

## Paranarratives of Space at Mt. Odae: Reconsidering Monumentality in Sacred Geography of Silla

Se-Woong Koo  
Stanford University  
(Not for Citation)

Seeing space takes as its point of departure an orientation, a position from which to survey the field and define its limits. That position is in academia often a God-like one, to dominate the schematic in its totalizing, monumental intimation of omniscience.<sup>1</sup> Put another way, rarely can an academic survey of space profess partial sight, lest it face accusations of inadequacy and, worse, ignorance. To counter such attacks, a large number of studies on Korean religion have pursued a spatiality that privileges centre, safely demarcating its own scope with narratives of political authority and religious hegemony. This mapping strategy has produced a vertically aligned landscape of ancient Korean religion that dangerously duplicates the traditional paradigm built upon “ceremonial centers.”<sup>2</sup> The discourse on the Kingdom of Silla 新羅 does not deviate from this orthodoxy, claiming that the synthesis of political and religious ideologies produced a space uniformly experienced, understood, and negotiated by the people of Silla.

The prevalent view of Korean history, suggesting a linear progression that hints at the idea of evolution, is understandable, given the degree of insecurity plaguing Korea as a nation-state of a short history, a country that has unceasingly expressed grievances against foreign powers it deems to have perpetrated historical agony against it for centuries.<sup>3</sup> The resulting nationalist attitude, justified through self-victimization, has given rise to an ontology of ethno-national destiny,<sup>4</sup> and in many ways academics both foreign and Korean have had to wrestle with the consequences of this historical imagination.<sup>5</sup>

I invoke the word ‘imagination’ in the vein of Benedict Anderson, who argues that institutions and media collectively create a “nationalist imaginary of simultaneity,” an idea of the nation that is empty, homogeneous, and timeless.<sup>6</sup> Such power held by agents of narration to shape history and has also been recognized by Paul Veyne, who has called history “products of the imagination.”<sup>7</sup> Though ‘imagination’ does not suggest falsehood, it is meant to question the existing paradigms of historiography as modern constitutions which are neither true nor wrong. Thankfully in Korean studies, there has been an outpouring of correctives in this regard, challenging aspects of Korean origin and identity theories central to the modern myth of the Korean nation.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Tuan Yi-fu, *The Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience* (St. Paul-Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> I borrow ‘ceremonial center’ from Paul Wheatley’s *Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Yim Chihyŏn, opening remarks at conference “Modern Korea at the Crossroads between Empire and Nation,” Hanyang University, Seoul, August 8-9, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Yim Chihyŏn, *Minjok chuŭi nŭn panyŏkida* (Seoul, Sonamu, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Yi Sŏngsi, *Mandŭljŏjin kodae* (Seoul: Sam’in, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> For examples, turn to: Pai Hyun Il’s *Constructing ‘Korean’ Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-formation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000); Ch’oe Yong-ho’s “An Outline History of Korean Historiography,” *Korean Studies* 4 (1980).

## Historiography of the Local

The case of Korean religion prior to Koryŏ 高麗, in its presently theorized, represented, and imagined form, is especially suited to reconstitution, for so much remains a question mark. One of the central problems for the scholarship on the periods of Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla has been the absence of credible sources, and the seemingly uncritical use of *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事, *The Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (ca. 1285), has been especially contested for being misleading.<sup>9</sup> This problem generated by *Samguk yusa* is very much of the “precession of simulacra,” or a faulty strategy employed to map the territory of ancient Korean Buddhism.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the research involving *Samguk yusa* has primarily served to feed the existing paradigms of intellectual thinking, helping to perpetuate the episteme buttressing the borders of national and disciplinary sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> Even though the authority of the text itself is in question over its accuracy in describing historical events, this awareness has not translated into a concerted effort to limit the source’s application.

In relation, the issues of *t’ong pulgyo* 通佛敎 and *hoguk pulgyo* 護國佛敎 as dominant paradigms for the study of Korean Buddhism have not escaped critical reconsideration.<sup>12</sup> A detailed discussion of both should be reserved for elsewhere, but suffice to say that they were both modern inventions, one to suit the need of a colonial subject to valorize Korean Buddhism, and the other an imperialist ideology first expounded by the Japanese and later adopted by the Koreans. The colonial scholar Ch’oe Nam-Sŏn’s role in promulgating *t’ong pulgyo* as a uniquely Korean exegetical achievement by Wŏnhyo is now a recognized fact, and Sin Ch’ae-ho’s reconceptualization of Korean history, traced to Manchuria and Tangun, has also entered the

---

<sup>9</sup> For an informative assessment on the state of research involving *Samguk yusa*, see Henrik Sorensen’s “Problems with Using the *Samguk yusa* as a Source for the History of Korean Buddhism,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Coreennes* 7: 269-86.

