A cursory glance at the abundant scholarly literature reveals that the Chinese Huayan, Korean Hwaõm, and Japanese Kegon schools (whose names are different readings for the same Chinese characters, 華嚴) have been studied until today predominantly through the thought of a handful of patriarchs—essentially Zhiyan 智顕 (602–668), Fazang 法藏 (643–712), Li Tongxuan 李通玄 (635–730), Chengguan 程觀 (738–839), and Zongmi 宗密 (780–841) for China; Úisang 義湘 (625–702), Wŏnhyo 无尭, and Kyunyŏ 庫均 (923–973) for Korea; Myóe 明惠 (alias Kóben, 1173–1232) and Gyônen 慈然 (1240–1321) for Japan. Much less has been done about other aspects—historical, institutional, cultural—of the Huayan tradition. The predominantly philosophical approach taken so far is amply justified by the sheer complexity of Huayan scholasticism. However, I believe that this approach is not sufficient to explain the enduring cultural impact of Huayan in East Asia. I will therefore take here a different approach, as I have already done in the case of another major school of Buddhism, Chan/Son/Zen, and also in the case of the Korean master Wonhyo.

In the case of Chan, I tried to show the ideological underpinnings of the doctrine of sudden awakening, and emphasized its “rhetoric of immediacy.” A similar ideological critique remains to be done in the case of Huayan. Clearly, notions such as the interpenetration of principle and phenomena (立真標宗, 華嚴宗) lent themselves to ideological recuperation. It is no coincidence that Mahavairocana, the cosmic Buddha of the Avatamsaka-sūtra (華嚴經, 金剛経) was chosen as symbol of imperial centrality and cast into the monumental Buddha of Todaiji 密教大寺 in Nara. The Hwaõm doctrine played a similar role in Korean politics. More recently, the Kegon teaching was used in Japan by the so-called Kyoto school to support imperial ideology. However, I will not attempt such an ideological critique here. I would like to focus instead on some cultural aspects of Huayan in Korea and Japan.

The philosophical teaching of Huayan was summarized in Úisang’s famous Diagram of the Dharmadhatu According to the One-vehicle of Huayan (Hwaõm listong pöpyeṣo 華嚴法界界, known under its abbreviated title Pöpyeṣo, Ch. Faṣie
While the content of Úisang’s poem is standard Huayan metaphysics, its diagrammatic format allegedly points to that which cannot be expressed by words, and more specifically, by analytic discourse.

The poem starts from the center of the diagram, and unfolds in four phases, forming four separate sections of the diagram, before finally returning to the center. The first and last characters, next to each other at the center, are said to show that the four separate sections of the diagram, before finally returning to the center.

The diagram is said to have the form of a Chinese seal, and to represent the ocean-seal samādhi (haiyin shanmei, J. kaiin zomma 海印三昧). In fact, the dynamic nature of the diagram calls to mind a Tantric mandala, with four assemblies, rather than a Chinese seal. In other words, the gaze of the reader or practitioner, starting from the center, follows the red thread between characters, in four successive centripetal and centrifugal movements, rather like the subsequent processes of emanation and reabsorption described (and instantiated) in mandalas.

The name of the samādhi represented by the diagram already implies a reference to Indian mythology. As Úisang himself explains, when the god Indra fought against the Asuras, all the warriors were clearly reflected in the sea and they looked like the characters of a seal. Hence the name ocean-seal samādhi.

For all the philosophical insights of Úisang’s poem, its semantic content is not the only thing that matters here. Úisang himself alerts us to the fact that the Diagram is supposed to represent the three realms of matter, life, and of the ultimate wisdom that includes all dharmas. The white paper – pure potentiality – on which the poem is written is said to represent the realm of matter. The black characters, all different, represent the realm of life in its mind-boggling diversity. Finally, the red line that connects these characters represents the realm of the enlightened mind that links and encompasses all the multifarious facts of life. The enlightened mind is the one who sees the writing on the wall. The way in which this Diagram was allegedly produced should serve as a model for all the scholars who have to copyedit a manuscript. We are told that Úisang, on the advice of his master Zhiyan, put a first draft of his text twice into a fire, and that only 250 characters remained, with which he composed his poem.

