

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 13, 2018

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A Case of Socialization

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On January 11th, 2018, Professor Jeehee Hong from the Department of Art History and East Asian Studies delivered the talk "Orthopraxy and 'Buddhist Art' in Chinese history: A Case of Socialization" in the senior common room of Birks Building at McGill University. This is the fifth session of the "Buddha and the Other" lecture series. Professors and students were amassing from various disciplines, ranging from McGill's School of Religious Studies (SRS), the Department of East Asian Studies (EAS), the Department of Art History, and the Department of Philosophy. The dynamic presence aligned with the goal of the lecture series to encourage interdisciplinary studies on Buddhism.

As one of the dominant cultural forces in Middle Period China (c. 100-1500 CE), Buddhism was a crucial source of inspiration for artists. In her talk, Prof. Hong examined the relationship between Buddhism and art, which allowed her to explore the religious life of the Chinese at that time. Focusing on the mourning scenes appeared in the tombs of monastics and lay Buddhists, Prof. Hong argued that the representation of mourning, which was clothed with Buddhist motif, "created an in-

between realm for the viewer to dwell in and grieve through them [the mourned and mourners; the viewed the viewers, and self and other].”¹ Understood as such, the mourning scenes served as the means for viewers to participate in the funeral rituals, and to express their emotions for the deceased. The way in which art works became an integral part of everyday rituals epitomized what Prof. Hong referred to as the “socialization” of tomb space. Further drawing on this concept of socialization, Prof. Hong detailed how the depiction of mourning in Buddhist visual arts often attested to the ritual propriety (orthopraxy) so that sadness manifested itself through the filter of cultural or ritual conventions.

In the tombs of lay devotees, there were many visual representations of the Buddha entering nirvana. Upon comparing and contrasting these nirvana scenes with those in other sites, such as the Mogao Grottoes, Prof. Hong addressed the question of why artists and lay people associated death with grief. This association does not seem to fit the Mahayana understanding of nirvana. As widely known, followers of the Mahayana tradition comprehended that the physical death of Buddha Śākyamuni was never tantamount to the end of dharma. This interpretation of Buddha’s nirvana was epitomized by numerous murals in the Mogao Grottoes. Now, if followers of the Mahayana tradition would not consider nirvana as a tragic event, why many weeping monks were carved on the stone relief of the tombs?

Prof. Hong proposed the following explanation: the association of death with sadness was inspired not by the Buddhist conception of nirvana but by the Confucian notion of filial piety. That being said, grieving for the deceased ones exemplified a way of inviting viewers to engage in

¹ Jeehee Hong, “Tears of Stone and Clay: The Affect of Mourning Images in Middle-Period China” (paper presented at the Second Conference on Middle Period Chinese Humanities, Leiden, Netherland, September 2017).

ancestor worship. Following this line of reasoning, one could understand the religious life of the Chinese, who were more accustomed to embracing a variety of ritual systems, Confucianism and Buddhism for instance, rather than treating one tradition as the antagonist of the other. As such, the morning scenes demonstrated the localization of a sacred realm in tomb space, further indicating another aspect of socialization.

Prof. Hong's talk highlighted the social interaction between "the mourned and mourners, the viewed and viewers, and self and other" in funeral art,² subsequently revealing the process of socialization of tomb space in the Middle Period of China. Interpreted as such, tomb art reflects how artwork meets orthopraxy, Buddhist nirvana meets the death of lay people, and Buddhism meets Confucianism. Professor Philip Buckley from the Department of Philosophy will deliver the next lecture in the ["Buddha and the Other"](#) lecture series on Buddhism in Indonesia.

Bibliography

Hong, Jeehee. "Tears of Stone and Clay: The Affect of Mourning Images in Middle-Period China". Paper Presented at the Second Conference on Middle Period Chinese Humanities, Leiden, Netherland, September 2017.

² Jeehee Hong, "Tears of Stone and Clay."