

Koryŏ Buddhist Ritual through the Lens of Materiality: Focusing on the Hand-held Censer*

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This article aims to uncover the correlation of ritual, space, and materiality by examining textual sources regarding Chinese and Korean Buddhist ceremonies since their transmission from India, looking at them as a space for ritual performance by focusing on the hand-held incense burner as a liturgical instrument. Hand-held censers were in use throughout the periods from the Three Kingdoms to Koryŏ, as attested to by both textual evidence and excavated artifacts. Since the early Chosŏn period, however, they were replaced by incense bowls or stationary censers. The absence of hand-held censers in Buddhist ritual scenes coincided with the transformation of the architectural structure and floor style of Buddhist halls. Prior to the Chosŏn period, hand-held censers were used for circumambulation, performed in the monastic courtyard or inside the sanctum during such rituals as dharma assemblies, purification ceremonies, or devotional practices. Yet the consolidation of different monastic orders, which the Chosŏn royal court implemented to suppress the Buddhist religion, precipitated changes in the ritual system of Korean Buddhism. The change of ritual practice naturally led to the change of ritual space. The altar was pushed to the rear of the hall; and wooden panels, instead of tiles, were laid. Such spatial rearrangement further allowed for placing the main icon at the center of the hall. These changes transpired as Buddhist ritual practice came to center on obeisance and invocation that called for a wide-open space in front of the main icon. This refocusing of Buddhist devotional practice from circumambulation to obeisance, I argue, served as the impetus for discontinuing the production of hand-held censers. In other words, the portability of hand-held censers was no longer necessary, and the sensuousness of scent and smoke could be achieved by stationary incense burners. This paper concludes that the changes in these three respects, that is, the architectural structure of the Buddhist sanctum, Buddhist ritual practice, and liturgical instruments—represented by the hand-held censer—were organically interlocked.

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