

The mountain road to Seokguram

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1.

There is a mountain in Seoul called Inwangsan, Mountain of the Generous King. Its other name is White Tiger Mountain. It is a centre of Korean shamanism. I went there with my girlfriend, Bryna, in October 2010, following the beat of a *mudang's* drum. *Mudangs* are female shamans. We walked along the route of the old city wall, then followed a dirt track. The drumbeat became louder and there was chanting, too. On reaching a concrete platform built into the mountainside, we saw the *mudang* with three female clients. She was dressed in a pink tracksuit and beat her drum, chanting loudly. A low altar of offerings was set out in front of her: fruit, Cass beer in a two-litre plastic bottle and some Oreo cookies. Carved into the rock face was a small Buddhist effigy.

A shamanic ceremony is called a *gut*. In this rite, the *mudang* acts as a medium for spirits and other deities, many of which have Buddhist roots. She goes on a journey looking for medicine in the

spirit world. Is this what the woman beating her drum was doing? There were photographs on the altar. Maybe this was a *saenam-gut*, a ritual to provide consolation for the dead. You find advertisements for shamanic services in many Korean newspapers. They can be expensive.

A private *gut* seems to be, traditionally, an act of last resort, when all other courses of action have failed. During the rule of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), Buddhism and shamanism were actively persecuted in favour of Confucian philosophy. Monks were driven into the mountains; shamans were reviled and ridiculed. Confucianism idealised reason and patriarchal order. Joseon scholars despised the uncontrolled passion and ecstasy of the *gut*. Perhaps they just hated women wielding power, as very few men are shamans in Korea. There is something of a revival in native religion though. There may be as many as 300,000 *mudangs* practicing today.

A middle-aged American man walked past us on the mountain trail. He stopped and took some photographs. That embarrassed me. The guidebook had told us *not* to take photographs of *guts*. We continued on our way, too, up to the peak. Bryna raced ahead. She loves hiking, and so she was annoyed by my bad navigation and lumbering pace. No trees grew up there, and erosion had created unusual rock formations. We climbed to the highest point and sat on a jutting rock slab. It was a warm day. Autumn is Korea's best season.

We were in the centre of Seoul, but there were no traffic sounds.

Skyscrapers surrounded us in all directions. Farther down the mountain was a military installation. The *mudang* had stopped beating her drum and started ringing a bell. We were there two hours and the ceremony continued the whole time. *Guts* can last hours or days.

Walking back down the mountain we went a different way and found ourselves in a Buddhist-shamanic hamlet. There were monks' houses and a small temple with an adjoining bell pavilion. A temple roof is a superb thing: the black tiled eaves - under the gables and on the long sides of the building - swing out over the structure with a curvilinear line; they stretch out quite far and seem to float over the building, propped up by vermilion wooden pillars. The rows of semi-cylindrical tiles give the appearance of ploughed furrows down the roof slope. Follow the line from temple roof to mountain ridge and they merge. It is something to see these buildings with a mountain-forest backdrop. Through seasonal pressure changes, you can imagine these roofs breathing with taut, diaphragmatic motions; look at the pillars and see long gashes opening along the grain.

Gateways are impressions of the larger temple complex; the ones at Geumsansa, a temple just south of Jeonju, are the most beautiful I've seen. Temple gateways are freestanding; a visitor is obliged to walk through a dawdling series of three or more before reaching the sanctum. It feels wrong to walk around them, but their dramatic rooflines encourage you to approach from an angle. At the corner point, the different rooflines meet and reach toward the sky. The first

gate at a Korean temple is the *iljumun*, one-pillar gate. They are given this name because, viewed from the side, they appear to stand on a single pillar. The roofs appear too big for the posts, blooming outwards and upwards as a cloud or a plant. From underneath, they are gilled, alien mushrooms, flowing with life and beautifully coloured: turquoise, red, yellow and blue. Geometric patterns adorn the beams, the posts and the lintels, particularly floral motifs. The roof brackets are elaborate, interlocking pieces, carved with curling, cirruslike wisps, lotus stalks and flowers, or sometimes with the heads of dragons. The brackets nest inside each other, rising upward, raising the roof high above the pillars, and it is as if at any minute they could become animate and shift the roof free. The emotional impact is one of calm and serenity - an encouragement towards meditation, and in my case, a place where my imagined, ideal world and reality meet. These wooden buildings require constant repair. Sometimes the dilapidation is shocking, hinging on disaster. There is beauty in entropy.

