Problems concerning the Sŏkkul-am Cave Temple in Kyŏngju

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I. Introduction

The Sŏkkul-am Cave Temple (figs. 1 & 2), situated on the steep slope of the Mt Toham in Kyŏngju, North Kyŏngsang Province, is known to represent the highest level of achievement in Buddhist sculpture of the Unified Silla period (668-935). Believed to have been built during the reign of King Kyŏng-dŏk (742-764), the monument at present consists of a rectangular ante-chamber and a circular domed structure connected by a short corridor. Its ground plan thus resembles a key-hole. The main image of the Buddha sits on a high pedestal with the right hand in the earth-touching mudra and the left hand in the meditation mudra. On the walls surrounding the main Buddha image, and those of the ante-chamber and the corridor, there are 29 relief figures, all individually carved on a stone panel and set in the walls. They are: 8 classes of the divine guardians (p’albujuŋ), two diamond bolt bearers, 4 guardians of the cardinal points, Brahma and Indra, the Bodhisattvas Manjusri (Munsu) and Samantabhadra (Pohyŏn), ten disciples of the Buddha, and finally, directly behind the main image, the eleven-headed avalokitesvara. In the domed chamber, above the relief panels, there are ten semi-circular niches, each of which contains a seated image of the various bodhisattvas and an old man believed to be the ailing Vimalakīrti. Two of the niches are now empty. All together, including the main Buddha, there are 38 images carved of the granite stone. The rectangular ante-chamber acquired a wooden architectural structure with a tiled roof at the

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Fig. 1. A distant View of the Sŏkkul-am Cave Temple, Kyŏngju.

Fig. 2. A View of the Interior of the Sŏkkul-am.
time of the 1961-66 renovation (fig. 1).1

Unlike the numerous Buddhist cave temples in China and the chaitya halls in India, which are caves dug into mountains, the Sŏkkul-am is a domed and walled architectural structure in stone covered with earth to make it resemble a grotto. The Sŏkkul-am is also different from its Indian and Chinese counterparts in that the images are carved and placed in the man-made cave, and not carved out of the natural stone wall of the cave itself. By far the most significant difference is that the entire structure of the Sŏkkul-am including the sculpture and the architecture seems to have been planned and executed under one single unifying theme illuminating the profound doctrine of the contemporary Buddhism. Such an extraordinary complexity and unity of the iconographic program is rarely found in other Buddhist monuments. This plus its consistently high level of the quality of the sculptures makes the Sŏkkul-am the most important work in the history of Buddhist art, not only of Korea, but also of the entire Asian region sharing the Buddhist culture.

Despite the above mentioned art historical and religious importance of the Sŏkkul-am, there is no contemporary official document which elucidates information such as the original motives of its construction, the iconographic program, the meaning of the principles of proportions governing its architecture and sculpture, and the identity of the individuals responsible for its planning and execution. The earliest historical document on the Sŏkkul-am is Sanγuk yusa (The Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea) compiled by Priest Iryŏn (1206-1289) of the late Koryŏ period. Then comes Sanjung Ilgi (Mountain Diary) written by Chŏng Si-han in 1688 in which the author recorded his visit to the Sŏkkul-am. There are two other documents of the 18th-century, namely Pulguk-sa Kogum Yŏktaegi (The Pulguk-sa Temple through the Ages) and Pulguk-sa Sajŏk (Events of the Past Concerning the Pulguk-sa Temple). Located on the foot of the Toham Mountain, the Pulguk-sa Temple is believed to be closely related to the Sŏkkul-am in planning and construction.

It is, then, quite natural that there are many problems concerning the origin of the monument, its original structure and iconography. It is the purpose of this paper to outline some of these problems and discuss important findings of the scholars of Buddhist architecture and sculpture. The problems to be reviewed presently are 1) its current appellation, Sŏkkul-

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am, 2) its original structure, 3) its iconographic program, and, 4) sculptural styles.

II. Sŏkpusa or Sŏkkul-am?

The present appellation, Sŏkkul-am, apparently was not the original name of the monument. Samguk yusa, the oldest historical document concerning the origin of Sŏkkul-am, calls it Sŏkpusa. To quote the relevant passage from it:

His heart moved by heavenly grace, Kim Tae-sŏng built the beautiful Pulguk-sa in memory of his parents of the present incarnation and founded the Sŏkpusa Temple for his parents of the former incarnation. He then appointed the two priests, Sinrim and P'yŏhun to take charge of each of the temples.

In the above passage, however, it is not clear whether the Sŏkpusa is the very structure we now call Sŏkkul-am or if it refers to a larger temple complex including the present Sŏkkul-am. The fact that the two high priests (sŏngsa, or the sacred teacher) were assigned to live in the Pulguk-sa and the Sŏkpusa respectively, suggests that the Sŏkpusa must have been at least more than just the present Sŏkkul-am itself. A supporting evidence to the above can be found in the 17th-century writing by Chŏng Si-han:

In his Sanyung Ilgi (Mountain Diary) of the 15th day of the 5th month, 1688, Chŏng Si-han recorded his visit to the Mt. Toham as follows.

