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Buddhist Rituals of Death in Contemporary Korea
Buddhistické rituály smrti v současné Koreji

Propositions for PhD Thesis

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1 Objectives, significance and potential impact

The aim of the dissertation is to present the complex system of Buddhist rituals of death. Being the first lengthy study on the topic written outside Korea, this work introduces these rituals in the context of the rich Korean religious scene and indicates its connection to other religious and philosophical ideas present in the Sinitic cultural area. Studying these rituals is also an excellent way to grasp Korean Buddhism and its traditions. From this treasury of various beliefs and doctrines that constitute Korean Buddhism, we can learn more about its pedigree. The dissertation should be also a meaningful contribution to Korean Studies as it addresses not only questions of Korean Buddhism, but also discusses the relation with neighboring religious traditions of Korea.

In my research, I attempt to connect a textual Buddhological approach with anthropological fieldwork. A shift from mere textual study to anthropological research in the has been an important change in the Buddhist Studies in past two decades Several inspiring studies were published shortly before or during my dissertation research. My dissertation is an attempt to contribute to this global trend, which already covered Japan, Sri Lanka, Tibet and several regions of China.

2 Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

My preliminary understanding of the rituals is based on theories found in some key anthropological works on the topic, especially those by Hertz (2004) and van Gennep (1960). I understand the rituals of death in Korean Buddhism as a rite of passage (Gennep 1960, 1–25, 146–65) or a cluster of such rites, as a basic threefold structure recurs in various parts of the ritual process. Buddhist cosmology is quite suggestive because the numerous stages of the transition from one life to another are described in emic terms, in one form or another, already in the Buddhist texts. The threefold structure of the rites of passage consists of separation, transition, and incorporation, which allow or support various changes in both individuals and groups involved. Hertz draws our attention to the three main foci of the rituals: the soul, the dead, and the living mourners. The closely related notion of liminality, which is present in each of these categories. Turner (1973, 1995) Huntington and Metcalf (1991) have further developed Hertz's analysis and expressed it in a triangular scheme (66) that not only includes the three main objects of the ritual but also expresses the relationships between each. In my work, I focus

especially on the “soul side” of the tripartite structure represented by different notions of “spirits,” as the core Buddhist rituals are spirit-oriented. Grimes’s analysis of different modes of ritual sensitivity (2010, 33–48) aids my understanding of ritual activity in the context of rituals of death. His concept of “liturgy” as a mode of ritual sensitivity different from ceremony, magic, or celebration is useful in evaluating the figures involved in various rituals and the performances one may encounter in Korea.

2.2 Textual Research

The first step in conducting textual research was acquiring textual material. However, it was already obvious to me at this stage that textual research would be inseparable from fieldwork. Based on the study of secondary sources, I located wonderful primary sources for the study of this topic, the *Han’guk pulgyo ũiryē charyo ch’ongsŏ* 韓國佛教儀禮資料叢書, or *Collected Ritual Texts of Korean Buddhism I-IV* (Pak 1993), and the *Sŏngmun ũibŏm* 釋門儀範 (SMUB), or *Rules for Buddhist Rituals* (An 1977, 1982).

Over the past two decades, Korea has witnessed a new wave of ritual text publication. The central authorities of Buddhist orders publish ritual collections and manuals, which serve as standards in the temple education system. Hence, a variety of primary sources that reflect the contemporary practice exist. Studying and comparing them was an important preliminary part of my research. Among them, I have selected the *Pulgyo sangyong ũiryē chip* (abbreviated as PSURC), or *A Collection of Common Buddhist Rituals* (Taehan pulgyo chogyejong 2013, 2016), published by the Chogyŏ order of Korean Buddhism, the largest order in Korea, the *Sangyong ũisik chip* 常用儀式集 (abbreviated as SUSC), or *A Collection of Common Rituals*, (Ch’oe 2012) is a ritual manual published by Tongbang Buddhist University (Tongbang pulgyo taehak 東邦佛教大學). Both texts list the ritual sequences based on ritual type. Hence they feature an ideal structure of the rituals, at least of their textual part.

After comparing various texts and creating my own digital corpus of primary sources, I immersed myself in translating. Translating these texts brings about specific problems. The texts, regardless of their type (invocation, educative verse, requesting prayer, verse of praise, etc.), are written in a form of Chinese-style poetry (*hansi* 漢詩). Hence the lines or phrases are very dense utterances referring to the vast treasury of Buddhist sources. I examined the ritual texts of the Chinese Buddhist canon using the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association’s digital tools (“CBETA” 2017), which include the *Taishō Tripitaka* 大正新脩大藏經, the *Shinsan Zokuzōkyō* 卍新纂續藏經, the *Jiaxing Canon* 嘉興大藏經, and several other

collections of Buddhist texts, to trace the sources of the texts I work with. I have also consulted the Han'guk pulgyo Chōnso *Collection of Korean Buddhist Texts*. To introduce the context of these texts I have employed a system of footnotes and commentaries.

