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Ancient Chinese and Korean influences on Japanese tomb murals

Abstract: *This paper will first introduce the basic burial customs of ancient Japan, then examine the cultural-historical factors that might have influenced the development of traditions of funerary art in the Kofun and Asuka period. The immigration of Korean monks, scholars and craftsmen to Japan during the Kofun and Asuka period transformed Japanese art. Analyzing the mural paintings of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb and Kitora Tomb, the author detects Chinese and Korean influences on Japanese funerary art. Many Korean influences during this time originated in China, but were adapted in Goguryeo or Baekje before reaching Japan. Moreover, imperial Japanese envoys who visited Sui and Tang China, came back to Japan with excellent artistic skills and introduced new artistic styles and themes of the Tang period. The frescoes of the Takamatsuzuka Tomb and Kitora Tomb are remarkable examples of how Japan greatly absorbed and modified the knowledge and philosophies of ancient Chinese culture.*

Keywords: funerary art, mural, art history, Takamatsuzuka tomb, Kitora tomb

Ancient Chinese and Korean influences on Japanese tomb murals

Cultural background of the ornaments found in burial mounds (3rd-7th centuries)

Many aspects of ancient Japanese burial traditions can be highlighted for analysis. This paper examines the origins, types, characteristics and symbolism of figural ornamentation in ancient Japanese burial mounds from both a cultural and an art history perspective. In order to review and analyse these ornaments in detail, we first need to understand the cultural background that has shaped funeral customs in Japan for hundreds of years.

From the 2nd to 3rd centuries, several types of burial options were common among the Japanese aristocracy, depending on the clan to which the buried leader belonged. While at the end of the Yayoi period, in Northern Kyūshū and the coastal areas of the Sea of Japan, the standard tumulus was small and rectangular with elongated corners, from the second half of the 3rd century onwards, the rulers of the Yamato dynasty in the Kinki region were buried in keyhole-shaped tumuli. At the end of the 4th century the Yamato clan's power increased considerably, and they extended not only the boundaries of their sphere of influence beyond the Yamato basin, but also their burial tradition, thus strengthening the relationship system in the freshly established 'state' based on tribal alliance. Burial chambers and sarcophagi in the early tombs were simple and unadorned. The size and design of the royal tombs increased spectacularly in the second half of the 5th century, illustrating the growing political power of the rulers (e.g. Emperor Nintoku). (Yoshida 1998)

It is worth noting that the Japanese state at this time had strong economic dependence on, and good diplomatic relations with the confederate state of Gaya (加倭) in the south of the Korean peninsula, and the state of Baekje (百濟) in the southwest, while it had hostile relations with Goguryeo (高句麗) in the north. Also in the 5th century, groups of elite Japanese envoys visited the capital of the Liu Song dynasty of southern China via Pekche, a total of 13 times, to gain approval for political ranks, and they received symbolic titles from the Chinese emperor. Throughout the 5-6th centuries, monks and envoys from Baekje and later Goguryeo arrived from time to time at the Yamato court: a relationship that had a profound impact on the culture and religious traditions of the Japanese aristocracy. Thanks to vibrant domestic and foreign trade, diplomatic relations and, not least, strong religious beliefs, a large number of burial mounds continued to be built (despite this being a turbulent period of warfare), both in the central Kinki region and in the provinces, most of it with Korean-inspired grave goods and/or artistic ornaments. (Yoshida 1998)

Decorated tombs

Burial mounds have two types of decorations. *Sōshoku kofun* (装飾古墳), that have simple color paintings and/or reliefs or engravings with original Japanese motifs, were built in three different regions of Japan: first in the north-western and central areas of Kyūshū (present-day Fukuoka and Kumamoto Prefectures), then in south-western Honshū (San-in region), and lastly in the north-eastern parts of Honshū. It is important to note, however, that the form and purpose of these decorations varied greatly from region to region. The second type of decorated burial mounds called *hekiga kofun* (壁画古墳) were only built in areas ruled by the royal court in the late 7th and early 8th century.

