Theme Issue: The Materiality of Koryŏ Buddhism

Guest Editor's Introduction

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This special theme issue is a modest attempt at applying the recent "material turn" in religious studies to the case of Koryŏ religious culture, notably Buddhism. Although it is arguably in the field of religious studies that a shift in focus from the spiritual to the material has wrought the biggest shift in perspective, in this issue I would like to view it in a broader perspective. In other words, a greater focus on material objects and what they tell us about mentalities is not only beneficial for religious studies, but also for all other disciplines of the humanities, history in particular.

The scope of the available literature on the subject is now already so extensive that it is possible to state that the "material turn" has established itself in the mainstream. Hence, a programmatic defense of this choice of approach does not seem to be called for anymore. I refer the reader to the excellent introduction of Kim Sung-soon to her article, which uses the work of Caroline Walker Bynum to frame her discussion of the use of incense in Buddhist practice and devotion. My own tutelary deity in this respect is Gregory Schopen, whose article on "Protestant Suppositions in the Study of Buddhism" helped me come to terms with my own assumptions about the place of ideas in the Buddhist religion.[1]

Yet the popularity of the term "material culture" and its avid application

1. Gregory Schopen, "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (1991): 1–23.

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does not necessarily imply that all problematic assumptions on how to read religious beliefs of the past have disappeared. As Fleming and Mann point out, "Attempts to integrate material data into the study of religion…have tended to read them through the lens of ideas and doctrines found in canonical texts. Even today, archeological, architectural, and artistic evidence are often considered worthy of integration into religious histories only inasmuch as they reinforce evidence known from literature."[2]

This is arguably also the case in Korean Studies. When perusing the available literature on materiality in East Asian religions, the absence of any Korean case studies is striking. Both Japanese and Chinese Buddhism now have standard "benchmark" works such as those of John Kieschnick and Fabio Rambelli,[3] and there is also a volume on Zen Buddhism and materiality,[4] to name but a few of the most salient publications. Yet there is almost nothing on Korean Buddhism and materiality.

The reasons for this are complex and may have more to do with the available source material than with the state of the field. For instance, a project on *pokchang* ("abdominal treasury," the objects stored within a Buddha statue) is being readied for publication as I write,[5] and this is perhaps one of the few areas where Korean Buddhism has a unique type of source material that is not abundantly available in either China or Japan. As far as I am aware, the quantity and diversity of objects found in many different Buddha statues from Korea far surpass that found in China or Japan. Usually it is the other way around: The comparative abundance of materials and studies on Chinese and Japanese Buddhism has set the tone of research, and Korean Buddhism is approached with assumptions derived from the Chinese or Japanese material. Focusing on the materiality of Korean Buddhism with such studies in mind would certainly risk fitting the Korean case into already established paradigms.

In any case, whatever the reason, to the extent that religious objects have been studied in Korean Buddhism, it is almost invariably for their art-historical

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2. Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann, *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2.

3. John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

4. Pamela D. Winfield and Steven Heine, eds., *Zen and Material Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). The nine chapters in this book all deal with Japanese Zen Buddhism.

5. A special issue of the *Cahiers d'Extrême Asie* on the practice of interring objects in Buddhist statues is forthcoming. My information on this project is based on the preparatory workshop that took place at Ewha University in 2017: "Consecrating the Buddha: On the Practice of Interring Objects (*bokjang*) in Buddhist Statues."

value; in so far as their religious significance is discussed, it is almost always on the basis of generalized assumptions on how Buddhism is supposed to be practiced. This issue is a modest attempt at turning the tables, letting the objects determine the text, not the other way around. However, given the state of the field, it has not been possible to apply this method to all papers. The archeology of Koryŏ sites is still relatively new; following liberation, South Korean archeology focused mostly on sites from prehistory to Unified Silla, and it was only in the 1990s that excavation reports and research on Koryŏ sites gradually started to emerge. Since the excavation of Hoeam-sa in the 1990s, more and more Koryŏ temples have been excavated, yet the results from these excavations have not yet been synthesized in a coherent narrative.

This is why the first article in this special theme issue, by Soon Chul Cha and Sun Kim, is so important. As one of the first articles to discuss the results of temple excavations in English, it focuses on a particular type of object, namely, what the authors term *t'oejang yumul*, objects that have been deliberately buried within the temple grounds, presumably for safekeeping and in order to be retrieved at a later date. These caches of precious objects yield important insights into what was considered important; based on the analysis of objects found, the recurrence of ritual objects that were placed on the altar—incense burners, candle holders, and vases—indicates that these were considered paramount to the temple's cultic function. While the conclusion that a shift from three to five ritual implements occurred from the twelfth century onward may not look spectacular, it is an important step in constructing a new narrative based on the objects retrieved from temple excavations.

The article on these deposits recovered from South Korean temple sites also includes one rare example of a report from a North Korean temple site. Reliable information from North Korean sites is still hard to come by, which makes the second article, by Choi Sunil, so important. Despite the fact that data about Koryŏ artefacts from South Korea far outstrips the amount of data from North Korea, Dr. Choi's paper shows that a balanced view taking into account information from all sides is crucial. Through a very careful retrieval of information from all possible sources, he builds a convincing case that a group of statues from ca. 1340 came from a single workshop, which he surmises was based in the capital. This article, too, presents many sources for the first time in English, including material from colonial archives, pictures from North Korean statues, and documentary sources about the temples discussed.

The third article, by Kim Sung-soon, takes a more macroscopic and long-term view, tracing the evolution of the hand-held censer over the *longue durée*. Although popular for its use in various rituals from the Silla period onwards, it

appears that after the founding of Chosŏn the need for these portable censers gradually disappeared. While it may be tempting to ascribe this simply to the proscription of Buddhist rituals, since incense braziers continued to be manufactured and used, shifts in ritual environment should also be considered. Here the changes in the layout of the main Buddha hall as a factor impeding the use of the hand-held censer is a very interesting example of combining two forms of materiality that are usually separated, namely, architecture and art history.

Finally, the last article, by Kong Man-Shik, is an exemplary case study of how established narratives that have been imposed on material objects can be revised and corrected. Based on the assumption that Koryŏ was a Buddhist country, and that it therefore must have upheld Buddhist values, evidence of meat-eating in Koryŏ has habitually been ignored or explained away. Looking at all the available evidence, the author shows that there was no comprehensive Buddhism-inspired ban on meat-eating. Restrictions on meat eating were often imposed on the basis of Confucian ritual demands, while lay Buddhists turned to a vegetarian diet only under certain circumstances.

The pressing importance of the issue of materiality becomes ever clearer as I write this introduction separated from any physical copy of relevant works that might help me in writing it. While online databases and my own set of scans should theoretically avail me a far wider range of valuable references much more speedily, the absence of high-quality published works on my desk also seems to distance me from the topic; the messy urgency of books and articles, filled with notes and other scraps of paper, would certainly be a good incentive toward grasping the topic. I am therefore all the more grateful that a grant from the Kyujanggak Institute of Korean Studies allowed the writers of the papers presented here to participate in field trips to Koryŏ temple sites throughout 2019 and organize a workshop. Perhaps one of the most memorable parts of the study gatherings to prepare for the workshop was the session where we could touch and hold actual pieces of Koryŏ celadon: Even if this only served to bring them down from hallowed museum objects to simple bowls for enjoying tea, at the very least, this prompted us to rethink the place of objects in life and the imagination.