When I arrived at Sŏkkul-am, the Priest of the am, Myonghae, welcomed me and offered me a seat. A little later, we went up to the Stone-cave (Sŏkkul) which was all man-made. Outside the stone-gate on either side, there were four or five large stone all filled with wonderfully carved images of the Buddha as though done by heaven. The stone-gate itself was carved in the form of a rainbow. Inside the gate, the Buddha image sits solemnly as though alive. After admiring them for a while, we came down to spend the night at the anta (subsidiary temple).

2 Samguk yusa, Ch 5, Section on Kim Tae-sŏng. See the English translation of the Samguk yusa, The Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea by Ha Tae-hŭng and Grafton K. Mintz (Yŏnsei Univ Press, 1972), pp. 380-383 for more background information on Kim Tae-ŭng's birth and the building of the a temples and erection of the Buddha image. The writer, however, does not follow their translation in the passage quoted above as they are not accurate in rendering the crucial proper noun, Sŏkpusa. Instead, the translation simply used "grotto of Sŏkkul-am" as it is called nowadays.

3 Chŏng Si-han, Sanyung Ilgi (Mountain Diary) (1688) quoted in Sŏkkul-am, Compiled by the Academy of Korean Buddhistic Studies, Buddhist Temples of Korea series, No. 2 (1974), p. 25.
As we see in the above quotation, Ch'ŏng Sin-han first went to the anya called Sŏkkul-am, and was greeted by a priest of the anya (amst'ing). He then went up to the sŏkkul or the stone-cave with the seated buddha image and other carved images he called buddha images, but apparently referring to the relief images of the various buddhist deities. The question arises then, why and when the cave itself began to be called Sŏkkul-am.

The third document called Pulguk-sa Kogım Yŏktaegi (The Pulguk-sa Temple through the Ages) written during the 18th-century provides us with additional information, although nothing conclusive. Pulguk-sa Kogım Yŏktaegi records the 1703 refurbishing of the Sŏkkul-am and the cave (kul) as follows:

In the 42nd year of the K'ang-hsi reign, (kyem), Chong-yŏl had the Sŏkkul-am refurbished and also had stone stairs built in front of the cave. In the 57th year of K'ang-hsi (munsul), Priest Taegyŏm ordered refurbishing.

The above short passages leave us with questions about how extensive the repair on both occasions had been. Furthermore, they do not make clear whether Sŏkkul-am refers to a separate anya or a structure including the stone cave. Judging from the time lapse of only 20 years between 1688 and 1708, it seems reasonable to assume that in both of the above quotations, the Sŏkkul-am refers to the same anya or the small temple and the sŏkkul (stone cave) or kul (cave) refers to the present Sŏkkul-am. Therefore, it is not clear when the anya disappeared or since when the present Sŏkkul-am is called as such.

Other references to the sŏkkul or to the Sŏkkul-am can be found occasionally in the literary works of the late 18th- and early 19th-century writers who composed poems after visiting the cave with a buddha image. One of them, a poem by Yi Kwan-o (b. 1760), has a title, “Sŏkkul-am” and describes the cave (am) built of stone with a buddha image in it. This could be the first sure document referring to the cave itself as Sŏkkul-am. Here is the translation of first four lines of the poem, describing the Sŏkkul-am:

On the western slope of the Ch'ŏn-t'aε Mt stands a lonely am
Stones overlaid to form a spacious hall and niches

4 Pulguk-sa Kogım Yŏktaegi (The Pulguk-sa Temple through the Ages) (18th-19th cen) quoted in ibid. For the date of the document, see Hwang Su-yŏng, “Sŏkkul-am üi Ch'anggŏn kwa Yŏnhyŏk” (The Origin & History of the Sŏkkul-am), Yŏksa kyoyuk Vol 8 (Aug. 1964), p 482, n 15

5 See Report, p 10
Above the stones, a high mound covered with grass all around
In the middle was kept a divine Buddha bathed in misty clouds. 

Since the author was born in 1760, we can assume that the poem could have been composed in late 18th century, by which time, the present Sŏkkul-am was known by that name.

Most recently, Prof. Moon Myŏng-daehas proposed that we call the monument “Kyŏngju Sŏkkul” following the general practice in China of calling the Buddhist cave temples after the place name, such as the Yŏn-kang caves or the Lung-men caves. However, the Sŏkkul-am is not the only cave in Kyŏngju, and therefore, it might be confusing to simply call it Kyŏngju Sŏkkul. Since it is now widely known as the Sŏkkul-am, it is best to call it by that name rather than trying to change it to something that is not even the original name of the monument.

