Language and Meaning

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I have just returned from a brief trip to Korea. I had learned the Hangul alphabet, but my vocabulary was limited to some rudimentary phrases. I could read but I could not understand. This led to some thoughts about language and meaning. My posting will take a roundabout course, beginning with a Korean scholar from the Silla dynasty. Be patient: I shall try to find some meaning before the day is done.

Choe Chi Won (857-925?)

At the age of 12, Choe Chi Won (Hangul □□□; Chinese □□□; literary name □□, Go-un, “Lonely Cloud”) was sent from Korea to study in Xian (Chang’an), the capital of the Tang dynasty in China. There he learnt the practices of Confucianism and the arts of poetry and calligraphy. He passed the Imperial Examination at the young age of 22 years, and rose quickly through the ranks of the Chinese Civil Service.

However, the Tang dynasty (618-907) was slowly coming to its end. In 874, Huang Chao had initiated a rebellion against the Emperor. By 880 he had taken control of the capital and assumed the throne, calling himself the “Emperor of Qi.” Choe served as the secretary to the Tang general Gao Pien in his campaign against Huang Chao. By 884, the rebellion was finally defeated and the Tang emperor Xizong reinstated in Xian.

However, the Tang empire was in pieces. Feuding warlords commanded different regions, and in 907 the Tang dynasty came to an end. China’s political turmoil continued through the period of the “Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms,” until some stability was finally regained with the Song dynasty in 960.

In 885, Choe asked to return to Korea as an envoy to the Silla dynasty. However, his home country was also in a period of

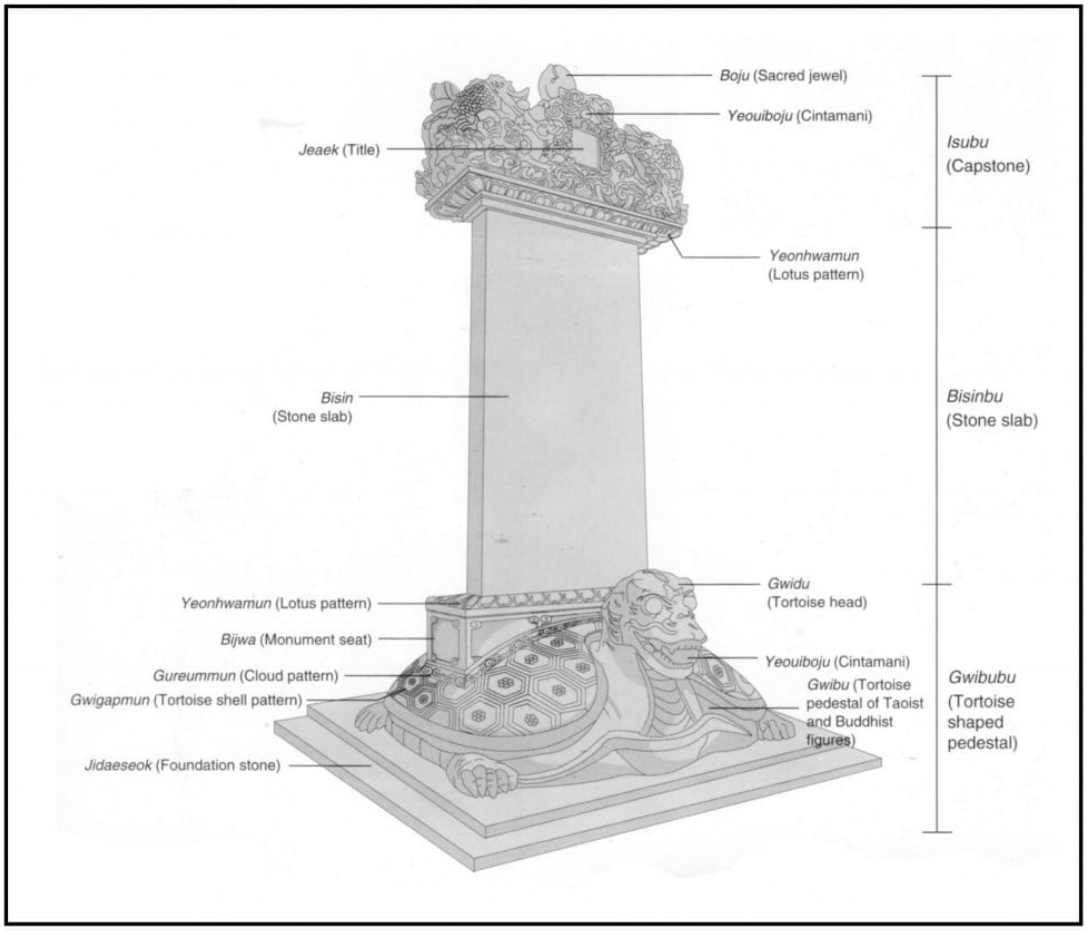
decadence and political upheaval. The 900-year old Silla dynasty was slowly coming apart. It would finally succumb to the Goryeo dynasty in 935.

