

Koryo Period

The period of the Koryo dynasty (918–1392) was a highpoint in the history and culture of Korea and it is from the name Koryo that Korea's English name derives. Koryo was a long dynasty, beginning at the time of the collapse of the Chinese Tang dynasty, outliving the Song and Yuan, and lasting long enough to witness the rise of the Ming (1368–1644). The founder of Koryo, Wang Kon, had a vision of restoring the glory of the ancient Koguryo kingdom and therefore established a new capital much further north than the Silla capital at Kyongju. The new capital, Songdo, was situated in present-day Kaesong, in North Korea.

Wang Kon (King Taejo) pursued a policy of expansion northwards, which inevitably brought him into conflict with the Khitan (Liao). This eventually resulted in three Khitan invasions of Koryo between 993 and 1018, during which time the Khitan even briefly occupied the Koryo capital. The third invasion resulted in an overwhelming victory for Koryo, following which, between 1033 and 1044, it built a thousand-*li* – a thousand-mile – Long Wall from the mouth of the Amnok river in the west, stretching right across the peninsula to the east coast. This wall was also intended for defence against the northern Jurchen tribesmen who founded the Jin dynasty in 1115, overran the Khitan Liao dynasty in 1125 and eventually captured the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng in 1127. The only reason that the Jin did not invade Koryo was that the latter consented to enter into a relationship of suzerain-subject with the Jin.¹ The early Koryo period was a time of splendour at the capital, a time of peaceful cultural and economic exchange with Song China, which had a great impact on Koryo culture. Within the framework of the tributary system that bound Korea to China, official embassies and private traders exported to China gold, silver, copper, ginseng and pine nuts, as well as paper, brushes, ink and fans. In return, Koryo imported silk, porcelain, books, musical instruments, spices and medicines.² However, when the Song requested that Koryo help them resist the Khitan and Jin by allying and attacking from both sides, the Koryo refused, not willing to become part of the conflict between the Jin and Song. Despite this, trade between the Song and Koryo flourished, even resulting in the arrival of Arab ships in Songdo's port, bringing mercury, spices and medicines.³

41. The storehouse at Hae'in temple on Mt Kaya in south-central Korea, where the complete Buddhist scriptures, carved on over 80,000 woodblocks in the 13th century, are stored.

Admiration for things Chinese was a feature of Koryo life, especially amongst the upper classes. In fact, Koryo's founder, Wang Kon, said: 'We in the East have long admired Tang ways. In culture, ritual and music, we are entirely following its model.'⁴ A Chinese-style civil service examination system was established in 958 and literature in Chinese flourished. Civil officials took pride in their ability to memorize the Chinese classics and students practised writing poems within a

stipulated time – this was called ‘Notched candle poetics’.⁵ However, this emphasis on the literary life led to the downgrading of the status of the military. High-level military commanders were reduced to acting as royal bodyguards in the pleasure-loving royal court at Songdo and ordinary soldiers were looked upon as little more than menial labourers. The reign of King Uijong (reigned 1147–70) is portrayed in the *Koryo sa* as the height of decadence, with the king more interested in building pavilions and digging lily ponds than running the country. Not surprisingly, a military coup erupted in 1170. King Uijong was removed and replaced by his younger brother and power fell to the military, with the authority of the throne rendered powerless, although the monarchy was preserved.⁶

In 1231 the military regime was faced with an invasion by the Mongols and so moved the Koryo capital in 1232 to Kanghwa island, exploiting the Mongols’ fear of the sea. Over the next thirty years, the Mongols were to invade Koryo a total of six times, but the court and ruling class remained fairly unaffected on Kanghwa island, continuing their luxurious lifestyle which was supported by tax revenues. The Mongols’ intention in invading Korea was to use it as a bridge to invade Japan and thereby reach Southern Song China. Terrible losses were suffered by the Korean peasantry and eventually, in 1258, the last military dictator was assassinated, power reverted to the king and peace was made with the Mongols. As a result, Koryo was forced to take part in two Mongol campaigns against the Japanese in 1274 and 1281, having to take responsibility for the construction of warships and the provision of supplies. Both campaigns failed, largely due to the Mongols’ lack of experience of seaborne invasions.⁷

There followed a period of Koryo subservience to the Mongols, who had established the Yuan dynasty in China in 1271. A succession of Koryo kings were married to Mongol princesses, starting with King Chungnyol (reigned 1275–1308) who married a daughter of Kublai Khan and hung sheepskins at the entrance to the palace.⁸ Koryo crown princes had to reside in Beijing as hostages until they became king. Mongol dress, hairstyles and language were used at the court in Songdo and the Yuan demanded tribute in the form of gold, silver, cloth, grain, ginseng and falcons for use in hunting. This led to the establishment of many falconries in Korea, the owners of which had special privileges and became very rich.⁹

In China the Yuan faced increasing popular opposition and in 1368 fell to a new leader who established his dynasty as the Ming. Reaction in Korea was divided between pro-Yuan and pro-Ming sentiment. Attempts by the king to impose reform on his nobles added to the confusion within the country, which further faced attacks from Chinese brigands and Japanese pirates. These incursions were fought off, but eventually the Ming threatened to reclaim land in the northeast of the peninsula which they maintained belonged to China. One of the generals sent to repel the Chinese, Yi Song-gye, took advantage of the turmoil, returned south and in 1388 seized control. In 1392 he established the Choson dynasty.

