in different colors and the features represent different race types. The Buddha preached to all peoples of all races; and as his India swarmed with strangers, among his early disciples there may have been white men and brown men and black men.

I love to think of the old capital of Shiragi, Kyong Ju. It had its period of glory; among its ruins I have been deeply impressed. Here we may see the splendid grave of General Kim, 1200 years old. It is faced around its whole circumference with stone slabs set firmly in place; twelve of them are carved with the animals of the eastern zodiac. There is an ice-house among the ruins of old Kyong Ju, an ice-house perhaps 900 years old; cunningly built of stone, underground, with true arch-vaulting it sheltered ice for the chilling of food and the cooling of drink a thousand years ago. There is a stone observatory intended for celestial observation, still standing; it is perhaps 1250 years old and it is the oldest known structure of its kind remaining.

In those fine old days, Kyong Ju was a center of trade.

We are certain that Chinese and Koreans and Japanese were there; we are equally certain that Tibetans and Indians and Persians came thither and it is claimed that merchants from Arabia used to stand in its market place.

Of course, we always think of the country around the Mediterranean as being a site of culture long ago. We always think of movement there; that does not surprise us. But we are apt to think of the far east as being eternally stagnant, and it surprises us to think of Kyong Ju with Arabian merchants in its market place.

And it had its scholars. There was Ch'oc Chuen. He was a poet and essayist; he was a skilled calligrapher writing the beautiful Chinese characters famously; he was reckoned as one of the greatest sages and learned men of his day in China proper which was an honor not to be surpassed.

All that splendor, which is no more, goes back to 424 A.D., when Mukocha, the black monk, went there to teach. The religion which he introduced flourished and developed. It became in time the state religion, but it was no longer the simple religion that Mukocha brought; it was the developed Mahayana, northern Buddhism. Like all state religions, while it gained power, wealth, and ease, it became corrupt; toward the end it did much harm in Shiragi, as in the other two kingdoms. For instance, at one time, the king became so infatuated with Buddhism that he became himself a monk, divorced his wife and made her become a nun. Later, things became still worse. In 911 the king upon the throne was extremely devout. Kung-ye was his name. He was absolutely absorbed in Buddhism; he neglected his duties; he did frightful acts in the name of religion; there can be no question that he became insane. Then the crash came; the people rebelled against him; there was revolution and a leader, named Wangon arose. He was at first devoted to his master's cause, but finding the case hopeless, he listened to the demand of the people and joined in the revolution; in time he became king, and founder of a new dynasty, that of Koryu. In its later days Shiragi had become mistress of the whole peninsula and the kingdom over which Wangon ruled was a united Korea.

In 918 the second period in Korean history begins. Wangon realized that the chief trouble had been Buddhism. Still, he himself was Buddhist, and he continued to practice Buddhism, but on a more moderate scale. Having moved his capital to Songdo, he ended his first year, 918, with a famous festival of which we have a description.

There was an enormous lantern, hung about with hundreds of others under a tent made of a network of silken cords. Music was an important element. There were also representations of dragons, birds, elephants, horses, carts and boats. Dancing was prominent and there were in all a hundred forms of entertainment. Each official wore the long flowing sleeves, and each carried the ivory memorandum tablets. The king sat on a high platform and watched the entertainment.

You see, he was very far from cutting loose from Buddhism. We may say that Buddhism really flourished to an extraordinary degree over the whole peninsula. When Wangon died, in 942, he left a written message for his son and successor. It contained ten rules of conduct for his guidance as king. These rules were numbered from one to ten. Three had to do with religion and of course that religion was Buddhism. In the first rule he advised his son to continue to recognize Buddhism as the state religion of united Korea. The second rule was that he should build no more monasteries. While it was a good thing to continue Buddhism, it was a bad thing to build more monasteries, as too much money had already been spent upon them. The sixth of his rules was for the establishment of an annual Buddhist festival of the same nature as the one he had celebrated at the end of his first year. So Wangon did not destroy Buddhism, but continued it as the national religion.

