Under the Microscope

Under the Microscope: The Secrets of the *Tripitaka Koreana* Woodblocks

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF TABLES

PREFACE

A MICROSCOPIC LOOK AT THE SECRETS OF THE *TRIPITAKA KOREANA*

Turn the wheel of time back to AD 1232. Woodblocks of the *First Tripitaka* and other Buddhist scriptures were instantly reduced to ashes at the hands of the pyromaniacal Mongol army during the second invasion led by Sartai. The wooden printing plates were a national treasure, embodying more than two centuries of sweat and blood from the entire population and the king since Hyeonjong of Goryeo (reigned 1009–1031). As flames engulfed their homeland, the hapless masses were lost in despair, with no one to trust or turn to. What was to be done and how was it to be done? The one possible source of hope in their wretched earthly life was the creed of the Buddha, the only religion up to that point and a world promising an easy passage into death, where at least their afterlife might be salvaged.

Choe U and others in power needed a religious extravaganza that would captivate the public, and made it their lofty cause to bring back to life the Tripitaka that had been lost to fire. The slogan appealed to the populace given the precedent of the *First Tripitaka*, whose creation had coincided with the retreat of the Khitan invaders. Following the necessary preparations, the entire country was busy logging, sawing and sanding timber, and engraving the Tripitaka; the project began in 1236 (year 23 of King Gojong), and 16 years of perseverance ensued. The set of scripture tablets that the people of Goryeo had given their bodies and minds to engrave was finally completed in 1251 (year 38 of King Gojong). That is the *Tripitaka Koreana*, which comprises an astounding 81,258 woodblocks and weighs 280 tons, the equivalent of 70 four-ton trucks. The scale is breathtaking: the 52 million-odd characters rival the number of characters in the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*, which chronicles about 470 years of Korean history.

The front yard of Haein-sa Temple is always bustling with hundreds to tens of thousands of visitors per day that come to see the *Tripitaka* woodblocks. The visits continue almost uninterrupted throughout the year. Up the steep steps behind the Great Hall of Silence and Light, we come

face to face with rectangular buildings that house the woodblocks. An alley for through-traffic bisects the first building, where high up on the right hangs a solitary sample woodblock coated with jet-black ink. Visitors scan the labels posted here and there, marveling and wondering at the endless stacks of innumerable identical tablets as they peer into the building through the wooden slats. Such is the unassuming ending to the encounter between visitors who have traveled hundreds of miles and the *Tripitaka Koreana*, survivor of centuries.

The *Tripitaka Koreana* plates are relics whose value must be weighed mentally. The woodblocks are not artworks like the Seokguram Grotto or the Dabotap Pagoda that boast delicate finishing touches; instead, they are proof of Korea's sophisticated age-old printing technology. Yet how much is understood or known about the woodblocks themselves or the history of their ordeals? Shame is the single unanimous Korean reaction to that question. That is because research on this topic is lacking due to the extreme paucity of relevant records, which stand in stark contrast to the towering presence of the woodblocks. The reliable records go only so far as to relate that a Buddhist service was held in Ganghwa-do to commemorate the completion of the woodblocks under Gojong of Goryeo (r. 1213–1259), that the plates were moved from Ganghwa-do to the capital Hanyang in 1398 (year 7 of King Taejo of the Joseon Dynasty), and that Haein-sa Temple began producing prints from those plates the following year (year 1 of King Jeongjong). Given the circumstances, the *Tripitaka Koreana* woodblocks are shrouded in secret, and the unknowns outnumber the known facts. Who engraved the tablets, and how did the carvers go about the task? How did the woodblocks find their way to Haein-sa, which is off the beaten path even by today's standards? Except for their birth date, which was some time during the reign of Gojong of Goryeo, most of our questions remain unanswered.

The only recourse is to look for the key to the hidden secrets of this poorly documented relic in the surviving artifacts. The extant objects are made of wood, and many pieces of the puzzle can be gleaned by analyzing the material. I took a time machine driven by wood anatomical science and went back 750 years. The first question is: what type of wood are the *Tripitaka* tablets made of? Using electron microscopy, I found that the woodblocks were hewn from cherry and pear wood rather than the popular contender birch. The next question is: where were the woodblocks made? We can deduce their birthplace by identifying the natural habitats of the source trees. It is difficult to readily embrace the current theory that the woodblocks were engraved at Ganghwa-do and stored there until they were moved to Haein-sa at the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, once we

take into account the tablet wood and the engraving process. Rather than having been transferred, the woodblocks appear to have been created at or in the vicinity of Haein-sa.

I published a modest volume in 1999 based on my long experience studying the material of the *Tripitaka* woodblocks. I supplemented that content with the research findings and assorted data that emerged in the intervening years, and translated the technical work intended for my peers to a book for a more general audience. My hope is that this book will help inspire understanding and greater interest in the *Tripitaka Koreana*, a great legacy of the Korean nation and of the world.