<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard was describing the modern West, but it equally applies to the current academic practices. The idea of ancient Korean Buddhism has never been anything more than a construct built on *Samguk yusa*’s multivalence of meanings. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); cf. Sam Gill’s “Territory” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 298-313.

<sup>11</sup> The most visible proponent is Naoki Sakai. See *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> For the germination of the debate regarding the validity of *t’ong pulgyo* as a paradigm, see Shim Jae-ryong’s “General Characteristics of Korean Buddhism: Is Korean Buddhism Syncretic?” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 2 (1989): 147-57; in Shim’s footsteps is Cho Eunsu’s “The Uses and Abuses of Wŏnhyo and the ‘T’ong Pulgyo’ Narrative,” *The Journal of Korean Studies* 9.1 (Autumn 2004): 33-59. Challenges to the nationalist *hoguk* paradigm of Korean Buddhism have arisen mostly from Western academia, with Robert Buswell leading the charge in “Imagining ‘Korean Buddhism’: The Invention of a National Religious Tradition,” in *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*, edited by Pai Hyung Il and Timothy R. Tangherlini (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1998); for the well-traced genealogy of the *hoguk* paradigm see Pankaj N. Mohan’s “Beyond the ‘Nation-Protecting’ Paradigm: Recent Trends in the Historical Studies of Korean Buddhism,” *The Review of Korean Studies* 9.1 (March 2006): 49-68.

realm of academic consciousness as a key moment in the development of Korean historiography.<sup>13</sup>

But less frequently addressed is how Sin Ch'ae-ho's view of Korean history has affected the discourse of Korean religion. The (re)discovery of Tangun 檀君 and what has been alternatively termed 'Eurasian' or 'Manchurian' Shamanism has ignited a debate in Korean academia regarding the source of a uniquely Korean religion,<sup>14</sup> and I argue that this trend has been the basis of the 'syncretism' paradigm often cited to explain the workings of religious interactions in Korea.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, investigating the root of syncretism as an analytical category in Korean religion leads to the excavation of what can only be seen as a reflection of a non-native academic concept: a subjectivist ontology based on the Eliadean notion of the sacred.<sup>16</sup> It discovers the root of Korean religion in a single sacred moment of revelation in the traditional Korean founding myth of Tangun, readily identified as the archetypal Siberian shaman whose ritual action opened up a symbolic center, *axis mundi*. This center, then, is identified with a site in what is broadly conceived as the Korean political domain, and is deemed the birthplace of the sacred essence/truth that defines Korean religion. Furthermore, situating the center is now accepted as a standard pattern for all politico-religious developments, such as the shaman-kingship of tribal confederations and even the putative 'Buddhicization' of Silla. In instituting the Eliadean phenomenological stance, the discipline of Korean religion has submitted itself to the nationalist agenda. As Robert Sharf has argued, syncretism, often couched in the language of 'conquest' and 'assimilation,' is problematic because of its key assumption that the religious traditions in collision possess essential characteristics devoid of imprints from external influences up until the moment of the encounter under study.<sup>17</sup> The syncretic explanation of Korean religion, too, assumes the presence of uniquely Korean beliefs and practices, signifying everything else as the 'other' in the native/foreign binary. Ultimately, we are left with a view that Korean religion is a grand formulation to be addressed within the frame of the definitively mapped out 'Korea,' in which sacred centers are periodically renewed; moreover, each narrative of center-making only reinforces the need to stabilize the political, religious, social, cultural, and moral order through construction of emblems or 'icons' of power.<sup>18</sup>

### Constructing Space for Korean Buddhism

---

<sup>13</sup> Andre Schmid, "Rediscovering Manchuria: Sin Ch'ae-ho and the Politics of Territorial History in Korea," *Journal of Asian Studies* 56-1 (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Kim Tae-gon provides a general overview of 'Shamanism' in "What is Shamanism?" in *Revivals, Survivals, and Change*, edited by Keith Howard (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> For the definition of *t'ochak chonggyo* ("Native Religion") and the rationale for it, see Sō Yōngdae's "Han'guk kodaie chonggyo sa" in *Haebang hu 50 nyōn Han'guk chonggyo yōn'gusa* (Seoul: Tosō Ch'ulpan Ch'ang, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, translated by William R. Trask (NY: Bollingen Foundation, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Sharf makes a convincing argument against 'syncretism' in examining the arrival and reception of Buddhism in China. See his *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Ed. Robert Innis, *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 9.

