

## The Korean Buddhist Temple Bi'rae-sa (飛來寺) and the Symbolism of Water, Fire, Mountains, and Trees

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### Abstract

The Buddhist mountain temple Bi'rae-sa is located above a picturesque gorge near Dae'jeon (大田) metropolis, South Korea. The present observations on Bi'rae-sa are a continuation of my previous reflections (Bayer 2022) concerning the symbolism of water, fire, mountains, and trees, in the temple Gwan'eum-sa near Seoul. These symbols appear in Bi'rae-sa's architecture and iconography in a similar way. However, the symbolism of these naturalia is less pronounced in Bi'rae-sa, even though the temple stands next to a brook that carries “medical water” (*yak'su*, 藥水).

Bi'rae-sa is exceptionally located next to a Confucian installment, a wooden pavilion constructed above the brook. The valley is not exclusively claimed by the temple and there is no temple gate further below in the valley.

As different from Gwan'eum-sa, the religious functions held at Bi'rae-sa as well as its iconography indicate a focus on school learning and entrance exams, catering less to the spiritual demands of agricultural society and more to contemporary information society. (The article uses the Revised Romanization of Korean, with an added separation of syllables.)

### Keywords

Korean Buddhism, natural symbols, hydraulic construction, ecology, shift in religious functions

### Introduction: Mountain Temples and the Cycles of Water and Life

In a previous article (Bayer 2022) on the temple Gwan'eum-sa (觀音寺) near Seoul, I have examined iconographical, architectural and geographical features in order to re-evaluate the assertion that religious activity for timely rainfall played a significant role in pre-modern East-Asian Buddhism

(Hodous 1924:23–28, Trenson 2013:114). Since the present research builds on these observations, I would like to recommend consulting the previous study first. I suggest that religious functions and symbols for timely rain and abundant harvests stand in close relation with funeral procedures as well as with practical hydraulic construction on the temple premises and beyond. Visible markers for these

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connections are, among others, water, fire, trees, and mountains, both in symbolism as well as in the surroundings of the temples. In the course of this article, I will frequently point out similarities and differences between Gwan'eum-sa and Bi'rae-sa.

Some fundamental considerations can be added from secondary literature I was able to access since the publication of the previous article. Charlotte Horlyck and Michael J. Pettid address life cycles and funeral rites in their introduction to *Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in Korea* (2014:7):

[The] shamanic worldview or popular folk practices[:] Whereas this worldview is not as structured, at least in terms of a written doctrine, as Buddhism or Confucianism, for centuries it was the primary means of understanding the cosmos and the cycle of human life and death. In premodern times the beliefs of shamanism intermingled with both Buddhism and Confucianism to create hybrid rituals that featured aspects of all three belief systems.

It should be acknowledged that Buddhism already carried aspects such as the veneration of *nāgas* as part of its Indian lore. The cultural significance of water management has been analyzed by Lee Seung-ho in his *The Climate and Culture of Korea* (2010:47):

Since the amount of rainfall in Korea varies greatly according to the season, the threat of water shortage had to be taken seriously. Going back to the Silla Dynasty, in the 3rd century C.E., there are records of Koreans building large reservoirs to maintain the year-round supply of water. As another consequence of this concern, the careful measurement and recording of rainfall started very early in Korea.

As a matter of course, such reservoirs usually play a role in flood prevention, too. In my previous article, I have further pointed to the symbolism of clouds in the “water-and-mountain” (Kr. *san'su*, 山水) paintings. Lee (2010:54) outlines the factual climatic circumstances as follows:

The abundant moisture both in the air and on the ground gives mountainous areas an advantage over lowlands for the growth of plants. However, the frequent rainfall in such areas is an inconvenience, and sometimes even a danger for workers.

In *Forests and Korean Culture*, Chun Yoon-woo (2010:23) describes natural symbolism in combination with royal power:

Pine is also represented in the royal pictures of the Sun and Moon in Heaven and Earth. This picture is placed behind the royal throne and shows the sun and moon, mountains, and water running alongside the pine. One interpretation says that the sun and moon represent the heavenly world; the mountain and water portray the earthly world; and the pine is indicative of all the gods living in the world.

The placement of this divine-tree symbol behind the royal throne naturally brings to mind the traditional interpretation of the character for “king” (*wang*, 王), according to which the three lines of the character stand for heaven, earth, and man (三者天地人), all three of which are connected by the power of the king (endnote 1). This traditional explanation was probably known to most of those who came to speak before the throne.

