

## A Fantasy in Korean Buddhist Painting: Hungry Ghosts in Nectar Ritual Paintings

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### Introduction

In Buddhism, death does not mean the discontinuity of life, but rather a process of reaching another life. This is the Buddhist view of death, in other words, death does not really exist. Eternal death, if there is any, would refer to the attainment of Nirvana. Almost all sentient beings consequently wander through either this world or the otherworld in a state reflecting the deeds they have accumulated since their unknown beginnings. The realms into which they can be reborn are divided into Six Paths (六道): heavenly beings, humans, asuras (demigods-fighting spirits), animals, hungry ghosts, and denizens of hell.

Until achieving Nirvana, all sentient beings must be cyclically reincarnated along one of these Six Paths to rebirth. Four stages of existence make up the process of transmigration: Basic existence in this world (本有, *bonuyu*), death existence (死有, *sayu*), an intermediate existence between death and rebirth (中有, *jungyu*), and rebirth existence (生有, *saengyu*). Nectar Ritual Paintings, or *Gamnodo* (甘露圖) in Korean, depict the intermediate existence between death and rebirth, or the realms to which the souls must go (Fig. 1). They structuralize the process of transmigration from suffering to pleasure through Buddhist symbols and metaphors.



Fig. 1. *Nectar Ritual Painting*. Joseon, 18th century. Color on silk. 188.5 × 198.0 cm. National Museum of Korea (The enlarged one is on the left page.)

During the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897), the Buddhist community was shrinking due to an ongoing policy of promoting Confucianism while suppressing Buddhism, but it still managed to develop the formalities of rituals praying for the repose of the people who had wrongfully died. Particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time when Joseon suffered increased social unrest due to natural disasters and wars, the Buddhist community strengthened the faith elements related to funerary and salvific rituals for placating the wandering souls of the dead and dispatching them to paradise such as Water-Land Retreat (水陸齋, the ceremony for deliverance of creatures of water and land), or Suryukjae in Korean. Nectar ritual paintings were mainly used in these rituals reflective of the circumstances of Joseon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In accordance with the ritual norms for Water-Land Retreat, nectar ritual paintings developed a specific iconographical system and came to be produced nationwide.

During the Joseon Dynasty, Water-Land Retreat was held mainly for placating lonely wandering souls (孤魂, *gohon*) that had no ancestors or descendants to hold memorial services on their behalf. These roving orphan souls that had been unable to pass into the afterlife were in a state of the intermediate existence between death and rebirth (*jungyu*) represented by hungry ghosts (餓鬼, K. *agwi*; Skt. *preta*) (Fig. 2). Those in the

state of *jungyu* are also referred to as *jungeumsin* (中陰身), lonely wandering souls, or more commonly as a ghost. The principal iconographic motif of nectar ritual paintings is the salvation of hungry ghosts, which is the objective of Water-Land Retreat. The depiction of the salvation of hungry ghosts in nectar ritual paintings is acted out during the process of Water-Land Retreat as several formulaic iconographic motifs sequentially appearing in the painting correspond to the stages of the ritual. Understanding the order of the individual iconographic motifs and their organic correlations also concretize the process of Water-Land Retreat. Thus, the meaning of the hungry ghost images is revealed over the temporal progress of the ritual as well as in the relations among iconographic motifs.

This paper aims to examine the multilayered connotations of hungry ghosts. Moreover, it will discuss the contexts in which hungry ghosts are perceived in relation to the concepts of bizarreness, loathing, hunger and thirst, miserliness, pain, and fear, both within the iconography of nectar ritual paintings and in the social milieu of the Joseon Dynasty. It further argues that these negative concepts were formulated to dramatically explicate the journey of lonely souls toward salvation, rebirth, bliss, and paradise, which are at the far opposite of what hungry ghosts represent. It concludes that such opposing notions are embodied simultaneously in the visual representation of hungry ghosts.