As long as history remains a discipline of imagination, an escape from what Jean Baudrillard termed the “hyperreal” may be an impossible feat.<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard’s metaphor of simulation reveals that the academic imagination of historiography has much to do with geographic space and mapping strategies. After all, history is a visual discipline, forever deploying metaphors of vision and representation to draw pictures of the past, and geographically modulating historical narratives has not been a novel approach for many historians. As applied to the subject of religion, the interest in the question of space has in recent years peaked, culminating in the genre of ‘sacred geography.’ It has also been a prominent part of the scholarship on Korean Buddhism, although never explicitly formulated as an academic paradigm as it is in today’s religious studies. Korean scholars have sought to highlight the sacralizing strategies embraced by the monastic and political elites, mostly in the context of Silla. The transplantation of Mt. Wutai 五臺山 to Korea in the name of Mt. Odae has received a great deal of attention,<sup>20</sup> as has construction of temple structures in the capital city of Kyôngju 慶州 as emblems of divine protection and royal authority.<sup>21</sup>

The term given to the process of Buddhist territorial conversion in Silla is *pulgukto* 佛國土, but the concept is not without its set of problems. Rather than being a historical phenomenon, it is highly likely a sophisticated mapping device conjured up as an elaborate superimposition. We can observe the emergence of the *pulgukto* paradigm in the influential article by Yi Kiyōng on comparing the ‘Buddha Land thought’ in Japan and in Silla.<sup>22</sup> The late Yi, a prominent buddhologist, called upon the Hwaōm 華嚴 teaching of the China-trained Buddhist monk, Ŭisang 義相, as the definitive model that subsumed and then converted divergent elements of Korean sacred geography into a unified spatial mode. Yi presupposed, with validity, that the politically stabilizing force of Ŭisang’s doctrine had spatial implications, but he far too hastily concluded that Hwaōm was an integral part of the political ideology at court around the time of the unification (668), undermining the credibility of his spatial theory.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Yi considered as key moments in the Buddhist transformation of Silla events portrayed in two *Samguk yusa* entries, one involving the founding of Hwangnyong Monastery 皇龍寺<sup>24</sup> and the other the casting of the said temple’s Śākyamuni triad.<sup>25</sup> While it is difficult to overestimate the importance of Hwangnyong Monastery in this pivotal period of Silla history, his interpretation begs a second thought. To Yi, the most important passage in the Śākyamuni triad narrative was the following: “Embarked on casting the Śākyamuni triad, [but it] has not yet come to be; loading [the iron and gold] onto a ship and floating [it] in the sea, [Aśoka] blessed, ‘[I] wish that it arrive at a country

<sup>19</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> For noteworthy examples, turn to Pak Nojun’s “Odaesan sin’ang ũi kiwōn yōn’gu,” *Yōngdong munhwa* 2 (1986); Kim Dujin, “Silla hadae ũi Odaesan sin’ang kwa Hwaōm kyōlsa,” *Han’guk pulgyo munhwa sasangsa* 1 (1992).

<sup>21</sup> Yang Chōngsōk, *Hwangnyongsa ũi choyōnggwa wanggwon*, Seoul: Sōgyōng munhwas, 2004; Pankaj Mohan, “6 segi Silla esōi wanggwōn kwa pulgyo kanūi kwan’gye,” *Pulgyohak yōn’gu* 9 (December 2004): 135-52; Richard D. McBride, *Domesticating the Dharma: Buddhist Cults and the Hwaōm Synthesis in Silla Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Yi Kiyōng, “Sangjingjōk p’yohyōnūl t’onghaesō pon 7~8 segi Silla mit Ilbon ũi pulgukto sasang,” in *Hanil kodae munhwa kyosōp yōn’gusa*, Seoul: Ŭlji munhwas (1974): 103-41.

<sup>23</sup> A useful summary of the existing scholarship on Ŭisang can be found in Ch’oe Yōnsik’s “Ŭisang yon’gu ũi hyōnhwang ōdi kkaji watna,” *Han’guk sasangsa hwak* 19 (2003).

<sup>24</sup> “Kasōpbul yōnjwasōk cho 迦葉佛宴坐石條,” in *Samguk yusa* vol. 3, sec. 4 ‘Tapsang 塔像.’

<sup>25</sup> “Hwangnyongsa changyuk cho 皇龍寺丈六條,” in *Samguk yusa* vol. 3, sec. 4 ‘Tapsang.’

with a karmic link, where [they] will build the six-foot venerable image.”<sup>26</sup> In the original text ‘with a karmic link’ is written as ‘有緣.’ And the expression for “karmic link 緣” appears again in Yi’s conclusion based on the narrative when he writes of a historical conviction that Silla was not a strange land “without a karmic link or a relationship 無緣無關” but “originally a Buddha Land 佛國土.”<sup>27</sup> The specific wording Yi employed speaks to a deliberate intent on his part to establish Silla as a Buddhist kingdom.