Bryna and I walked around the small temple in the hamlet. We didn't understand the wall art iconography. Which of these painted figures was the historical Buddha? Which were bodhisattvas? Why did they wear their gowns in such particular ways? Why did they hold their hands in such a manner? Were these purely Buddhist images or did they include shamanic elements? There is a certain homogeneity in Korean Buddhist art. I do not think it was always this way, but due

to this country's turbulent history, many of the best art pieces were destroyed or plundered, and the greatest temples and pagodas were burnt down. A recent example is the pagoda-style gate of Namdaemun, which was destroyed in 2008 by arson. Before that, it was the oldest wooden structure in Seoul. To see the best of Korean art, you must go to Japan, the former colonial master. The repatriation of art is a constant source of tension in Korean-Japanese relations.

After the visit to Inwangsan, I promised that I would familiarise myself with Buddhist iconography. I thought it strange that after years of casual research on Buddhism, I should still remain so ignorant. The path I took brought me to Seokguram.

2.

Bryna and I had a week off for *Seollal*, Lunar New Year, and so we decided to go to Gyeongju, the ancient capital of Shilla, and a centre of Korean Buddhist art. The journey took four hours from Dangjin, the town where Bryna lived. We drove past the large cities of Daejeon and Daegu; Daegu is a monstrous, ugly city, sprawled out and dirty with industrial zones and tower blocks. We found ourselves stuck in traffic for an hour on a twelve-lane ring road.

Over eighty percent of Koreans live in apartments; less than four percent of Irish people do. It was a shock when I first arrived here to see row after row of tower block projects. I had foolishly imagined a land of small-scale farming and villages in forest glades, with only

the occasional super-city. A few years before I came to Korea, I saw a film called *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring*. It tells the story - a parable framed by each season - of a Buddhist monk and his child-student living on a floating wooden platform on a lake in a virgin valley. Buddhist ruins surround, and silence is pervasive. It is a film that deserves more than one viewing with its sparse dialogue, striking cinematography and elegant scenery. The setting is contemporary, and it remains with me due to its paced, calm aesthetic and strange cruelty. Maybe I had thought this would be the Korea that would present itself to me. However, you have to make an effort to find beauty here, and you have to reinterpret the meaning of beauty. Sometimes I stare out the window and feel nauseous from the monotony of it all; the grey drabness of the cityscape can make you want to stay in bed or drink yourself stupid. Of the foreigners I have met, many become entrenched in their bias and blame all their problems on this country. They only see ugliness and mayhem. They retreat into homesickness and refuse any possibilities beyond their rock-hard worldview. Travelling around Korea prevents one reaching this point of stasis. Forest glades do exist.

We continued past Daegu and into the more open and gentle valley districts of Gyeongsangbuk Province. There hadn't been snowfall for a month, and the last winter dregs of slush and ice lay in the dark alcoves of the mountains. This is the hinterland of old Shilla, one of the trio of sovereignties (the other two being Baekje and Goguryeo)

that existed during the Three Kingdoms Period, 57 BCE - 668 CE. Shilla defeated the two competitor states and managed to unify the majority of the Korean Peninsula. Its hegemony lasted until 935 CE. What's left in this region is a fascinating archaeological landscape. How can I convey the breadth of archaeology in Gyeongju? It would take a volume, and is beyond my scope. Here is a sketch instead.

Gyeongju's population is less than 300,000, and due to long-enforced building guidelines, it is a relatively low-rise city. Most buildings are required to have traditional roofs (it's odd to see beautifully tiled petrol stations), but it's the burial mounds of Shilla nobility that really dominate. The mounds are exquisite, grassy hillocks, some of them four or five storeys high, and they mimic the surrounding mountains. They take on many forms: half moons, domes, and gourd-shapes. The grandest is Bonghwangdae, the Phoenix Tomb. It is eighty-two metres in diameter, twenty-two metres high and lies in the city core. Gnarled zelkova trees grow at angles near its crest. When I first saw it, the grass was still brown after the long winter, and so at night it appeared amber under the wash of spotlights. This landscape is akin to Brú na Bóinne and the mound complex at Tara. But in Gyeongju there is little spatial separation between the sacred-historic and the profane: a mound edge verges on motorway or a bicycle path bisects a cemetery. It lacks a necropolis atmosphere, that enigmatic quality with which we view our own historic sites in Ireland. This is a museum city, but it also an organic urban area.

Perhaps it is diminished because of this.

We walked around the city in the morning. We saw the ancient astronomy tower called Cheomseongdae; the pond park and remaining pavilions of the long-gone Anapji palace; the half-moon plateau of Banwol fortress and the ice storehouse built into its northwest bank; and finally, in the grounds of Gyeongju Museum, the copper-cast masterpiece called the Bell of King Seongdeok. Its nickname is the Emile Bell. In the legend, a child who was sacrificed during the making of the bell screamed, "*emile, emile* (mommy, mommy)" after he was melded into it. It is no longer struck, but one writer describes it as having "a mysterious resonance in its grave but sweet ring ... with soft sustain, close to that of Buddha's voice."

