

# **THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM IN EAST ASIA: KOREA AS A LAND BRIDGE**

**GRADES:** High School

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**SUBJECT:** Religion, History

**TIME REQUIRED:** Two to three class periods

## **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Locate the route that Buddhism “travels”
2. Identify the interaction between the peoples of East Asia with regard to Buddhism
3. Explain why the religion of Buddhism became popular in early Korean history
4. Explain how Buddhism was introduced to Japan.
5. Write an essay discussing the spread of Buddhism in East Asia
6. Compare and contrast the spread of any major world religion with that of Buddhism in East Asia.

## **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- Maps of East Asia for the time period covered. (See resources)
- Distributed readings to groups (attached)

## **BACKGROUND:**

The purpose of this lesson plan was to infuse more Korea specific content into the world history curriculum. Given the massive amount of material that must be covered in a general world history class, a lesson plan has to meet the needs of other closely related topics. This would allow world culture, East Asia and other related courses teachers teach to include Korea specific material in their courses.

Consideration was given to the World History Association (<http://www.thewha.org/>) that world history be taught as a series of interactions and exchanges between peoples, societies, nation states and civilizations. In addition, it addresses how peoples, societies, etc., incorporate new ideas and culture into their environment. There should be an attempt to incorporate more Korean history in world history and East Asian history curricula. The spread of Buddhism within the East Asian region is an example of interaction, exchange and syncretism. Korea, serving as a land bridge for the spread of ideas and culture through the Silk Road to East Asia can be used as a case study. The spread of Buddhism from China to Korea and Japan is yet another example of how religions developed. Thus this lesson fits under the general world history, East Asian, world cultures and religion classes.

## **NOTE TO TEACHER:**

There should be some preparation work done on the part of the teacher and the class prior to conducting this lesson. It is strongly recommended that the basic geography of Asia (East Asia in particular) be reviewed. In addition, references to the various Kingdoms and successor dynasties on the Korean peninsula should be identified so as to avoid any confusion about the

names, dates and locations of kingdoms and dynasties. Materials are freely available courtesy of The Korea Society on their website (<http://www.koreasociety.org>). Other excellent online resources include the Korean Buddhism Information Page (<http://www.hm.tyg.jp/~acmuller/>) and Asia for Educators: an Initiative of the East Asian Curriculum Project and the Project on Asia in the Core Curriculum (<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu>)

**PROCEDURE:**

The lesson can be done as a “whole class” lesson. However, it is recommended that students be in groups of three or four to discuss readings and answer questions at the end of each reading. Having more than one group read a particular reading is recommended for a variety of reasons. The teacher can review questions from the reading and write responses to questions on the board. When the whole class reconvenes, the teacher can consider the questions below. Each of the discussion questions can serve as a basis for a culminating activity for the lesson and assess the students’ understanding.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Why did the kingdoms on the Korean peninsula initiate contact with various dynasties on the Asian mainland during the fourth and seventh centuries AD?
2. To what extent did these contacts between the kingdoms of the Korean peninsula and the mainland influence the spread of culture/ideas across East Asia?
3. To what extent was Buddhism readily accepted on the peninsula as well as in Japan?
4. How does the spread of Buddhism compare with the spread of other major world religions? (May be assigned as homework or a project)?

## READING ONE

“In the relations of the Three Kingdoms with their neighbors in Northeast Asia, the relationship with China and Japan was pivotal (important). The general characteristics of the policies adopted by the Three Kingdoms toward China may be summarized as follows. First, as they vigorously pursue their expansionist policies of conquest, the Three Kingdoms at times made bold (moves) launched military assaults against China itself and naturally they in turn had to face Chinese attacks. This was the particular case with Koguryō, whose frontiers bordered China . . . . Secondly, in the process of mapping out their own strategies for unification of the peninsula, all of the Three Kingdoms took appropriate advantage of the conflict at this time in China between the Northern and Southern Dynasties and, moreover, attempted in their diplomacy to make use of the nomadic peoples of the northern regions and the Wa (Japanese) to the south. Nevertheless, thirdly, none of the Three Kingdoms showed any hesitation in adopting whatever elements of Chinese culture might be needful for its own development. Most notable illustrations of this are the adoption of Chinese legal and other institutions, of the Buddhist and Confucian ideologies and the Chinese written language.

