

Enduring, Endearing Korea

Marian Werner

The author and her husband paid their eighth visit to South Korea in 2007. They would like to return many more times, but are not getting any younger and the day is inevitably approaching when they will have to put away their maps and leaflets and rely on wonderful memories and their photographs and video films. Starting in 1999 they have spent a total of twenty-four weeks exploring different regions of the country, with a particular interest in seeking out Buddhist temples. Last year they went back to four places already somewhat familiar to them: Seoul, Seoraksan, Gyeongju and Busan. On this occasion they visited thirty-nine temples and hermitages, twenty-four for the first time. The following account is not a travelogue but is simply an Englishwoman's attempt to set down some of the remarkable characteristics of Korean culture which have drawn her and her husband to return over and over again. As on every other visit, there were surprises in store, from a country which has endured numerous setbacks over the centuries but has managed to preserve strong links with its past and to come up smiling.

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Before all our expeditions to South Korea, there has been a tingling sense of anticipation. That was so in 1999, arriving for my part in a state of blissful ignorance, and it was so in 2007, even though we knew by then what to expect in general terms.

But there is nothing “general” about Korea, and certainly not about the Buddhist temples and hermitages we have seen, now numbering more than two hundred, each of which is unique. For example, I have seen only one temple which has the Korean national flag hanging behind the shrine (Cheonusa in Namsan Village), and only one where the bell hangs over a pit so that it is possible to stand underneath and see the characters inscribed inside it (Buramsa, Seoul).

In fact it was at Buramsa that we began last year’s explorations. It was not on any of our maps, but we had kept with our papers an article from the *Korea Herald* in 2000 which described the temple and its location, so on the day after we landed in Seoul we set off for it. That was on 16 April. Why April? Well, we had never yet seen the famed cherry blossom of Korea, having arrived too early in one spring and too late in another, and hoped we would be lucky this time. I thought of the lines by the English poet, A. E. Housman,

“Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough”

and felt optimistic. There was indeed some blossom to be seen in Seoul, but not in the quantity which was to dazzle us later. Meanwhile we were discovering many unusual features at Buramsa, besides the bell. Founded during the Silla dynasty, the temple has massive pillars at the entrance, contrasting with the delicate arrangements of pansies and violas adjacent to it. The carved triad on a large rock is impressive, as is the tall pagoda in front of the Daeungeon, hung at the time of our visit with hundreds of colourful lanterns for the forthcoming birthday of the Buddha. I learnt from signboards that precious wooden printing-blocks were produced at Buramsa in the 17th and 18th centuries, two sets about the Buddha’s life and two about his

disciples. Another special memory I carried away with me concerned the Jindo dog belonging to the gardener. In England I am wary of strange dogs as they sometimes spring at me, whereas I have always found dogs in Korea to be polite, keeping their distance. I noticed the gardener's dog approaching me and wondered how close she would come. About four feet away she stopped, lay down on the ground and rolled over onto her back. Then, having conveyed her friendly greeting, she got up and walked away. A Korean couple who had been watching were as charmed as I.

Buramsa—described in the *Korea Herald* article as “an alcove of tranquillity”—is quite high up on a mountainside, but we were afterwards taken almost to the top of the mountain by a kindly Korean who stopped his car when we were leaving, and asked where we were going. We had seen a sign for Jeonbosa, but did not think we could reach it. Without more ado, he invited us to get in, and drove us up the steep winding road to the terraces on which it stands. Stupendous views of misty distant hills spread below us. Magnificent azaleas bloomed in pots outside the main hall. Golden figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were arranged inside, around a central triad. I looked in vain for Sansin, to whom I usually paid my respects, but instead found a large grotto for the Sea King to the left of the main hall; artificial lotuses and turtles decorated the shrine. Even higher up the slope was a carving of the Buddha on a rock face.

It is difficult to convey in words the sense of pleasurable awe I experienced at those two temples and indeed all the others we have ever visited in Korea. Aesthetically they are very satisfying, but the spiritual reflections they engender set them apart from beautiful works of art of a temporal kind. The thoughts and prayers of the Buddhist monks, nuns and lay devotees at each temple imbue the images, the carvings, the paintings and the very stones with their individual energies.

To save time, we took a plane from Gimpo to Yangyang airport, and stayed in Seoraksan at a hotel which makes me feel very much at home. The Kensington Stars Hotel not only displays in its western-style restaurant many paintings and photographs of the British Royal Family but also now has

two red Routemaster double-decker buses on its front lawn! Routemasters are, alas, no longer used by London Transport. To complete the picture, several members of the hotel staff were dressed in Beefeater costumes. The last part of the journey to the hotel was down a long pink tunnel. The cherry trees lining the road from the coast were in full bloom, and against the dark background of rugged mountains made a breathtaking sight. We were delighted we had arrived at the right time.