III. The Original Structure of the Sŏkkul-am

The Sŏkkul-am as it is now (see section I) is apparently somewhat different from its original structure. Architecturally, the most obvious change took place at the time of the 1961-66 restoration when the new wooden roofed structure was added to the ante-room. Dr. Hwang Su-yŏng, who was in charge of the restoration, decided to have the structure added, based on the 1733 painting by Ch'ŏng Sŏn(1676-1759), Kolgul Sŏkkul do, in which the two cave temples are shown on the slopes of Mt T'oham with the wooden architectural structure.

Prof. Nam Ch'ŏn-u contends that the ante-room was not a “room,” but a “front court” and that there was a light-window (kwang-ch'ang) above the arched doorway to the circular main hall. His argument against the roofed wooden structure is based on the 1708 Pulguk-sa Sajŏk in which is found the following

When the Sŏkkul-am was constructed, no wood or mud was used, only the finely cut stones were interlocked together to make the stone room of the Buddha. 

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6 石窟庵
天台西畔有孤庵，疊石為邸忽以鑫，上築高陵沙草遍，中藏神佛霧雲昏，… Ibid


8 See Report, p 10 and p 22

9 Nam Ch’ŏn-u, “Kambul ŭl Poham han Chesang kwa Sŏkkul Pŏptang ŭl Kyori jŏk Haesŏk” (The Doctrinal Interpretation of the Main Hall of the Sŏkkul including the Various Images on the Walls and in the Niches), Yŏksa hākpo No 111 (1986), pp 1-65

10 Nam Ch’ŏn-u, op at , pp 17-18
He also points out that the earlier quoted passage from *Sanjung Ilgi*, "Outside the stone gate on either side, there...", suggests that the present anteroom was at that time a space "outside" or without any roof.\(^{11}\)

Prof. Nam's belief on the original presence of the "light-window" is based on his discovery of a piece of stone which he considers to be from the upper frame of the alleged stone structure with vertical grills. He contends that this window is an important element together with the direction of the Sökkul-am which faces east-south 30 degree, the exact direction of the sunrise at the time of the winter solstice. The rising sun will illuminate the Buddha image through the "light-window" on the morning of the solstice, the beginning of the new cycle of the year. This is an important fact in understanding the doctrinal aspect of the Sökkul-am as a whole.\(^{12}\) Leaving the interpretation of the doctrinal aspect aside, the original presence of the light-window sounds convincing as the photograph of the Sökkul-am prior to the 1913 Japanese restoration does show what appears to be an arched opening above the main arched doorway to the main hall.\(^{13}\) Prof. Nam also points out that the recurring problem of humidity inside the Sökkul-am after the 1960s restoration is due to the blocking of the ventilation caused by the newly added structure.\(^{14}\)

The third structural problem concerns the now missing pagoda, presumably a five-storey stone pagoda believed to have been located between the main Buddha image and the eleven-headed bodhisattva. Dr Hwang Su-yông argues that during the Japanese colonial rule the pagoda and at least two images from the niches that are now empty were taken to Japan by the colonial officials. His argument is based on the observation by the famous Japanese scholar, Yanagi Muneyosi and on the fact that there is a square stone base with a square hole for *sanra* between the Buddha and the eleven-headed bodhisattva.\(^{15}\) Dr Hwang further develops a theory that, with the small stone pagoda, considered to be the "pagoda of thousand-buddha of the past" (*Ch‘ŏnbul tabo-t‘ap*), discovered from the Sökkul-am during the

\(^{11}\) *Ibid*, p 14

\(^{12}\) Prof. Nam attempted to interpret the iconographical program and the key doctrine behind the planning of the Sökkul-am to be the principle of dependent-rising (pratītya-samutpada or *yān’gi* of the 12 directions represented symbolically by the images on the wall and in the niches. But this theory is too controversial to be accepted as it is. See *ibid*, pp 22 ff & pp 29 ff.

\(^{13}\) See *Report*, pl 1

\(^{14}\) Nam Ch‘ŏn-u, p 2 & 15

\(^{15}\) Hwang Su-yông, "The Origin and History of the Sökkul-am", *op cit*, pp 184-185
Japanese restoration (now in the Kyŏngju National Museum), the missing pagoda forms a two-pagoda temple layout as may be seen in the Pulguk-sa Temple.\(^{16}\)

However, the two images and the pagoda, allegedly taken to Japan, are not readily accounted for as the present whereabouts of them are not known to anyone. Furthermore, the space behind the main Buddha and the eleven-headed bodhisattva is a very narrow one to effectively accommodate a five-storey stone pagoda. A definitive answer to this problem must await further evidences. It seems that the three-storey pagoda on the east slope of the Sŏkkul-am with a round base is more directly related with the Sŏkkul-am as its diameter is in mathematically meaningful proportion to the diameter of the main hall's ground plan (the latter is approximately 3.5 times larger than the former).\(^{17}\) The principle of the proportion governing the entire structure of the Sŏkkul-am and the main image is too complicated to be discussed at this point. However, in the following section, the essential aspect of it will be dealt with in connection with the iconographic symbolism of the monument. Suffice it to say that the pagoda on the outside of the Sŏkkul-am, not the presumably missing one has closer tie with the monument itself.

