

## Aspects and Cultural-historical Values of Plays in Buddhist Rituals During Goryeo Dynasty

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### Abstract

Since its introduction to East Asia, Buddhism had developed with close relations with politics. In particular, Buddhism had great influence on the spirit and everyday life of ordinary people in its acceptance process, and later played an important role in the creation of culture in East Asia. Wang Geon (877-943), who founded Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), accepted Buddhism as the national governing ideology and held various Buddhist rituals. Therefore, it is necessary to try to understand from the viewpoint that the Buddhist rituals of Goryeo Dynasty were the national ceremonies.

The purpose of this study is to identify the aspects of plays reflected in the Buddhist rituals of *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* that were held until the fall of Goryeo Dynasty. During the rituals, diverse plays were always performed, which were accompanied by teas, food, wine, dancing, music, flowers, fruits, etc. They were held as the grand festivals that provided people with various things to eat and watch.

In particular, the plays, which were held as a ceremony of *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe*, started to get out of a primitive form from this period and could develop a balanced form. As they were passed down to Joseon Dynasty, their frame and form became consolidated into what they are today. The banquet held in the Buddhist rituals of Goryeo Dynasty had a medieval cultural value thanks to their contribution to reproduction and development of various plays.

**Key words:** Goryeo society, Buddhist rituals, *Yeondeung-hoe*, *Palgwan-hoe*

### Introduction

Religion is the most complex phenomenon in human culture. It is the ritual that best represents the complexity of religion. The ritual has repeatability. It is because it is shared by a group of people who practice the standardized belief system of the religious doctrine contained in the ritual acts. The religious ritual is the field of action to perform a basic social function of converting knowledge into wisdom and creating and maintaining a community. Durkheim said that the ritual is the means for bringing individuals together into groups.

Wang Geon (877-943), who founded Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), accepted Buddhism as the national governing ideology. He thought of Buddhist rituals as an effective way to settle social chaos and to gain public sentiments in the early stage of the state's foundation, and carried out the rituals under the leadership of the royal family. Therefore it is necessary to try to understand from the viewpoint that the Buddhist rituals of

Goryeo Dynasty were the national ceremonies. Among them, *Yeondeung-Hoe* (lotus lantern festival) and *Palgwan-hoe* were the most representative events that were carried out without any specific purposes at the palace and temples and were the festivals for people because the doors were open to the people during the events.

Then, how did Buddhist rituals and plays develop and what kind of relations did they form with each other in the society where Buddhism became a governing religion for a newly-founded nation the Korean peninsula? What cultural inheritance and social values did these acts leave? In order to find out answers to this question, it is necessary to explore the aspects of *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-Hoe*, the Buddhist rituals of Goryeo Dynasty. It is because their historical and cultural values are very important despite the limitation that there remain only fragmented records about the plays in the Buddhist rituals. There have been various studies on the events that have been conducted as Buddhist rituals in Goryeo society. However, there are not enough cultural-historical studies on the plays performed in the Buddhist rituals. Therefore, this study will examine the rituals from a viewpoint of plays, which currently lacks comparative studies among various research perspectives.

As the study purpose, we would like to highlight the aspects and values of plays reflected through Buddhist rituals such as *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* during Goryeo Dynasty from a cultural-historical viewpoint. For this purpose, we conducted an in-depth investigation on the literatures of the time such as 『*Goryeosa*』 and 『*Goryeosajeolyo*』 [1], which are the history of books of Goryeo Dynasty and examined the content of the two rituals and their development aspects. We believe that the findings of this study will become the foundation to offer better understanding of the presence and values of plays performed around the Korean peninsula at the peak of Buddhism as well as the ways of living, and in this study, we will examine which cultural and historical processes these plays have undergone while they have been passed down to today and, based on these findings, identify the cultural values of the plays.

### Discussion

#### 1. Hosting and Cultural Nature of *Yeondeung-Hoe*

In the Goryeo society, Buddhism was designated as the state religion with supports by the royal family and aristocrats. Buddhism has a profound effect on Koreans after Goryeo Dynasty. Especially, the temples that protected and conveyed the teachings of Buddha were the places not only for prayers and study but also for plays. Since *Yeondeung-Hoe* and

*Palgwan-hoe* were usually held at the palace or temples during Goryeo Dynasty, they can be said to be Buddhist rituals led by the state.

