

Korea's Sipjangsaeng Iconography: The Quest for Longevity and Immortality in the Visual Arts of the Joseon Dynasty

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Abstract

This article introduces Korea's *sipjangsaeng* iconography in the visual arts, including its proliferation in Joseon's elite and folk contexts, its codification in the painted screens of the court, and its application in works of art held at various international museums. It considers how Chinese motifs came to be used so widely in Korea; which individuals or groups commissioned and produced the *sipjangsaeng* design; and why, despite its resolutely Neo-Confucian worldview, the Joseon dynasty played host to the proliferation of a genre emanating largely from a Daoist tradition. To address these questions, it investigates the transnational, ideological, and social contexts that gave rise to Korea's distinctive *sipjangsaeng* imprint on the longevity theme and highlights the intrinsic importance of symbolism to Korea's cultural heritage, and its contribution to the articulation of artistic identity and difference in East Asian visual culture.

Introduction

In the collection of Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, there is a magnificent example of Korea's ten longevity symbols (十長生 *sipjangsaeng*) iconography, artfully depicted in an eighteenth century painted screen (Fig. 1). Its grand scale, detailed brushwork, and *chaesaek* ("brilliant colours") style are characteristic features of works commissioned for use in the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) court. The work presents a dramatic departure

from the classical restraint of contemporaneous monochromatic ink paintings (*sumukhwa*), in which artists used variegated washes and spatial voids to relay the complexity of nature's forms and textures. The screen is intended to be read from right to left, in accordance with East Asian pictorial conventions. In the opening panels, the dominant motif is a solitary pine tree (*sonamu*), long regarded in East Asia as a symbol of longevity for its ability to withstand the harsh winter. It rises from verdant mountainous terrain (*san*), also associated with endurance and constancy. Scattered across the ground are the mythical red and pink fungi (*yeongji*) believed to contain the elixir of immortality, and nearby are various groupings of twelve deer (*saseum*), the only animal reputed to be able to locate them. The life-giving and replenishing properties of water (*mul*) are dynamically represented as a river, waterfalls, and the sea; boisterous waves carry the four turtles (*geobuk*) whose long lifespans connote an obvious association with the scene. Venerated for its flexibility and durability, a clump of bamboo (*daenamu*) sits on the rocky outcrop above the sea. In the upper part of the composition, wispy clouds (*gureum*) reiterating the water theme are interspersed with sixteen flying and stationary cranes (*hak*). As one of the most celebrated birds in East Asian mythology and folklore, the crane is endowed with many lofty attributes, including wisdom, promotion, and filial piety, but it is also widely associated with longevity. Finally, the glowing red sun (*hae*) warrants inclusion in the *sipjangsaeng* iconography for its constant provision of warmth and regenerative power (Lachman, 2006, pp. 25-45). Overall, the composition is harmonious and whimsical, imparting a sense

of cosmic balance in a paradisiacal realm.

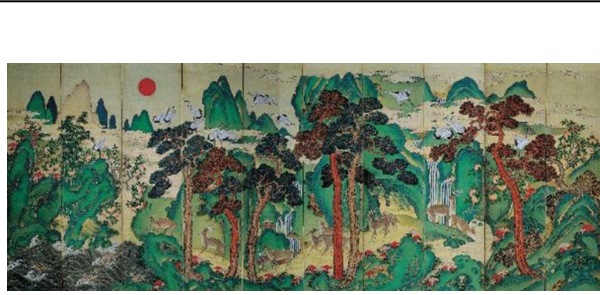


Figure 1. Painting on silk (210cm x 552.3cm), late 18th century. Image courtesy of Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art.

Longevity and the closely related theme of immortality are recurring themes in the visual cultures of East Asia. In many artistic traditions in China, Korea, and Japan, patterns and motifs have historically been employed not only for decorative purposes, but also as symbolic means of advancing ideological, philosophical, and social meaning. The Korean *sipjangaeng* scheme featuring the ten longevity symbols was popularised in the late Joseon dynasty, and continues to be widely used by contemporary Korean artists such as Hyun Mi Woo (b.1963) and Sunny Kim (b.1969). Extant Joseon objects featuring the iconography range from paintings, ceramics and textiles to lacquerware, metalwares and domestic items. The motifs comprising the scheme fall into one of four groups: celestial (sun, clouds), terrestrial (mountains/rocks, water), botanic (pine, bamboo, fungus), and animal (deer, crane, turtle). Throughout East Asia, each of these motifs is independently connected to notions of longevity and/or immortality, often appearing as decorative modes clustered in groups of two, three, or five (Fig. 2). The *sipjangaeng* grouping of ten motifs, however, is unique to Korea, and reflects a long history of ornamental and symbolic expression, which developed through the amalgamation of assimilated Chinese iconographic conventions and indigenous ideas that gradually evolved

into a new artistic genre with a distinctively Korean sensibility. Although the genre is thought to be ideologically rooted in the Daoist cult of immortality, it also draws from elements of Korean folk beliefs, Shamanism and animism (Yoon, 2003, pp. 13-17). The auspicious symbolism was understood and utilised across all Joseon social classes as a visual expression of the universal human desire to live a long and healthy life, and more broadly, as a means of inviting good fortune and protecting against evil spirits (Moes, 1983, pp. 21-22).



