

An Overview of Interaction within Pre-modern East Asian Region Through Buddhist Impact

Lekang Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*College of Liberal Arts and Science, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, Urbana, 61801, USA*

a. 1517678213@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Scholars have researched the impact of Buddhism on pre-modern and modern East Asia from different aspects, both within and between politics (states since the late 19th century): art, ideology, cultural practice, and food. Among existing academic literature on Buddhism's impact on the interaction between polities within East Asia, the expansion of certain material cultural elements and cultural concepts and foodways are among the major focuses. This paper employs the anthropological understanding of non-material and material components of culture. The “working” anthropological definition of religion is combined, to summarize and categorize the existing research on Buddhism's impact on pre-modern East Asian culture. Understanding culture in its material and non-material components, and its relationship with religion through time and space leads to this article to structure the relationship between Buddhism and pre-modern East Asian cultures into its expansion, its development, and its impact on different subcategories of a culture. The overview suggests an increase in future research on the multidirectional interaction of Buddhist pre-modern East Asian cultures and Buddhism's influence on greater foodway within different pre-modern East Asian societies.

Keywords: Premodern, East Asia, Buddhism, Interaction, Overview

1. Introduction

The term “premodern” in this paper means the pre-mid 19th Century East Asia, as China, Japan, and Korea tried to modernize themselves in the face of Western encroachment from the 1850s and 1860s. Scholars from different disciplines have different degrees of coverage on different aspects of Buddhist impact on the interaction between polities within East Asia. The diffusion of material culture's elements including art across the region has received a substantial amount of research in the past decades. This is the same situation for ideologies and cultural norms spreading across the region. Researchers also covered how Buddhism impacts the spread of food in East Asia, but instead of focusing on the staple food across the region, the research focuses mainly on specific food types and culinary practices, such as dairy and vegetarianism [1-6]. In general, the research's blank point regarding how Buddhism's expansion impacts art, ideology, cultural practice, and culinary practice's spread in pre-modern East Asia needs to be addressed by research focusing on untraditional dimensions and perspectives.

This paper classifies the different periods of research, the thematic focus of research, and the

direction of dissemination, and summarizes the influence of Buddhism on pre-modern cultural-political interactions in East Asia. At the same time, This paper illustrates the density of research according to the aforementioned categorization and points out the new direction of research: more interaction within the region, instead of unidirectional expansion. The research on food should also broaden its scope to include more food types and practices (i.e., did Buddhism impact the spread of certain staple foods in the region). Hence, this paper formulates an overview of several decades of research on how Buddhism became the crucial ingredient of East Asian culture and history.

2. Theoretical Basis

From an anthropological perspective, both physical and nonphysical components form a culture. Values, norms, symbols, and a “mental map of reality” form the nonphysical component of a culture. While artifacts and other artificial or non-artificial objects constitute their physical components [7]. Thus, understanding culture through time and its whole expanse should combine knowledge of both its physical and symbolic components. The physical component of culture, exemplified by food, books, artworks, and all kinds of artifacts and structures, explicitly and implicitly conveys its symbolic components. Buddhism is a type of religion. Religion is difficult to define due to its context varies throughout the world, but anthropologists still formulated a definition for it: religion is formulated usually around the belief in supernatural beings, figures more astonishing (spiritually) than the rest of society’s members, or a unique world view; with a specific set of rituals accompanying this belief within a society [7]. Religion is an intricate part of human culture and society. Processual archaeologist David Clarke frames religion as a subsystem in his “systematic view of culture” along with economic, social, and material culture subsystems, all of the subsystems operate in an intercorrelated manner [8]. Thus, material culture is interrelated to religion, society, and the whole culture set.

Researching art through material artworks is a common approach among scholars, as artwork is tangible, which means it is a package of cultural information that can be touched. Calligraphy, paintings, statues, sculptures, and architectural features are the material cultural products that embody art. Cultural norms can be traced from either textual material or untextual material, which makes research discern cultural significance through both textual evidence: codex, books, and inscriptions on artifacts; and non-textual evidence: artifacts themselves and architectures. Subsistence, or simply food has undisputed importance in human life across time and space, but cultural practice shaped how different people perform the essential activity of eating and drinking. Finally, the cross-cultural relationships between politics and cultural groups can be classified into unidirectional spread and bidirectional or multidirectional interaction.

