Introduction

In 1993, archaeologists recovered a large and magnificent gilt-bronze incense burner (Fig. 1) from the site of an ancient Buddhist temple in present-day Buyeo, in South Chungcheong Province. The censer, now in the collection of the Buyeo National Museum and registered as Korean National Treasure 287, was created during the late Baekje Dynasty (公元前18 BCE-660 CE). It is shaped like the mythical Mt. Baksan (_charset(boshan)), and its decorative details have strong Taoist associations. This article discusses the background, symbolism, and Taoist associations of the censer, which ranks among the most important Korean archaeological finds of the past twenty-five years.

Over its nearly 700-year period, the Baekje Kingdom had three different capitals: Hanseong, near present-day Seoul (公元前18 BCE-475 CE); Ungjin, present-day Gongju (475-538); and Sabi, present-day Buyeo (538-660). The latter period is now known as “Sabi Baekje” (_charset(boshan)). The Buyeo area is bounded by mountains to the north and east, and by the Baekma River to the west; the ancient capital itself was enclosed within the walls of Naseong Castle. To the east of the castle lies the Neungsan-ri Complex of Ancient Tombs, which is believed to be the burial site of the kings of Sabi Baekje.

During the 1992 excavations of a paddy field at Neungsan-ri, an ancient Buddhist temple site was discovered between the castle and the tomb complex. In 1993, during the second archaeological investigation of the temple site, the remains of an ancient workshop were excavated. Near the smoke vent of the workshop, a wooden water tank was found, and the gilt-bronze incense burner was discovered inside the water tank, along with fragments of roof tiles, earthenware vessels, and jade objects. Other items recovered from the site included glass beads, materials and tools for crafting jade objects, and various types of metal objects, including filigree ornaments, openwork ornaments, and fragments of wind chimes.

The lid of the gilt-bronze incense burner is shaped like Mt. Baksan, the sacred mountain that is frequently depicted by Taoist incense burners. Censers shaped like Mt. Baksan are known in Korean as baksan hyangno; in Chinese, they are called boshan xianglu or boshanlu (_charset(boshan)), and in English, they are sometimes referred to as “hill censers.” Such censers have rarely been found in Korea. Because of its rarity, size (61.8 cm in height and 11.85 kg in weight), artistic sophistication, and diversity of pictorial details, this censer has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Yun Mubyeong 1994; Choi Eungchon 1999; Jo Yong-joong 2000; Park Kyungeun 2000; Kim Jarim 2006).

The censer consists of three components: the lid, the bowl, and the base. The lid is shaped like a series of mountain peaks, topped by a phoenix with its wings spread as if in flight. This mythical bird is known as bonghwang in Korean, or fenghuang (Charset(fenghuang)) in Chinese. The bowl is decorated with lotus petals in high relief, and the pedestal is shaped like a...
dragon. The three components were cast separately and then subsequently joined together. The bowl and base are connected by a short, thin rod that runs from the dragon’s mouth through a hole in the bottom of the bowl, where it is secured with a small tube. A variety of humans and animal figures can be found among the mountain peaks on the lid, including people in diverse poses, wild animals (e.g., tigers and wild boars), as well as trees, rocks, stream, and mountain paths. Five birds and five humans with musical instruments appear near the top of the lid, just below the phoenix. Each of the lotus petals on the bowl frames a figure of an animal or person; the represented figures include waterfowls, crocodiles, lizards, flying fish, four-legged animals that live near streams, as well as two immortals wearing long haps and robes made from feathers. Forming the base, the coiled dragon raises its head so that the end of its snout nearly touches the bottom of the bowl.

In order to better understand the background and production of the Baekje incense burner, it is necessary to examine the traditional meaning of the motifs, including the ways in which their meaning changed over time. Furthermore, it is important to understand why the Baekje incense burner was used in Neungsan-ri temple of Baekje, and how its motifs operated in the context of production and consumption of the censer. An analysis of these reasons will enhance our understanding of the censer’s production, function, and purpose, as well as the intentions of those who created and used the censer.

