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Cheeyun Lilian Kwon’s monograph *Efficacious Underworld* is a welcome addition to the study of Korean art history as well as East Asian Buddhism and its visual culture. Exploring the extant canon of Ten Kings paintings rendered in China and Korea during the medieval period, the volume invites its readers to the resplendent world of East Asian paintings and the riveting underworld of Buddhist death and purgatory. The significance of the book, however, does not remain in its comprehensive presentation of the rich array of visual sources. Taking the set of Ten Kings hanging scrolls currently in the collection of the Seikadō Bunko Art Museum in Tokyo as the main material that forms the core of the monograph, Kwon provides an opportunity to reconsider one of art history’s traditional yet thorny issues of style and provenance. In contrast to Kwon’s proposal that the Seikadō Ten Kings is the production of Koryŏ (918-1392), the provenance of the scrolls has been, with a few exceptions, suggested as China, either the Yuan (1279-1368) or Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. Korean academia has not paid much attention to the work so far, and specialists of Koryŏ Buddhist paintings have rarely included the set in their study accordingly. Bravely taking the enigmatic work as the central piece, *Efficacious Underworld*, through multifaceted investigation of the various features of the paintings, contends that the Ten Kings at the Seikadō were drawn in mid-Koryŏ under the huge influence of Northern Song (960-1127) painting styles. The composition of the chapters is designed to effectively present the evidence with which the author persuades her readers that the paintings are the production of Koryŏ. But in the course of building up her argument, Kwon faithfully examines the origin and development of the Ten Kings cult in China and Korea, and the social, religious, and historical backgrounds against which relevant images were produced.

The volume begins with a relatively short and concise introduction, which is followed by the main body consisting of three parts. The first part, titled “Evolution of Ten Kings Paintings in China,” is composed of four chapters. In the first chapter,
Kwon traces early images of the Ten Kings, many of which are dated to the tenth century and were yielded from the Mogao Grotto in Dunhuang. The significant transition in the format of the illustrations from continuous handscroll to individualized hanging scrolls is highlighted in the following chapter, centering on the Ten Kings paintings from the former Packard collection. Close examination of the Ten Kings hanging scrolls drawn during the Southern Song (1127-1279) period in Ningbo, which the author characterizes as the full efflorescence of the theme, constitutes the third chapter. The last chapter briefly surveys the post-Song variations of the Ten Kings paintings. The step-by-step introduction of Chinese Ten Kings paintings from the tenth to fourteenth centuries helps readers to understand what the author terms as the “evolution” of the Ten Kings paintings in China and the forthcoming exploration of the complicated features of the Seikadō scrolls.

The second part of the book is titled “The Ten Kings Cult in Koryō” and is composed of two chapters. The first one (chapter 5) is devoted to the examination of textual sources with regards to the Ten Kings cult in Korea, which reveals the Koryō royal family’s active assimilation of the cult into their ancestral worship. It also investigates surviving illustrations of the Ten Kings among the extant Koryō Buddhist paintings, most of which are dated to the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and were drawn as a group with bodhisattva Kṣṭigarbha in one painting (namely the paintings of Kṣṭigarbha and Ten Kings), rather than individually rendered on separate hanging scrolls like the Seikadō Ten Kings. The second chapter (chapter 6) provides a detailed investigation of the illustrations carved on the woodblock of The Scripture Spoken by the Buddha on Preparing the Ten Kings Rituals for Rebirth after Seven Days (hereafter The Scripture on the Ten Kings) currently preserved at Haeinsa Temple in Hapchŏn, in the southern part of Korea. Privately patronized in 1246 by Chŏng An (?-1251), who is known to have sponsored the court’s re-carving of the Koryŏ Tripitaka in the early thirteenth century, the woodblock edition of The Scripture on the Ten Kings contains a rare yet significant series of illustrations. In particular, several features of the illustrations, such as the overgrown underworld pantheon and the composition of the Ten Kings’ courts are distinguished from earlier Ten Kings paintings in China but significantly shared by the Seikadō scrolls. Being the earliest extant woodblock rendition of the scripture, the Haeinsa version serves as the most important evidence with which Kwon links the Seikadō Ten Kings with Koryŏ.