May 2007
Park Sang-jin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I read Professor Park's eye-opening book in summer 2011 when I was in Paris on a research trip. I was about to start a non-teaching year in Nigeria, and absolutely wanted to spend part of that time to translate this work so that many more researchers interested in the history of printing and books could benefit from its findings. Fortunately, the Literature Translation Institute of Korea provided a very generous grant to support this translation project. I am grateful to Yoomi Lee and Helen Cho, who have shepherded this project from the very beginning and helped me deal with the logistical challenges along the way. I applaud the Institute's endeavor to bring fine literary and scholarly books by Korean writers to a larger readership, and hope that their program will help enrich literature and scholarship worldwide.

I am truly indebted to Professor Park, who patiently went through my extensive lists of questions and allowed me a glimpse inside the mind of a wood anatomist with his detailed explanation and comments. He recommended to me further reading to broaden my knowledge of his field, and helped me locate sources that he had used in his book so that I could gain a first-hand experience of these documents. I was not at all surprised upon encountering his many admirers as I prepared for the publication of this volume; their admiration inspired them to go the extra mile in facilitating the release of an image file or a copyright license.

I am also grateful to several curators and preservation specialists. Venerable Sungahn at the Preservation Department of the Institute of the *Tripitaka Koreana* not only gave me permission to publish images of the *Tripitaka Koreana* and Haein-sa Temple, but also made his image archive available to me and kindly offered alternative options after examining the list of images I had initially planned to include in the English edition. As Professor Park mentions in his book, we owe to the priests of Haein-sa the survival of one of Korea's greatest national treasures, and indeed I was deeply moved to find that the efforts of the community to preserve the images of the artifacts were no less vigorous than those that have ensured the survival of the artifact itself against all odds. I owe a debt of gratitude to the curators of the Buddhist Central Museum, Dong-A University Museum, and Horim Museum, who did not spare their resources to provide me with high-quality images for this volume.

Further, I wish to thank the Communication Department of the National Park Service of Korea for helping me find photographs of Sargent's cherry trees in bloom—this species was a major source material for the *Tripitaka* woodblocks—in the dead of winter. Without their timely assistance, the publication of the English version may have been delayed by a few months, since the Sargent's cherry only blooms in early spring.

Above all, I am grateful to my sister, Ji-yung Kim, for mailing research material to my address in Nigeria, for reading the drafts of my translation in its various stages, and for meticulously annotating them. I could not have completed this translation without her help, and her support means everything.

Seoul, February 2013
Ji-hyun P. Kim

CHAPTER ONE

THE DAWN OF WOODBLOCK PRINTING

In Korea, woodblock printing gave birth to the *Great Dharani Sutra of Immaculate and Pure Light* and came to full bloom with the *Tripitaka Koreana.*

It was September 3, 1966, and the night was dark as pitch. A dozen robbers stole up to the Sakyamuni Pagoda at Bulguk-sa Temple. These foolhardy thieves, expecting a big score from the *sarira* [Buddhist relics] in the pagoda, inserted a jack between the tiers and tried to lift the body. However, the *sarira* that had stayed enshrined for 1,300 years would not give freely into the hands of these crooks, and the tower kept its treasure tightly sealed. The robbers exerted more pressure in an attempt to separate the tiers further, causing the jack to buckle and the body of the tower to thud to the ground. In a panic, they took off at once. The whole nation was abuzz the next morning. The police force, naturally on high alert, arrested the entire gang on September 19 after canvassing the Gyeongju area for a fortnight.

The trials of the pagoda did not end there. The unthinkable happened a little more than a month later, on October 13, during routine maintenance: a worker's negligence caused the third-tier stone awning to fall off and shatter.

Ironically, those two painful mishaps unlocked a treasure that marked a turning point in the history of Korean printing. The restoration process brought to light a *sarira* box containing an artifact that rewrote that history: the oldest xylograph in the world, reproduced in ink from woodblocks with characters carved in relief, was found inside the box from the second tier of the pagoda.

The *Great Dharani Sutra of Immaculate and Pure Light* thus awoke from its long sleep of 1,300 years to unveil itself to the world. Debate still rages regarding its publication date. At the earliest, the document dates back to the early 700s, and at the latest, to 751, when the pagoda was erected; it predates by a minimum of two decades the *One Million Pagodas*

and Dharani Sutras[1] found at Hōryū-ji, Japan, previously known as the world's oldest woodblock print.

The *Great Dharani Sutra of Immaculate and Pure Light* is a copy of the *Dharani Sutra* on paper made from paper mulberry (*Broussonetia kazinoki*). The dark frame on its cover is 5.3–5.5 cm wide; each line consists of 7 to 9 characters; the scroll is 6.5–6.7 cm wide, and about 620 cm long. The scroll sutra, comprising 12 pages glued edge to edge, was found wrapped in silk. The silk wrap was heavily worn, and the document itself had sustained damage from insects and mold. In addition, 33 disjointed pieces made up the document, whose first 250 cm was missing 1 to 2 lines at regular intervals. The sutra was badly in need of restoration at the time of discovery, but because the technology had yet to be developed, it was kept at the National Museum of Korea for two decades until it was recently restored with the help of specialists from Kyoto National Museum. The *Great Dharani Sutra* is now in the collection of the Buddhist Central Museum.