In course of time the old religion regained its destructive influence. It gathered wealth and refinement and became corrupt beyond even what it had been before. There is not time to state the different points. I shall mention briefly a few instances and events from the history of the religion during this period. In 1026 there was an effort made to break its power; there had come in from China

a fuller development of Confucianism the official class became Confucianist; it organized and directed everything done in the government. Between the officials, Confucianists, and the priests, Buddhists, there grew up a deadly conflict.

In 1036 the king was devoutly Buddhist. "Those who could read the signs of the times surmised this when in 1036 the king decreed that if a man had four sons, one of them must become a monk. Because of the Buddhist canon against the spilling of blood, the death penalty was changed to banishment. Another great festival was added. The king also encouraged the custom of having boys go about the streets with Buddhist books on their backs from which the monks read aloud as they went along to secure blessings for the people." (Hulbert.)

In 1046 it is said the king fed and lodged 10,000 monks in his palace. In 1056 or thereabouts one son out of three was compelled to become a monk. In 1136 we are told that 30,000 monks were present at a single ceremony.

Under such circumstances, what would happen? When a religion had such a hold on the community—building splendid monasteries, developing great temples, making idols into whose construction gilt of pure gold entered in great quantity, making bells of metal that might have been used better for practical ends, draining the people of wealth by giving enormous properties eternally into the possession of the monasteries, a crash was bound to come. It came in Korea. The country had been drained; the people had been heavily burdened; the men who as monks and priests should have led the people in instruction and in good living, were corrupt beyond conception.

At last, in the year 1392, a man arose who fought against the king. The basis of his fighting was the fact that the government was completely given over to a corrupt religion. In 1392 the old kingdom of Korai disappeared and with it the dynasty of Koryu, and in their place came the modern Chosen and the Yi dynasty. Seoul became the new capital.

Just as before, it was the successful general who became the founder of the new dynasty; in this case also he had been

loyal at first to the deposed king. This man's name was Yi, and his title Ta-jo, and he is commonly known in Korea as Yi Ta-jo. He is revered as the founder of the dynasty which has just ended. Remember that it was Buddhism carried to excess against which the revolution had been directed. Just as Wangon was fairly gentle in his treatment of Buddhism, so Ta-jo did not at once wipe out the old religion. That remained to be done by a man considerably later, the king who ascended the throne in 1469. His name was Chasan. During the early part of his reign his mother ruled as regent. Three years later, in 1472, he abolished all monasteries and temples, not only in his capital city of Seoul, but in every city throughout the kingdom.

The priests, driven out of all the cities and large towns, had to take refuge in the mountains, and from that time down until these latter days there have been no Buddhist temples in Seoul or Songdo or P'yeng-Yang or the other cities of Korea. There have only been monasteries out in the mountains, often in inaccessible places.

Those were pretty drastic measures and under such drastic measures Korean Buddhism sank to its worst conditions. There were hard times in the mountain monasteries—400 years practically, of exile.

Several things happened. In the first place, each monastery became a thing of itself; there was no unity, no combination, no force in the movement of Buddhism as such over the kingdom. In the second place, not being permitted to enter the cities, the Buddhist priests gradually came to be looked upon with contempt by the people; they were, of course, beggars, vowed to poverty; they always had been that, but they had had respect; with their seclusion in mountain monasteries they lost the respect which had been paid them; they became ignorant, vicious and depraved. Buddhism could hardly sink lower than Korean Buddhism did after being driven to the mountains.

It would, however be a great mistake to think there were no good men among them; none who cared for education. Some incidents show redeeming features and show hope.

In 1592 (it is interesting how '92 runs through the his-

tory of Korean Buddhism—392, 1392, 1592) occurred the invasion of Hideyoshi. Hideyoshi, in Japan had become a great general, was actual ruler of the country; he had dreams of empire and wanted expansion. He sent a vast army to conquer Korea. This army was under two generals, one a Christian and the other a Buddhist. They wrought great destruction in the unfortunate peninsula. Even today, every man, woman, and child in Korea has heard the story of that time.

