

## Daoist Influence on Korean Thought and Culture

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### Summary

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Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism have been the influential ‘external’ philosophies and belief systems that are considered not indigenous within Korean history. Although never predominant in its culture, Daoism has always had an underlying presence in Korea. Whereas Confucianism and Buddhism left behind a myriad of historical records, the only recorded information concerning Daoism, that remains is scarce and fragmented. Because of this lack of written sources, Korean Daoism was incapable of spreading as a mere philosophy. However, that is not to say that the ideas of Zhuangzi did not have some influence. The term ‘Daoist’ in Korea is connected with: 1) the works of Zhuangzi, Laozi and Liezi that have been known in Korea at least since the Koryo period, but after 1392 have been regarded as dissident; 2) an organized religion since king Yongryu of Koguryo received Daoist missionaries from Tang in 624 and established their cult as a restricted band for the elite; 3) almost anything in Korean culture that is not clearly Buddhist or Confucian in the history of popular belief.

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In tracing the development of the *Dao-culture* in Korea, we may divide its evolution into three stages and then analyze them in further details: 1) the local shamanism, called *San-Shin*, to some extent still practiced today; 2) the arrival of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism from the mainland, which have affected all manners of intellectual, mental and aesthetic life; 3) the individual characteristics of the *Way/Road* in Korean philosophy as an amalgam from traditional and for the most part borrowed influences.

Historically animism and the ritual complex, called *San-Shin* existed on the Korean peninsula before the arrival of other spiritual and philosophical movements. The archetype of *San-Shin* (Mountain spirit) underlay all Korean thought, artistic and daily life. As Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism were introduced to Korea, each was slowly incorporated into the native shamanistic practice and culture, creating a new syncretic spiritual trend. Koreans were open-minded and accepted any foreign thoughtways that harmonized well with their primordial ideas and ancestral cult and this has kept the *San-Shin* ideals alive even up into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While many

modern countries were abandoning their inherent, indigenous ways of life, Korea continued to embrace its innate wisdom.

Much of what is seen in the ceremonies of shamanism represents a deep affinity with the Universe and is actually nature-acknowledgment and respect for the principles that govern our world. The *San-Shin* complex cultivated animistic Earth's forces: human or natural forms – its figurative language was created by observing life, with shared images used to describe the energy of a particular area or phenomenon. The stories of *Dangun* and the myths concerning the founding of Korea are doubtlessly influenced by tales of immortality, immanently connected with ancient indigenous culture. The Korean *kukson* – national immortals – used to be 'free and easy wandering' recluses, much similar to the Chinese great sages, described in the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese philosophical text *Zhuangzi* was written in part by a man named Zhuang Zhou in the late fourth century B.C. Amazing stories in the book reveal the mundane situation of the narrow-minded men in correlation to the sage wandering 'in the clouds' above ordinary affairs of life. With humor and relentless logic Zhuangzi attacks peremptory assertions about the world, especially evaluative knowledge of what is good and bad or right and wrong.<sup>2</sup> Setting its arguments in beautiful prose and poetry, the text is gaining recognition as one of the classics of world literature. Despite the slightly skeptical tone<sup>3</sup>, Zhuangzi himself does not think that our situation is utterly hopeless, since at the very least we are better off aware of our ignorance.

There is a basic questioning about self-belief in the *Zhuangzi*: self-consciousness is the realization of life's most fundamental sense, so Zhuang Zhou claims that in the universal interrelation no new idea is impossible<sup>4</sup>. The result of the Daoist perfection is often misleading: not only with the quest for immortality defying the common sense, but with a relativistic attitude towards morality threatening serious ethical rules. Taking into account this inconsistency, we have to mention that the important theoretical and practical implications of Daoism should not be confined to the lack of political activity and everyday conformism. At the same time, there is an implicit invocation in *Daodejing* to become more cautious with the traditional values opposing the freedom of genuine ideas and behavior<sup>5</sup>.