The diagrammatic form of Úisang’s argument is certainly not, as Yi Chi-kuan argues, a reflection of Úisang’s incapacity to emulate his master’s rhetorical flourishes. To believe that resorting to diagrams is a sign of illiteracy reveals an unjustifiable prejudice in favor of writing. If that were the case, the Shingon master Kūkai 空海 (d. 735) as well, who obviously loved diagrams and mandalas, should be characterized as a poor writer of Chinese. This is obviously not the case, and neither is it for Úisang.

Apart from its attempt to transcend the limits of the written word, Úisang’s diagram, like other similar diagrams (I have in mind here texts such as Dōgen’s 道元 檀闍 Jike kanketsu 自家訓懸 “Rules for Our School”, as found in the transmission documents or kirigami 切紙 of the Sōtō 塗流 tradition, probably had a ritual function. It seems that, in some cases at least, these diagrammatic texts also imply a kind of ritual choreography.

At any rate, a purely philosophical understanding of such works falls obviously short of the mark. This may serve here as a metaphor for the broader understanding of Huayan texts. We know for instance that the Avatamsaka-sūtra, along with many other sūtras, was renowned primarily for its apotropaic efficacy. Likewise, the masters who commented on these texts were famous above all for their thaumaturgic powers. As I have argued in the case of Wŏnbyo, their “life,” as it developed in hagiographic literature, was another aspect – and perhaps the most important – of their “thought,” and it is in large part what explains the enduring appeal of that “thought” – rather than its purely doctrinal or philosophical excellence.

At the formal level at least, my argument will emulate Úisang’s Diagram in its labyrinthine meanders. My central point, however, is that the appeal of Huayan in Korea and Japan, but probably also in China, had much to do with the mythological context of the Avatamsaka-sūtra and its commentaries. The images of the bodhisattvas Mahāsāryā and Samantabhadra, in particular, have played a fundamental role in the devotion and the imagination of Huayan followers. Another important figure is that of the youth Sudhana, in his vision quest throughout the Buddhist realms. The Kegon mandala, representing the fifty-three scenes of Sudhana’s pilgrimage as described in the Ganjāvatīkā, was the main object of worship in rituals performed in

3 T 1887A.
4 Yi 1994: 82.
7 Ibid., 718b. This brings to mind another similar seal, said to have been imprinted at the bottom of the sea of Japan by the Buddha Mahāvairocana (Dainichi 大日). See for instance Sahaśambhava沙石集 1:1, trans. See Morrell 1985: 73.
This pilgrimage was also probably the model emulated by priests like Uisang and Myöe, in their desire to go in search of the Dharma in China and/or India. Inasmuch as this representation deconstructs itself, by pointing out that the end of the quest is contained in its beginning, it was also perhaps, as I will argue in the cases of Wönyö and Myöe, a reason not to embark on a long and strenuous trip.

Sudhana’s pilgrimage is a root-metaphor for Uisang’s Diagram. As Uisang explains in his Pöpyeô ko: “One day someone fell asleep and dreamt that he was wandering about thirty places. When he awoke, he found that he was lying in the same position as he had started in, without changing. In this way, though we start out to be a grave. This is not quite true, since - as any reader or traveler knows - any word or place is always understood through the context of those that preceded it.

The contrast does not stop there, however. We are told that the contrast between the two monks could best be described in the Chan terms of “sudden” and “gradual.” Uisang’s pilgrimage represents the gradual process of learning and awakening, whereas Wönyö’s realization that there is no need to travel in search of the Law, and decides to return home. He thus comes to realize the cardinal tenet of Huayan, namely, that the world is produced by our own mind. He draws the logical conclusion that there is no need to travel in search of the Law, and decides to return home. Uisang continues alone, and becomes a disciple of the Huayan master Zhiyan. Upon his return to Silla, he becomes the first patriarch of the Hwaoms school, whereas Wönyö remains unaffiliated with any particular school.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two monks could best be described in the Chan terms of “sudden” and “gradual.” Uisang’s pilgrimage represents the gradual process of learning and awakening, whereas Wönyö’s realization that there is no need to travel in search of the Law, and decides to return home. He thus comes to realize the cardinal tenet of Huayan, namely, that the world is produced by our own mind. He draws the logical conclusion that there is no need to travel in search of the Law, and decides to return home. Uisang continues alone, and becomes a disciple of the Huayan master Zhiyan. Upon his return to Silla, he becomes the first patriarch of the Hwaoms school, whereas Wönyö remains unaffiliated with any particular school.

