



# From *Jātaka* to Vernacular Fiction

## Adaptation of the Buddhist plot of the two brothers (journey beyond the sea) in classical Korean literature

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### FROM JĀTAKA TO VERNACULAR FICTION: ADAPTATION OF THE BUDDHIST PLOT OF THE TWO BROTHERS (JOURNEY BEYOND THE SEA) IN CLASSICAL KOREAN LITERATURE.

The present paper focuses on the strategies for adapting the specific Buddhist plot (the story of the two brothers travelling beyond the sea in search of a magical pearl) that has been recounted over the course of centuries in classical Korean literature. The objective of the article is to examine the adaptation of this plot through a comparative analysis of similar narratives, highlighting the distinctive features and changes determined by the various genres and philosophical ideas under the influence of which these texts were written, the purposes of creating these narratives, the target audience, etc. The comparison is based on three texts: *Ten Stages of Tathagata Shakyā's Practices* (1328), *Wōrin Sōkpo* (1459) and the vernacular fiction *Story of Chyōk Syōngūi* (19th century). Furthermore, the article lists all relevant previous Buddhist manuscripts containing the plot of interest, provides a brief outline of Korean Buddhist literature tradition, and emphasizes literature as a universal medium connecting Confucian and Buddhist cultures.

#### KEYWORDS:

Buddhist literature — *Wōrin Sōkpo* — classical Korean literature — *jātaka* — Korean vernacular fiction — Buddhist plot

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### INTRODUCTION

Korean literature, emerging from a distinctly Chinese-centric cultural context, exhibited a remarkable capacity for assimilating elements from a plethora of diverse cultural traditions. One such wellspring of influence was the opulent reservoir of Buddhist literature, with particular emphasis on *avadāna* and



*jātaka*<sup>1</sup> texts. It should be noted that numerous Buddhist narratives permeated the corpus of Korean literature, seamlessly integrating into its cultural fabric and thus becoming an integral part of the Korean cultural paradigm.

This article is dedicated to a specific adapted narrative that has traversed centuries within Korean texts — namely, the plot of the “Two brothers” (alternatively known as “Journey beyond the sea”). The objective of the article is to trace the adaptation of this narrative within the realm of Korean literature across genres elucidating the distinctive features and nuances added or omitted over time. Furthermore, it seeks to shed light on the plot variations used in the texts we are studying.

It is imperative to acknowledge that while this narrative recurs consistently within Korean literary works spanning an array of genres, from Buddhist scriptures and didactic secular literature to works of entertainment fiction and popular prose works, the discourse surrounding its adaptation remains merely fragmented. A primary cause for this lacuna is the relative obscurity of one of the principal sources containing this narrative — the 15th-century text known as *Wōrin Sōkpo*<sup>2</sup>, which, regrettably, has not yet been translated into any European language or subjected to rigorous academic scrutiny. To address this gap, we have undertaken to translate this text from Middle Korean and integrate it into the comparative analysis alongside other relevant texts, offering a comprehensive view of how the narrative evolved within the traditional Korean literature.

This article, therefore, focuses on the strategies of adaptation, primarily achieved through a meticulous comparative analysis of the three main Korean source texts. Additionally, it provides a concise overview of the Korean Buddhist literature tradition, emphasizes the role of literature as a universal medium bridging Confucian and Buddhist cultures, compiles a list of pertinent manuscripts featuring the narrative of interest, and delves into an in-depth, systematic narrative analysis of these three pivotal texts.

## BUDDHIST LITERATURE IN KOREA

Buddhism was initially introduced to the Korean peninsula during the Three Kingdoms Period in the 4th–6th centuries AD, predominantly in its “Chinese edition” with intermittent Indian influence attributed to sporadic pilgrimages. By the 7th century AD, Buddhism had gained a substantial following on the peninsula. Subsequently, Buddhism began to forge its own distinctive path, receiving significant government

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1 *Avadānas* are the Buddhist stories of heroic deeds, stories of *arhats*, of anybody except the Buddha, or of karmically significant deeds and their fruits. *Jātaka* stories narrate episodes in a past life of the Buddha illustrating moral lessons, the workings of karma, or the perfections required for the attainment of buddhahood. Stories of both genres play an important role in the culture inspiring literature, theatre, opera, and other art forms. For more details see Appleton 2015.

2 Published online in Database of Korean Classics in Hangeul: [Accessed 8. 4. 2024], [http://db.sejongkorea.org/front/detail.do?bkCode=P14\\_WS\\_v022&recordId=P14\\_WS\\_e01\\_v022\\_0020](http://db.sejongkorea.org/front/detail.do?bkCode=P14_WS_v022&recordId=P14_WS_e01_v022_0020), with scanned original manuscript of *Wōrin Sōkpo* (National treasure # 745-7).



patronage and reaching its zenith during the Koryŏ period (10th to 13th centuries). During this epoch, Buddhism ascended to the status of a state religion and adopted various structural elements from Confucianism, including the monk examination system. It emerged as a significant force, enjoying nearly boundless resources and wielding substantial political and cultural influence. Notably, this era saw the creation of pivotal and renowned Korean Buddhist texts, including the Buddhist Canon *Tripitaka Koreana* (first edition 1011–1087) and *Samguk Yusa* (三國遺事, Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms, allegedly 1281).

While we may readily discern and attribute its cultural impact, juxtaposed against the backdrop of Confucian or Neo-Confucian traditions, this apparent elucidation appears as something of an oversimplification. It is essential to recognize that the term “Buddhism” encapsulates a multitude of diverse branches, traditions, beliefs, and practices that are rooted in and have evolved from the teachings attributed to the Buddha.