In contemporary temples in the Republic of Korea, divine kings are usually represented in their traditional position. As different from premodern times, however, their regalia no longer correspond to those of the contemporary rulers.

Sam Vermeersch (2014:33) observes an interesting element in the connection between cremation, water, and *nāga* serpent spirits:

[C]remation was but one option for Silla kings and practiced initially only in connection with their expected transformation into water dragons. These were likely inspired by the nagas, or water serpents, from Buddhist and pre-Buddhist mythology, creatures of great power often associated with kingship but also with Buddhahood: a naga (or cobra) shielded the Buddha after his enlightenment. The transformation by fire as practiced among kings may thus be seen as a kind of empowerment ritual.

According to a version of the Buddha legend, a tree had guarded the Buddha before his awakening. At the point of awakening, a snake appeared in the same role as the tree. This may suggest that, just as the serpent spirits provide sufficient rain, a snake, rising up from the ground, can also protect against too much rain. We may here consider a rather remote but realistic similarity: just as the king collects grain from irrigated fields as taxes, so he can also use this grain to pay workers in civil engineering (*to'mog*, 土木) projects for irrigation and flood control, and to sponsor Buddhist rituals for regular rain. Just as the farmer acts between irrigation and harvest, so the king acts between receiving grain and regulating the floods. Where monasteries are landowners, they may take the roles of collecting taxes and providing hydraulic construction.

### Approaching Bi'rae-sa

The mountain temple Bi'rae-sa is located to the East of present-day Dae'jeon (大田) metropolis, less than one kilometer away from the densely populated area of Dae'jeon's Song'chon-dong (宋村洞) district. The temple belongs to the Jo'gye Tradition (曹溪宗), the largest denomination of Korean Buddhism, whose head temple Jo'gye-sa is located close to the former royal palace in Seoul.

Bi'rae-sa is a destination on a publicly maintained hiking route. It is mostly known for a wooden statue of Buddha Vairocana, dated to 1651, and for a scenic pavilion built above the brook below the monastery. The temple is much smaller than Gwan'eum-sa, and on my visit on 1 August 2023, my sole informant on site was the *bo'sal-nim* (菩薩님), the female assistant in charge of the temple's office, whose normal role does not include explanations about the temple's history or iconography. Furthermore, as different from Gwan'eum-sa, no information materials were available at the office.

### The City and the Ascent to the Temple

The name of the city, Dae'jeon, literally means "Great Acre." True to its name, the area of the present-day city had mostly been farmland in pre-modern times. A modern bypass road on the lower hillslopes now forms a strict separating line between the city on its western side and the mountain slopes on the eastern side. No agricultural land is left on the western side of the bypass, and the municipal government provides a belt, about fifty meters wide, with parks, parking lots and other facilities, separating the bypass from the apartment blocks.

Most hikers either arrive by public transport or park their cars in public parking lots on the west of the bypass. Through a small tunnel, an asphalt road leads to the eastern side of the bypass, through a small cluster of restaurants and other facilities for hikers on the lower slope. Further uphill, the road enters a valley on the mountain proper.

### The "Rooster Foot" Mountain in India

Bi'rae-sa lies at about 200 altitude meters in a ravine on the slopes of Gye'jog-san (雞足山, 423m), the "Rooster-Foot Mountain." This name of this mountain may have been chosen for one or two reasons. Firstly, the name seems to allude to the three ridges on the mountain's northern side, resembling the claws of a chicken foot. Secondly, it may further allude to the Buddhist sacred mountain by the same name in India. In Buddhist translations from Sanskrit, Gye'jog-san stands for Kukkuṭapāda, the "Rooster Foot" mountain where the Buddha Maitreya is believed to descend eventually, in order to end this age of decline. In a cave on this mountain, Mahākāśyapa, the most famous ascetic among the Buddha's followers, waits for this event in deep meditation. An outspoken proponent of the asceticism during his lifetime, this legend made him the archetypal Buddhist mountain ascetic. Though a

recluse, his lifestyle also endeared him to the rural populace, as different from the monks who would meet kings and citizens in the urban centers.