Figure 2. Ming vase with longevity design (crane, deer, peach, bamboo, fungus) painted in underglaze cobalt, Jiajing period (1522-1566). Image courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A number of scholarly studies published in English have investigated specific aspects of the use of Korea's *sipjangaeng* iconography in the visual arts, including its proliferation in

Joseon's elite and folk contexts (Han, 2013; Kim, 2011), its codification in the painted screens of the court (Jungmann, 2007; Kim, 1993), and its application in works of art held at various international museums (Park, 2002; Lachman, 2006). None, however, have presented a wider contextual interpretation of the range of questions that arise when examining the many extant objects featuring the *sipjangaeng* scheme. How, for instance, did Chinese motifs come to be used so widely in Korea, and why was meaning ascribed to this particular group of ten motifs? Which individuals or groups commissioned and produced the *sipjangaeng* design? And why, despite its resolutely Neo-Confucian worldview, did the Joseon dynasty play host to the proliferation of a genre emanating largely from a Daoist tradition? In order to address each of these questions, this article investigates the transnational, ideological, and social contexts that gave rise to Korea's distinctive *sipjangaeng* imprint on the longevity theme. In addition to promoting understanding of the factors that influenced the transformation of Chinese designs into a distinct Korean iconographical genre, this article highlights the intrinsic importance of symbolism to Korea's cultural heritage and its role in contributing to artistic identity and difference in East Asia.

Chinese Influences on Korean Iconographical Schemes Prior to Joseon

The geographical proximity of Korea and mainland China has long spurred mutual interest in the social, political, and cultural codes of the Other. As noted above, the Chinese precedent of investing auspicious meaning in patterns and symbols appealed to Koreans, who augmented their own ornamental repertoires with designs from the continent (Welch, 2008, p. 12). From the fourth century, the Korean assimilation of Chinese ideographs, which became the *lingua franca* among East Asian elites, further helped facilitate and enhance contact, trade, and diplomatic

relations (Sun, 2011, p. 14). Early ornamental patterns used in Korea, such as the lozenge, key fret, and trefoil, can be traced to art forms dating back as far as China's Shang dynasty (ca.1600–1100 BCE) (Stuart, 1993, p. 35). Many of the iconographical schemes from this period originated in ancient cosmological and mythical beliefs heavily influenced by animism, which asserted that all elements of the natural world were inhabited by the spirits of ancestors watching over their living descendants. Birds were revered as symbols of the free soul, and supernatural creatures such as the dragon and *taotie* were commonly depicted on bronzes (Ebrey, 2014, pp. 14–15). Over time, other creatures were chosen for auspicious iconographical schemes as visual metaphors or through linguistic connections. For example, the motif of the bat (蝠) is ubiquitously used in Chinese art as a rebus signifying "good fortune, happiness" (福), due to the shared pronunciation *fu*. The familiar grouping of five bats (五蝠 *wufu*) is representative of the Five Blessings (五福 *wufu*), which articulate the desire for affluence, health, longevity, virtue, and a natural death (Welch, 2008, pp. 112–113; Fang, 2004, p.80).

Two important transitional periods mark the early history of ornamentation in China, which in turn influenced the development of Korean designs. The first occurred in the tumultuous period between the collapse of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and the advent of the Sui dynasty (581–618), when Buddhism was firmly established. The growth and dissemination of Buddhism led to the diversification of themes and subjects for ritual and symbolic decoration. For example, in sculpture and painting, Buddhism initiated the practice of depicting gods in human form, while the construction of Buddhist temples introduced floral and foliage motifs into the Chinese iconographic repertoire. Particularly emblematic of the new religion was the lotus motif, which was used to signify compassion, purification, and transcendence (Kim, 2000, p. 251; Ebrey, 2014,

p. 71; Rawson, 1984, p. 14). As Buddhism travelled eastward and carried over into the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–668 CE), Koreans adopted sinified iconography and styles, but over time, became more selective in their interpretations of the continental prototypes (Lee, 2002, n.p.).

The second transitional period in ornamentation coincided with the Tang dynasty (618–907), when contact with the West, opened up through trade routes with Central Asia, diversified knowledge of foreign artistic conventions (Rawson, 1984, p. 77; Barrow in Williams, 2006, pp. 21–22). The political unification of the Korean peninsula in the seventh century, enabled by the victorious alliance between the Tang army and the Silla Kingdom, solidified Korea's tributary status as a vassal state of China. Periodic gift exchanges facilitated the transmission of iconographic style, as Korean envoys to the Tang court returned with highly ornamented objects and designs that artists self-consciously strove to imitate and adapt. The visual arts of this period are imbued with a cosmopolitanism that reflects the convergence of disparate traditions acquired through diplomacy, conquest, and pilgrimage. For example, a number of objects held at Tōdaiji Temple's Shōsōin in Nara, Japan, indicate that Chinese versions of the grape motif (in turn derived from Hellenistic decorative modes) were introduced to Korea during this period (Sun, 2011, pp. 13–14).

The importation of Chinese designs continued into the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), as the artistic achievements of the Song dynasty (960–1279) reached an efflorescence widely considered as a pinnacle of Chinese culture. The educated elite scholar-official class were adept at a wide range of skills in the arts, and many became enthusiastic painters of natural themes containing metaphorical meanings (Ebrey, 2014, p. 136). The abundant depictions of birds, fish, flowers, and mountains in Song paintings also delighted the emerging class of

elite Goryeo officials (*sinjin sadaebu*), who commissioned artists to incorporate continental symbols of lofty idealism and literary allusion in their own paintings. For example, the Song literati's great admiration for artistic works depicting the grouping of the plum blossom, bamboo, orchid, and chrysanthemum that formed the so-called Four Gentlemen (四君子 Ch. *sijunzi*; Kr. *sagunja*) also gained popularity in Korea as an aspirational subject for Confucian scholars to display in their surroundings. In addition to its representation of the four seasons, the iconographical scheme also alludes to the metaphorical virtues to which the Confucian man of letters should aspire, namely endurance, filial piety, elegance, and propriety (Welch, 2008, p. 21; Itoh, 1998, pp. 299–300). Similarly, the Three Friends of Winter (歲寒三友 Ch. *suihan sanyou*; Kr. *sehan samwu*) motif featuring the plum blossom, pine, and bamboo was highly regarded by Confucians as representative of the scholarly ideals of perseverance and integrity. It was popularised among the Song literati through the works of artist Zhao Mengjian (1199–before 1267), an accomplished scholar and calligrapher who was a member of the Song imperial family. In some contexts, the motif also represented Chinese Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Hutt, 1987, p. 97). The motif's popularity in China prompted widespread imitation in Goryeo art forms as well (Welch, 2008, p. 37; Mino, 1991, pp. 32–33).

