

ANIMAL MOTIFS REPRESENTING *SIPJANGSAENG*
(LONGEVITY) AND *SAMGANG ORYUN* (BASIC
VIRTUES OF NEO-CONFUCIAN SOCIAL ETHICS)
IN THE FURNITURE AND DECOR
OF A TRADITIONAL KOREAN HOUSE

Animals, both real and mythical, frequently played the role of important motifs in painting and decorative forms in artistic crafts. Although it is possible to identify certain regional differences, these symbols convey very similar meanings throughout those parts of the Far East where Chinese cultural impact has been dominant for centuries.¹⁾ Due to its geographical proximity, Korea has also been distinctively influenced by the social, political, and cultural codes coming from mainland China. Long-term exposure to interactions with China led to Korea's absorption of the Chinese ideographs which went on to become the *lingua franca* among East Asian elites.²⁾

Adapting Chinese doctrines, such as Taoism and Confucianism, to Korean conditions sparked the emergence of a separate Korean system of thought. Wedged between native beliefs and royal favour bestowed by Joseon dynasty rulers, Neo-Confucianism in Korea evolved into a socio-political program unique among the thought systems of the world. Therefore, the animal motifs encountered in Korean arts and crafts can only be interpreted in the context of the ideology that had exerted such a profound influence on the visual culture of the time.

¹⁾ Zwierzęta w Sztuce Dalekiego Wschodu (1996: 3).

²⁾ Bailey (2016: 109).

In this paper, the theme of animal motifs in the furniture and decor of a traditional Korean house serves as the starting point for discussing the mutual influence of Taoism and Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon era based on the example of a visual culture element.

IMPACT OF NEO-CONFUCIANISM AND TAOISM ON KOREAN ICONOGRAPHY UNDER THE JOSEON STATE

Confucianism and Taoism emerged in China around the same period and gained a dominant position during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.). While the former was more ethically and politically oriented, the latter placed more emphasis on spiritual dimensions. Although complementary, these systems stood in opposition to each other. Both were based on the doctrine of the unity of Heaven and mankind, but differed in terms of how this unity should be pursued. Taoists saw following natural law as the only path leading to becoming one with the universe, while Confucians believed that humans could achieve harmony with Heaven through self-improvement and the teachings of the sages. Even after the divergence between Confucianism and Taoism had sparked open debates, it failed to prevent the adherents of these doctrines from mutual “borrowings”. This two-way exchange intensified with the growing importance and supremacy of Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty (960–1279).³⁾

Korean Taoism arose from the amalgamation of doctrinal Taoism and folk beliefs. Throughout the reign of successive dynasties, it never secured a strong social footing as the faith of the common people. Instead, it was integrated into native shamanism – as the syncretic worship of the multiplicity of gods fits very well with Korea’s indigenous animist beliefs. In the later stages of its development, Taoism was influenced by Buddhism, which became the official religion in all Three Kingdoms (57 B.C.–660 A.D.) and the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), and by the subsequent adoption of Confucianism.⁴⁾

During the reign of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), Korea’s socio-political system underwent a thorough reorganisation based on Neo-Confucian ideology. Neo-Confucianism was perceived as the comprehensive roadmap for

³⁾ Xinzhong (2009: 229–231).

⁴⁾ Park (2002: 53–56).

Korean social and political renewal. Its feasibility was believed to be anchored in the exemplary world of the sage-kings of Chinese antiquity. However, success would be rendered impossible without full commitment to the program of social change.⁵⁾ That is why the government methodically implemented and strengthened its position of state religion and governing law. In the 15th century, the practical ethical and ritualistic aspects of Neo-Confucianism gained priority over its philosophical aspects.⁶⁾

The new ideology also placed strict requirements on the production of visual culture, according to which the primary function of objects was to remind people of righteous conduct. Early Joseon rulers enthusiastically acculturated the vastly simplified aesthetic principles of Ming (1368–1644), nominating for example undecorated white porcelains (*baekja*) to be representative of the new code.