Around the time Yi put forth his theory of ‘Buddha Land,’ we see other works of similar nature addressing the topic of syncretism in Korean and Japanese religions. I will not dwell on Kim Taekkyu’s well-known article,<sup>28</sup> but Hwang P’aegang’s study of the Buddhist-Native dynamic is particularly noteworthy for its use of terminology. Conspicuously, in describing the state of religiosity in Silla, Hwang labels native practices *sin* 神 ‘divine’ in diametric opposition to *bul* 佛 ‘Buddhist.’ He writes: “The native Silla divinities were originally Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of India. It conformed to the idea that Buddhist beings appeared in Silla in shapes of divinities in order to lead sentient beings to salvation. Buddha is the original place, and the divinities are manifest traces.”<sup>29</sup> In describing the *pulgukto* thought in Silla, Hwang liberally invokes the concept of ‘original place, manifest trace’ – *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 – most likely with the knowledge that the same phrase is a standard in the study of medieval Japanese Buddhism. In Japan, the paradigm refers exclusively to the mode of interaction between Buddhism and the putative ‘Shinto 神道.’ The medieval Japanese operated temple-shrine complexes where Buddhist and native deities were worshipped within the same ground, with their duality explained through a doctrinal synthesis of the local beliefs and orthodox Buddhism.<sup>30</sup> What Hwang implies by *honji suijaku* is that the same can be said of religion in Silla, Buddhists and non-Buddhists entered into mutually beneficial arrangements, and that such an interaction comprised part of Silla’s ‘Buddha Land’ ideology. But never has in Silla been seen any mode of religious operation that resembles the *honji suijaku* phenomenon, which in Japanese scholarship is closely tied to the ‘Buddha Land’ thought. Kim’s appropriation of it is clearly with the purpose of furthering the *pulgukto* conception of Silla.

What I hope to draw attention to, is that the cornerstone of research informing the popular *pulgukto* paradigm contains these problematic intellectual associations. The *pulgukto* thought, though still in wide circulation, should not have the academic currency it has been invested with, as it now looks to be a curiously drawn map. Much like nationalist scholarship built upon *t’ong pulgyo*, *hoguk pulgyo*, and the syncretic understanding of Korean religion, *pulgukto* is an endorsement of the notion of centrality. Agents of *pulgukto* have created boundaries both conceptual and territorial, leaving us confronted with the question of imaginary centers and margins.

### De-centering Monumentality

Center and margin have much heuristic value in analysis of historical religious phenomena, as directional awareness no doubt existed in many pre-modern societies including Silla. The urban

---

<sup>26</sup> 將鑄釋迦三尊像未就載舡泛海而祝曰願到有緣國土

<sup>27</sup> Yi, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> Kim Taekkyu, “Silla mit kodaie Ilbon ūi sinbul sūphap e taehayō,” in *Hanil kodaie munhwa kyosōp yōn’gusa* (Seoul: Ŭlji munhwasa 1974): 221-81.

<sup>29</sup> Hwang P’aegang, *Silla pulgyo sōlhwa yōngu* (Seoul: Iljisa, 1975): 286.

<sup>30</sup> An excellent case study of a religious site operating on the native-Buddhist alliance, as well as the summary of the general theory, appears in Allan Grapard’s *Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

and exurban layout of the capital, Kyôngju 慶州, and descriptions of official and popular cults convey to us a concern with space even in the Silla zeitgeist. Furthermore, documentation of the Chinese cosmological ideas embedded in the continental intellectual imports Silla so eagerly received would quell any suggestion that its people were not mindful of their place in the world.

Paul Wheatley submitted that ceremonial centers were “instruments for the creation of political, social, economic, and sacred spaces, at the same time as they were symbols of cosmic, social, and moral order....Above all they embodied the aspirations of brittle, pyramidal societies in which, typically, a sacerdotal elite, controlling a corps of officials and palace guards, ruled over a peasantry whose business it was to produce a fund of rent which could be absorbed into the reservoir of resources controlled by the master of the ceremonial center.”<sup>31</sup> His view reminds us that the supposed center functioned in a way that legitimized its centrality and perpetuated its existence through construction of tangible emblems. A more conceptually driven definition by Edward Shills (as quoted by Geertz) speaks of the center as “the point or points in a society where its leading ideas come together with its leading institutions to create an arena in which events that most vitally affect its members’ lives take place”.<sup>32</sup> Both these definitions capture the mode of centrality’s generation and operation in the Silla society, and to ignore them completely would be a mistake.

