

Article

Religious Syncretism between Daoist and Shamanistic Imagery in Goguryeo Tomb Murals

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Introduction

The Three Kingdoms period 三國時代 (57 BCE–668 CE) was a time of significant religious diversity in Korea, offering scholars an important window into the peninsula's spiritual landscape prior to the formal introduction of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism 三教 from China. During this era, indigenous folk traditions and shamanism (Muism 巫俗) formed the dominant religious worldview, a heritage likely rooted in the earliest migrations from Manchuria and Siberia (Janhunen 2019).

These northern connections are reflected in shared practices of spirit communication, possession, and mediation, though distinct differences emerged. As Kim Chongsuh (2010, 25) notes, “Siberian shamans often rely on fire and soul-journeys, while Korean shamans employ bells and mirrors for healing and even perform ‘blade-riding’ (*jakdu tagi* 斫刀打機) to display spiritual authority.” Another distinguishing feature is gender: whereas Siberian shamans are predominantly male, Korea has a strong tradition of female shamans (*mudang*) (Kister 1999, 78).

Early Korean shamanism emphasized the interaction between human and spirit worlds, with shamans serving as mediators who secured protection, healing, fertility, and guidance for the dead (Cho 1999, 60). Rituals often incorporated dance, music, and symbolic instruments (bells, mirrors, and swords), reinforcing the communal dimension of spiritual practice (J. Lee 1973). These beliefs also appear in tomb art, where protective motifs and cosmological symbols highlight the importance of afterlife guardianship.

For the purposes of this analysis, “Korean shamanism” (Muism) is understood not as a monolithic doctrine but as the indigenous, animistic worldview of early Korea, characterized by a focus on mediation between the human and spirit worlds. Central to this practice is the medium (*mudang*), who acts as a ritual specialist to secure protection, healing, and, crucially for the context of tomb art, guidance for the deceased (J. Lee 1973). This worldview emphasizes communal rituals involving music and dance to facilitate this mediation and envisions the cosmos as populated by protective spirits and deities associated with natural forces. It is this core function of spiritual guardianship

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and afterlife guidance that provides the foundational layer onto which Daoist (and Buddhist) cosmological symbols were syncretized in Goguryeo tomb murals.

When the Three Teachings entered Korea, they encountered not a religious vacuum but a long-established shamanic/folk tradition (Shin et al. 2020, 231). Syncretism, the selective blending of indigenous and imported systems, has long been a defining feature of Korean religiosity (C. Kim 2010, 26–27). Rather than wholesale replacement, foreign traditions were reinterpreted to harmonize with existing cosmologies. As early as the late Silla period, Choe Chiwon 崔致遠 (857–?) articulated the principle of “Three Teachings in Harmony” 三教會通, an idea later emphasized during the Goryeo dynasty as a basis for stable governance.¹

Religious syncretism refers to the blending or merging of different religious traditions and practices, often resulting in the creation of unique cultural expressions that reflect both external influences and indigenous beliefs. This process often arises from sustained contact between diverse cultural or religious groups, leading to mutual adaptation and reinterpretation of symbols, rituals, and cosmological frameworks (Grayson 1992, 200).

Religious syncretism in the Korean context refers not simply to the coexistence of diverse traditions but to processes of mutual adaptation and symbolic reconfiguration. Specifically, in the Goguryeo context, tomb murals illustrate this phenomenon vividly: Daoist cosmological emblems such as the four directional beasts and *yin-yang* imagery appear alongside motifs resonant with Korea’s shamanic emphasis on spiritual mediation and protection. Such juxtapositions suggest that foreign elements were actively reinterpreted within local frameworks rather than passively adopted. Simon Mills summarizes this phenomenon as follows:

In the *mudang*’s post-death ritual, all the protagonists (including the deceased) are encouraged to expurgate their sorrows and then the *mudang* “guides” the unhappy spirit to a peaceful place, thereby helping achieve some degree of “closure” for all. There are many different versions and styles of post-death

1 Chih-yuan (976–1022 CE), an eminent Buddhist monk, claimed that the three teachings were as important as the three medicines for three diseases and should be treated as triangular legs of one pot because, if any one of the three teachings is absent, the world would not be stable (Y. Lee 1992, 47).

ritual, varying according to region, context of death, and specialisms of the ritualist. In most cases, music and dance feature in the proceedings. (Mills 2012, 146)

This post-death ritual involving music and dance becomes relevant later when discussing the common motifs of immortals playing musical instruments and two “shaman” figures found in one of Goguryeo’s fifth century tombs, the Samsilchong Tomb 三室塚.