An important difference between the use of these conventional Chinese motifs in Korea and the *sipjangsaeng* theme, however, is that the latter is not a wholesale imitation of a continental mode, but a transformation of borrowed elements into a new, Korean, decorative idiom tailored to native requirements and preferences. The use of independent longevity motifs in Korea has been traced to murals from the Three Kingdoms Period, as well as to ornamental objects in Baekja (18 BCE–660 CE) culture, but it seems likely that the development of the iconography

as a complete scheme comprising all ten motifs was not employed until much later (Yoon, 2007, pp. 12, 27). The first mention of *sipjangsaeng* in extant literary records is recorded by scholar Yi Saek (1328-1396; a.k.a. Mokeun Sigo), in the poem “Sehwa Sipjangsaeng” (New Year’s Painting of Ten Longevity Symbols), which was penned during his recovery from a serious illness:

It is now October but the new
year’s painting

of the Ten Longevity Symbols in
my room still looks fresh.

When one is ill, his only wish is
for a long life.

I wrote a short comment on each
symbol. (quoted in Kim, 2006, p.
29)

This record confirms firstly that the ten longevity symbols iconography was in use at least by the late Goryeo dynasty, and secondly, that new year offerings from monarch to meritorious subjects were conveyed through the presentation of auspicious paintings inviting prosperity and good fortune, as well as warding off evil and misfortune (Kim, 2011, pp. 347-348; 2003, p. 64). This custom may have been adopted from China, where it was common to gift auspicious works, such as special new year woodblock prints produced in Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, and Tianjin (Hutt, 1987, pp. 64, 66).

Joseon’s Adoption of Neo-Confucianism and Subsequent Changes in Visual Culture

The transition from Goryeo to Joseon precipitated sweeping changes in the social, political, and cultural fabric of Korea as Yi Seonggye (1335-1408) ascended the throne as King Taejo (r.1392-1398), the first of Joseon’s twenty-seven rulers. The dynastic change was largely enabled by political developments

unfolding in China. In 1368, the Ming had risen to power in the wake of the Mongol retreat, claiming legitimacy as the restorers of ethnic rule - and by extension, all Confucian civilisation - wrested from barbarian domination. In 1392, in an attempt to distance his fledgling state from the corruption of the Mongol-tainted Goryeo regime, Yi established vassalage to the Ming state, which he viewed as the perfect model upon which to structure Joseon society. To reflect Korea’s renewed devotion as a member of Confucian civilisation, the Joseon architects installed a monarchy with a governing bureaucracy of civil and military officials (the elite *yangban* class), and drafted sumptuary laws based on the wisdom of Confucianism’s Four Books (Chung, 1985, pp. 63-80). Confucianism had entered Korea as early as the fourth century, but Neo-Confucianism - the groundswell of new thought that emerged from the Confucian revival in Song China - only achieved a dedicated following under the auspices of the Joseon court, more than a century after its introduction in 1286 (De Bary, 1985, pp. 4-5; Kang, 2006, pp. 140, 158). It is not a religion, but an ethical doctrine that emerged from a mixture of traditional Confucian teachings and ideas from other orthodoxies, including China’s other two major belief systems, Buddhism and Daoism. There are various strains of Neo-Confucianism, but in Korea, the ideology’s development was guided mainly by the writings of the eminent Chinese scholar and statesman Zhu Xi (1130-1200), who emphasised the idea that prolonged peace and prosperity were only achievable if strict moral codes were maintained at each level of society (Kang, 2006, pp. 14, 120-121). This included tributary missions dispatched to China several times a year, with contingents of two to three hundred people who stayed in the capital for forty days. Korea offered gifts of paper, ginseng, and cotton, and in return, received books, medicines, and art objects (Kim, 2006, p. 38-39).

Under the Joseon state, the parameters guiding the production of visual culture significantly changed. Throughout the Goryeo dynasty, the Buddhist clergy had committed sizeable resources to worship, commissioning artists to produce elaborate relics as expressions of spiritual devotion. The Joseon state, by contrast, viewed the primary function of objects as vehicles to communicate correct modes of behaviour and reminders for righteous conduct (Cho, 2014, p. 8). Accordingly, various style mandates were drafted stipulating that visual cultures should encourage the ideals of integrity, probity, and moral pragmatism (Deuchler, 2006, pp. 6, 8; Best, 2000, p. 36; Kang, 1993, p. 82). In the public arena, ceremonial ritual accrued a heightened significance, and royal patronage of the arts became crucial to conveying a sense of dynastic legitimacy, political authority, and monarchic dignity (Kim, 1993, pp. 35-36, 42). To this end, early Joseon rulers enthusiastically acculturated the vastly simplified aesthetic principles of the Ming. Undecorated white porcelains (*baekja*) based on Ming prototypes, for example, were considered eminently suited emblems of the new aesthetic code (Roberts and Brand, 2000, p. 11; Lee, 2009, pp. 40, 62). A portion of early *baekja* works were decorated with motifs executed in iron, cobalt, and copper pigments, using pictorial conventions inspired by inherited traditions and the painting manuals that arrived in Korea with Chinese envoys (Kim, 2006, pp. 39-42). Generally, Joseon visual arts are elegant and modest, reflecting the early rulers' desire to build the consummate Neo-Confucian state based on strict adherence to Zhu's instruction. This particular iteration of Confucianism was the most rigid, and Koreans were subsequently regarded in the Confucian sphere as more pious than their counterparts in China or Japan (Duncan, 2002, p. 65; Kim, 2014, p. 14; Wells, 2000, p. 16).