2.3 The Fieldwork

I employed techniques ranging from mere observation to active participation. I was also afforded the unique experience of playing the role of an actual mourner. I conducted most of my fieldwork between winter 2011 and my departure from Korea in summer 2012 and during three approximately two-month-long stays in the subsequent summers of 2013, 2014, and 2015. Based on a preliminary study of secondary and primary texts and observations at Chijang chōngsa, I opted to conduct qualitative research among clergy and laity in the form of interviews and by participating in, observing, and recording the various rituals accessible to me.

My fieldwork mainly focused on extensive research of guiding ceremonies, *ch'ōndo chae*, in various forms and on various occasions. I documented dozens of instances of *sasipku chae*, the forty-ninth day ceremonies, ranging from an intimate occasion performed by two nuns and one female patron to a ceremony celebrated by seven monks, two professional performers, and several participating laypeople and visitors, as well as approximately twenty instances of *ch'ōndo chae* ceremonies performed ad hoc upon request from patrons or as organized group ceremonies. I planned my summer fieldwork “to coincide with the *Paekchung* 百中 or *Ullanbun chae* 盂蘭盆齋 on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, when *ch'ōndo chae* ceremonies are also performed.

The interviews I conducted with various ritual participants differed according to type of participant. I prepared a bank of questions that focused on motivations, efficacy, and economical aspects. I posed special questions to the clergy, which focused on performance, learning the rituals, the importance of certain ritual elements over others, and the evaluation of other temple's performances and differences. Laypeople were asked about their religious affiliation, ability to comprehend the ritual, ritual life outside the ceremony attended, satisfaction with the ritual practice, and so forth. I have learned, as many anthropologists before me, that if the silence of an informant lasts more than two seconds then it was better for me to remain silent. When reviewing the first interviews, I realized how much my preunderstanding of the rituals distorts the interviews.

3 Content

3.1 The Ritual Constituents

Chapter 2, “The Ritual Constituents,” is an attempt to define an apparatus for analysis of the rituals. I propose examining rituals along their vertical and horizontal axes, which allow us to see the fundamental relationships between the basic ritual modules and their contents. The two-axis scheme is an attempt to provide a tool which will help us grasp not only the relative “richness” of the ritual but also its variability. The horizontal axis representing the structure of the words, phrases, rites, and ritual sequences used and their ordering and the vertical axis representing the relative richness and complexity of the ritual *mise-en-scène*.

The second part of the chapter is dedicated to two key elements from the vertical axis, the spirit and the corpse. The spirit-body duality is crucial for the structure of the rituals of death. There is a clear distinction between the rituals aimed at the corpse and those focused on the spirit.

3.2 The Structure and Typology of the Rituals

Chapter 3, “The Structure and Typology of the Rituals,” presents an overall analysis of the ritual process from the deathbed, to rebirth, and beyond. Its structure is based on contemporary rituals. I also use examples from Korean historical sources to demonstrate that certain types of rituals have been standard ritual activities throughout the history of Korean Buddhism. Buddhist rituals of death have developed into a today’s complex system covering the period from the time before actual death until the forty-ninth day after the death when the spirit of the deceased is supposed to be reborn in its new destination. However, the spirit never leaves, and is present in one form or another and the ritual practice continues.

3.3 The Key Sequences of *Ch’ōndo Chae* Ceremonies: An Annotated Translation

Chapter 4, “The Key Sequences of *Ch’ōndo chae* Ceremonies,” takes the reader deeper into the structure of the rituals and presents a translation of selected ritual texts with a twofold commentary—a commentary on doctrine and a commentary on performance. The former relates the meaning of the sections to Buddhist teachings, the latter draws from my field observations.

4 Conclusions

4.1 One Aim: A Better Place

From the data collected in the field, namely through interviews and the study of the *mise-en-scène* of various ritual instances, we have learnt that the Buddhist rituals of death in Korea function in the broader context of what we can perhaps call a “syncretic religious environment.” Nearly two millennia of coexistence have created a universal cosmological “metaframework” in which traditional Korean religious systems function. The metaframework appears to combine a shared structure and shared symbolic codes. Ritual patrons therefore do not think in the framework of Buddhist cosmology, but in the metaframework of Korean religious milieu. The basic underlying structure is the duality of *this world* and the *other world*. There is a whole spectrum of methods for securing well-being of a deceased relative. The spectrum does not simply end at a Buddhist temple’s gates or where there is no Buddhist monk to perform rights. It continues via liminal ritual professionals to the sphere of *musok*.