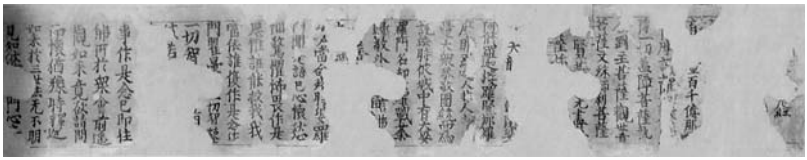

Fig. 1-1 *Great Dharani Sutra of Immaculate and Pure Light* © Buddhist Central Museum.

In the absence of records on the *Great Dharani Sutra*, the identity of its creators and the creation process remain a mystery. What is certain is that the document was printed from woodblocks. Hand-copied scriptures[2] used to be the chief means of passing on knowledge, but those manuscripts were the exclusive preserve of noblemen or the literati. Woodblock printing

[1] The *One Million Pagodas and Dharani Sutras*, found in small three-story wooden pagodas from the Nara period of Japan, is a publication from AD 770 measuring 5.9 × 46 cm. It was known as the world's oldest print prior to the discovery of the *Great Dharani Sutra of Immaculate and Pure Light* in the Sakyamuni Pagoda.

[2] The process of copying scriptures or sutras is known as *sagyeong*. *Sagyeong* as practiced in Buddhism was a religious activity that transcended rote copying. The primary objective was to make Buddhist scriptures available to readers, but people also engaged in *sagyeong* for study or discipline. The oldest known manuscript in Korea is the *Ink-on-White-Paper Flower Garland Sutra*, dating back to Gyeongdeok of Silla (r. 742–765).

was the fruit of the subsequent search for ways to broaden access to the teachings of the Buddha for missionary work. This groundbreaking invention that enabled mass production is thought to have originated in China around AD 660.

The process of woodblock printing is as follows: first, timber is cut to the desired specifications and shaped into blocks, whose surface is then polished smooth. The characters are etched onto the finished boards using a thin sheet of paper inscribed with the text as a guide. Once the text is carved, the woodblock is slathered with ink and covered with a sheet of paper; a rub with a brush of horsehair or human hair yields the end product known as a xylograph or woodblock print. Mass dissemination became possible with woodblock printing as tens or hundreds of duplicates were produced from a single carving.

A crucial question arises with regard to the world's oldest woodblock print, which put Korean civilization and the history of printing in Korea on the map: which wood species did the blocks for the *Great Dharani Sutra* come from? An educated guess is the best we can do, now that the woodblocks no longer exist. The *History of the Three Kingdoms*—Korea's oldest surviving chronicle—sheds some light on the history of printing on the Peninsula. The *History* documents restrictions on everyday articles approved for each rank in the kingdom of Silla. Headranks (頭品) 5 to 6 did not have permission to use imported woods such as New Guinea rosewood (*Pterocarpus jancok*) or agarwood (*Aquilaria sinensis*) for saddles, and they could not even use local woods such as Korean boxwood (*Buxus koreana*), *Zelkova serrata*, or mulberry (*Morus bombycis*). The Korean boxwood is especially interesting: interchangeably known in Korean as *hoeyangmok* or *hwangyangmok*, this small tree is used mainly for decorative purposes in garden hedgerows. In its natural state, it is so slow-growing that it takes over a century to reach the girth of an adult's wrist. The Korean box tree in Yeongneung, Yeoju, designated as Natural Monument No. 459, is over 300 years old, yet it is barely 4.7 m tall, and 21 cm in diameter.

I believe that Korean boxwood was used for the plates of the *Great Dharani Sutra*. Why? Although several woods are suitable for letter-carving among the thousand-odd species in Korea, lumber from the puny and humble Korean box tree takes the prize for the following reasons.

Korean boxwood has a special cell structure: the inside is densely packed with evenly sized cells, whether in the vessels or fibers. This is quite different from most woods, which consist of thick vessels but thin fibers. Boxwood has a structure that is unrivaled by the average wood whose cells vary in size and are localized in one part of the growth ring. It

has a fine-grained, homogeneous, dense, and hard texture, and hence is as good as ivory or jade for letter-carving. The Korean creators of sutra woodblocks had an eye for picking out the ideal engraving wood. This heavenly match would later yield wooden printing plates of the finest quality.