During Hideyoshi's invasion, there was a monk in one of the mountain monasteries named Hyu-Chung. I will read what Hulbert says:

Hyu-Chung, known throughout the eight provinces as the great teacher of Sosan, was a man of great natural ability as well as of great learning. His pupils were numbered by thousands, and were found in every province. He called together two thousand of them and appeared before the king at Euiju and said: "We are of the common people but we are all the king's servants, and two thousand of us have come to die for Your Majesty." The king was much pleased by this demonstration of loyalty and made Hyu-Chung a priest-general and told him to go into camp at Pop-heung monastery. He did so, and from that point sent out a call to all the monasteries in the land. In Chulla province was a warrior-monk, Choe-Yung, and at Diamond Mountain another named Yu-Chung. These came with over a thousand followers and went into camp a few miles to the east of P'yeng-Yang. They had no intention of engaging in actual battle, but they acted as spies, took charge of the commissariat, and made themselves generally useful. During battle they stood behind the troops and shouted encouragement. Yu-Chang, trusting to his priestly garb, went into P'yeng-Yang to see the Japanese generals.

So you see, notwithstanding the condition of poverty and ignorance and unimportance to which the Buddhist monks sank, there were still among them occasional teachers of great learning with thousands of students, who were ready to serve their king in his struggle against the invader.

In 1660 a curious condition had arisen. With these mountain monasteries open to any one who would come, they became a refuge for the disaffected generally. Suppose a man had trouble with his family; he would become religious and retire to a mountain monastery, becoming a monk; or if some man failed in business, he might find refuge as a

monk in a monastery; for one reason or another, it was easy for a man who was vicious or a failure or unhappy, to take refuge in the mountain monasteries. They flocked to them by thousands, until the government became disturbed and about 1660 the king issued an edict "that no more men with family ties should desert them in this way, and that all monks who had families living should doff their religious garb and come back to the world and support their families like honest men."

Such has been the history of Korean Buddhism. In 1902 an effort was made to revive it. In 1894 the Chinese-Japanese war took place. It was a war over Korea, and in 1895 it ended with the treaty of Shimonoseki. From 1895 on, Korea was a hot-bed of world intrigue. China, Russia, Japan, all were struggling on the peninsula for a continued foothold. Each was trying to gain advantage. Korea was a very important spot in the world. In 1904, came the great war between Japan and Russia, and in 1905 the treaty of Portsmouth. So you see, 1902 came right between those two great wars, both of which were fought on account of Korea. In 1902 the man who had been king—the last real representative of the Yi dynasty, had become emperor. One of the results of the war of 1894 was to make Korea an empire, and to make the king of Korea an emperor. In 1902 when the effort was made to reestablish and revive Buddhism in Korea, it was an empire with a new emperor. Hulbert, who never admired Korean Buddhism, says this:

In 1902, a very determined attempt to revive the Buddhist cult was made. The emperor consented to the establishment of a great central monastery for the whole country, in the vicinity of Seoul, and in it a Buddhist high priest who was to control the whole church in the land. It was a ludicrous attempt, because Buddhism in Korea is dead.

That was written by Dr. Hulbert in 1905. It referred to an attempt made in 1902, and it seemed to him that Buddhism was dead. Now, I visited Korea last year, and the bulk of my time while there was spent in the study of Korean Buddhism. I went to many of the monasteries. It was an interesting study, and I confess I should differ

strongly with Dr. Hulbert in saying that Korean Buddhism was dead.

It seems to me that, whatever was true in 1902, in 1917 and 1918 Korean Buddhism is very much alive. The monasteries of Korea are under the control of thirty head monasteries, each of which has from a handful to forty or more lesser monasteries and temples under its charge, looking to it for direction. These thirty head monasteries had come to be greatly reduced in property, membership, influence and splendor in 1902; that is true. It is true that they were separated from each other; there was no feeling of unity among them; each monastery was a thing by itself, and decay and corruption were evident everywhere.

