

Note from the Editor

It never rains but it pours, as the saying goes, and following a fairly dry period in terms of submissions, this issue is blessed with a deluge of exciting new research. The first part consists of a theme issue on materiality in Koryŏ Buddhism, and since it will be introduced by me, donning the cap of guest editor, I will say no more on this topic but move straight to the other articles in this issue.

The first two articles deal with pre-modern Korea, Unified Silla and the Late Chosŏn period respectively. First, Maurizio Riotta takes us way beyond the familiar boundaries of Korean Studies to investigate an intriguing similarity between a story about King Kyŏngmun (r. 861–874) and the legend of King Midas, who is much better known in world history. Both were punished with donkey's ears: While Midas was punished for breaking ranks with Apollo in adjudging Pan the most accomplished musician, in the case of Kyŏngmun, unfortunately, we do not know for what misdeed he was punished with long ears. It is not possible to prove (or disprove) that the story travelled from West to East, but the author points to underlying cultural and political tensions by way of explanation. Both kings were anachronisms: Midas represents a longing for a disappearing “Dyonisian” world, whereas Kyŏngmun tried to hearken back to the times of the Hallowed Bones. Also, both were tragic figures in failing to read the signs of the times and adapt to new demands.

Jeong Ho-hun then takes us to the court of a king whose renaissance was successful, albeit short-lived: King Chŏngjo (Jeongjo; r. 1776–1800), who founded the Kyujanggak as a center for his cultural policy in the year he acceded to the throne. Chŏngjo's attempts at fostering publication and compilation projects of course had ulterior motives. As Professor Jeong shows, the project of compiling a catalog of all the printing blocks in the kingdom was not just a benevolent act of fostering academic learning, it was also intended to centralize the knowledge-building project, with the king at its apex.

The last three articles of this issue, even though they were submitted separately, fit together wonderfully to the point that they organically form a

kind of theme issue. All shed new light on North Korea, not by illuminating it directly, but rather by looking at its international refractions.

Whereas the term “puppet” (*koeroe*) is now strongly associated with North Korean denunciations of South Korea as a US client state, Jein Do and Mincheol Park take us back to an era when the South was an equally avid user of the term. But as the authors show, the mid-1960s was a turning point for this term, which was associated with an isolationist worldview that negated the very existence of North Korea. The authors point to 1966 as a watershed year; despite the lack of clear political narratives, consensus grew that North Korea’s existence would have to be somehow acknowledged, and hence the term *koeroe* grew more and more contested.

The last two articles compare North Korea’s history and ideology with former Communist states of Europe to challenge the cliché of North Korea’s uniqueness. Contrary to the common assumption among many scholars that North Korea abandoned Marxist-Leninist materialism in favor of the nativist mysticism of Chuch’e (Juche) thought, Thomas Stock shows that even after the publication of Kim Jong Il’s famous 1982 essay on Chuch’e, orthodox views on materialism remained par for the course. The author shows this by comparing treatises on Chuch’e with East German writings on materialism.

Balázs Szalontai’s article seeks to explain why North Korea survived the 1989–1991 transition period by comparing it with Communist states that did transition, choosing Romania and Albania because they show the closest parallels in terms of their ruling system. With the benefit of hindsight many would probably argue that the DPRK regime’s “unusually repressive nature” (together with its ideology) is the key distinguishing factor, but the author shows that this is just one among many variables. Here, too, the narrative of North Korean “uniqueness” often precludes stringent analysis of the historical and accidental forces that helped North Korea escape the “end of history,” and the author’s systematic comparative analysis provides a good antidote to such simplifications.

Finally, I would also like to announce another change to our editorial board: We bid a fond farewell to Burglind Jungman (emeritus professor, UCLA), and extend a warm welcome to Cheeyun L. Kwon (professor, Hongik Univ.). Professor Kwon is a specialist in Koryŏ art, whose latest book, *Efficacious Underworld*, looks at the Korean adaptation of the “Ten Kings of Hell” paintings. We are excited to have her on board, and look forward to a greater range of contributions on Korean art.

Sem Vermeersch
Editor-in-chief