In order to faithfully adhere to the new ascetic values and ritual requirements, a number of

Joseon rulers launched campaigns to suppress other religions or belief systems. Despite the historically peaceful coexistence between Buddhism and Confucianism in Korea, for example, in the early days of the dynasty, Buddhism became the object of censure from the state (Yi, 1985, pp. 140-157; Haboush, 2009, p. 3). During the reign of King Taejong (r.1400-1418), for instance, the occupants of Buddhist temples and monasteries were expelled and forced to practise their faith in remote locations under restricted conditions (Deuchler, 1992, p. 198). The push to purge Buddhism was furthered by King Yejong (r.1468-1469), who drastically culled the monastic population by abolishing the monk registration system, and Yeonsangun (r.1494-1506), who, in addition to withdrawing state recognition of the faith, also intensified campaigns targeting the destruction of temples and devotional objects (Haboush, 2009, p. 4). Daoism also came under fire as fourteen of the fifteen sacred sites constructed for Daoist offerings during the Goryeo period, when the religion flourished, were abolished. Prior to his accession, King Taejo had performed Daoist rites to the planet Venus, but following advice from the Ministry of Rites in his inaugural year, he dissolved all Daoist sites except Sogyeokjeon, the Sanctuary of Brilliant Investigation. The site was renamed and demoted under King Saejo (r.1455-1466), even as ceremonies to exorcise evil spirits and harness good fortune continued. During King Jungjong's reign (1506-1544), Sogyeokjeon was closed by a Confucian reformist faction, and then reopened by a competing faction. It was finally abolished after the Japanese attacks on Korea initiated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1592-1598), precipitating the decline of Korean Daoism in the official sphere (Jung, 2000, p. 797-801). The general pattern of oppressing Buddhism and Daoism in the public realm cleared the way for Neo-Confucian elites, who exerted their authority in all matters of moral and intellectual endeavour.

However, historical records also indicate that in both the public and private sectors, members of Joseon society were still receptive to cultural systems not officially sanctioned by the state. For example, more than a few Joseon monarchs turned to Buddhism for reassurance on matters pertaining to the afterlife, and under some monarchs, the court even requested that temples conduct Buddhist rituals for the royal family (Woo, 2014, p. 231), or commission large-scale Buddhist ceremonial banners (*gwaebul*) for display at liturgical ceremonies (Kim, 2014, p. 21; Kim, 2006, p. 27). In the early years of the dynasty, Buddhist practices were also quietly propelled by *yangban* women and members of the non-elite classes, who were not permitted to participate in Neo-Confucian rituals until the seventeenth century (Wells, 2000, p. 19). Shamanism and Daoism also continued, through the performance of ritual prayers for the dead, healing, and wish-granting (Haboush, 1993, p. 32). The Daoist followers, displaced after the abolition of Sogyeokjeon, formed private groups to maintain Daoist learning and conduct experiments in inner alchemy. As with Buddhism, some ceremonies remained in the official realm, such as the Worship of the Deified Heaven, which was jointly run by the Office of Daoist Rituals and the Office of Constellation Rituals (administered by Shamans) (Kim, 1993, p. 44; Kang, 1993, pp. 79, 82, 85). This intermingling of Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Shamanism led to a blurring of lines regarding the origins and use of decorative and symbolic elements from each system. For example, the themes of inviting good fortune and repelling evil spirits are common to Daoism and Shamanism, and, even more intriguingly, the Shaman mountain spirit Sanshin manifests variously as a Confucian sage, a bodhisattva, and a Daoist Immortal (Jung, 2000, p. 798; Kim, 2006, p. 27).

Although the vast majority of extant objects employing *sipjangsaeng* date to the late Joseon

dynasty (Yoon, 2007, p. 2), it is likely that despite its predominantly Daoist message, the iconography was also popular in the dynasty's first two centuries. Of the heterodox systems of thought, the state considered Daoism the least incompatible with Neo-Confucianism, perhaps because Daoist elements entailed appealing talismanic themes of luck and fortune, which transcended institutionalised religion and philosophy. Unfortunately, material records for the early Joseon period are scant, as many artworks, along with all of the meticulously documented *Records for Royal Ceremonies (Uigwe)* detailing the use of objects at the Joseon court, were destroyed in Hideyoshi's attacks on Korea. However, a literary source again proves invaluable in illuminating what the limited number of objects cannot: the poem "Susa Sehwa Sipjangsaeng" (Receiving a New Year Painting of the Ten Longevity Symbols from the King) by *yangban* scholar Seong Hyeon (1439-1504) details a gift from Yeonsangun in 1502, confirming the continuation of the Goryeo custom noted above (Kim, 1998, p. 15; Kim, 2006, p. 177).

Furthermore, by the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), a number of motifs and narratives on the longevity theme were firmly ensconced as standard themes in China's visual arts (Welch, 2008, p. 10), which facilitated the reinforcement of the theme through trade contacts and official exchanges. Curiously, some emblems of longevity, such as Shoulao, the God of Longevity, were not widely imitated in Joseon, but his standard peach accessory became a permanent fixture in immortality myths. In Chinese Daoist lore, the peach is associated with immortality through the narrative of Xiwangmu (Queen Mother of the West), who resided in the paradisiacal grounds of Mount Kunlun in western China. Typically, she is portrayed in her peach orchard, where she distributes the fruit at her lavish birthday celebrations held once every 3,000 years. The peaches were reputed to confer immortality and eternal youth on her heavenly guests

(Welch, 2008, p. 55). The transmission of the motif to early Joseon vernacular is confirmed by one of the most famous paintings of the period, *Mongyu dowondo* (Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land, 1447). The work depicts majestic mountains and lyrical streams dotted with peach blossoms reminiscent of Mount Kunlun or Mount Penglai (the home of the Eight Immortals in Chinese mythology), or perhaps Korea's Geumgangsan (Diamond Mountains). It was painted by the famous landscape artist An Gyeon (1418–after 1464), who was strongly influenced by the Chinese landscapes of Northern Song artist Guo Xi (ca.1000–ca.1090). Gyeon was commissioned by Prince Anpyeong to paint his dream of landing in the utopian world described by the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming (365–427). *Dream Journey* attests to the widespread appreciation among Joseon elites for the continent's artistic traditions surrounding the longevity/immortality theme (Jungmann, 1995, p. 311; Kim, 2006, p. 40).