In the 18th century, the economic prosperity achieved under the enlightened rulership of King Yeongjo (r. 1724–1776) and his grandson King Jeongjo (r. 1776–1800) generated a cultural revitalisation across Joseon society. The permeation of different cultural traditions in late Joseon is reflected in arts, when religious and philosophical motifs drawn from Buddhism, Taoism and shamanism were sometimes mixed with Neo-Confucian themes. Late Joseon objects are often more colourful and densely decorated than earlier works, as the emphasis on Confucian austerity gave way to a sense of spontaneity and lyricism.⁷⁾

The increased receptivity to the culture of Qing China (1644–1911) resulted in a revival of interest in Taoism, which has always strongly influenced Korean consciousness and ways of life, although it has never gained the status of a state religion. Nevertheless, of the heterodox thought systems, Taoism was considered the least incompatible with Neo-Confucianism. Many Taoist elements connoted universally appealing talismanic themes of luck and fortune, which eluded the strictures of institutionalised religion or philosophy.⁸⁾

⁵⁾ Deuchler (1995: 27).

⁶⁾ Koh (2003: 67).

⁷⁾ Bailey (2016: 109–111).

⁸⁾ Bailey (2020: 7–9).

THE *SIPJANGSAENG* (TEN LONGEVITY SYMBOLS)
IN LATE JOSEON ICONOGRAPHY

One of the main themes of Korean Taoism was the search for eternal life or immortality, a quest successful for those living by the will of Heaven and guided by a mystical reverence for nature.⁹⁾ *Sipjangsaeng*, the Korean term for the ten (*sip*) living and inanimate objects symbolising longevity, is ideologically rooted in the Taoist cult of immortality. However, it also draws from elements of Korean folk beliefs, shamanism and animism. The ten motifs comprising the *sipjangsaeng* scheme fall into one of four groups: celestial (sun, clouds), terrestrial (mountains/rocks, water), botanic (pine, bamboo, fungus), and animalic (deer, crane, tortoise). Decorative representations of longevity symbols can be found on a wide range of objects, from paintings, ceramics and textiles to lacquerware, metalwork and furnishings. Each of these ten motifs, independently symbolising longevity and/or immortality throughout East Asia, often appears in groups of two, three, or five. The grouping of all *sipjangsaeng* motifs is unique to Korea, combining assimilated Chinese iconographic conventions and indigenous ideas (fig. 1).¹⁰⁾

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. Nevertheless, the universal appeal of *sipjangsaeng* iconography may have remained a cherished subject at that time as well, which confirms the New Year custom of offering *sipjangsaeng* paintings mentioned by a literary record dating to 1502. Extant Joseon objects employing the ten longevity symbols date to the 18th and 19th centuries, when a renaissance in Joseon's cultural development spurred interest and tolerance in philosophical and religious systems other than Neo-Confucianism. In particular, the flourishing of religious Taoism led to a proliferation of art objects offering codified illustrations of the Taoist worldview.

Despite the shift away from the unattainable Chinese aspiration of eternal life to the more temperate desire for a long and healthy life, the harmonious depiction of landscapes reminiscent of the paradisiacal realms of the Immortals held particular appeal among all sectors of Joseon society. Painted works employing it consist of horizontal or vertical single-panelled scrolls,

⁹⁾ Park (2002: 55–56).

¹⁰⁾ Bailey (2016: 108–111).

or large folding screens (figs. 2, 3). The latter format was produced for use at court functions celebrating weddings, sixtieth birthdays, anniversaries, and investitures. Another example for featuring *sipjangsaeng* were the high-necked underglaze-decorated jars that became enormously popular from the early 19th century on (fig. 4). The *sipjangsaeng* motifs filtered from elite class houses down to the homes of commoners in the form of folk paintings (*minhwa*), where they were used for decorative, talismanic or ceremonial purposes. The scholar-official Yi Gyugyung noted in his work “*Oju Yeonmun Jangjeon Sang*” (“Random Expatiations of Oju”, c. 1850) that *sipjangsaeng* was a common decorative theme in the entertaining areas of the commoner classes. It was placed on both mounted hanging scrolls and screens, as well as works nailed or pasted to walls, pillars, storage chests, and doors.¹¹⁾ The auspicious symbolism was thus utilised across all Joseon social classes as a visual expression of the universal human desire to live a long and healthy life, and as a means to invite good fortune and protect against evil spirits.¹²⁾

BASIC VIRTUES OF NEO-CONFUCIAN SOCIAL ETHICS (SAMGANG ORYUN) IN KOREAN FOLK PAINTING

By publishing the *Samgang haengsildo* (“Illustrations of the Virtues of the Three Bonds”), *Sohak* (“Lesser Learning”, the Korean version of the *Xiaoxue*) and *Juja garye* (“Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals”, the Korean version of the *Zhuzi jiali*), the Joseon dynasty displayed a great interest in the enforcement of Neo-Confucian social ethics and Confucian rituals. Like the “Lesser Learning”, the “Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals” was taught at official schools and was a mandatory subject in state examinations.¹³⁾

While following Zhu Xi’s ritualism was required of the educated upper class, the inculcation of social ethics to the unlettered masses was of perennial concern to the government. The examples of filial children or chaste wives were customarily marked as a measure to encourage virtuous behaviour.¹⁴⁾ Within the hierarchy of relationships, benevolence was presented as the characteristic element of humanity, most manifested in the loving relationship

¹¹⁾ Bailey (2020: 10–14).

