Religious Culture in Korea

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BULGUKSA TEMPLE & SEOKGURAM GROTTO

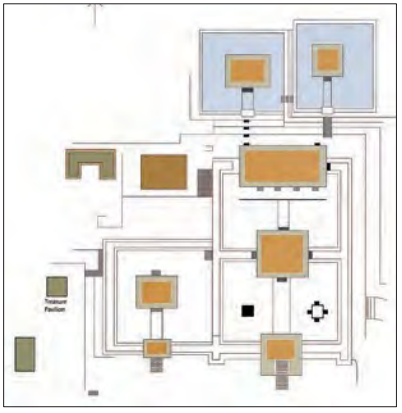
Bulguksa Temple and Seokguram Grotto

Located about 16 kilometers southeast of downtown Gyeongju, the former capital of the ancient Silla Kingdom (57 B.C.-A.D. 935), is Bulguksa, one of the largest and most beautiful Buddhist temples in Korea. Built on a series of stone terraces, Bulguksa temple appears to emerge organically from the rocky terrain of the wooded foothills of Mt. Tohamsan. This is because it was built in accordance with ancient notions of architecture and principles of geomancy that man-made structures should not be obtrusive but should harmonize with their surroundings. Bulguksa is both monolithic and intricate and takes on different guises as the light and shadows shift and the weather changes.

Bulguksa traces its origin back to a small temple that King Beopheung (r. 514-540), Silla's 23rd monarch and the first Silla ruler to embrace Buddhism, had erected for his queen to pray for the prosperity and peace of the kingdom. Its present structures, however, date to 751 when Kim Daeseong, a devoted Buddhist who had served as chief state minister, began building the large "Temple of the Buddha Land." An able administrator with an eye for beauty, Kim directed the construction until his death in 774, a few years before the project was completed. Originally consisting of more than 80

An autumn view of Bulguksa temple

Hundreds of granite blocks of various shapes and sizes were assembled to form the cave. The domed ceiling is capped with a round granite plate decorated with a lotus design.



Bird's-eye view of Bulguksa temple (above) and its ground plan (below)

buildings, 10 times the number surviving today, it was the center of Silla Buddhism and served primarily as a place to pray for the Buddha's protection against invaders. The temple's stonework including the foundations, staircases, platforms and several pagodas date from that time.

Two large stone balustraded staircases that were constructed without mortar dominate the temple's facade. The one on the right comprises a lower flight of steps called Baegungyo (Bridge of White Clouds) and an upper flight of steps called Cheongungyo (Bridge of Azure Clouds) and the one on the left, two flights of steps called Chilbogyo (Seven Treasures Bridge) and Yeonhwagyo (Lotus Bridge).

The staircases are called bridges because symbolically they lead from the secular world to Bulguk, the Land of the Buddha.

Baegungyo leads to Jahamun (Mauve Mist Gate), the main entrance to Daeungjeon, the temple's main sanctuary. The other staircase leads to Anyangmun (Pure Land Gate), the entrance to Geungnakjeon, another main sanctuary.

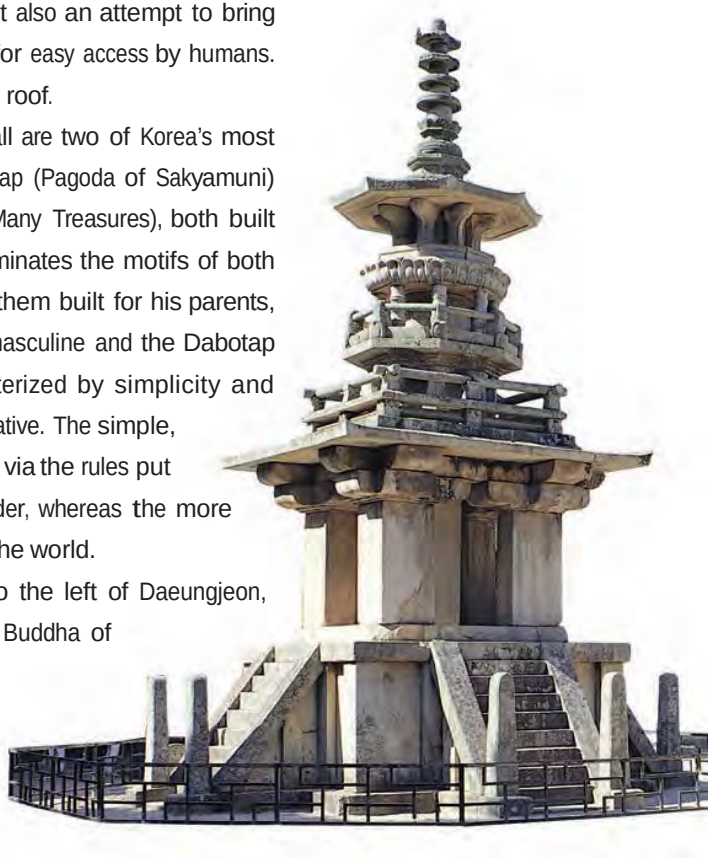
The colorful Daeungjeon is not Bulguksa's largest building, but it is certainly the most important as it enshrines a statue of Sakyamuni, the Historic Buddha. The gilt bronze image made in 1765 is flanked by Dipamkara, the Bodhisattva of the Past, and Maitreya, the Bodhisattva of the Future, and two arhats, or disciples, Ananda and Kasyapa. Ananda, the younger of the two, is a cousin of Sakyamuni and his habitual attendant. Kasyapa is a leading disciple.