## Symbolism in Nectar Ritual Paintings

The composition of nectar ritual paintings is commonly divided into upper, middle, and lower sections with iconographic content ranging from top to bottom. The motifs in the upper, middle, and lower sections are all narrative, correspond to the stages of the ritual, and are metaphorically interconnected. The upper section features Buddhas and Bodhisattvas related to salvation, including the Seven Buddhas (七如來) and Soul-Guiding Bodhisattva (引路王菩薩), which indicates a future that will soon arrive in the ritual process. The lower section portrays the beings to be saved, thus representing the past, while the altar and the ritual scene in the middle section symbolizes a present moment connecting the past and the future. In other words, the three-sectioned pictorial space of nectar ritual paintings demonstrates the temporal progression of the ritual. It starts from the “present time” of middle section through the lower part where lonely souls—represented by a hungry



Fig. 2. Hungry Ghost in Fig. 1





Fig. 3. *Nectar Ritual Painting* at Yakusenji Temple. Joseon, 1589. Color on hemp. 169.3 × 158.2 cm. Entrusted to the Nara National Museum

ghost—are depicted as summoned to the ritual and finally on to the upper section, the future, where Buddhas and Bodhisattvas descend to save them. Thus, the iconography temporally progresses from the middle through the lower and to the upper section following the order of the ritual (Fig. 3).

In the upper section of nectar ritual paintings, the Buddhas descended to the ritual scene bestow “sweet dew,” or nectar called *gamno* (甘露, Skt. amṛta), to save the hungry ghosts—if officiant monk is present at the scene, the monk himself sprinkles the nectar over the hungry ghosts. These

hungry ghosts or forlorn wandering souls absorb nectar through their whole bodies and then are released from their pain, which is the main theme of nectar ritual paintings. The hungry ghosts or lonely souls who have received the grace of this nectar head towards the paradise seen in the upper section under the guidance of Soul-Guiding Bodhisattva and are reborn (Fig. 4).

The names and roles of the Seven Buddhas appearing in the upper section of nectar ritual paintings are (Fig. 5):





Fig. 4. *Nectar Ritual Painting* at Boseoksa Temple. Joseon, 1649. Color on hemp. 238.0 × 228.0 cm. National Museum of Korea

1. Prabhutaratna Tathagata (多寶如來, Dabo yeorae): The Buddha of Abundant Treasures helps lonely souls abandon greed and stinginess and become fully equipped with precious dharma.
2. Ratnaketu Tathagata (寶勝如來, Boseung yeorae): The Buddha of Treasure and Victory leads lonely souls to abandon evil paths and achieve the exaltation they seek.
3. Surupakaya Tathagata (妙色身如來, Myosaeksin yeorae): Known as the Buddha of Fine Form Body, this deity cleans and smooths out the tattered and repulsive forms of lonely souls.
4. Vipulakaya Tathagata (廣博身如來, Gwangbaksin yeorae): The Buddha of Broad Extensive Body allows lonely souls to be freed from the bodily forms of the Six Paths and obtain dharmic bodies as pure as the air.
5. Abhayamkara Tathagata (離怖畏如來, Ipowoe yeorae): The Buddha of Leaving Fear helps lonely souls to leave behind the fear and gain the pleasure of Nirvana.
6. Amrtaraja Tathagata (甘露王如來, Gamnowang yeorae): As the Buddha of the Nectar-King, this deity opens the throats of all lonely souls, which are as thin as needles, to enable them to taste the sweet dew.
7. Amitabha Tathagata (阿彌陀如來, Amita yeorae): Called the Buddha of Infinite Light, this deity causes lonely souls to transcend life and be reborn in the Western Paradise according to their prayers offered to him.





Fig. 5. Seven Buddhas in Fig. 4

Each of these Seven Buddhas exerts a unique supernatural power. Once the officiant monk invokes the honorific names of these Buddhas in the order of Prabhutaratna, Ratnaketu, Surupakaya, Vipulakaya, Abhayamkara, Amrtaraja and Amitabha, they emerge one after the other and erase one by one the sufferings of the lonely souls and hungry ghosts. Since nectar ritual paintings depict the moment of the Seven Buddhas—including Amitabha, the final one to arrive—have descended, all seven of them are presented together in the scene.