**IV. The Iconography of the Sŏkkul-am**

The main Buddha image surrounded by various bodhisattvas and disciples of the Buddha, together with the guardian figures in the ante-chamber, makes the Sŏkkul-am one of the most unique single Buddhist monument in the world. No such impressive combination of images can be found in any cave in China, India or any other places. The Sŏkkul-am in itself is a microcosmic representation of the Buddha-world. However, as to the exact identity of the main Buddha image and the meaning of such combination of images, there have been various interpretations.

The main Buddha image in the earth-touching mudra (fig 3) in the circular chamber has been identified either as the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, or as Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Paradise.

The earth-touching mudra is the one perhaps most closely associated with the historical Buddha as it represents his victory over the devil, Mara, before the moment of his enlightenment. Prof. Kim Lena convincingly

\(^{16}\) *Ibid*

\(^{17}\) See Kang Woo-bang "Sŏkkul-am kŏnch'uk kwa Ch'osang e ŭngyŏngdoen chohwa ēn Mun" ('La Porte d'Harmome' Applied to the Sŏkkur-am Monument Proportion and Pratitya-Samutpadā) *Misul charyo*, No 38 (Jan, 1987), fig 1
traced the transmission of the Buddha image with this particular *mudra* made for the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya in India (no longer extant) to China and Korea through Chinese and Korean pilgrims of the 7th and 8th centuries. The image was described by Hsüan-tsang in his *Ta-T'ang Hsi-yü-chi* (Travel to India) written in 646. The Silla priest Ŭijŏng, who left Kyŏngju in 671 and traveled to India before settling in T'ang China, wrote *Tae-Tang Sŏyŏk Kubŏp Kosŭng-chŏn* (Lives of the Eminent Chinese Monks Who Traveled to India) completed before 692. Of the 57 biographies contained in this work, seven are those of Silla monks and one is a Koguryŏ monk's. It is therefore extremely probable that the travelling monks brought back Buddhist images from India and China, and it is more than

incidental that after the mid-seventh century, both in China and Korea, there appeared many Buddha images with the earth-touching mudra, obviously modelled after the Mahabodhi Temple Buddha image. The main Buddha image of the Sŏkkul-am with its earth-touching mudra should be understood in this light to be the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. On the wall surrounding him are ten disciples of the Buddha as well as the two companion bodhisattvas of Shakyamuni, Munsu (Marjusri) and Pohyon (Samantabhadra), a fact that further strengthens the supposition about the identity of the Buddha as Shakyamuni.

The theory that the main Buddha image is Amitabha was advanced by Dr. Hwang Su-yŏng. His argument was based on the following four points: 1) A large sign board with characters Sukwang-jŏn was discovered in the vicinity of the Sŏkkul-am before the Japanese restoration. The characters su and kwang can be understood as coming from the words muryang-su-pul or muryangkwang-pul both of which are the alternate names of Amitabha. 2) On the wooden panel recording the refurbishing of the monument in 1891, discovered during the Japanese restoration, the Sŏkkul-am is referred to as muta-gul or the cave of Amitabha. 3) The cave itself faces east which makes one to face west when worshipping the main Buddha. This is the prescribed direction of worship for Amitabha according to the sutra of the Muryangsu-pul. 4) The bodhisattva avalokitesvara (in its Tantric form with 11 heads), one of the two flanking bodhisattvas for Amitabha is placed directly behind the Buddha, on the central axis of the cave. Dr. Hwang also contends that during the Unified Silla period, the earth-touching mudra was frequently seen in the Amitabha images, which were made in increasing numbers due to the efflorescence of the Pure Land sect.

19 See the description of the seated image in the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya in the Ta-T'ang Hsü-yu chi quoted in Kim Lena, op. cit., pp. 741-42
21 ibid., p. 93 This panel was hung on the only surviving wooden building in the vicinity of the Sŏkkul-am before the Japanese restoration in the 1910s. The building has been enlarged and refurbished during the 1960s restoration and is now used as an office. See Drawing No. 5 in Report for its relative location to the Sŏkkul-am itself. Dr. Hwang contends that the panel must originally have been hung above the entrance of the rectangular ante-room of the Sŏkkul-am.
22 See Report, pl. 97 for the panel, and p. 256 for the transcript of the text. Currently, the panel is kept in the Tongguk University Museum.
23 Hwang Su-yŏng, "On the Seated Amitabha", p. 94
Most recently, Mr. Kang Woo-bang brought to our attention an interesting fact that the measurements of the Mahabhodi Temple image and that of the Sŏkkul-am Buddha image are almost identical.\textsuperscript{24} For example, the two images share almost identical height, width of the shoulders, and the distance between the two knees\textsuperscript{25} Although he is inclined to identify the Sŏkkul-am Buddha as the historical buddha based on the above fact, he feels that the evidence is not conclusive, and that Dr. Hwang's argument is also worth considering.\textsuperscript{26}

The question of the identity of the Buddha is also closely related to the particular Buddhist sect which is responsible for the creation of the Sŏkkul-am. It is too complicated to introduce all of the various theories and arguments on this subject here. I will simply discuss a few of the important ones in detail.