This article argues that several Goguryeo tomb murals neither simply replicate Chinese funerary iconography nor can be straightforwardly classified as “Daoist.” Instead, they reflect a process of cosmological reinterpretation in which symbolic systems later formalized within Daoist traditions were already circulating on the Korean peninsula prior to their documented “official” introduction in 624 CE, as recorded in the *Samguk sagi*. By examining the iconography of Ohoe Tombs 4 and 5 and Samsilchong, this study demonstrates that motifs commonly associated with Daoist cosmology, such as astral symbolism and paired creator figures, were selectively appropriated and recontextualized within Goguryeo ritual and afterlife conceptions. The murals therefore do not attest to the institutional presence of Daoism in Goguryeo; rather, they reveal how shared East Asian cosmological vocabularies were integrated into a local mediatory ritual framework to articulate a distinct Goguryeo worldview. In doing so, they illuminate an early phase of religious and cultural adaptation and underscore the importance of material culture as a primary source for reconstructing the formation of Korean religious identity.

In using the term “Daoist,” this article adopts a heuristic rather than institutional definition. The label refers to cosmological and symbolic systems that were later formalized within organized Daoist traditions, particularly astral cosmology, correlative frameworks, and mythic figures such as Fuxi and Nüwa. It does not presume the presence of fully developed Daoist ritual institutions or Tang-style liturgical structures in Goguryeo. Likewise, the term “shamanistic” is used narrowly to indicate indigenous mediatory ritual traditions centered on specialist figures (*mu*) and a cosmology structured around communication between human and transcendent realms. By clarifying these terms, the argument avoids reifying “Daoism” as a monolithic system and instead focuses on how shared cosmological elements were selectively reinterpreted within a Goguryeo ritual context.

Theoretical Framework: Reassessing Syncretism and Defining Shamanic Context

Here I seek to establish the theoretical underpinnings for analyzing the syncretic elements in Goguryeo tomb murals, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from religious studies, folklore, and art history. By reassessing syncretism as a dynamic process and clarifying the shamanic context in early Korea, the framework outlined here situates the murals within broader discourses on cultural hybridity, while addressing the fluidity of religious boundaries in East Asia. This approach responds to calls for nuanced interpretations of visual culture and also positions this study within Korean folkloristic scholarship, emphasizing lived practices, oral traditions, and indigenous epistemologies alongside iconographic analysis.

Reassessing Syncretism: Beyond Coexistence to Ideological Assimilation and Cultural Recontextualization

Religious syncretism, as defined in the introduction, involves the blending of diverse traditions through mutual adaptation and reinterpretation. However, to move beyond a superficial notion of “coexistence,” this study adopts a more elaborated theoretical lens, viewing syncretism as a multifaceted process encompassing ideological assimilation, ritual integration, and cultural recontextualization. Drawing on James Grayson’s (1992) framework, syncretism in Korea is not a passive merger but an active negotiation where indigenous elements selectively absorb foreign influences to reinforce local identities. Grayson highlights “reverse syncretism,” where folk traditions reshape imported religions, a concept particularly relevant here; Daoist symbols in Goguryeo murals are not merely adopted but recontextualized within shamanic emphases on spiritual mediation and afterlife guidance.

This perspective aligns with broader comparative religious theories, such as those from Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw in “Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism,” who claim syncretism often serves as a strategy for cultural resilience amid power imbalances. They argue, “Syncretism has presumably always been part of the negotiation of identities and hegemonies in situations such as conquest, trade, migration, religious dissemination and intermarriage” (Stewart and Shaw 1994, 18). In the Korean Three Kingdoms context, ideological assimilation is

evident in how Daoist cosmology, e.g., *yin-yang* duality and the four directional beasts, integrates with shamanic worldviews without erasing the latter's focus on communal rituals and spirit possession. Ritual integration further manifests in shared practices, like music and dance in post-death ceremonies—as noted by Simon Mills (2012, 3)—which echo Daoist visualizations of celestial energies. Cultural recontextualization, meanwhile, transforms symbols; the sun and moon motifs, typically Daoist emblems of harmony, acquire shamanic connotations of divine mediation in Korean tombs (Yang 2025, 5).