Nevertheless despite the forging of peaceful diplomatic ties and the close cultural contact, the history of the warfare between Korea's Three Kingdoms and China constitutes the principal theme of the relationship.

Lee Ki-baik, *A New History of Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1984) pp. 45-46.

- Contrast a map of East Asia during the third to seventh centuries with a present day map. How do the maps differ?
- In your opinion, why would there be so much conflict between the Kingdoms and their neighbors in East Asia?
- To what extent do you think any of the states of East Asia influenced the others?

## READING TWO

When Buddhism was introduced in Korea in the fourth century during the period of the Three Kingdoms, Koguryō was the first to receive this new teaching. However prior to this introduction, there was a reference to the presence of Buddhism in Korea. It was, however, only during the reign of King Sosurim (317-384) that Buddhism was officially recognized. In 372, a monk was sent from China with images of the Buddha and copies of several texts . . . and in 384, monks founded two monasteries. This was the beginning of Korean Buddhism. In 392, shortly after the arrival of Buddhism, King Kogugyang proclaimed that his people should believe in Buddhism and thus attain secular benefits. Buddhism was seen as another method for attaining worldly profit.

The ancient historical record of Korea, the *Samguk yusa*, says that (in 384) an Indian monk, Maranant'a, came from the Eastern China and was brought to the (royal) court (Paekche) where he received homage. In the next year (385) ten Buddhist monasteries were built in the new capital, Hansan, and monks were installed in them. In the first year of King Asin's reign (392) the King ordered the people to believe in Buddhism and seek happiness."

During the reign of King Nulchi (417-457) a Koguryō monk, Mukhoja, came to a village in Silla and he propagated Buddhism in secret. At that time an envoy from Liang China brought incense to Silla, but no one knew how to use it. Mukhoja instructed them in its use. He cured the illness of a princess. Buddhism known at this time had very little effect on Silla society. Later, however, during the reign of King Soji (479-499), another monk from Koguryō came. Others followed him.

Buddhism gradually diffused among the general population of Silla and the royal family sought to obtain official recognition for the new religion; aristocrats opposed this. The ancient tribal system remained strong. The clan was still an important social unit, and indigenous beliefs and customs were powerful and deep rooted; Buddhism could not gain acceptance among the people.

Adapted from Ahn Kye-hyon, "A Short History of Ancient Korean Buddhism" in *Introduction of Buddhism to Korea: New Cultural Patterns*, in Lancaster, Lewis, R., and Yu, C.S., (ed.) Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1996.

- What is the time difference between the introduction of Buddhism in the Three Kingdoms and its official acceptance?
- Why would there be any resistance to accepting Buddhism or any new religion?
- Why were the monarchs interested in having their citizens accept Buddhism?

### READING THREE

Interest in Buddhist culture soon generated a corresponding interest in the doctrines of the religion, which demanded familiarity with written scriptures. There was a relationship between Buddhist culture and literacy. There were several stages through which this relationship developed, as can be seen in Korea in the inscriptions on Buddhist steles (monuments) and the use of Han'gul, the indigenous Korean alphabet. The earliest Korean inscriptions from the Three Kingdoms period were all written in elegant literary Chinese, including the stele of the King, Kwanggaet'o, erected in 414. Other monuments, such as Paekche's King Muryong tomb, are on the stele commemorating the annexation of territory by Silla King Chinhung, erected between 561 and 568. The first use of Korean is found on stele erected on Namsan (South Mountain) in Kyongju, reportedly built in 591.

The inscriptions, which were concerned with local administration, show that the Silla people had developed their own indigenous writing system soon after they became literate. In Koguryō, a very early (414) inscription, a simplified native language also appears.

Once Buddhism was introduced to Silla, dragons that appear prominently in Buddhist legends came to possess the same qualities as snakes and were introduced into local snake worshipping cults. Indigenous religions of both Japan and Korea viewed snakes as being either water spirits or a wild beast. Silla saw those snakes as being equivalent to Chinese dragons and dragon worship and legends about the dragon cities flourished. Such legends about the palace of the dragon king eventually became part of Japanese folklore. Therefore in Silla, just after the reception of Buddhism, there was a great need to fuse the new alien faith, Buddhism, with the indigenous worship of yellow dragons. The story is told about the monarch, Chinhung, who ordered a new palace built. A yellow dragon appeared at the site and suspicious of what had occurred, the king had the palace redesigned as a Buddhist Monastery.