Koryo society was, in general, a very highly stratified one, with descent and kinship of supreme importance. The style was epitomized by the first Koryo king, Taejo, who linked his close kin through marriage. Since he had twenty-nine queens, twenty-five sons and nine daughters, he created a large support group of close kin.¹⁰ Consanguineous marriages were widespread at the beginning of the Koryo, the linking of close relatives by marriage being politically and economically beneficial. The position of women in the Koryo was strong as they shared an equal right of inheritance with their brothers.¹¹ In fact, bridegrooms com-

monly moved into the bride's family house after marriage. A man could have several wives, each wife residing with her own family and being visited by her shared husband.¹²

There was, in practice, little scope for social advancement through the examination system, as a result of the *umso* system of protected appointments, whereby one son of an official of the fifth rank or above was entitled to receive an official appointment.¹³ The division of Koryo society into aristocrats at the top, commoners in the middle and base people or slaves at the bottom continued throughout the dynasty and it was virtually impossible for the general peasant population of commoners to take the examinations. Commoners tilled the fields while the base people were the artisans who made such products as metal, paper, textiles and ceramics. They lived in village communities isolated from the general population and were forced to intermarry. Because their products were so important to the court and the government, they were exempt from tax and corvée labour.¹⁴

Religion

Buddhism had an all-pervasive influence during the Koryo (fig. 41). Temples and monasteries were constructed and works of art were produced for the glorification of the church as well as for the accumulation of individual and national merit. Wang Kon (King Taejo) attributed his success in founding the dynasty entirely to the Buddhist church and had ten temples built in Kaesong. He claimed: 'The success of the great enterprise of founding our dynasty is entirely owing to the protective powers of the many Buddhas. We must therefore build temples for both Son and Kyo Schools and appoint abbots to them, that they may perform the proper ceremonies and themselves cultivate the way'.¹⁵

There was therefore a great proliferation of temples in Koryo and enthusiastic participation in the many Buddhist festivals throughout the year. Some of these festivals represented in fact an amalgamation of Buddhism and native Korean practices. The Yondung-hoe or Festival of Lotus Lanterns was the first major ceremony offered to the Buddha in the New Year; the Chopa-il was the celebration of the birth of the historic Buddha; Paekchung, with shamanist associations, was the feast for the souls of the dead; and Palgwan-hoe was also a feast for the dead, held on the fifteenth day of the eleventh month. Vegetarian feasts for monks fed as many as 100,000 monks at a time and sometimes food was offered to anyone who turned up. Indeed, Buddhist monasteries seem on occasion to have acted as relief agencies, feeding groups of itinerant beggars in mess halls. Sometimes fishing nets were burned and domestic animals freed in ceremonies designed to show faithful adherence to the Buddhist principle of non-killing.¹⁶

The Buddhist church developed its own economic system to such an extent that it became a kind of state within a state, challenging the functions of the central government. Monasteries were palatial buildings, rivalling the royal palaces. Temple lands produced goods which were sold to provide capital, the labour coming from either worker monks or slaves. Capital was also created from the sale of harvested goods from land owned by the temple and interest on funds was put towards the financing of feasts, relief work or scholarships for monks.¹⁷ The whole system was privileged because it was exempt from tax and because many donations were made by the royal family and the aristocracy, in the hope of gaining merit. Wine-making and high-interest loans of grain increased the wealth of the church. It was even felt necessary to train monks as soldiers in order to

protect the church and warrior-monks such as the Subdue Demons Corps were used against the Jurchen invasions.¹⁸

An examination system for monks was set up, on the lines of that for the civil service examination. The monks' examination had to be divided into two sections in reflection of the division of the Buddhist church into two main sects at that time, the Kyo or textual school and the Son (Zen) or meditational school. In the eleventh century the monk Uichon made an unsuccessful attempt to unite the Korean Buddhist church. He was particularly influential because he was the fourth son of King Munjong (reigned 1046–83), an example of the widespread practice amongst early Koryo aristocrats of sending one of their sons to a monastery. Uichon tried to introduce the Chontae (Chinese: Tiantai) sect from China, attracted by its balance of meditation and doctrine. Although he was unsuccessful, Koryo Buddhism did unite later in the dynasty under the influence of the monk Chinul (1158–1210), with the formation of the Chogye sect. This was a reaction against the secular Buddhism of the early Koryo which catered to the royal family and aristocrats. Chogye was a uniquely Korean sect and developed in remote mountain monasteries.¹⁹

Confucianism and Buddhism co-existed during the Koryo, with the government supporting Confucian studies as well as Buddhism. During the late Koryo a bureaucratic class of literati grew up, their honesty and integrity in marked contrast to the opulent lifestyle of the early Koryo aristocrats. Under the influence of Chinese Neo-Confucianism, these scholars were to have a profound effect on the development of the relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism during the following Choson period.