¹²⁾ Moes (1983: 21–22).

¹³⁾ Koh (2003: 68).

¹⁴⁾ Lee (1985: 484).

of relatives.¹⁵⁾ The basic virtues of Neo-Confucian social ethics, i.e. the Three Bonds and the Five Relations (*samgang oryun*), were constantly preached and upheld. The philosophy of *samgang oryun* illustrates three kinds of obedience and five constant relationships and obligations between five sets of people: the father and the son who should treat each other with kindness and filial piety, the husband and the wife – with decorum and formality, the ruler and the subject – with benevolence and loyalty, an older friend and a young friend – with humanity and deference, and between friends – with trust. The ruling aristocrats of the Joseon dynasty period recognised these five relations as the most significant proprieties in human relations, and Korean Neo-Confucians made great efforts to convince the people to practice *oryun* in their daily lives. Since the 16th century, by which time Neo-Confucianism had already become Korea's dominant ideology, *oryun* has become the universal way of Korean thinking.¹⁶⁾ These five cardinal virtues, or the five principal relationships, were extended and related by analogy. The position of the father, for example, as the head of the family was seen as analogous to that of the king, who is the head of the state.¹⁷⁾

Folk painting (*minhwa*) became one means by which the cardinal principles of Neo-Confucian morality were promoted among commoners. *Minhwa* was executed by local or itinerant amateur painters with little or no formal training.¹⁸⁾ Unlike *hwawon* (court painters), however, those painters enjoyed a freedom of expression which gave rise to a variety of styles, formats, and artistic techniques.¹⁹⁾ This type of anonymous painting flourished mainly between the 18th and 20th centuries. Although imitative of more refined court and literati paintings, and produced en masse, *minhwa* also won favour with members of royal families and the elite class.

Munjado – pictorial ideographs of *samgang oryun* – is a genre of *minhwa* that enjoyed popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries. This educational painting consists of eight large Chinese characters, representing filial piety (*hyo*), fraternity (*je*), loyalty (*chung*), trust (*shin*), propriety (*yae*), righteousness or justice (*ui*), integrity (*yeom*), and conscience or a sense of shame (*chi*). The

¹⁵⁾ Park (2002: 85).

¹⁶⁾ Academy of Korean Studies (2009: 178).

¹⁷⁾ Park (2002: 84–85).

¹⁸⁾ Bailey (2016: 113).

¹⁹⁾ Moes (1983, 20–21).

characters are always written in the same order, which is why *munjado* is also called “*hyoje*”, representing the first two characters.²⁰⁾

In the Confucian classic treatise *Xiaojing* (“Classic of Filial Piety”), the virtue *hyo* – filial piety – was inculcated and most highly prized as the essence of Confucian thought. According to the *Xiaojing*, Confucius (552-479 B.C.) once said to his disciple Zang, “Filial piety is the root of virtue, and the stem out of which grows all moral teaching”.²¹⁾

Munjado were typically painted on folding screens, showing one large Chinese character on each panel (fig. 5). Stylised depictions of each character were combined with those of animals and plants which referenced specific stories or parables drawn from Chinese history. The symbols placed on each panel, such as fish, lotus, dragon, bird or tortoise from an old episode or folk tale about one of the virtues, helped viewers decipher the meaning of each character and the virtuous deed it represented.²²⁾ The folding screens were used as daily reminders to observe the virtues of social ethics.