As we approach specific points in history, notably during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) and the subsequent decline of Buddhism in the late Chosŏn period due to rigorous government suppression and relegation of Buddhist monks to the lowest societal status, this religious tradition often tends to be overlooked in basic publications on Korean history and Korean religious history. This decline was characterized by G.H. Grayson, as “the lowest point of its historical trajectory in terms of its social and cultural influence.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Buddhism literally stepped out of the capital, withdrew from political affairs, finding its niche, guiding and enlightening the lives of common people while also filling the existential void in the hearts of Confucian literati scholars, who sought more than the philosophy of Zhu Xi<sup>4</sup> alone.

Further exploration<sup>5</sup> of this topic reveals the complexity of the intricate relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism. First, despite official governmental suppression, Buddhism continued to receive private support and patronage from high-ranking officials and court members, integrating into the official ritual system. Second, Buddhism itself underwent a transformation in its attitude towards Confucianism, considering it as an equally beneficial path. Buddhist texts were treated like any other written sources within the textual culture of educated Confucian scholars of various social strata: they were read, analyzed, discussed, and criticized, thus preserving the tradition and anchoring it within Korean society. During this time, monks became more acquainted with Confucian classics and engaged in rigorous intellectual debates and literary dialectics, forging a harmonious coexistence.

During the Early Chosŏn period, all existing Buddhist sects were intentionally amalgamated into the Sŏn (禪, meditation) and Kyo (教, text) supersects. Subsequently, the remainder of the Chosŏn period was marked by efforts to synthesize the method of enlightenment (meditation) with theoretical foundations (text) and create more integrative philosophies, amalgamating Confucian Classics with Buddhist thought.

3 Grayson 2002, p. 137.

4 Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) was a Chinese calligrapher, historian, philosopher, poet, and politician who was influential in the development of Neo-Confucianism.

5 See Shim (1989) and Warlaven (2007) for more detailed information.



Unquestionably, written and oral texts emerged as the most effective means of integrating Buddhist ideas and doctrines into Korean society and culture. Within the realm of Buddhist literature, the *jātaka* and *avadāna* texts held a pivotal position within the Canon, consequently becoming indispensable elements of Korean Buddhism. These stories from the Buddha's previous existences, initially circulating in oral form, were eventually transcribed by various authors and evolved into popular and esteemed genres of Buddhist didactic literature. In the early stages of its development, *jātaka* also adsorbed many folk motifs and narratives, drawing them into Buddhist patterns and linking them with key concepts Buddhism yet keeping the story entertaining and reliable.

### JOURNEY BEYOND THE SEA

One of such stories referred to below as a *journey beyond the sea* or a *story about two brothers* is repeatedly found in various translations and versions among Buddhist as well as secular texts.

The plot, in general, represents the story of a prince or a nobleman who went beyond the sea in search of a *cintāmaṇi*<sup>6</sup> pearl capable of fulfilling one's wishes. The pearl is stored in the Palace of the Nagas' King (in Sanskrit texts, *Sāgara-nāga-rāja*) or the Palace of the Dragon King in the Far Eastern versions. According to most variants of the texts, the prince had an evil brother who joined and followed him. The purpose of obtaining the pearl is not of an egocentric nature, but comes out from the prince's desire to help all sentient beings (so it is a specifically Buddhist idea or intention) or to help his parents and fulfil his filial duties (so we can consider it as a kind of mixed idea, which includes popular elements from both Buddhism and Confucianism).

As mentioned above, the story of two brothers originally circulated as a Buddhist *jātaka*. Since *jātaka* and *avadāna* represent a synthesis of literary and folkloric traditions, it can be assumed that the plot existed before Buddhism emerged in the region and before this story started to be used for didactic purposes. For example, the idea of obtaining happiness through some magical object, in our case a pearl, is a typical feature of fairy tales in many cultures, as seen from different catalogues of international folktale types (by Aarne, Stith Thompson, Hans-Jörg Uther<sup>7</sup>, Yu. Berezkin and E. Duvakin<sup>8</sup> and others). We will leave the search for the folklore roots of this plot

6 *Cintāmaṇi* (Sanskrit, Devanagari चिन्तमणि, Chinese 如意寶珠) is a wish-fulfilling jewel within both Hindu and Buddhist tradition.

7 The Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU Index) is a catalogue of folktale types used in folklore studies. The ATU Index divides tales into sections with an identifying number for each entry and a name by its central motif or by one of the variant folktales of that type. The first catalogue was compiled by Aarne in 1910 and later it was revised and expanded by, first, Stith Thompson (1928, 1961), and, then, Hans-Jörg Uther (2004).

8 Yu. Berezkin and E. Duvakin developed "The Thematic Classification and Areal Distribution of Folklore-Mythological Motifs. The Analytical Catalogue". It contains ca. 50,000 abstracts of oral texts from all over the world.



to Indian folklore culture researchers, and proceed directly to the evolution of this plot at the stage when this story already evolved from fairy tale into didactic *jātaka*, acquiring specific features of this genre.

*Haribhaṭṭa's Jātakamālā* (*Garlands of stories about previous lives of the Buddha*, ca. AD 400), the finest example of classical Sanskrit literature, is one of the latest and fullest *jātakas* compilations. As Michael Hahn points out in his article on *The Buddhist Contribution to the Indian Belles Lettres*,<sup>9</sup> *Haribhaṭṭa's Jātakamālā* was also introduced to China in the 5th century, probably after a group of Chinese monks visited Central Asia and studied several Indian works there. Hahn also mentions stories from this compilation which became widely adopted in Central Asia<sup>10</sup> and the fact that more remains of Buddhist literature are rather to be found in other places, such as Central Asia, Tibet, and the north-western parts of what can now be called Greater India, and eventually in Chinese and Tibetan *Tripitakas*, so next we are going to examine Tibetan and Chinese sources.