Woodblock Printing: Its Inception at Haein-sa

Woodblock printing was developed toward the end of the Silla Dynasty (57 BC–AD 935), and its evolution continued into the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392). A wealth of Buddhist scriptures were produced as a result of the competition among temples, but the majority disappeared in the string of invasions by the Khitan, the Jurchen, and the Mongols, as well as political unrest during the Goryeo Dynasty; only a fraction survives today. The oldest extant printed document from that period is the *Treasure Chest Seal Dharani Sutra*, published in 1007 (year 10 of King Mokjong) at Chongji-sa Temple in Gaeseong. A Buddhist illustration (變相圖 [Ch. *Bianxiangtu* 'transformation tableau']: pictorial illustration of Buddhist sutras or precepts) is carved in relief in the header. The strokes in the lettering are well-proportioned and expertly finished, hinting at the accomplished craftsmanship of the time. The frame is 5.4 cm wide, with each line consisting of 9–10 letters, and is 240 cm long in total. Just like the *Great Dharani Sutra*, I estimate that the *Treasure Chest Seal Dharani Sutra* was printed from plates made of Korean boxwood.

The Haein-sa community engraved many sutras in the heyday of woodblock printing. Woodblocks of the *Flower Garland Sutra*, created in 1098 (year 3 of King Sukjong), some 90 years after the *Treasure Chest Seal Dharani Sutra*, are among the Goryeo Woodblocks of Haein-sa Temple, which have been designated National Treasure No. 206. The *Flower Garland Sutra* plates are 50 cm long, 2 cm thick, and 24 cm wide, smaller in size and inferior in craftsmanship compared with the *Tripitaka Koreana*. The mediocrity of the technique is no surprise: the *Flower Garland Sutra* predates the masterpiece that is the *Tripitaka Koreana* by a century and a half; the intervening years allowed Haein-sa to hone its craft.

With the woodblocks expanding from 5–6 cm to 24 cm in width, Korean boxwood was no longer an option, despite its texture that was perfectly suited for the purpose: woodblocks of the requisite size could not be fashioned from a tree whose trunk rarely exceeds 20 cm in diameter. Another key factor may have been the scarce supply, due to the popularity of that particular wood since the Silla Dynasty. As a result, it became increasingly difficult to produce portable scroll sutras with tiny lettering from boxwood plates.

A different material had to be found. Woods with small vessels evenly scattered throughout, such as Sargent's cherry (*Prunus sargentii*), sand pear (*Pyrus pyrifolia*), ribbed birch (*Betula costata*), Schmidt's birch (*Betula schmidtii*), and maple, emerged as the new carving material of choice. Although not quite the equal of Korean boxwood in texture, these species have thicker trunks and were easy to come by, and consequently gained wide usage as woodblock material.

The *Tripitaka Koreana*: The Epitome of Woodblock Printing

"Nidana" refers to the necessary dependence between entities. It is a Buddhist term for the invisible force that binds the cause and the effect of an action. Haein-sa and the *Tripitaka Koreana* share an ancient nidana. The *History of the* Tripitaka Koreana *of Haein-sa* documents a Buddhist mass to celebrate the temple's acquisition of woodblocks created by Yi Geoin on Geoje Island in the last years of Silla, well before the Goryeo Woodblocks. Although often dismissed as a mere legend for inconsistencies in its narrative, the document nonetheless hints at the shared history of Haein-sa and woodblock sutras.

The *Tripitaka Koreana* is incontrovertible evidence of the nidana between Haein-sa and xylograph sutras: its woodblocks have stood the test of time, unlike other Tripitakas that were handed down in a few prints to the exclusion of the original wooden plates. The *Tripitaka Koreana* is the only case in the world where the printed copies as well as the tablets were preserved whole. Also known as the "*Second Goryeo Tripitaka*," "*Goryeo Tripitaka*," "*Tripitaka Proper*," "*Principal Tripitaka*," and "*National Edition*," the *Tripitaka Koreana* was designated National Treasure No. 32 on December 20, 1962. It is currently housed in two wooden buildings, the Hall of Sutras and the Hall of Dharma at Haein-sa.

The *First Tripitaka* and the *Catalog of Sutras* (compiled by Uicheon based on exegeses and studies of sutras) burned down during the Mongol invasion of 1232. The Goryeo court relocated the capital from Gaegyeong to the island of Ganghwa-do and established the Tripitaka Directorate, hoping to fight off the enemy and restore public morale with the help of the Buddha. The *Tripitaka* was produced during the 12 years Goryeo was waging war with the Mongols, from 1237 through 1248. Including the preliminary steps, it took as long as 16 years to complete the *Tripitaka Koreana* in its present form. Lore has it that the woodblocks were initially stored in the building outside the western gate of Ganghwa Fortress, and subsequently in Seonwon-sa Temple, until their transfer in the early Joseon

Dynasty to Jicheon-sa Temple in Seoul, and finally to Haein-sa. I have quite a different theory about the birthplace of the woodblocks and their supposed relocation to Haein-sa; I will elaborate on it below.

The *Tripitaka Koreana* is a proud cultural legacy of Korea, and bears comparison with humanity's foremost artifacts. Yet it is not an artwork that inspires awe for its grandeur or exquisite craftsmanship; its value is exalted by the fact that it embodies the very essence of a printing tradition worthy of national pride.