Dr. Min Yŏng-kyu contends that the Sŏkkul-am is the representation of the Shakyamuni Buddha's preaching on the Spirit Vulture Peak as described in the \textit{Lotus Sutra}. His conclusion is based on the discovery from the Sŏkkul-am of the small stone pagoda, "the pagoda of thousand-buddha of the past". According to the \textit{Lotus Sutra}, the Buddha Prabhutaratna, or the Buddha of the Past, and Shakyamuni preached together seated side by side. The disciples and the bodhisattvas surrounding the main Buddha in the circular hall of the Sŏkkul-am completes the scene of the Spirit Vulture Peak.\textsuperscript{27}

Prof. Kim Sang-hyon on the other hand, regards the Sŏkkul-am together with the Pulguk-sa Temple as a symbolic representation of the Buddha Land of the Hwaŏm sect (Avatamsa), the Sŏkkul-am being the world of "realization within" (naejeung) while the Pulguk-sa Temple, that of the "external manifestation" (woehwa) of the truth.\textsuperscript{28} The presence of the two major bodhisattvas of the Hwaŏm sect, Pohyŏn and Munsu were also cited as the reason for Sŏkkul-am's affiliation with the Hwaŏm sect. However, as noted earlier, there are numerous other figures in the Sŏkkul-am, and there is no indication that the main Buddha could be identified as Vārocanā, the Buddha of the Hwaŏm sect. Prof. Moon Myong-dae also points out that

\textsuperscript{24} Kang Woo-bang, "Sŏkkul-am Ponjon ŭi Tosang sogo" (A Study on Iconography of the Main Buddha in Sŏkpul-sa Temple) \textit{Misul charyo}, No 35 (Dec, 1984), p. 54-57
\textsuperscript{25} See the comparative chart of the measurements in \textit{Ibid}, p 55
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid}, p 56
\textsuperscript{27} Min Yŏng-gyu, "Sŏkkul-am chosang ŭi Kyori-baekyŏng" (The Buddhist Doctrine behind the Sŏkkul-am Sculptures) \textit{Kogo Misul}, No 13 (Aug, 1961), p 135
the Sŏkkul-am and Pulguk-sa as representation of the Buddha world is too general and could be applied to other sects as well. 29

Most recently, Prof. Moon developed a theory that the Sŏkkul-am is directly connected with the Silla royal family, i.e., the parents of the alleged builder, Kim Tae-sŏng, and is a monument of the Sinin (divine seal) sect of Buddhism, a kind of an esoteric sect evoking the secret method called munduri. 30 Apparently, this sect was quite prevalent at the time of the unification of the Three Kingdoms by Silla, and maintained its influence throughout the Unified Silla period. 31 Prof. Moon points out that the central tenet of the sutra, Kwanbul sammae haegyōng (Buddha-dhyana samadhi-sangra sutra), the major sutra of the Sinin sect is filial piety and defense against the enemy, the two aspects which are closely linked with the building of the Sŏkkul-am. As mentioned earlier in section I, according to Sanguk Yusa, Kim Tae-sŏng had the Pulguk-sa and the Sŏkkul-am built for his two sets of parents, those of previous incarnation and present incarnation. It is assumed that, with his social status in the mid-8th century Silla society and with Kim as his family name, Tae-sŏng could very well have been a member of the Kim royal clan of the Silla dynasty. As for the Sŏkkul-am’s function as the defender of the enemy, one can cite its commanding position on the high slope of the Mt. Toham overlooking the Eastern Sea, through which the Japanese invaders sailed to Korea to cause ceaseless troubles since very early in Korean history.

Prof. Moon makes another interesting point. According to him, Kwanbul sammae haegyōng is the sutra in which the Buddha’s 32 major and 80 minor divine bodily characteristics are spelled out in detail so that the image makers can follow its direction, and it would have been quite appropriate to have this sutra to be the guide to making various images in the Sŏkkul-am. 32

Mr Kang Woo-bang takes a rational and abstract approach. He interprets the architecture and sculpture of the Sŏkkul-am as a closely interrelated unit with each part of the architecture and sculpture creating harmonious relationship based on the mathematical and geometrical orders. His interpretation was inspired by the findings of the late Yoneda Miyoi, the Japanese architectural engineer who surveyed many Korean traditional

29 Moon Myong-dae, op cit, pp 11-12
30 ibid, pp 13 ff
32 Moon Myong-dae, (1967), op cit, p 16
architectures and left careful records of measurements of each monument including the Sŏkkul-am.\(^{33}\)

