
Korea in World History

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One way of looking at Korea's many contributions to the world, and one of the ways of seeing the connections to other countries is to look at the seven sites that have been declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Beginning in the late 1990s, UNESCO began recognizing natural and man-made sites that are important beyond the borders of a particular country. On three separate occasions, two or three sites from Korea have been accepted giving us seven sites total at this point. Let us examine each one as a touchstone for examining various aspects of Korea's connections to the world and her place in World History.

Dolmen



Dolmen are large stone monuments found in many places in the world. They are associated with burials and date from pre-historic times. Found in many places in the world, the ones in Korea are some of the best examples of dolmen. And they are located in many areas around Korea.

There are two categories found in Korea, northern style and southern style. The northern style are large and include three stones; a horizontal table stone on top of two vertical stones that act as legs or support for the table stone on top. The stone on top can be six or seven feet long and five or six feet wide. The vertical stones that hold up the top

stone can stand nearly six feet tall.

The southern style has smaller stones, usually not supported and held up above the ground, but rather tend to be smaller stones, two to three feet long and wide. The southern style is more numerous.

The Ancient Capital Kyōngju

Chronologically, the second site to develop is the city of Kyōngju, once the capital of the Shilla dynasty (traditional dates: 57 BC - 935). In the city several sites are important. The city is dotted with huge mounds that are tombs for prehistoric period kings. A few of the tombs □those where we have lost track of which king or queen is buried □have been excavated. In one the archaeologist found a



mudflap for a horse on which was painted a flying horse. The tomb, called the "flying horse tomb," has been recreated as a museum tomb □one can actually walk inside it and see the recreation of what the tomb contained. In addition to the flying horse painting, there is a gold crown.

The Shilla crown has on it shining mirrors of gold and dangling stones cut of jade in the shape of a bear or tiger's claw. The symbols have connections with shamanistic worship practices in northeast Asia and also in Japan.

Also in the city of Kyōngju is Ch'omsongdae, a tower of cut stone that was once an astronomical observatory. There are also several Buddhist temples and archaeological excavations that reveal how magnificent a city Kyōngju once was.



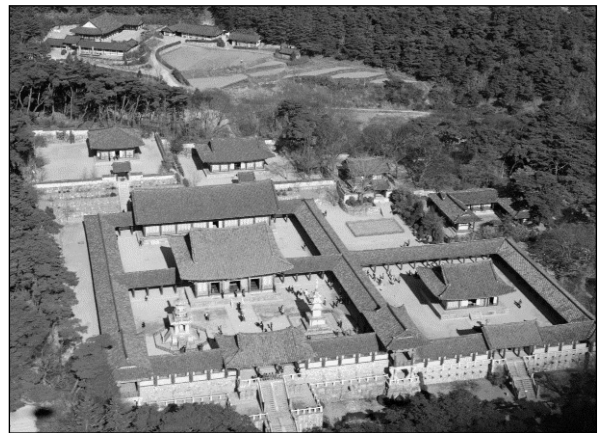
The Sōkkuram Stone Buddha and Pulguk-sa Buddhist Temple Complex



On the outskirts of Kyōngju, there is a Buddhist temple complex that holds several buildings and pagodas, but the most magnificent site is the solid granite Buddha high on the mountain side overlooking the East Sea. The stone Buddha cut from a single piece of granite sits inside a man made cave. Inside the cave, lining the walls around the great Buddha

are carvings of some of the historic Buddha's disciples. They have caucasian or Indian features, and we know that there were travelers from Central Asia in Kyōngju, some of whom may have posed for the sculptures. The creation of a cave was in and of itself an indication of a Central Asian connection, because the first Buddhists to take the new religion to China were those who traveled the Silk Route, where images of the Buddha were often found in caves, rest stops along the dangerous Silk Route. As those inn keepers and travelers came to believe in the Buddha, there was an association with worship in caves. The Sōkkuram Buddha in its man-made cave is virtually the eastern-most stop, the last stop on the Silk Route on the continent of Asia.

The rest of the temple complex of which Sōkkuram is a part is also noteworthy. Located at the foot of the mountain, whereas the Sōkkuram cave is near the top of the mountain, there are some noteworthy structures in a complex of several buildings.



The twin staircases, made of stone, with two archways each, arching over a symbolic stream, serve as symbols of the Buddhist concept of crossing over, dying and going to nirvana.

Inside the courtyard in front of the main hall there are two stone pagodas, Sōkkatap and Tabotap. Sōkkatap, the one on the east is faithfully reproduced on every ten-wōn coin in the country. It is a



beautiful and unique pagoda. Though cut from granite, it is cut to look like it is made of wood, with railings and pillars that look like wood. In the late 1960s when the complex was remodeled and painted, the pagoda was taken apart and rebuilt. In the process, the workers found a

"time capsule" which was sealed inside the pagoda when it was built. Therein was a piece of paper, with the story of the temple's building printed on it. It revealed the exact date of the temple, 751, but more importantly, the printed paper turns out to be the oldest example of printing on paper in the world.

Haein-sa and the Wooden Printing Blocks for the Koreana Tripitaka

Moving northwest about 100 kilometers, and forward in time from the Shilla dynasty to the Koryŏ dynasty (917-1392), we find another beautiful temple complex tucked away in a remote mountain. At the rearmost part of the temple are two long buildings, parallel to each other and parallel to the main hall, built to house 80,000 wooden tablets or printing blocks that were hand carved to contain all the scriptures known to Buddhism. There were other such carvings in China, but all have been destroyed. The Korean collection is the most complete in the world.