The Silla Royal Family and the court refused to accept Choe's advice about how to improve their government. Disillusioned, Choe left the court to become a provincial magistrate. Finally, he retired completely from public life, spending his last years in meditation at various Buddhist monasteries in the southern regions of Korea. For a brief while he lived in Busan, where he gave the name Haeundae (□□□Sea Cloud Platform) to Dongbaek Island. He had these characters inscribed on one of the rocks near the present lighthouse. The photo to the right shows Choe's memorial statue on the island (now connected to the mainland in the Haeundae region of Busan. The exact date of Choe's death is unknown. Legend has him wandering off into the forest never to be seen again.

(Biographical details for Choe Chi Won are available in Jones, 1903; Lee, 1997; Lin, 2011, and on David Mason website).

The Mountain Stelai

Before he died, however, Choe composed the inscriptions for four stelai commemorating the achievements of famous Korean Buddhist monks. As well as describing the lives of the monks, these inscriptions commented upon the philosophy of Buddhism and how it might be made compatible with Confucianism.



Each stele contained a flat stone slab upon which the inscriptions were carved. This was set upon a tortoise base and topped with a cloud-dragon capstone. Tortoises and dragons both symbolize immortality. The above figure shows the general structure of a stele (from Park 2002), and the photograph on the right shows the actual stele commemorating the monk Chin’gam Hyeso (774-850) at the Ssanggye monastery in Southern Korea (from the webpage of David Mason). This monk had studied in China and returned to Korea in 830 to establish a monastery and transmit to his disciples the principles of Seon Buddhism.

Seon Buddhism

Although Buddhism first came to Korea in the 4th century AD, it did not become prominent until the advent of Seon Buddhism in the 7th and 8th centuries. This line of Buddhism derived from China's Chan Buddhism. Zen Buddhism in Japan had a similar source though it began much later (in the 12th century). Chan Buddhism emphasizes meditation as the primary means to enlightenment – "Chan" comes from □□ (pinyin: *chánnà*, meaning meditation), which itself derives from the Sanskrit *dhyana*. The key scripture describing the principles of Buddhist meditation is the *Lankavatara Sutra* (Red Pine, 2012; also available in a web translation), which was compiled in the 3rd or 4th century and translated into Chinese in the 5th century

Chan Buddhism traces itself back to the patriarch Bodhidharma (known as Daruma in Japan), who lived in China in the 5th and 6th centuries (Suzuki, 1956, Chapter 3; Red Pine, 1989). Bodhidharma may have journeyed to China from India, though the details of his life come more from myth than history. He is usually portrayed as a fierce, bearded sage, with brow furrowed from concentration, eyes staring after years of meditation ("wall-watching"), and earlobes extended with enlightenment.

As well as meditation, Chan Buddhism fostered asceticism, irrationality, chanting and marshal arts. Truth was conveyed from master to pupil; scriptures were irrelevant other than as used by the masters to suggest what could only be attained by meditation. The goal was to drain the consciousness of self and thus to share in the vast emptiness beyond being.

One teaching, attributed to Bodhidharma, but likely composed much later is

> A special transmission outside of scriptures;
> No dependence upon words and letters;
> Direct pointing at the soul of man;

Seeing into one’s nature to attain Buddhahood.
(adapted from Suzuki, 1956, p. 61)

The last two lines are inscribed above the portrait of Daruma by the Japanese Zen Monk Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768, illustration from Wikipedia).

Chan Buddhism differs from the other main line of Chinese Buddhism, Pure Land, which stresses recitation of the scriptures, and mindfulness directed specifically to the Amitabha Buddha (Ching, 1993, Chapter 8 Mysticism and Devotion. Buddhism becomes Chinese). Chan meditation halls are simple and unadorned; Pure Land temples have a baroque exuberance, with statues of Buddhas and Boddhisattvas everywhere. Chan seeks inside for emptiness, Pure Land looks

outside for fulfillment.

Chin’gam Hyeso Stele

The monument to Chin’gam Hyeso was erected in 887. Choe Chi Won composed the inscription using regular script (*kaishu*) in the style of Ouyang Xun (557–641), a Chinese scholar and calligrapher. Some of this balanced and graceful script is illustrated above (derived from Park, 2002). Choe’s calligraphy was then engraved by Hwan Yong. The inscription begins with a brief introduction, continues with a summary of the life and achievements of Chin’gam Hyeso, and ends with some poetry celebrating his greatness. The following brief quotations and translations are from Jorgensen (2012).