One crucial discovery made by Yoneda was the fact that the module in determining the measurement of each part of the Sŏkkul-am is 12 TC.\(^{34}\) For example, the following measurements are all 12 TC: 1) the height of the wall from the ground to the top of the relief panel, 2) one half of the diameter of the ground plan of the main chamber, 3) the height from the head of the Buddha to the top of the hemispherical dome of the main chamber, and 4) the width of the entrance to the circular chamber. With these basic measurements first determined, the height of the seated Buddha


\(^{34}\) TC is an abbreviation of T’ang-ch’ŏk, a unit of T’ang Chinese linear measurement which equals 29.7 cm. Note that it is slightly shorter than the modern ch’ŏk which is 30.3 cm.
is set to be equal to the length of the diagonal of the square made by 12 TC, that is if 12 TC is 1, it is \( \sqrt{2} \), according to the Pythagorean theorem \(^{35}\) (fig 7). However, Yoneda did not pursue further the symbolic significance of the \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle (fig 8)

It is Mr Kang Woo-bang who tried to unlock the secret of the proportion in the Sŏkkul-am by relating the harmonious proportion of the \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle and the “mutual penetration” and the “mutual identity” of the Hwaŏm philosophy (note that it is not sect, but philosophy) which also corresponds to the principle of dependent-arising (pratitya-samutpada, or yŏn-’gi) of the Sunyata (void) doctrine which advocates interdependence of all existences \(^{36}\). The property of the \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle is such that within a \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle, there are infinite numbers of \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangles as shown in fig 8. Also the proportion of 1:\( \sqrt{2} \) found in a \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle is similar to that of the golden section, \(^{37}\) and thus most pleasing to the visual senses. For these reasons, the \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle is called “la porte d’harmonie,” and it is these characteristics of the \( \sqrt{2} \) rectangle that led Mr Kang to compare the proportional principles of the Sŏkkul-am to the Hwaŏm philosophy of interdependence \(^{38}\)

Mr Kang’s basic approach to the problem of contemporary Buddhist sect is quite different from that of all other scholars quoted above. He seems to go along with the view that, not until the Koryŏ period, the division among the various sects in Korean Buddhism was so clear. \(^{39}\) Therefore, the Hwaŏm philosophy, which serves as the basis of Buddhism in general, could be applied to whatever sect or sects that was responsible for the building of the Sŏkkul-am. He is thus inclined to interpret the architecture of the Sŏkkul-am as the concrete representation of the macrocosm, and the central image of the Buddha as the microcosm of the Hwaŏm philosophy \(^{40}\)

In retrospect, all the above iconographic interpretations point to the mul-

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35 A theorem in geometry: the square on the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares on the other sides, i.e., \( A^2 + B^2 = C^2 \) if \( A \) and \( B \) are 1, \( C \) would be \( \sqrt{2} \)

36 Kang Woo-bang, “‘La Porte d’Harmone’” p 25

37 The division of a line or the proportion of a geometrical figure in which the smaller dimension is to the greater as the greater is to the whole

38 Kang Woo-bang, “‘La Porte d’Harmone’” op. cit., Compare the approach taken by Moon Myong-dac on the matters of the forms and proportions of the Sŏkkul-am in Moon Myong-dac (1987), pp 23-32


40 Kang Woo-bang, “‘La Porte d’harmonie” p 26
ti-layered nature of the Buddhism and the Buddhist art of the Unified Silla period. At present, scholars of the history of Buddhism are inclined to discount the sharp division among the different sects in the Unified Silla period. It is believed that there were various schools of Buddhist thoughts, but not necessarily Buddhist sects. Silla Buddhism is thus best understood as a "national Buddhism." There is no doubt that the Buddhist philosophy behind the Pulguk-sa Temple and the Sŏkkul-am is tied to the prevalent Silla Buddhism, as much as the filial piety of one man, Kim Tae-song. Also it is not a coincidence to find the kind of mathematical proportion which can be directly related to the philosophy of the Hwaŏm School. Perhaps it is the very multiplicity of the meaning locked inside the Sŏkkul-am that makes the monument so unique.

V. The Sculptural Style of the Sŏkkul-am Images.

As mentioned earlier, in the Sŏkkul-am, there are 38 images in all. With the exception of the main Buddha image which is a complete sculpture in the round, all other images including the 8 seated images in the niches above the relief panels in the circular chamber are in relief. Scholars are in general agreement that the sculptures can be grouped in two stylistically different groups: 1) The main Buddha, and all the figures of the bodhisattvas, disciples of the Buddha, seated figures in the niches, and the two thunderbolt-bearers and the four guardians of the four directions; 2) The relief sculptures of the 8 classes of the divine guardians in the square antechamber.

