The Buddha's Moon Reflected on a Thousand Rivers

Review > Korea

The illustrious ruler, King Sejong the Great (reigned 1418-1450 at the beginning of the Korean Yi Dynasty, 1392-1910) personally supervised various scientific projects in the fields of sinology, medicine, astronomy, and geography. However, modern Koreans remember him for having invented their national alphabet, now called *han'gŭl*. His son, Prince Suyang, used this brand-new alphabet to compose the 'Detailed Record of the Buddha's Life' (*Sŏkpo sangjŏl*), commissioned by his father in honour of the Prince's mother, the beloved Queen Sohŏn who had died in 1445. He submitted this first work of prose in the Korean language to his father in 1447. It was compiled from translations of Chinese Buddhist sutras, and King Sejong used it as source for his poetic version, the 'Song of the Moon Reflected on a Thousand Rivers' (*Wŏrinch'ŏn'gangjigok*, 1449).

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The song is composed of cantos of two verse lines, except the first canto which consists of one line only. It opens with lyrical verses, followed by tales of earlier lives of the Buddha and his career in our world, and the whole story is full of supernatural events. In 1459, when Prince Suyang ruled as King Sejo, he had the two works combined in a new edition, but in the course of time large parts of the works have gone missing, due to the low status of Buddhism in the Yi period, when neo-Confucianism was the state ideology.[1] Tantalizingly, the meaning of one section of the song (cantos 76-78) still remains obscure, as the prose part, *Sŏkpo sangjŏl*, which would probably explain it, has not yet been found. From the 1960s onwards, many volumes and parts of Buddhist books were recovered in Korea: in libraries, monasteries, including a dilapidated stupa, and private homes. Now, 550 years after its completion, the first volume of the Song of the Moon (volumes two and three are only partly recovered) has finally been translated, not in English, but in German. The translators, Werner Sasse, an established authority in Korean linguistics, and his colleague at Hamburg University, An Jung-Hee, laboured for five years to produce this rare translation of a Middle Korean literary work.

The layout of this translation is very attractive. Every canto is given in facsimile of the original, flanked by a version in modern print; the translation follows below, together with an explanation of the contents. As this translation is not just intended for a German-reading public interested in exotic literature but, foremost, as a textbook for students of classical Korean, the second part of the book explains grammatical forms and vocabulary. Sasse and An have produced a very readable translation, in a poem-like form, quite close in content to the original text. The Korean verses are composed of parallel phrases containing a certain number of syllables (between 5 and 12), which cannot easily be imitated in German. In the preface the translators humbly speak of their clumsy (*ungemein holpriger*) style. Proper names that are not mentioned in the original text have been added for clarity, as fifteenth-century Koreans presumably understood the verses without the names. Sometimes the original Indic form is given; sometimes the meaning of the name is translated into German. For me personally, translating *Wangsasŏng* as '*Königshausen*' renders the impression that the action had shifted to the borders of the Rhine. It is all a matter of taste which language one prefers, but I believe the Korean form does the original Korean more justice.

As mentioned earlier, the book is meant for students, and offers a lot of explanation. But not all is settled in the fields of background or grammar. The explanation of the magical fight between Sariputra and Raktasa (pp. 157-164) is very cleverly worked (notwithstanding that Amitabha is mistakenly branded Buddha of the East, see p. 160). The grammatical forms are extensively analysed, but it is a pity Sasse and An abstained from any explanation of the fascinating phenomenon of the 'side-dots' in Middle Korean texts that indicate 'pitch levels'. The authors do, however, mention the 'pitches' a few times when they influence grammatical forms. The appearances of the -o/u- verbal infix in Middle Korean are, also, as colourful as they are troublesome. One function of -o/u- occurs in modifier forms when the modified noun can be seen as object of the modifying verb. The authors call this form '*Faktitiv/Passiv*' (p. 381), '*Volitiv*' (p. 384), or declare it hard to explain (p.451); perhaps it would have been better to follow one uniform explanation of the form.

Professor Sasse has also been studying the structure of the Song of the Moon, which unfortunately is not treated in the book discussed here. I look forward to a publication on this aspect sometime in the future. In the meantime, the English-reading public will have to wait for an English translation of this old Korean version of the life of the Buddha. <

- Sasse, Werner, and Jung-Hee An, *Der Mond gespiegelt in tausend Flussen. Das Leben des Buddha Gautama in Verse gesetzt im Jahre 1447 von Konig Sejong*, Seoul: Sohaksa Verlag (2002), pp. 469 + 18, ISBN 89-7191-212-X

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Er brachte einen zehnköpfigen Drachen hervor,
und durch Edelsteinregen und Blitz und Donner
wurden die Menschen erschreckt.

Da kam ein Vogel mit goldenen Flügeln,
ergriff den Drachen, riß ihn in Stücke
und fraß ihn völlig auf.

Dann brachte *Raktasa* einen zehnköpfigen Drachen hervor, aber der Vogel *Garuda* (Begleittier des *Amoghasiddhi*, des Buddha des Nordens) erschien und fraß den Drachen.

Taken from the book under review.

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1 e.g. the 'Song of Dragons Rising to Heaven' *(Yongbiŏch'ŏn'ga)*, 1447; translated twice in the 1970s, by J. Hoyt in 1971 (and 1979), and by Peter H. Lee in 1975.