Goryeo Dynasty's designation of Buddhism as the state religion can be dated back to King Taejo. King Taejo took a measure to emphasize the state's ideological foundation based on Buddhism to the descendants by saying, "Our nation's grand missions are dependent on the help of all Buddhas. Therefore, let's build temples of the Dhyana School (*Seonjong*) and the Doctrinal School (*Gyojong*) of Buddhism and send monks to defend them, and let them advance their respect achievements"[2]. The decision to designate Buddhism as the state's religion under the influence of King Taejo reproduces the people's views of nature, life and the world through Buddhist rituals. Buddhism played an important role in building and developing the Goryeo culture. Goryeo hosted *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-Hoe*, the Buddhist rituals imported through China from India, as regular events held from the first year of the state's foundation. The place where the rituals were held was the palace or temples that had a close relationship with the royal family, except for some special cases. It can be seen that Goryeo had forged and maintained an inseparable relation to *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-Hoe*.

First, let's look at *Yeondeung-Hoe* held on January 15<sup>th</sup>[3] or February 15<sup>th</sup> every year. The lotus lantern ceremony was one of the Buddhist rituals that have existed since the ancient India. In India, the practice of offering "lanterns" is believed to develop from the customs of devoting water, incense, flowers, lamps, food to the gods of Brahmanism, and it has said that this practice was accepted by Buddhism[4]. Since the time when Buddha was alive, offering 'lanterns' was treated as an important ritual. In China, *Sangwon-Yeundeung-Hoe* (*Lightning Lotus Lantern Festival*) held on January 15<sup>th</sup> became a regular annual event during the period of the Tang (618-907) and became regularized as the annual ritual ceremony held every year. Later, the form of *Sangwon-Yeundeung-Hoe as an event to watch and enjoy the ritual was completed* during the succeeding Song Dynasty (960-1279) [5].

Before the death of King Taejo of Goryeo, he left the "*Hunyosipjo* (Ten Essential Lessons abided by the succeeding kings)" which summarized his own political philosophy. Among them, the king said, "'lotus lantern' is to serve the Buddha. The succeeding kings must continue to hold *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-Hoe*. Please enjoy these ceremonies together with your subjects." [6]. King Taejo's words 'Please enjoy these ceremonies together with your subjects' reveals the king's will that it is of utmost importance to make these ceremonies as the state's annual events in order to build one community by integrating the king with his subjects and people.

As a good example of how spectacular and extravagant *Yeondeung-Hoe* was, there is the record of Chinese envoy Hsu Ching's observations who came to Goryeo in 1123. He said, "The people of Goryeo love the Buddha. On February 15, they light up lamps in all the temples and they are very busy and extravagant. The king and his subjects all watch it and the people fill the streets, noisy and restless." [7]. Like this, *Yeondeung-Hoe* was a sumptuous ritual. As the years progressed, people filled the streets with more colorful and

lavish hanging lanterns, and a large group of people filled the streets, causing mess.

On the other hand, the bureaucrats' objection was raised against the discontinuation of *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-Hoe*. When the Mongol invaded Goryeo in 993, Lee Gi-Baek said, "Instead of splitting the land in a hurry and giving it to Mongolia, I recommended re-organizing events such as *Yeondeung-Hoe*, *Palgwan-hoe* and *Seonrang* and not following a weird custom from China in order to preserve the country and establish the reign of peace?" [8]. Lee Ji-Baek recommended resuming *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* to pray to the Buddha at the time of war and making these events as an opportunity to promote unity among people in order to break through the crisis of war.

When *Yeondeung-Hoe* was held, the king gave two days' leave to the officials. *Yeondeundogam*, which is the special governmental department to prepare for *Yeondeung-Hoe*, was established so that that there would be no disruption to the preparations. In the early days of the state's foundation, *Yeondeung-Hoe* was mainly held on January 15 or February 15, which was meaningful for the religious unification into Buddhism and had a close relation to the meaning of the harvest ritual and the agricultural ritual as the folk rituals. Entering the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), *Yeondeung-Hoe* originating from Goryeo Dynasty was held on April 8 at each temple or home as a ritual to represent individual faith.