But about five years ago the priests of the thirty head monasteries came together; they held a great meeting and discussed their common interests; they decided that union was necessary and a forward movement, a thing such as was tried in 1902 and which failed then. It was tried again and has not failed. They elected a President of their commission, and this President's term of office was for one year; now every year at their annual meeting they elect a President whose whole time is devoted to the interests of combined Korean Buddhism for that year. They bought property in the city of Seoul and erected a central building, partly temple, and partly office building. The expenses of the head office are borne by the thirty temples, in proportion to their importance and wealth; each contributes annually a set sum for the advancement of Buddhism in Korea.

While in Seoul this last year I visited a theological seminary of Buddhism. It has a good property in a desirable part of the city; it occupies a fine old Korean building; it has a corps of teachers of some ability; I found sixty-five students. The institution has been running about three years. The young men with whom I talked seemed to be earnestly interested in the work and looked forward to doing something in the way of advancement in the mountain monasteries. A definite course of three years' instruction is offered. The number of students has grown steadily, and I

imagine the time may come when there will be hundreds of students in this theological seminary.

And there is a magazine conducted today in the interests of Korean Buddhism. It has been under way for something like five years. The history of the young man who edits it is rather interesting. I met him and had quite a talk with him about his religious experience. His father is a pillar of the Presbyterian Church in Seoul, one of the most successful of the missionary churches of the city. The young man himself was educated in Catholic schools in the city of Seoul; his whole education came from foreigners, and he himself now has a double employment; he is official interpreter for the Belgian consul in the city of Seoul, but he finds his pleasure and devotion in his magazine for the advancement of Korean Buddhism. Son of a Presbyterian elder, trained in Catholic schools, speaking French, Korean, Chinese and Japanese, professionally engaged at a foreign consulate, he is the editor of a magazine whose object is to revive, strengthen and carry on Korean Buddhism. He is, moreover, the author of a history of Korean Buddhism, which is not yet in print. It is, I think, the only history of the kind that has been written covering the whole period of Korean Buddhism.

I went to Tsudoji on Buddha's birthday. It is one of the great mountain monasteries of the south. They knew I was coming and I therefore found a place to sleep. When we came near it—within three or four miles—we found the crowd going up; the nearest railway station is about ten miles away. Most of the people, however, had walked from their homes. It is a mountain district and a country district, not thickly populated; there are surely only two or three towns of any size within fifteen miles. When I reached Tsudoji I found one of the liveliest scenes I ever saw in Korea. The head priest told me that 10,000 people slept on the grounds of the temple that night. The majority of them were women. Of course, *that* would have been true, if it had been a Presbyterian gathering. I stayed there two nights. The full day I put in there, there was a wonderful crowd of people present; there were a few

Japanese,—a teacher and one or two officials,—but apart from those, the whole crowd was Korean. I have no doubt 15,000 people were on the grounds that day. I was interested to find that one of the events of that evening was a moving-picture show, on the grounds of the temple. The life of Buddha was to be represented in moving pictures before an audience of 10,000 Koreans. That didn't look much like death! I am told that at the other head monasteries there were proportionately equal crowds.

Korean Buddhism has perhaps a political part to play. When the Japanese took over Korea, Buddhists came into the country in great numbers. The Japanese are Buddhists and many Japanese priests and temples came with the settlers. The Japanese priests and temples, however, do not fit with the Koreans. There may be thousands of them but they will not make Korean converts,—not because the Japanese are not ready to do missionary work, but because the Koreans are not ready to accept it. The Korean Buddhism of today is Korean, not Japanese.

I can imagine nothing that would be more dangerous to Japanese control than a strong and vital Korean Buddhism that was hostile to Japan. On the other hand, I can think of nothing that would be a greater help to Japan than a Korean Buddhism developed among those people by their own priests and friendly to Japan. What Korean Buddhism is to be in the future depends upon its relation to the government now there. If Korean Buddhism accepts and coöperates with the Japanese control, it will become the mightiest factor that can be devised to make Japan's hold on the peninsula a success. If hostile to Japan, when the crisis comes, as it surely will come, when Japan will be tried out again and once for all on Korean soil, Korean Buddhism may be the decisive element in that moment of test.