

Unearthing the Past from the Ground: Buddhist Temples during the Goryeo Dynasty Seen in a New Light

A Yearlong Celebration of the Goryeo Art and Culture

Museums big and small across Korea celebrated Wang Geon's 王建 founding of Goryeo (918-1392) 1,100 years ago by hosting special exhibitions and forums that highlighted various aspects of the art and culture of the kingdom throughout 2018. Any celebrations in honor of bygone kingdoms must have been retrospective in nature. The feast of Goryeo art and culture that we had last year raises a question about what Koreans did to mark the millennial anniversary of Goryeo's establishment in 1918. Simply speaking, there was nothing. No special exhibitions were held although there were public museums such as the Yi Royal Museum, the successor of the Imperial Museum of Korea founded by King Sunjong (r. 1907-1910) in 1909, and the Museum of Japanese Government General of Korea founded in 1915. This does not come as a surprise since Korea was under Japanese colonization at the time. Still, it presents a great irony in that most of the prized exhibits displayed in the Yi Royal Museum such as jade-colored celadon ware were from the Goryeo Dynasty.

The National Museum of Korea apparently took the 1,100th anniversary of Goryeo as an opportunity to accomplish what should have been done a century ago in commemoration of the kingdom that gave the country its modern English name, Korea. The National Museum of Korea and eight out of thirteen regional national museums under its umbrella organized a series of special exhibitions to mark the historical anniversary. The yearlong celebration of Goryeo art, culture, and history began with Buyeo National Museum's "Gaetaesa: Royal Temple for Protecting the Goryeo Dynasty," launched in May 2018 and culminated with the National Museum of Korea's "Goryeo: The Glory of Korea," which opened in December 2018 and completed the series with a huge audience. In the meantime, Naju National Museum, Cheongju National Museum, Chuncheon National Museum, Mireuksaji National Museum, Jeonju National Museum, Daegu National Museum, and Gongju National Museum held special exhibitions in

due order. Museum goers enjoyed this unprecedented opportunity to explore the world of Goryeo Koreans that they might not have again in their lifetime.

It might have been a good time to reflect upon how Goryeo art and culture materialized in the four special exhibitions offered by Cheongju, Chuncheon, Mireuksaji, and Daegu National Museums. They did not match up to “Goryeo: The Glory of Korea,” which was the grand finale of the series, in terms of scale and scope. The virtues of the four exhibitions are to be found elsewhere. While the National Museum of Korea shed light on the glorious past of the dynasty with displays of extraordinary art objects, the four regional national museums brought the material culture of local Buddhist temples into the spotlight by exhibiting recent archaeological finds. By shifting the focus from a few masterpieces whose provenance remain uncertain to a group of objects excavated from the sites of local Buddhist temples, the curators of the four exhibitions successfully presented the material and spiritual world of Goryeo Koreans to museum goers of the twenty-first century.

Exhibiting the Material Culture of Local Buddhist Temples

Buddhism played an important role in the art, culture, and everyday life of Goryeo Koreans. As Wang Geon famously proclaimed that the grand enterprise of Goryeo’s unification of the peninsula was indebted to the power of the Buddhas, Buddhism was one of the most important principles that governed and constituted the spirituality of Goryeo Koreans. The four special exhibitions I will be reviewing all shed new light on what Buddhism and Buddhist temples meant for local residents and what their roles were in the historical trajectory of Goryeo Buddhism.

The first exhibition to consider is “Goryeo Temples in Central Korea: People and Prayers,” held from July 24 to November 11, 2018 at Cheongju National Museum. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, featuring 95 works with illustrations and scholarly essays by a number of contributors who have worked on the history and art of Goryeo Dynasty.¹ The “Central Plain” or Jungwon 中原, corresponding to today’s North Chungcheong Province, emerged as one of the major stages of history in the process of Wang Geon’s conquering

of Later Baekje (892-936), which eventually resulted in a unified kingdom on the peninsula. It was not only one of the most important military bases but also played a crucial role in gathering Wang Geon’s supporters including the Chungju Yu clan, which produced the third queen of Wang Geon, who was the birth mother of King Jeongjong (r. 945-949) and King Gwangjong (r. 949-975). The exhibition aimed to elucidate the significance of Buddhism to the local people at the time through displays of objects mostly excavated from the major Buddhist temple sites in North Chungcheong Province.