But the validity of center notwithstanding, there may not be a need to locate the center after all, for our centers and margins occur largely in discursive plans that privilege a spatial hierarchy. Especially when the current imaginaries of centralities are so problematic, the larger question to be asked is, not where the centers were, but whether centers must be found at all. Denying centrality in discourse is not to deny historical belief in it. While recognizing the historical centers, we can still dismantle the ideological assumptions that affirm centers on the academic plane. J. Z. Smith, who takes exception to the dominant paradigm of religious space, offers useful starting points for deconstructing the center. To him the center “is not a secure pattern to which data may be brought as illustrative;” in other words, to begin a spatial inquiry of religion based on the assumption of the sacred center would be inaccurate, for there is no stable pole. Smith holds steadfast that humans are the constructors of the world, and that religion is a way of both creating and discovering it. Space and time are not to be deterministically understood, and we must consider and question every method, every assumption about space and time, including our own views that shape our field and inquiries. And since creating and discovering can be the same act, Smith is especially keen on examining how the two can correspond to each other, or can be fudged to allow correspondence between the truth claims of the religious traditions and experience of life. The two mapping strategies Smith speaks of as defining features of religion, one “locative” and the other “utopian” – whereby the former is a terrestrial conception of space in its attempt to create a perfectly corresponding map between the physical and celestial landscapes, and the latter a conception of space that transcends any such correspondence between the putative “profane” and the putative “sacred” in its all-encompassing negation of the landscape, thus creating universal, timeless space – are ultimately a single strategy that constantly shift to redraw, abandon, and produce new space.<sup>33</sup>

Smith’s view has been supported by several researchers working on various religion traditions. Bernard Faure, in commenting on Chan Buddhism and popular religion in medieval China, argued that seeing space in religion was epistemological: the same space can possess more than one character depending on who defines the space or, simply, on the perspective itself. He makes

---

<sup>31</sup> Wheatley, p. 225.

<sup>32</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings and Charisma: Symbolics of Power,” in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

a convincing case that a single space can both transcend articulation and allow categorization even when the site is under competition for an exclusive claim.<sup>34</sup> David Carrasco has also proposed thinking of space in terms of shifting sights in his study of Aztec sacrificial rituals. For the Aztec dynasty which devoted vast resources to maintenance of a cosmological map, ensuring conformity between the celestial bodies and human affairs was of the greatest importance. Alignment was confirmed in the eyes of the king-priest, whose physical location determined the correct view of significant heavenly workings. If the symmetry sought through the placement of the viewing platform was not to satisfaction, it was reconstructed entirely to avoid prophesized calamities.<sup>35</sup> Edward Davis invokes Prasenjit Duhara's "cultural nexus" to begin a conversation on the spatial nature of the Chinese religious 'landscape.' The cultural nexus, made up of "hierarchies, networks, and associations...converge and diverge among themselves around temples, altars, and monasteries," which are often unaffiliated with the governing authorities and much more likely to be community-based institutions. What is striking is how the cults represented by the temples, altars, and monasteries are not tied to any "moral obligations relative to a position within a status hierarchy" in carving out their places, but instead depend "on the efficacy of the gods relative to boundaries that distinguish smaller from larger spatial units." Put another way, even as they depend on the kind of spatial measurements that make up the basis for governance like households, neighbourhoods, and cities, their spatial ontology was derived from the internal dynamics of the cults themselves. "The boundaries that mark a cultic unit are not coterminous with administrative or even marketing hierarchies."<sup>36</sup>

Though Michel Riou claimed that power was the "capacity in which a person, a class or an institution finds them- or itself able to make the whole social body revolve around them,"<sup>37</sup> it appears that such power to cast a singular vision of the world belongs to no one. Even when an entity claims ownership of the cartographic process, center and margin are never stable, and icons of power are mere landmarks on the map of historical imagination. No matter how totalizing the intent is to wipe out a given space's heterogeneity, a hegemonic erasure of the local memory is simply an impossible task.<sup>38</sup>

### Paranarratives of Mt. Odae

When a narrative fails to yield a unified imagination, what is the functioning mechanism of a religious site? Michel Foucault believed that real space was defined by "a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another."<sup>39</sup> In the religion of Silla one sees this real space – which Foucault called 'heterotopia' – enfolding enmeshed in institutionally sanctioned records of spatial formation, even where official

---

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Faure, "Space and Place in Chinese Religious Traditions," *History of Religions* 26.4 (May 1987): 337-56.

<sup>35</sup> David Carrasco, "Star Gatherers and Wobbling Suns: Astral Symbolism in the Aztec Tradition," *History of Religions* 26.3 (February 1987): 2279-94.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> Michel Riou, "Response" in *Heterodete* 6.2 (1977): 21-3, appearing in *Space, Knowledge, and Power: Foucault and Geography*, edited by Jeremy Crampton and Stuart Elden (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007): 35-7.