The introduction begins

> □□□□□, □□□□.
>
> The path is not distant from human beings, and human beings are not different due to country.

The first part of this sentence is a quotation from the beginning of Chapter 13 of the Confucian classic “Doctrine of

the Mean” (□□ Zhongyong, in the Book of Rites): “The Way is not something separate from man” (Muller translation; Ezra Pound translates the teaching as “The process is not far from man, is not alien from him” in *The Unwobbling Pivot*, 1951). Confucius is pointing out that truth is not beyond the grasp of the human mind. The second part of this introductory sentence is original to Choe. This scholar was educated in a foreign land, and was treated as an alien when he finally returned home. He therefore insists that all human beings should be treated equally, regardless of country, language or race. The statement can also be translated as “For man there is no foreign country.” These words also have a metaphorical meaning – that there is no limit to what the human mind can consider – that complements the initial quotation.

Choe goes on to consider how Buddhism might be reconciled to Confucianism. How can freedom from the world fit with allegiance to the state? Choe refers to the work of an early Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Huiyuan who wrote a treatise on why monks should not pay homage to kings. This does not challenge the government of kings since monks have no desire for worldly power. (The argument is analogous to “Render unto Caesar” from Matthew 22:21 – see Hurvitz, 1957). Thus, apparent contradictions can be dissolved through interpretation. Choe quotes from the Confucian classic “Book of Rites” (□□, Liji, Chapter *Jiyi,* Verse 7)

> □□□□□□, □□ □□□.
>
> How could a word have only one side? Each [side] has a valid point.

Choe then goes on to discuss how the meditation process of Buddhism is impossible to describe in words:

> □□□□□□, □□□□, □□□□, □□□□.
>
> □□□□, □□□□, □□□□, □□□□.□□□□□, □□□□.

> Regarding the Buddha's spoken words on the mind-dharma, it is the arcane within the arcane; the name that cannot be named, the explanation that cannot be explained.
>
> Although it is referred to as pointing at the moon or sitting in oblivion [of the surrounding world], in the end it is like [attempting] to bind the wind or like the difficulty of capturing a shadow. But as one progresses from what is far to what is near, what harm is there in using metaphors?

However, even metaphors cannot do justice to the mind-dharma. The experience cannot be put into words. Choe once again quotes Confucius:

> □□□□.
>
> What words does Heaven speak?

The full context (Analects, Yang Huo, Verse 19) for this is

The Master said, "I would prefer not speaking." Zi Gong said, "If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?" The Master said, "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?"

This reference to Confucius provides Choe with his segue into the biography of the Seon master Chin'gam, the monk who was able to transmit to his disciples the experience of the mind-dharma without using words. The truth cannot be taught; it can only be experienced.

Final words

After the biographical details, Choe concludes with a set of poems in praise of Chin'gam. Among the lines are Choe's attempt to describe the meditative experience:

□□□□,
□□□□.

He fiercely searched for the tiger’s cave,
floating afar over huge waves.

He also portrays the way that the monk was able to release himself from the all the distinctions and suffering of the world:

□□□□,
□□□□.

He lacked [discriminative] thinking and anxiety,
he was uncut and uncarved.

Just before these final poems, Choe apologizes. He was asked by the King to write the text of the monument and to promote the Buddhist principles, but he is ashamed for trying to describe what is ineffable.

□□□□□, □□□□,

The Dharma can neither be written down nor expressed in words.

Meanings

I feel great empathy for Choe. Like him, I am deeply involved with words. Like him, I realize that experience cannot be fully expressed in language. Metaphor helps, but can often be misleading. Some things seem true by intuition – the heart has its reasons that reason cannot comprehend (Pascal).

Language does not always connect clearly to meaning. Poetry slips easily into different meanings – tell the truth but tell it slant (Dickinson). Irony allows a meaning completely opposite to the words. As Confucius said, any set of words has more than one interpretation. How one arrives at their correct meaning is sometimes a mystery.

Nevertheless, I trust what can be put into words. Language allows me to tell others about my experiences and to learn about theirs. It helps me to remember what has happened. It allows me to formulate ideas and hypotheses for testing and revision.

The ineffable troubles me. How can I tell that it is not illusory? If it cannot be scrutinized or tested, how can I know that it is true?

I realize, of course, that those who devote their lives to meditation consider the world that I experience as illusory. They would say that I can read but I cannot understand.

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