The last part, “The Ten Kings from the Seikadō Bunko Art Museum,” is the pinnacle of the book. Among the five chapters that constitute the part, the first one (chapter 7) introduces the current state of the scrolls. It also discusses the existing scholarship, which is, as the author aptly argues, seriously insufficient. Close analysis of the composition, pictorial motifs, and styles of each scroll are presented in the subsequent three chapters. In the second chapter (chapter 8), Kwon points out that the depiction of the Ten Kings in each of the Seikadō scrolls is exceptionally iconic, a feature that is rarely found in any surviving Chinese examples, where the kings generally show dynamic poses, actively engaging with other figures in the painting. The iconic mode of the Seikadō Ten Kings is instead shared by the illustrations in the Haeinsa woodblock and the Ten Kings paintings produced during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). The third chapter (chapter 9) begins with a condensed history of the Northern Song figure paintings focusing on the depictions of emperors, courtiers, and guardians, which reveals a number of stylistic features shared by the Seikadō scrolls. However, this chapter also highlights a diverse range of motifs such as the large peacock fans held by female servants, costumes of male officers, textile decorations, and so on, which Kwon suggests as uniquely Koryŏ based on relevant textual, material, and archaeological sources. The Northern Song landscape-, flower-, and dragon-painting styles serve as the point of comparison in the next
chapter (chapter 10), where the author, based on her expertise in Chinese paintings, carefully traces the stylistic origins of the paintings of the same genres found in the painted screen standing behind each of the Seikadō Ten Kings scrolls. The last chapter (chapter 11) revisits the ritual-oriented atmosphere of the Koryŏ society, where ancestral worship, according to the author, was the primary religious concern among others. Such an understanding leads her to presume that the Ten Kings paintings possibly played an integral part in the royal ancestral rituals, although no direct evidence, as Kwon admits, remains.

What has been painstakingly built up in the three parts is cleverly rewritten in the conclusion. Instead of summarizing each chapter, Kwon changes the tone over the series of materials that she cautiously presented in the preceding pages and firmly situates the Seikadō scrolls in the social, religious, and historical context of Koryŏ. She pronounces that “the Seikadō Ten Kings, in short, conforms to the pluralist zeitgeist of early Koryŏ, combining all that may have been considered precious, elegant, and refined at the time” (pp. 161–162). This claim is supported by not just the visual evidence she laboriously identified in the scrolls but also by textual sources which indicate Koryŏ’s intensive interest in and effort at assimilating the Northern Song culture. Proposing that the Seikadō Ten Kings were drawn during the mid-Koryŏ before the Mongol Invasion (1231-59), Kwon emphasizes that “it [the Seikadō Ten Kings] bridges the gap between the tenth- and eleventh-century classical Chinese painting traditions and the extant late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Koryŏ paintings” (p. 162).

If the Seikadō Ten Kings are, as Efficacious Underworld claims, from the mid-Koryŏ, this claim can have a much more powerful impact than the claim that the paintings’ provenance is Korea rather than China. Most of the extant Koryŏ Buddhist paintings are dated from the late thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, the period generally labeled by scholars including Kwon as late Koryŏ. Although Efficacious Underworld does not labor in explaining periodization, it is worthwhile to consider the idea of “mid-Koryŏ” in the study of Koryŏ Buddhist art, which is a recent conception. Scholars have generally divided the history of Koryŏ Buddhist art—both sculpture and painting—into two phases based on the stylistic and formal changes detected from extant works. In the bipartite model, the late thirteenth century, the moment when the Yuan intervention began, serves as the point for division. Recently, however, specialists of Koryŏ Buddhist sculpture have begun to posit “mid-Koryŏ,” which includes the twelfth to thirteenth centuries as an alternative model. This new periodization, combined with the evidence from written sources from the statues’ inner recesses, helped a few, key wooden sculptures to be newly dated no later than the thirteenth century and to be considered the prime examples of mid-Koryŏ art. Although the source of origin of the novel stylistic and formal features displayed in the mid-Koryŏ sculptures is still debated, cultural exchanges between Koryŏ and its neighboring regions including Liao (916-1125), Northern Song (960-1127), and Southern Song (1127-1279) are considered to be significant factors.[1] In terms of the history of Buddhist paintings, the corresponding mid-Koryŏ is left blank, as no work is believed to be extant today. In such a situation, the Ten Kings scrolls at the Seikadō, if the claim of Efficacious Underworld is accepted, would be one of the first works to have parallels in the newly identified mid-Koryŏ Buddhist statues. This, further, may inform us of the intriguing history of the less-explored but significant period.