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The nāga-palace reappears in Wŏnhyo’s legend (a priest also known by the name “Yellow Dragon,” from the name of his monastery, the Hwangnyong-so 黃龍寺), in the circumstances surrounding his writing of a commentary on the Jin’gang sanmei jing 金剛三昧經. According to Robert Buswell, this apocryphal scripture was probably composed in Korea by Pŏmmang 波夢（n.d.), a disciple of the fourth Chan patriarch Daoxin 道信 (580–651). As the legend has it, the Korean queen was beset by an apparently incurable illness. Divination revealed that only drugs brought from overseas could cure her. An envoy was therefore sent to Tang China.

On the way, the envoy was diverted to the dragon-palace, where he received a stūra (the Jin’gang sanmei jing) that could heal the queen’s illness. The dragon-king added that this stūra should be the object of a commentary by Wŏnhyo. The latter, owing to his eccentricities, had been shunned by his colleagues and by the court, but now, with the dragon-king’s support, he suddenly rose to prominence.

The Song gaoseng zhuan adds a discussion to its biography of Wŏnhyo, in which it mentions other cases of scriptures hidden in (or revealed from) the nāga-palace. “The scriptures state that there is a seven-jewelled stūpa in the nāga-king’s palace. All that all the buddhas have said and all of their profound teachings, such as the twelve-fold chain of causes and conditions, the dhāranīs and the samādhīs, are kept there in a seven-jeweled casket.”

It is also a dragon that stands behind the rise of his former companion Ŭisang to the rank of first patriarch of Hwaom. Here again, the legend is well known and I will simply give its outline. While in China, Ŭisang stays in the house of Buddhist lay persons, whose daughter, a young girl by the name of Shanmiao 莊 мом, falls in love with him. Ŭisang, intent on keeping his vows, “makes his heart like a stone,” and resists the girl’s advances. Better, he converts her. Later, when he returns to her town on his way back to Korea, she rejoices at the thought of seeing him again. Then she is stricken with grief when she hears that his boat has already set sail. Finally, she vows to become a dragon to escort him and protect him always. The scene where she throws herself into the sea and turns into a magnificent dragon that carries Ŭisang’s boat on its back forms the climax of the Japanese illustrated scroll known as Kegon engi emaki 華厳経絵巻 (Illustrated Scroll on the Origins of Huayan/Kegon). Upon returning to Korea, Ŭisang intends to take up residence in a monastery. However, he complains about the presence of monks of other schools (described as “heretics” in later documents). Shanmiao then turns into a huge rock that stands in mid-air above the monastery, frightening the “heretics” away. Ŭisang eventually moves into the monastery, which he renames “Monastery of the Floating Rock.” Ŭisang’s teaching on the Avatamsaka prospers from that moment onward.

This story exerted a great influence on Myōe, the so-called Restorer of Japanese Kegon. Scholars have discussed the role played by Myōe in the production of the Kegon engi emaki. While he may not have sponsored it initially, he did use a commentary on it, in which he pays close attention to the story of Shanmiao.

The motif of Shanmiao’s transformation into a dragon made a particularly deep impression on Myōe. The latter was acutely aware of the fact that that motif, also found in the famous Dōjōji 寺西寺 legend, could have a negative interpretation. In the Dōjōji legend, a young girl falls madly in love with a young monk who stays for a night in her house, on his way to Kumano 赤野. In order to resist her advances, the monk promises that he will visit her again when he returns from his pilgrimage. When she realizes that he has not kept his promise, she runs after him in anger and transforms into a huge snake while crossing a river. She finally catches up with him at Dōjōji, and, coiling around the temple bell under which he has taken refuge, she reduces him to ashes through the burning intensity of her hatred.