3. The Spread of Buddhism in East Asia

Buddhism in East Asia began with its advent into China in the first century CE [9]. Pollard and Liu argued that the Buddhist art of brass statues spread into China together with brass-making metallurgy from the Gandhara Region (today’s Pakistan and Afghanistan) which in turn gained the technology from the Hellenic World and making Buddha statues with Brass emerged in the region after adopting Buddhism in the third century B.C. [9]. In this sense, Buddhism and the Gandhara region facilitated the spread of certain technologies into East Asia along with religion.

After China, the Korean Peninsula became the second region to adopt the religion in East Asia, and eventually the stepping stone of Buddhist Expansion in East Asia. Buddhism arrived on the peninsula in the 4th century A.D. during the “Three Kingdom Era” [1]. This religion entered the Korean Peninsula when the region was divided by Koguryō, Silla, and Paekche. Scholars studying Buddhism in continental East Asia have paid attention to how Confucianism (originated in China)

interacts with Buddhism in both China and the Korean Peninsula: both regions saw syncretism between the two intellectual systems, while Buddhism handled a more significant role of setting moral doctrines than its Chinese counterparts before Joseon Dynasty (founded in 1392) that held largely by Confucianism in China [2].

From the Korean Peninsula, Buddhism eventually spread into Japan. Early Buddhist temples in Japan, exemplified by Asukadera, demonstrate an influence from the Korean Peninsula. Lee Byongho pointed out that the archaeological excavation of Asukadera recovered evidence that both Paekche and Koguryō Buddhist architecture influenced this early Japanese Buddhist temple [3]. Lee also proposed that constructing Asukadera in 588 A.D. symbolized Buddhism taking root in Japan [3]. The spread of Buddhism thus facilitated the spread of technology and architectural style into and within East Asia and linked pre-modern East Asian polities to the larger Eurasia.

After Buddhism took root in China, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan, Buddhism developed both individually within the polities and influenced by Buddhism from within or outside of East Asia. As previously mentioned, when Japan adopted Buddhism from the Korean Peninsula, this religion existed in the Peninsula for two centuries, similar to Buddhism in China when the Korean Peninsula adopted the religion. Zhu resented that Hwangryongsa is an example of how different Chinese Buddhist architecture influenced a Korean Buddhist temple in the Kingdom of Silla. This temple was originally constructed from 553 to 569 A.D and then overhauled in 573 A.D. The whole construction process reflects both northern and southern dynasties' Chinese Buddhist "ritual-architecture" [10]. In the coming centuries before the advent of East Asian modernity, the development continued. Kim Yongtae illustrated the relationship between 17th-century Joseon Period Korean Buddhism and contemporary Chinese Buddhism: after the rivalry between two Dhamar lineages (Chinese-based and Koryō-based) lineage in Joseon Buddhism, the Chinese-based one emerged victorious. Further integration between Buddhism and Confucianism also happened in this period [1]. Kim concluded that Buddhism of the Korean Peninsula was not isolated and static as previous research argued, but dynamic and interconnected with its counterparts in East Asia.

4. The Development of Buddhism in Pre-modern East Asia

East Asia's adoption of Buddhism, as demonstrated in the order of time, is heterogeneous. Different polities and subregions adopted Buddhism at different times and evolved into different variations under different but interrelated conditions. Buddhism's process of becoming an ingredient in both individual East Asian cultures and the relationships between them can be classified into unidirectional spread (diffusion) or bidirectional/multidirectional interaction. The Korean Peninsula received Buddhism from China. There is no doubt that most research focuses on the relationship between China and the Korean Peninsula through Buddhism about how the cultural elements spread from China to Korea unidirectionally without searching for reversing influence afterward. A large number of existing studies have confirmed the one-way spread of Buddhism from China to North Korea, and pointed out that this type of relationship presents through time: from the early history of the Korean Peninsula's food of rice consumption and Buddhism-inspired vegetarianism, the construction process of Hwangryongsa in Silla, to the 17th-century formulation of a new tradition (Dhama lineage) for Joseon Buddhism [1] [10] [11].