The difficulty in ascertaining the volume’s argument is, however, undeniable, regardless of the author’s tireless effort and meticulous investigation of all available sources. The absence of Ten Kings paintings of the Northern Song period, as well as of any period in Koryŏ, makes the Seikadō scrolls an isolated case. The fact that most surviving Koryŏ Buddhist paintings are dated to the late
tenth and fourteenth centuries adds difficulty in securely locating the Seikadō scrolls to a particular temporal and regional setting. These obstacles are, however, employed in the book as part of the evidence for situating the Seikadō Ten Kings forward a century. In other words, the fact that the Ten Kings paintings at Seikadō are distinguished from late Koryŏ Buddhist paintings has led Kwon to conclude that they were drawn in mid-Koryŏ. While the conclusion is reached mainly by the author’s thorough analysis of the paintings’ style and pictorial motifs, we may be able to gain more concrete information if the materiality of the scrolls is considered through scientific examinations. Several Koryŏ Buddhist paintings currently remaining in Japan have gone through microscopic investigations and part of the results—including their silk weave and loom width—have been published. The Seikadō scrolls can be invited to the new scientific environment of art-historical investigation, which is now closely connected with the domain of material culture.

In relation to the issue, it is also worth reconsidering the efficacy of “style” as art history’s methodology. Efficacious Underworld faithfully relies on the traditional method of analyzing stylistic features of and pictorial motifs in the paintings, with the unreserved use of derivative expressions such as “evolution” and “development.” Doubts remain, however, whether linear understanding of the illustrations of a certain subject matter is appropriate, particularly in the case of the Ten Kings paintings where surviving examples are widely, and more importantly, sporadically dispersed in terms of period and provenance: tenth-century Dunhuang, twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ningbo, thirteenth-century Koryŏ, fourteenth-century Ningbo, etc. The differences in style, as well as the variations in motifs, are so evident that it is difficult to say that one evolved from, or developed out of the other.

In this sense, a few works that Efficacious Underworld discusses in line with the developmental model may need more explanation with regard to the diverse views on their date and provenance. The Ten Kings hanging scrolls from the former Packard collection is one such case. The paintings are discussed in the second chapter of the book, in which the author argues that the work encapsulates a singular moment in the evolution of Ten Kings paintings in terms of format and composition. Emphasizing the archaic motifs and iconographic conventions shared by the tenth-century handscroll illustrations, Kwon situates the former Packard Ten Kings between the tenth and twelfth centuries. However, the question of the origin of the paintings is as complicated as that of the Seikadō scrolls because it can range anywhere from the Southern Song to late Koryŏ and even to early Chosŏn. While the presence of diverse opinions is simply mentioned in the volume, the complexities behind this work might have made another intriguing case for the understanding of the complicated features and diverse receptions of the Seikadō scrolls. It is also noteworthy that the three pieces of the former Packard collection were purchased by the National Museum of Korea in 2012 and that they were on view in a series of special exhibitions on Koryŏ, such as the “Masterpieces of Goryeo Buddhist Painting” and “Goryeo: The Glory of Korea.”

Nevertheless, as the first academic volume written in English that comprehensively explores Ten Kings paintings both in China and Korea, the Efficacious Underworld, equipped with an in-depth investigation of the paintings’ composition, iconography, and styles, makes a significant contribution to the fields of art history, Buddhist studies, and East Asian studies. The Ten Kings is surprisingly one of the less-studied subjects in the West, except for Stephen Teiser’s monograph, The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism (1994), and a few recent revisits of the theme. While the large portion of Efficacious Underworld is greatly in-
debted to the well-established Korean and Japanese scholarship on the cult and paintings, this volume, with its cross-regional and interdisciplinary approach to the diverse sources of materials from the medieval period, occupies a unique position. The inclusion of Japanese reproduction of Chinese and Korean canons of Ten Kings broadens the temporal and spatial scope of the study. Fluid writing with elaborate descriptions makes the reading enjoyable, and the color figures with enlarged details are lavish enough to please readers’ eyes. Above all things, the value of the book lies in its "excavation" of the Seikadō Ten Kings and brings them again to the stage for a full-scale discussion. It is more delightful if one considers the long period of silence in Korean academia since the publication of the author's PhD dissertation on the same subject matter at Princeton University in 1999 and her subsequent journal article published in Korea in 2000.[4] Thanks to the author’s unflagging affection, the sumptuous work is reinvited to the academic world and awaits renewed attention and evaluation.

Notes


[3]. See the exhibition catalogues: National Museum of Korea, Masterpieces of Goryeo Buddhist Painting (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2010), plates 70-74 (the pieces are indicated as late Koryô); National Museum of Korea, Goryeo: The Glory of Korea (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2018), plates 197-99 (the pieces are indicated as late Koryô or Southern Song).

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