

Buddhism in Silla Korea

During the first several centuries of the common era, the Korean peninsula was ruled by three different kingdoms: Silla, Koguryo, and Paekche. Because these kingdoms emerged in the shadow of Chinese civilization, they possessed a number of cultural aspects borrowed from the Chinese. Among these were Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Buddhism began to take a strong hold in Korea by about the fourth century, when rulers began to make it the state religion. Despite this, many in Korea continued to practice older indigenous religions. In some cases, these older traditions were blended with the practice of Buddhism.

In the seventh century, the rise of the Tang Dynasty in China (618–907), brought the kingdoms of Korea more firmly into the Chinese cultural orbit. It was also at about this time that the kingdom of Silla, which had made itself a vassal of Tang China, emerged as the dominant Korean power. As such, it proceeded to conquer the other two kingdoms and bring the peninsula under Silla rule. This process of unification also helped to spread Buddhism across the peninsula.

Buddhism offered Korean rulers a spiritual and supernatural vindication of their authority. Indeed, some of the early rulers who promoted Buddhism eventually took Buddhist names and abdicated their thrones to become Buddhist monks towards the end of their lives. Under Silla rule, Buddhism was successfully blended with Confucianism, and both grew deep roots in the peninsula. During this time Buddhism became more acceptable and popular in the country. This helped stimulate increased Buddhist-inspired artistic and scholarly output.

This does not mean, however, that Koreans were simply imitating the Buddhists of Tang China. In fact, one of the major Buddhist intellectuals of these early years was a man named Wonhyo (617–686), who helped develop an

indigenous sect of Buddhism called Haedong. This form of Buddhism blended together from several Buddhist sects elements that Koreans found most popular. Like so many other things Korea absorbed from the Tang, such as the Chinese written language, the Koreans took what they received and adapted it to suit Korean cultural and intellectual needs.

Two outstanding examples of the artistic creativity fueled by Buddhism in Korea are the Pulguk-sa temple near Kyongju and the Sokkuram Grotto also near Kyongju. The Pulguk-sa temple was completed in 751 and is considered an excellent example of Buddhist art during the period. Part of the same complex, though a few miles from the Pulguk-sa temple, the Sokkuram Grotto, from which one can watch the sun rise over the sea, symbolizes the spiritual journey towards Nirvana.

Instructions

In this activity, you will use what you have learned about the flow of Buddhism from China into Korea before and during the Tang Dynasty in China. As you read, take notes in the graphic organizer below. Then, use those notes to answer the essay question that follows.



Reading Analysis

Use the graphic organizer below to take notes as you read.

What took Buddhism into Korea?
How did Buddhism become the state religion of Korea?
How did Korean adapt and adopt Buddhism from China?