Adapted from Hideo Inoue, "The Reception of Buddhism in Korea and Its Impact on Indigenous Culture," in *Introduction of Buddhism to Korea: New Cultural Patterns*, eds. Lewis R. Lancaster and C.S. Yu (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 29-77.

- How did the interest in Buddhism lead to an increase in the level of literacy in Korea?
- To what extent did the Koreans copy Chinese civilization?
- How did the Koreans harmonize Buddhism with their indigenous beliefs?

## READING FOUR

Buddhism came to Koguryŏ from the Former Qin state then in control of northeastern China which transmitted images of the Buddha and Buddhist sutras in 372. Twelve years later the monk Maranant'a introduced Buddhism to Paekche from the Eastern Jin state in the Yangzi River valley. In both instances, it would appear that a welcoming attitude toward the adoption of Chinese culture already had developed. The new doctrine was conveyed by officially sanctioned missions from states in China that had friendly relations with recipients on the peninsula. The royal houses of Koguryŏ and Paekche welcomed Buddhism without any serious objections or discord.

In Silla, Buddhism was first disseminated by the mid fifth century. However this missionary effort was made by an individual monk from Koguryŏ. Thus the effect was limited in geographic scope and was met with local hostility. Buddhism was brought to the Silla royal house perhaps a century later, with the arrival of the monk-envoy, Yuanbiao, from the southern Chinese state of Liang (502-557). Opposition by the aristocracy in Silla prevented King Pophung from granting official acceptance until later.

In all of the Three Kingdoms the principal sponsors for the acceptance of Buddhism were the royal houses. The concept of a single body of believers all alike devoted spiritually to observing the way of the Buddha, taken together with the notion of all the nation's people serving the king as one, surely played a major role as a force for unity and cohesion in these early Korean states. At the same time however it should be noted that the powerful aristocracy had to agree to any official acceptance of Buddhism. It is plausible that in societies like these with strict social structures, the Buddhist teaching of reincarnation, of rebirth based on karma, was welcomed as a doctrine giving recognition to the privileged position of the aristocracy and monarchy.

Adapted from Lee Ki-baik, *A New History of Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 59-60.

- Why was the new religion readily accepted officially in two of the Kingdoms and not in Silla?
- How did the religion help legitimize the status quo in each of the Kingdoms?

## READING FIVE

Buddhism had been seen as a vehicle for seeking the well being of the individual, for example through prayers for recovery from illness or for having children, but its practice as a faith assuring the well being of the state was stronger. Such sutras as the *Inwang kyong* (Sutra of Humane Kings) were held in particular esteem. Ceremonies for the Recitation by One Hundred Monks (Inwang Assemblies) were held for the well being of the state. Another assembly called the P'algwanhoe (Assembly of the Eight Prohibitions) was also a way to pray for the well being of the state. Numerous temples in the Three Kingdoms, such as Paekche's Wanghung-sa (Temple of the King Ascendant) and Silla's Hwangnyong-sa (Temple of the August Dragon) are both dedicated to beliefs supporting state protection. They were both built on the grandest of scales.

A look at the Buddhist learning that flourished during the Three Kingdoms period also illustrates the close relationship that existed between state and religion. The most important was the study of the Vinaya, the monastic rules for the monks. Chajang (d. between 650-655) served as the first Supreme Buddhist Overseer in Silla. He supervised the entire Buddhist establishment in Silla. The emphasis on the Vinaya, which set forth rules governing monastic life, also had political significance. Silla established a hierarchy of abbot administrators at the district, province and national levels, who applied the rules of the Vinaya in order to control the temples and monks of the whole country.

Since Buddhism received such extensive support from the state, it is not surprising that at times monks performed the function of political advisors. Two well-known examples of this are the Silla monks Won'gwang (d. ca. 640), to whom the king turned to for advice on how to rule, and Chajang, who proposed the building of a nine-story wooden pagoda at Hwangnyong-sa for the protection of the state. Buddhist monks were part of the majority of those who traveled to China for study and returned to the Three Kingdoms to teach and preach.

Adapted from Lee Ki-baik, *A New History of Korea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 60-61.