The catastrophic incursions into Korea by Japan in the late sixteenth century, and by the Manchus in the early seventeenth century were compounded by the chaos that ensued from the fall of the Ming to the Manchus in 1644. Beyond its obligations to the newly ensconced Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the Joseon court attempted to free the country from outside contact by adopting a policy of isolationism. It was widely accepted that the change to foreign rulership in China meant that Joseon was now the sole entity responsible for the maintenance of authentic Confucianism (Kim, 2014, p. 14). In a radical move away from Joseon's early ideological elitism, Neo-Confucian ethics and mores were vigorously disseminated among the non-elite classes (Deuchler 2002, 323–24). At the same time, the conflicts with foreign aggressors inspired a renewed sense of patriotism across all levels of society. Support for the preservation of distinctively Korean cultural characteristics gained momentum, prompting strong interest in traditional art

forms. In the visual arts, the mid-Joseon period ushered in an age of creative flexibility and innovation as artists focused on defining a new native vernacular by retaining only the Chinese elements that interested them (Kim and Kim, 1966, p. 22). It remains uncertain whether the *sipjangsaeng* theme was used in the seventeenth century, but the indigenous origin of the design, the flowering sense of freedom and energy in the visual arts, and a growing sophistication in iconographic conceptualisation in this period suggest that the theme appealed to the sophisticated tastes of the Joseon court. In ceramic production, for example, designs of underglazed painted dragons symbolising the ultimate power of imperial rule acquired a vitality and whimsy, reflected both in exuberant free-style compositions and deft, unevenly applied iron pigment brushstrokes (Fig. 3). This dynamic, uninhibited, and freeform style was antithetical to the meticulously detailed versions contemporaneously produced at China's official Jingdezhen kilns and provincial kilns.

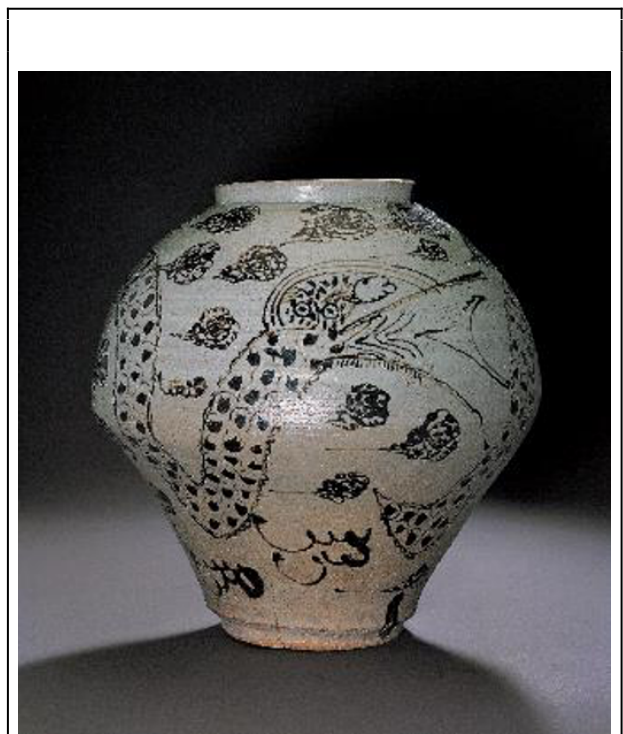


Figure 3. Porcelain jar painted in underglaze

iron, 17th century. Image courtesy of Ho-Am Art Museum.

Ideological Syncretism in Late Joseon and the Prominence of Daoist Themes

The economic prosperity achieved under the enlightened rulership of King Yeongjo (r.1724-1776) and his grandson King Jeongjo (r.1776-1800) generated a wave of cultural revitalisation across Joseon society (Kim, 2003z, p. 252). One striking example of dramatic changes in the arts during this period was the development of *jingyeong sansuhwa* (“true view landscape painting”) by Jeong Seon (1676-1759), which proposed an alternative to conventional Chinese landscape themes, such as the popular Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers (瀟湘八景圖Ch. *Xiaoxiang bajing*; Kr. *Sosang palgyeong*). Ideologically, Neo-Confucianism managed to retain its position as the dynasty’s ideological mainstay, but from the eighteenth century onwards, iconoclastic systems of thought were increasingly tolerated and integrated into the fabric of society. In particular, Daoism - which had always strongly impacted Korean consciousness and ways of life, but eluded the status of state religion - experienced a resurgence, prompted in part by increased receptivity to the culture of Qing China (1644-1911). The religious strand of Daoism that particularly appealed to members of Joseon society was organised by Zhang Daoling (34-156), centuries after the establishment of philosophical Daoism by the great sage Laozi (ca. sixth century BCE). Zhang purportedly received the title of Celestial Master (Tianshi) in a revelation from Laozi in 142, and thereafter launched a campaign for the reformation of what he viewed as degenerative religious practices. He drew from the formative texts *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi* to disseminate an understanding of the Dao (usually translated as the Way) as the inexplicable and undefinable infinite void that spontaneously generates the cosmos. Among

other things, Dao teachings advocate freedom and spontaneity, yielding over assertion, and living in harmony with the natural world (Fowler, 2005, pp. 4-7; Little, 2000, pp. 16-17, 115). Like many Daoist adepts, Zhang stressed the importance of attaining spiritual enlightenment, and he and his devotees attempted to engineer immortality through the regulation of consciousness, dietary restrictions and physical exercise, exorcisms, and the use of alchemy and magical elixirs (Robinet, 2005, p. 9954).