The salvation by the Seven Buddhas can reach all lonely wandering souls, but in a narrow sense, it can be said that its targets are limited solely to the hungry ghosts. Not only representing one of the Six Paths of rebirths, but the hungry ghosts also stand for all those requiring salvation, including ancestral spirits and *mujugohon* (無主孤魂, lonely wandering souls with no posterity to hold memorial rites). As a case in point, the first Buddha, Prabhutaratna, endeavors to erase worldly desires and miserliness from them, which are the ultimate causes of being reborn as hungry ghosts.<sup>1</sup> The second Buddha, Ratnaketu, frees hungry ghosts from the pain of evil paths stemming from misdeeds in a past life. While these two Buddhas focus on releasing the karmic ties of being reborn as hungry ghosts, the third and fourth Buddhas, Surupakaya and Vipulakaya, concentrate on healing their tattered and repellant appearances. The fifth Buddha, Abhayamkara, eliminates the fears experienced by the hungry ghosts after existing in such bodies for an extended period. The sixth Buddha, Amrtaraja, opens hungry ghosts' throats, which are as thin as a needle, allowing them to taste the nectar and be liberated from hunger

and thirst. After being fed nectar, they are no longer hungry ghosts, so the seventh Buddha, Amitabha, can help them to transcend the cycle of rebirth along the Six Paths and be reborn in the Western Paradise instead. The Soul-Guiding Bodhisattva appearing on one side of the upper section of nectar ritual paintings directs the souls to paradise after they have escaped the hungry ghost state thanks to the bestowal of nectar.

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The middle section of nectar ritual paintings presents a scene of monks holding a ritual in front of an altar. The altar is adorned with the various dishes required for the ritual, along with flowers, lamps, and banners (Fig. 6). This scene embodies a wish for the salvation of the souls through the ritual. Merits accumulated by believers performing rituals move the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and encourage them to confer grace on all lonely souls, thus saving them and breaking the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth of all sentient beings along the Six Paths.



Fig. 6. Altar in Fig. 4





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The lower section depicts lonely souls in the appearance of their past lives. It shows the world of all sentient beings, including hungry ghosts, who are trapped on endless transmigration along the Six Paths. The past lives of the lonely souls, as depicted in the painting, are not so different from our present lives, reflecting the realities at that time. The diverse causes that led the lonely spirits to face death became standardized over several centuries, and they appear as major motifs in the lower sections of nectar ritual paintings. These sections commonly consist of about forty scenes. In the upper portion, relatively closer to the altar in the middle, are the forlorn wandering souls of officials, generals, and soldiers who forsook their own lives to save their own countries; late kings and queens who favored Buddhism and performed good deeds; and those related to the Buddhist community, including monks, nuns, and lay disciples. Social standing and the hierarchical bureaucracy of the mundane world are partially reflected in the depictions of the figures in the intermediate existence. The bottom portion of the lower section includes figures of relatively low social status, including a performing troupe based out of temples; wanders who starved to death away from home; those

who died alone after they grew old and had no one to rely on; and those who died after being bitten by animals, trampled under horses' hooves, drowned, crushed by a collapsing house, or consumed in a wildfire. The main motifs here are the causes of the tragic death of the forlorn wandering souls while in human form. The deathbed moments of people who passed away in a foreign land or disasters particularly stand out. These motifs represent lonely wandering spirits who hold great regrets and fail to leave this world. However, they are believed to have reflected living people's apprehension over the unforeseeable misfortunes that wandering souls might bring (Fig. 7).

Through these upper-middle-lower sections of iconographic composition, nectar ritual paintings convey a message regarding the salvation of forlorn wandering souls from the tormented realms of hell or of hungry ghosts. It is important to understand the iconographic motifs in the three sections according to their temporal order since they manifest the miracles occurring during the stages of Water-Land Retreat, which are generally held day and night over several days. These miracles are reconstructed based on the method of depicting different temporal sequences within a single painting (同圖異時).



### The Procedures for Water-Land Retreat and the Salvation of Hungry Ghosts

Several ritual manuals related to Water-Land Retreat record similar procedures. Most manuals begin by explaining the motives for performing Water-Land Retreat and the origin of the ritual. It proceeds from building an altar and purifying its surroundings to summoning messengers to open a way for the advent of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and forlorn wandering souls. Next, the low-ranking wandering souls are called in, and eventually, the high-ranking Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are invited.