Zhuangzi's uncompromising rejection of power makes him avoid any collective social gestures, bringing plenty of frustration and leading to overall disappointment of the political experience. In contrast to Confucius, he talked of some monarch and officials as 'nothing between heaven and earth to escape' to remind us how difficult is to survive surrounded by insidious maneuvers, mortal threats and diplomatic

rumors. Therefore, the *Zhuangzi*, unlike the *Daidejing* refused any political suggestions principally not because of intellectual reasons, but as a question of position. Resisting any governance, his stance is basically not to politicize - the so-called *non-action* (*wu wei* – 无为) of the Way (*Dao* – 道).

According to some scholars<sup>6</sup>, an original form of Daoist culture was shared between ancient Korea and China – shamanism and mountain worship have flourished in both regions. Korean Daoism includes an ancient and authentic indigenous component, but it has grown into a system with completely new dimensions when the organized Daoist teaching was transmitted from *Tang* China. The local and the introduced components ultimately merged into an entirely new form of Daoism with both similar and disparate characteristics to the Chinese school of Dao (*daojia* – 道家). Through the foundation of an institutionalized Daoist structure, the theoretical and the practical implications of Chinese Dao-doctrines became the object of disciplined study and scholarship among *Koryo* and *Choson* intellectuals. “Ever since the seventh century, Korean Daoism has been influenced by Chinese Daoism in its organization and doctrine and has grown substantially richer in its structure and scholarship. The *Koryo* and *Choson* dynasties established national Daoist temples, such as the Bokwon gung (Palace of Original Happiness) and the Sogyok so (Bureau of Brilliant Investigation).” (Jung Jae-Seo 2000: 793)

The predominant and influential philosophies in Korea used to be Confucianism and Buddhism, rather than Daoism; however, although never at the core of Korean history, it has always existed as an underlying presence. Whereas the first two schools of thought and religious systems left behind a myriad of historical records, the Daoist teaching did not – the only recorded information that remains is exiguous and fragmentary. As a result of this, until the end of World War II only one fully researched paper on Korean Daoism existed<sup>7</sup>. The researches on Korean Daoism have been relatively limited in the modern period, in comparison to those on be Confucianism and Buddhism, but Daoist studies have increased since 1890, exploring the intrinsic, fundamental Korean values.

Daoism within Korea, unlike Buddhism and Confucianism, or the Chinese Daoist schools, failed to grow as an autonomous religious denomination or cultural phenomenon. As it is well known<sup>8</sup>, Daoism first arrived in Korea in 624 A.D. Its popularity in China led the *Tang* Monarch, Gaozu, to send a Daoist preacher to the *Koguryo* Kingdom along with appropriate literature: the texts ascribed to Laozi and *Zhuangzi*. Korean historical documents show that the instructions of *Daodejing*, *Liezi* and *Zhuangzi* were welcomed and eagerly scrutinized by one of the Three Kingdoms<sup>9</sup>, *Koguryo* Court, in early 7th century A.D. This enthusiasm can be seen

in the fact that the Daoist preacher spoke on the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi in lectures that were attended by the *Koguryo* monarch and his ministers. Daoism was imported for the political purpose to restrain the power of *Koguryo* Buddhism – the promotion of the new Chinese cult, mixed with indigenous shamanistic elements, served as a barrier to the Buddhist expansion in Korea.

As a result of this processes in the *Koguryo* Royal court, Buddhist temples were eventually transformed to Daoist ones; but this tendency within the *Koguryo* Kingdom lasted for only 30 years. In the *Baekje* Kingdom (B.C. 18 – A.D. 660), another one of the Three Kingdoms, Chinese Daoism did not have the same effect as in the *Koguryo* Court. The philosophy was only briefly introduced and was merely a passing vogue; nevertheless, the thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi had some influence through syncretic treatises linking it to Buddhism and Confucianism. It was the ruler's hope that the religious ideals of Buddhism as well as Daoism and the Confucian morality would help for unification of the warring clans on the peninsula and the royal support of Daoism was just an extension of this trend.