Defining the Shamanic Context: Korean Muism as Mythic, Ritual, and Epistemological System

To avoid monolithic portrayals, “Korean Shamanism” (Muism 巫俗) is defined here as an indigenous, animistic worldview emphasizing mediation between human and spirit realms, rooted in early migrations from Manchuria and Siberia (Janhunen 2019). Mythic systems include foundational narratives like the Jumong myth, where solar (Haemosu) and lunar (Yuhwa) deities embody *yin-yang* harmony, legitimizing royal authority (Yang 2025, 5). Ritual structures focus on post-death guidance (*gut* ceremonies), facilitating closure through music and possession (Mills 2012, 4). Later vernacular beliefs, such as mountain spirit (*sansin*) worship, evolve from these, blending with imported religions during Goryeo (J. Lee 1973).

This definition draws on Korean folkloristic traditions, which stress practice, orality, and lived experience. Ethnographic records reveal ancient shamanism's ties to fertility, sexual play, and magical flights—elements resonant with mural motifs of immortals and dancing figures (Na 2021). In Korea, female shamanic traditions are central: *mudang* as mediators mirror the murals' guardian roles, reflecting indigenous epistemologies of interconnected worlds (J. Lee 1973, 153).

In sum, this framework reassesses syncretism as transformative and defines Muism through its mythic-ritual layers, positioning the study as a bridge between visual culture and folkloristics. It challenges assumptions of Daoist dominance, highlighting Korean adaptations that reveal universal concerns of cosmic balance and spiritual guardianship.

Religious Context of Goguryeo

Goguryeo (37 BCE–668 CE), the northernmost of Korea's Three Kingdoms, occupied a strategic position in modern-day North Korea and northeastern China, facilitating extensive cultural exchanges with Chinese dynasties and nomadic groups from Manchuria and Siberia. Its religious landscape was characterized by a foundational layer of indigenous shamanism (Muism), interwoven with early influences from Daoism and Buddhism, creating a syncretic worldview that emphasized cosmic harmony, spiritual mediation, and afterlife protection. This blend is vividly preserved in tomb murals, which served as both artistic expressions and ritual spaces for the deceased.

Indigenous shamanism formed the core of Goguryeo's earliest spiritual practices, rooted in animistic beliefs where shamans (*mudang*) acted as mediators between the human and spirit worlds through rituals like *gut* ceremonies involving music, dance, and possession to ensure healing, fertility, and guidance for the dead (Cawley 2019, 17–18). Drawing from Siberian and Manchurian migrations, Goguryeo shamanism featured communal elements, such as reverence for solar/lunar deities, as seen in founding myths like that of Jumong, where Haemosu (sun-associated) and Yuhwa (moon/river-linked) embody *yin-yang* duality. These practices underscored a cosmology of interconnected realms, with rituals facilitating transitions to the afterlife, motifs that appear in murals as dancing figures and protective spirits.

Early Daoist influences permeated this shamanic base through cultural contacts with China, predating the “official entry” of organized Daoism in 624 CE, as recorded in the *Samguk sagi* (Damyanova 2018, 138). Visual and ritual traces in murals suggest unofficial adoption as early as the fourth to fifth centuries, challenging the traditionally accepted timeline. For instance, middle-period tombs (fifth-sixth centuries) like Samsilchong feature immortals (*xian*) and mythical animals, reflecting Daoist pursuits of transcendence and harmony with the Dao, integrated with shamanic mediation (Jung 2000, 795). Buddhism, officially adopted in 372 CE, further contributed to syncretism, with lotus motifs appearing even earlier (e.g., Anak Tomb No. 3, 357 CE), blending with shamanic and Daoist elements in a multi-ethnic warrior kingdom.

Daoism's cosmological symbols relevant to Goguryeo murals were selectively adapted to align with local beliefs. Central among these are the four

directional beasts—Azure Dragon/east, White Tiger/west, Vermilion Bird/south, and Black Tortoise/north—often painted on chamber walls as guardians, unlike Chinese tombs where they appear on ceilings, symbolizing cosmic order, *yin-yang* balance, and protection against evil (Wu 2021, 11–12). Sun and moon imagery, depicted with shamanic motifs like the three-legged crow (sun) and toad/rabbit (moon), embodied duality and celestial energies, echoing Daoist practices of absorbing *qi* for longevity.² Immortals, shown flying or playing instruments, represented transcendence and bridged human-celestial realms, syncretizing with shamanic dance rituals for post-death guidance. Constellations (e.g., Big Dipper) on ceilings further illustrated Daoist stellar influences, predating official endorsement of Goguryeo Daoism and highlighting Goguryeo's adaptive religiosity.