Kyūshū has always experienced frequent interactions among the Yellow Sea sphere. The very first decorated tombs appeared in Kyūshū during the late 5th century. (Shiraishi 1993) Walls of burial chambers were decorated with patterns of simple circles and repeated triangles. Coffins were decorated in traditional Japanese relief and line carvings with patterns of circles, triangles, arcs, and lines. The 6th century *yokoana*-style¹ tunnel tombs in Kyūshū, influenced by the architecture of burial mounds of Baekje², show more developed decorations.³ (Shiraishi 1993) The distinctive feature of these 6th century tumuli (in contrast with their counterparts in Baekje and with some of the earlier Japanese decorated tombs), was that only one of the four side walls was gorgeously decorated with unprimed paintings and/or reliefs – usually the one visible from the southern entrance. Burial chambers built later frequently featured illustrative decorations, that were diverse not only in colour (black, red, blue, green, rarely yellow) but also in subject matter: people, ritual implements, animals, supernatural creatures, weapons, shields and armour, boats etc. Non-figurative decorations were also often made. These were either complex Japanese patterns (e.g. *chokkomon*⁴直弧文) or simpler geometric shapes. These designs are said to have been imbued with the magical meaning of protecting the deceased who was buried there. (Shiraishi 1993) Concerning the narrative decorations, the human figure and animals are represented at Takehara, Mezurashitsuka, Ōzuka, Gorōyama sites. The most famous image⁵ at the Takehara tumulus (竹原古墳) in Fukuoka was painted on the 2 metre wide chamber wall facing the south entrance, as a background decoration for a stone coffin placed in front of it. The painting depicts ceremonial fans, a horseman with his horse, a boat and waves in bright red and black color with no black outline. These themes suggest that the deceased person may have been a leading cavalryman with military and foreign

¹ The Late Kofun chambers were set on the ground under or in the barrow mound and entered from the side through a tunnel-like passageway called *yokoana* chambers.

² The real extent of the Paekche influence on this architecture typical for Kyūshū is unclear.

³ There are several theories about the origin of the ornaments and stone figurines of the 6th-century tumuli in Kyūshū, the most well-known of which is that the wall paintings and coffin ornaments appeared because the Yamato court banned the ancient burial tradition of the local clans after the Iwai rebellion (527-528), and therefore the nobles hid their traditional decorations inside the tumuli.

⁴ A visually stimulating design consisting of straight and arched lines. Chokkomon designs occur on a wide variety of Kofun-period materials.

connections. In conclusion, the 6th century tumulus decorations in Kyūshū highlight the deceased aristocrat, protecting him and making him the 'most splendid' central element of the grave chamber. (Nishitani 2004: 23-39)

Ancient burial mounds in the North Kantō and Tōhoku regions of Honshū are characterised by primitive wall-paintings: figures wearing crowns and noble robes, warriors, hunting scenes and geometric patterns. The wall-paintings from Tōhoku, which appear at the very end of the Kofun period, are mostly orange-reddish in color, most often painted on white plastered stone walls. Among the best-known tombs in the region are the Torazuka tumulus (虎塚古墳) and the Kiyotosaku cave tombs (清戸迫横穴).

In the second half of the 7th century, Yamato was transformed into a centralised, strictly organised state based on Chinese model. The Taika reform not only outlined the rules for everyday life, but influenced burial traditions as well. It banned the use of tumuli and the burial of ritual objects outside present-day Nara Prefecture, and all Yamato aristocratic tombs were required to be built in a pre-designated burial ground around the capital. The size and design of the tumuli was regulated for each rank: the acceptable shapes were circular, rectangular or polygonal, much smaller than before and, in most cases, undecorated. The most advanced techniques of burial mound decoration date from the late 7th to the early 8th century and can be found in present-day Asuka.

How did the Japanese people learn the new techniques of fresco painting and what inspired them to adopt foreign motifs? In the Asuka period, the Yamato court was already well acquainted with ancient Chinese cosmology and Taoism, thanks to Korean monks, scholars and Japanese envoys sent to Sui and Tang China from 630 onwards. In addition to the Chinese classics imported to Japan from the 5th century, the growing popularity of Chinese geomancy also contributed to the integration of several cosmological principles into the culture of the Japanese court. We know from the detailed entries of *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀), that the Korean monks and scholars who arrived in Japan in the 7th century were of great help in interpreting the cosmological symbols often seen in the tumuli of ancient China and Goguryeo, in introducing new materials and in learning the new painting techniques of continental origin. First and foremost, the monk Kanroku⁶ of Baekje, who arrived at the Yamato court in the early 600s.

