Chapter 2

Buddhism, Confucianism and the People

The tribal confederacies that developed into the Three Kingdoms and served as the basis for the aristocratic clan lineages competing for wealth and influence under the United Silla and Koryŏ monarchies had each their own religious system. In each system the functions of priest and chieftain were undifferentiated, often fused in the same person. As the territories expanded into the Three Kingdoms, the tribal belief systems had to lose their specificity as local religions and be subsumed under the more universal character of the Buddhist, Confucian and to a lesser extent Daoist systems that were introduced throughout the peninsula from the fourth century AD. In the process, a religious and philosophical syncretism evolved, whereby more or less equivalent elements were blended or admitted so long as there was no conflict with the normative principle that all was under the way or pattern of Heaven, the overarching order of interdependence and harmony.

Silla Religion and Culture

By the mid-eighth century, United Silla culture was at its prime, and from the ninth century it began to decline until it gave way to the Koryŏ dynastic system. The centre of this culture was Kyŏngju in the southeast, which reached a population of almost 900,000, and which was a city of great affluence with solid, sumptuous buildings. The principal source of this culture, or rather the form of its expression, was religion. In this it is comparable to the cultures that thrived in Japan, China and India, and also in Europe’s Middle Ages. And in fact, the religious system which inspired a great deal of Silla’s cultural refinement and products originated in India, that is, Buddhism, a Buddhism albeit that had undergone some changes before it spread across China into the Korean Peninsula, where it would again be modified before being passed on to Japan. Buddhism was the religion of the Silla period. Confucianism, as we shall see, at this stage functioned mainly as a set of administrative principles. Buddhism did not, however, enter a religious vacuum when it reached the peninsula: there was extant already a religious perception with its own rites and deities, which we may call Korean Classical Religion.
Classical Religion

The central organizing feature of Korea’s classical religious system is animism, the belief that all living beings and all material and natural phenomena are animated by spirits: animals, trees and other plants, humans, wind, rain, thunder and earthquakes, and all the celestial bodies. In the case of animate life at least, the animating spirits are detachable from the bodies that they animate, but usually only after death, as in the case of humans whose spirits survive death of the body and remain active, affecting the lives of the living for good or for ill.

This sense of the spiritual structure of the world and universe extended through all spheres of life, from political to personal realms. From the time of the tribal confederacies, there was a belief in animal gods, some of which were transforming gods, and these possibly lay behind the carving of tribal totems depicting animals. The story of the birth of Tan’gun from the union of a divine being with a bear-turned-woman reflects precisely this belief system and was employed in each of the Three Kingdoms to establish the sacred entity of their states, their supernatural origin, and the descent of the royal line from an important deity. Although not as explicit as the Japanese foundation myth of the sun-goddess, Amaterasu, from whom the emperors were supposed to descend in an unbroken line, these foundation stories served the same function of establishing legitimacy at a time when tribal chieftains and later, monarchs, warred for supremacy.

Insofar as the state had divine legitimacy, the monarch at first had priestly functions. Depending on the version of the tradition one consults, Tan’gun lived between 200 and 1500 years and after abdicating the throne became a mountain god, an important state-defending deity. In one section of the Annals of Silla, it is written that the king personally sacrificed in the Great Shrine—that is, to the deity on whose grace his rule was thought to depend. He did not always assume the office of a priest, but he was authorised to do so if he chose. One of the Silla Kingdom’s royal titles, ch’ach’iaung, meant priest, perhaps even shaman. It was not until after the United Silla dynasty was established and Buddhism became a state-protecting creed that priestly and monarchical functions became formally separated, but even then palace and temples were modelled on very similar lines.

Classical beliefs ascribed considerable importance to animals, and in relation both to state affairs and the rhythm of family life animals could be omens. Marvellous sightings, the presence of red birds and so on were duly reported to the court; but a tiger seen in the palace gardens was not at all an auspicious thing and led not infrequently to demotions of high officials and ministers.