The spread of disparate cultural traditions is reflected in the arts produced late in the period, when religious and philosophical motifs drawn from Buddhism, Daoism, and Shamanism were sometimes intermingled with Neo-Confucian themes (Wells, 2000, p. 19; Fong, 1983, p. 192). Late Joseon objects are often more densely decorated than earlier works, as the emphasis on Confucian austerity gave way to more spontaneity and lyricism. Daoist subjects ranged from simple designs of Laozi riding an ox or Shoulao accompanied by a deer, to more elaborately painted utopian landscapes similar to the Leeum screen, alluding to the mythical realms of the Immortals. One motif that is sometimes used to augment the ten longevity symbols is the peach. As noted above, it is most famously connected to the longevity and immortality themes through its central role in the Daoist narrative of Xiwangmu, as well as something Shoulao carries, but it also appears in Shaman representations of the mountain spirit Sanshin. Its addition to the Leeum screen in two trees heavily laden with ripened fruit indicates that there was some degree of flexibility in the execution of the *sipjangsaeng* theme, and suggests that the meaning of “ten” (*sip*) was not necessarily limited to a numerical value, but may have also encompassed the definition of “auspicious” or “unlimited” (Park, 2002, p. 393). The colouring of the peaches and their intentionally exaggerated forms are suggestive of the vulva and the nipple, which connote

fertility and forge a link to the concept of attaining immortality through the continuation of the family line. A number of scholars have argued that the predominance of the *sipjangsaeng* scheme in late Joseon reflected a conscious shift away from the unattainable Chinese dream of granting eternal life to the human body, and towards the more realistic desire for a long and healthy life, articulated in serene images of the natural world (Yoon, 2007, p. 15). Whatever the case, the diversity in medium and style among extant objects employing the *sipjangsaeng* theme attests to the iconography's enduring impact and widespread popularity in late Joseon's visual arts.

Visual Culture Employing *Sipjangsaeng* in Late Joseon

Painted works employing the *sipjangsaeng* theme occur in horizontal or vertical single-panelled scrolls, or large folding screens. Many extant examples of the latter format were produced for use at court functions celebrating weddings, sixtieth birthdays, anniversaries, and investitures. These works generally do not include signatures or production dates (Park, 2002, p. 385), but fortunately, the *Records for Royal Ceremonies* after the Japanese and Manchu attacks meticulously detail the commission and consumption of art objects for the court. These documents indicate the use of *sipjangsaeng* large folding screens at royal events until the end of the dynasty, both to indicate the elevated status of the person seated before them and to inculcate a feeling of auspicious festivity among the guests (Park, 2002, p. 391). In order to meet the court's specific requirements, such paintings were executed by court painters (*hwawon*) employed by the Bureau of Painting (Dohwaseo), which fell under the authority of the Ministry of Rites (Yejo). Due to the seminal role of visual culture in reinforcing the authority and legitimacy of the royal court, *hwawon* were bound to adhere to strict protocols. The *sipjangsaeng* theme

must have aligned with the preferences of the court, as the painters were not permitted to transgress the boundaries of convention to create their own original designs (Cho, 2014, pp. 5-6; Park, 2002, p. 392). They were, however, called upon to furnish the *yangban* class with screens to celebrate sixtieth birthdays and wedding anniversaries, as well as to decorate porcelains for elite use. In order to cope with the demanding requirements of the position, candidates were vetted through a rigorous examination process, which tested their degree of technical proficiency in four categories: bamboo, landscapes, figures and animals, and plants and flowers (Kim, 1998, p. 14). Once accepted, the painters were required to create works with didactic, commemorative, celebratory, documentary, or topographical content. Works painted in the *sipjangsaeng* theme must have been particularly challenging, as they required dexterity in all four categories.

A number of extant documentary paintings confirm the placement of the longevity screens behind members of the royal family at celebratory events. The eight-panelled *Royal Banquet in the Year of Mushin* (1848, Fig. 4), for instance, details four lavish events held at the Changdeok and Changgyeong Palaces in the fourteenth year of King Heonjong's reign (r.1827-1849) to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of the king's grandmother, Elder Dowager Queen Sunwon (1789-1857), and the forty-first birthday of the Dowager Queen Sinjeong (1808-1890). As the Dowager Queen declined to participate, the screen depicts three banquets held in honour of Elder Dowager Queen Sunwon (Han, 2013, pp. 122-123). Figure 4 illustrates the panel of the final night's banquet. The seat of honour is empty, because with the exception of royal portraits, artists were not permitted to depict royal figures in paintings. However, the elder dowager's presence at the event is indicated by the careful attentions of her ladies-in-waiting and the *sipjangsaeng* screen placed behind her elevated throne (Cho, 2014, p. 5; Han, 2013, p.

145). This aniconic representation followed the custom of placing the *ilwol obong* (Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks) iconography behind the king's throne to indicate his presence. This particular motif was chosen for the exclusive use of the king as a symbolic reminder of his role as mediator between Heaven and Earth (Jungmann, 2007, pp. 95, 100; Han, 2013, pp. 20-25). By contrast, the *sipjangsaeng* theme was frequently invoked for the women of the court, as indicated by an 1879 commission of a screen by King Gojong (r.1863-1907). As its title suggests, *Celebrating the Recovery of the Crown Prince from Smallpox* commemorates the remarkable convalescence of the boy destined to be the last ruler of Joseon. As a sign of his deep appreciation, the king ordered multiple copies of the painting to bestow upon all the members of the medical team (Woo, 2014, pp. 30-32). Reflecting its popularity in screens and paintings, the *sipjangsaeng* theme was also featured in the majestic high-necked underglaze-decorated jars that became enormously popular from the early nineteenth century on (Smith, 2000, pp. 100-103). The lavish use of cobalt and copper confirms that this work (Fig. 5) was destined for use in the court.