The first group of figures shows a more graceful proportion between the face and the body. For example, the bodhisattva Manjusri (fig 5) and Brahma have a proportion of about 1.93 between the face and the body. In Indian sculpture, the size of the face is measured from the top of the forehead to the chin (almost one palm), and this measurement, called thalam, is taken as a module to determine the height of the figure which, in an ideal image, is usually 9, making the total height of the figure 10 thalam as seen in the above Sŏkkul-am figures. Also, the relief figures around the main Buddha take the posture of turning slightly either to the right or to

41 Hŏ Hŭng-sik, op cit, p 110
42 Moom Myong-dae (1987), p 75 ff for the measurements of the figures, p 127 ff for the proportions of the figures
the left to make them stand toward the entrance of the chamber. Their graceful turning motion together with the tribhanga (threebend) posture make the figures look as if emerging out of the stone panels into the space. The granite, the material of the Sökkul-am, is a stone which in general does not render itself to minute, detailed carving due to its coarse grain; but in the relief images of the Sökkul-am, the sculptor seems to have brought out the best of it.

The seated Buddha image (fig. 3) is considered by far the most grandiose, dignified and perfectly carved image in the entire history of Korean Buddhist sculpture. The proportion between the head (not face, this time) and the seated body is 1:3, while most other seated images of the mid-8th century show 1:2.9 proportion. The proportion between the seated image and the
Fig 7 A schematic drawing of the elevation of the Sŏkkul-am's circular chamber with the Buddha image. If one half of the diameter of the ground plan is 1, the height of the Buddha image is $\sqrt{2}$ (from Kang Woo-bang).

Fig 8 A $\sqrt{2}$ rectangle containing an infinite numbers of $\sqrt{2}$ rectangles (from Kang Woo-bang).
pedestal is approximately 1.0.5 (346cm·168.4cm) 44 When the image is viewed at the entrance of the main chamber, the circular halo, whose diameter is one-fourth of that of the circular chamber,45 looks perfectly positioned behind the head of the Buddha. The facial features and the body forms as well as the drapery of the Buddha are the model of what is called the "idealistic naturalism," the ideal blend of naturalism and the geometric simplicity in which the beauty of natural forms is maintained and yet all the undesirable irregularities are omitted. The result is one of classic simplicity and serenity rarely seen in any other images of the Unified Silla period.

Although the influences of T'ang Chinese sculptures such as the Pao-ch'ing ssu triad of the 724 (K'ar-yuan 12)46, or the central image of the cave 18 of the T'ien-lung shan caves (fig. 4) should not be overlooked, none of them look as serene and ideal as the Sŏkkul-am image. The Sŏkkul-am Buddha in that sense is closer to the Gupta Indian image such as the seated image with the wheel-turning mudra (5-6th cce A.D.) in the Archaeological Museum in Sarnath,47 although admittedly, there are some differences between the two. As speculated in the section on iconography, during the Unified Silla period, influences of the Indian sculptural style was quite possible. The ideal form and proportion of the Indian Gupta style is not confined to the Gupta period, but had had an enduring influence both in India and Southeast Asia for centuries to follow after the fall of the Gupta Dynasty in 600 A.D. It is a testimony to the cosmopolitan character of the Unified Silla period culture in general that we find influences of both T'ang Chinese and Gupta Indian sculptural styles in the Sŏkkul-am image. The Sŏkkul-am Buddha image, however, stands alone among all the images compared here: the serenity stemming from its ideal proportion, the simplicity of forms and the facial expression make this image unique. This is what makes Unified Silla sculpture the classic of Korean Buddhist sculptures.

The second group, namely the eight classes of the divine guardians (fig. 6), shows slightly different stylistic characteristics, both in their posture and in the bodily proportions. Most of the eight guardians are in strictly frontal position, thus showing greater rigidity. The proportion between the face and the body is mostly 1.8, forming a figure of 9 thalam, rather than 10

44 Moon Myong-dae (1987), pp 127-129
45 See Kang Woo-bang, "'La Porte d'Harmone' " p 9 fig 4
46 Matsubara Saburo, Chumgguk Pulkyo Chogak-sa Yön'gu (Chinese Buddhist Sculpture) (Tokyo, 1961), pl 167 a & b
47 B Rowland, op cit, pl 83
thalam as seen in the bodhisattva figures in the first group. This kind of rigidity and proportion can be compared to the late 8th century sculptures such as the Buddha image of the Yongbong-sa dated 799, or the 12 zodiac figures around the tomb of the General Kim Yu-sin also of the late-8th century. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider the eight classes of the divine guardians to the the works done about a half century later than the first group of figures.

The development of the Buddhist Sculpture in Korea during the Unified Silla period, especially during the 8th century, shows a keen sensitivity to political changes as well as internal cultural development. The mid-8th century is the time when Silla had grown confident of itself both politically and culturally after the unification of the three Kingdoms in 668. The reign of King Kyŏng-dok (742-764) is considered the highest point in 1000 years of the Silla history in terms of its cultural achievements. The Silla royal power began to be challenged during the period of the next king, King Hye-gong (reigned 765-779), who was assassinated by the one who succeeded him. Such changes in the political stability seem to have had direct impact on the art of the period, and Buddhist sculptures from the late-8th century on till the end of the Silla dynasty shows steady decline, never regaining the glory of the mid-8th century.