The exhibition was composed of three thematic sections. The first section, entitled “Buddhism in the Mundane World,” focused on the wishes and aspirations of lay Buddhist practitioners in the region (Figure. 1). It was composed around several sub-themes including the aspirations of lay Buddhist practitioners, the royal support of eminent monks at major temples in the region, and the royal temple, named Sungseonsa 崇善寺. Sungseonsa Temple, which prospered in the present-day Munsung-ri, Sinni-myeon, Chungju, was founded by King Gwangjong to honor his late mother of the Chungju Yu clan. The bronze wind bell, excavated from the Sungseonsa Temple Site and now in the collection of Cheongju National Museum, was one of highlights of the entire exhibition (Figure. 2). The wind bell, which is the largest of its kind, seems to have been suspended under the eaves of the main Buddha hall of Sungseonsa Temple. It was displayed together with a similar wind bell on loan from Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art and several others excavated from Goryeo archaeological remains such as the Sanoesa Temple Site in Cheongju, the Wolnamsa Temple Site in Gangjin, South Jeolla Province, Seonyu-ri in Paju, Gyeonggi Province, and the Gameunsa Temple Site in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang Province. Other important archaeological finds from the



Figure 1. Installation at the Exhibition “Goryeo Temples in Central Korea: People and Prayers” at Cheongju National Museum

Figure 2. Installation at the Exhibition “Goryeo Temples in Central Korea: People and Prayers” at Cheongju National Museum

1. See Cheongju National Museum 2018.

Sungseonsa Temple Site, shown to public for the first time, included gilt-bronze tile rivets beautifully crafted in the shape of a lotus bud. A reconstructed model of the roof of the main Buddha hall on display helped visitors understand how these artifacts were actually used to enhance the majestic beauty of the building.

Next, the “Buddhism in the Supramundane World” section turned to cast light on a couple of themes including the eminent local monks such as Deokgyeom 德謙 (1083-1150) and Misu 彌授 (1240-1327), the tradition of Seon practice and the Jungwon area, and the flourishing of Buddhist publications at temples like Wonheungsa 元興寺 and Heungdeoksa 興德寺 in Cheongju as well as Cheongnyongseonsa 靑龍禪寺 in Chungju.

The last section, “Offerings to the Buddha, Encounter between the Mundane and Supramundane World,” enabled visitors to learn about the function and meaning of making offerings to the Buddha at temples through a selection of various ritual objects used in Buddhist ceremonies. The key concept of this section was that of *gongyang* 供養, which constituted the most basic and constant activity of any Buddhist practitioner. Many Buddhist scriptures assert that those who make offerings of food, cloths, flowers, incenses, and so on to the Buddha would gain immeasurable merit in return. The section presented several types of ritual objects; for example, those used for offering light, a metaphor for Buddha’s teachings, to the Buddha such as a jade lamp, celadon and bronze candlesticks, bronze lamp stands, and bronze lamps; those used for offering incenses that were meant to purify bad odors of afflictions and dirt cast on one’s mind; different musical instruments made of bronze, symbolizing the sound of the Buddha; and bronze containers used in making food offerings to the Buddhist altar at the temple. The curators of the exhibition made full use of this occasion to bring out bronze artifacts from storage, not only including those excavated from such well-known sites of Sanoesa and Heungdeoksa Temples in Cheongju, but also lesser known sites scattered across North Chungcheong Province. The exhibits included archaeological finds from Bon-ri in Chungju, Yonggok-ri in Boeun, Sadam-ri in Goesan, Uncheon-dong in Cheongju, Gyo-dong in Jecheon, Sinman-ri in Chungju, and Yongjeong-ri in Jincheon among others.