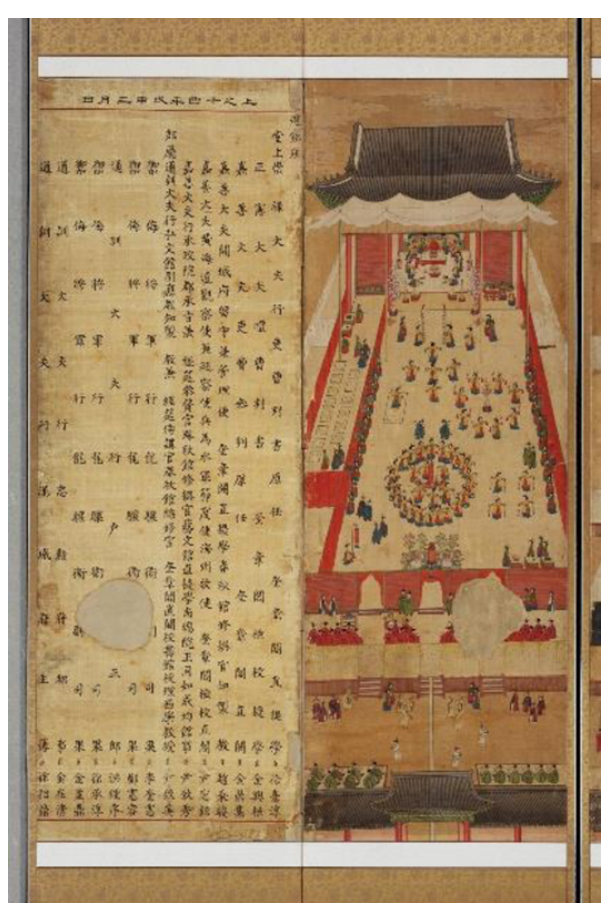


Figure 4. Royal Banquet in the Year of Mushin, 1848. Last two (of eight) panels, Ink and colours on silk (each 141.5cm × 49.5cm). Image courtesy of National Museum of Korea.



Figure 5. Porcelain jar painted in underglaze cobalt and copper, 19th century. Image courtesy of National Museum of Korea.

The ten longevity symbols are also found in other media, such as embroidery, lacquer, and even architecture. In the course of restoring Gyeongbok Palace in 1865, King Gojong constructed Jagyeong Hall as living quarters for the Dowager Queen Sinjeong. Behind the building, a number of chimneys were built to facilitate the construction of an *ondol* heating system to warm its floors. The chimney wall is profusely decorated with *sipjangsaeng* motifs (Fig. 6) and a number of other auspicious symbols including chrysanthemums, lotus, bats and grapes. The choice of design was most befitting for a woman who, in addition to being the most senior member of the royal household, had also outlived both her husband and her son (Han, 2013, p. 126). Many other extant objects also attest to the popularity of the design among Joseon elites. For instance, the wooden

spectacles case in Figure 7 beautifully captures six of the *sipjangsaeng* symbols, embroidered onto the lower part of its silk covering. For convenience, the cases were made to be fastened at the waist (Woo, 2014, p. 179). The case opening is decorated with the simplified character denoting longevity (寿 *su*) on the front, complemented by good fortune (*bok*) on the reverse. A tobacco box (Fig. 8) provides another stunning example of Joseon artistry and craftsmanship on the theme of longevity. The practice of smoking tobacco was introduced to Korea in the early seventeenth century. It spread across social classes, causing a spike in demand for objects that could contain shredded tobacco leaves (Woo, 2014, p. 156). Accordingly, this box's elaborate exterior was inlaid with very thin strips of silver, cut in a manner similar to the traditional Korean practice of inlaying mother-of-pearl into lacquer. On each side, a delightful rendition of each of the ten longevity symbols is complemented by the stylised *hanja* longevity character (壽 *su*) on the box's lid. Each decorative element in the pictorial scheme is accentuated by the bands of key fret, arabesque, and floral patterning occupying the spaces between them.

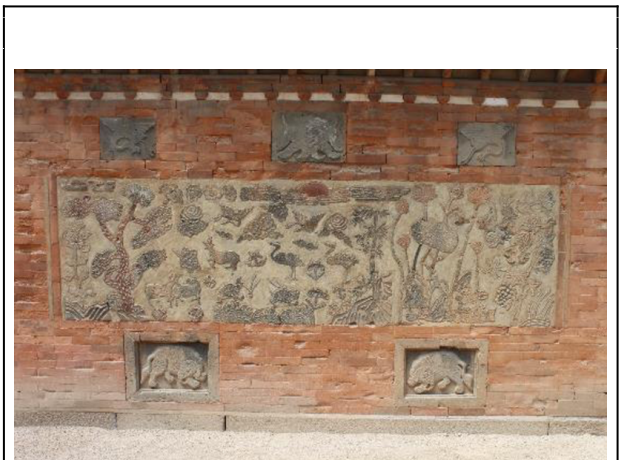


Figure 6. Jagyeongjeon chimney wall, Gyeongbok Palace, 19th century. Photograph by author.



Figure 7. Embroidered silk spectacle case, late Joseon dynasty. Image courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



Figure 8. Silver inlaid tobacco box, 19th century. Image courtesy of Ewha Womans University Museum.