This context reveals Goguryeo's religion as a dynamic synthesis, where shamanism provided the ritual foundation for absorbing Daoist cosmology, as seen in murals that functioned as microcosms of the universe for the afterlife. Such evidence underscores the need to reassess timelines through material culture, setting the stage for the symbolic and analytical discussions that follow.

Daoist Symbolism in Korea's Three Kingdoms Period

One of the motivations for this paper is to challenge the commonly accepted timeline of Daoism's introduction to the Korean peninsula, which is traditionally cited as 624 CE in the *Samguk sagi* 三國史記. Kim Bu-sik 金富弼 (1075–1151 CE), the compiler of this seminal text, claimed that Daoism entered Korea via Goguryeo in 624 CE. Some modern scholars also use Kim Bu-sik's date of 624 CE to mark the entrance of Daoism but clarify that it was the date of “official acceptance.” This is to say, being sent directly at the behest of the Chinese emperor to the Korean king, it was “organized Daoism” which is termed as religious Daoism 道教 that entered Korea (Damyanova 2018, 138). However, not all scholars take such a nuanced position and follow the traditional scholarship which uses this date of 624 CE to mark the entrance of Daoism in general into Korea (Seidel 1989, 298; Yoon 2018, 17). Such a date is at least

2 For more on this practice see Pregadio's *Encyclopedia of Taoism* entry on *bajing* 八景.

300 years off the mark and this paper is an attempt to demonstrate this fact from just one stream of source material (tomb murals). Establishing a more accurate timeline for Daoism's arrival in Korea is crucial for refining historical accuracy and addressing misconceptions in traditional and modern scholarship. Identifying earlier Daoist influences reveals the complexity of cultural exchanges between Korea and China during the Three Kingdoms period and offers insights into how Daoist cosmology was integrated with indigenous Korean traditions like shamanism.

The term "Daoism" is used here in a broad, inclusive sense. While scholars often distinguish between "philosophical" 道家 and "religious" 道教 Daoism, the boundaries between them were historically fluid. Concepts such as *wuwei* 無爲, often treated as philosophical, appear integrally in early ritual texts like the *Taipingjing* 太平經. In this paper, "Daoism" thus refers to the composite cosmological and ritual system that informed visual and symbolic expressions in East Asia.

Daoist cosmological symbols are deeply embedded in the traditional understandings of the universe as a balanced, interconnected system. These symbols often reflect ideas of protection, cosmic harmony, and the cyclical nature of existence. Among the most prominent are the four directional (auspicious) beasts (Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Black Tortoise 四神, sun and moon imagery, and depictions of Daoist immortals 仙 (L. Kim 2004). These symbols carried iconographic meanings in Daoism and were integral to rituals, cosmology, and artistic expressions.

The four directional beasts are perhaps the most recognizable Daoist cosmological symbols. However, I need to state that the earliest depictions of these creatures which remain today were found in the tombs of ancient Chinese shamans during the Shang dynasty 商朝 (Childs-Johnson 2021). This belief system would later be absorbed by Daoists and become primarily associated with Daoism, but the origins are much older and from a separate group of religious practitioners (Childs-Johnson 2021).

As for descriptions of the animals themselves, each creature corresponds to one of the four cardinal directions and is associated with specific elements, colors, and seasons and more: the Azure Dragon (East/wood/Spring), White Tiger (West/metal/Autumn), Vermilion Bird (South/ fire/Summer), and Black

Tortoise (North/water/Winter).³ These associations and roles evolved over many centuries and came to represent cosmic order and protection, often appearing in Daoist temples, rituals, and visual art (Pregadio 2008, 1099-1102). In the context of tomb art, these creatures served not only as guardians of the deceased but also as symbols of the harmonious balance of the universe. These creatures hold persistent symbolic meaning even for modern Koreans, with the four beasts being featured in a recent animated show based on a Korean webtoon.⁴

Sun and moon imagery also features prominently in Daoist cosmology, often symbolizing the duality and balance of *yin* and *yang*. The sun, often associated with *yang* 陽, represents light, warmth, and activity, while the moon, tied to *yin* 陰, reflects coolness, darkness, and rest. Together, these celestial bodies embody the Daoist ideal of interdependence, a concept central to both philosophical and religious Daoism. Additionally, there are various visualization and meditative practices associated with religious Daoism with the goal of absorbing a portion of the solar, lunar, and astral *qi* 氣 (Pregadio 2008, 648).