The planning of the entire Sŏkkul-am might have been done at once, but the actual execution might have been done over at least half a century, long enough to reflect the stages of development of Buddhist sculpture at the crucial juncture. Also, the structure of the Sŏkkul-am is such that there is a strong possibility of the works done at different stages. Nevertheless, the Sŏkkul-am as a whole can still be taken as the highest achievement of the Silla sculpture as well as Korean Buddhist sculpture and architecture.

VI. Summary and Conclusion

In the above, various problems concerning the Sŏkkul-am Cave Temple in Kyŏngju have been examined. Due to the lack of reliable contemporary record elucidating the planning and building of the monument, we had to rely on the semi-legendary Sanguk Yusa account written at the end of the 13th century for the story behind the construction of the Pulguk-sa Temple.

48 Moon Myong-dac (1987), pp 140 ff
49 ibid., p 143
50 Moon Myong-dac, Hau'guk Chogak-sa (A History of Korean Sculpture). (Seoul, 1971), fig. 71
and the Sŏkkul-am. Available evidences suggest that the monument we now call Sŏkkul-am was originally a part of a larger complex called Sŏkpul-sa while the present appellation of the Sŏkkul-am was applied to it only after the 18th century.

Because of the poor state of preservation in the past, the Sŏkkul-am was found at the beginning of the 20th century, partly destroyed, leaving many questions as to the original architectural structure and arrangement of the sculptural figures. During the 1960s restoration work done by the Agency for protection of Cultural Properties, the wooden architectural front was added, and some of the sculptural panels were rearranged. Those responsible for the restoration work had reasons to do so, but there are evidences indicating that a wooden front was not a part of the original structure. Therefore, disputes arose about the authenticity of the present state of the Sŏkkul-am. Further studies should be continued on this matter.

By far the most complicated problem is that of the iconography. Understanding the nature of Buddhism during the Silla period undoubtedly will be the key to the identification of the iconographic program as a whole. As discussed earlier, there are enough indications to prove the identity of the main Buddha to be the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. But the fact that the Pure Land sect was very strong in the Unified Silla period, together with other material evidences found in the vicinity of the Sŏkkul-am, lead us to consider the possibility of its being Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Paradise.

Interesting observations have also been made about the correlation between the mathematical and geometrical orders found in the Sŏkkul-am architecture and sculpture and the Buddhist philosophy of the Hwaom school, namely, that of the principle of dependent-arising (yŏn'gi). At this point, it seems most reasonable to follow the view that the Silla Buddhism was not as sectarian as one would think. Political and cultural considerations lead us to believe that the monument such as the Sŏkkul-am built under the state sponsorship at the height of the Silla power could be a representation of the state or national Buddhism, and thus least sectarian in nature.

As to the sculptural styles of the Sŏkkul-am images, most scholars agree that the Sŏkkul-am represents two different stages of the stylistic development during the Unified Silla period. 1) the classical stage of the mid-8th century sculpture exemplified by the main Buddha image, the figures on relief panels surrounding it, and those in the niches, 2) the stage of the decline in Silla sculpture immediately following the height of achievement represented by the figures of the eight classes of the divine guardians on the
walls of the ante-room. The first group testifies to the diversity of sources and influences from outside, and to the uniqueness of the Silla achievement. The second group points to the historical change which took place just after the reign of King Kyŏng-dŏk.

Although relatively small in scale, taken as a whole, the Sŏkkul-am is beyond dispute the most unique and valuable monument of Buddhist architecture and sculpture not only of Korea but also of the region sharing the Buddhist culture in the Far East.

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# Glossary

(Terms and names appearing in the bibliography are excluded)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Pao-ch'ing ssu</td>
<td>寶慶寺</td>
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<td>Pohyŏn</td>
<td>普賢</td>
</tr>
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<td>Pulguk-sa</td>
<td>佛國寺</td>
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<td>P'yohun</td>
<td>表訓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Simn sect</td>
<td>神印宗</td>
</tr>
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<td>Sillim</td>
<td>神琳</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Sŏkpul-sa</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Sŏngsa</td>
<td>聖師</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Sŏkwang-jŏn</td>
<td>壽光殿</td>
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<td>Taegyŏm</td>
<td>大謙</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Tae-Tang Sŏyŏk Kubŏp</td>
<td>大唐西海朱法 高僧傳</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kṣoṣa-ch'on</td>
<td>大唐西海朱法 高僧傳</td>
</tr>
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<td>T'ang-ch'ok</td>
<td>唐尺</td>
</tr>
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<td>T'ien-lung Shan</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>woe-hwa</td>
<td>外化</td>
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<tr>
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<td>柳宗悦</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yi Kwan-o</td>
<td>李觀吾</td>
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<td>yŏn'gi</td>
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