The building is decorated with colorful dancheong patterns that are not only a reflection of the Buddhist heaven but also an attempt to bring the harmony and unity of the cosmos to earth for easy access by humans. Horned dragons look down from the eaves of the roof.

Dominating the courtyard of Daeungjeon hall are two of Korea's most beautiful pagodas: the 10.4-meter-high Seokgatap (Pagoda of Sakyamuni) and the 10.4-meter-high Dabotap (Pagoda of Many Treasures), both built around 751. A mimicry of wooden structure dominates the motifs of both pagodas. It is recorded that Kim Daeseong had them built for his parents, which is perhaps why the Seokgatap is rather masculine and the Dabotap feminine in appearance. Seokgatap is characterized by simplicity and princely dignity whereas Dabotap is highly decorative. The simple, three-story Seokgatap represents spiritual ascent via the rules put forth by Sakyamuni, Buddhism's historical founder, whereas the more complex Dabotap symbolizes the complexity of the world.

Geungnakjeon (Hall of Paradise), which is to the left of Daeungjeon, enshrines a gilt bronze image of Amitabha, the Buddha of the Western Paradise. A masterpiece of Buddh the lovely image is believed to have been made in 1750.

Bulguksa's Dabotap (Pagoda of Many Treasures)



Daeungjeon, the main hall of Bulguksa, was rebuilt in 1765. The stone foundations for the building were laid out during the Silla Kingdom (57 B.C.-A.D. 935).