Of the Three Kingdoms, the *Shilla* Kingdom left the most substantial Daoist legacy – it received *Daodejing* in 738 A.D. from the Tang Monarchy. As a result, *Shilla* scholars went to China in order to study Daoism – *Daodejing* began to be used in civil service examinations, which led to a popularization of the *Laozi* among the public. The characteristic of *Shilla* Daoism was its concentration on the practice and training of one's mind or self discipline – its most distinctive mark can be found in the rule of the *Hwarang*<sup>10</sup> – the rigorous disciplinary aspect dominated *Shilla* Daoist teaching. The training of the Elite Youth Corps of *Shilla* included physical exercises, martial arts and self-discipline in ethics, morality and spirituality. *Hwarang* participated in all state events and when the kingdom was prosperous, they used to travel through the countryside and refine their artistic talent. “Choi Chiwon, a later representative of *Shilla* immortality, integrated the ideas of Confucius, Buddha and Laozi with his worldview. The notion of harmonizing the three teachings had already appeared in China in the Six Dynasties, but in *Shilla* it came from the indigenous ‘three-in-one’ thinking.” (Jung Jae-Seo 2000: 811) The concept ‘three-in-one’ designates the pursuit of personal self-cultivation on the one hand (inner alchemy), and work the for the benefit of all mankind, on the other (implying a valid ontology, not only ethics and social teaching).

There are multiple evidences that Daoism flourished during the *Koryo* dynasty (918–1392) – although it was predominantly a Buddhist state, the royal court favored the Dao-teaching in its early period. The secret records about King Taejo's accession and the stories of various divinations resemble the myths about the

founders of Chinese dynasties – the celestial approval was legitimized through a renowned Daoist master. There used to be a sympathetic relationship between the founder, King Taejo, and the Daoist adepts both before and after his accession to the throne. The originally Buddhist ceremony called *Palkwan hwe* (Assembly of the Eight Views) includes Daoist aspects such as the sacrifices to the god of Heaven, the five mountains, to famous hills and great rivers.

In the seventh year of his reign, King Taejo set up the *Kuyo dang* (Hall to the Nine Luminaires) as a venue for Daoist offerings (*jiao*) to the stars, further consolidating his authority by giving to Daoism an equal rank with the state religion of Buddhism, which in turn implemented Daoist practices and principles. The most important innovation regarding *Koryo* period, was the establishment of the *Bokwon gung* in the tenth year of King Yaejong, specially organized to allow the performance of the Daoist purification ceremonies and offerings for the protection of the state, supported by the *Northern Song* emperor Huizong.

The *Choson* (1392–1910) society was predominantly set by Neo-Confucianism as a state religion and was accepted by the Royal Court as well as lesser aristocrats but not by the common people. King Taejong rejected the installation of state worship of the *Great One* (*Tai'i* – 太一), which would result in giving offerings to the Great Lord of Heaven, thus sacrificing the national Korean gods. Meanwhile, at least at the start of the *Choson* dynasty, Daoist literature was quite popular among Korean intellectual groups. They published and produced various pieces of literature as a result of a kind of academic research on Daoism, predominantly from a Confucian perspective. Regardless of the undeniable divergence between Confucianism and Daoism, there was a growing opposition from the main Confucian faction against the latter, and Daoism began to be perceived as ‘heretical’<sup>11</sup>. The Confucian schools and universities were founded by this dynasty in a try to raise the standard of ‘refinement’ and understanding among the populous. The dominant direction of Korean Daoism in the *Choson* dynasty shifted from being national and disciplined to private and experimental alchemical studies – the *Chonghak jip* (Collection of Master Blue Crane) and Hong Manjong’s *Haedong yijok* (Record of Eastern Sea Immortals)<sup>12</sup> can be seen as examples of this trend.