## 2. Hosting and Cultural Nature of *Palgwan-hoe*

Among the Buddhist rituals of Goryeo, *Palgwan-hoe* was a very important ritual and also a national event held under the auspices of the royal family throughout the entire period of Goryeo Dynasty. *Palgwan-hoe* was a ritual for wish for the long life of the king and to worship the ancestors of the royal family, which was celebrated together with the people. *Yeondeung-Hoe* was held in the spring, and *Palgwan-hoe* was held in the winter. However, *Palgwan-hoe* had greater social importance and larger scales than *Yeondeung-Hoe*.

It was a ritual for the purpose of abstinence and asceticism, which requires the believers to observe eight commandments for one day. As *Palgwan-hoe* was based on the eight commandments, the ritual was imported from India through China. *Palgwan-hoe* was known to be held for the first time in Korea during Goguryeo Dynasty. The origins of the ritual can be found in the record that the monk Hyeryang, who came Silla from Goguryeo, presided over the ritual in 551 [9]. As seen in the record in 572 that "*Palgwan-hoe* was held to commemorate the deaths of soldiers in war and was discontinued in seven days" [10], *Palgwanjae* (Eight Prohibition Retreat) was introduced through Goguryeo to Silla. However, in the course of Silla's acceptance of *Palgwan-hoe*, the ritual came to integrate the country's unique folk faith and harvest ritual and was also held as part of the consolation ceremony of the fallen soldiers.

*Palgwanbo* (the special team dedicated to the preparation of *Palgwan-hoe*) was installed, and it was comprised of ten officials to prepare for the ceremony [11]. *Palgwan-hoe* was held twice a year. It was held in Seogyeong on October 15 and in Gaegyeong on November 15. He also pardoned prisoners or forbade the death penalty [12]. The bureaucrats were given a three-day vacation [13], and it seemed that the king gave an

opportunity for his subjects and people who finished harvest to get away from every-day life and enjoy eating, drinking, singing, dancing as much as they could.

When something bad happened to the country, the dates for *Palgwan-hoe* could be changed. The detailed ceremonies of *Palgwan-hoe* were not much different from those of *Yeondeung-hoe*, and they were held on two days-small meeting day and grand meeting day. On the small meeting day (November 14), domestic citizens could participate in the ritual. The king went to a temple and paid tribute to the Buddha and the preceding kings. On the grand meeting day (November 15), it was held at the royal court. The barons of local provinces served the ritual by sending their congratulatory remarks to the king. Merchants from Song Dynasty and delegations from Jurchen, Tamra (Jeju Island) and Japan paid visits to offer gifts. Plays including music and dancing were performed. *Palgwan-hoe of Goryeo*, which inherited the culture of Silla and the Latter Goguryeo, degenerated into spectacular and pleasure-seeking events different from *Palgye* of Buddhism over the years.

Goryeo's *Palgwan-hoe* is rooted in both Silla's tradition of lotus lanterns and Gung Ye's ideology for holding the ritual by succeeding the alliance with Goguryeo. However, it chose the path for coexistence with Taoism, Confucianism, mountain god worship and ancestor worship. This shows that the Goryeo society was very open. Especially in the beginning of the Goryeo period, *Yeondeung-Hoe* and *Palgwan-Hoe* emphasized the harmonious value between the king and his subjects to integrate the forces supporting the king. However, once the kings strengthened the kingship and became stable, it re-established itself as a national ceremony to strength the social status order between the king and his subjects and people rather than social harmony. After the reign was shifted to Joseon, *Palgwan-hoe* was abolished. Only some dances and music like *Cheoyongmu* and *Saseonmu* were passed down.

### 3. Cultural Values of Plays in *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe*

Both in China and the ancient Korean societies, the term "music" is not about music as it is today but was used as a comprehensive concept that included songs and dances, various plays and acrobatics, mask dramas and puppet theaters[14]. We have to remember that the term 'Baekhui' means all the events to entertain the participants by bringing together songs, dances, acrobatics, mask dramas and other activities. The records about enjoying 'Gamu' and 'Baekhui' means that various plays including singing, dancing and acrobats were performed in tune to much played by the musical band (*GyeoBang*) [15], together and entertain the participants.

