

BUDDHIST SCROLL PAINTINGS AND OUTDOOR CEREMONIES IN KOREA AND LADAKH

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 12 May 2025

Revised: 26 May 2025

Published: 3 June 2025

ABSTRACT

This research examines the comparative ritual functions of large-scale Buddhist scroll paintings in outdoor ceremonies between Korea (Gwaebulhwa) and Ladakh (Thangka). Although both have roots in Buddhist traditions, they have developed unique styles and meanings in their local settings. The study has two main goals: to identify and analyze the core functions of these large-size paintings in Buddhist outdoor ceremonies, examining how they serve as focal points for spiritual devotion and community gathering, and second to compare the thematic and iconographic elements present in these paintings, and how they reflect Buddhist ideas in different ways in Korea and Ladakh. The research is based on field visits, historical records, and interviews with monks, artists, and scholars. Case studies show both shared beliefs and differences in how these artworks are made and used. The findings suggest that these scrolls are more than just a religious art. They help connect the everyday world with the sacred during ceremonies. By looking at both Korean and Ladakhi traditions, this study offers a deeper understanding of Buddhist art and rituals and highlights the importance of preserving these cultural practices in today's changing world.

Keywords: Buddhist Large Scroll Paintings, Outdoor Ceremonies, Gwaebulhwa, Thangka, Korea, Ladakh

CITATION INFORMATION: Singh, V., & Barthel, A. (2025). Buddhist Scroll Paintings and Outdoor Ceremonies in Korea and Ladakh. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(6), 3.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism's spread across Asia led to the development of distinct regional practices and artistic expressions. Among these are large-scale scroll paintings used in outdoor ceremonies, notable in Korea and Ladakh. In Korea, Gwaebulhwa (hanging scroll paintings) are central to Mahayana Buddhist ceremonies such as Yeongsanjae. In Ladakh, Thangkas (often unfurled during festivals like Hemis Tsechu) serve similar functions within Vajrayana Buddhism. This paper aims to compare the use, symbolism, and sociocultural roles of these scrolls, highlighting both convergences and divergences.

While existing literature discusses these traditions independently, a comparative approach can uncover shared functions, theological underpinnings, and adaptive strategies to contemporary challenges. This study also explores how the use of sacred imagery in outdoor rituals fosters spiritual accessibility and sustains cultural identity among practitioners.

Research Objectives

- 1) To examine the historical origins and ritual functions of Gwaebulhwa and Thangka in outdoor ceremonies.
- 2) To analyze the iconographic themes and visual elements of these scroll paintings and their socio-economic aspects.
- 3) To explore their roles in community life, religious transmission, and cultural heritage preservation.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Scholarly studies on Buddhist ritual art across Asia highlight rich regional variations, yet comparative research between Korea and Ladakh remains limited. Korean Gwaebulhwa has been analyzed in terms of both iconography and ritual function. Park Hyung-gook (2010) explores its role in Yeongsanjae, while Lee Kyung-sook (2015) examines stylistic changes during the Joseon Dynasty in relation to socio-political shifts. Institutional research from the National Museum of Korea and the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (NRICH) further documents materials and formats of Gwaebulhwa.

For Ladakhi Thangkas, researchers such as David Jackson (2008) have studied stylistic influences, while Giuseppe Tucci and Robert Beer have contributed foundational iconographic analyses. Orofino (2010) interprets the use of Thangkas in festivals like Hemis Tsechu as visual theology integrated with public ritual performance.

Despite these valuable individual studies, direct comparisons between Korean and Ladakhi scroll traditions remain surprisingly rare in the literature. Rhie and Thurman (1991) offer some cross-regional context but do not address ritual use specifically. This study therefore contributes by bridging that gap, emphasizing the scrolls' active role in community-centered religious practice.