This paper investigates the traditional meaning of the Taoist motifs represented on the incense burner, including the ways in which the Baekje interpreta-


dition of those motifs differed from the Chinese tradi-

tion. Moreover, by exploring both the reasons for the censer’s creation and the context of its use within the socio-political context of the late Baekje, this paper argues that the censer was meant to serve as a political symbol representing a new type of Taoist worldview.

I. Sabi Baekje and the Neungsan-ri Site

In 538, King Seong (在位, r. 538-554) moved the Baekje capital from Ungjin to Sabi, where the surrounding mountains and Baekma River offered advantageous natural defenses, while the vast plains proved an excellent economic resource. In preparation for the capital’s transfer, Sabi was constructed as a planned city with an infrastructure that included the town, royal palace, government office buildings, various production facilities, and roads. In conjunction with the transfer, King Seong restructured the Baekje state, reorganizing the Buddhist sects, creating a hierarchy of sixteen ranks for government officials, and implementing the hang-gun-seong system (方郡制度), the new governing system of regional provinces, and the twenty-two departments of the central government. All of these initiatives were intended to consolidate the ruling order and royal authority, thus reviving the nation. Under King Seong, Baekje had regained its former territory in the Han River basin, though that territory was soon lost to the Silla Kingdom (57 BCE-555 CE). In the wake of that loss, King Seong launched an attack against Silla, but he was killed in 554 at the battle of Gwansanseong Castle, a crushing defeat for Baekje. His son Prince Chang (昌), who insisted on that war, and also fought in the battle, succeeded him as King Widesok (在位, r. 554-578), and subsequently spent much of the mid-sixth century trying to stabilize the nation amidst the tremendous political pressures resulting from his father’s death and the military defeat of Gwansanseong Castle.

In 1995, a stone sarira reliquary was excavated from the remains of a wooden pagoda at the Neungsan-ri temple site (Fig. 2). The inscription on the front of the reliquary states that the Buddhist temple was built in 567, commissioned by King Widesok and his sister. However, the results of the full excavation of the site suggest that some buildings, including the lecture hall and workshop, were actually built in the mid-Sanjeol period, prior to 675. The two-story lecture hall, which was located at the highest elevation point of the temple grounds, had two rooms, which was unusual for a Buddhist lecture hall. The west room had a stone base where ancestral tablets were likely placed. The unique configuration of the lecture hall recalls structures of Donggadae (東大寺) where large-scale ancestral rites were performed during the Goguryeo Dynasty (37 BCE-668 CE), suggesting that some buildings constructed prior to the inscription date of 567 may have been used for such rites (Kim Jongman 2000). In the mid-sixth century, King Widesok sought to overcome Baekje’s political crisis and strengthen the royal power through various measures at both the domestic and international level. Therefore, it is likely that these efforts included the construction of a group of buildings (which later became a Buddhist temple) next to the tomb complex at Neungsan-ri, where King Seong is believed to have been buried. The temple was likely intended as a place for ancestral rites to be carried out and for Buddhist rituals to offer prayers for the happiness of King Seong in the afterlife.

II. Taoist Iconography of the Baekje Incense Burner

1. Sacred Mountains and Immortality

The ten peaks that encircle the base of the censer’s conical lid ascend in four tiers. Various animals inhabit the peaks, including elks, snarling tigers, an elephant with a small figure on its back, wild boars with their tongues extended, a monkey licking its paw, feral dogs striding around the ridges, a bird swallowing prey, and some type of beast biting a snake. This frightening world of wild beasts living according to the law of the jungle is a type of imagery traditionally associated with depictions of the sacred mountains of the immortals, and is a motif typically associated with the Deukje to the taoist tradition from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE).