In the afternoon, Bryna and I drove to Tohamsan, the mountain on which Bulguksa and Seokguram are built. Bulguksa is considered to be the greatest Buddhist temple in South Korea. The original structure was destroyed during the first Japanese invasion in 1592. Only the stonework remained. Over the passing centuries there were some repairs, but as the Korean state moved away from Buddhism, the temple slipped into further dilapidation. What stands today is the result of large-scale renovations in 1973. It is an impressive complex of worship halls, cloisters and pavilions.

The staircases known as the Blue Cloud Bridge and White Cloud Bridge form the main entranceway. At the top of the landing is Jahanmun, the Purple Mist Gate. Passing through, you reach the spa-

cious courtyard of Śākyamuni Hall. Śākyamuni is a Sanskrit name for the historical Buddha. He is more widely known in the West as Siddhārtha Gautama. Cloisters surround the courtyard and on either side of the path leading from gate to hall are two impressive stone pagodas – Seokgatap and Dabotap. Seokgatap is tall and minimalist with smooth straight edges. It is almost Grecian in its refined and solemn balance and ratio. Dabotap is far more dramatic. Many different architectural themes and motifs compete for attention in its three stories. It seems to squat, about to burst into motion.

The whole complex stretches out much farther than this small area. It includes the Vairocana Hall, the Avalokiteśvara Hall, the Saddharmapundarīka Hall site, the Non-speech Hall, and finally the Sukhāvātī Hall with its gilt-bronze statue of Amitābha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. It is a sublime collection of architecture. During Bulguksa's golden age, sometime in the seventh century, there were up to sixty different buildings here, adding up to around two thousand rooms. I am sure that despite the efforts of the restorers, the current complex bears only a passing resemblance to its original. There is an air of decay here, with chipped paint, broken tiles and splintered wood. This only makes it more inviting to my eye, as if to speak of all the collected violations this temple has endured. But Bulguksa is nothing compared to Seokguram, the cave temple farther up the mountain.

3.

Tohamsan is 745 metres high, making it the tallest mountain in Gyeongju. The meandering road from Bulguksa to Seokguram circuits the mountain from east to west. Snow patches appeared more regularly the higher we climbed in the car. Halfway up was the frozen mass of a waterfall. A long line of traffic followed us. The East Sea appeared on the horizon, hazy in the afternoon light. We arrived at the parking lot, almost packed to capacity. Most Koreans will visit this place at least once in their lives and it being *Seollal*, some of the day-trippers wore traditional gowns. Up the steps, past the car park, is a bell pavilion, and after that are the *iljumun* and some other buildings. We walked along the path with about two hundred other people for ten minutes until we reached the cave temple. It was Bryna's second time here and she was excited for me to see it. Finally, we climbed the last few steps and before us was Seokguram.

Cave temples are a long-established part of Buddhist architecture. The oldest are the Barabar Caves in India. Buddhist statues are a later addition. Siddhārtha Gautama had not wanted images in his likeness to be created. But attitudes changed in the first century CE. In the city of Mathura on the upper Ganges and farther northwest in Gandhara, people were influenced by the Hellenised cultures of Central Asia. Artisans in these cities had created images of the Greek gods for a long time. It was not much of a departure to create images of the Buddha.

Buddhism moved out of India into central Asia, creating such masterpieces as the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. It was carried along the Silk Road through Tibet into Tang Dynasty China, the most immediate influence on Korea, particularly the kingdom of Shilla. The Tang had assisted Shilla in defeating Baekje and Goguryeo. But rather than remaining a vassal state, Shilla drove the Tang out of the peninsula. The kingdom went even further, and forged a culture that could withstand Chinese domination; it would not passively receive Sino-Buddhism. Instead, Korean monks were sent directly to India. Shilla's ambitions ultimately led to the construction of Seokguram, a building that combines Korean tradition with an international style.

Seokguram is not carved into the rock like its cave temple precursors. The granite would have been too hard to excavate. Instead, the architects built an artificial cave with large pre-cut blocks. The stones are quite large, with grass growing on top, but it's a small structure, maybe a third of the size of Newgrange. The wooden front room, covered in a small tiled roof, emerges from the mound. It is ugly. It is not part of the original structure. The Japanese added it when they dismantled and reconstructed Seokguram in 1913. This completely changed the structural balance. Shilla engineers had an advanced knowledge of masonry; the cave temple had been able to regulate its own ventilation. But the Japanese poured concrete around the perimeter. Humidity built up and mildew spread. The structure has to be artificially ventilated now.