The Jo'gye Tradition designates itself a Seon (禪, Ch. Chan) tradition and considers Bodhidharma one of its main forefathers. Bodhidharma, too, is said to have lived in a mountain cave for many years and stands in a similar tradition as Mahākāśyapa. However, the Jo'gye factually incorporates various elements of the Mahāyāna tradition, such as the study and recitation of the *Hwa'eom* (華嚴, *Avataṃsaka*) *sūtra* which advocates a more active role of the bodhisattva.

In either case, Gye'jog-san is not the only mountain by that name in Korea. The temple is thus located at a mountain with a great name, but a direct reference to the legend of Maitreya and Mahākāśyapa was not discernable during my visit. Even though the “Lonesome Saint” (Dok'seong, 獨聖) is sometimes associated with Mahākāśyapa (Hyewon & Mason 2013:163), his veneration is a common feature of Korean Buddhism and not limited to the temples at Gye'jog-san.

The remains of a sizable castle, which fell into disuse at some point in the Jo'seon dynasty (1392–1894), can be visited at the peak, a strategic point overlooking the land.

### Passage into a Higher Realm

The “Bi'rae Valley Street” (Bi'rae'gol-gil, 飛來谷길) sets out at about 100 altitude meters and follows a small river for about half a kilometer. At about 200 altitude meters, it reaches a narrow ravine with impressive bare cliffs on the left (north-west) and right (south-east). Public parking space for about three cars is available, and on the right side of the road, a wooden staircase and foot path has been skillfully crafted next to and above the river. It can also be used as an observation platform for the

picturesque cliffs and the natural cascades between them.

A frequent visitor to temples will notice that no temple gate or “mountain gate,” (*san'mun*, 山門) is placed on the road approaching the temple. Gwan'eum-sa featured not only a wooden gate but also wooden *jang'seung* (長承) poles representing protective spirits, placed at a steep narrow passage below the temple. According to Chun (2010, 21), such protective landmarks were formerly also erected at the entrance to Korean villages.



Stairway to the higher part of the valley. The pavilion in the rear, the temple's outside kitchen on the left.

They were variously wooden or stone pillars, stone heaps, or specific trees, all with the function of “security and protection of the village,” and “bountiful agricultural harvests.” At Bi'rae-sa, however, smaller megaliths with poems in *han'gul* have been placed in the gorge below, on the north-west side of the road.

The first inscription is openly a Buddhist poem, which can be summarized as: “Parents love all their children in the same way, but when one of them is sick, they take special care. In the same way, the Buddha loves all living beings, but he specially cares for the ill.” The other one is not necessarily Buddhist, stating that, “Some flowers are beautiful but they have no smell. In the same way, beautiful

words are of no benefit, when they have no foundation in real deeds.” Poems in *han’gul* are probably a rather modern, non-traditional way to mark the entry into a sacred area. The mention of the Buddha caring for the sick may be an allusion to the “medicine water” (*yak’su*, 藥水) from the spring near the temple.



Megaliths instead of entrance gate.

The gorge itself may have been difficult to pass before the construction of the road. It naturally marks the entrance into a different sphere. On passing the cliffs, the temperature changes considerably, especially when the broader lower part of the valley is lit by direct sunlight while the steeper upper part is not. True to the scenery, the motto “transcend this natural [world], beyond [material] things” (超然物外) is carved into the biggest boulder before reaching the upper part of the valley. This motto would align nicely with a Buddhist hermitage, but also with the view of the lofty Confucian pavilion that can be gazed from the point where the motto has been inscribed.

### A Pavilion Above the Brook

Nowadays, the asphalt road continues through the gorge, and the ascending visitor first gains sight of the “Jewel (or, Jade)-Flow-Pavilion” (Ol’lyu-gak, 玉溜閣), a famed wooden structure, the southern

part of which is built directly above the running brook. The beams below the southern part rest on stone sockets in the riverbed, but even with these precautions, some mold can be seen on the pillars, suggesting that they may have to be replaced at regular intervals.

A plate of Dae’jeon municipality informs the visitor that the pavilion was built in 1693 on the initiative of a Confucian scholar. Its name alludes to the water river which is said to be as pure as a jewel (*ok*, 玉), or “jade” as it is stated in the English translation. It is registered as tangible cultural property no. 7 (of Dae’jeon municipality, it seems), and is alternatively called Bir’rae’su-gak (飛來水閣), an appellation closer to the temple’s name. The pavilion’s roof is said to resemble the numeral eight (八), a possible allusion to the octagon used in geomantics and divination.