Such a goal and practices can be traced back to the Shangqing school (Highest Clarity 上清) which began in the fourth century via Wei Huacun 魏華存 (252–334 CE) and was greatly developed in the fifth century under Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536 CE). The early Shangqing community placed significant emphasis on absorbing astral essences (*jing* 精) and is described by Michael Winn as:

Jing, the subtle substance holding the form of one's body, is the key ingredient to apprehending the function of sexuality in this Daoist cosmology. *Jing* is perhaps best understood in Western terms as prime matter. *Jing* is the raw fuel that drives the pulsating rhythm of the body's moment-to-moment cellular division and reproduction of itself. (Winn 2022, 20)

Various techniques were developed for this purpose, including drawing in the luminous energies of the sun, moon, stars, mists, and other celestial phenomena (Komjathy 2011, 83). Of note is that these practices associated with Lord Lao, the deified Laozi 老君, and are sometimes referenced alongside the four auspicious beasts (Raz 2012, 87). As I will describe in the next section, in the

3 A more detailed description of these creatures can be found in the Han dynasty text *Huainanzi*. For this, see Major et al. 2012, 51–52.

4 The show is titled “The God of High School” and aired in 2020.

Goguryeo tombs highlighted in this paper, the four auspicious beasts and various solar, lunar, and astral motifs are always placed alongside one another. This artistic convergence suggests that Koreans of the Three Kingdoms period may have adopted or adapted to similar cosmological practices.

Daoist immortals, often depicted in art and literature, symbolize transcendence and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. These figures are thought to have achieved harmony with the Dao, granting them supernatural powers and eternal life. Representations of immortals frequently emphasize their connection to nature (especially mountains and animals) and their ability to bridge human and celestial realms. Livia Kohn, an eminent scholar on Daoism describes the practices of immortals as such:

This training usually involved a variety of longevity techniques—breathing exercises, diet control, healing exercises, sexual hygiene, absorption of solar energies, and meditations. Like hermits in other parts of the world, Han seekers undertook these practices with great seriousness. They lived in the wilderness, dressed in garments of leaves or deer skins, fasted by living on pure *qi*, or ate raw food they found in the woods. (Kohn 2009, 59)

Having briefly explained the symbols this paper aims to cover, I will now go on to describe some of these Daoist and Shamanic cosmological symbols which can be found in Goguryeo tomb murals.

Case Studies: Analysis of Goguryeo Tomb Murals

Goguryeo tomb murals provide some of the earliest visual evidence of cultural interactions between China and Korea, showcasing a fusion of indigenous shamanistic traditions with Daoist cosmology and other foreign elements. There are some 13,000 Goguryeo tombs scattered across parts of modern China, North Korea, and South Korea (L. Kim 2004). Of these tombs only a small number (around 100) are mural tombs and they all reside in parts of Jian 集安, China (20 tombs) and North Korea (80 tombs) making studying these valuable relics of history difficult (L. Kim 2004). These mural tombs are categorized by Park Jin-uk (1997) into three periods according to their structures and themes of the murals.

The early period, spanning the late 3rd to early 5th centuries, is a time of artistic individuality, with paintings reflecting unique regional styles. The middle period, from the mid-5th to early 6th centuries, marks the period where Daoist symbols can first be seen, such as the four directional animals (typically smaller paintings located on the ceiling, more akin to the older Chinese tomb murals) and big dipper motifs. These middle period tombs also offer a glimpse into daily life, adorned with intricate decorative motifs. The final period, the mid-6th to mid-7th centuries, is distinguished by single-chamber tombs whose stone walls served as canvases for vibrant, full-wall murals of the four directional deities, which demonstrates their growing importance and perhaps also the increasing importance of Daoism as a whole (Park 1997). It was during this final period as well as during the reign of King Yeongnyu 榮留王 that Daoist emissaries from Tang China were sent at the behest of the emperor in 624 CE. The next and final king of Goguryeo officially endorsed Daoism (favoring it over Buddhism) and converted some Buddhist temples into Daoist temples (Jorgensen 2012, 66–67).