- Explain why Buddhism appealed to the monarchy, the aristocracy and common people.
- What evidence does the author cite as examples of the state's support of the religion?
- What evidence is cited to illustrate the power that some monks had in the government of the Three Kingdoms?

## READING SIX

It was Paekche among the three Korean Kingdoms that began cultural communication with Japan. The official date of the transmission of Paekche Buddhism to Japan varies from source to source. The dates range from 538 to 552. There was interaction between Japan and Paekche before these dates. Japanese sources cite dates as early as 283, when a Paekche king sent a seamstress to Japan. Others went from Paekche to Japan within a period of two years or so after the seamstress. Ajikki, an expert on both the Confucian *Analects* and Buddhist scriptures, was present in Japan and recommended another expert on Buddhism be invited to Japan.

Paekche officially recognized Japan in 523. In 552, King Song of Paekche sent an envoy to Japan. This envoy carried with him a bronze image of Buddha, as well as banners, canopies and scriptures. He also sent a letter indicating that good things would happen to the court from the display and veneration of these gifts. Paekche Buddhism was a court centered religion, which was accepted, and supported primarily because it was thought to be of value in averting disasters and gaining success in worldly matters.

Adapted from Kamata Shigeo, "The Transmission of Paekche Buddhism to Japan" in *Introduction of Buddhism to Korea: New Cultural Patterns*, ed. Lewis R. Lancaster and C.S. Yu (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 143-158.

Letter to Japanese from the King of Paekche:

"This doctrine (religion) is amongst all doctrines the most excellent, but is hard to explain . . . The doctrine can create religious merit and retribution without measure and without bounds...Imagine a man in possession of treasures to his heart's content, so that he may satisfy all of his wishes in proportion as he used them. Thus it is with the treasure of this wonderful doctrine. Every prayer fulfilled and naught is wanting. Moreover, from distant India it extended hither to Korea, where there are none who do not receive it with reverence as it is preached to them."

Adapted from the Ancient Japanese historical record, *Nihongi*, II, 66 as quoted in *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Vol. I* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 91.

- Why is it so difficult to pinpoint that exact dates of contact between any of the Three Kingdoms and Japan?
- The author suggests that the reasons for promoting Buddhism were not necessarily religious. Why?
- Why can it be suggested that the royal court of Japan considered Buddhism to be a valuable addition to society?



## READING SEVEN

The new religion, which was recommended by the Paekche king to the Japanese court in glowing language, caused much dissention. The leaders of the clans whose functions were concerned with the practices of the native cult opposed Shinto. The failure of Japanese arms and the threat to their ally Imna (Mimana in Japanese, one of the small states of the Kaya confederation located between Silla and Paekche) had brought home to them the fact that their country was backward in everything but sheer fighting spirit.

Faced with a multitude of threats and problems at home and abroad, those in the court urging reform took the side of Buddhism. Those opposed (conservatives) thought that the new religion would threaten the foundation of Japanese people's lives. The underlying conflict was a clash of political interests. The conflict lasted some fifty years.

The Mononobe, a military clan, joined and later led the resistance to Buddhism. They disapproved of foreign ideas on what could be considered nationalistic grounds. Opposed to this was the Soga clan, whose leader was the Great Minister Iname. The clan was convinced of the need for a new system of government, which would break the autonomy of the other clans and assert the authority of the Crown and its appointed ministers. A member of the Soga clan had married into the Imperial family.

With an outbreak of sickness and drought, the Buddha image was thrown into a canal. With an outbreak of smallpox, the religion gained favor. Soga no Umako, the son of Iname, and successor to the post of Grand Minister obtained the Emperor's permission to worship privately. He built a small chapel on family property. With succession to the Emperor Bidatsu in 587, a new round of competition arose between the leading clans. The Soga clan defeated the rival clan militarily by organizing opponents of the Mononobe clan.

In 588, the prince chosen by Umako was elevated to the throne as Emperor Sujun. Thus the fortunes of Buddhism rose quickly, thanks to the protection of the Soga clan, and by the end of the sixth century, it was well established in Yamato, at court and in a large number of noble families.

Adapted from George Samson, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 48-66.

- Why would the King of Paekche make such an offer to the Yamato Court?
- Why did some in Japan consider the introduction a good opportunity to introduce reforms to society?
- What were the obstacles that prevented immediate official recognition of the new Buddhist religion?