- *Nihon Shoki*, Volume 22, Suiko-ki: In the 10th lunar month of the 10th year [of the reign of Empress Suiko] (602), Monk Kanroku arrived from Baekje. He brought gifts: books on Chinese calendar-making, astronomy and geography. He also brought books on Chinese divination and Taoist cosmology. Then 3-4 students were selected to be taught by Kanroku. Thus, it happened that Yako no Tamafuru of the fuhito/fubito rank,

⁶ 'Kanroku' is the Japanese way of pronouncing his name.

was taught calendar-making. Chinese astronomy and divination were taught to Ootomo no Takasato of the suguri rank, and esoteric cosmological teachings to Yamashiro no Hitate of the omi rank. They all completed their studies. (Sakamoto 1995:457)⁷

We can also learn from Nihon Shoki that Japanese artists were introduced to the knowledge of how to make pigments and black ink by the Buddhist monk Donchō⁸ of Goguryeo.

- Nihon Shoki, Volume 22, Suiko-ki: In the 3rd lunar month of the 18th year [of the reign of Empress Suiko] (610), the king of Goguryeo [King Yeongyang] offered up the priests Donchō and Hōjō⁹ as tribute [to the Japanese imperial court]. Dōnchō knew the Five Classics well. He produced colors, paper and ink well, moreover made watermill. Has making watermill [in Japan] presumably started ever since? (Sakamoto 1995:464)¹⁰

After the fall of the Goguryeo (668), and the fall of the Baekje (660), several artist families of noble origins fled the Korean peninsula and settled in the Japanese capital of the Asuka period, taking up office. In addition to Donchō, other painters of noble Goguryeo origins mentioned in Nihon Shoki include members of the Kibumi (黄文) family and the Koma (高麗) family. Later, in the 8th century, their descendants were the artists who travelled with diplomatic envoys and monks to Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty, to study art, and returned to Japan with more books and other objects (e.g. Kibumi no Honjitsu). (Donohashi 2013:337)

The earliest Japanese frescoes using techniques from the East Asian continent were made near the capitals of the Asuka period. There are two tumuli with walls plastered with Chinese techniques and then decorated with Chinese-themed paintings: the Takamatsuzuka tumulus¹¹ (高松塚古墳) and the Kitora tumulus¹² (キトラ古墳).

⁷ Translated by the author.

⁸ 'Donchō' is the Japanese way of pronouncing his name.

⁹ 'Hōjō' is the Japanese way of pronouncing his name.

¹⁰ Translated by the author.

¹¹ The first sources documenting the existence of the Takamatsuzuka tumulus date from the second half of the Edo period. Excavation work began only after the accidental rediscovery of the tumulus in 1972. The walls and ceiling of the tomb, made of thick granite slabs, are decorated with brightly coloured frescoes and were declared national treasure in 1947. Based on the characteristics of the frescoes, sue pottery shards and the pattern of a Tang period bronze mirror, the tumulus was probably built between 694 and 710. (Donohashi 2013:344). The discovery of the frescoes was a huge sensation, attracting scholars both inside and outside the country, stimulating the development of several scientific fields. By the end of the 2000s, the frescoes had been so badly damaged by the negative effects of the Japanese climate (mould due to high humidity, chipping plaster, fading colours) that in 2007 they were removed from the walls of the chamber and placed in a dedicated restoration room. (Matsumura 2007) The restoration work was completed in spring 2020.

¹² The Kitora tumulus, discovered in 1983, is also a two-storey structure. The four walls and ceiling of the burial chamber are decorated with colorful frescoes, the themes and depictions of which suggest that the tumulus was probably built between the end of the 7th century and the early 8th century. (Donohashi 2013:365-366) Learning from the damage caused by the looting of the Takamatsuzuka tumulus and the collapse of the southern wall, researchers waited a few years to excavate the Kitora tumulus. With the publication of high-resolution color images, video footage and excavation reports, international interdisciplinary research has resumed in the late 1990s. Similar



Figure 1: Takamatsuzuka Tumulus (above) and Kitora Tumulus (below) in Asuka, Nara prefecture¹³

Characteristics and culture-historical background of the frescoes

Frescoes in the Takamatsuzuka tumulus include illustrations of ancient Chinese origin: three of the Four Guardians¹⁴, portraits of court ladies and officials, sun and moon motifs and 28 ancient Chinese constellations. On the north wall we can find the Black Warrior, on the east wall the Azure Dragon, the Sun and the officials, on the west wall the White Tiger, the Moon and the ladies of the court, and on the ceiling the constellations. The Vermilion Bird was depicted presumably on the south wall, but it was

to the Takamatsuzuka tumulus, by the end of the 2000s the wall paintings of the Kitora tumulus were also in danger due to the hot, humid climate. To avoid further damage, the burial chamber was removed from the mound, the frescoes were cut out of the chamber wall and restoration work began immediately in a newly constructed, climate-controlled room. The exquisite frescoes have been carefully restored and later displayed at the adjoining modern museum (キトラ古墳壁画体験館 四神の館), which is designed to reflect the structure and atmosphere of the original tumulus. (Lazar 2018:66-67)

¹³ Photograph was taken by the author. (2015.07.24.)