Across the road from this very modern hotel is a potent reminder of Korea's long history. When we stayed at the Kensington in 1999, there were several pieces of an ancient 3-tier stone pagoda lying by the road. Now it has been restored, silent witness to the establishment in 653 by the monk Jajang Yulsa of the Divine Undertaking Temple, Sinheungsa, on a nearby site.

I wrote in an earlier article about seeing the war memorials in the Seoraksan National Park, and this spring, in Busan, I was to be moved to tears at the United Nations Memorial Cemetery.

But there was much still to see in and around Seoraksan, including Naksansa. We knew it had suffered a disastrous fire since our last visit but it was still a shock to find the hillside bare of trees and learn that the Joseon dynasty bronze bell had been destroyed by the heat. However, restoration work was speeding ahead. Standing on the bluff above Hongnyeonam, I gazed down at the rocks and waves of the East Sea and comforted myself with the thought that no fire could change that view, which Uisang must often have contemplated in 676, when he founded the temple.

The influence of the great scholar and builder monks of seventh century Korea extended across the whole country and has not been forgotten today. When we first went, in 2002, to Bunhwangsa, in Gyeongju, a festival in honour of Wonhyo was taking place, with speeches, ceremonies, and an exhibition of paintings of scenes from his colourful life. This time there was no festival and hardly anyone else about, so we could walk freely around the sublime three-storeyed pagoda, erected in 634 during the reign of Queen Seondeok, and ponder what it must have looked like originally, when it was seven or nine stories high. I have often wondered if the Queen resembled in

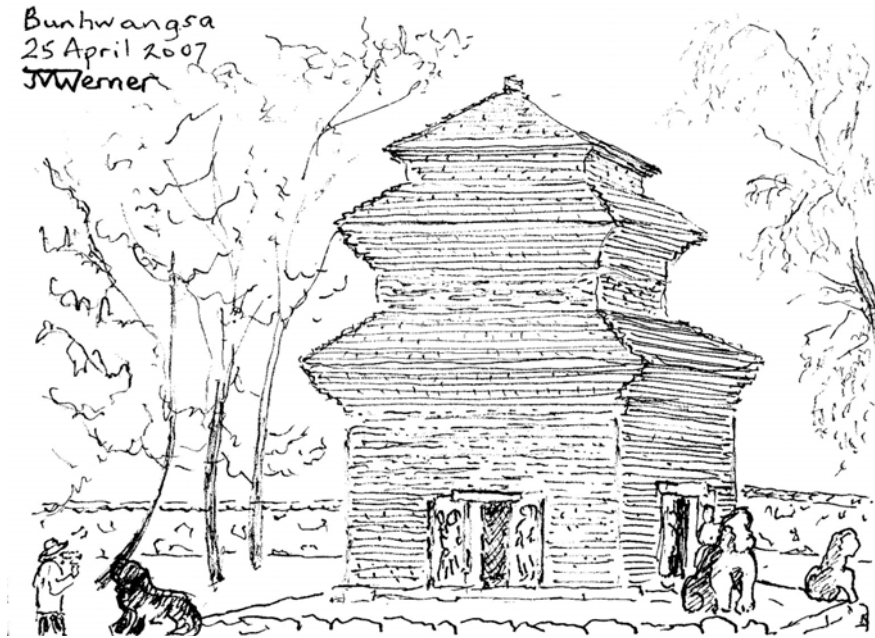


Fig. 1. Bunhwangsa (25 April 2007 J.M. Werner)

any way the English Queen Elizabeth I, although the marvellous works created in the latter's reign, nearly a thousand years later, were not of such spiritual import. From Bunhwangsa we crossed the lane to the site of Hwangnyongsa, Silla's largest temple, the Imperial Dragon Temple. Again, my imagination went into overdrive, recalling that the huge nine-storey wooden pagoda in the courtyard was erected in Queen Seondeok's reign and though destroyed several times over the centuries was not finally demolished until 1238 when the Mongols burnt it to the ground. As I stood there, lost in thought, the silence was broken by the unmistakable song of a skylark rising above me. Surely in every country where larks sing, poets and musicians are inspired by them? The English composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, wrote an exquisite tribute, *The Lark Ascending*, and our poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, started his *To a Skylark* with the famous words, "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!" I imagined

Queen Seondeok halting on that spot to listen to the very same music. Past and present, the particular and the universal, seemed to hover in the air at that moment.