The ritual scene in *Nectar Ritual Painting* (1589) at Yakusenji Temple (薬仙寺) in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan includes an old monk holding a vajra bell in one hand while sitting on the left corner of the altar (Fig. 8). It is highly possible that this scene may depict the invitation of low-ranked beings, namely lonely wandering souls, to the ritual space. The Yakusenji painting demonstrates that the depicted ritual phase involves the essential task of summoning lonely spirits from all quarters.

Ritual manuals indicate how difficult it can be to call in the lonely wandering spirits of the deceased. In order to

summon them, a monk must dedicate a considerable amount of time to allow them to hear the Buddhist sermons and the logic of the world and become informed that food made from nectar will appear in this sacred ritual space (道場).

According to the ritual manual, while shaking a vajra bell and repeatedly calling in souls deep into the night, the monk chants, “as the night sky darkens and grows serene, galactic waves sink into the mind.” Monks steadily burn incense and chant Buddhist hymns, but the suffering wandering spirits from everywhere are not yet gathered, although several saints have arrived from the three realms of existence in which beings undergo rebirth. The monks dolefully chanting the mantra and reciting lengthy discourses and the young nuns holding a flower and staring into the air reflect the difficulty of summoning the wandering souls. The invitation of low-ranking beings is followed by the invitation of the Seven Buddhas, whose advent is illustrated in the upper section of nectar ritual paintings.

Nectar ritual paintings also feature a monk standing apart from the group of other monks. He holds a small bowl in his left hand in front of the altar, raises his right arm above his shoulder, and makes a unique gesture with his right hand. This hand gesture, as seen in the Yakusenji painting, indicates the Water Wheel mudra (水輪觀印) symbolizing the action of bestowing nectar over numerous lonely souls, including hungry

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Fig. 8. Ritual Scene in Fig. 3



Fig. 9. Hungry Ghost in Fig. 3



ghosts, who have been summoned to the ritual space (Fig. 9). The depiction of this monk embodies the moment of delivery of the nectar created by the incantations (加持) of the Buddhas in the upper section.

In the end, forlorn wandering spirits represented by hungry ghosts receive the benefit of tasting nectar. The hideous-looking hungry ghost depicted in the center of the lower section captures this dramatic moment. However, the ordinary people who participate in Water-Land Retreat are unable to see the hungry ghosts. The emergence of the hungry ghosts can be perceived only through the spiritual eyes of the monk officiating the ritual. In other words, the presence of hungry ghosts is established using *gwansang* (觀想), visualization through the mind's eye. Thus, the images of hungry ghosts in nectar ritual paintings are the most effective means of demonstrating the efficacy of Water-Land Retreat to the general public who participate in the ritual.

While events occurring sequentially at each phase of a lengthy ritual vanish with the passage of time, these moments captured as iconographic motifs in nectar ritual paintings remain available since they are recorded according to the *dongdo yisi* method of presenting different temporal sequences within a single painting. The primary motifs in the upper, middle,

and lower sections of nectar ritual paintings show the main characteristics of each stage of Water-Land Retreat. In particular, the scenes focusing on the salvation of hungry ghosts, which is sought in the latter stages of the ritual, demonstrate how nectar ritual paintings envisage key points of the faith in appeasing the souls of the deceased and sending them off to paradise. The ritual in the middle section in which several monks gather and the appearance of hungry ghosts in front of a monk correspond to the core contents of the ritual: respectively, the summoning of wandering souls and the realization of the effects of the sweet dew.

