

The Symbolic Meaning of the Elephant in Korean Culture

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ABSTRACT

Elephants have been the subject of various cultural depictions in popular culture, mythology and symbolism. Ever since the stone-age, they have been depicted in the arts in various forms, including pictures, sculptures, music, film and even architecture. In Buddhism, the elephant became a symbol of physical and mental strength as well as responsibility and steadfastness. Throughout the Tipiṭaka, the Buddha is often compared to elephants such as ‘elephant look’. In Asian culture elephants are admired for their high levels of intelligence and good memory. In Korea, elephants symbolize noble things such as wisdom, royal power, and longevity and are considered to bring good luck and prosperity. However, Korea is not habitat for elephants and elephants are still rarely seen except in the zoo.

Therefore the main purpose of this paper is to examine how non-inhabitant elephants had symbolic meanings in Korea. The collected data was observed on historical bases.

It is said that Buddhism was first introduced into Korea from China in A.D. 372. However, as “Garakuk-gi” of Samguk Yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) says that an Indian princess named Heo Hwang-ok came from Ayodhya in India to meet King Suro (AD 33-189), the founder of Geumgwan Gaya. It reveals that Buddhism had already planted its roots deeply in Korean soil prior to the 2nd century. As clear-cut evidence, the elephant’s icon is painted with other Buddhist images on the hanging board in the royal tomb of King Suro. The proverb “It’s like the blind men who touched only one part of an elephant and claimed that what it was like” is additional proof.

Religion of any form is a constant in every culture. In fact, Buddhism has played a very important role as the psychological force for the first unification of the Korean peninsula. In the past most Koreans were Buddhists because it was the state religion for over a thousand years. Even in the Joseon Dynasty when the state religion was Confucianism, most people believed in Buddhism. Like symbolic meanings of the elephant, Buddhist architecture and temples are also still admired and appreciated by Koreans beyond the religious dimension. Buddhism permeated the entirety of Korean culture including proverbs and everyday language.

Key words: *Buddhism, elephant, Korean culture, religious symbol*