The *Tripitaka* is priceless in that the full set—the most extensive in the world—of the original printing plates from the 13th century is available today. Given Korean history, plagued as it was by foreign attacks, it is nothing short of a miracle that the *Tripitaka* escaped destruction by fire and has survived intact. The *Tripitaka* is also a time capsule, providing a window into the Goryeo period. Another quality is the completeness of its content: it was modeled on the *First Goryeo Tripitaka*, which was checked against the Song and the Khitan versions for errors or omissions; the wide-ranging survey and revisions are the reason this Buddhist canon has attained the highest level of perfection.

The *Tripitaka Koreana* is unmatched in scale as well. The woodblocks are truly prodigious: stacked together, they stand almost as tall as Mt. Baekdu [2.74 km]; reach nearly 60 km lined up one next to another; and weigh 280 tons. The sheer magnitude is evident in the 52 million characters engraved onto the blocks; an individual well-versed in classical Chinese would have to spend 8 hours a day for 30 years to read through the whole set.

Japan's Entreaties for Printed Copies of the *Tripitaka Koreana*

Lacking a full-fledged woodblock Tripitaka of its own, Japan was envious of China and Korea, and had been nagging Korea for prints of the *Tripitaka Koreana* since the end of the Goryeo Dynasty. Japan produced a number of printing-type Tripitakas in the Modern Era, and sought to assuage its wistfulness by compiling the known Buddhist scriptures into the *Taishō Tripitaka* in 1926–1935, but never managed to create a woodblock Tripitaka, which entailed considerable expenses and superior craftsmanship; its capacity was simply not equal to the challenge.

The first time the Japanese asked for a printed copy of the *Tripitaka* was in 1388 (year 14 of King U) at the end of Goryeo, in return for the repatriation of 250 Koreans they had abducted. Japan constantly renewed its pleas, which amounted to some 80 appeals by the time of Hyojong (r.

1649–1659), according to the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty*. Subsequent requests are not recorded in the *Annals*, but appear instead in diplomatic documents well into the second half of the Joseon Dynasty (1637–1897).

The pretexts were as varied as the bids were frequent—in the name of the Japanese monarch via his envoys, and even directly from provincial lords. The Joseon court was at a loss how to respond: it would reject the appeals on the grounds that the *Tripitaka Koreana* was out of print because Buddhism was no longer the national creed, but it would occasionally offer printed copies to placate the Japanese, out of fear for any desperate acts they might commit. The pestering was such that under Kings Taejong and Sejong, some Korean officials even suggested sending the physical woodblocks as opposed to the prints. The Japanese envoys went on hunger strikes or planned to mobilize troops to take the *Tripitaka* by force when their repeated entreaties proved futile. The following is a sampling of passages from the *Annals of the Joseon Dynasty* concerning Japanese demands for the *Tripitaka*:

- In 1406 (year 6 of King Taejong) and 1407, the King of Japan personally sent an embassy to ask for the *Tripitaka*. On September 1, 1407, the court sent a printed copy via the departing emissaries. According to official records, this marked the first gift of the *Tripitaka* to Japan.

- On May 22, 1408 (year 8 of Taejong), Ambassador Choe Jaejeon relayed the following appeal to the King when he reached Ulsanpo on his return from Japan: “The reception in Japan was very cordial … They feel a fervent loyalty to Your Majesty. The delegates I have brought with me swore they want nothing in return … other than to be bestowed at Your Majesty’s discretion the requested *Tripitaka*.”

- On January 28, 1410 (year 10 of Taejong), governor of Iki Province (一岐州) Minamoto no Ryōki (源良喜); on May 26, 1411 (year 11 of Taejong), Kyushu governor Itakura Mitsuie (板倉滿家); and on July 25, 1411, Minamoto no Ryōki again asked for the *Tripitaka*. On October 21 of that year, the King of Japan had a mission bring over their local produce as an offering, hoping to obtain the *Tripitaka*. Lord Ōuchi (大内殿) Tatara Tokuo/Norio(多多良德雄) likewise sent emissaries to present carts and arms and ask for the *Tripitaka*. On December 1 of the same year, one set of copies was sent through the returning envoy of the King of Japan.

- On March 2, 1413 (year 13 of Taejong), Tsushima Prefect Sō Sadashige (宗貞茂) dispatched a delegation to express his gratitude for the *Tripitaka*. On June 11 of the same year, a copy was sent to Lord Fuji (藤公) of Chiku Province (筑州).

- On July 20, 1415 (year 15 of Taejong), Lord Ōuchi of Japan asked for the *Tripitaka*, but his appeal was denied due to the unavailability of xylographs and the excessive number of copies requested.

- On January 2, 1424 (year 6 of King Sejong), envoy Keiju (圭籌) and his companions went on a hunger strike when they failed to obtain woodblocks of the *Tripitaka*. The court sought to conciliate them by offering one copy of the *Buddhist Tantras in Sanskrit* and one copy of (80 chapters from) the *Annotated Flower Garland Sutra*.

- On September 16, 1485 (year 16 of King Seongjong), Lord Ōuchi of Japan claimed Joseon lineage and requested the *Tripitaka* on the basis of his special kinship.