The *Choson* intellectuals were deeply interested in *Lao-Zhuang* Daoism – they tried to establish their own interpretation of the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi* thought and Daoist immortality scriptures as a genuine textual criticism from a metaphysical standpoint. Kwon Kukjung, the great master of late-*Choson* inner alchemy, introduced a systematic *neidan* philosophy in his Commentary to the *Cantong qi*<sup>13</sup> including a complete ontology, theory of human nature, system of alchemical

practice and doctrine of immortality. His followers established the original trend of their time to submit objects of scholarship to analysis and research from a Daoist perspective along with detailed discussions of Dao as an exposition of its essence. Another form of Daoism in the late *Choson* were the Chinese-style morality books – the first among the transmitted to Korea texts in this genre: the *Yinzhi wen* (*Tract of Secret Blessings*) was sent by the *Ming* Emperor *Chengzu* to the *Choson* king *Taejong*. Korean commentaries, compilations and authentic ethical teachings in the late *Choson* reveal that during this period the inner alchemy had attained a certain level of profundity and that theoretical inquiry was more wide-ranging than ever<sup>14</sup>.

Between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries Korean Dao-teaching developed a harmonious view of the world of human affairs and a cosmology based on the supreme god, who coexisted with many local and foreign deities: from the mid-*Choson* the organized Daoism went into decline, superseded by popular cults and practices. But scholars such as Jung Ryom advocated the traditional worldview of an integrated, harmonized Daoist doctrine merged with Confucianism and Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Kwon Kukjung claimed that Daoism and Buddhism came from the same origin and that the immortality pursued by the alchemists was equivalent to the highest realm of Buddhist salvation. According to his theory the aim of the inner alchemy, as well as in Buddhism, was the returning to the *Great Supreme* (*taiji* – 太極), attaining a state beyond life and death. For him *Chan* meditation and the Daoist *Neidan* cultivation were complementary paths to spiritual releasement, seen as methods of both physical cultivation and mental enlightenment<sup>16</sup>.

With such a historical framework, today the Dao influence throughout Korea is quite insignificant. A clear instance of the effect of Daoism among Koreans is the pursuit of good fortune and long-life, a part of Daoist religion rather than philosophy. Moreover, it affected the lives of everyday people in other ways, including geomancy, fortune-telling, prognostication and folk literature<sup>17</sup>. Religious Daoism flourished briefly, but mainly within the Royal Court as a means of rite and ceremony, whilst Korean philosophical Daoism was poorly developed as an abstract theory. Popular Daoist cultural forms have existed mainly in practices of shamanism and animism – *Sin-Sun Sasang* – and this can be seen as a rather meager reflection of the initial flourishing of philosophical Daoism in Korea. The effects of Daoist thought can be seen throughout Korean culture even today – the most obvious example is the national ensign of South Korea with the ‘*Taeguk*’, which is the symbol of *taiji*. The *Supreme Ultimate* or yin (陰) and yang (陽), with the *Yijing* trigrams flanking each direction: ☰ Force; ☷ Field; ☲ Radiance and ☵ Gorge.

Any discussion of the intellectual milieu of East Asian countries must include Korea and from this perspective the importance of Daoism in comparison to Confucianism and Buddhism is relatively latent in the local consciousness. It is undeveloped as a system of ordination and yet Daoist theory and practice dominated the internal aspects of Korean culture. As it was demonstrated above, some scholars believe that Daoism was not imported from China at a particular time, since it is an intrinsically Korean tradition that shares characteristics with Chinese Daoism. Prior to its transmission from *Tang* dynasty, there existed an indigenous form of worship similar to the Daoist rituals and beliefs in Early China. In the end, we came to the conclusion that the cultural development of Korea – its spirituality, art and way of life – were all dramatically impacted by a mixture of Daoist, Confucian and Buddhist thought with a traditional shamanistic base. The same can be also said for much of East-Asia, including China and Japan. The naturalistic aesthetics, lifestyle and worldview of China, Korea and Japan are similar because they were all influenced by such traditional shamanism, blended with local cultural aspects and the philosophical schools of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

## Notes

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**1** Early Chinese Thought, Indiana University [B/E/P374] – Fall, 2010 (R. Eno) *Zhuangzi* <<http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Zhuangzi.pdf>>

**2** The satirical approach is extensively used in the *Zhuangzi* often in order to imagine a way of life that is depicted in the parables and anecdotes. The symbolism of the edifying stories and dialogues can be summed up in the mentorship of the great and venerable master as an ideal personal relationship, which excludes the kings, heroes, etc. on the basis of the mainstream values of these characters. On the other side, as long as you are willing for utilitarian benefits, such an orientation can be described as disturbing the intimate clarity and spontaneity of the pure mind. Following this direction, we might notice that “if the success is once awakened to take place for individual purposes, then even the entire country etiquette becomes a talisman of power violating the longstanding morals.” (Wu Kuang-ming 1982: 123).

