



August OOM Choice made by Wendi Chen

Attendant to the King of Hell (Korea); 19th Century; by an unknown artist

On view in G 206

Medium: Sculpture | Painted wood

Size: 29 3/8 x 12 5/8 x 8 7/8 in. (74.61 x 32.07 x 22.54 cm)

Creation Place: Asia, Korea

Culture: Asia, Korea

Style: 19th century, Chosun dynasty

Current gallery label:

Subsidiary halls within Buddhist monastic complexes often featured statues or paintings depicting the fierce Kings of Hell. Here, prayers were offered in an attempt to mitigate the punishments meted out on the souls of the deceased. In addition to painted and sculptural images of the Kings of Hell, artists also depicted attendant figures. This wooden sculpture represents one such figure, holding a long scroll on which the names and judgments would be recorded. The charming, simplified carving style and compact form of the figure are characteristic of Korean folk sculpture. In an interesting mixture of religious beliefs, the figure is dressed in the robes and lacquered hat of a Confucian scholar-official.

Questions and key points:

- Before we take a look at the object, let me ask you one question: If someone asks you what an attendant to the King of Hell would look like, how would you respond or

describe the attendant? (The responses would probably contradict what they are going to see.)

- Now let's look at the sculpture of an attendant to the King of Hell from the 19th century Korea. What do you think of this? How would you describe this figure? Does he look more like a scholar/official from this world or someone who works for the King of Hell in the underworld?
- Why would an attendant to the King of Hell wear a Confucian scholar-official robe? Explain the influence of Confucianism in Korea since the 4th century. Confucianism has exerted a very strong influence in Korean culture for over 1600 years. During the Chosen Dynasty (1392-1910), it became the official religion, replacing Buddhism as the state religion in Korea. Even today, Confucianism still plays a major role in Korean society, and family values, education, and filial piety are still deeply rooted in their collective consciousness. To learn more about this topic, please read the attached article "Confucianism in Korea."
- What does an attendant to the King of Hell have anything to do with Buddhism? Discuss the influence of the indigenous religious beliefs and practices on the non-native religion of Buddhism. Buddhism was originally introduced to Korea from China in the latter half of the 4th century, about 372 A.D. As it was not seen to conflict with the worship of various natural elements, Korean Buddhism accepted and absorbed Korean Shamanism, blending foreign and native religions and their ritualistic practices. For instance, iconographic figures belonging to native religions and folk beliefs were incorporated into Korean Buddhism. *Sanshin* (the Mountain Spirit), *Toksong* (the Recluse) and *Chilsong* (the Spirit of the Seven Stars, the Big Dipper)--these three spirits in Korean Shamanism can be found in Buddhist temples in Korea, with special shrines built just for them. This attendant to the King of Hell is another example of Korean Buddhism absorbing the folk religion.
- What does this figure tell us about the Korean's belief in the afterlife? Koreans share many beliefs with Chinese, including ghosts and underworld. Hell in Chinese is *diyu* (literally underground prison); in Korean, 지옥 Jiok, literally: "hell" or "underworld" The idea of hell is "loosely based on a combination of the Buddhist concept of Naraka, traditional Chinese beliefs about the afterlife and a variety of popular expansions and re-interpretations of these two traditions. Diyu is typically depicted as an underground maze with various levels and chambers, to which souls are taken after death to atone for the sins they committed when they were alive. The exact number of levels in Diyu and their associated deities differ between Buddhist and Taoist interpretations. Some speak of three to four 'courts'; others mention 'Ten Courts of Hell', each of which is ruled by a judge (collectively known as the Ten Yama Kings); other Chinese legends speak of eighteen levels of Hell. Each court deals with a different aspect of atonement and different punishments; most legends claim that sinners are subjected to gruesome tortures until their 'deaths', after which they are restored to their original state and the torture repeated" ("diyu" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Di_Yu). After the judgment was made, the good souls would ascend the Heaven, and the bad ones remain in the Hell.
- What is the function of this attendant? He is probably one of the judges in the underworld, who, dressed like an official, exercises his official duty to pronounce the judgment on the deceased. Buddhist believers who have just lost their beloved ones would go to Buddhist temples and bow to this attendant asking him for a favorable

treatment of the deceased. The living would probably also pray to the judge asking him to grant the deceased a better life in reincarnation.

- This figure demonstrates not only the harmonious coexistence but also the incorporation and union of different belief systems. We see (Indian) Buddhist, (Chinese) Confucian, and Korean folk beliefs manifested in this single figure. To me, that's the art of spiritual harmony, and that makes this object most intriguing and fascinating.

For your interest, please check out this popular Korean *manhwa* (*manga in Japanese*) called [King of Hell](#).

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Cover of the first volume of [King of Hell](#), released in the United States by [Tokyopop](#) on June 10, 2003

"[King of Hell](#)" is a Korean [Manhwa](#) that is written by Ra In-Soo and illustrated by Kim Jae-Hwan. The story follows the main character, going by the name of Majeh, who is an envoy to the next world for the King of Hell. When evil spirits started escaping into the living world, the King of Hell had Majeh's spirit returned to his body and ordered Majeh to hunt down and capture these escape demons. As the series progresses, Majeh gets acquainted with new and old characters in which some of them joins Majeh on his quest into capturing these escape demons.