The carvings were made at great expense and effort by hundreds of monks at the height of peril for the Koryŏ kingdom. The kingdom was first threatened by the Khitans to the north, and then invaded by the Mongols. The wood carvings had

been done once before, as a kind of prayer or appeal to the Buddha, but those carvings were burned. So, the monks determined to do it all again. Although the Mongols did invade, and hauled away treasures and slaves, and dominated the Korean court for the next 150 years, the 80,000 wooden blocks



known as the Koreana Tripitaka have become an international symbol of courage and faith. Under the Mongols there was great suffering. For example, the Mongols, who knew nothing of sailing, forced Korean sailors and shipmakers to build ships and then sail them loaded with Mongols soldiers and their horses to Japan for the Mongol invasion of Japan. Twice the invaders were met by taiphoons (hurricanes) that sunk the ships and prevented the invasion. The Japan refer to the storms as the divine winds, the kamikaze, that protected Japan.

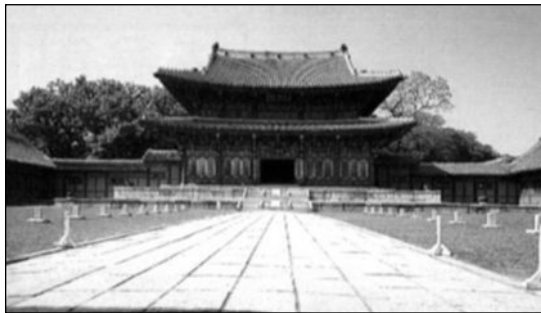
Chongmyo, the Royal Ancestral Shrine

The Koryŏ dynasty was replaced by the Chosŏn (1392-1910), and with it, an emphasis on Confucianism rather than Buddhism swept the country. In Confucianism, the ceremonies for the ancestors are central. And no ancestors are more impor-



tant than the ancestors of the king, the deceased kings. The "spirit tablets" of the kings of the Chosŏn court are housed in a long building with nineteen rooms that separately open onto a large courtyard, about the size of a football field.

Confucianism, imported from China, is classified in the study of world religions, as a "this



worldly" religion, meaning it is concerned with this life, with society, and with politics. One of the key figures in Confucianism is the king, and one of the key relationships is that of the king to his subjects. The Royal Ancestral Shrine, therefore, is one of the most important places in the Confucian view of the world.

Changdŏk Palace

Changdŏk Palace is one of three surviving royal residential compounds of the Chosŏn period, and it was selected over the other two as the prime example of Chosŏn court architecture and a symbol of the grandeur of the Chosŏn dynasty. This dynasty was one of the longest in the history of mankind, and the one immediately preceding it, Koryŏ, was nearly as long. The strength of the Korean dynasties was not found in their military might, although the military played an important role. But rather, their power was found in the civilian sector, with scholar-officials assisting the king in dealing with challenges that faced them. Both the Koryŏ dynasty and the Chosŏn dynasty survived major invasions. The Mongols

invaded in the mid-thirteenth century and the Japanese invaded in the late sixteenth century. The invasions were devastating. Yet, each dynasty survived by aiding the people to recover, adjusting their policies to meet the new realities, and by promoting loyalty to the king — again, a Confucian virtue.

The Korean court of the late Chosŏn period reached a kind of perfection. The values of Neo-Confucianism had come to permeate the court and the countryside. It was a much more ideal Confucian society than ever existed in China or anywhere else. One of the symbols of that perfection is Changdŏk Palace. Quiet. Open. It was a place for the king to meet his court. In the courtyard in front of the palace are stone markers, a row on the right and a row on the left, to show where the officials should stand according to their rank and position. On the right were the civil officials, and on the left were the military — the two files. The Korean word today for a gentleman is *yangban*, which means literally "two files."

Suwŏn Fortress

In chronological order, the last of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites is the Fortress in Suwŏn. Built in the late eighteenth century it was a model of grand-scale fortress architecture. Suwŏn



was not the only walled city; Seoul had a wall around it as did many regional cities. In fact, the earliest histories speak of walled towns, so the concept of a defensive wall was old, but the thing that made the Suwŏn walls interesting was the fact that they were new. The technology used for building the walls made them higher and straighter and more difficult to attack. And they never were attacked.

However, we can use the fortress as a symbol of the troubles that came to Korea at the end of the nineteenth century. Just as the United States forced a modern trade treaty on Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, two decades later, Japan forced a similar treaty on Korea. There was no invasion, no attack. But gradually, Japanese efforts to control not only Korean trade but all aspects of Korean life grew. Finally in 1910, Japan "annexed" Korea and for the next thirty-five years ruled Korea as a colony.

The war that came to Korea in the mid-twentieth century did not originate from the outside. Rather, it was a civil war between the northern half and the southern half of the peninsula. After liberation from Japanese control in 1945, Korea was split in two. It was never intended to be a permanent split, but the interests in the north, communism, and the interests in the south, democracy, did not allow the two sides to reunite. The north became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, aided by the Soviet Union and China; and the south became the Republic of Korea, aided by the United States. On June 25, 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea and nearly overran the southern half of the peninsula until U.S.-led military forces authorized by the United Nations cut the invasion in half by landing at Inchon, near Seoul, and pushed them back to the northern border of Korea. That action threatened China, which sent its own forces into Korea and pushed the UN forces back to a line just north of Seoul. And that is where Korea is

still divided today. In a very real sense, Korea is the last remnant of the Cold War.

South Korea today is a prosperous, industrial country. Although North Korea is struggling with a failed communist system, South Korea has become one of the strongest economies in the world. Its products — cars, electronics, steel, ships — are sold in markets all around the world. Although there are echoes of the war and threatening words from time to time, North Korea and South Korea are gradually finding ways to communicate, exchange family visits, and cooperate on a number of major economic projects. Today, the two Koreas hope and wait for the day when they will be united as one country.

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