There are at least five relatable sources to be mentioned regarding the target plot:

1. 生經 *Sheng jing*, Rebirth Sutra, 285. TT. Vol. 3. № 154.
2. 大智度論 *Daizhiduo lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*), The Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise. TT. Vol. 25. № 1509.
3. 四分律 *Sifen lu*, Four-part Vinaya, 408. TT. Vol. 22. № 1428.
4. 賢愚經 *Xianyu jing*, Sutra on the Wise and the Foolish (henceforth SWF). Translation into Chinese — 445, translation into Tibetan — 632. TT. Vol. 4. No. 202. Two stories with this plot:
  - 4.1. 30th chapter,
  - 4.2. 33rd chapter.
5. 大方便佛報恩經 *Da fangbian fo baoen jing* (henceforth DFB), Great Skilful Means Sutra on the Buddha's Repayment of Kindness (Buddha's Great Skilful Means of Gratitude Sutra), translation into Chinese — 25–220. TT. Vol. 3. No. 156.

It should be mentioned that we can find the plot of the journey beyond the sea for the *cintāmani* pearl in texts 1 and 2 as well as in 4.1., but without conflict between two brothers. Texts 3, 4.2. and 5 present the story of two brothers, but with some differences in storylines.

<sup>9</sup> Hahn 2010, p. 456.

<sup>10</sup> There are several reasons for the fact that his *Jātakamālā* was very popular in Central Asia and the north-western parts of India: a complete folio of a Sanskrit-Uigur bilingual version of legend No. 32 (Simha); legend No. 25 (Kinnarisudhana) has served as model of a Khotanese tale; legend No. 6 (Rūpyāvati) is retold in Tocharian; two fragments of legend No. 32 were found in Afghanistan; the Kashmirian poet Ksemendra based his *Sudhanakinnaryavadāna* (No. 64) on Haribhaṭṭa's version of the same story (No. 25); and recently a complete folio of the Gilgit manuscript could be determined as belonging to legend No. 32. According to the colophon of the Tibetan translation, Haribhaṭṭa ended his life in Kashmir, and his work contains many hints that he was familiar with the mountainous regions of north-west (Hahn 2010, p. 456).



The main episodes of the *jātaka* version of the story can be generalized as follows:

- there is a trouble/violation of harmony or some principles/disease in the state or family;
- two brothers (their names are Good Brother and Evil Brother) go overseas in search of the *cintāmani* pearl;
- Good Brother overcomes the thousand obstacles and obtains the pearl, and Evil Brother leaves him midway;
- the reunion of the two brothers after Good Brother obtains the *cintāmani* pearl from the Naga King;
- Evil Brother steals the pearl from Good Brother, blinds him and takes the pearl home;
- blind Good Brother is wandering, playing some instrument (kind of lute);
- Good Brother meets his (promised) wife;
- Good Brother regains his sight;
- Good Brother returns home, heals all beings/parents with the *cintāmani* pearl, and resolves the moral conflict.

A comparison of the above-mentioned texts shows that some details and the sequence of described events in the analyzed texts may be different, but this set of episodes is preserved in almost all the narratives. It seems interesting to follow the adaptation of this story in Korean texts belonging to different genres, to describe details and their specific features and try to explain these differences.

On the Korean peninsula, this story appeared in the 6th–7th centuries together with some sutras and *jātakas*<sup>11</sup>. In the original Korean literature, the plot of two brothers or the journey beyond the sea could be found in several texts, both religious and secular. The first one is the 14th-century *Records of the Ten Stages of Tathagata Shakyā's Practices* (*Ten Bodhisattva Bhūmi*, 釋迦如來十地修行記, henceforth TS, 1328), written in *hanmun*<sup>12</sup> and edited in 1448 by the monk Sosil. The TS represents the collection of the edited *biānwén*<sup>13</sup> texts,<sup>14</sup> the popular form of narrative literature used in oral performances for common people.

Another pivotal text of the same time that contains the story of two brothers who went beyond the sea in search for a *cintāmani* pearl is *Wōrin Sōkpo* (月印釋譜, hence-

11 *Povest o Chyōk Syōngūi* 1996, p. 11.

12 *Hanmun* (漢文) is the koreanized form of Literary Chinese. From the first centuries of the Common Era, *hanmun* served as the official written language for affairs of state, education, and culture. It remained in use despite the creation of a Korean phonetic alphabet in the mid-15th century.

13 變文 *biān wén*, kor. *pyōnmun*, is a popular form of narrative literature flourishing in the Tang Dynasty (618–907) with alternate prose and rhymed parts for recitation and singing.

14 It is also considered that the TS represents a rudimentary form of Korean vernacular fiction, which later developed into separate prose works such as *The Story of Crown Prince Sōn U* (선우대자전), *The Story of Chyōk Syōngūi* (적성의전), *The Story of Crown Prince Kūm U* (금우대자전) etc. Park Byung-dong (1997) in his doctoral dissertation provides an excellent and comprehensive analysis of the TS.



forth WS, 1459). It is one of the first Korean literary texts published in the 15th century using the newly obtained Korean alphabet. The WS represents a compilation of two previous texts: the *Songs of the Moon Reflected in a Thousand Rivers* (月印千江之曲, *Wōrin-ch'ōn'gang chi kok*, henceforth WCK, 1448–1449) and the *Abbreviated and Particularized Life of the Buddha* (釋譜詳節, *Sōkpo sangjöl*, henceforth SS, 1447), a prose text on the same subject but no longer extant in its first edition. Despite the fact that these texts were compiled at the Korean court, the dynastic records are relatively silent about the origins of the texts.<sup>15</sup> It is simply known that the grieving King Sejong (1418–1450) when his wife Sim-ssi Sohōn-wanghu (沈氏昭憲王后) passed away in 1446 asked Prince Suyan (later King Sejo, 1455–1468) to compile a Buddhist text as a means to pray for the queen's happiness in the next life. This text was namely SS. The dynastic records mention that King Sejong was so moved by this text that he produced an epic hymn based on it and called it WCK. Later, the King Sejo combined and revised both his SS and WCK and printed them in 1459 as the new text WS with the purpose of praying for the repose of the souls of the late King Sejong, the queen Sohōn-wanghu and his nephew Tanjong (端宗, 1452–1455), who died at an early age. Beside this apparent motif, it is known that since the King Sejo dethroned his young nephew Tanjong and ascended the throne, the WS could be also written in expiation for the killing of unnumbered subjects including Tanjong.

