

A Transnational Analysis of an Ancient Buddhist Site: Japanese art critic Yanagi Sōetsu's reading of *Sekibutsuji* (1919)

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Research Project Outline

In 1919, the Japanese art critic Yanagi Muneyoshi (also known as Yanagi Sōetsu) became the first person in the modern era to critically appraise Korea's famous Buddhist cave temple site Sōkkuram as a work of art, in his substantive landmark essay "*Sekibutsuji no chōkoku ni tsuite*" (The Sculptures of Sōkpulsa [Sōkkuram] Temple). Sōkkuram is an eighth-century sacred Buddhist site, heritage listed by UNESCO since 1994. It is located on the outskirts of Kyōngju, the ancient capital of Korea's Silla Kingdom during the Unified Silla period (668 to 935).

Yanagi's essay was published in Tokyo in the June 1, 1919 issue of the art journal *Geijutsu*. Despite the positive reception of the essay among his peers and the influence it wielded among later art historians and researchers, to date, it has received very little scholarly attention. One exception is the article "Oriental Sublime: Sōkkuram in the Imperial Japanese Landscape" (2014) by the Korean scholar Hwang Jongyon. This article, however, focuses on Yanagi's work in terms of Japan's colonisation of Korea, rather than on a scholarly study of the essay's construction and its impressive transcultural interpretation.

Based on my English translation of the work, this project constitutes the first comprehensive investigation into Yanagi's construction of the essay, and how it was received among his contemporaries and later art historians. It will make significant contributions to new knowledge in the field of *mingei* studies, and more broadly, to Japanese art history. Importantly, Yanagi's appraisal of Sekibutsuji is particularly significant because it predates his establishment of the Mingei Movement in the 1920s with the potters Hamada Shōji (1894–1978), Kawai Kanjirō (1890–1966), Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886–1963) and Bernard Leach (1887–1979), for which he is best known. In his role as the guiding theoretician of the movement, he built on these early visual interpretations of Korean culture to complete a vast canon of writings.

Yanagi's text is ground-breaking in that it was the first of its kind to appraise the Buddhist cave temple as a work of art, drawing from his extensive knowledge of art historical methods, Buddhist theology, and Christian mysticism. Broadly speaking, this research project investigates the art historical methodologies employed by Yanagi to construct his essay, the circumstances that led him to write it, and the ways it impacted on his future career as the leader of the Japan Folk Craft Movement.

Methodologically, the research project adopts an interdisciplinary framework encompassing Japanese studies, art historical models, and studies of Japan-Korea relations in Korea's colonial era (1910–1945). In order to establish a solid critical foundation on which to base the research, the core approach of the project is a combination of close textual scrutiny of "*Sekibutsuji no chōkoku ni tsuite*" and supporting historical and contemporary

documentation. The research is also supported by visual analyses of the cave temple's statuary.

Research Process and Findings

Most of my research was conducted at the National Diet Library, where I found a vast array of resources supporting my project, including an invaluable book published in 2022 commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Yanagi's book *Chōsen to sono geijutsu* (Korea and Its Arts), a compendium of ten of Yanagi's essays on Korea which includes Yanagi's Sōkkuram essay. I also found contemporaneous accounts of Korean art by the scholar Sekino Tadashi, who extensively researched art and architecture in Korea, journal articles (e.g. The Chōsen and Manshū), and historical newspaper articles (e.g. Tōkyō Nichinichi Shinbun, present day Mainichi Shinbun) detailing aspects of Sōkkuram.

Additional materials were obtained at the Japan Folk Arts Museum and the Research and Information Centre at the Tokyo National Museum. Additionally, thanks to the support of NF-JLEP, I was also able to access a very important document of Yanagi's related to the Sōkkuram essay in the collection of Tōyō University's library. Entitled *Chōsen no bijutsu* (Korean Art), this handmade *wasōbon* work by Yanagi published in 1922 (three years after the Sōkkuram essay) contains information on one of the statues (Manjushri) at Sōkkuram, including a photograph and the statue's iconographical elements. There are only three copies of this valuable work in libraries across Japan.

Completed in 775, Sōkkuram is thought to have been commissioned by the prime minister Kim Taesōng (700–774), under the reign of King Kyōngdōk (742–765). There are very few historical documents charting the grotto's history, and those that do exist were written centuries after its completion. Sōkkuram differs from other Buddhist grottoes in Asia in that it is not carved into a mountainside (in the style of the Ajanta Caves in India and the Longmen and Yungang Grottoes in China, for example), but constructed from granite slabs hewn from the mountain and arranged according to a meticulous mathematical scheme. It is also the only cave temple in the world that employs a symmetrical layout with sculpted granite figures systematically arranged according to the hierarchy of the Buddhist pantheon.

Yanagi analysed each statue with meticulous care, and theorised that the cave temple was the starting point for a national Korean preference for artworks preferencing linear characteristics. His observations were influential for the remainder of the colonial period (1910–1945), and beyond, precipitating a lot of other Sōkkuram studies. By comparing Yanagi's essay with contemporary accounts, I was able to crossmatch each of the 38 statues at Sōkkuram with Yanagi's own detailed accounts. His visit to Sōkkuram inspired him to embark on an intensive investigation into Buddhism. After returning to Japan, he published his first collection of essays, *Shūkyō to sono shinri* 宗教とその心理 (Religion and Its Truth), in February 1919, two months prior to his appointment as Professor of Religion at Tōyō University (Tokyo), and four months prior to the publication of his Sōkkuram essay.

Presentation of Research Results

The research findings will be disseminated through attendance at conferences, participation in research seminars, and a peer-reviewed journal article.

After completing this research, my goal is to continue publishing in the field of *mingei* studies. The research conducted on this project will thus also have a cumulative benefit to planned future projects.

Use of Yanagi Sōetsu's Sōkkuram Text in Teaching and Cultural Education

In terms of language teaching practice, Yanagi's text constitutes a rich example of early twentieth century writing which can be excerpted for use by advanced (level 3) language learners. It includes a variety of prewar kanji (kyūjitai), structures and key grammatical features that align with advanced textbook content. The text may also be useful in advanced translation classes.

In level 1 classes, the text can serve in cultural discussions as an important example of a Japanese national who attempted to form friendly relations with Koreans in the colonial period through the intercultural relevance of art.

Further, the text's analysis of the Buddhist cave temple statuary exhibits strong connections with important visual cultures in Nara and Kyoto that inform our understanding of ancient historical sites and the ways that they forge links to the present. These connections can be explored in Japanese cultural courses.

I am very grateful to the NF-JLEP Association for this generous grant and for the invaluable opportunity to further my research in this field. I believe the materials I collected on this research trip will be of great assistance in my research for years to come.

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Figure 1 : Nihon-Mingeikan, Komaba, Tokyo