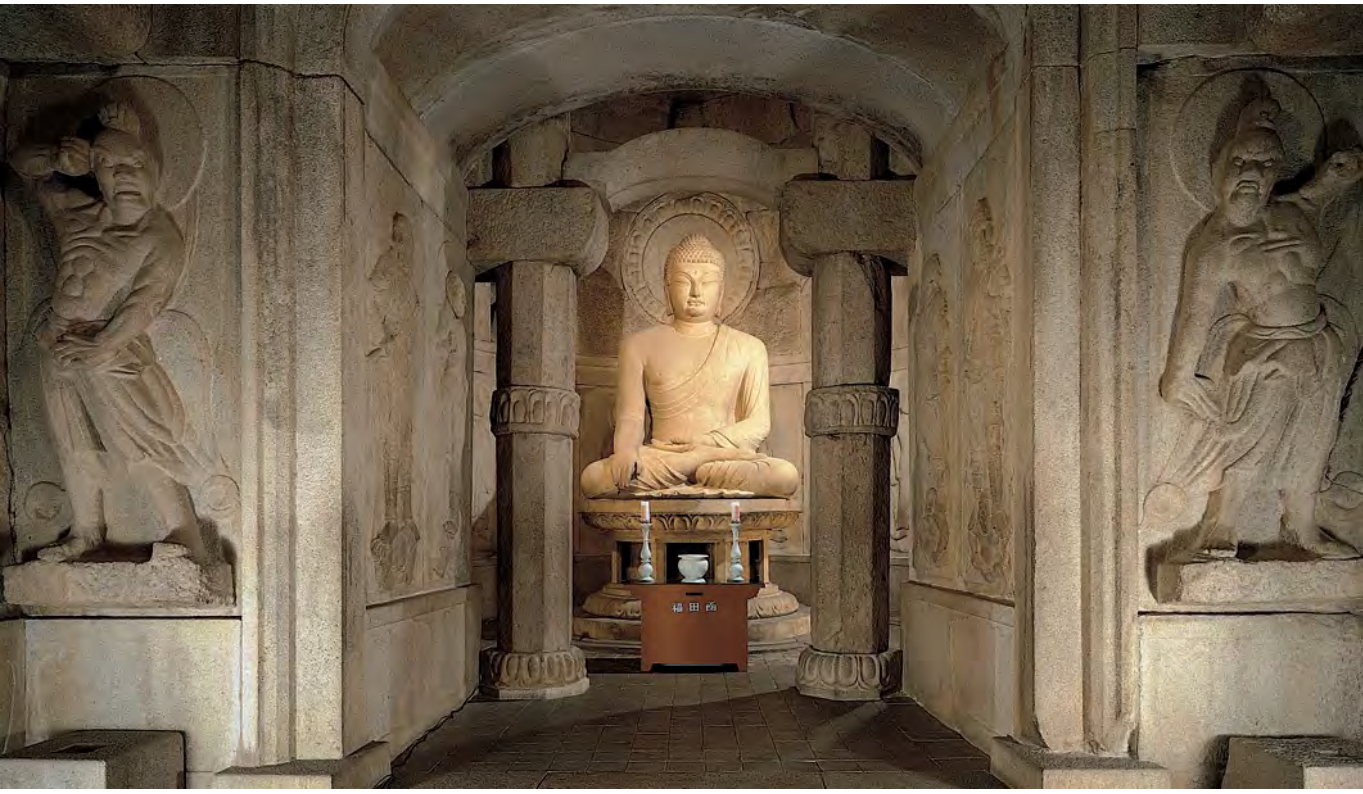
Behind Daeungjeon is the temple's largest building, a 34.13-meter-long lecture hall called Museoljeon. It is interesting to note that the name literally means no lecture, implying that truth cannot be obtained through lectures. Behind and to the left of this hall is Birojeon (Hall of Vairocana), where an imposing gilt-bronze image of Vairocana, the Buddha of All-pervading Light, made during the eighth or ninth century, is enshrined. The mudra, or hand gesture of this image, symbolizes that the multitudes and the Buddha are one. To the right of Birojeon is Gwaneumjeon in which an image of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Mercy, is enshrined. The image was made when the temple was restored.

High up on the mountain behind Bulguksa temple is Seokguram, a man-made stone grotto designed around the worship of a principal statue of Buddha.

The main hall enshrines a gilt-wooden Buddha triad flanked by earthen images of the two disciples of the Historic Buddha.

One of Asia's finest Buddhist grottos, it reflects the application of advanced scientific principles and precise mathematical and architectural concepts, not to mention great technical skills. It is also a testament to the enthusiasm, courage, and sacrifice of Korea's early Buddhist monks who risked their lives to make pilgrimages to faraway India to learn firsthand about their religion and its traditions.

This type of cave temple originated in India where two kinds were constructed: chaitya, a sanctuary or hall containing a sacred object to be worshipped such as an image of a Buddha or a small stupa; and vihara, a monastery or shelter for monks, often with a stupa or niches for images. Both chaitya and vihara were created by tunneling in stone mountains and carving on natural rocks.



The main rotunda as viewed from the antechamber.

Seokguram follows the chaitya model but it was not created by tunneling; perhaps Korea's granite bedrock precluded the type of tunneling and carving involved in the Indian cave temples. Instead, the cave, which is high up on the mountain some 750 meters above sea level, was artificially created using carved granite slabs. Kim Daeseong constructed Seokguram at the same time he built Bulguksa temple; at the time, the former was called Seokbulsa, literally Stone Buddha temple. It was designed to guide the Buddhist faithful into the land of the Buddha, to enable them to take a spiritual journey to the realm of nirvana.

Seokguram comprises a rectangular antechamber and a round interior chamber with a domed ceiling connected by a rectangular passageway. The antechamber represents earth and the round chamber, heaven. A large image of a seated Buddha is in the rotunda. It is placed in the rotunda in such a way that the first rays of the sun rising over the East Sea strike the urna, the jewel in the forehead. Thirty-nine figures from the Buddhist pantheon such as bodhisattvas, arhats and ancient Indian gods are arranged systematically on the walls of the antechamber, corridor and rotunda according to their

Seokguram bonjon bulsang (the 3.5-meter-high main Buddha) is a world cultural heritage that is especially spectacular in terms of the religiosity and artistry of its carving. (left)

A legion of bas-relief images of various guardian deities decorates the walls of the antechamber of Seokguram.

functions and ranks, giving the impression of the Pure Land of the Buddha incarnate in the present world. Most of the images are in base-relief.