The present study therefore contributes to the literature by bridging this comparative gap, emphasizing the scrolls' active role in community-centered religious practice rather than treating them as passive art objects. By applying concepts from material religion studies (Morgan, 2010) and ritual theory (Bell, 1992), this research examines how these monumental paintings function as agents of religious experience and community formation across different cultural contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study combines qualitative data collection in Korea (temple visits, expert interviews, participant observation). Iconographic and comparative analysis were used to interpret findings. Primary fieldwork in Korea involved visits to the National Museum of Korea, Beopryunsa Temple, and Jogyesa Temple. Interviews were conducted with Buddhist

instructors and researchers to gather findings on ritual use and cultural meaning of Gwaebulhwa.

For Ladakh, due to logistical, financial, and seasonal constraints, the study relied primarily on secondary sources including academic publications, documentary footage of Hemis and Thiksey festivals, digital archives from cultural institutions, and published ethnographies. Virtual consultations with two Ladakhi scholars supplemented these materials but could not replace the depth of understanding that direct fieldwork would provide.

Methodological Limitations and Implications

This study draws on primary fieldwork in Korea and secondary sources for Ladakh, creating an uneven basis for comparison. Three key limitations follow:

- 1) Korean data includes direct observation and participant accounts; Ladakhi materials lack recent documentation and local voices.
 - 2) Key aspects of Ladakhi ritual and social context may be overlooked without fieldwork.
 - 3) The analysis may lean toward Korean interpretations due to deeper contextual familiarity.
- These challenges were addressed through source triangulation and critical self-awareness. Still, findings on Ladakh remain tentative and require further field-based research.

Future Research Directions

To strengthen future work:

- 1) Field studies in Ladakh during major festivals (e.g., Hemis, Thiksey) are essential.
- 2) Collaboration with Ladakhi scholars and practitioners should be prioritized.
- 3) Parallel methods should be applied across regions by teams with relevant expertise.

Despite current limits, the study establishes a foundation for future comparison. Its use of iconographic, ritual, and comparative frameworks helps manage the uneven source material.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Historical Context and Ritual Functions

Gwaebulhwa emerged during Korea's Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) when Buddhism was marginalized under Confucian dominance. These monumental scroll paintings (often exceeding 10 meters) function as visual surrogates for Buddha during outdoor ceremonies like Yeongsanjae and Suryukjae (NRICH, 2021). Painted with mineral pigments on silk or cotton, they typically depict Shakyamuni Buddha with Bodhisattvas and guardian figures, reflecting Mahayana emphasis on universal salvation (Lee, 2015; Park, 2010).

Ladakhi Thangkas, rooted in Tibetan Vajrayana traditions, are massive textile scrolls (often over 20 meters) created using appliqué and embroidery techniques. Displayed during festivals like Hemis Tsechu and Losar, they typically feature Guru Padmasambhava, wrathful deities, or mandalas. Their unveiling confers spiritual merit through "liberation upon seeing" (Snellgrove, 1987; Rhie & Thurman, 1991).

Korean Gwaebulhwa and Outdoor Rituals

Gwaebulhwa are large Buddhist scroll paintings, often over 10 meters tall, used in Korean outdoor rituals like *Yeongsanjae* and *Suryukjae*. Originating in the Joseon Dynasty, they depict Shakyamuni Buddha with bodhisattvas and guardians, serving as visual stand-ins for the Buddha during ceremonies with chanting and dance. Painted with mineral pigments on silk or cotton, these sacred scrolls are carefully handled by monks and preserved as national treasures by organizations like NRICH. They remain central to Korea's Buddhist heritage and ritual life.



Figure 1 Gwaebulhwa (Buddhist hanging scroll painting) exhibited at the National Museum of Korea, Seoul. (Photo by Vaishnavi Singh, September 2024)

The monumental Gwaebulhwa depicted in Figure 1 exemplifies the distinctive visual theology of Korean Buddhist traditions. This scroll, photographed during fieldwork at the National Museum of Korea, demonstrates several key features that distinguish Korean approaches to Buddhist iconography. The central Buddha figure is rendered with remarkable attention to proportional harmony and facial serenity, reflecting the Mahayana emphasis on the Buddha's human accessibility despite his transcendent nature. The surrounding bodhisattvas are arranged in a hierarchical composition that guides the viewer's eye upward, creating a visual metaphor for spiritual ascension that would be immediately comprehensible to lay participants during outdoor ceremonies.