The Jewel-Flow Pavilion seen from the road. The foundations of the pillars on the left stand in the brook.

According to the *bo’sal-nim*, the pavilion, as a Confucian installment, is not managed by the temple, even though it may appear to be part of the temple structure at first sight. As it is well known, the rulers of the Jo’seon Dynasty (1392–1897) mostly favored Confucianism at the expense of the Buddhist order. Visibly, the pavilion occupies an important geographical location.



While the information plate hints that it was used for education, it is also imaginable that higher officials used it as a naturally cooled getaway from the summer heat. Its construction was undoubtedly a costly affair. It offers a peculiar perspective of the brook, which simply disappears as it cascades downhill between the cliffs.



The pavilion in 1984. Photo: Academy of Korean Studies, KOGL.

While the pavilion is one of the major attractions near the temple, it may also be one of the reasons why the entry to the temple precincts is not marked by a temple gate, as the area was obviously not exclusively owned by the temple. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the contemporary public hiking path is called Chung'hyo'ye (忠李禮, "Loyalty, Filial Piety, and Respect") and explicitly designed as a path to commemorate Confucian virtues and Confucian sites along the mountain. This does not mean that hikers are being discouraged from the temple: Bi'rae-sa is naturally listed among the recommendable sites along the way (see also Jikimi 2013). However, Dae'jeon municipality has chosen to assign specific themes to each of their hiking routes, and in this case, Bi'rae-sa as a Buddhist site does not fit in quite smoothly. Judging from the geographical features of the location, it seems

probable that a Buddhist hermitage existed there long before the seventeenth century. However, research on its earlier history could not be conducted for this article.



Confucian pavilion in the left margin of the image, the monks' quarters in the rear, the main hall on the right, the protected juniper tree in front, next to a table for dedicating roof tiles. On this side of the bridge, an information plate about the Vairocana statue. A puddle can be seen on the muddy road where hikers walk barefoot.

### Entry Into the Temple Precincts

The motorable road ends at the entrance to the temple courtyard, where an information plate on the Vairocana statue has been placed. After crossing the road on a modern, flat bridge, one passes a table on which visitors can sign the lower side of roof tiles for a donation. These tiles will eventually be used for repairs at the temple roof, and the donor's names remain for a long time. After the table comes a juniper tree, more than 200 years old. Its Korean name "scent tree" (*hyang-na'mu*, 香木) seems commonsensical for juniper, but it may also hint at its being used in the production of incense (*hyang*, 香). A plate of Dae'jeon city stands near the tree, providing data such as its age and registration number as a "protected tree" (*bo'ho'su*, \*保護樹, see also Jikimi 2013).

Considering the symbolism of trees and fire, such incense is not only used as an offering of all-pervading scent to the Buddha, it also adds an element of fire and smoke rising up to the offerings

on the Buddhist altar. However, this aspect is usually not emphasized in explanations on the significance of incense offering.

### Kitchen, Office, and Monk's Quarters

Having crossed the bridge and passed by the juniper tree, the visitor naturally faces the monk's quarters with a smaller kitchen and the temple's office on the ground floor. On its right, an open, roofed kitchen for public events is located.

However, while many mountain temples along hiking routes provide simple meals for visitors, this is not the case in Bi'rae-sa. Meals for larger groups are only prepared in the case of public ceremonies (*haeng'sa*, 行事). Both kitchens use "medicine water" (*yak'su*, 藥水) from the spring at the brook, which is diverted there by underground pipes.

When I visited the temple in the afternoon, the two resident monks were absent, which is quite common with mountain temples that can be reached by car. Monks and nuns often visit lay followers in the city or have other business to attend, for example if they are branch temples of a larger temple, or if the mountain temple has branches in the city. This may not be exactly the ascetic lifestyle of Mahākāśyapa or Bodhidharma, but is of course a practical necessity since the temple needs to stay in touch with its donors.