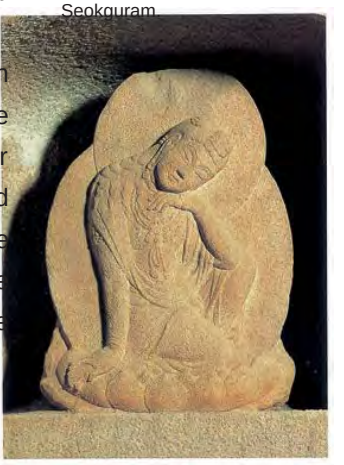
Chiseled out of a single block of granite, the 3.5-meter-high main Buddha is seated cross-legged on a lotus throne facing the east, eyes closed in quiet meditation, a serene, all-knowing expression on its face. Its gentle eyebrows, noble nose, long ears and tightly curled hair are exquisitely portrayed.

The hands are poised in the mudra of calling the earth to witness. An image of power and serenity, it presents Sakyamuni at the moment of enlightenment. The personification of divine and human natures, an enigmatic combination of masculine strength and feminine beauty, the image represents Buddhist sculpture at the zenith of classical realism. Many art historians consider it to be one of the most perfect Buddhist statues in the world.

Seokguram and Bulguksa were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in December 1995. At the same time, the woodblocks of the Tripitaka Koreana and their storage halls at Haeinsa temple, and Jongmyo, the royal ancestral shrine of the Joseon Dynasty, were also added to the list.

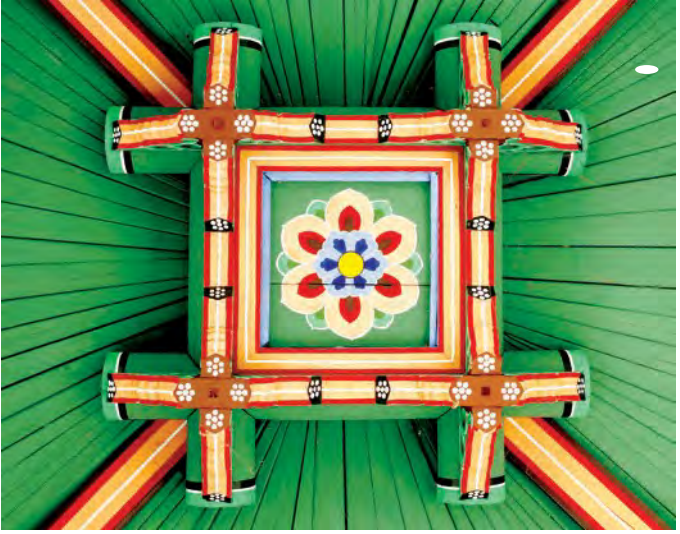
The World Heritage List is part of an inter-national program under which unique and irreplaceable cultural assets located in countries that are signatories to the World Heritage Convention are recognized for their universal value and registered in an effort to ensure their preservation and maintenance in the interest of all humanity. The World Heritage Committee recognized Bulguksa and Seokguram as masterpieces of human creative genius and as an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble illustrative of a significant stage in human history.

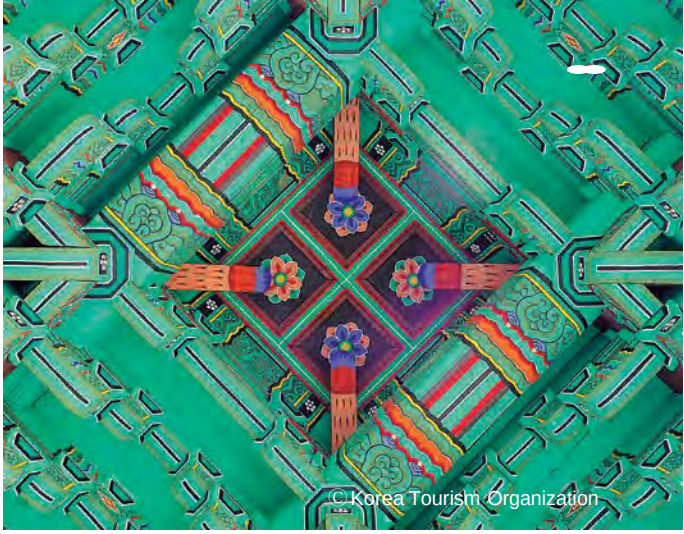
One of the miniature statues of seated Bodhisattvas and faithfuls ensconced in the 10 inches on the wall of the main rotunda of Seokguram