It should be mentioned that despite their importance these three texts (WCK, SS and WS) have been little studied, especially in English or other European languages.<sup>16</sup> One of the most valuable works on these texts, as it represents a brilliant example of linguistic research and the best overview of the comprehensive bibliography on the topic, is Ross King's paper "The Moon Reflected in a Thousand Rivers: Literary and Linguistic Problems in *Wōrinch'ōn'gang chi kok*" from 2018.<sup>17</sup>

Along with the *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (龍飛御天歌, *Yongbiōch'ōn-ga*, henceforth YG, 1447) it is not only a great source for linguistic studies of Middle Korean, but also a valuable supplement for cultural studies of this period. However, due to a complicated cultural background we are going to dive in further, the WS is not as well preserved as the YG, and some volumes of the WS are yet to be discovered.

The third text we are going to consider is a later vernacular fiction, *The Story of Chyōk Syōngūi* (적성의전, henceforth CSC, 19th century)<sup>18</sup>. It is widely known in Korea,

15 King 2018, p. 1–2.

16 A new annotated English translation of the WCK made by Thorsten Traulsen appeared in 2023.

17 Ross King not only surveys the scholarly literature on both literary and linguistic problems in the WCK but also provides an excellent and comprehensive analysis of the academic articles on these texts in English and Korean. Besides the in-depth overview of the most representative works, his paper outlines some of the debates about the authorship, original language and chronology, describes the unique orthographic features of the text and proposes a new approach to treatment of one of the most difficult grammatical issue in Middle Korean: transitivity. It is by far the most essential secondary source for anyone who wants to work with any of these texts.

18 A. F. Trotsevich uses the term *novel* or *vernacular novel* for the prose works of this genre. See Trotsevich 2013, p. 69. The genre of vernacular novel itself is discussed in Trotsevich 1975.



there are many versions of this prose work, which differ in forms, number of volumes and content. The edition used in this article belongs to the collection of J. Aston and it was published in the “Monuments of the Culture of the East” series in 1996.<sup>19</sup> This anonymous manuscript<sup>20</sup> is dated to the 19th century, and, going by the obvious narrative similarities, heavily based on the Buddhist plot we are considering.

Many scholars have studied the adaptations of Buddhist plots into traditional Korean literature. For example, in 1996 A. F. Trotsevich made remarkable research on Buddhist plots in Korean literature,<sup>21</sup> analyzing storyline changes based on materials from the vernacular fiction CSC and the TS text. Unfortunately, at that time, the 22nd volume of WS<sup>22</sup>—one of the landmark works containing the plot we are interested in—was not available and could not be brought to analysis. One of the aims of this article is to involve the WS in a line of compared texts (TS — WS — CSC), to discover the special features of this text and its plot in comparison with other Chinese and Korean sources, and also to analyze the further changes of this plot in the Korean vernacular fiction. For this purpose, we compared the basic key points of the narrative in the three earliest Korean texts.

## NARRATIVE COMPARISON

### 1. PREFACE<sup>23</sup>

TS: No actual preface, just a phrase “In early times it was told...”

WS: As we can see in other sutras and *jātakas* (DFB, SWF, etc.), there is a special framework for such kind of Buddhist texts: the Buddha is surrounded by his followers, they see something strange or interesting that they cannot explain, so one of them (mostly Ananda) asks the Buddha a question. As an answer, he tells a story about one of his previous existences. In WS, this framework is started by a story about a magic light

<sup>19</sup> *Povest o Chyōk Syōngūi* 1996.

<sup>20</sup> It is quite common for Korean literary or art pieces not to be properly signed or dated, which opens a wide room for academic speculation and leads to attribution issues. The situation can be generalized in a saying which is quite popular with Korean art researchers, “The most productive artist in Korea was named Unknown”.

<sup>21</sup> *Povest o Chyōk Syōngūi* 1996, p. 8–70.

<sup>22</sup> It was not clear for many years how many volumes comprised the WS until the discovery of the 25th and final volume in 1998.

<sup>23</sup> *Jātaka* as a genre has very specific structural features. It usually consists of two stories — one in the present, where something happens and the Buddha’s apprentices ask for his opinion on something, and one in the past, which happens with the same characters, in their past lives, which were witnessed by the Buddha. Usually the “present-time” story is wrapping the actual *jātaka* plot as a framing. This framing, however, traditionally has some components, which can sometimes be omitted, but mostly are present and serve as a genre-defining feature. Those components include naming a place for the “present story”, noting the poetic verse composed by the Buddha, regarding upcoming story plot and question, request or any kind of event happening around which triggers the storytelling.



from the mouth of the Buddha, which is the Great Deliverance of the Buddha from suffering (大悲光). Thereby he shows great mercy to Devadatta, who always tried to harm him.

As we can see in WS, this traditional framework is preserved, but the name of the meeting place, which is usually mentioned in *jātakas*, is excluded.

CSC: No preface.

## 2. PLACE OF ACTION AND INTRODUCTION OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS

TS: The place of action is Vārāṇasī state. The main characters are the Good Friend (善友) and the Evil Friend (惡友). There is no story about the births of the two brothers.

WS: The place of action is Jambudvīpa (閻浮提), state of Vārāṇasī, a place named Parane. The main characters are the Good Friend (elder brother, 善友) and the Evil Friend (younger brother, 惡友). The King, heirless for a long time, prayed to have an heir, and after twelve years, two of his wives gave birth to two sons. These names were given according to the characters of their mothers.