SPATIAL DIVISION AND FURNITURE DECORATION OF JOSEON UPPER-CLASS HOUSES REFLECTING THE NEO-CONFUCIAN DICTATES

Under the Joseon state, the structure of residential buildings reflected the Neo-Confucian orthodox ideology, clearly differentiating between the status of master and servant, man and woman, and senior and junior. In accordance with the Confucian concept of separate roles for men and women, their main living space in the house was also divided. The men lived in the centrally located quarter (*sarangchae*) which became the symbol of a family’s authority, where the head of the household and the eldest son carried out their everyday activities. The master of the house occupied the *sarangbang*, i.e. the most important room used for dining, sleeping, reading, drinking tea, resting, studying, practicing calligraphy, playing music and games, and receiving guests (male family members were supposed to maintain ties with the outside world). The women’s quarter was situated next to the *sarangchae*, behind

²⁰⁾ Kim (n.d.).

²¹⁾ Park (2002: 127).

²²⁾ Saeji (2013: 236).

a low wall. From there the mistress ran the household. Its name *anchae*, which literally means “inner quarter”, captured the essence of women’s lives in the noble class residences of the Joseon dynasty period. After marriage, a woman moved into the *anchae* of her husband’s house and, in extreme cases, did not leave it for the rest of her life. Her contact with the outside world was restricted to an absolute minimum. The *anchae* was composed of a mistress’s room (*anbang*), a daughter-in-law’s room (*geonneonbang*), a kitchen, and a storeroom. The *anbang*, which was tucked away into the most secluded corner of the house, was where the mistress spent her first night as bride, gave birth and raised children, slept and did housework, such as sewing, and passed away.²³⁾

Various furniture items were designed specifically for either male or female quarters. The furniture for the *sarangchae* basically excluded complicated decoration or excessive display. Scholars, who were cherished in the Confucian-oriented Joseon kingdom, pursued a moderate life and proclaimed the aesthetics of frugality and the virtue of simplicity. They placed the highest value on thrift and discipline, and therefore promoted compact and simple wooden furniture which was designed to be convenient in the small rooms. In the encyclopaedic work *Sallim gyeongje* from the turn of the 18th century, bookshelves, ink stone cases, reading tables, *baduk* boards, *geomungo*, drug shelves, wooden pillows and small tables are listed as furniture placed in the *sarangbang*. The main furniture consisted of writing stationery needed for studying and some other items necessary for basic life. The frames were usually made from sturdy wood like solid pine, zelkova and ginko, while visible panels from paulownia, zelkova or black persimmon were added for their natural decorative grain effect.²⁴⁾

Unlike the items in the *sarangbang*, the furniture pieces for the women’s quarters were elaborately decorated. *Anbang* furniture was usually made from woods with attractive-looking grains like zelkova, black persimmon, or ash, and it was often elegantly decorated with mother-of-pearl or painted ox-horn. Popular motifs included flowers, birds, *sipjangsaeng* and other auspicious symbols expressing wishes of wealth, happiness, and longevity. Major furniture and accessories of the *anbang* included wooden chests and cabinets of different sizes used for storing clothing, bedding and valuables (figs. 6, 7),

²³⁾ Choi (2007: 27–87).

²⁴⁾ Saeji (2013: 241–242).

boxes for sewing equipment and combs, and cosmetic boxes with a mirror (figs. 8, 9, 10).

Folding screens were used in both *anbang* and *sarangbang* quarters to separate individual spaces and create a more intimate atmosphere. On windy and frosty days, the screens were placed in front of doors or windows to protect from the cold. Their frames were made of wood, and the panels were made of paper or silk. Additionally to their utilitarian values, the screens also had a decorative significance, as they were often covered with paintings and calligraphy.²⁵⁾ A folding screen always consisted of an even number of panels, and the eight *munjado* characters were a frequently used motif.

EXAMPLES OF ANIMAL MOTIFS REPRESENTING *SIPJANGSAENG* AND *SAMGANG ORYUN* IN THE FURNITURE AND DECOR OF A TRADITIONAL KOREAN HOUSE

In traditional Korean houses, the *anbang* chests were among the most richly decorated furniture pieces, boasting great ornamental variety. Mother-of-pearl decorations were often used for depicting *sipjangsaeng*, and the most commonly presented animal motifs were cranes and deer. Their images were meant to magically provide long and healthy life, as both animals were believed to be the companions and messengers of the Taoist Immortals, accompanying them to Peng Lai, the Paradise of the East Sea.²⁶⁾ The crane, next to the phoenix, is the most distinguished bird of oriental lore. It was not only credited with living to a fabulous age, but when it reached its six hundredth year, it was able to subsist exclusively upon water. When it turned two thousand years old, its white plumage changed to black. The crane was supposed to carry souls to paradise, and was further related to womankind, since it is ever commended as an example of motherhood to be emulated. In its most familiar representation, it is presented in combination with the pine and the sun – the three emblems of longevity, in which the crane symbolises length of years, the pine – evergreen existence, and the sun – everlasting life.²⁷⁾ Deer represented the hope of a long and successful life, as the adherents of

²⁵⁾ Łakomska (2019: 116).