**3** Some analyzers of the treatise address the question of how he manages to sustain a positive moral vision in the face of this seemingly indiscriminate skepticism. In order to pinpoint more exactly what he doubts and why, Zhuangzi is compared to the Greek philosophers Plato and to Sextus Empiricus. His views on language and the role that it plays in shaping the reality we perceive are also examined at length. Other authors test the application of Zhuangzi’s ideas to contemporary debates in critical theory and to issues in moral philosophical thought such as the establishment of equal worth and the implications of ethical relativism. They also explore the religious and spiritual dimensions of the text and clarify the relation between Daoism and Buddhism.

**4** According to the second chapter – ‘Equality of Things’ (齐物论), everyone has the inherent right of self-certainty in his own experience, but to face the prospect of death is one of the most difficult personal challenges. Similarly, outside the daily life perspective, those with good physique may be disabled more than those living a healthy life if the selection criterion is the ‘usefulness of the useless ones’, achieving peace and longevity.

**5** Early Chinese Thought, Indiana University [B/E/P374] – Fall, 2010 (R. Eno) – The *Dao de jing* <<http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Daodejing.pdf>>

**6** “Ultimately, the best way of dealing with this question is to regard Korean Daoism as comprising key elements of indigenous ideas and practices similar to those of Chinese Daoism and originally part of Korean culture. These ele-

ments were then fused with and formalized under the influence of the systems and doctrines of Chinese Daoism later transmitted to Korea.” (Jung Jae-Seo 2000: 794–795).

**7** Nung-Hwa Yi (1868–1945) was the first historical-scholar on Korean Daoism. He wrote *Choson Togyo Sa* [The history of Choson Daoism]. This writing was the first fully accounted research on the history of Korean Daoism. (Sung Soo Kim: 1994)

**8** All traditional scholars base their theories about the origin of Daoism in Korea on the *Samguk sagi* (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*) – the most ancient Korean written document. The critical researchers assume that the official chronicles refer only to the establishment of an organized Daoist ordination system in Korea, not diminishing the preceding indigenous Dao-culture, which the Tang dynasty’s missionary activity expanded and systematized. They examine the primordial Daoist legends, mountain-spirit cults and tales of immortality, already present in Korea before the arrival of Gaozu’s envoys. “Lee Nunghwa, the founding father of modern Korean Daoist studies, compared the ancient Korean beliefs in three divinities, Hwanin, Hwanwung and Dangun, with Chinese myths about the sacred mountains Penglai, Fangzhang and Yingzhou, and proposed that immortality cults in Yan and Qi came, contrary to the common view, from an ancient Korean range of indigenous beliefs surrounding the sacred Mount Baekdu, the Chanbai shan of the Chinese.” (Jung Jae-Seo 2000: 794)

**9** The *Three Kingdoms* denotes the kingdoms of *Koguryo* in the north, *Baekje* in the southwest, and *Shilla* in the southeast. Data from the kingdom of *Koguryo* (37 B.C.E. – 668 C.E.), predating the formal transmission of Chinese Daoism in the seventh century reveals that there was a preexisting Daoist culture in Korea. In the same time, in a later edition of the *Samguk sagi* there is a record that *Celestial Masters Daoism*, then called *the Five Pecks of Rice* sect was popular in *Koguryo* at the beginning of the seventh century, suggesting that this form of Daoism was transmitted to Korea by the northern *Celestial Masters*. (Jung Jae-Seo 2000: 795)

**10** An elite armed force of *Shilla* – the so called “Elite Youth Corps” (*Hwarang do*), noted for its disciplined composure, simplicity, relaxation and harmony: each a component of philosophical Daoism.