CSC: The place of action is moved to the south of China, the land of plenty, which we can find in many Korean prose works.

Two main characters are Hyangüi (older brother) and Syöngüi (younger brother). The King has one wife and has been living with her for twelve years. Syöngüi is described as a noble man and Hyangüi, as an evil person. Here, we can see the conflict: according to law, Hyangüi should be the heir to the throne but the King wanted the younger son, Syöngüi, to be his successor. But Syöngüi was acting according to Confucian rules and never claimed the throne despite all the harm that Hyangüi inflicted on him.

## 3. THE REASON TO GO FOR THE MAGICAL PEARL

TS: Deliverance from suffering for all living beings: the Good Friend left the palace and saw the suffering, disease and starvation of every creature. To help them, the Good Friend distributed all the treasures from the state treasury and then decided to go find a magical pearl.

WS: Deliverance from suffering for all living beings: the Good Friend left the palace and saw people kill animals, catch birds and fishes, and other living creatures kill each other to feed themselves. The Good Friend distributed two thirds of the state's treasures to help them and then received an advice to go for a *cintāmaṇi* pearl.

CSC: Mother's disease: Syöngüi was ready to give his life to help his mother, he was praying every day for her healing and, one day, a Taoist appeared in front of him and told him about a magical pearl that could help his mother. Therefore, he decided to go beyond the sea to the "Western Heaven", that is the land of immortals.





NOTE: It is important to note that this motif of a socially superior person, such as a King or parent, being ill and then healed by monks could be found in early Buddhist texts. For example, in *Samguk Yusa*, there is a story about the monk Wŏn Kwang, who healed the King of Silla by reading and interpreting Buddhist texts.<sup>24</sup>

The reason to go for a *cintāmaṇi* pearl in the vernacular fiction is not “personal”, but is a reason to express filial piety, one of the most important Confucian virtues, on the one hand. On the other hand, it is a reason to restore harmony in the state, because Syŏngŭi’s mother is a Queen, which is why the harmony in the state also depends on her well-being.

#### 4. PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

TS: The Good Friend prayed to Three Jewels of Buddhism and Indra sent a saint to the earth to help the prince find the Dragon King and obtain the pearl. The Good Friend asked his father for permission, got it and went to the sea with his younger brother.

WS: The Good Friend received advice from the minister to bring the *cintāmaṇi* pearl and wanted to go but did not get his parents’ permission. He went on a hunger strike, and so his parents finally let him go. They gathered five hundred merchants to search for treasures beyond the sea. The Evil Friend was afraid that their parents would dislike him even more and drive him away from the palace, so he joined the Good Friend.

The Good Friend prepared ships for the journey and asked the merchants if their intentions were strong enough, frightening them with the difficulties of the sea journey: there were seven anchors and, each day, the Good Friend cut on of them, until, on the seventh day, the last anchor holding the ship was cut.

CSC: Syŏngŭi prepared the boat and left without Hyangŭi.

#### 5. THE JOURNEY

TS: In open sea, the two brothers and the sage were hit by a storm. The Evil Friend was scared and asked to be returned to the shore, so the sage sent him back. The Good Friend and the sage reached the Dragon King’s palace.

WS: The Good Friend and his companions reached the land of jewels; his companions, having made their fortunes, left the Good Friend who went further to look for the *cintāmaṇi* pearl. The only one who knew the way to the Dragon King’s palace was an old blind master mariner. He guided the Good Friend for three weeks, through several rivers, but when they reached the land of silver, he died and the Good Friend had to overcome the rest of obstacles alone. Subsequently, he visited the lands of silver, gold, lapis-lazuli, the lotus lake full of poison serpents, and finally, reached the Dragon King’s palace. Three times he was faced with poisonous snake- and dragon-guards at the external, middle and inner gates, but walked through them protected by his kind-heartedness.

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<sup>24</sup> *Samguk jusa* 2012. p. 274.



CSC: Syǒngǔi was going to the west. He overcame the Syǒgang river, and then he was attacked by a sea monster: Syǒngǔi prayed to the Gods of Heaven and Earth, as well as the Dragons, the lords of the four seas, and the sea monster left. Then he met an immortal man on a boat. This man had a fan in the shape of a phoenix tail, he told the prince about the Ruo Shui river and disappeared. Syǒngǔi again prayed to Heaven that he wanted to save his mother and other two immortals appeared. One was floating on a banana leaf, the other one floated on a whale and chanted hymns to the wind and moon. The first one took the prince on the banana leaf across the river and gave him a token<sup>25</sup> that would protect him from the Dragon in the sea. Syǒngǔi arrived in the land of immortals, at the insistence of a celestial, and went to the cave in which the Buddha was located.

NOTE: General inconsistency of narrative comes as the side effect of later juxtaposition of plot elements and can be noted many times. It seems that the later editor of this classical Buddhist story did not care too much about the source and he lost or mismatched some elements, which did not help to entertain the reader, like the actual geographical logic of Syǒngǔi's route. It was important to save the "crossing of two rivers" as a general element or every pilgrimage route, and to describe the beauty of the Western land according to traditional Chinese models, symbols and lexical sets. We intentionally leave out of the discussion the image of the "Western land," only noticing that this image combined two ideas: first, it was associated with India, the pilgrimage centre, and second, it was associated with the place where souls went after death and which was closed for ordinary mortal men. To enhance this effect, the Ruo Shui river was used as the symbol of the boundary between the world of the dead and the living.

Also, curious enough that there are three water obstacles mentioned in WS, while in CSC the main character crosses three rivers: the Syǒgang, the Ruo Shui, and the Yangtze.