On the pretext of Joseon lineage …

On September 16, 1485 (year 16 of Seongjong), King Seongjong consulted his court about the request from Lord Ōuchi of Japan. The discussion provides some insights on the stance of the Korean court as concerns the *Tripitaka Koreana*.

Jeong Changson suggested, "Your Majesty has no love for the Buddha, and heretical scriptures are no treasure in this realm. But since there are not many copies of the *Tripitaka*, could we not deny him his wish?"

Han Myeonghoe and others joined in, "There is no comparing Lord Ōuchi with barbarians on the other islands. We have long been bounteous with him, and have no choice but to grant his request."

Noh Sasin argued, "The *Tripitaka* is a heretical book, and will not be missed even if we were to burn it. We ought to be able to part with it easily when a neighbor asks for it. However, it is very costly to produce a copy, and it is difficult to supply the necessary material. We used to give copies freely to the Japanese who came calling since these scriptures are of no use to the State. That was possible because we had a rich supply of the prints. But how many are there now? It does not appear that we will be able to oblige Lord Ōuchi as readily. Indeed, we have shown uncommon consideration in his regard, but he lives far away. His bitterness will not grow even if we refuse. We have many islands presenting tributes to us, and they would value the *Tripitaka* as highly as gold or jade if they received a copy, for they worship the Buddha. Should they hear that one has been bestowed upon Lord Ōuchi, they will clamor for the same bounty. Their unhappiness will grow, and they will complain, 'Some are treated well and others ill,' if we should find ourselves with insufficient copies and thus unable to satisfy them all. How will we be able to print more copies in that case? If I may, I propose that delegate be sent back with the words: 'You have more than once asked for the *Tripitaka*, and we obliged every time while there were many prints available. However, our stock is now drained, and we can no longer accede.'"

Yi Pa observed: "Lord Ōuchi has been accorded special courtesy, even though difficulties with the transfer made it impossible to send the *Tripitaka*

promptly with every request. We should advise the delegation thus, and show them exceptional generosity in other matters."

Jeong Nanjong remarked: "Lord Ōuchi said himself that his forebears were of Joseon origin, and we have treated him with special favor compared with other lords, given the precedent of those amicable ties. Since his latest deputy does not ask for anything other than the *Tripitaka*, it seems wise to oblige. The *Tripitaka* is but a useless work, filled though it may be with letters. Each print is still too costly to produce, and if we were to respond to this request for no good reason, especially when it was made purely on a whim, other lords will clamor for the same and we will be unable to accommodate all their wishes. Under the circumstances, we could give them a select few—e.g., the *Shurangama Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra*, and *Lankavatara Sutra*—and instruct the Ministry of Rites to answer as follows: 'Several of your delegates asked for the *Tripitaka* in the past and were granted their wish, leaving us with few copies. We are thus granting your appeal with these few volumes.' By so doing, both sides will be at ease since we will not be at fault of denying their wishes and they will have received something."

The Japanese resorted to all manners of ruses to obtain as many copies of the *Tripitaka* as possible, placing separate requests on behalf of their king and their queen, or from different fees or garrisons. They even went so far as to conjure up non-existent states such as Kyūhen-goku (久邊國) and Ezochishima-goku (夷千島國) when their needs were not met.

Kyūhen-goku

Yi Deongmu (1741–1793), a proponent of Practical Learning under Kings Yeongjo and Jeongjo, closely studied the origin of Kyūhen-goku and documented his findings in the *Complete Works of Yi Deongmu*. Yi concluded that no such state exists, based on his inquiries into the country's geographical location and the history of various states in Southeast Asia. His findings suggest that the cunning Japanese made up the state's name and its king, and even sent tribute through a spurious envoy to trick the Joseon court into giving them parts of the *Tripitaka*. The Joseon court was aware of the deception then, but failed to deal with it adequately. The impostor had the temerity to claim that his king's last name was Yi [like the Joseon royal family]. The Japanese came up with this stratagem because of the difficulty in obtaining the *Tripitaka*, which they had always coveted.

The earliest reference to Kyūhen-goku appeared in an official report submitted by the governor of Gyeongsang Province on September 1, 1478 (year 9 of King Seongjong), to the Ministry of Rites, announcing the visit by an envoy from the supposed state. The court recommended: "Despite the lack of former exchanges, we cannot refuse to receive this delegate that Yi Hoek (李獲), King of Kyūhen-goku, has presently sent. Decisions should be made after discussing

the matter with the governor, who shall be instructed to conduct a thorough investigation into the size of the state's territory, and the vesture and language of the delegate." The King had the interpreter bring the envoy. On October 15 of the same year, the King said at the royal lecture: "I cannot trust the man from Kyūhen-goku," and Yi Seungso replied, "I asked the Prefect of Tsushima, who denies knowing him. I believe that the Japanese in Satsuma (薩摩州) or Hakata (博多) fabricated the letter. Another came earlier, claiming to have been sent from Ryûkyû Kingdom, but he was from Hakata and had merely brought a letter he had obtained from Ryûkyû. This recent delegate must be of the same ilk." His Majesty observed: "We must still receive him properly. My only concern is that this might set a precedent for a never-ending stream of purported deputies." Yi Seungso suggested: "When the delegate arrives, he shall be questioned about the customs of the state and his king's lineage so as to tell the truth from the lies."