### The Main Hall and the Statue of Buddha Vairocana

Ascending a staircase, the visitor reaches the main hall which houses the famed wooden statue of Buddha Vairocana. Classified by the Cultural Heritage Agency as a "treasure" (*bo'mul*, no. 1829 see CHA 2023), the statue figures prominently in descriptions of the temple found on the information sheet for the hiking course or the information plate directly at the entrance. According to the Academy

of Korean Studies (AKS 2023:E0075401) an ink writing at its socket allows dating it to 1650, though most other sources date it to 1651. It seems to have been kept in another temple at least until the mid-nineteenth century, and it is not known when it was moved to Bi'rae-sa.

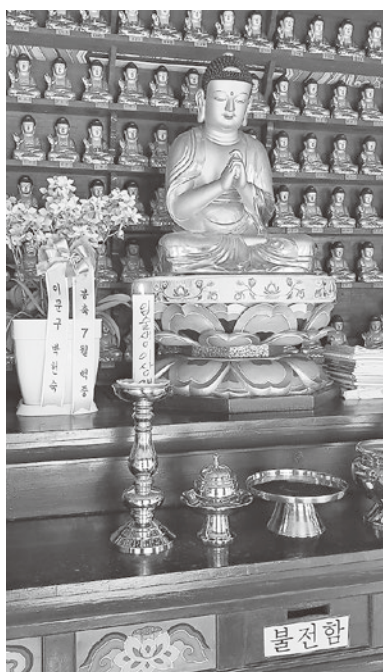


The main statue in 2014. Notice the absence of dragon imagery. Photo: AKS, KOGL.

Although the sitting Vairocana is designated as a wooden statue, the artist, or the later owners, did not emphasize the specific features of wood, such as its brown color or grain. With its thick plating, it rather has the appearance of a gold-plated metal statue.

### The Wisdom-Fist Gesture of the Buddha

Vairocana's hands are folded in a variation of the wisdom-fist gesture (*ji'gwan-in*, 智拳印). It has been depicted in many different ways in Buddhist art, with the common denominator being that the outstretched index finger of one hand is covered by the other hand. The Buddha of Bi'rae-sa holds the index finger of the right hand stretched out, covered by the index finger of the left hand.



The statue and its background in 2023.

A variety of explanations for this gesture can be found in Buddhist literature (Hyewon & Mason 2013:76). According to Yamasaki (1988:115), it “symbolizes the activity of enlightenment throughout the universe.” This suggests that the outstretched index finger indicates vigor, activity, and control in a similar way as the rising snake, the tree, the *stūpa*, or the mountain. Enclosing the index finger with the other hand symbolizes the union with the opposite polarity, such as space or the universe. However, as Yamasaki and others indicate, the interpretation of this gesture is more complex.

In the Buddhist depiction of hand gestures in general, the dynamic principle is symbolized by the right hand, and the static principle by the left (Yamasaki 1988:114). This seems to correspond to the version of the wisdom-fist gesture as found in Bi'rae-sa, with the left hand enclosing the index finger of the right. However, the opposite arrangement, in which the right hand encloses the left index finger, can be seen in numerous depictions, for example the

stone Buddha at Dong'hwa-sa (桐華寺) in Dae'gu (大邱). Yamasaki (1988:115) describes this as the standard form practiced in Japan.

The information plate before the bridge to Bi'rae-sa, too, provides explanations about the hand gesture, albeit to the common version in which the right hand encloses the left and the right thumb touches the left index finger. This version has also been described by Yamasaki (1988:115) who holds that,

the wind element (the index finger) on the left hand symbolizes the breath of life, while the element space (the right thumb) represents the great void, which in terms of consciousness is the wisdom of the Buddha.

These explanations presuppose a correspondence of the five fingers to the five elements, earth, water, fire, wind, and space (also symbolized in the five main parts of the *stūpa*), which is common in East-Asian esoteric Buddhism. The Bi'rae-sa Vairocana, however, covers one index finger with the other index finger, and I am unaware whether the correspondence of the fingers with the elements can be presupposed for the time and region at which the statue was made.

The explanations on the information plate at the entrance do not mention the five elements, which may indicate that control of the elements is no longer seen as the responsibility of the Buddhist order or a focus of Buddhist learning. Neither do they emphasize the vigor or dynamic activity of the Buddhist practitioner. The focus lies on the Buddha (enclosing hand) protecting ordinary human beings (index finger). This does not wholly contradict the interpretation in which the practitioner develops vigor (or “wind,” index finger) in order to act in the world, pursue spiritual training, and eventually attain the state of a Buddha through personal initiative. However, it is clearly an interpretation suitable for common visitors, relegating spiritual



power to the Buddha. It is suitable for the modern world and visitors to the temple, many of whom may be “spiritual but not religious” and hold some sympathy for Buddhism. It is especially suitable for Bi’rae-sa, nowadays visited by hikers on a path dedicated to Confucian values.