Introducing Taoist immortals was a common thing in later fictional Korean literature of Yi dynasty times. The original personalities of Eight Taoist immortals of Chinese mythology soon became generalized by Korean authors as the "sage with supernatural powers" trope. Taoist immortals, as well as Taoist sages, were believed to have magical powers, and they helped move the narrative by giving characters magical items, guiding them to sacred places or teaching them special (often magical) skills. However, the banana leaf of this specific character is, probably, a reference to Buddhist scriptures written on plant leaves, so we can speculate, to some extent, that this role in the narrative was earlier played by some Bodhisattva or another Buddhist celestial, who was later replaced by a Taoist.

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<sup>25</sup> This token was supposed to help Syǒngǔi deal with the Dragon King, keeper of the pearl, just like in other narratives we are considering. Here, for some reason, the Dragon King was replaced by the Buddha, and the token remains unused, contributing to the overall inconsistency of this story.



## 6. OBTAINING THE MAGICAL PEARL

TS: The Good Friend and the sage came to the Dragon King's palace and explained that, according to the will of Heaven, the prince had come for the *cintāmaṇi* pearl to help all living beings. The Dragon King gave it to him. The sage advised the prince to play the lute in difficult times and then disappeared. The Good Friend returned to the shore by ship.

WS: The Good Friend described why he had come, and the Dragon said that he would only give him the pearl after instructing the Dragon in Buddhist teaching for seven days. Seven days passed, the Dragon gave him the pearl and sent the Good Friend to the shore with the help of spirits.

CSC: Syōngūi came to the palace following the instructions of the immortal and met a monk who would not let him go further. After realizing that the Buddha had already been waiting for Syōngūi, he allowed him to enter. As soon as he entered, the Buddha immediately praised Syōngūi for his filial piety and awarded him medicine for his mother, in the form of a pearl, and instructed him to beware of his brother. Syōngūi returned to the shore from the world of celestials on the banana leaf.

## 7. MEETING WITH THE BROTHER

TS: When they met on the shore, the Evil Friend asked whether the Good Friend had obtained the pearl. The prince responded positively and, being tired, fell asleep. While the Good Friend was sleeping, the Evil Friend blinded him, pricking his eyes with bamboo sticks, took the pearl and went back home. Upon returning, the Evil Friend lied to their parents about everything that had happened to them.

WS: The Good Friend met his brother on the shore and learned from him that all their companions had drowned, because their ship had sunk because it was overloaded with treasures. The Good Friend gave the pearl to the Evil Friend to guard it while he slept. The Evil Friend was jealous of how their parents loved his brother. So, like in TS, the Evil Friend stabbed the Good Friend's eyes with bamboo sticks in his sleep. The Good Friend woke up and thought he was being attacked by robbers, but the Forest Spirit told the Good Friend that the robber was his younger brother. Upon returning, the Evil Friend told his parents that he had obtained the pearl, and the Good Friend died along with their companions. Father and mother drove away the Evil Friend, telling him that he should not have returned with such news, so the Evil Friend left in fury and buried the magical pearl.

CSC: Hyangūi, envying his young brother, decided to prevent him from bringing the medicine to their mother. He left the palace to meet his younger brother and kill him. When they met, Hyangūi told Syōngūi that their mother felt worse because she was worried about him and that he should not come back, because she would feel even worse after seeing her son being so unfilial. Hyangūi got the medicine by deception and then ordered some mercenaries to kill Syōngūi and all his companions. The com-



panions, seeing the mercenaries, tried to escape by jumping into the water and they drowned. Hyangŭi ordered his warriors to kill his brother, but one of them, named T'aeyong, did not follow the order, raised his sword and drove away all other soldiers of Hyangŭi. In response to this, Hyangŭi rushed at Syöngŭi himself, poked his eyes with his sword and threw him into the sea.

Upon returning home, Hyangŭi gave his mother the medicine, she consumed it and recovered, but continued to suffer because the youngest son had not yet returned. Hyangŭi said that Syöngŭi had become a monk during the journey and forgotten about the human world. The parents did not trust him, but accepted things as they were.

#### 8. BLIND PRINCE<sup>26</sup> SHOWS UP IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

TS: The blinded Good Friend tried to find a way home, but did not succeed. The God of the Earth was deeply touched by his suffering and sent him a celestial man to give him a lute. So the Good Friend was playing the lute and chanted hymns to the Buddha and was able to find the way home. It happened on the fifth day of the fifth moon.

WS: The Good Friend wandered in sorrow and reached the land of Li che Po (Rṣabha). There, the Good Friend came across a herd of cows that was tended by a virtuous man named Lee. Five hundred cows licked his eyes and removed the bamboo sticks from his eyes, alleviating his suffering. Lee invited the Good Friend to stay at his house. The house was very poor and, after a while, the family started to dislike that the Good Friend was living with them. He decided to leave and asked the virtuous Lee to make a lute for him and bring him to the capital. He played wonderful music in the market place and was able to feed five hundred hungry children with the offerings. A gardener from the palace saw him and invited him to play music in the King's garden, to chase away the birds.

CSC: The boat with Syöngŭi was cast on the shore of the Cho kingdom. He made a bamboo pipe and played. Minister Ho found him and was amazed by his music and his strength to survive being blind in the wilderness. Minister Ho took Syöngŭi to the palace, gave him food and housing.

NOTE: The story in TS is shorter than the other two. The Good Friend did not wander in other countries but went home directly. We believe it could be because the story of two brothers had a long oral tradition, so the details without didactic meaning could be omitted. Also, it might give a hint on a more complicated and diverse roots of the story. The story of two brothers might be a compound of minor narratives, melted to-

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<sup>26</sup> While it is still unclear whether blindness of a ruler makes him less rightful, or just that a general disability was considered a fatal flaw for a king, there are few narratives in classical Buddhist literature, involving blinding as an ultimate trial for a pure-hearted king. Also, in the classical Indian epic *Mahabharata*, a divine child born in royal family was considered flawed and could not possibly become a king, just because, with all his virtues, he was born blind.



gether rather early, to-wit: a story of a virtuous ruler granting his people wishes and giving away his eyes as ultimate sacrifice, a story of a journey beyond the sea, containing description of never-seen lands, and finally the story of a good and an evil brother. All these plots could be found separately in various *jātaka* compendia.