The image of women turning into snakes because of jealousy or hatred was a medieval Japanese topos. Thus, when someone asks Myōe whether Shanmiao’s turning into a dragon was not a mark of attachment, he insists that, in her case, things are quite different—because she had previously been converted to Buddhism, not only by Ŭisang in her present life, but already in a past life. Her love for Ŭisang, Myōe argues, was not an ordinary love that grew out of attachment, but a pure love that stemmed from a deep respect for the Dharma. This is, Myōe concludes, why she became a dragon, and not a monstrous snake like the protagonist of the Dōjōji legend.

On the surface, Myōe read the story of Shanmiao as an exemplum on moral causality, but at a deeper level, another scene is taking place, and Myōe himself was aware of it when he tried to establish a clear-cut distinction between snake and dragon—a distinction that does not reflect Japanese beliefs of the time. According to the Jinten ainōshō 金添攀義抄, a medieval dictionary, dragon and snake are distinct, but the dragon is a former snake. From the symbolic standpoint, however, the line of demarcation between them is often blurred. Medieval deities are fundamentally ambivalent, as shown for instance by the figure of the goddess Benzaiten 弁財天, who manifests herself as both a snake and a dragon.

In the case of Shanmiao as well, Myōe seems to have been at times more hesitant. In a dream he had in 1203, he sees a Chinese doll that turns into a tearful young woman. Moved, Myōe decides to take her under his protection. When he visits a monastery with her, someone accuses her of mating with snakes. Myōe argues that this is not the case, and that she merely happens to have a snake-body. He concludes that she is none other than Shanmiao (J. Žennyo).
Shanmiao was so important for Myōe that he made her the main object of worship (honzon 本尊) of Zennyoji 善榮寺 in Hiraoka 平岡, a nunnery that he founded as a refuge for women widowed by the Jōkyū Disturbance (Jōkyū no Ran 承久の乱) in 1221. This nunnery was a sub-temple of Myōe’s Kōzanji 高山寺, near the Kiyotaki 清滝, an appropriate place for a dragon-deity. Significantly, owing to her role in protecting Ōisang’s monastery, Zennyo was enshrined as a protecting deity “from Silla” (Korea), not from China.33

After Myōe’s death, some of the nuns who had copied the Avatamsaka-sūtra on his behalf (the so-called Nuns’s Sūtra, Amo-gyō 依縁) followed him in death by drowning themselves. One such case is that of the nun Myōtatsu 妙達, who jumped into the Kiyotaki River in 1232, six months after Myōe’s death.34 Tanabe has argued that, in doing so, Myōtatsu was following the example of Shanmiao, who sacrificed herself to protect Ōisang. While there may be some truth in this, another explanation has to do with the belief in the nāga-palace and the legend of the Empress Keienmon'in 建礼門院, as spread by the Heike monogatari 平家物語. According to this legend, when the Taira were defeated by the Minamoto at the battle of Dan-no-ura 売ノ浦, the Nun of Second Rank, mother of Kyomori, jumped into the waves with the child-emperor Antoku 尿子. While there may be some truth in this, another explanation has to do with the belief in the nāga-palace, the nāga-girl, and the dragon imagery. 35

The enlightenment of the child-emperor Antoku 尿子 is a such that he appeared to the dragon-kins Myōe, together with the eight great dragons/nāga-kings that protect the Dharma, in the retelling of the legend by Zeami 蔵前 in his play “Kasuga Ryūjin 与一楼神 (The Dragon-God of Kasuga).” 36 It is, therefore, the nāga realm does not simply belong to one of the six paths (rotkudo 六道), but it is, as it were, the source and fountainhead of the entire Buddhist cosmos. Along the same line, we recall that the two dragon-kings Nanda and Upanda are coiled around the cosmic axis, Mount Sumeru. In similar fashion, maps of Japan at the time of Myōe showed a huge dragon coiled around the Japanese archipelago.38