²⁶⁾ McKillop (1992: 90).

²⁷⁾ Ball (2004: 205–210).

Taoism believed that the deer was the only animal able to locate the sacred fungus of immortality.²⁸⁾

Decorative folding screens used in both male and female quarters were – together with other paintings and calligraphic works – eagerly collected in the late Joseon period. A combination of the tradition of gifting paintings to avert misfortune and bring happiness, the practical purpose of stopping cold drafts, and the enjoyment of luxury in the times of economic growth led to these paintings being used as home decoration. Patterns and motifs were employed not only as decorative devices, but also as symbolic means of advancing ideological, philosophical, and social meaning.²⁹⁾ One painting type to gain enormous popularity among all of Korea’s social classes was the *munjado*, typically presented on eight-panelled folding screens and serving an educational function. Stories known to the Korean society were incorporated into ideographs in an abbreviated or abstracted manner. Stylised Chinese characters were combined with depictions of animals and plants which referenced specific parables. Some of the animal motifs were repeated on several panels, e.g. the fish, which is one of the most popular motifs of oriental art. The fish most commonly used for decorative purposes is the carp.³⁰⁾ Under the Joseon dynasty, most Koreans readily associated the carp, which was used to symbolise the character *hyo*, with the famous ancient tales about the paragons of filial piety (fig. 11). This fish is connected to the story of Wang Xiang, who caught a carp for his ailing stepmother by breaking the ice on a frozen river. The carp is also depicted within the character *chung* (loyalty), since this fish is believed to be able to swim upstream and transform itself into a dragon (fig. 12) – symbolising a capable man passing the civil service examinations, eventually to become an important government official who loyally serves the ruler and the nation.³¹⁾ Those who succeeded were referred to as “the fish who transformed into dragons”, and were said to have leaped over the Dragon Gate of Lung Mên. Other repeatedly depicted *munjado* animals were birds (figs. 13, 14, 15), such as wagtails, doves, geese – and the phoenix as one of “four divine animals” controlling the three hundred and sixty varieties of the feathery tribe. The dragon – the chief of all scaly beasts – presides over authority; the unicorn – the chief of all hairy animals – presides

²⁸⁾ Bailey (2013: 146).

²⁹⁾ Bailey (2016: 108).

³⁰⁾ Ball (2004: 181).

³¹⁾ Kim (n.d.).

over literature; the tortoise – the chief of all the shelly animals – presides over divination, and the phoenix – the chief of all feathery animals – presides over virtue. Together with man, who is said to be nude, these divine animals constitute the five tribes of the quinary system of the ancient Chinese. The colours of a phoenix's plumage symbolise the five cardinal virtues: uprightness, honesty, justice, fidelity, and benevolence, the ideographs of which may be found inscribed on its body. Such is its benevolence that it will never peck nor injure any living thing, nor tread upon any growing plants. It subsists entirely upon the seeds of bamboo and drinks only at sacred springs.³²⁾ For this reason it is depicted in *yeom*, the seventh character of *munjado*.

Although the decorative furniture and accessories belong to the female space of a traditional Korean house, some of the animal motifs can be encountered in the *sarangchae* area as well (fig. 16). They are usually hidden inside the furniture pieces (and visible, for example, when opening a door) or discreetly placed on the side elements and on the fittings.³³⁾ Of all the objects found in the *sarangbang*, the ceramic versions of water droppers (which were essential to the preparation of ink sticks for use in calligraphy and painting) most often featured decoration containing various auspicious symbols of Chinese origin, e.g. fish iconography (figs. 17, 18).³⁴⁾