Although Yamasaki does not elaborate on this, he mentions a distinction between the gesture as formed by practitioners in ritual meditation and the gesture as shown by the Buddha Vairocana. This could be a key to the different versions of the gesture, showing either the left or the right hand as the enclosing one. The question lies however beyond the scope of the present article, and it has probably been pursued in the specialized literature on Buddhist art.

### **The Statue of Vairocana and the Lineage of the Temple**

Since the Buddha Vairocana is the main Buddha of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (*Hwa’eum’gyeong*), the presence of the statue could indicate that temple formerly belonged to a lineage focused on the study and ritual of an Avataṃsaka tradition (see Hyewon & Mason 2013:145), as different from Seon. However, this is not necessarily the case. Firstly, *seon* was formerly a general term for meditation, one of several subjects taught in a monastery. Several monasteries and temples taught meditation as well as the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, and in these cases, the meditation may not follow the specific methods ascribed to Bodhidharma and the Seon patriarchs. Even temples that stood in the tradition Bodhidharma may have valued the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* or at least its iconography to some extent, as the Jo’gye tradition does nowadays.

At least at present, this seems to be the case. As it is common in Jo’gye temples, recitation handbooks for lay participation are kept in the main hall and

can freely be used by visitors. Bi’rae-sa uses the common Jo’gye handbook, which includes a section of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* but provides a balanced mix of recitations, including passages from the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* focusing on Avalokiteśvara and other practices.

### **Dragons and Water in the Main Hall**

Although *nāgas* (*yong*, 龍) play an important role in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, dragon and cloud symbolism is mostly absent in the main hall. The Buddha Vairocana sits on an elaborate lotus flower with its petals colored in light blue. This is probably the most obvious allusion to water and fertility in the main hall, besides rather common lotus paintings and paper lanterns. However, when comparing the present surroundings of the statue with a photograph from 2014, it becomes clear that the wall is painted with decorative elements that gradually became covered with shelves housing smaller statues, for received donations. It cannot be excluded that the ornamentation included dragons or other symbols of interest for this study. Even in this case, the images were not considered too essential to be concealed.

Nothing peculiar can be observed in the painting of the gods and demons on the northern (left) wall. The southern (right) wall prides a well-kept shrine with ancestral tablets, suggesting that this temple enjoys a particular popularity for paying respect to the deceased.

### **The Shrine of the Three Saints (Sam’seong-gak, 三聖閣)**

The shrine of the three [hermit] saints features, as usual, a painting of San’sin (山神, lit. “Mountain God”), the archetypal mountain hermit. In front of it stand the traditional offerings of candles, incense and clear water, whose relation to the five elements should be self-explanatory. While the San’sin

image in Gwan'eum-sa (Bayer 2022, 85) is a wood carving with more simplistic and naïve coloring, the painting in Bi'rae-sa features fine brush strokes and more subdued coloring.

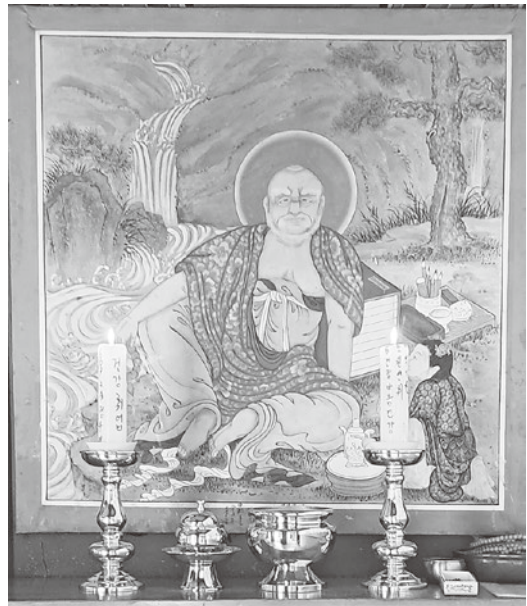


San'shin in the shrine of three saints.