The motif of the nāga-palace also played an important role in the promotion of “local knowledge” and the elevation of Japan to the status of sacred Buddhist land and of “country of the gods” (shinkoku 神国). The nāga-palace came to be perceived as a kind of underworld that was not located exclusively in (or below) India, but existed in it (or below) Japan as well; indeed, it could be reached from the bottom of any waterfall or from any of the numerous “dragon-holes” (ryūketsu 龍穴) scattered all over Japan. It is no longer necessary to undertake a long journey to India to bring back Buddhist scriptures or relics of the Buddha: these may be found in the backyard of one’s own monastery, provided there is a waterfall, a pond, or a dragon-hole there.

This revalorization of Japan as “land of the gods” calls to mind another episode in Myōe’s life (or rather legend) that came to be connected with dragon imagery. During his visit to the Kasuga 春日 Shrine in Nara in 1203, he received from the Kasuga deity an oracle that told him to abandon his project of pilgrimage to India.39 Significantly, the episode describes, in mythological terms, the same meaninglessness of the vision quest that Wūnīya had already emphasized. Through the mouth of a female shrine attendant (who happens to be a relative of Myōe), Kasuga Daimyōjin 春日大明神 reveals to him that the essential places of Indian Buddhist lore (the Eagle Peak, etc.) can be found here in Japan, at Kasuga. The name Kasuga Daimyōjin usually refers collectively to the five ancestral deities of the Fujiwara clan worshiped at Kasuga Shrine, but it also sometimes designates other deities that are seen as the “original ground” (honji 本地) or the “traces” (suijaku 足跡) of the latter. In this particular instance, the god refers to himself as “this old man” (okina 爷), but he is also sometimes identified with the Dragon-King Nanda. It is a such that he appears to Ōisang, together with the eight great dragons/nāga-kings that protect the Dharma, in the retelling of the legend by Zennyo in his Ōi no play “Kasuga Ryūjin 春日龍神 (The Dragon-God of Kasuga).” 40 In it, the deity reveals its true form to a Myōe still intent on going to China and India, as well as the scenes of Buddha’s life that he yearned to see: “Māya’s delivery of Śākyamuni. His Preaching the Law on Eagle Peak. His entering nirvāṇa beneath the dual teach trees.” All are revealed in

33 Kōzanji engi 高山寺縁起 (dated 1253). See DNBEZ 117.
34 On this question, see Okuda 1997: 31–51; Faure 2003: 98.
37 This calls to mind Ōisang’s line, in his commentary on the Diagram: “From where does the inverted mind come? From ignorance that has no beginning? From where does ignorance without beginning come? From the absolute? Where is the absolute? In the dharmakaya of each person.” Hwadam iingeop peopkyedo, T 1887A: 45, 716a.
their entirety. Now then, Myōe Shōnin, about your plans to go to China?" To which Myōe, having finally reached Wŏnhyo’s state of mind, replies: “I abandon them.”

According to Royall Tyler, the figure of the dragon here, instead of the traditional “old man” image of Kasuga Daimyōjin, stands simply as a generic image of the deity in Nō plays, and “says less about the Kasuga deity than about the conventions of Noh.” This may be so, but precisely it shows the prevalence of dragon symbolism in medieval imagination, and more specifically in Myōe’s imagination. Not only the origins of the Avatamsaka, but also the subsequent fate of the Huyan school in Korea and Japan were intimately connected with dragonlore. As Frédéric Girard and George Tanabe have shown, the case of Myōe, whose teaching is nourished by a rich visionary imagery, provides a paradigmatic example of the mental world of medieval Buddhists. Without that imagery, that is, without due attention to the concrete mythological aspects that constitute, together with the philosophical abstractions, the warp and woof of the Huyan teaching, one risks losing the red thread that connects doctrinal developments, not to mention the “oceanic feeling” in which practitioners like Usan and Myōe immersed themselves.

References


41 Other dragon-kings were believed to dwell in the Sarrusawa Pond near Kasuga and in the dragon-temple under the Main Hall of Kōfuku-ji. See Tyler 1990: 124–126.

42 Tyler 1990: 143.