Although we used local transport to see many temples around Gyeongju, it was only thanks to our good friend, Professor An, that we were able to get to several we had not visited previously, among them Bogwangsa, Geumcheonsa and the small hermitage of Baegunam. Another good friend, Mr Cho, enabled us to see Jajangam. Years earlier, we had stood by the river at Oeosa and looked wistfully at that tiny hermitage perched high above, not dreaming we would one day be taken to it. The kindness of our friends was all the greater because this was examination time, and both were heavily involved.

In Busan we were taken by a pharmacist friend, Soon Hee, to dinner at an astonishing fish restaurant unlike any we had seen in Britain. On this and two previous occasions she had very kindly made our hotel arrangements. We were invited by another kind friend, Professor Jang, to make some introductory remarks at a conference of Buddhists at Anguksa. Despite his having been very busy organizing the conference, he drove us next day to see Jangjansa and Bucheonam, a small hermitage by the side of a stream into which Gwaneum's flask is eternally pouring.

Beomosa cannot, of course, be omitted when visiting Busan. Of the eleven hermitages associated with the temple, we had over the years seen nine, and now managed to walk to one more—Manseongam, where ladies were making lanterns and plied us with ginseng drinks and rice cakes. We then continued further up, to a solitary hermitage, Yeongnakam, where we were grateful for the pear and apple brought out to us by a lady who perhaps had noticed that the long rocky climb had taken its toll.

At the lovingly tended United Nations Memorial Cemetery we paid our respects to the dead of many countries who gave their lives in the June War. I made a point of looking closely at the Canadian memorial. When working in Montreal forty years ago I learnt from the secretary at the next desk that her brother had been killed in Korea. Among the names on the memorial

was his, Edward J. Hanspiker. I was very moved also by the New Zealand memorial, shaped like the chin tattoo given to Maori women when they reach adulthood, as a sign that they can now accept pain and take responsibility. The notches on the side of the memorial are for the men who died, but unusually the design reflects also, and pays tribute to, the women who suffered anxiety and bereavement as a result of the war. Perhaps somewhere there is a monument to the Korean women who suffered so grievously during those terrible years.

Back in Seoul, our days were very full. On the invitation of Professor Yong-pyo Kim, my husband gave a lecture at Dongguk University, and in the evening we attended a delightful performance of traditional Korean dance, in which E kon mi starred, and also her 64-year-old teacher. By chance we found our way one afternoon to Jaunam, and were standing by the rock carving of Mireuk when a black squirrel ran up to a small bag that had been left as an offering, extracted a sweet, swiftly climbed a tree, discarded the wrapping and sat eating its trophy for the next quarter of an hour.

There is space for me to mention just one more memorable experience. On our very last day in Korea, before we flew back to London from Seoul, our friend Karen and her mother enabled us to visit for the first time Seunggasa, reached by a special minibus that safely negotiated the formidably steep road up the mountainside. We were amazed at the artistry shown in the carvings of the nine-storey pagoda at the top of the long staircase, and admired all the many other unusual features of the temple, restored after the June War. Then I wandered off to pay my respects to Sansin, and lost sight of my husband. Asking our friends if they had seen him, I was told, "Yes, he has gone up the cliff." Now, my husband dislikes having to climb steps or staircases in London, but I found him at the top of 108 steps which lead up to a large carving of the Buddha. When I told a Christian friend this story, he commented with a twinkle in his eye, "Ah, Marian, that's the power of the Buddha for you!"

If this was indeed our last visit to South Korea, we have accumulated a rich store of memories, of friendships made and glorious scenes beheld. We

feel privileged to have been able to see so much of a country that has endeared itself to us many times over.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, S=Sanskrit)

- Anguksa (K) 安國寺
 Baegunam (K) 白雲庵
 Beomeosa (K) 梵魚寺
 Bunhwangsa (K) 芬皇寺
 Buramsa (K) 佛巖寺
 Geumcheonsa (K) 金泉寺
 Gwaneum (K), Avalokiteśvara (S) 觀音
 Jajangam (K) 慈藏菴
 Jajang Yulsa (K) 慈藏 律師
 Jaunam (K) 慈雲菴
 Mireuk (K), Maitreya (S) 彌勒
 Naksansa (K) 洛山寺
 Oeosa (K) 吾魚寺
 Sansin (K) 山神
 Seondeok (K) 善德
 Seoraksan (K) 雪嶽山
 Seunggasa (K) 僧伽寺
 Sinheungsa (K) 神興寺
 Uisang (K) 義湘
 Wonhyo (K) 元曉