Ohoe Tombs: Numbers 4 and 5

The first examples are tombs in the final period and they are dated between the late sixth century and early seventh century. They are known as Ohoe Tombs No. 4 and No. 5 and reside in modern day China in Jian city 集安.⁵ In these tombs we can find many easily identifiable Daoist symbols such as the four directional animals and nine immortals each depicted in unique ways (flying on animals, playing instruments, etc.).⁶ For purposes of this paper the most important figures in the tombs are the sun god and the moon goddess. These figures are typically identified as Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧 who are two deities associated with the creation of humans and culture (music, hunting, cooking, etc.) (Scapari 2006, 16). Such an identification is plausible as they are depicted as having a serpentine lower body and a human upper body along with a human face. Each figure holds a disk above the head; Fuxi holds a sun disk containing

5 For pictures see L. Kim 2004, 91.

6 For instance, in Shangqing rituals the Four Auspicious Beasts are claimed to guard the practitioner (Pregadio 2008, 838). For more information about the Four Auspicious Beasts and their relationship to Daoism see Pregadio 2008, 1099–1102.

a black three-legged crow, while Nüwa holds a moon disk containing a toad.⁷ Interestingly, Lena Kim (2004, 91), who prepared the UNESCO write-up, describes Fuxi and Nüwa as wearing the garb of Daoist immortals, presumably on the basis of the robes' resemblance to those conventionally associated with immortals.

However, there is some disagreement about the identity of these two figures. Hyunkyoung Shin et al. (2020, 221–22) argue that they are not the depiction of Fuxi and Nüwa who are Chinese deities; rather, they are Haesin and Dalsin, the Korean version of the sun god and the moon goddess, respectively. Haesin and Dalsin belong primarily to the sphere of Korean shamanism and folk belief. If this identification is correct, their appearance in the tomb mural marks a departure from the standard repertoire of Daoist cosmological imagery, such as the four directional animals and the Seven Stars of the Northern Dipper 北斗七星.⁸ According to Shin et al. (2020), the inclusion of these two deities in the tomb constitutes evidence that the people of Goguryeo continued to believe in shamanism while also accepting the influx of Chinese culture and mythology. For example, Shin et al. (2020, 224) concede that the mural clearly reflects the influence of *yin-yang* and five elements theory, which points to the influence of Daoism; they also note that the figures are depicted wearing clothing similar to that of other Daoist immortals.

In an infinite universe, Haesin is an emperor or sun king, and his task is to control education and to decree, while Dalsin rules the earth. In Korean mythology, Dalsin is described as the *sansin halmeoni* (birth-spirit grandmother 産神 할머니), who then transforms into a “mountain spirit,” or *sansin* 山神. (Shin et al. 2020, 229)

This “mountain spirit” is a central figure of Korean shamanism and is its most well-known deity (J. Lee 1981, 178). Female mountain spirits were more common than male mountain spirits in antiquity according to David Mason. However, in modern times, male mountain spirits are by far the most common

7 These animals commonly associated with the sun and the moon since ancient times. Sometimes you can also see a rabbit in the moon which is responsible for crafting the elixir of immortality.

8 The Seven Stars of Northern Dipper clearly held a place in Daoist cosmology since the Han period, as noted in *juan 27 of Shiji (Records of the Historian)*.

to come across (Mason 2011, 35). As a final note on mountain spirits, Dangun, the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom of Gojoseon, is also seen in contemporary literature as having both Daoist and shamanic elements in his myth and he also transforms into a mountain spirit upon retiring from ruling over Korea (N. Lee 1976, 11).

Sun and moon worship has been a noted feature of Korean folk belief for much of the Three Kingdoms period (Na 2021, 122). Interestingly, moon worship during the Chuseok festival is associated with sexual play and magical flights, both of which are also associated with Haesin and Dalsin. Others claim early Korea had a robust sun cult which falls into the category of “folk worship” and loosely shamanic.⁹ Evidence for this can be seen in the Silla myths such as when a bright light signals the miraculous birth of Kim Alji. Others have pointed to Goguryeo’s worship of the rooster, an animal strongly associated with sun worship (Riotto 2022).