A similar paradigm of unidirectional transmission of Buddhism accompanying continental Asian cultural elements also dominates the academic discussion of Japanese adoption of Buddhism from the Korean Peninsula. Lee and Qi's study on Asukadera, and Tōdaiji (respectively) also paid some attention to the spread of the Chinese law system into Japan accompanying Buddhism [3] [12]. However, Qi also pointed out that Tōdaiji became a facility of diplomacy after it was finished, suggesting a more complicated mode of relationship between Buddhism and foreign influence. Tōdaiji was influenced not only by the Korean Peninsula and China but also by Southeast Asia

(Champa, today central Vietnam) and India [12].

Relationships between Japan and other East Asian pre-modern polities through Buddhism also developed in the following centuries. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, China and Japan saw widespread adoption of specific Buddhist literature, the “Blood Bowl Sutra”. Lori Meeks formulated the research into China and Japan section, to explore how this sutra impacted Chinese and Japanese society during the aforementioned two centuries, and to provide an alternative narrative about the current Western perception of Buddhism. This female-specific sutra instilled a cult in both China and Japan, which is far from “progressive” as the current day Western, especially North American perceived [4] [5]. It is worth noticing that the author classified 16th and 17th-century China and Japan as early modern, similar to the classification of American historian Johnathan D. Spence as he began his narration of modern China from the late Ming Dynasty, which is the first half of 17th Century [4] [13]. Meeks pointed out that the Blood Bowl Sutra proclaimed the damnation of women into a specific section of hell to purify their pollution of menstruation blood and blood from laboring [10]. According to Meeks, this Buddhist textual originated in China, which means it was Chinese Buddhists’ own creation between the 11th and 12th centuries to cooperate with contemporary Chinese society and reinforce the status quo. This cult of the Blood Bowl Sutra, dealing with female funeral practice, spread into Japan during the 15th century [4] [5]. Again, this is another example of how Japanese practice in Japan is influenced by Chinese elements, as the scripture is a Chinese creation. Interestingly both Chinese and Japanese practices associated with this female-specific Buddhist scripture assured some signs of salvation for women through Buddhist teaching, another similarity between Chinese and Japanese Buddhist concepts through unidirectional transmission [4] [5].

Thus, the research on the influence of Buddhism on political interactions in pre-modern East Asia is dominated by the paradigm of unidirectional transmission. Indeed research on bidirectional interaction between political entities in East Asia exists. However, as demonstrated by Cody R. Bahir’s article on Sino-Japanese esoteric Buddhism’s interaction, this research focuses on modern East Asian Buddhism [14].

5. Different Aspects of Buddhist Impact in Premodern East Asia

The development of Buddhism in pre-modern East Asia is explored through food, cultural concepts, and art. Cultural concepts, crystalized majorly in pre-modern Buddhist scripts, are another type of focus when scholars dealing with Buddhist (as well as other religions or belief systems) impact on different societies through time, and become a major attraction for scholarly interests. From the difference in syncretism between Chinese-originated Confucius’ teaching and Buddhism in China and the Korean Peninsula before the Joseon Period, the disputed Dharma lineage (tradition), to how the indigenous Chinese Buddhist text the Blood Bowl Sutra influenced Japan and evolved in both societies respectively, it can be known that how historians and religion researchers retrieved information of Buddhist cultural concepts spread from its origin loci into the outside world from textual evidence.

Foodways are an intrinsic component of every culture, and belief systems can certainly impact the ways people engage with consuming nutrients. Buddhism in East Asia is characterized by foodways, too, exemplified by vegetarianism. Cherl-ho Lee introduced the early history of the Korean Peninsula’s foodways of rice as a staple and highlighted the importance of Buddhism in stilling a wave of adopting vegetarianism in the peninsula [11]. Another type of food that has gained more popularity through Buddhism in East Asia is dairy products. Jeffery Kotyk stated that dairy’s history in pre-modern East Asia deserves more appreciation, while Buddhism plays an important role in promoting it as both regular food and medicine [6]. He stated that dairy product is indigenous to continental East Asia (3000 years ago, in the Eastern Eurasian steppe and in Han Dynasty China), and both Buddhism and Daoism promoted its consumption. However, their advent in Japan is a

byproduct of Buddhist expansion into Japan, largely used as medicine, as opposed to the wide range of usage in China [6].