While Cheongju National Museum took a traditional historical approach in presenting local archaeological finds to visitors, Chuncheon National Museum adopted a quite innovative approach in their “Five Hundred Arhats from the Changnyeongsa Temple Site: Reflection of Our Hearts,” held from August 28, 2018 to March 31, 2019. The exhibition aimed to introduce a

collection of statues representing arhats, advanced disciples of the Buddha who were believed to have supernatural powers, once again to visitors from a different perspective. In retrospect, the special exhibition illuminated the distinctive beauty of stone arhat statues from the Gangwon region, while successfully presenting results of ongoing research on them in the formats of an exhibition as well as a research report published by the museum.²

Changnyeongsa Temple 蒼嶺寺 was completely lost in history until the chance discovery of arhat statues at Nam-myeon, Yeongwol in Gangwon Province back in 2001. The second excavation of the site in 2002, which followed the rescue excavation conducted in the previous year, uncovered remains of three buildings and a pagoda along with more arhat statues and numerous roof tiles bearing the characters, *chang* and *nyeong*. It appears to have been a temple of considerable size equipped with a main hall, arhat hall enshrining stone statues of the five hundred arhats and the main Buddha, and a pagoda in its heyday, but fell into ruin due to Confucian scholars’ persecution of Buddhism in the middle of the Joseon Dynasty. Some of the unearthed arhat statues were first shown to the public when Chuncheon National Museum held its inaugural exhibition in 2002. The arhat statues in their entirety and other excavated artifacts from the Changnyeongsa Temple Site, which were reverted to the government by law, were acquired by Chuncheon National Museum in 2005 and 2006. Since then, the arhat statues have received their due attention both in special exhibitions held at Chuncheon National Museum and other venues including the Center for Fine Arts in Brüssel, Belgium and Woljeongsa Temple Museum in Pyeongchang, Gangwon Province, and in the permanent gallery custom designed for them at their home institution. Neither designated as National Treasures nor Treasures by the Korean government, these arhat statues have attracted visitors’ attention more than any other objects displayed at Chuncheon National Museum.

The overarching structure of the exhibition was divided into three sections along with the dual goals of appreciating and understanding the arhat statues. The first section was designed to allow visitors to enjoy the aesthetic and meditative quality of the selected arhat statues. The installation artist Kim Seungyoung 金承永 paved the floors of the first section with thousands of bricks individually stamped with short inscriptions reading “now and here,” “my heart,”

2. See Chuncheon National Museum 2018.



Figure 3. Installation at the Exhibition “Five Hundred Arhats from the Changnyeongsa Temple Site: Reflection of Our Hearts” at Chuncheon National Museum

or “knowing others’ sorrow” among others. Another artist Oh Yunseok’s 吳玠錫 sound installation enlivened the otherwise silent space with background sounds. The museum decided to put arhat statues on simple pedestals sparsely installed in the gallery, while making the entire space somewhat similar to a forest of arhats through collaboration with the two contemporary artists (Figure. 3). Each arhat statue was brought into the spotlight on a high pedestal rather than being shown as a constituent of the five hundred arhats. Visitors were naturally led to walk slowly around the arhats, which were arranged as if they were sitting in meditation in the forest, while

occasionally making pauses to interact with them face-to-face.