### Representation of Hungry Ghosts

Despite their inability to see them, Joseon people did not deny the existence of spirits or souls as the beings that exist alongside us, invisible to the human eyes. They believed in countless types of spirits, including some that held deep regrets from their life in this world and were thought to interfere with human life. These spirits had died wrongful deaths and could not be reincarnated, so they wandered this world and meddled in people's affairs. In Buddhism, they were called forlorn wandering souls, or *gohon* and should be appeased and conveyed to paradise. The souls of people who died while away from



Fig. 10. Two Hungry Ghosts in Fig. 4



home or due to unexpected disasters were especially known as *mujugohon* since they could not receive memorial rites and held many bitter regrets. Starting in the sixteenth century, Joseon society suffered from roughly 150 years of severe climate effects that triggered bad harvests and subsequent famines, epidemics, and wars. Joseon endeavored to overcome these disasters based on the Confucian view of the Ways of Heaven (天道觀).<sup>2</sup> One of the associated means was, ironically, to hold Buddhist Water-Land Retreat. Despite the official promotion of Confucianism, Buddhist Water-Land Retreat became established as a major ritual to wish that the forlorn wandering souls that had died due to the series of disasters and the hungry ghosts that embodied the agony of these souls could be reborn in the next world. In this way, the Joseon court sought to enhance social stability through Buddhism.

The hungry ghost concept is related to the traditional Indian notion of “pitr”, the spirits of departed parents. The idea of “pitr” came to be combined with the Chinese conception of “gui” (鬼), meaning departed ancestors who are subject to memorial services. Accordingly, grotesque-looking hungry ghosts suffering from hunger and thirst came to be characterized as a spirit connected to ancestral rites. Hungry ghosts are not only the ancestors subject to memorial services, but they also indicate the beings trapped in a world of ignorance and desire. Hence, they become the roots of infatuation, desire, and evil-doing.<sup>3</sup> Hungry ghosts are also considered to be the beings lower than animals on the Six Paths of Rebirth. Given all these, why did hungry ghosts become the representative icons of salvation in nectar ritual paintings among the three evil realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell?

First, a hungry ghost image in nectar ritual paintings epitomizes the many wandering souls depicted in the lower sections. Moreover, since it integrates the agonies of these souls, a hungry ghost is also called as “Burning-face Ghost King” (面燃鬼王). In nectar ritual paintings, a hungry ghost is portrayed with a large body since it represents a group of hungry ghosts as myriad as the grains of sand in the Ganges River. A hungry ghost in nectar ritual paintings is also known as Bijeu Bosal (悲增菩薩), a Bodhisattva known mainly for extraordinary compassion. According to the ritual manuals, a hungry ghost is a Bodhisattva who saves sentient beings on evil paths and is a manifestation named “Burning-face Great Being” (面燃大士) who wishes for mercy but looks old and weary. Burning-face Great Being and Burning-face Ghost King are similar in appearance. Burning-face Great Being can be understood as a being incarnated in order to seek companionship with a number of suffering sentient

beings in a state of intermediate existence while taking on the appearance of a hungry ghost with a throat as thin as a needle. With the above portrayal of the ritual manuals in mind, the enormous hungry ghost in nectar ritual paintings can be regarded as the transformation of Bijeu Bosal into such appearance. The bodhisattva took on the same form as a hungry ghost to save sentient beings on evil paths (Fig. 10).

The word “Bijeu” itself emphasizes the practice of compassion, an intrinsic attribute of Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism. Depending on the ritual manual, Bijeu Bosal is sometimes described as Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva or Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Regardless, Bijeu Bosal suffers the same terrible hunger as hungry ghosts to extend mercy by working to save them. In nectar ritual paintings, Bijeu Bosal defies the dualistic classification into agents that save and objects that are saved. In the late sixteenth century, when the iconography of hungry ghosts was being established, a single image of a hungry ghost was presented in nectar ritual paintings. However, starting in the mid-seventeenth century, there were cases where two hungry ghosts appeared. By the eighteenth century, many paintings featured two hungry ghosts. By visualizing Burning-face Great Being, the savior, as Burning-face Ghost King, who shall be saved, the painting demonstrates that in the ultimate state of Buddhism, there is no separation between the agent and the object of

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Hungry ghosts internalize pain, whereas sentient beings in hell are inflicted with pain by jailers or torture devices. Moreover, hungry ghosts have elected to take on a bizarre appearance on their own accord in order to save other beings. This can be understood in the context of Christian iconography in which Jesus Christ’s difficult choice to suffer and die as a martyr is applied as a powerful tool for the propagation of Christianity. Jesus taking on the sins of all humanity is depicted through his crucifixion with nails through his hands and feet and his side pierced by a spear. The crueller the iconography of Jesus is depicted, the more sacred it becomes. The image of a detestable-looking hungry ghost embodying the attributes of miserliness and greed corresponds to the image of Jesus on the cross in that it symbolizes Bijeu Bosal rather than a hungry ghost suffering retribution for misdeeds. Indeed, a grotesque hungry ghost in great pain is in fact a manifestation of a Bodhisattva and a venerable being whose sacredness is paradoxically displayed through suffering. Thus, nectar ritual paintings materialize the ascendance of salvation by using the metaphor of suffering inverted through a hungry ghost.