<sup>38</sup> An interesting example of the Chinese Communist Party's effort to transform a religious shrine into a secular community center is described in Ann Anagnost's "Politics of Ritual Displacement," in *Asian Visions of Authority*, edited by Laurel Kendall (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault, Info, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>.

monopoly on the putative center was sought. Sites may project impervious singularity, or be rewritten to project it, but “monumentality of a site masks the diversity of thought systems underlying it” beyond what can be discerned, discriminated, and articulated by scholars as ‘traditions.’<sup>40</sup> One is reminded of the words of J. M. Blanchard that a narrative often comprises of many more sub-narratives, often difficult to discern and marked by referents understandable only to a specific culture but complementary of one another in a relationship stronger than the one they have with the main narrative.<sup>41</sup> He called them “paranarratives,” an apt term, one thinks, for the subtle descriptions of Korean religious experience, rarely scrutinized in favour of a single dominant explanation.

Mt. Odae 五臺山, the centerpiece of most discussions on sacred space in Silla, demonstrates that creation of regional spatiality undermined any effort at producing a hegemonic space during Silla. The mountain, which shares its name with Mt. Wutai 五臺山 in Shanxi 山西, China, is generally understood as the abode of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, and the narratives involving the sacred origin of this Korean mountain in *Samguk yusa* have been cited as proof that the mountain was a natural symbol of royal authority in service of the ‘Buddha Land’ thought perpetrated by the ruling class based in the capital. But Mt. Odae is a complicated puzzle in the grand picture of Korean Buddhism, and its significance as a cultic center for Mañjuśrī worship has been questioned on several fronts.

There are five *Samguk yusa* entries detailing the sacralization of Mt. Odae, but much of their information overlaps, being variations on two central themes of Master Chajang 慈藏’s (60?-65?) visit to Mt. Wutai and of two princes in flight from a royal succession struggle at court.<sup>42</sup> The stories tell us that Chajang travelled to Mt. Wutai and received Buddha relics from Mañjuśrī, who informed him that Mt. Odae in Myōngju 溟州, Silla, was the abode of the Bodhisattva. Chajang returned to Silla, where he deposited the relics at three temples and spent the remainder of his life in pursuit of another audience with Mañjuśrī. Subsequently, two prince fled internecine fighting at the palace to Mt. Odae and performed austerities, experiencing visionary encounters with assemblies of the Buddhist pantheon. The younger prince of the two ultimately returned to the capital to become the next king, but the older remained, systematizing the Mañjuśrī cult.

But it is doubtful that Chajang actually visited Mt. Wutai, throwing into question Mt. Odae’s origin as the center of Mañjuśrī cult in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. For one, the available Chinese sources on Chajang fail to mention that Chajang ever made a pilgrimage there.<sup>43</sup> Even Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667), who wrote his biographic entry on Chajang while Chajang was still alive, makes no mention of Chajang’s devotion to Mañjuśrī or visit to Mt. Wutai even though the two monks communicated with each other during their lifetimes.<sup>44</sup> It has also been pointed out that the verses, which *Samguk yusa* says Chajang dreamt after seven-day austerities at Mt. Wutai, are from the 80-fascicle version of *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, which was transmitted to Silla in the 8th century. The

<sup>40</sup> Bernhard Kölver, “Stages in the Evolution of a World Picture,” *Numen* XXXII.2 (1984): 136-68.

<sup>41</sup> J.M. Blanchard, “The Eye of the Beholder: On the Semiotic Status of Paranarratives,” *Semiotics* 22 (1978): 235-68.

<sup>42</sup> “Hwangnyongsa kuchūngtap 皇龍寺九層塔,” “Chōnhu sojang sari 前後所將舍利,” “Taesan oman chinsin 臺山五萬真身,” and “Myōngju Odaesan Pojildo t’aeja chōn’gi 溟州五臺山寶叱徒太子傳記,” in *Samguk yusa* vol. 3, sec. 4 “T’apsang 塔像,” “Chajang chōng’yul 慈藏定律,” in *Samguk yusa* vol. 4, sec. 5 “Ŭihae 義解.”

<sup>43</sup> Daoxuan 道宣, “Chajangiōn 慈藏傳,” in *Xu Gaosengzhuan 續高僧傳*, T. 2060; Daoshi 道世, “Chajangiōn 慈藏傳,” in *Fayuan zhulin 法苑珠林*, T. 2122.

<sup>44</sup> Nam Dongsin. “Chajang ūi pulgyo sasang kwa pulgyo ch’igukchaek,” *Han’guksa yōn’gu* 76 (1992): 11.