The second section of the exhibition was devoted to foster better understanding of the arhat statues. The showcases along the walls of the gallery were used to display new discoveries made by the museum curators while conducting research for the show. The themes of each sub-section closely mirrored those examined in the research report that accompanied the exhibition. They included such important issues like the formal and iconographical features of the arhat statues, the historical context in which these unique images were produced, and the process of their destruction. The scholarly outcomes were presented in a way that visitors could digest them easily by means of displaying actual objects along



Figure 4. Installation at the Exhibition “Five Hundred Arhats from the Changnyeongsa Temple Site: Reflection of Our Hearts” with Kim Seungyoung’s *Mind* (2001–2018) in the Foreground at Chuncheon National Museum

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with text and video panels. The square space at the center of the second section was designed to provide a resting place for visitors. It was also used in the gallery talks and other educational programs such as meditation practice (Figure. 4). This informative section was followed by the last section in which paintings of local artists who have reinterpreted the Changnyeongsa arhat statues were hung on the walls. All in all the exhibition enabled visitors to ponder the meanings the arhat statues carry for us today, while revealing little-known aspects of Buddhism in the region after its heyday during the Goryeo Dynasty. The great success of the exhibition can be measured by the fact that the exhibition ran three months longer than originally scheduled.

The subject of Mireuksaji National Museum’s special exhibition was quite different from that of Chuncheon National Museum’s in many respects. Although Changnyeongsa Temple still remains obscure despite its renowned arhat statues, Mireuksa Temple 彌勒寺 is familiar to most of Koreans who are not necessarily well-versed in history as one of the greatest Buddhist temples founded and sponsored by the royal court of Baekje Kingdom. Nevertheless, the history of Mireuksa Temple during the subsequent periods is little known to the public although excavations of the temple site from 1974 to 1975 and from 1980 to 1994 have uncovered various artifacts that attest to the prosperity of the temple long after the fall of Baekje Kingdom. Then, what happened to Mireuksa Temple during the Goryeo Dynasty? It was the question underlying the small yet impressive exhibition, entitled “Mireuksa Temple during the Goryeo Dynasty,” held at Mireuksaji National Museum from September 9 to December 30, 2018 (Figure. 5). Although Mireuksa Temple continued to prosper for around 900 years long after the kingdom collapsed in 660, there is little textual evidence that allows us to fathom how Mireuksa Temple looked and its monastic residents lived in the Goryeo Dynasty. Taking advantage of being an on-site museum, the curators of the exhibition turned to archaeological finds from the Mireuksa Temple Site.

The exhibition was organized along themes of Mireuksa Temple in the Goryeo Dynasty, the revival of Mireuksa Temple and its appearance,



Figure 5. Installation at the Exhibition “Mireuksa Temple during the Goryeo Dynasty” at Mireuksaji National Museum



Figure 6. Installation at the Exhibition “Mireuksa Temple during the Goryeo Dynasty” at Mireuksaji National Museum

the celadon wares of Mireuksa Temple, Sajaam Cloister 獅子庵, and the reimagining of Mireuksa Temple. In the beginning part of the exhibition, the roof tiles bearing inscriptions of reign dates such as the “fifth year of Taping xingguo” (980), the “fourth year of Yanyou” (1317), or the “third year of Tianli” (1330) from the Mireuksa Temple Site were shown as evidence of construction

of new buildings as well as repairs of existing ones (Figure. 6). In fact, the multi-year excavations of the temple site revealed that the temple occupied a larger area than it had originally taken in the previous era. The exhibition further led visitors to explore the daily lives of Mireuksa Temple’s residents through displays of ritual objects used in daily offering to the Buddha such as domestically produced celadon vessels, imported Chinese porcelains, and lamp stands put in front of Buddha images, as well as daily objects including bronze alms bowls, spoons, stone pieces for the game of Go, and an iron cauldron. Making the best use of archaeological finds from the Mireuksa Temple Site, the Mireuksaji National Museum did a wonderful job bringing little-known aspects of this famous temple closer to the ordinary people of Goryeo from its earlier position as the royal temple of Baekje Kingdom.