DANCHEONG







Dancheong

(Decorative Coloring Used on Buildings)

The use of dancheong in Korea dates back many centuries, and the skillful techniques developed long ago are preserved intact today. Dancheong refers to Korean-style decorative coloring used on buildings or other items to convey beauty and majesty, and is done by applying various patterns and paintings in certain areas. Five basic colors are used: red, blue, yellow, black and white.

In addition to its decorative function, dancheong was applied for practical reasons as well. It was used to prolong the life of the building and conceal the crudeness of the quality of the material used, while emphasizing the characteristics and the grade or ranks that the building or object possessed. Dancheong also provided both a sense of conformity to certain traditions and diversity within those traditions.

Ordinarily, dancheong refers to the painting of buildings made of wood. Coloring of other buildings or objects may be found as well to bring majesty to a stone building, statue or artifact.

Due to the absence of buildings that date from ancient times, the history of Korean dancheong can only be traced via murals in old tombs during the Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C.-A.D. 668). Particularly, in murals of old tombs

The coloring used on Soyojeong, Changdeokgung Palace

Ceiling of Magoksa temples's daegwangbojeon, Gongju, Chungcheongnam-do Province

In murals of old tombs from the Goguryeo Kingdom, diverse colored patterns show the early appearance of dancheong.

from the Goguryeo Kingdom (37 B.C.-A.D. 668), there remain diverse colored patterns which show the appearance of dancheong and architectural characteristics of that period. Along with those murals, colored pictures and lacquerwork excavated from tombs also demonstrate elements of dancheong.

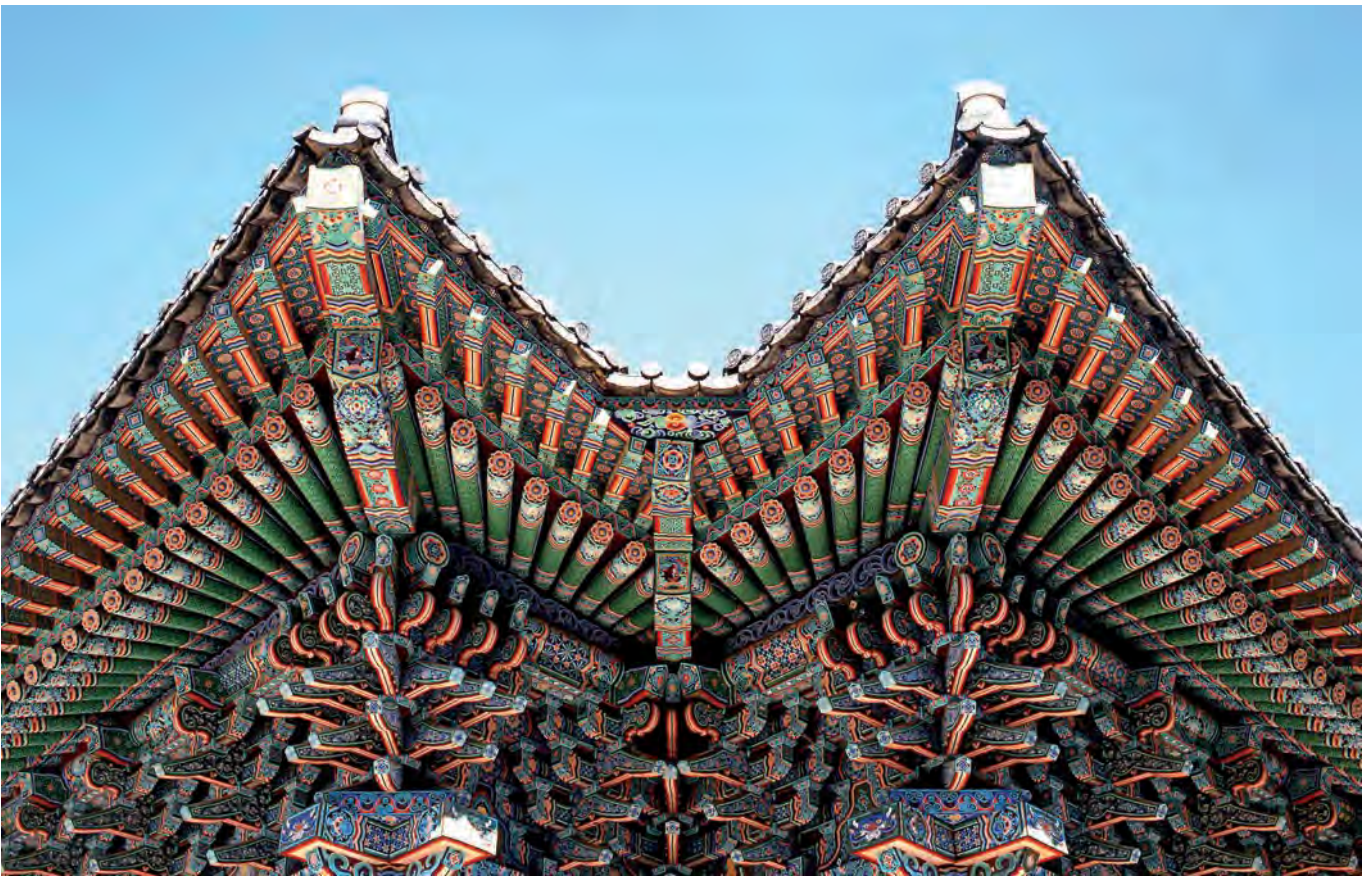
According to historical records of the Three Kingdoms, only nobility with the rank of seonggol (possible heirs to the throne in the royal family) could use the five colors during the ancient Silla Kingdom (57 B.C.-A.D. 668). Unfortunately, no building decorated with dancheong from that era remains today. Only through evidence from architectural remains excavated in Gyeongju, the capital of the Silla Kingdom, can it be deduced that dancheong during that period was quite delicate and beautiful.