Ladakhi Thangka and Outdoor Rituals

In Ladakh, large Thangkas, known as *Gos-sku* or *Thongdrol*, play a vital role in Vajrayana Buddhist festivals like Hemis Tsechu, Monlam Chenmo, and Losar (Orofino, 2010; Samuel, 2012). These scrolls, often over 20 meters tall, are crafted using appliqué, brocade, and embroidery, depicting figures such as Guru Padmasambhava, wrathful deities, or mandalas. Their unveiling is believed to grant spiritual merit through 'liberation by seeing' (Snellgrove, 1987; Rhie & Thurman, 1991). The Hemis Festival notably includes Cham dances, music, and teachings focused on a giant Padmasambhava Thangka (Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation, 2020). Preservation efforts are mainly led by monasteries and NGOs but face challenges from climate and artisanal decline. Nonetheless, Ladakhi communities deeply revere these Thangkas as living manifestations of enlightened beings revealed through ritual (Orofino, 2010; Tucci, 1949).

Iconography and Artistic Features

Korean *Gwaebulhwa* typically portray Shakyamuni Buddha surrounded by bodhisattvas like Avalokiteshvara and Ksitigarbha, along with celestial guardians and arhats. Their compositions emphasize balance and hierarchy, supporting clarity in worship, and are rendered with natural pigments and delicate brushwork. In contrast, Ladakhi *Thangkas* depict both wrathful and peaceful deities, complex mandalas, and lineage figures such as Guru Rinpoche, reflecting

Vajrayana cosmology where every color, gesture, and posture carries symbolic meaning. These are often made with appliqué techniques and embroidered borders, enhancing their sacredness. Both traditions rely on oral teachings or monastic guidance during ceremonies to help devotees interpret the intricate iconography.

Ritual Contexts and Community Functions

In Korea, *Gwaebulhwa* are central to rituals like *Yeongsanjae* (a UNESCO Intangible Heritage), involving chanting, dance, and offerings in temple courtyards, where the scroll represents the Buddha's presence. Another ritual, *Suryukjae*, uses the scroll to console restless spirits, blending compassion with community identity. In Ladakh, giant *Thangkas* are displayed at festivals such as Hemis, Losar, and Monlam, accompanied by Cham dances, prayers, and communal feasts. These ceremonies affirm cosmic order, lineage, and social harmony. Viewing the scrolls itself is considered a salvific act, believed to purify karma and generate merit according to Vajrayana belief.

Production and Conservation

Gwaebulhwa production follows rigorous artistic and ritual protocols. Artists receive monastic training, and iconometric precision is paramount. Pigments are derived from minerals like azurite and cinnabar, applied to cotton or silk. The process is considered a meditative offering. Korea's National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (NRICH) plays a leading role in conservation, with specialized storage, documentation, and restoration protocols. Several Gwaebulhwa are designated National Treasures.

Ladakhi Thangkas are often produced within monastic workshops. They may take months to years to complete, especially appliqué types. Materials include dyed silk, brocade, and cotton. Conservation is more decentralized, with monasteries and NGOs working together under difficult climatic and financial conditions. Limited access to traditional pigments and trained conservators poses risks to preservation.

Comparative Analysis

To better understand the unique and shared characteristics of Korea's Gwaebulhwa and Ladakh's Thangka traditions, a comparative table was created to synthesize their key elements. Table 1 below is now expanded upon in narrative form, contextualized with references from the literature review and supported by findings from this research.