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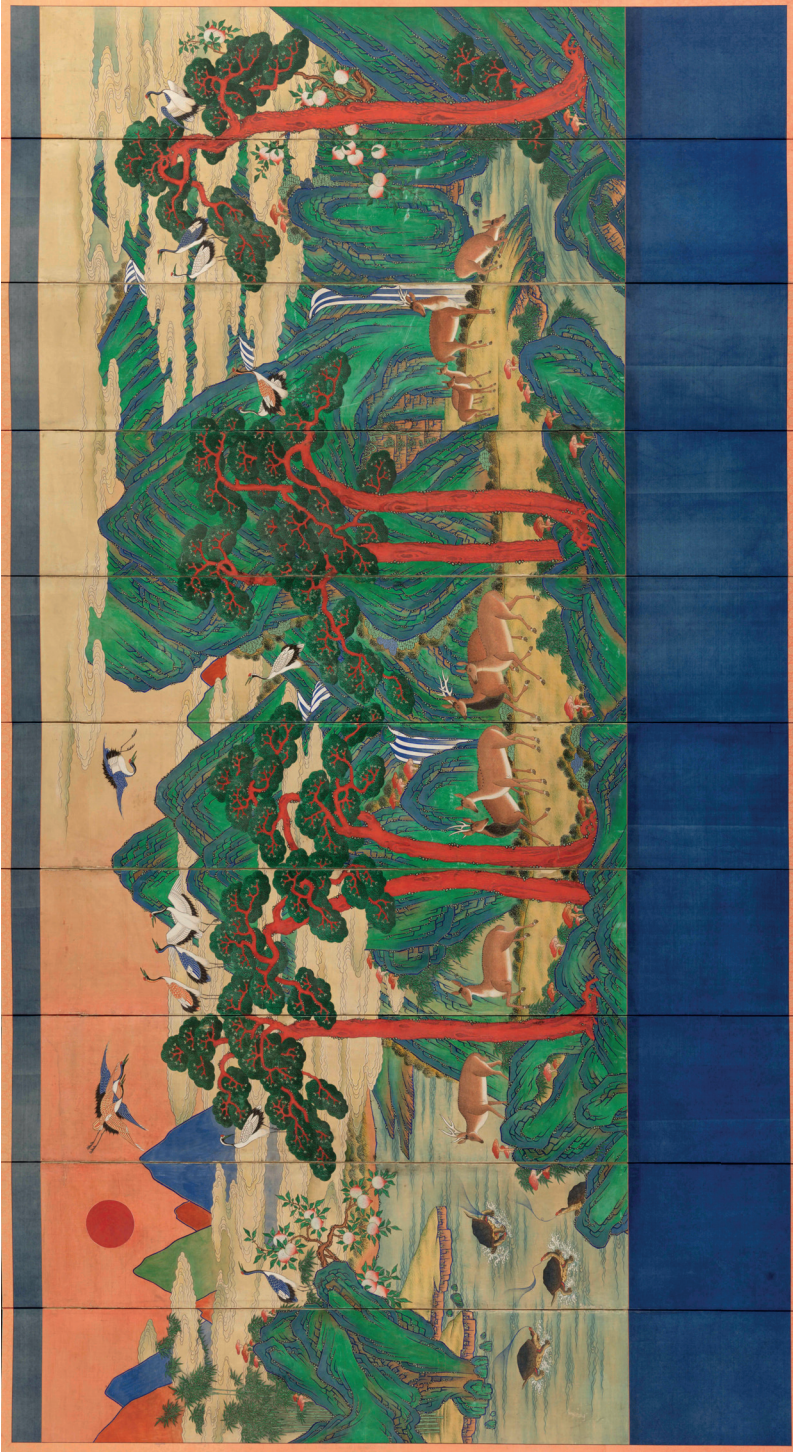
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³²⁾ Ball (2004: 5–25).

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1. Folding screen showing all *sipjangsaeng* motifs. Image courtesy of National Palace Museum of Korea.



2.



3.

2, 3. Painted works employing *sipjangsaeng* motifs. Images courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



4. 19th-century porcelain jar painted in underglaze cobalt and copper. Image courtesy of National Museum of Korea.



5. *Munjado* folding screen. Image courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



6.



7.

6, 7. *Icheungnong* two-tier chests. Images courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



8.



9.

8, 9, 10. Boxes for storing valuables, sewing equipment and cosmetics. Images courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



10.



11. Panel of *munjado* folding screen with the character *hyo* (filial piety). Image courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



12. Panel of *munjado* folding screen with the character *chung* (loyalty). Image courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



13.



14.



15.

13, 14, 15. Panels of *munjado* folding screen depicting birds. Images courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



16. *Sarangbang* pencil case. Image courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.



17.



18.

17, 18. Ceramic water droppers featuring fish iconography. Images courtesy of National Folk Museum of Korea.