80-fascicle version was translated into Chinese around 699, well after Chajang's death, and it is unlikely that he could have heard verses not yet written.<sup>45</sup> It has been said that the Chinese Huayan 華嚴 Master Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839) made the definitive connection between Mt. Qingliang 清涼山 of the 60-fascicle *Avatamsaka Sūtra* and Mt. Wutai of Shanxi in his commentary on *Avatamsaka Sūtra, Yanyi chao* 演義鈔.<sup>46</sup> Given that the systematic Mañjuśrī cult at Mt. Odae, as described in *Samguk yusa*'s story of the princes, resembles that which is laid out in Chengguan's commentaries, this is yet another piece of evidence showing this particular form of devotional practice as a late Silla phenomenon, possibly developing after 799 when Chengguan's writings were transmitted to Silla.<sup>47</sup>

If Chajang's relationship with Mañjuśrī and Mt. Odae was completely fabricated, and the cult was a product of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, as has been suggested,<sup>48</sup> what does the late development of Mt. Odae say about sacred geography of Silla? Notably, Yi Kibaek surveyed the landscape of Silla in a way that excluded any notion of 'Buddha Land' or Mt. Odae. *Samguk sagi* 三國史記's spatial ordering of Silla revolved around ritual sacrifices conducted at mountains of three categories: Samsan 三山, Oak 五岳, and miscellaneous mountains, venerated respectively through *taesa* 大祀, *chungsa* 中祀, and *sosa* 小祀.<sup>49</sup> Yi determined that Samsan or the Three Mountains clustered around Silla's traditional powerbase of Kyōngju, Oak or the Five Marchmounts demarcated the four cardinal directions of Unified Silla's expanded territory, and that the lesser mountains were sprinkled throughout as minor foci of nature worship.<sup>50</sup> Conspicuously absent from this *Samguk sagi* schema is Mt. Odae, allegedly one of the holiest sites of Silla. Instead of Mt. Odae, representing North among the cardinal directions is Mt. T'aebaek 太伯山, a distance away to the south. Indeed, the geographic rendering of Silla, upon unification, was restructured to reflect the new margins of the land. The central government instituted the system of five regional or "lesser" capitals named *osogyōng* 五小京. Among them the closest to Mt. Odae was Puk'wongyōng 北原京, located in the present-day Wonju 原州. In relationship to even the northernmost regional capital, Mt. Odae represented the hinterland, in the farthest reach of the central power. This new conceptualization of space, however inclusive it may seem, was a reflection of Silla's insular, conservative character, as its ruling elites never abandoned their antagonistic attitude toward the conquered population and simply refused to reach out to areas beyond the capital and the surrounding region.<sup>51</sup> Especially in the area around Wonju occurred significant anti-government activities, and local hegemony rallied support for breakaway movements.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the emergence of Mt. Odae as a religious site of importance in the margins of the kingdom in the 9<sup>th</sup> century is indicative of growing provincial power rather than of the centralized authority of kingship in the twilight of Silla.

Then, what the second central narrative of the Mañjuśrī cult at Mt. Odae informs us about Silla's religious milieu is something different from what conventional historiography would have

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Pak. "Tangdae Odaesan singang kwa Chinggwan" (Wutai-shan worship and Chengguan during Tang). *Kwandong sahak*. Vol. 3. pp. 112-3.

<sup>47</sup> Sin Dongha, "Silla pulgukto sasang ūi chōn'gae yangsang kwa yōksa chōk ūi" (PhD dissertation, Seoul National University, 2000), 134-5.

<sup>48</sup> Pak Nojun. "Han Chung Il Odaesan sinang ūi chōn'gae kwajōng," *Yōngdong munhwa* 6 (1995).

<sup>49</sup> *Samguk sagi* 32, "Jesaji."

<sup>50</sup> Yi Kibaek, *Silla chōngchi sahōesa yōn'gu*, Seoul: Iljogak (1974): 194-5.

<sup>51</sup> Yi Kidong, "Silla ūi p'ungto wa kŭ sajōk tŭksōng." *Ch'ōn Kwan'ŭ sōnsaeng hwannyōk kinyōm Han'guk sahak nonchong* (1985): 261.

<sup>52</sup> Ch'oe Kŭnyōng, *T'ong'il Silla sidae ūi chibang seryōk yōn'gu*, Seoul: Sinsōwōn (1990): 118-20.

us believe. The narrative of the two princes goes that in 648 Crown Prince Pochôn 寶川 and his younger brother Hyomyông 孝明, whose father was King Chôngsin 靜神, hid in Mt. Odae and built two hermitages. One day the princes were climbing up the mountain, when a myriad of deities led by Buddhas and bodhisattvas appeared and filled the sky. As the princes cultivated *do* 道 ('the way'), there broke out a succession battle in the palace, and people, weary of the chaos, dethroned the king and sent four generals to bring back the princes. Pochôn tearfully refused the entreaty, so only Hyomyông was taken back and made the new king. He ruled for many years after.<sup>53</sup> That this story, coming on the heels of the claim that Chajang was involved in the transplantation of the Mañjuśrī cult, was likely a fabrication, is a well-known fact. The known historical circumstance challenges the contention that there was a succession battle in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and furthermore, there is no known junior prince inheriting the royal mantle around that time.<sup>54</sup> The author of *Samguk yusa*, Il'yōn 一然, himself had his reservations about the record and voiced them alongside the narrative.