While researchers have thoroughly examined the relationship between the expansion of material cultural elements and cultural concepts and Buddhism's expansion in pre-modern East Asia, new directions for future research can still be found, especially on the subject of foodways. Researchers have paid their attention mainly to specific food types and culinary practices associated with Buddhism. While staple food, as exemplified by rice in this article, has received scholarly attention, more studies on how Buddhism impacted the adoption or expansion of certain staple foods in more than one subregion or polity should be encouraged. As exemplified by the Early Korean example, Buddhism facilitated the flourishing of grain cultivation and consumption. It also gave rise to several types of rice-made dishes in the peninsula [11]. More research on similar processes in wider East Asia to depict a more elaborated picture of how Buddhism influenced the adoption of certain staple foods and popular foods as well as their expansion outside their original location can be conducted in the future.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the “working” anthropological definition of religion and culture are utilized to understand Buddhism's impact in East Asia before the 1850s. Understanding culture in its material and non-material components, and its relationship with religion through time and space leads to this article to structure the relationship between Buddhism and pre-modern East Asian cultures into its expansion, its development, and its impact on different subcategories of culture. While the researchers thoroughly covered the whole timeline between the advent of Buddhism in East Asia and East Asian modernity and beyond with their cross-discipline research, the dominant relationship in the academic relationship is the unidirectional spread and adoption, which can be supplemented by more bidirectional and multidirectional interaction between political entities through Buddhism; while material culture's and cultural concepts' spread dominate the academic literature, with a substantial amount of attention on foodways especially on less common foods, more research on staple food can be the supplement to elaborate how this belief system impacted larger society in different locations. However, this simple overview has the issue of oversimplification, and the inclusion of a higher quantity of more diverse cross-disciplinary research translated into academic literature can enhance this simple overview.

References

- [1] Kim, Y. (2020). *Formation of a Chosŏn Buddhist tradition: Dharma lineage and the monastic curriculum from a synchronic and diachronic perspective*. *Journal of Korean Religion* 11 (2): 101-113. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975929>
- [2] Vermeersch, S. (2020). *Syncretism, harmonization, and mutual appropriation between Buddhism and Confucianism in Pre-Joseon Korea*. *Religions* 11 (5): 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11050231>
- [3] Lee, B. (2022). *Tracing the Origin of Japan's First Buddhist Temple: Japan's Asukadera Viewed through the Lens of the Korean Paekche Kingdom Temple Site of Wanghŭng-sa*. *Religions* 13 (9): 2-14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090846>
- [4] Meeks, L. (2020). *Women and Buddhism in East Asian history: the case of the Blood Bow Sutra, Part I: China*. *Religion Compass* 14 (4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12336>
- [5] Meeks, L. (2020). *Women and Buddhism in East Asian history: the case of the Blood Bow Sutra, Part II: Japan*. *Religion Compass* 14 (4), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12335>
- [6] Kotyk, J. (2021). *Milk, yogurt, and butter in medieval East Asia: dairy products from China to Japan in medicine and Buddhism*. *Religions* 12 (5), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050302>
- [7] Guest, K. J. (2018). *Essentials of cultural anthropology: a toolkit in a global age* (2nd ed.). W.W. Norton & Company Inc.
- [8] Johnson, M. (2020). *Archaeological theory: an introduction* (3rd ed.). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

- [9] Pollard, A.M., and Liu, R. (2022). *From Alexander the Great to the Buddha: Buddhism and the introduction of brass technology into China*. *Archaeological and anthropological sciences* 14: 1-14. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12520-022-01583-6>
- [10] Xu, Z. (2023). *Hwangryoungsa reconsidered: a Korean mirror to the medieval Chinese Buddhist ritual-architecture transformation*. *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 12 (1), 28-41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2022.06.004>
- [11] Lee, C. (2022). *Food culture in the early historical era: vegetarianism, rice cakes, and traditional sweets*. In *Korean food and foodways: the root of health functional food*, (pp.99-137). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-0023-5_5
- [12] Qi, Z. (2021). *Tōdaiji, A state appropriation of Buddhism*. *Advance in Social Sciences, Education and Humanities Research* 24: 1638-1645. 10.2991/assehr.k.211220.277
- [13] Spencer, J. D. (2013). *The Search for Modern China*. W.W. Norton & Company Inc.
- [14] Bahir, C. R. (2021). *From China to Japan and back again: an energetic example of bidirectional Sion-Japanese esoteric Buddhist transmission*. *Religions* 12 (9), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090675>