A hungry ghost is believed to have been chosen as the



principal icon in nectar ritual paintings for the following reasons. First, rituals held to placate the wandering souls of the dead are related to nectar. In Buddhist rituals, nectar is a symbolic drink that quenches the thirst of a hungry ghost. In a similar vein, according to the Confucian view of the Ways of Heaven, nectar is bestowed from heaven in response to a reign of peace when the truth is revealed. Hungry ghosts are the main recipients of food-offering rituals (施食) and are multilayered beings, including those known as *jung eumsin*, in a state of intermediate existence. Above all, hungry ghosts representing hunger and a craving for nectar, which is bestowed in the upper section of the painting, accord well with the iconographic contents of nectar ritual paintings. Second, unlike other beings that are exposed to pain from the outside, hungry ghosts actually embody pain in them, displaying the agony through their grotesque figure. Their appearances are extremely effective for expressing the beauty that resides in tragedy. Their grotesqueness carries a double meaning of lofty sacrifice. Since Joseon society was at risk from famine, war, resentment, and exploitation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the iconography of nectar ritual paintings was being established, hungry ghosts were used to caution against their intrinsic attributes of miserliness and greed.

080 Sentient beings suffering in hell and hungry ghosts reflect our own wandering through the karmic cycle. The image of a hungry ghost effectively visualizes samsara (the eternal cycle of birth and death), which is the major doctrine underlying Buddhism. Such hungry ghosts are detestable yet terrifying. The small hungry ghosts emerging all over the nectar ritual paintings establish the significance of the large hungry ghost in the center. This giant gruesome-looking hungry ghost connotes multilayered meanings; it is the compassionate Bijeung Bosal, the deceased parents, and simultaneously, our own future beings waiting for salvation. Just as John Ruskin (1819–1900) noted in *The Stones of Venice* that the nature of the Gothic encompasses the rough vitality within grotesqueness, the grotesque appearances of hungry ghosts present their own rough vitality. Moreover, Ruskin further asserts that elegance and horror are both present in examples of the grotesque. The ludicrous and frightening, which accords with the definition of the grotesque, are expressed in hungry ghosts. The grotesque hungry ghosts set against the refined, colorfully embroidered textile covering the altar in *Nectar Ritual Painting* at Boseoksa Temple present us with such a contrast of humor and horror.

If people or their ancestors can be associated with the icon of the hungry ghost, which is based on disgust

and horror, it would facilitate their assimilation into or submission to the Buddhist conception of hungry ghosts. Accordingly, even after Joseon society had been stabilized to a large degree in the eighteenth century, the Buddhist community willingly performed rituals for placating the souls of ancestors and sending them off to paradise in return for financial compensation. The faith in accumulating merits through pre-mortem rituals held for the living also gained popularity. The production of hell-related iconography and nectar ritual paintings increased owing to the effectiveness of their grotesque depictions. Furthermore, the intensification of anguish and horror within the iconography serves to highlight the resplendent pure land, which is the opposite of the world of anguish and horror. Hidden in the portrayal of ragged and agonized hungry ghosts from the nectar ritual paintings, therefore, are the ecstasy and nobility.

## Conclusion

Human reality is filled with uncertainty. In this world of contradictions, we have no choice but to walk through a pitch-black tunnel. Religion is based on this disturbing reality, but it seeks a world of order that extends beyond it. Thus, religious rituals are the actions performed with a focus on being incorporated into an unimaginably vast realm. Such actions embody a will to restore the cosmic order by neutralizing contradictions within this temporarily unsettling reality. The rituals held at Buddhist temples to placate the wandering souls of the dead and send them off to paradise are the wishes for the assuagement of these disembodied spirits within the symbolic order of the other world.