In the Gaoli tujing (Goryeodogyeong, Illustrated Account of Goryeo), written in the 12th century by the Chinese scholar Xu Jing (Seogeung), it is noted that Goryeo people enjoyed building royal palaces. According to the text, the structure of the palaces where the king stayed was constructed with

round pillars and a square headpiece. The ridge of the roof was colorfully decorated and its configurational structure appeared as if it were about to ascend to the sky. This description suggests the size and majesty of the palaces of the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392). Xu Jing's book also included a description of the luxurious dancheong work, stating that "the handrail was painted in red and decorated with vine-flowers; the coloring was very strong, yet gorgeous, thereby making the palace stand out among other royal palaces."

Buildings from the Goryeo Dynasty that remain standing today exhibit bright and soft coloring and the dancheong there shows that the techniques used during the Three Kingdoms period were further improved during the Goryeo Dynasty.

During the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), Korean dancheong work was further developed and diversified. The general characteristics of dancheong during that period were a more expressive style, a complex unit pattern and decorative composition, along with more luxurious coloring.



Dancheong of Songgwangsa Temple.
Colorful dancheong, where diverse and vivid colors intertwine.

There were a number of different types of dancheong. Even in one particular building, patterns might be differentiated according to the part of the building they were located in. Nevertheless, dancheong patterns were systemized in consistent order. The system of patterns was categorized into four different types based on the structural characteristics and positions within the decorative composition. These four types included morucho, byeol-jihwa, bidanmunui and dandongmunui.

Morucho, also called meoricho, was a pattern used in painting both ends of supporting beams or corners of a building (such as the tips of eaves). Although the pattern of morucho differed based on the era and the building, its basic patterns consisted of a green flower, water lily, pomegranate, bubble, and whi (feather), although it should be noted that the whi pattern was not featured in Goryeo era dancheong. Using one sample pattern, morucho was repeatedly used in all the same parts of a building. Naturally, it occupied the largest amount of space and was the most noticeable. Morucho was therefore the basic dancheong pattern used in almost all types of buildings. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Morucho developed quite diverse styles,

Dancheong on eaves at Jeondeungsa Temple (left)

Crane pattern dancheong of Beopjusa Temple, Byeoljihwa used to decorate dancheong is mainly found in Buddhist structures.

showing the vivid characteristics of Korean dancheong techniques.

Byeoljihwa refers to decorative painting that utilized a storytelling technique and occupied the gap between two morucho. It differed based on the characteristics of the buildings and was not used in constructing palaces; instead, it was most often employed in temples or government buildings such as Gwandeokjeong on Jeju.