You enter the wooden front room from the sides. The interior consists of three parts - an antechamber, a vestibule and an inner rotunda. A glass panel separates the visitor from this interior. There is no wall painting here; it is all three-dimensional stonework, illuminated by soft yellow light. The walls of the antechamber are decorated with the eight dharma protectors, the guardian spirits of Buddhism, as well as two representations of Vajrapani, a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas postpone their own awakening in order to help lesser beings attain enlightenment. Past the antechamber, in the vestibule (in Korean known as the *bido*, the Path to Heaven), are the relief carvings of the Four Heavenly Kings, two on the left and two on the right. In a normal Buddhist temple, large, painted and dramatic depictions of the kings are usually found in the gatehouse known as the *cheonwangmun*. In Seokguram, they are carved in low relief on individual tables. They stand straight-legged, almost floating, on the backs of demons. Next, beyond two pillars that support a flattened arch, is the domed inner rotunda. Relief carvings of Indra and Brahma flank its entrance. To the left and right on the circular wall are two more bodhisattvas, followed by Śākyamuni's ten disciples. At the room's centre sits Śākyamuni Buddha on a lotus pedestal. The pedestal is 1.6 metres tall and the Buddha is 3.4 metres. The craftsmanship is astonishing. There are no hard angles on this statue. Its face draws you first. The eyes appear as long slits, almost closed. I stared at them for a long time imagining that if they were to suddenly

open, I would see the back of the stone skull. There is a great emptiness beyond those almond-shaped eyelids. The eyebrows are soft and gently arched, leading your gaze to the *baekho*, the white dot in the centre of the forehead. The hair is curled in tight, circular knots, with a tuft at the crown. The nose plunges down from the brow-line like the pillar of a canopy. The lips are delicate and plump, unsmiling and dignified. The whole face seems corpulent in its smoothness. The chin protrudes over the fleshy jowls; the ears hang low, almost reaching the neck. When he was a prince, the Buddha would have worn heavy earrings stretching the lobes. The neck is thick, with three concentric crease lines to represent his resonant voice. The shoulders are wide and sweep downward, leading your eye to the webbed hands, which form “the gesture of touching the earth.” The right hand reaches over the legs (crossed in full lotus) to point towards the ground; the left hand is raised to the navel, palm upward. This symbolises Siddhārtha Gautama’s attainment of enlightenment. He calls on heaven and earth to bear witness. The fingernails are delicate; the knuckle lines are defined. The sheer robe, slung over one shoulder, clings to the stylised body and appears stretched at the knees and loose just above the ankles.

I’d never seen anything like it. It was different from other Buddhist statues. I stared at it for twenty minutes while tourists swept by. We left the wooden front room for a while, but I had to come back and attempt to memorise everything. Photography is not allowed in-

side. Of course, my memory faded. I spent a month studying pictures in books and online to help me remember. But I have found that if I stare too long, something disturbs me and I must look away.

The whole chamber is balanced. It is a three-dimensional mandala: a symbolic representation of the Buddhist universe. The central statue is set back from the axis point to give a greater sense of space. Behind the Śākyamuni’s head is a lotus halo embedded in the wall, increasing the depth. Directly below the halo is an eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. You cannot see this carving from the viewing area at Seokguram as the central statue blocks it. To the left and right of the halo, at the same height, are ten niche shrines, seven of which contain bodhisattvas in high relief. The other three niches are empty, having been looted. Finally, the dome itself has a lotus flower carved in a single circle in its uppermost part. What was the sunrise like before the wooden front room was built? I think of the early morning light streaming through the entrance, tracking along the Buddha’s body until it hit the eyes. I wish I could have seen that.

4.

Buddhism eludes me. I return to it year after year, in search of foundation. But to find foundation here is to dig in a vacuum. The statue, though! Can I find something in it beyond my own idolatry? If I have conveyed the true impact of it all, maybe I can reach an endpoint. But

I am afraid that if I search too hard, all I will find is silence.

In an essay on topography and architecture, is the central issue still humanity, or do we become mere measures of scale? VY Canis Majoris, a red, hypergiant star, is the largest object yet detected in the universe. It is 4,900 light years away from earth and 3.063 billion kilometres in diameter. To feel oneself as a speckling in the void of voids must be liberating. I try to imagine the ecstasy at the vanishing point of existence, the micro-moment when the flame and wick separate and the candle is snuffed - nothing beyond nothing beyond nothing. A topography of annihilation must be glorious. But stuck in my limitations I will hold to more local things. Leave me with art, books and friends. The earth is my cathedral.

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