Nectar ritual paintings based on Water-Land Retreat, illustrates the journey to paradise of numerous forlorn souls represented as hungry ghosts in a three-tiered structure comprising the upper, middle, and lower sections. Overall, the iconography of the three sections reconstitutes a series of miracles that occur over the course of this ritual held across several days and nights to console these souls and guide them to paradise. A nectar ritual painting may appear rather complex, but the images in the upper, middle, and lower section are organically connected. These images depict the events occurring at each stage of a long ritual. However, since they were presented using the technique of incorporating scenes taking place at multiple time periods



within the same painting, such multiple time periods are spatially concurrent. In particular, the scene in which a hungry ghost is saved, which corresponds to the final stage of the ritual, visualizes the core elements of Water-Land Retreat.

Bijeung Bosal descends to earth in a manifestation as an agonized hungry ghost in order to directly participate in the sufferings of the real world. This Bodhisattva undergoes the same pangs of extreme hunger as does a hungry ghost, thus reinforcing the belief in salvation and mercy. A hungry ghost is the epitome of beauty and mercy manifested within the ugliest and most anguished possible form. As both an agent and recipient of salvation, Bijeung Bosal eliminates the dualistic classification into an agent that saves and an object that is saved. Like the cycle of dependent origination, the journey to paradise is not subject to this division between agent and object, but is ascendible through mutual causation.

Nectar ritual paintings convey an implicit message that opposing concepts such as hell and heaven are, in fact, indivisible. Just as ugliness is required for beauty, death simultaneously means a new birth. By acknowledging the possibility of its transcendence, the existence of hell presupposes that of paradise and consequently manifests the realization of religious salvation. Moreover, the amplification of the fear and pain retained by a hungry ghost in nectar ritual paintings epitomizes an ascendance to a noble paradise that is the inverse of fear and pain. A hungry ghost further paradoxically reveals religious sacredness through suffering.

**Translated by Kwon Ye Gee and Park Shinhee**

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- 1 One of the main triggers of karmic retribution that causes sentient beings to be reborn as a hungry ghost is miserliness. Among the seven kinds of suffering that hungry ghosts experience and the Seven Buddhas alleviate, miserliness gives cause for agony and is considered the first quality to be eliminated. Within Christian teachings, however, pride is the root of all evil and the gravest among the seven deadly sins as stipulated by Pope Gregory I in 604 (pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust). This shows a contrast between beliefs in the East and West. See Park Sungeun 2010, 117.
- 2 Since *Cheondogwan* in Confucianism held people accountable for all natural calamities and abnormalities, the severity of abnormalities in Heaven resulted in an emphasis on restoring order to human society. After undergoing the Little Ice Age, which affected the entire planet, Joseon society came to place great emphasis on the properties (禮) (Yi Taejin 1996, 235). From the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, Joseon society suffered through a period of unprecedented cold and other temperature anomalies. Due to a series of wars and the poor harvests, famine, and epidemics that accompanied this climate shift, Joseon experienced conditions of extreme unrest. Notably, during the reign of King Seonjo (宣祖, r. 1567–1608), people facing a devastating famine butchered corpses to eat and ended up resorting to cannibalism. The Joseon court banned the practice in 1594. In the Eulbyeong Great Famine (1695–1699), during the reign of King Sukjong (肅宗, r. 1674–1720), the death toll is estimated to have reached over four million, making up 23 to 33 percent of the entire population of the country. In France, one-tenth of the population perished from famine and plague between 1693 and 1694 (Kim Moonkee 2010, 167).
- 3 “Pitr,” a Sanskrit term applied to hungry ghosts, mainly means a spirit (鬼). However, it also refers to a father or an ancestral spirit. “Pitr matr” not only means parents but also implies ignorance (無明) as a father or desire/concupiscence (貪愛) as a mother. The word further alludes to the parents of all delusions and karma. Moreover, it refers to a kind of hungry demon. The Sanskrit word “preta” can be explained as a departed or disembodied spirit, a dead person, a ghost, a demon, or an evil being. See Soothill and Hodous 1975, 162.



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