Daegu National Museum presented another small yet impressive exhibition, entitled the “Treasures from the Geumgangsa Temple Site in Yeongju” that welcomed visitors from October 23, 2018 to February 24, 2019. The exhibition



Figure 7. Installation at the Exhibition “Treasures from the Geumgangsa Temple Site in Yeongju” at Daegu National Museum

cast light on the finds from a little known temple named Geumgangsa 金剛寺 that once prospered in today’s Geumgwang-ri, Pyeongeun-myeon, Yeongju in North Gyeongsang Province (Figure. 7). The remains of Geumgangsa Temple were found during the three-year excavation of Geumgwang-ri from 2013 to 2016 before the area was submerged due

to the construction of Yeongju Dam. Featuring 34 objects mostly excavated from the site of a well at the Geumgangsa Temple Site, this thematic exhibition not only shed new light on the site that became impossible to visit, but also presented us with a valuable opportunity to reflect upon the methodology of local history. In particular, the exhibition paid attention to an archaeological concept called a hoarding or *toejang* 退藏, meaning to store things away. The well, considerably larger than typical wells from that period with a depth of 550 centimeters, yielded daily objects such as a wooden paddle at the point of 110 centimeters above its bottom and a collection of bronze ritual objects including an incense burner, bowl, lampstand, and so on at the point of 70 centimeters above its bottom. Such a hoard of Buddhist ritual objects, especially made of gilt bronze, has often been interpreted as a ritual deposit that was buried intentionally underground or hidden in secret in case of emergency. Important remains of hoardings from the Goryeo Dynasty include the Dobongseowon Confucian Academy Site in Seoul, Sanoesa Temple Site in Cheongju, Yeongchuksa Temple Site in Ulsan, and Malheul-ri Site in Changnyeong. The curators of the exhibition raised two possibilities regarding the disposal of these finds: the objects might have been buried in the well in an attempt to protect them from the fire that swept away Geumgangsa Temple at the end of the twelfth century, or they may have been hidden in the well in a period when the temple was about to fall into ruin for certain reasons in the first half of the thirteenth century.

The centerpiece of the exhibition was no doubt a bronze lampstand with an inscription reading “Geumgangsa,” which came to light again after almost 800 years when it was excavated from the well. Known as “stand for light” or *gwangmyeongdae* 光明臺, this type of object was widely used to support a lamp or a candle. Given the significance of this object to the entire exhibition, it is worth introducing an accompanying inscription: “It was cast and dedicated to the Buddha of Geumgangsa Temple in hope that my late father, Ujaebu who held the office of *anil hojang*, will be reborn in the pure land. Dedicated by Boseok, who held the office of *ilpum byeljang*, on the 29th day of the fourth month in the *byeongo* year.” The lampstand holds significance in that it not only reveals the name of the otherwise completely unknown temple, but also allows us to visualize the spirituality of ordinary patrons like Boseok whose lives were not recorded. With only a small number of exhibits, the “Treasures from the Geumgangsa Temple Site in Yeongju” persuasively appealed to visitors to look at the spiritual world of Goryeo Koreans encapsulated in the Geumgangsa Temple

Site beyond the appreciation of such well known temples like Buseoksa and Bongjeongsa that coexisted in the northern part of North Gyeongsang Province.

Toward a Renewed Understanding of Goryeo Buddhism and Buddhist Art

Students of Goryeo art, religions, and history have lamented the inaccessibility of Gaegyeong, corresponding to the present-day Gaeseong in North Korea, and historical monuments that may remain there. It should be also noted that a large number of Goryeo celadon wares and Buddhist paintings, which are widely recognized as representative of artistic and technical achievements of the period, were brought to the Japanese archipelago at various points in history and to Western countries since the beginning of the twentieth century. These art objects, now scattered in foreign institutions and collections, are hard to access for the domestic audience and fraught with problems challenging anyone looking to examine or plan an exhibition with them. Although these exquisite masterpieces shine with splendor, they have already lost their provenance, making it difficult to examine such basic issues of who produced or commissioned them, how they were used in the daily lives, or what function they performed in the religious lives of Goryeo Koreans. Furthermore, as the precious materials and superb skills used in the production of these canonical art objects imply, they were most likely commissioned and used exclusively by the upper echelon of the Goryeo society, revealing a particular facet of Goryeo art and culture.