## 9. MEETING WITH THE KING'S DAUGHTER AND WEDDING CEREMONY

TS: this story is omitted.

WS: Many years ago, the King of Li Che Po promised his daughter in marriage to the Good Friend, but when she met the Good Friend in the garden, she did not recognize him because he was dressed as a blind beggar. Nevertheless, she talked to him and announced to the King that she wanted to marry only him and no one else. She stayed in a small hut with the Good Friend as his wife. One day, when she wanted to leave him for a while, the Good Friend suspected that she would return to the palace. She swore by his blind eye<sup>27</sup> that what she said was true, and one of his eyes recovered. Then, the Good Friend confessed that he was not a beggar but the prince of Parane. First, she was suspicious, so he swore by his other blind eye and completely regained his sight.

When the King of Li Che Po knew about this, he sent the Good Friend to the border of the state and met him properly with gifts and esteem. They solemnized a marriage according to the rules and prepared to go to Parane.

CSC: The princess met Syōngūi at the palace; they played music together, recited verses and got closer. She did not care about his low status and considered him an outstanding man. One day a goose<sup>28</sup> brought a letter from his mother and he wanted to read it so much that he regained his sight. Living at minister Ho's house, Syōngūi prepared for the exams, passed them perfectly, married the King's daughter and sent the goose back home.

NOTE: In CSC this story about meeting the King's daughter consists of a lot of typical motifs from other Korean and Chinese prose works. For instance, their first connection happened during a moonlit night when they were playing music on a distance but their sounds called each other and followed one another making one performance together. We can see the same trope in the early fiction *Kuunmong* ("The Cloud Dream of the Nine") by Kim Man-jung (1637–1692), in the works of Kim Sisūp (1435–1493), etc.

<sup>27</sup> This is a good example of Indian ontological belief in the power of a truthful word, found in Vedic rituals, which evolved into the *satyavaca* trope: someone swears to be saying the truth, and if they lie, they receive punishment, but if their words are true, something else happens. Sometimes, *satyavaca* is the only valid way for a character to prove he or she is right and to resolve an argument.

<sup>28</sup> Goose in Sanskrit literature is a bird able to walk on earth, swim in water and fly in the skies, which makes it the ultimate traveller with no place it cannot reach. Goose can also be sent as a messenger or negotiator.

## 10. JOURNEY BACK HOME

TS: This story is omitted.

WS: After the truth about the identity of the Good Friend was revealed, he asked the King of Li che Po to invite the shepherd Lee to the palace and reward him generously.

It also tells about a goose that had been raised by the Good Friend and longed for him. The Good Friend's mother sent the goose in search of her son, giving him a letter saying that the Good Friend's parents were blinded by tears. The goose wandered for a long time and finally found the Good Friend in the palace. The Good Friend wrote them the whole story back. The Evil Friend was sent to prison. The Good Friend came back home with his wife.

CSC: After the marriage, Syǒngŭi went home. He passed places he had visited on the way for the pearl and made offerings to the souls of his killed companions. When the goose arrived home, Hyangŭi was locked in the palace. Hyangŭi knew about Syǒngŭi's arrival and sent mercenaries to kill him. Syǒngŭi fought the leader of the killers and the goose helped the prince. Syǒngŭi's wife killed the leader of the bandits. The younger brother of the bandit leader wanted to kill the prince, but Syǒngŭi killed him first. The last obstacle on the way home for Syǒngŭi was his brother. As a result, Hyangŭi was killed by T'aeyong, the warrior who did not follow Hyangŭi's order to kill his brother during the episode after obtaining the pearl. Then T'aeyong killed himself for having violated Confucian morality. Thanks to this character, justice was obtained and Syǒngŭi could remain an exemplary Confucian nobleman.

## 11. ARRIVING HOME

TS: The Crown Prince returned to his homeland, playing the lute on the summer holiday, *Tano* (the midsummer holiday celebrating light and the sun). During the celebration, his wife watched the boat race and heard the sounds of a lute. By the style of performance, she immediately recognized the Good Friend. He told her how he had been wandering and how he had come across their country. They also informed his parents. The sight was returned to the Good Friend by praying to the Buddha, then his wife licked his eyes, and he regained his sight. The Evil Friend fled from the kingdom in fear of punishment from his king father. The *cintāmaṇi pearl* was also presented during the offerings to the Buddha, the Sun, Indra and other gods<sup>29</sup>, and on the next morning the tower and streets were covered with treasures and food. The prince was glad that he could help all living beings. In the end, he and his wife left the palace and went to the mountains, where they built a hut and attained nirvana.

WS: When he arrived home, the Good Friend asked about the health of his parents and went to the dungeon where the Evil Friend was locked. The Good Friend hugged him and forgave him for everything. Then he dug up the pearl and asked it to recover

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<sup>29</sup> Old Hindu gods still exist in the Buddhist world and sometimes even take action, disguised or revealed.



the sight of his parents. When the parents saw their son, they were delighted and there was a great celebration. The Good Friend performed a ceremony with the pearl and made a wish for the salvation of all living creatures in the world on the fifteenth day of the lunar month, after which rice, garments, and jewelry fell from the sky and the world was cleansed of filth.

CSC: The first thing Syŏngŭi did upon his arrival was inquiring about his mother's health. Then, Hyangŭi and the mercenaries were buried. Over time, Syŏngŭi became the ruler of both states, and over fifty years of rule in the states there were no unfilial sons and treacherous brothers.