In the founding myth of Goguryeo, the story of Jumong 朱蒙 holds a central place, shedding light on the divine and cosmological significance attributed to its origins.¹⁰ Jumong’s father, Haemosu 解慕漱, is depicted as the king of Buyeo 夫餘 and is recognized as the son of heaven. Haemosu is strongly associated with the sun, embodying celestial power and authority. Scholars have noted that the narrative of Haemosu’s dual existence, which consists of the human world during the daytime and returning to the heavenly world at night, suggests his role as a solar deity. This duality underscores his connection to both the celestial and earthly realms, emphasizing the legitimacy of his divine lineage and authority as a ruler.¹¹

The myth further intertwines celestial phenomena with human origins through the conception of Jumong. It describes a ray of sunlight impregnating Yuhwa 柳花, a daughter of the river god Habaek 河伯. Yuhwa, associated with the moon, was driven out of her home for her miraculous pregnancy, eventually giving birth to Jumong, the founder of Goguryeo (National Museum of Korea 2005, 34). The motif of divine light impregnating Yuhwa signifies the

9 For an account of early Korean sun worship see Riotto 2022.

10 There are three primary versions of this myth—found in the *Samguk sagi*, *Samguk yusa*, and *Dongguk Yi Sangguk jip* by Yi Gyubo.

11 “Characteristics of Korean Myths,” *The Center for International Affairs*, accessed January 14, 2025 (https://www.aks.ac.kr/cefia/webzine/2204/focus_eng.html).

transmission of heavenly power into the human lineage, legitimizing Jumong's status as a divinely ordained ruler. Through this myth, Goguryeo's origins are elevated into a sacred narrative, one that grounds the kingdom's foundation in both divine favor and natural cosmology.

The founding myth of Goguryeo, centered around Haemosu and Yuhwa, hints at the principles of *yin-yang* cosmology. Haemosu, the sun deity, embodies the *yang* principle: radiant, active, and possessing celestial authority. Conversely, Yuhwa, daughter of the river god, embodies *yin*: receptive, nurturing, and deeply connected to the earth. Their union, symbolized by the impregnation of Yuhwa by a ray of sunlight, represents the harmonious interplay of these complementary forces. This creative act, resulting in the birth of Jumong, the kingdom's founder, not only legitimizes his divine lineage but also places Goguryeo's origins within a cosmic order governed by balance and harmony.

The inclusion of Haesin and Dalsin in the murals of Ohoe Tomb No. 4 and No. 5 suggests the blending of Goguryeo's indigenous shamanic traditions with the imported cosmology of Daoism. These deities, acting as mediators between the physical and spiritual realms, align with the shamanic role of guiding spirits to the afterlife, while their depiction alongside Daoist symbols such as the four directional animals and *yin-yang* motifs reflects the dynamic cultural synthesis of the period (Shin et al. 2020, 231). The portrayal of Haesin and Dalsin with serpentine lower bodies and celestial emblems, such as the three-legged crow and the moon toad, highlights their cosmic significance and points to the kingdom's ability to integrate external influences while retaining its spiritual identity. Even their attire, resembling that of Daoist immortals, underscores this intersection of traditions, where Daoist cosmology complemented rather than replaced existing Korean beliefs.

This cultural synthesis mirrors the broader cosmological themes in Goguryeo's foundation myth, where the union of Haemosu and Yuhwa embodies the harmonious interplay of *yin* and *yang*, situating the kingdom's origins within a sacred cosmic order. Just as the myth legitimizes Jumong's divine lineage, the mural depictions of Haesin and Dalsin affirm the enduring importance of shamanic traditions alongside Daoist principles, reflecting a nuanced spiritual landscape. These narratives and artistic expressions together illustrate Goguryeo's unique ability to balance its indigenous identity with external influences, creating a vibrant and cosmologically resonant culture deeply rooted in its sacred and mythological heritage.