The increased diversity in religious and philosophical motifs at court and among elites filtered through to the homes of commoners, where a vibrant genre of folk painting (*minhwa*) evolved. Like the royal family and elite classes, commoners used the iconography of the ten longevity symbols as auspicious charms that could bring favourable circumstances into their lives (Moes, 1983, pp. 22, 120; Welch, 2008, p. 11). As socioeconomic changes of the dynasty's last two centuries dramatically increased the wealth of the middle class, the custom of creating decorative living spaces became popular. *Minhwa* works were created by local or itinerant amateur painters, who had little or no formal training for decorative, talismanic, or ceremonial purposes (Kim, 2006, p. 31). Unlike *hwawon*, however, who were concerned with the constraints of officialdom, these painters enjoyed a freedom of expression, which gave rise to diverse styles, formats, and artistic techniques (Moes, 1983, pp. 20-21). The scholar-official Yi Gyugyung (1788-?) noted in his work "Oju Yeonmun Jangjeon Sango" (Random Expatiations of Oju, c. 1850) that *sipjangsaeng* was a common decorative theme in the entertaining areas of the commoner classes, appearing in everything from mounted hanging scrolls and screens, to works nailed or pasted to walls, pillars, storage chests, and doors (Yoon, 2007, pp. 4, 9). Mirroring the custom among Joseon's elites, weddings in the commoner classes also often used *sipjangsaeng* screens (usually borrowed) as backdrops for the festivities, in addition to the more conventional screens of peonies (signifying female beauty and reproduction) and multiple children (fertility). The longevity theme also appeared in the vividly embroidered ceremonial *hwalot* robes worn by brides - robes that were otherwise only for royal use (Han, 2013, p. 188; Kim, 2006, p. 258). The proliferation of the iconography in these contexts not only created an auspicious ceremonial atmosphere, but also emphasised the connection between the Joseon royal families and their faithful subjects.

Conclusion

The *sipjangsaeng* iconography, featuring the unique grouping of ten symbols of longevity and immortality, is illustrative of the ways in which Koreans created distinct themes in decorative and symbolic art by augmenting their own cultural traditions with elements selectively borrowed from China. The earliest record of *sipjangsaeng* is in the writings of a scholar official of the late Goryeo dynasty, who describes a New Year painting he had received from the king. With the inauguration of the Joseon dynasty in 1392, the parameters of artistic production were radically altered by Neo-Confucian dictates requiring simplicity, austerity, and pragmatism in the visual arts. Although there are no surviving objects from this period, the continuation of the new year custom of offering *sipjangsaeng* paintings is confirmed by another literary record dating back to 1502, suggesting that the iconography's universal appeal may have outweighed the ascetic and ritual demands of the court. Following Korea's closure to the outside world in the seventeenth century, the pursuit of dynamic and exploratory indigenous themes in the arts also implies that *sipjangsaeng* remained a cherished subject. Extant Joseon objects employing the ten longevity symbols date back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a renaissance in Joseon's cultural development spurred interest in and tolerance of philosophical systems other than Neo-Confucianism. In particular, the flourishing of religious Daoism led to a proliferation of art objects with codified illustrations of the Daoist worldview. The ordered and harmonious depiction of *sipjangsaeng* landscapes, reminiscent of the paradisiacal realms of the Immortals, held wide appeal among all sectors of Joseon society. Surviving objects range from painted screens, scrolls, and *minhwa* folk paintings to works of embroidery, metalwork and lacquerware. The enduring use of the ten longevity symbols' iconography in contemporary media reflects

both the continued significance of symbolic representation in the artistic canon, and the deep imprint of Daoist tradition in Korea's cultural heritage.

Notes

Equally spectacular examples are found in the collections of the National Museum of Korea, Ho-Am Art Museum, and the National Palace Museum.

During the Joseon dynasty, the ink monochrome painting genre was so revered as a form of self-expression and erudition that the responsibility of keeping *chaesaekhwa* alive fell to court painters and Buddhist monk-painters (Kim, 2006, p. 25).

"The Four Gentlemen" is also translated as the "Four Noble Characters," or the "Four Plants of Virtue."

Namely, *Lun-yü* (Analects of Confucius), *Meng-tzu* (Works of Mencius), *Ta-hsüeh* (Great Learning), and *Chung-yung* (Doctrine of the Mean) (Deuchler, 1992, p. 20).

Although Neo-Confucianism derives from Confucianism, the two terms are often used interchangeably in discussions of the Joseon dynasty (Chöng and Han, 1996, pp. 3-4). In this article, "Confucianism" denotes the broader ideology, while "Neo-Confucianism" refers specifically to the ideology's iteration under the Song dynasty, an iteration that was widely practised in Joseon Korea.

In China, Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism was the dominant state ideology from 1241 (Song dynasty) until the rise of the Republic of China in 1912 (Best, 1991, p.18).

Yoon (p. 30) mentions the use of *sipjangsaeng* in Goryeo bronze mirrors, but thus far, I have been unable to locate them in public or private

collections.

Shou is third of the Three Stars of Wealth, Status, and Longevity (福祿壽三星Fu Lu Shou Sanxing).

The debate surrounding the origins of Korean Daoism is beyond the purview of this article, but briefly, the widespread belief that Daoism entered Korea by way of China is questioned by scholarship asserting that an intrinsically Korean tradition, which shared many characteristics, existed in the peninsula prior to the introduction of Chinese Daoism in the Tang dynasty (Jung, 2000, pp. 792-795).

There are five extant screens of the 1848 celebration (all in the collection of the National Museum of Korea), but of these, only three are intact with all eight screens (Han, 2013, pp. 140, 162 note 20).

In Korea (as in China and Japan) the sixtieth birthday (*hwangap*) is particularly auspicious, as it represents the completion of the sexagenary cycle of the Korean zodiac. The forty-first birthday (*mang-o*) was also considered auspicious as it literally means “looking forward to the fiftieth” (Han, 2013, p. 160 note 4).

Sinjeong was observing a period of mourning for her father and was thus reluctant to participate in a celebratory banquet. She eventually acquiesced to a ceremony to grant her honorary titles (Han, 2013, pp. 134-135).

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