We can summarize all of the above in the following table:

**TABLE 1.** Text comparison

釋迦如來十地修行記 석가여래십지수행기 <b>TS</b>	月印釋譜 월인석보 <b>WS</b>	적성의전 <b>CSC</b>
1328/1448	1459	19th cent.
<i>Hanmun</i>	Korean (mixed script). <sup>30</sup>	Korean (alphabet).
<b>Purpose of composition:</b>		
1. as an example of self-training and proper practices among more and more decaying monks in Late Koryŏ. <sup>31</sup> 2. popularization of the Buddha's biography with commoners.	WS was written to be read inside the palace.	Easy reading.
<b>Target audience:</b>		
From high-rank monks to low-rank monks and commoners.	From kings (secular Buddhists) to other members of the Royal family and court. <sup>32</sup>	For commoners.

<sup>30</sup> Mixed script is a form of writing the Korean language that uses a mixture of the Korean alphabet and Chinese characters: native Korean words, including grammatical markers were generally written in alphabet, and words borrowed from Chinese or created from Sino-Korean roots, were generally written in characters.

<sup>31</sup> Volkov 1985, p. 152.

<sup>32</sup> According to Ross King's paper (2018, p.9), Chŏng Soyŏn (2009) and others suppose that the target audience of the WCK could be palace women and other palace employees (likely also certain monks and lowly palace functionaries) involved in performing the rituals at which the hymns would have been sung.





釋迦如來十地修行記 석가여래십지수행기 <b>TS</b>	月印釋譜 월인석보 <b>WS</b>	적성의전 <b>CSC</b>
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**Based on:**

TS is based on the *sokkang* texts 俗講 which circulated orally during late Silla and early Koryŏ (IX-X). These *sokkang* texts, in their turn, were based on *pyŏnmun* 變文, which, in their turn again, were based on the texts about the former lives of the Buddha, from the complete collection of Buddhist Sutras, Laws and Treatises (*Tripitaka*). Then they are supposed to be edited as a kind of narrative form, exemplified by a record of the Buddha's practices by a senior Korean monk in 1328.

So, briefly, the consequence is as follows:

The complete collection of Buddhist Sutras, Laws and Treatises (*Tripitaka*) → *pyenmun* 變文 → *sokkang* 俗講 → edited narrative text of TS.

DFB: 大方便佛報恩經 *Great Skillful Means Sutra on the Buddha's Repayment of Kindness*.  
Based NOT on *pyŏnmun* 變文 for commoners, but on the classical Sutra from the Canon, the earliest translation into Chinese from Sanskrit text.

Based on TS.

**Characteristic features of the text:**

- The text is dramatically shorter.
- The storyline is tenser.
- It has narrative features of heroic story or myth.
- A finale that is unique for this plot: the prince and his wife are not ruling as generous king and queen but leave for the mountains and continue Buddhist practices until becoming *bodhisatvas*.

The text of WS is very accurately translated from Chinese Sutra DFB, nothing is inserted and nothing is omitted.

1. There is a lot of Confucian elements in the text: the hero is expected to pass the State exams, is guided by his filial piety, etc.
2. All characteristic features of traditional Korean fiction are preserved (e.g., the action taking place in China, Chinese poetic and image-bearing expressions are used, historical personalities appear in the narrative, etc.)
3. As for Buddhist motifs, the author did not care too much about inserting the proper details into the text. There are some Buddhist details connected to the original of the story but they are not real (e.g., when the hero came to the dragon's palace, he met the Buddhist Master who wore a yellow hat, had a rosary in his right hand and a Sutra in his left hand. All these features are attributes of different *bodhisatvas*). It is supposed that it happened because Buddhism lost its position among literates.



## CONCLUSION

From all the above, we can conclude that variations in the storylines, specific symbols and details depend on many aspects: the purpose of composing, the target audience, the position of Buddhism in the country at any given time, etc. De-sacralization of the story and the need to entertain the reader inevitably led to less logical connections between narrative elements and mixed plotlines. More than that, we can see that the CSC acquires the features of folk tales, setting itself apart from Buddhist works through its portrayal of heroes and events. Unlike in the narrative of the WS where the elder brother embodies goodness and the younger brother is cast as evil, in the CSC this disposition is reversed: the younger brother emerges as virtuous, aligning more closely with the archetypes found in folk tales and different folklore traditions all over the world. Another example concerns the goal of the journey. While Buddhist literature depicts the hero undertaking perilous journeys to alleviate the suffering of living beings, the CSC shifts its focus towards personal narratives steeped in filial piety, with the hero wanting to help his mother — a theme resonant with the stories found in folk tales. Finally, another example is in the different endings of these texts: instead of forgiving the evil brother as in the WS, the hero of the CSC confronts and defeats him, aligning with themes of justice and personal honor prevalent in folk tales. This shift emphasizes the fiction's departure from the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhist literature towards a more narrative tradition focused on individual deeds and their consequences. At the same time, the intrusion of Confucian patterns made the story more relatable to a potential reader by mimicking established literary tropes.

Text as a communication medium helped integrate Buddhist thought into literati culture but also de-sacralized it and made it vulnerable to criticism. From the point of view of literary tradition, Buddhist stories were adopted and treated as merely a narrative source, with no consideration given to their symbolic meaning. As we can see from the case of the story of two brothers, the plot that originally used Indian folk motifs was transferred to the Buddhist tradition as *jātaka*, then travelled through China and acquired Confucian moderations, to be edited as a tale or a piece of easy reading in later Korean tradition, completely losing its key iconographic features and flourishing narrative.

Translating the WS and analyzing its key features helps to detect different approaches and levels for such adaptations throughout Korean literary works. The variations in the storylines, specific symbols, and details reveal various levels of extent to which narrative could be altered, depending on the purpose of composing, the target audience, and reflects the position of Buddhism in the country at any given time. This story could be a great example of Korean literature that combines all that Korean culture could gather, to form a unique, yet recognizable work of literature.

Therefore we can say that the present study is not only a comparison of invariants, but also an example of the Koreanization of Indian, Chinese and other stories, providing a promising avenue for future research in the field labelled “the text on the way to naturalization”.



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