Samsilchong Tomb 三室塚

The final example is a late middle period tomb (roughly 5th century) known as Samsilchong 三室塚 where we find the common Daoist symbolism that would come to dominate the later period tombs. This tomb is also found in Jian city, Jilin province 吉林省. The tomb, featuring a circular mound, exhibits a unique architectural design. It is a three-chambered tomb, with a rectangular entrance chamber leading to a long, narrow corridor orienting southwest. This corridor then connects to two or three spherical burial chambers. Such a distinctive configuration is found in no other Three Kingdoms period tomb.¹²

This tomb contains murals of the four directional beasts, immortals playing musicians, auspicious birds, and mythical animals. The most notable figures for this study are what Jon Covell and Alan Covell (2009, 20) describe as a “flying shaman.” This figure is accompanied by other similarly distinct portraits of muscular men who are larger in size compared to the other human figures of the tomb. Some of these men are wearing armor and carrying weapons, but two of them are distinct from the rest and do not bear such instruments of war. The figure described as flying does not appear to be flying; rather, it seems to be holding up the tomb above his head in a dance-like, semi-squatting pose that demonstrates his power. Another figure appears in a dancing posture with a snake around his neck. These two figures are further distinguished by their unusual clothing and ribbons.

If these two figures are indeed related to Korean shamanism, they may have served not merely as tomb guardians but also as spiritual mediators guiding the deceased through the afterlife. At this point, it is useful to recall Simon Mills’s (2012, 146) description of post-death rituals in Korean shamanism: “There are many different versions and styles of post-death ritual, varying according to region, context of death, and specialisms of the ritualist. In most cases, music and dance feature in the proceedings.” This association between dance and post-death ritual may help explain the otherwise unusual and distinctive appearance of these two figures.

12 “Samsichong,” *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, accessed January 11, 2025 (<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0026706>).

Conclusion: The Legacy of Syncretism in Korean Religious Art

The tomb murals of the ancient Korean kingdom of Goguryeo offer examples of early religious syncretism, illustrating how cultural symbols and cosmologies are dynamic, evolving through processes of contact, adaptation, and reinterpretation. The integration of Daoist symbols such as the four directional beasts, *yin-yang* imagery, and celestial motifs with shamanic figures like Haesin and Dalsin reflects not a simple assimilation of foreign cosmology but a dialogical process in which imported ideas were reconfigured to align with indigenous Korean beliefs. This fusion created a unique expression of Korean spirituality, shaped by both external influences and local traditions.

This artistic synthesis challenges rigid categorizations of religious traditions, revealing their fluid and interdependent nature. It invites us to reconsider the boundaries of religious and philosophical systems: How do symbols and practices persist, transform, or acquire new meanings across cultural contexts? What does the blending of spiritual systems reveal about universal philosophical concerns, such as the balance of cosmic forces, the nature of the divine, or the human quest for transcendence? These murals encourage us to view religious identity not as static but as a process shaped by continuous negotiation and reinterpretation.

Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of material culture—art, iconography, and ritual objects—as visual “philosophical texts” in their own right. The interplay of Daoist and shamanic elements in tomb murals reveals a narrative of cultural exchange and philosophical integration that extends beyond written texts. This narrative contributes to broader discussions in comparative philosophy, offering potential insights into how local traditions mediate universal themes related to cosmology, morality, and the afterlife.

Future research could further examine how these syncretic processes interacted with other philosophical and religious traditions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, and diverse forms of folk belief, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of Korea’s religious and cultural development. Ultimately, the study of these tomb murals provides not only historical insight but also a philosophical framework for examining the dynamics of cultural and spiritual exchange. It reminds us that material artifacts, like texts, can serve as vessels of complex ideas, illuminating the continually evolving nature of human thought and belief.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the syncretic interplay between Daoist and shamanistic imagery in Goguryeo tomb murals of Korea's Three Kingdoms period. Focusing on motifs from the Anak, Ohoe and Samsilchong tomb mural complexes, the study traces how indigenous spiritual symbols, such as shamanic figures and cosmological patterns, were reinterpreted through imported Daoist cosmology. Through a comparative iconographic and textual analysis, it argues that these murals reveal a dynamic process of cultural exchange, wherein Daoist cosmological themes were integrated into Korea's pre-existing shamanic worldview. The visual synthesis of divine figures like Fuxi and Nüwa with native spiritual motifs demonstrates not mere artistic borrowing but the formation of a localized religious language that articulated the unity of heaven, earth, and humanity. This study contributes to understanding how Daoist metaphysics and indigenous Korean beliefs coexisted and interacted during the early development of Korea's religious identity, offering new insights into the spiritual pluralism of premodern East Asia.

Keywords: Goguryeo tomb murals, Daoism in Korea, Korean shamanism, religious syncretism, Three Kingdoms period