The curators of the Cheongju, Chuncheon, Mireuksaji, and Daegu National Museums must have faced the challenges listed just above at various stages of their exhibition planning. As examined above, the four museums turned their attention to the visual and material culture of “local” Buddhist temples in an attempt to offset the previous emphasis on the magnificent Buddhist temples in the capital area and masterpieces of Goryeo Buddhist art. The success of the four exhibitions in bringing Goryeo Buddhist temples closer to local audiences is indebted to the achievements of modern Korean archaeology after the liberation of Korea in 1945 to a great degree. Despite the formidable amount of archaeological data accumulated over the years, historians of medieval and early modern Korea have long been reluctant to use archaeological finds as primary sources for their inquiries until quite recently. It was not until the early 2000s

when the distinctive subfield called “medieval archaeology” emerged. Since then, the remains of Goryeo Buddhist temples, where the major exhibits of all four exhibitions were originated, have become a scholarly arena shared by students of medieval archaeology, medieval history, architectural history, and art history. A growing number of scholars and curators across disciplinary boundaries utilize recent archaeological finds in their inquiries of medieval cities and local history, the material and visual culture of Buddhist temples, and the religious aspirations and practices during the Goryeo period. It was a great pleasure to witness this larger trend that emphasizes the use of archaeological findings to re-write the history of Goryeo in the galleries of the four special exhibitions reviewed here.

Another important exhibition, which shared the approach taken in the four exhibitions, is the “Yeongguksa Temple and Dobongseowon Confucian Academy,” held by Seoul Baekje Museum from March 3 to June 3, 2018 to mark the occasion likewise.³ The exhibition was also grounded in archaeological finds dating from the Goryeo Dynasty, which were excavated in 2012 at the site of a Confucian academy of the Joseon Dynasty on Seoul’s Dobongsan Mountain. The excavation revealed that Dobongseowon Confucian Academy was constructed on the former site of a Goryeo temple, Yeongguksa 寧國寺, while yielding seventy-nine gilt bronze objects once used at the temple. They attracted fierce public attention because of their unlikely findspot and highly unusual iconography that adorn a set of vajra bell and vajra holder among the finds. Each of five sides that constitute the body of the vajra bell bears an image of one of the five dharma-guardians of the five dhyāni-buddhas. This is the sole example of these esoteric divinities that has come to light thus far. As such, the object was rightly brought into the spotlight as the center of the entire exhibition at Seoul Baekje Museum and was loaned to Cheongju National Museum and the National Museum of Korea for their special exhibitions held in 2018 (Figure. 8). Objects like this vajra bell



Figure 8. Installation at the Exhibition “Yeongguksa Temple and Dobongseowon Confucian Academy” at Seoul Baekje Museum

3. See Seoul Baekje Museum 2018.

have already expanded the spectrum of Goryeo Buddhist art. More importantly, they urge us to reconsider a few key issues such as the beliefs and practices of esoteric Buddhist schools in the history of Goryeo Buddhism.

This short review only hints at the depth and breadth of scholarly research incorporated into these exhibitions. Last not but least, it should be noted that these four exhibitions and “Goryeo: The Glory of Korea,” the most comprehensive of the nine special exhibitions in homage to the kingdom, complemented each other in terms of scope and focus.⁴ While the former cast a spotlight on the local Buddhist temples during the Goryeo Dynasty through displays of archaeological finds, the latter rightly portrayed the medieval kingdom as an open and cosmopolitan society that produced magnificent works of art by means of showcasing well-known masterpieces. Taken together, the exhibition series orchestrated and implemented by the National Museums across the country was perhaps the most momentous among a host of special exhibitions held domestically and overseas in 2018 because of the effect that they will have on ways of seeing and presenting this medieval dynasty in the future.

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4. See National Museum of Korea 2018.