The content of byeoljihwa consisted of auspicious animals (such as dragons, horses, lions, and cranes), the sagunja ("the Four Gentlemanly plants" or plum, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo), or scenes from Buddhist sutras. Though unrelated to the content of the sutras, the prevailing state of society of the time was also often depicted in temple byeoljihwa.

Bidanmunui refers to the diverse coloring of rare and elegant designs or geometric patterns, and was used in various parts of the building, particularly in temples, while dandongmunui involves the design of a single flower plant or animal, or the application of a single geometric or other pattern in one section.

The colors of dancheong reflected the characteristics of the period. During the Goryeo period, parts of a building exposed to outside sunlight, such as pillars, were painted in red, while protruding corners of eaves or ceilings not exposed to sunlight were painted in greenish-blue, so as to enhance the contrast of brightness and darkness. This application was known as the sangnok hadan (green-top, red-bottom) principle.

During the Joseon Dynasty, red, orange, blue, yellow, green, and seokganju colors were used profusely. Seokganju, also called juto, denotes red clay or ocher that yields a dark red or reddish brown pigment typically used for dancheong and pottery. This pigment, basically composed of ferric oxide or ferrous sulfate, is noted for its resistance to sunlight, air, water and heat. It was also mixed with white pigment, Chinese ink color and other ingredients to derive various other colors. The colors were separated by insertion of white lines, thereby enhancing the distinctiveness of the pattern's outlining and coloring.

Ordinarily the order of colors used was determined by the characteristics, size, and appearance of the building. Usually, however, two to six colors were used following a set of rules. For instance, when a gradual reduction of colors

Dancheong at Haeinsa Temple

was derived from six colors, colors immediately after the first and immediately before the last colors were eliminated to achieve a 5-4-3-2 order. Coordination of colors for dancheong consisted primarily of juxtaposing different and complementary colors. A technique of alternating a warm color with a cold one was used to make the different colors more distinct from each other. Traditionally, typical pigments employed for dancheong were derived from pyeoncheongseok, a kind of copper ore for dark blue and navy blue colors, and from malachite for dark greenish blue. These pigments were preferred because of their vividness, durability and relative serenity. In addition, the vermilion pigment produced from clay, also a popular color for dancheong, was mostly imported from China's western regions and was hence highly valued.

Dancheongjang, artisans skilled in the work of dancheong, engaged in their craft.

The painting of dancheong was done by dancheongjang, artisans skilled in the work of dancheong. A dancheongjang artisan was referred to by a number of titles: hwasa, hwagong, gachiljang, or dancheongjang. When the artisan was a monk, he was referred to as a geumeo or hwaseung.

For construction of palaces, dancheong was done by a government official, the Seongonggam. Seongonggam artisans exclusively carried out dancheong work for palaces and other places, such as guest houses and government buildings. Temples, on the other hand, had their own resident dancheongjang. In addition to performing dancheong work, however, the temple artisans also engaged in production of other works, including Buddhist

Dancheong of Naejangsa Temple. Faded dancheong reveals the grain of wood.

painting and sculpture. Although there were two different categories of dancheongjang for palace and temple painting, the technical procedures related to dancheong work were the same. The patterns and coloring systems were therefore identical for the two categories.

At the beginning of a project, a pyeonsu, or head artisan, was chosen by the initiating party of the construction project. The pyeonsu then selected the format of dancheong for the pertinent building and chose the patterns to be used. From the mixing of colors to instruction about construction procedures, the pyeonsu was responsible for the completion of dancheong in its entirety.

Harmony between urban buildings and dancheong

Upon the beginning of dancheong work, a sample pattern was created for use in generating the same pattern of the pertinent parts of the building. This procedure was called chulcho. A bluish-green color was used as the base color, after the pattern was placed on the desired spots of the building. This is done by pounding a powder sack over a paper transfer on which the design was outlined with pinholes. This work was referred to as tacho.

After completing the above procedures, coloring could finally commence. When coloring, each artisan painted only one color. The number of artisans employed in painting equalled the number of colors used in the design. Through such construction procedures, dancheong work was executed with admirable efficiency.

Dancheong at Gyeongbokgung Palace. The collective effect of the dancheong is one of faded yet serene beauty. (right)

SHAMANISM

Shamanism

Shamanism is a folk religion centered on a belief in good and evil spirits who can only be influenced by shamans. The shaman is a professional spiritual mediator who performs rites. Mudang, in Korean, usually refers to female shamans, while male shamans are called baksu mudang.