Table 1 Comparative Features of Buddhist Scroll Paintings in Korea and Ladakh

Aspect	Gwaebulhwa (Korea)	Thangka (Ladakh)
Tradition	Mahayana Buddhism	Vajrayana Buddhism
Display Context	Yeongsanjae, Suryukjae, memorial ceremonies	Hemis Festival, Losar, Monlam, public empowerments
Iconography	Shakyamuni Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Four Heavenly Kings	Guru Padmasambhava, Yidams, wrathful deities, mandalas
Materials	Silk or cotton with mineral pigments	Textile appliqué, brocade, embroidered silk
Function	Reenactment of sutras, merit-making, public teachings	Liberation upon sight, cosmic renewal, blessing transmission
Preservation	Institutionalized via NRICH and UNESCO recognition	Community-led, supported by NGOs like Himalayan Cultural Heritage Foundation
Community Role	Temple-centered events with strong lay-monastic cooperation	Monastic-led events integrating lay pilgrims and tourists

The table provides a structured visual comparison of core aspects of the scroll painting traditions from Korea and Ladakh. The doctrinal foundation represents a major differentiating

factor Gwaebulhwa arises within the Mahayana tradition, emphasizing universal salvation and community-focused rituals. In contrast, Ladakh's Thangka traditions are firmly embedded in Vajrayana practices, emphasizing esoteric visualizations, deity yoga, and symbolic empowerment. These theological differences manifest in production methods, iconography, and ritual usage.

Despite these differences, both traditions share fundamental features: they create sacred space through visual means, they serve as tools for religious pedagogy and community cohesion, and they face similar challenges in modern preservation. Both traditions demonstrate remarkable resilience in adapting ancient practices to contemporary contexts while maintaining their essential spiritual functions.

Informed reflections

Expert interviews revealed significant insights about Gwaebulhwa in Korean Buddhist ceremonies. Youngjin Shin (Yeondeunghoe Preservation Committee) emphasized these paintings as pedagogical tools, visually bridging monastic specialists and lay congregants during rituals. Byungjik You highlighted the communal nature of handling these massive scrolls, noting strict protocols believed to maintain their spiritual efficacy.

A tourism studies researcher discussed preservation challenges, including the shift toward synthetic pigments for durability while efforts continue to revive traditional pigment techniques. Korean experts acknowledged functional parallels with Himalayan practices despite material differences (painted scrolls versus textile appliqué).

Virtual consultations with Ladakhi scholars confirmed Thangkas' central role in festivals like Hemis Tsechu, with community-led preservation efforts addressing environmental challenges. A common concern across both traditions was engaging younger generations, with experts recommending educational outreach and digital documentation to ensure these sacred traditions' continuity.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study of Gwaebulhwa and Thangka traditions reveals how Buddhist communities across Asia have employed monumental sacred art as tools of religious practice, cultural preservation, and communal identity. These scroll paintings represent dynamic adaptations of Buddhist visual culture to specific regional contexts, embodying both universal doctrinal principles and local cultural expressions.

The findings suggest that despite significant differences in theological emphasis, production methods, and ritual context, both traditions fulfill analogous social and religious functions. They create temporary sacred spaces, they make abstract teachings accessible through visual means, and they strengthen communal bonds through shared ritual experiences. These commonalities point to an underlying pattern in Buddhist material culture across geographical and sectarian boundaries.

Contemporary challenges to these traditions include modernization, secularization, and the loss of traditional knowledge. Yet both Korean and Ladakhi communities demonstrate remarkable resilience in adapting ancient practices to changing circumstances. Conservation efforts, whether institutionally supported (as in Korea) or community-led (as in Ladakh), reflect growing recognition of these scrolls as vital cultural heritage requiring protection.

Future research could explore how these traditions are adapting to digital documentation and virtual access, and how younger generations are engaging with these heritage practices. The comparative approach employed in this study offers a model for understanding Buddhist material culture as both locally embedded and transregionally connected, opening new avenues for cross-cultural religious studies.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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