Most intriguingly, the inhabitants of this wild kingdom include some creatures with both animal and human features. Such mythical beings represent Taoist spirits, who were believed to have special powers. Two of the creatures are beasts with ghostly faces, shaggy manes, and talons like those of a bird of prey (Fig. 1a). The creatures wear short pants, but are nude from the waist up, and they run upright on two legs, waving their arms. Images of such creatures were more widely used in East Asia from the fifth through the seventh centuries, and frequently appear on walls or artifacts from excavated tombs in China and Korea. For example, twenty-two such creatures appear on an epitaph tablet and its cover of Lady Yuan, the wife of Feng Yong (馮俶) and a Yuan clan member of the Northern Wei Dynasty (北魏, 386-534) (Fig. 3, dated 522, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Other examples of this motif can also be seen on artifacts of the Northern Dynasties (北朝, 386-581), including the epitaph cover of Hau Kang (侯剛, 526, printed in Juliano 1986); the epitaph cover of Guo Jing (郭靖, 529, the Xian Benlun Museum); and the painted ceilings of Mogao Cave 429 (late Northern Wei Dynasty to early Western Wei Dynasty) and Mogao Cave 285 (Western Wei Dynasty /西魏, 535-556), in Dunhuang in China’s GanSu Province. In Korea, the motif can be seen in tomb murals from the Goguryeo Kingdom, such as the Deokje to the taoist tradition from the Han Dynasty, and such Tang-Dynasty (唐) texts as Zhen- guan gongsi huashi (真觀功寺畫史, History of Public
and Private Art during the Zhenguan Era) by Pei Xiaoyuan (裴孝元, active c. 639) and Lidai minghua ji (列代名畫集, Record of Famous Paintings through the Ages) by Zhang Yanyuan (張延巒, c. 815-c. 877). According to these records, oesu were typically associated with exorcism during China’s Jin Dynasty (晉, 265-420). According to Professor Nagahiro, various forms of ghost imagery were gradually integrated into oesu motifs during the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (後北朝, 420-589), until oesu eventually came to be regarded as nature deities with control over natural phenomena, including storms (Nagahiro Toshio 1969; Kosugi Kazuo 1977; Bush 1974; Hayashi Minao 1985; Yun Mubyeong 1994; Park Kyungeun 1999).

The Baekje incense burner also features three mythical creatures with human faces but the bodies of birds or animals (Fig. 1b). In Baopuzi (抱朴子, [Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity]), a fourth-century Taoist text from the Eastern Jin Dynasty (東晉, 317-420), Ge Hong (葛洪, 283-343) writes that beings with the face of a human and the body of a bird are called either qianqiu (千秋, Kr. cheonchu), meaning “a thousand autumns,” or wansui (萬載, Kr. manse), meaning “ten thousand years.” Ge Hong also specifies that such names were befitting of Taoist immortals, who were thought to enjoy eternal life.

An excellent contemporaneous depiction of cheonchu and manse can be found on a tile (Fig. 5) excavated from a tomb at Xuezhuang village in Deng County (登縣), Henan Province (hereafter, the Dengxian Tomb), which dates to the late fifth century (Julião 1974). An inscription reading “qianqiu” (千秋, Kr. cheonchu) appears immediately to the left of the creature with a human face and bird body, while the inscription for “wansui” (萬載, Kr. manse) appears immediately to the right of the creature with the head of an animal and the body of a bird.

Another mythical creature can be seen at the lower edge of the Baekje incense burner’s lid, under the tail of the bonghwang (Fig. 1c). Various authors have identified this creature as a posu (鬼頭, Ch., pusou), a term typically referring to a monster mask represented on door handles (Hayashi Minao 1985; Yun Mubyeong 1994; Park Kyungeun 2000). The posu looks downward so that we see the top of its head; between its two curved horns, there are three small triangles arranged in a tiered pattern that echoes that of the mountain peaks. The posu has circular curls of hair, paws that appear on either side of its head, and a diamond-shaped tail that extends upward. This posu closely resembles a related Chinese image found on
The Baekje gilt-bronze incense burner, which dates to around 495, and the posu on the Baekje incense burner suggests that Baekje art may have been influenced by the art and culture of China’s Southern Dynasties (Nanjing Museum 1989, 420-589). On Han-Dynasty bronze vessels and baksan hyangno, posu figures often face the handles on either side of the bowl. The Baekje incense burner has no handles, however, and the posu figure appears only once on the lid. Posu figures also frequently appear on or near the entrances of early tombs or on the tombs’ ceilings; notably, they are found on the northern part of the ceiling, and north was the direction from which evil spirits were believed to come. As such, the posu figures on ancient tombs were likely intended to ward off evil spirits or other dangers. For example, a posu figure can be seen on the northern part of the ceiling in Sasinching Tomb of the Goguryeo Dynasty, located in Tongguo, China (Park Kyungeun 1999). On the Baekje incense burner, the posu figure appears under the tail of the bonghwang that is atop the lid. Since the bonghwang is estimated to face south, the posu faces north, which indicates that it was meant to protect the sacred mountain, which symbolizes the Taoist paradise. As such, the world of the sacred mountain represented on the incense burner includes various creatures of paradise that were commonly depicted in Chinese and Korean tombs of the fifth and sixth centuries.