When shamans dance, they enter a trance, and their souls supposedly depart their body for the realm of the spirits. By falling into a state of ecstasy, the shaman communicates directly with the spirits and displays supernatural strength and knowledge as the spirits' mouthpiece. The shaman plays the role of an intermediary between human beings and the supernatural, speaking for humans to deliver their wishes and for the spirits to reveal their will.

The extraordinary gifts of the shaman allow him or her to be naturally distinguished from others in society. The belief that the shaman communicates with the spirits traditionally gave that person a certain authority. In ancient societies, probably from the time of tribal states, the shaman assumed the role of a leader as his or her supernatural powers contributed to the common interest of the community.

A great variety of spirits are worshiped in the pantheon of shamans, such as the mountain spirit, the seven star spirit, the earth spirit and the dragon spirit. In addition to these spirits in nature, the shaman may also serve the

Flags of shamanism to ward off evil spirits

Shamanist rituals involve experiences of ecstasy through dance. The influence of shamanism can be found in Korean modern dance.

Shamanism is depicted in Munyeodo, a painting by Sin Yun-bok, Joseon Dynasty.

spirits of renowned historical figures including kings, generals and ministers.

Shamans are divided largely into two types according to their initiation process — those who are chosen by the spirits and those who inherit the vocation from their ancestors.

The shamans who are chosen by the spirits are believed to be endowed with supernatural powers to heal and to divine. They communicate with the spirits and speak for them in rites. The costumes used by these possessed shamans vary widely, and include some 12 to 20 different kinds, representing the various spirits they embody. Percussion instruments are played in fast, exciting rhythms to accompany the shaman as she or he falls into a state of ecstasy by dancing.

Procession escorting guksa seonghwang, main deity of Gangneung Dano Festival, designated as a World Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO

Shamans of this type experience without fail the so-called sinbyeong, an illness resulting from resisting the call of the spirits, as an unavoidable process of initiation. The shaman candidate usually faints and has visions, and similar symptoms. Then, in a vision or a dream, the spirit who has chosen them appears and announces their being chosen, a call necessary for shamans to acquire their powers.

The illness supposedly causes the future shaman to suffer for months, or even years. Statistics say that the illness lasts about eight years on the average, but in some cases, it may last as many as 30. In an extremely unstable psychological state bordering lunacy, the person can hardly eat and sometimes roams around in the fields and mountains. The illness, which

The shaman needs to serve and assist specific spirits. They are the spirits of nature and the spirits of renowned historic figures. A table prepared by a shaman for the Janggunsin.

defies modern medicine, disappears all of a sudden when the person finally gives way to the compulsion and becomes a shaman.

An initiation rite is then held under the guidance of a senior shaman assuming the role of a godmother or a godfather. The novice shaman learns all the necessary skills of a professional shaman from the senior shaman before practicing on his or her own. The apprenticeship lasts for about three years in most cases, though it may vary depending on individual talent.

Those who become shamans by inheritance do not possess transcendental powers, and their role is restricted mostly to the performance of rites. The rites they officiate at do not involve ecstasy for communion with the supernatural, and no specific spirits are worshiped. These shamans do not

In coastal areas, gut (shamanic ceremony) is held on various occasions including wishing for safe returns of vessels and abundant fishing. (left)

A Seseupmu is a shaman who inherited the vocation from his or usually her ancestors.

keep altars, and for each rite they set up a sacred passageway for the descending spirits. During a rite, the shaman does not embody the spirits but takes on a separate role.

These shamans use simple costumes of two or three kinds. But they use more colorful music, including not only percussion but also string and wind instruments as well. Both the music and the dance are much slower than those performed by the "possessed" shamans.

Shaman rites are classified into three kinds based on their style. The simplest form is offering prayers while rubbing one's palms. Rites of the possessed shamans are characterized by an ecstatic state in which the shaman is temporarily deified or embodies the spirits. Rites of the hereditary shamans also involve communion with the supernatural but the shaman and the spirits keep their separate identities.

Ssitgimgut, held to guide spirits of the dead to a better land, held in Jeollanam-do Province

In the shamanistic world view, human beings have both a body and a soul, or even several souls. The soul, which provides the vital force of life for the body, never perishes. After the body dies, the soul lives forever in the after life or is reborn in a new body.

Shamanism classifies souls into those of living persons and those of dead persons. The souls of dead persons are personified, too. These souls are believed to be formless and invisible but omnipotent, floating around freely in the void with no barriers of time or space.