**11** Subsequently the number of practitioners of *Choson* Daoism was drastically reduced and the volume of Daoism was cut hugely; eventually, when the Japanese Invasion took place in 1592, *Choson* Daoism was systematically abolished. Since that time until the present day, Korean Daoist teaching has been marginalized not only by the Korean Royal Court, Confucians and Buddhists, but also by society as a whole. The devastation that official Daoism suffered during the *Choson* dynasty led to the formation of less official centers, where Daoist masters conducted studies and experiments in inner alchemy, collectively known as *Danhak pa*. Their occurrence can be traced back to the *Koryo* period, when groups of independent intellectuals had practiced Daoist methods in private, away from the organized or national Daoism

**12** These texts trace the *Choson* ideas and teachings back to Korean myths about *Hwanin*, *Dangun* and others. Alchemist studies under the *Choson* dynasty incorporated practices of inner *Neidan* – 內丹術, or internal alchemy as undertaken in the Zhong-Lu tradition: its formulas resonate with writings attributed to Lu Dongbin, one of the Chinese semi-legendary *Eight Immortals*, around which the Zhong-Lu *neidan* and the *Quanzhen* (*Complete Perfection*) tradition first flourished in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Historically, it is not clear if the practice of inner alchemy adopted by Korean Daoism originally came from scattered mountain Dao-practitioners seeking longevity and immortality, but its followers did not simply take over Chinese theories – they attempted “through a pattern of scholarship and commentary, to deepen their own understanding and interpretation. Kim Sisub, in his *Yongho ron* (Discussion on Dragon and Tiger), developed his own critical theory of inner alchemy using the language of Neo-Confucianism, while Jung Ryom wrote the earliest Korean work on inner alchemy, the *Yongho bikyol* (Secret Formula of Dragon and Tiger). The latter not only became the basic textbook of the period, but also had a great influence on the formation of the distinctively Daoist medical system represented in the *Choson* medical text *Dongui bogam*”. (Jung Jae-Seo 2000: 799–800)

**13** The *Cantong qi* is deemed to be the earliest book on alchemy in China – the title has been variously translated as *Kinship of the Three*, *Akinness of the Three*, *Triplex Unity*, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, and in several other ways. The full title of the text is *Zhouyi cantong qi*, which can be translated as *The Kinship of the Three, in Accordance with the Book of Changes*. According to a well-established traditional view, the text was composed by Wei Boyang in the mid-second century A.D., and deals entirely with alchemy – in particular, with *Neidan*, or Internal Alchemy. Besides this one, there has been, within the Daoist tradition, a second way of reading the text: in agreement with its title, the *Cantong qi* is concerned not with one, but with three major subjects, namely cosmology (the



system of the *Book of Changes*), *Daoism* (the way of ‘non-doing’), and alchemy, rejoining them to one another into a single doctrine. (Pregadio 2011)

**14** For example, Shin Donbok can be seen as continuing the tradition of inner alchemy studies of Kwon Kukjung and others, in addition to which he incorporated the whole range of schools of Chinese Daoism. Such Korean Daoist collections are of great importance – they systematically consolidate selections from Korean and Chinese texts dealing with inner alchemy, cultivation, breathing exercises, gymnastics and morality. The immortality scriptures present the principles of moral enlightenment required before practicing inner alchemy, the main themes of spiritual and bodily discipline, “from practical plans for physical training to self-cultivation through taking herbs and regulating the interior fire” (Jung Jae-Seo 2000: 806).

**15** He identified the mysterious pearl that condenses in the *Niwan* palace after the bright and pure *qi* has been established in a full cycle of proper regulation of the fire, with the relicts of the Buddha.

**16** Kwon Kukjung persisted in the pursuit of a syncretic and holistic teaching and practice for the refinement for the *qi* handed down from ancient Chinese doctrines and indigenous Korean culture and beliefs.

**17** In this respect, Korean Daoism tended to reinforce certain fatalism – prayers for health, for rain and for strengthening the army. It emphasized making do with one’s lot, carefulness and even submission, and at the same time, legitimated certain animist trends in popular culture. (Sung Soo Kim: 1994)

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