The main bonghwang stands at the very top of the lid, above five birds that rest on five peaks. The five birds likely represent the lords of the five great mountains of the five directions (i.e., the four cardinal directions and the center). Historical records, such as volume 49 of Zhoushu ([Book of Zhou], 1980), state that five birds are found among the lotus petals, including birds, crocodiles, lizards, flying fish, four-legged animals with wings, as well as two immortals wearing long hats and feathered robes. The edges of the petals are engraved with thin short lines, matching the mountain peaks on the lid.

In addition to these mythical creatures, the mountain-shaped lid of the censer also features various human figures. One figure of particular note is an equestrian hunter with bow and arrow (Fig. 1d). Combined with the holy mountain motif, this motif sometimes appeared since the Han-Dynasty, suggesting the influence of the nomadic culture of the tribes of northern China and Mongolia (Wenley 1948-9). The hunter motif is believed to have originated from ancient sacrificial hunting rituals that were held in gardens representing the sacred mountains of the immortals. Such rituals were intended to ward off evil spirits and to honor celestial and ancestral deities (Munakata Kiyohiko 1993).

2. Lotus and Rebirth

The lower part of the main body of the incense burner is covered with three rows of lotus petals, each with eight petals with their tips pointing outward (Fig. 16). Twenty-six different creatures can be found among the lotus petals, including birds, crocodiles, lizards, flying fish, four-legged animals with wings, as well as two immortals wearing long hats and feathered robes. The edges of the petals are engraved with thin short lines, matching the mountain peaks on the lid.

The lotus motif, which passed from West Asia to East Asia, figures among the primary symbols in various creation myths. Although the lotus is typically associated with Buddhism, in India, the association between the lotus and the creation of the world predates Buddhism. According to the ancient Hindu text Taittiriya Brähmana, at the beginning of time, nothing existed except water, which was covered with green lotuses. Prajapati, the Creator, walked into the water and discovered the earth, and then divided the earth into segments that he then spread over the green lotuses, thus creating the world. Lotus blossoms open at sunrise and close at sunset every day, which makes them natural symbols for rebirth and light. As such, ancient people frequently decorated tombs with lotus motifs in hopes of attaining eternal life and rebirth of the deceased.

Baksan hyangno are believed to have been used in rituals associated with the royal family during the Han Dynasty. During the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, they were used in funerary ceremonies and in Buddhist rituals, eventually becoming Buddhist ecclesiastical paraphernalia (Fig. 7). Although lotus motifs are usually associated with Buddhism, the association between the Baekje incense burner and Buddhism remains highly ambiguous. Other than lotus petals, the censer does not feature any other Buddhist symbols. As mentioned, the censer was recovered from the site of an ancient Buddhist temple, but succeeding excavations have demonstrated that the site might have been used for royal rituals prior to 567, the estimated date of the Buddhist temple, but succeeding excavations have demonstrated that the site might have been used for royal rituals prior to 567.

a Baksan hyangno from the Eastern Han Dynasty were often decorated with a configuration of four petal-like images between the bowl and the pedestal, as evinced by censers excavated from the Houzhou zhuanhuang ([Funeral Bowls] M4 tomb in Luoyang, Henan Province; China (found in Yushi Shangzheng Mu-seum)); from tombs in Pyeongyang, Korea (Printed in Byung Na-tional Museum, 2013, fig. 142); and an incense burner excavated from Ye County, Shanxi Province, China (printed in Erickson 1989, fig. 33). From the late fifth century on, the main bodies of Baksan hyangno were typically decorated with lotus petals, as seen in the Baekje incense burner (Erickson 1959).