Rescuing the *Samguk yusa* entry from historiographical fallacy involves marginalizing the recognized agent. *Samguk yusa* has always been seen as a central discourse, because there are so few sources on Silla, and also because the nationalist historiography has always endowed the text with the subjectivity of the Nation. *Samguk yusa*, however, speaks with a “cacophony of incongruous strands of cultural discourses.”<sup>55</sup> The tale of two princes journeying to locality from the center of the realm contains voices of the 7<sup>th</sup>-century sovereigns, 9<sup>th</sup>-century hegemony, and the 13<sup>th</sup>-century monk-writer who brought together the multiple spatial ontologies. Read from the point of view of the province, the border – that which normally stands for the unimportant – is the actual marker of the center, and, therefore, the center itself. The *Samguk yusa* tales of Mt. Odae show that center is eternally threatened and articulated by what is not central. It is only when the same is seen through the lens of the likes of the *pulgukto* thought that all is transformed into a monumental worldview.

It is easy to treat Mt. Odae, and Silla, as center, from the Eliadean reading of *Samguk yusa*, due to the intrinsic characteristic attributed to sacred locales. Often in courses of discussing sacred geography, sites are often objectified as monuments. Their combined physicality and layered sacrality make it difficult, for those who must excavate through the textual and archaeological debris, to see them as anything other than having always been sacred. The meticulously detailed revelations of divine truths at these places make it easy for us to succumb to Eliade's idea of the sacred opening – ‘hierophany’ – as an explanation of the religious phenomena recorded in the text.

But a close reading would dispute the idea of Mt. Odae as a conventional center. The princes secretly promised each other to “depart the mundane world and fled without people knowing, hiding in Mt. Odae. Those who were guarding [the princes] did not know where [they] had gone and returned to the capital.”<sup>56</sup> The mundane world of the capital stood in contrast to the sacred of Mt. Odae, it seems to imply, but the case is not so simple. The king was *cakravartin*, the universal ruler, the mirror image of the Buddha in the negative. The king's court was the effective center of the realm, and Odae-san physically located in the northeastern corner of Silla was as far from that center as it could possibly be, a spatial margin of the Buddhist universe. The princes chose to live there, however, engaging in spiritual cultivation that brought them visionary

<sup>53</sup> “Taesan oman chinsin.”

<sup>54</sup> “Sinmunwang Hyomyōngwang Sōngdōkwang 神文王孝明王聖德王” in *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 vol. 8, ‘Silla pon’gi 新羅本記’ sec. 8.’

<sup>55</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981).

<sup>56</sup> “Taesan oman chinsin.”

experiences of the sacred, and eventually preternatural powers. When the succession battle broke out between the king and his younger brother, people sought them out to save them.

As insights into the political machinations of Southeast Asian Buddhist kingdoms have revealed, the marginal and its residents had the power to define the center, with claims of genuine practice and access to cosmic reality. When turmoil brewed at the center, the marginal was enlisted to “purify” and re-order it again, participating in a political battle against the throne.<sup>57</sup> In this way the mutually dependent relationship rendered uncertain any distinction between the two beyond limited temporal durations of cyclical occurrence. The center-margin paradigm in Silla bears a striking resemblance to this notion, with the two princes of the margin compelled to resolve the political chaos of the center, in turn becoming the center themselves, one as the new king and the other as a spiritually endowed ascetic.

“The image is not unified,”<sup>58</sup> and neither is historical imagination. Our sources on Mt. Odae are riddled with opacity, conferring sacrality and authority, yet instigating alarm and instability simultaneously. It is full of “elements of alterity” brought on by “the inherent heterodiscursive nature of the culture” of which the narrator is a product of.<sup>59</sup> I termed expressions of these historical incongruities ‘paranarratives,’ for they challenge the tradition idea of monumental space. The historical beginning of Mt. Odae will probably never be pinpointed accurately, barring extraordinary findings of new materials, but the Mt. Odae tales are not meant for a uniform interpretation, as the site itself likely never effected uniform experiences. After all, a landscape is always duplicitous.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Ed. Bardwell L. Smith. *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma* (Chambersburg, PA: ANIMA Books, 1978).

<sup>58</sup> Mieke Bal, “Seeing Signs: The Use of Semiotics for the Understanding of Visual Art,” in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Mark A. Cheetham *et al* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 78.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 7.