At Bi'rae-sa, the waterfall symbolizing the element of water is more prominent on the painting, while fertility as such is less emphasized. In the Gwan'eum-sa relief, peaches and food figure prominently. The boy accompanying the old sage held a walking staff with a water flask made from bottle gourd, a combination of water and fertility symbolism. On the Bi'rae-sa painting, the boy holds a book in his hands, and one does not need to look far for a probable reason: The most prominent public rituals on the temple's notice board are prayers for school and university entrance exams.

The depiction of books on the painting may be merely coincidental, but it seems to correspond to the fact that many of the temple's visitors wish their young family members to succeed in school. The

Gwan'eum-sa carving features the hermit, a boy, and a grown-up man holding fruit.



The "Lone Saint" with books and writing utensils.

The painting of the "Lone Saint" (Dok'seong, 獨聖) on the opposite wall again features books and writing materials, in front of a waterfall, tree, and mountain background. The Lone Saint is bald and wears a kind of monks's robe. The child serving him seems to be a girl.

At Bi'rae-sa, the grown-up man does not appear but a girl of approximately the same age as the boy. It is quite common to depict a girl on the mountain-god painting (Hyewon & Mason 2013:466). However, it may also imply that there is more consideration for girls, including the wish that they succeed academically.

### The Buddha in the Cave

Moving on in a clockwise direction around the main hall, the visitor encounters a typical cave-shrine (*gam'sil*, 龕室) under a cliff, featuring a stone statue of the Buddha Śākyamuni. The earth-touching

gesture can be interpreted in various ways, either as depicting the legend in which Siddhārtha summons the earth-goddess as his witness, or as a more general symbol for a grounded attitude and mental stability. The earth-touching gesture goes along well with the mountain environment in which Śākyamuni has been placed here, considering that mountains obviously indicate groundedness in combination with ascension to higher realms. In traditional legends, Siddhārtha's Buddhahood occurs either below a tree or a group of trees, equally symbolizing groundedness and ascension. As said in the introduction, the *nāga* spirit that rose behind the Buddha at the point of awakening shielded him just like the bodhi tree shielded him or, as in this location, the mountain cave.



Śākyamuni in the *gam'sil*.

At this shrine, followers prostrate to the Buddha and thus automatically towards the mountain. This combines Buddhism with traditional autochthonous mountain worship, which is still enjoys widespread popularity (Bayer 2022, 79). The names of donors are carved into the pavement, indicating the religious importance of the shrine. In front of the Buddha, burning candles and an altar for incense offering imply an element of fire.

### The Crematorium

Behind the main hall, to the north-east, the crematorium can be seen, a traditional building

with a well-considered design, much different from the merely functional and simple iron oven at Gwan'eum-sa. Notably, the smoke does not escape through an upward opening but through holes in the side wall, towards the mountain.



A flat stone with food offerings, next to the crematorium. In the background, the temple wall and the walking path on the other side of the brook.

### Water and Dragons

It is furthermore noteworthy that the temple does not feature a separate shrine for the dragons, the custodians of rain and water. At Gwan'eum-sa, this is located at the highest point of the temple precincts, close to the river source. At Bi'rae-sa, the building at most upstream location is the crematorium giving, at first sight, the impression that the dragons have been somewhat forgotten in this temple, especially when considering that dragons are mostly absent in the main hall. However, slightly above the crematorium, food offerings have been placed on a flat stone, most probably for the local spirits, including the spirits of earth and water. This stone seems to fulfil a similar function as the dragon shrine at Gwan'eum-sa.



### The Healing River and the Healing Path

Possibly, one of the reasons that the dragons are venerated in a separate shrine at Gwan'eum-sa is its location close to the river source. At Bi'rae-sa, however, a stronger mountain brook bypasses the temple, its main source further up the mountain. If we look up from the offering stone, beyond the temple wall and up the valley, a stūpa can be seen that is located upstream near the brook.



Crematorium with the stūpa in the background.

As hypothesized in Bayer 2022, Buddhist constructions near mountain streams do not only fulfil a religious function of protecting against floods via the gods and spirits of rain and water. The actual, material construction may in fact regulate the stream to some extent, or it may serve as a benchmark for measuring the degree of flooding.