b Baksan hyangno were believed to have been used in rituals associated with the royal family during the Han Dynasty. During the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, they were used in funerary ceremonies and in Buddhist rituals, eventually becoming Buddhist ecclesiastical paraphernalia. As such, the censer was recovered from the site of an ancient Buddhist temple, but succeeding excavations have demonstrated that the site might have been used for royal rituals prior to 567.
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The bird represents a spread, as if having just descended from above (Fig. 8), clearly identifying the image as a messenger of the Emperor of Heaven, claiming the sacred mountain as the world of its master.

The sacred mountain represented by the lid of the Baekje incense burner might be Gollyun Mountain (尾春山, Ch. Kunlunshan), one of the mythic mountains of the immortals. According to Shizhou ji (十洲記, Notes on the Ten Island Continents), a Chinese text believed to date to the Six Dynasties period (六朝, 220-589), Gollyun Mountain has an inverted pyramidal shape with steeply inclined sides, and it is occupied by fearsome carnivorous beasts. Shanhaijing describes Gollyun Mountain as a mysterious, treacherous place surrounded by powerful currents of water in which even birds’ feathers sink. Ancient baksan hyangno represented this inaccessible sacred peak by placing the wider bowl of the censer atop a slender pedestal.

In ancient times, dragons, such as the one at the base of the Baekje censer (Fig. 1g), were also commonly associated with the sacred mountains. According to Chu Ci (楚辭, Songs of Chu) and Shanhaijing, the sacred mountain of the immortals can be reached by riding on a dragon. This belief is supported by a painting on a T-shaped piece of silk (Fig. 9) and by murals from ancient tombs that show human figures (presumably the tomb occupants) riding dragons to the world of the immortals. Many animals, including cranes, deer, tigers, and kirin (麒麟, Ch. qilin), were believed to be vehicles of the immortals. However, according to Shiji (史記, Historical Records), traditionally ascribed to Sima Qian (司馬遷, c. 145 or 135 BCE-86 BCE), only dragons were able to reach Gollyun Mountain. All these records indicate that dragons were believed to connect heaven and earth.

III. Baekje Metalworking Techniques and Production of the Baekje Incense Burner

Chinese-style baksan hyangno first appeared in Korea in the early centuries of the Common Era (Fig. 10). In particular, fragments of baksan hyangno have been excavated around Pyeongyang from tombs belonging to the ruling class of the Nangnang (南陽, Ch. Lelang) Commandery. In 108 BCE, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (漢武帝, r. 141-97 BCE) established Four Commanderies (四郡) in Korea, including the Nangnang Commandery, which controlled the area around present-day Pyeongyang. Mountain-shaped incense burners discovered inside the tombs of Nangnang leaders (e.g., Seokam-ri Tomb 9 and 219 and Jembaek-dong Tomb 88) were embellished with various motifs, including four-petal flowers, turtles, and phoenix (Buyeo National Museum 2013).
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In China, the peak of baksan hyangno occurred during the Han Dynasty, several centuries before the creation of the Baekje censer. Most sixth-century Chinese censers are ceramic vessels that take the simplified form of flowers or Buddhist cintamani (Fig. 12) (Erickson 1994). Even so, it should be noted that, to date, no baksan hyangno with the detail and sophistication of the Baekje incense burner has been discovered in China.

The Baekje incense burner can also be distinguished from its Chinese counterparts by its distinctive Taoist imagery. As discussed, the Baekje censer features such mythical creatures as cheonchu, manse, oru, which more commonly appeared on the walls of fifth- and sixth-century tombs. Also, instead of featuring only the traditional motifs of winged immortals or primitive hunters, the Baekje incense burner also features more civilized human figures who seem to be practicing meditation. As such, the censer reflects the understanding of the Taoist world was changing in the fifth and sixth centuries. The figures on the incense burner seem to be Taoist hermits on the holy mountain. Wearing long robes and carrying walking sticks, they stroll on the mountainside, rather than eating grains, meditating for self-cultivation, and practicing special breathing techniques. The practices discussed in this book of Taoist theory and principles had significant influence on Taoist beliefs and rituals after the fourth century. The Baekje incense burner reflects those changes, differentiating it from Chinese baksan hyangno of the time.