The Joseon court postponed the reception of the letter from Kyūhen-goku brought by the envoy, who had arrived on September 1. The reception of the envoy Binhu (閔富) and the letter from the supposed king Yi Hoek took place on November 3. The letter read:

"Humble creature that I am, I am a faithful servant of Ming China, and because we bear the same family name Yi, we seem to share a strong bond. I have long believed in the Buddha, and my faith has led me to build a temple; I all the more wish to be blessed with the *Tripitaka*. I shall send ships with treasures for Your Majesty's pleasure. I obediently await your response."

On November 13, Second Deputy Director Yi Seungso reported after the royal lecture: "During the meeting yesterday, I interrogated the delegate from Kyūhen-goku on a number of matters. On the lineage of his king, he said, 'I do not know, as I am not from Kyūhen-goku but merely a messenger.' About the court attire, he answered, 'It is like the Chinese,' to which I asked if he had been to China, and he said, 'No, I have not.' Then I asked him how he happened to deliver the letter from Kyūhen-goku, and his response was: 'I went there to sell goods, and one official told me he had heard of a state by the name of Joseon but they could not send a delegation because the passage was closed. He has sent me here in his stead.' When I questioned him about the customs of the state, the so-called delegate had no answer, until his attendant helped him. Thus it is hard to confirm whether this is indeed a delegate from Kyūhen-goku, and therefore Your Majesty need not accord him a hearing." The King said, "You are quite right. They are indeed not to be trusted. The hand of the letter was the very same as that on the Japanese correspondence."

The Joseon court evidently realized the envoy was a fraud, but nevertheless hesitated to take any decisive action. When the so-called envoy Binhu came to take his leave on December 1, the court advised through the Ministry of Rites: "Although you have asked for the *Tripitaka*, we have very few copies left owing to the demands from tribal chiefs. We cannot grant your wish," and settled the matter for the time being. Yet the court had a similar discussion 4 years later on whether to receive another embassy from Kyūhen-goku.

Ezochishima-goku

On April 9, 1482 (year 13 of King Seongjong), the King of Japan and Kasha (遐叉), King of Ezochishima-goku, dispatched an embassy to present local produce and a letter with the following message: "King of Japan Minamoto no Yoshimasa (源義政) directs this reply to His Majesty the King of Joseon. We wish to acquire a copy of the *Tripitaka* and to enshrine it in a temple so as to increase the fortune of our state manifold. We pray that Your Majesty will share the jewel of Buddhism for the benefit of those in neighboring lands, and advance our cause by bestowing upon us the necessary materials, in which case your grace shall know no bounds." The other letter read: "King of Ezochishima-goku Kasha presents to His Majesty the King of Joseon this memorial. It has been nearly 300 years since this state, which was not blessed with Buddhism at first, became aware of Joseon's existence through exchanges with Japan. We have acquired the same Buddhist statues and sutras that are available in Japan, but we have long done without the *Tripitaka*, as it is wanting in Japan also. The distance to Joseon made us waver, notwithstanding our wish to obtain the scriptures from your kingdom. It is said that Buddhism originally came from your state to Japan, which passed on the gift to mine, and thus our tradition can trace its roots westward to your realm. I beseech Your Majesty to make our creed whole by conferring the *Tripitaka* on us; your grace and Buddhism shall then reach all the barbarians farther east. If my wish can be granted, I will ready rich offerings and send them by ship. My humble state adjoins Joseon to the west and is known as 'Tokoroura' (野老浦). The people of the region commit treason at the slightest provocation, blessed though they are by your grace. If I had the honor of becoming your humble servant, I shall conquer them and mete out punishment. I am sending a Japanese man residing in my state to serve as my deputy, as my people have difficulty speaking your language."

The implication is outrageous: a Japanese envoy was sent on the pretext of the language barrier lest the fictitious state should be exposed; the thinly veiled threat is that aggressions by Japanese pirates from "Tokoroura" will be arranged if the demands are not met.

On April 25, the Ministry of Rites submitted the following report on the situation: "Lord Kunai (宮内卿), sent by King of Ezochishima-goku Kasha, was treated to a banquet, where he was asked about the shape of his island. His answer was replete with contradictions, and the hand of the letter he brought was identical to his own. Further, it is evident from his words, 'I have not been to the island myself, but have brought a letter that was handed me,' that he is lying. It would be best to send neither the *Tripitaka* he demanded nor a response. But since he has traveled hither from afar and has been staying at the port eight months already, I fear that the provisions will be impoverished if none are given to the sailors. Might they be accorded half of the allowance?" After such exchanges, it was decided that Kasha's demands would be verified through the King of Japan, with suitable measures to be taken thereafter.