At Bi'rae-sa, the location of the stūpa suggests that it protects the temple against evil influences coming from above. If this holds true, it augments the bare flat stone for food offerings above the crematorium. Both fulfil a similar function as the dragon shrine at Gwan'eum-sa

In order to reach the stūpa, one has to leave the temple area via the bridge. Directly opposite the bridge, a gravel road leads up the south-eastern

ridge and along the mountainside where eventually other publicly maintained and surveyed sources of healing water can be reached.



View from the washing place towards the stūpa. The stream is narrowed upstream to provide a constant water level.

On the right of the road to the ridge, a public toilet is maintained by the municipality. In general, it can be assumed that it was the task of mountain temples to avoid the contamination of drinking water in pre-modern times. However, no details about the early history of Bi'rae-sa could be ascertained.

The gravel footpath to the stūpa, uphill along the stream, is one of the footpaths in the Dae'jeon region which tends to be moist or even muddy due to its geological features. It is rather common for visitors to take off their shoes and walk barefoot in the mud. This refreshing experience seems to be reinforced by the good quality and the healing features of the water in this valley.

In the stream, bathing places can be discovered with ladles left behind for washing the body. As anywhere else in Korea, the custom of piling up





A bathing place in the brook, close to the stūpa.

rocks at road bends or mountain passes is still alive, and similar heaps of stones have been piled up near the bathing places. The stūpa stands at a river bend, between the brook itself and water-soaked path.

### The Stūpa

Physically, the stūpa stands at the inside of a river bend, about one or two meters above the water level on a day without rain. It will likely remain unimpeded even by a severe swelling of the brook.

### The Source and the Staircase

A hiker descending the healing path will first bypass the stūpa on the left and gain sight of the temple wall at the shore of the brook. The main hall housing the Buddha Vairocana can be seen, with several wooden pillars supporting the roof on the outside. Among those, the pillar closest to the river seems to have been replaced rather recently, probably because it stands in a rather moist location.

The temple wall ends shortly below the main hall, so that the brook can be accessed from the courtyard between the temple and the Confucian pavilion. This is also the location of a minor river source, the water of which is stored in two cisterns on both sides of the river. The cistern on the courtyard is an officially registered reservoir for drinking water. From there, water is led to the temple's kitchen through a pipe system below the courtyard. As stated in Bayer 2022, underground pipe systems for water supply and drainage were

already used in pre-modern monasteries. Looking upstream from the temple's bridge, one sees a well-prepared platform just above water level, which is maintained by narrowing the brook. With its broad staircase, it remotely resembles a bathing place at a sacred river in India.



Washing place below the monastery, seen from the bridge. The stream is narrowed at the end of the washing place. Cisterns on the left and right.

### Conclusions

In comparison to Gwan'eum-sa the symbolism of fertility and water is less prominent in the iconography of the temple's interior and the constructions visible from the outside. Gwan'eum-sa, being dedicated to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, almost inevitably features the symbolism of Amitābha (fire, ascent) and of the flask indicating water and fertility. The Buddha Vairocana, on the other hand, is traditionally associated with the sun, which is hardly discernable from his iconography, nor does it easily translate into the rhythm of rain and growth that are of immediate concern for the farmer. The *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, which celebrates

Vairocana, is more concerned with social cohesion and the active rule of an omniscient overlord. In detail, the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* deals with dragons and dependent origination as a positive cycle quite extensively, but this is not discernable in the main hall's interior.

The ritual calendar of the temple and the depiction of books on the image of San'shin strongly

suggest that praying for a relative's entrance exams has become a major focus of religious activity, corresponding to the shift from agricultural to information society. However, an active search for the veneration of mountains, rivers, and fire shows that all aspects are duly represented in Bi'rae-sa's iconography, architecture, and surroundings.

## Endnote

- (1) From the explanation of the *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字): 董仲舒曰: 古之造文者三畫而連其中謂之王、三者天地人也、而參通之者王也。 Accessed 2023-8-3 at <https://kanji-database.sourceforge.net/dict/swjz/v01.html>. See also Searns 2023, s.v. 王 (U+738B).

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## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the lay helpers at Bi'rae-sa and local informants for patiently answering my questions, as well as to Antonio Ferreira-Jardim and Robert Kritzer for their suggestions on the paper. All shortcomings are the author's responsibility.

Research for this article was supported by grant number AKS-2012-AAZ-2102 (KSPS), awarded by

the Academy of Korean Studies and funded by the Government of the Republic of Korea (MoE).