If we look at the records in "*Goryeosa*" about the procedure and content of the ceremonies held on the small meeting day, it consisted of some ceremonies performed at the royal palace and others performed in Bongeun temple where the portrait of King Taejo was enshrined. However, the most important part of the ritual is the performance of *Baekhui* played by all kinds of acrobats. Once it was finished, they came off the stage. And dancers came onto the stage to the music played by the musical band (Gyobang), which was the same as a common ceremony [16]. In other words, various music and dances as well as plays were performed among the ceremonies held on the small

meeting day. Although the record did not mention which kinds of plays were performed, it can be assumed that various kinds of music and dances, puppets, puppet theaters, and mask dramas were performed during *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe*. As seen in this record, because the plays of *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* of Goryeo shared much similarity with those of China, it can be guessed that they introduced music, dance and plays of China and digested them to recreate them to an international festival to attract favorable response from many people.

Humans create some imaginable, creative and holistic performances that deviate from their every day through their bodies and words and by using instruments, tools and disguise. By merging such acts with plays oriented for the audience, the were performed as the important programs of Buddhist rituals such as *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe*, and they functioned as the foundation to inherit those plays, the basic desire of humans, and to advance them further.

### Conclusion

Goryeo designated Buddhism as the state's religion after unification of the three kingdoms, and held *Yeondeung-hoe* in spring and *Palgwan-hoe* in winter of every year to foster national stability and social kinship. These rituals have been developed based on what were introduced through brisk exchanges with China and through merge with the folklore religions of Silla and Goguryeo to become the representative Buddhist rituals. Although the lavish and sumptuous aspects of *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* led to their discontinuation for 22 because of the concern that they could bring about maladies, these rituals were resumed to search for a breakthrough to overcome the crisis of war by promoting the unity of people when the country was endangered by the invading Mongolia. The people of Goryeo seemed not to think of worshiping the Buddha together with their indigenous gods as a contradiction.

The purpose for the Goryeo Dynasty to hold *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* was to strengthen the authority of the royal family, pay ancestral ceremony and to pray for the health and long life of the king. However, as these rituals became more lavish over the years, social maladies of mobilizing more money and people appeared. Naturally, amid this atmosphere, the plays that were performed during the rituals might be performed lavishly and sumptuously. for royal authority, offering sacrifices to ancestors, and praying for the royal family. *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* were the rituals who merged different religious elements including such as a country-defending faith, ancestor worship and the Maitreya faith, which has been succeeded until today as the filial piety ("Hyo ideology").

Goryeo's *Yeondeung-hoe* shows its clear cultural identity with the theme and material to venerate the virtues of the Buddha through the use of lanterns and lights by the king and his subjects and people. For the Korean people, *Yeondeung-hoe* is one of the Buddhist rituals that have been continued for more than a thousand of years and succeeded until now as a cultural festival for its believers. Over the period of a thousand of years, the hosting agent, content, forms, etc. of the ritual were changed slightly; during Joseon dynasty, the lantern festival

was separately held in the royal palace, but it was carried out by ordinary people as a Buddhist ritual with a strong nature as a play. Goryeo's *Yeondeung-hoe* has been succeeded and practiced until today in the form of a seasonal lantern festival on the birthday of the Buddha. As traditional cultural events containing historical and cultural values, the lotus lantern play, culture square, and lantern parade are held at each temple on April 8th of every year.

However, *Palgwan-hoe* gradually disappeared from people's memories, because Lee Sung-Gye (1335-1408) staged a military coup to overthrow Goryeo Dynasty and founded Joseon. When Lee Sung-Gye tried to promote Confucianism as a political ideology and clean up the legacies of Goryeo's culture, he took it as his top priority to abolish *Palgwan-hoe*. Since *Palgwan-hoe* was abolished as a national ceremony and reduced to *Palgwanjae-hoe* held by each temple, it came to lose its cultural value.

The In terms of the cultural values perceived as the aspects of plays through the medieval Buddhist rituals of the Goryeo society, a dominant number of the remaining records describe them as the history of the king and aristocrats' plays, meaning that they seemed to have been held to provide things for them to watch within the rituals such as *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe*. Despite the limitation that they were the national ceremonies which were held at the royal palace and temples, ordinary people could freely participate in festivals and enjoy themselves when *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe* were held. This means that the rituals might have great influence on the culture of ordinary people.

In particular, *Gamubaekhui*, which was held as a ceremony of *Yeondeung-hoe* and *Palgwan-hoe*, started get out of a primitive form from this period and could develop a balanced form. As it was passed down to Joseon Dynasty, its frame and form became consolidated into what it is today. Given this, they had a cultural value due to their contribution to reproduction and development of various plays.

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