On May 12, the returning envoy was asked to convey the following message to the King of Japan: "We are sending the requested donation for your temple

and one copy of the *Tripitaka* through your deputy." The King of Ezochishima-goku was to receive the following refusal: "The *Tripitaka* has been claimed by the King of Japan through his delegate, and distributed to many tribal chiefs that asked for it; we are therefore unable to grant your request, for there are very few left. Furthermore, we cannot but harbor doubts about your assertions, as we have never before heard of your state of 'Ezochishima,' wherever it may be, and because we could not make sense of what your man told us."

CHAPTER TWO

TREES CROSS PATHS WITH SAKYAMUNI

From birth to nirvana, Sakyamuni's life was marked by an array of nidanas with trees.

His teaching survive, etched on the *Tripitaka* woodblocks.

Sakyamuni is also known as "the Buddha" or "Gautama Buddha." *Sakya* refers to his kingdom, while *muni* means 'sage'; hence *Sakyamuni* denotes 'the sage of the Shakyas.' His family name was Gautama, and his name Siddhartha. He later went by the name "Buddha" after he attained enlightenment. Within the Buddhist community and among his followers, he is alternatively known as "Tathāgata," which refers to one who has experienced and thus embodies truth, or reverently as "Sejon" or "Seokjon" among Koreans. It is uncertain whether Sakyamuni was strictly of Arian descent; some speculate that he may have been of Nepalese lineage, although the Arian influence is undeniable.

The Trees that Witnessed Sakyamuni's Birth and Death

Prior to his death, Sakyamuni lived 80 years in this world. The dates of his birth and death are still debated. According to the Buddhist chronicles of the Korean Jogye Order, he was born in 544 BC, and attained nirvana in 464 BC. He was born in the small kingdom of Kapilavastu, at the foot of the Himalayas near the border between present-day India and southern Nepal, to King Suddhodana and Queen Maya. As the due date approached, Queen Maya wished to follow the customs of the day and give birth at her parents'. She was on her way there, when she suddenly felt contractions in beautiful Lumbini, held onto a tree nearby, and gave birth to Sakyamuni. The tree that helped her through the pangs was *Saraca asoca*, known in India as the "Asoca" or "Ashoka" tree (Sanskrit word for 'without sorrow').

Sakyamuni lost his mother 7 days after his birth; the loss was a dreadful blow and tragedy. He was raised by his aunt, and acquired the knowledge and skills befitting his station as a scion of the royal family. As

was the custom, he wed Yasodhara at the age of 16, and soon fathered a son, Rahula. He led a life of comfort and happiness as the prince of a kingdom but gradually grew disillusioned with his life: he began wondering about the source of suffering that underlay life when he witnessed a bird feeding on a worm or people age, ail, and die. At 29, Sakyamuni set out on a quest to plumb the nature of suffering and to attain nirvana, renouncing all worldly privileges including his family ties and his princely title. He embarked on a life of asceticism. Heading south, he crossed the Ganges over to Rajagrha in the kingdom of Magadha, whence he sought out two hermits and became their disciple. But unfulfilled with their teaching, he settled into a solitary, abstemious life in a forest near Bodh Gaya.

Yet nirvana remained out of his reach even after the extreme self-imposed discipline had nearly reduced him to a skeleton. He sat down under a tree as thick with branches as a bush, and sank into deep meditation. So it was that at the age of 35, six years after renouncing the mundane world, he finally had an epiphany—a peaceful state of mind free from the countless human desires and their shackles, commonly known as "nirvana". The tree that sheltered the Buddha at the moment of enlightenment is the sacred fig, whose binomial name is *Ficus religiosa*; it grows in the subtropics including India, and is botanically classified as a member of the Moraceae family. It is an evergreen that may reach up to 30 m in height and 2 m in diameter; a single tree can grow so dense with branches as to rival a shrubbery. Its Sanskrit name is *Bodhidruama* 'enlightenment'; it is also known as "Peepal" or "Bo". Its Chinese name *potishu* (菩提樹) can be traced back to the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit name following the introduction of Buddhism in the Middle Kingdom.

Sakyamuni's sacred fig does not grow in the colder climes of central and northern China or the Korean Peninsula, whose residents felt the need for a substitute when they were first exposed to Buddhism. The alternative was the linden (*Tilia*), which comprises a wide range of species including the Manchurian linden (*Tilia mandshurica*), *Tilia megaphylla*, and *Tilia miqueliana*, among others. Those species are so similar that only botanists can tell them apart. The Korean counterpart of the sacred fig that we see in Buddhist temples is clearly distinct from the original species that is endemic to India; it is a species of linden with only a nominal link to the sacred fig.

After attaining nirvana, Sakyamuni traveled barefoot throughout the sweltering Central India for 45 long years with five ascetic arhats, and died at the advanced age of 80. He breathed his last breath under sal trees, the ever-loyal Ananda by his side. Legend has it that of the eight sal trees