Where and how was the Baekje incense burner made? Since its discovery, scientific analyses have been conducted on the Baekje censer, as well as on other relics excavated from the temple site at Neungsan-ri (Kang Hyungtae, Yu Heisun, and Kwon Hyeknam 2000; Kang Hyungtae, Ko Minjeong, and Kim Yeonmi 2013).

Quantitative analysis of bronze and gilt specimens taken from the Baekje censer revealed that its bronze alloy consists of 81.5% copper (Cu), 14.5% tin (Sn), and less than 0.1% (each) of various other impurities, including lead, silver, nickel, cobalt, antimony, and iron (Kang Hyungtae, Yu Heisun, and Kwon Hyeknam 2000). Meanwhile, quantitative analysis of the gilt-bronze halo collected from the workshop site at Neungsan-ri (Fig. 13) found that its bronze alloy consists of 81.6% copper, 11.5% tin and 0.91% lead. Lead is believed to be an impurity in this instance, as its ratio is less than 3%. The results show that the halo was made from a bronze alloy very similar in composition to that of the Baekje censer. It would appear that Baekje metalworkers were familiar with the technique of casting, forging, and chasing. In particular, the gold and gilt-bronze sarira jars, lavishly decorated with chased designs, feature an innovative arrangement of decorative motifs that rarely occurs on Chinese artifacts.

Among the three kingdoms that ruled the Korean peninsula in the early centuries of the Common Era (i.e., Goguryeo, Silla, Baekje), Baekje was most active in making exchanges with China and introducing advanced culture and products from abroad. Records of interactions between Baekje and China’s Liang Dynasty (梁, 502-557) can be found in various historical texts, including volumes 3 and 54 of Liangshu (梁史, Book of Liang); volume 26 of Samguk gagi (三國志記, Historical Record of the Three Kingdoms); and volume 7 of Nanhni (南海, History of the Southern Dynasties). According to those records, during the reign of Baekje’s King Seong (r. 533-554), the Liang Dynasty sent Baekje a copy of the Buddhist Nirvana Sutra, along with a renowned scholar of China’s Shi jing (詩經, Classic of Poetry), and painters, craftsmen, and other artists. King Wideok established close diplomatic ties with several Chinese states, negotiating five times with the Southern Dynasties, six times with the Northern Dynasties, and four times with the Sui Dynasty (隋, 581-618). Based in part on the advanced culture and production techniques imported from China, Baekje developed its own style of ceramics and metalwork in the sixth and seventh centuries. For example, Baekje’s unique interpretation of Chinese ceramic jars is evident in a silver sarira jar from the site of Wangheungsa Temple in Buceyo (enshrined in 577) and in two sarira jars—one gold and one gilt-bronze—from the site of Mireuksa Temple in Iksan (enshrined in 639, Fig. 11) (Yi Songran 2009; Joo Keyongmi 2014). The sarira reliquaries from the Mireuksa Temple site show the advanced metalworking techniques that Baekje artists developed, including casting, forging, and chasing. In particular, the gold and gilt-bronze sarira jars, lavishly decorated with chased designs, feature an innovative arrangement of decorative motifs that rarely occurs on Chinese artifacts.

In China, the practice of attaining immortality, including residing on a sacred mountain, following an herbal diet and “elixir” rather than eating grains, meditating for self-cultivation, and practicing special breathing techniques. The practices discussed in this book of Taoist theory and principles had significant influence on Taoist beliefs and rituals after the fourth century. The Baekje incense burner reflects those changes, differentiating it from Chinese baksan hyangno of the time.

Some portion (around 4.1%) is unaccounted for due to oxidation and erosion.
Selected Bibliography