4.2 Two Directions and Two Powers

Belief in Amitābha has a central position among the various Buddhist teachings in Korea. For many Buddhists, Sukhāvātī is not a lesser or secondary goal, but the final goal. Rebirth in Sukhāvātī and chanting of the name of Amitābha became also an integral part of *musok*, shamanist, religious endeavors. It is the better place they want to arrive in after death. We can conclude that Korean rituals of death feature two distinct soteriological goals.

Throughout the dissertation, we have learned that Sukhāvātī can be reached by means of the ritual. However, the presence of Amitābha in the ritual texts is rather weak. Therefore, I suggest that the efficacy of the ritual is not based on classical concept of Amitābhic “other power”. Ritual texts employ the concept of *kaji*, the compassionate helping power of the Buddha, which is not the Amitābhic “other power” that helps achieve nirvana through rebirth in Sukhāvātī; instead nirvana can be achieved here and now through self-cultivation or the helping power of the buddhas through the ritual.

4.3 Many Ways: *T’ong pulgyo* Reconsidered

One of the clichés in Korean Buddhist studies is the concept of *t’ong pulgyo* 通佛教, literally “interpenetrated Buddhism” or “holistic Buddhism.” It is a term used within Korean academia as well as among the general public to describe one aspect of Korean Buddhism. Due

to different influences, both internal and external, a tendency towards inclusivity has long been a feature of Korean Buddhism. Thinkers like Wŏnhyo, who took such a stance as their doctrinal position, as well as the measures against Buddhism from the state in Chosŏn or controlling policies that both forced the Buddhist community to centralize and unify, were another contribution to this process.

The performance of rituals allows for different doctrinal, or canonical, stances to exist side by side. As ritual plays an important role in establishing conventions, it helps keep the different doctrinal stances bound together. Rituals have the ability to communicate universal orders that are interwoven with self-referential orders. Rituals convey the various doctrinal messages as the “canonical stream.” Throughout the dissertation, we have seen that the rituals go beyond *t’ong pulgyo* because they unify notions from the environment surrounding Buddhism. Seen through the perspective of the ritual, it is not possible to accent only the intellectual or doctrinal strata of Korean Buddhism, but it is necessary to admit that in addition to Buddhist elements, non-Buddhist elements too comprise the “harmonious whole.”

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6 Academic activities

6.1 Selected publications

- Irjon. 2012. *Samguk jusa: nepominutelné události Trí království*. Translated by Miriam Löwensteinová and Marek Zemánek. Praha: NLN, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.
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- . 2013. "The Perfect Passage: Contemporary Buddhist Rites of Death." In *AKSE 2013 Conference Papers*, by Rüdiger Frank, nečíslováno. Vienna: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna.
- . 2014. "Symbolická Eliminace Časoprostorové Separace v Kronice Samguk Jusa." In *Tradice a Proměny: Mýtus, Historie a Fikce v Asii*, edited by David Labus and Miriam Löwensteinová, Varia, 48–64. Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy.
- . 2015. "Buddhist Ceremonies of Death in Contemporary Korea." In *Proceedings: The 14th International Conference*, edited by Maria Soldatova and Ekaterina Pokholkova, 14:309–14. Moscow: MSLU.
- . 2016. "Rituals Now and Then: Some Observations on Rituals of Death in Ancient and Contemporary Korea." *CEESOK Journal of Korean Studies*, no. 16: 208–20.

6.2 Conferences and guest lectures

- November **2014** Death and Rites among Contemporary Lay Buddhists. *7th World Congress of Korean Studies*, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu.
- May **2014** *Communities of Memory: Reimagining and Reinventing the Past in East Asian Buddhism. East Asian Buddhism Symposium*, Universität Hamburg.
- May **2014** Death in Korean Buddhism: Texts and Practice. *Central European Symposium on Korean Studies*. Bratislava/Wien.
- April **2014** Guest Lecture: Korean Buddhist Rituals of Death. *Tübingen Korean Studies Lectures*, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen.
- December **2013** Religions in Korea. *Guest Lecture (24 hours block)*. Comenius University, Bratislava.
- December **2013** Symbolic Elimination of Spatiotemporal Separation in the *Samguk Yusa. Workshop: History and Fiction*. Charles University in Prague.
- September **2013** Symbolic Strategies of the Samguk Yusa: Space, Time and Landscape. *The 14th Colloquium of the Institute for International Korean Studies*. Academy of Korean Studies, Bundang.
- July **2013** The Perfect Passage: Korean Buddhist Funeral Rites. *26th Biennial AKSE Conference Vienna*. Universität Wien.