Buddhism and the development of printing

It was the desire to propagate the Buddhist scriptures that had led to the development of printing on woodblocks during the Unified Silla period and it is for two great achievements in the field of printing that Koryo is perhaps best remembered. These are the carving of the entire Buddhist scriptures twice on woodblock and the invention of movable metal type.

By the beginning of the eleventh century, woodblock printing had developed in Korea to such a level that it was decided to engrave the entire Buddhist scriptures on woodblocks. This was partly done as a sort of prayer, to protect Korea against the Khitan invasions, and partly to systematize the doctrines taught in the scriptures.²⁰ When these woodblocks were destroyed in the Mongol invasions, a new edition was begun on Kanghwa island and completed in 1251. This set of 80,000 woodblocks, usually known as the Tripitaka Koreana, is now stored in Hae'in temple in South Korea (see fig. 41). It is generally thought to be the finest of about twenty East Asian versions of the Tripitaka, because of its accuracy, beautiful calligraphy and carving technique.²¹ The blocks were made from magnolia wood, soaked and boiled in salt water to extract the gum, and then dried for years in the shade. Each block was 24 cm by 65 cm by 4cm (9.3 in by 25.3 in by 1.5 in), capped with bronze on each corner and supported by two wooden sticks. The surface was painted with lacquer, which was a very good preservative. Each side of each block contained twenty-three vertical lines of characters. Paper was then pressed against the inked surface and volumes of one hundred pages compiled.²²

Paper-making was also highly developed in the Koryo, to the extent that it was exported to China. Even in the Silla period, Korean 'white hammered paper' had earned the reputa-

tion in China of being the best in the world. By that period, Korean paper was made of pith from the paper mulberry shrub (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) as opposed to hemp fibre, which had been used in the Koguryo period.²³ According to records 2000 sheets of white paper and 400 ink sticks were sent from Korea to China in the Koryo. The Yuan were also to demand large quantities of Korean paper for printing the Buddhist scriptures.²⁴

Tough paper that could sustain the pressure of metal type was therefore available in Koryo, as was oily, glue-processed ink. Ordinary ink was sufficient for woodblock printing but an oilier ink was necessary for use with metal type. The impetus for the invention of movable metal type in the twelfth century came from the combination of the difficulty of obtaining books from Song China, a result of the war between the Song and the Jin, together with big fires in Korea in 1126 and 1170, in which many books were destroyed and a shortage of wood resulted. Bronze-casting techniques were already well developed in the Silla and the Koryo was experienced in minting good-quality bronze coins. On this foundation, metal type was introduced and by about 1234, twenty-eight copies of the *Sangjong yemun* (*Detailed and Authentic Code of Ritual*) had been printed on Kanghwa island. At first the metal type was cast into sand moulds, which had been made by pressing a wooden version of the character into a bed of sea sand. Molten bronze was then poured into the indentation.²⁵

Koryo's use of metal movable type was the earliest in the world. This early experimental period was followed by the establishment, at the end of the Koryo, in 1392, of a National Office for Book Publication. By using movable type, a greater variety of works could be produced, although woodblock printing was useful when a large number of copies of one work was needed.²⁶

Tombs

Most of the Koryo royal tombs are located in the vicinity of Kaesong, now in North Korea and therefore difficult to visit. The mausoleum of the thirty-first Koryo king, Kongmin (reigned 1330–74), and his Mongolian wife Noguk is the best preserved. She died in childbirth in 1365, causing great grief to King Kongmin, who never recovered completely from her death. Kongmin was himself a renowned painter and calligrapher and at least one surviving Koryo painting, a hunting scene, is tentatively attributed to him. He has been compared to Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song, as they both excelled in painting birds and flowers.²⁷ His and his wife's tombs are covered in two round mounds and situated on a wooded hillside outside Kaesong. On the lowest of three terraces stand two pairs of military officers facing each other, dressed in suits of armour and helmets. On the upper terrace are two pairs of civil officials, a pair of stone lanterns and a pair of stone tables or altars. On the third terrace are the tombs, with a pair of hexagonal pillars in front and to either side. Between the pillars and directly in front of each tomb are a pair of stone slabs supported by four drum-shaped legs. The burial mounds are surrounded by carved stone balustrades and alternating statues of seated tigers and standing sheep, representing *yang* and *yin*. The stone-carving is in general sophisticated and detailed. The tombs have been excavated fairly recently, revealing a stone chamber under each mound, decorated with wall- and ceiling-paintings. On the ceilings are star formations such as the Dig Dipper and on the walls are figure paintings of the twelve animal spirits of the oriental zodiac.²⁸ The