¹⁴ The belief of the Four Guardians refers to an ancient Chinese faith in four mythological animal-beasts, each representing a cardinal direction: Azure Dragon of the east (Qīnglóng 青龍), Vermillion Bird of the south (Zhūquè 朱雀), White Tiger of the west (Baihù 白虎), Black/Dark Warrior of the north (Xuánwú 玄武). This topic will be discussed in detail in a following section.

not possible to confirm the existence of the painting because the wall had been damaged by robbers in the Medieval period.

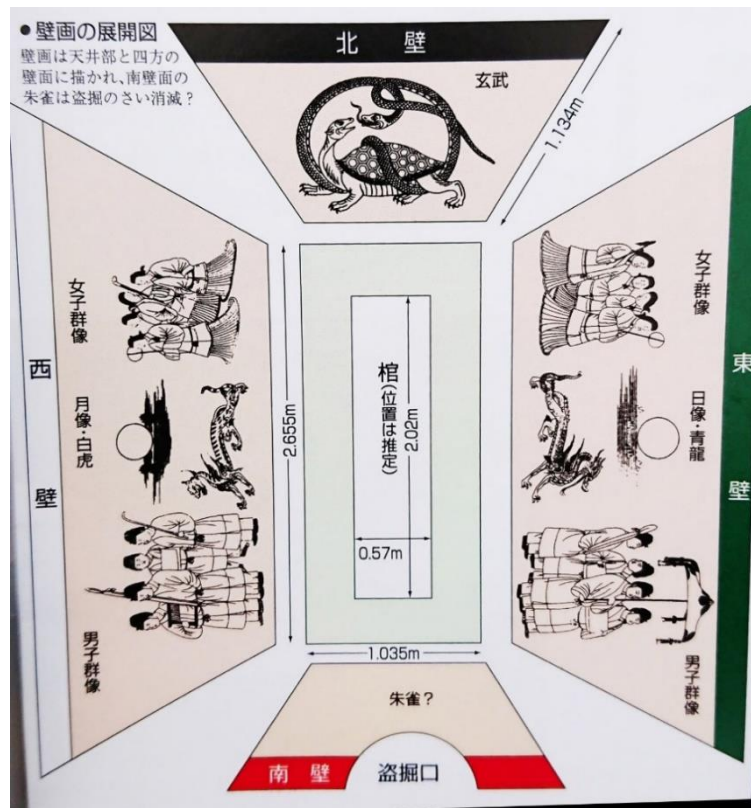


Figure 2: Frescoes of the Takamatsuzuka tumulus¹⁵

The Four Guardians can also be found among the wall paintings of the Kitora tumulus (all four frescoes are intact), but here the mythical figures of the 12 signs of the Chinese zodiacs appear on the side walls instead of the aristocrats. Although investigations have shown that all 12 motifs were originally painted on the walls, only 6 of these frescoes remained in a visible state by the time the tumulus was discovered in 1983. The star map on the ceiling, with sun and moon motifs of the same size framing the east and west sides, is a very precise work.

The question of the closest analogy of the Japanese frescoes has fascinated many art historians and archaeologists around the country. Among these renowned scholars, the monographs and other publications of Akio Donohashi, Yoshiharu Inokuchi, Yoshitaka Ariga, Atsumu Wada, Takashi Kitamura, Tadashi Saitō, Shinji Katō, Kōjirō Naoki and Tadanao Yamamoto have been the most significant over the last 30 years. In the following, based on previous research (conducted by referenced Japanese scholars) and the authors's doctoral research,¹⁶ the author will first explain the methods of

¹⁵ Photograph was taken by the author. (2021.06.01.) Source: Takamatsuzuka Hekigakan (高松塚壁画館) museum pamphlet. Owned by the author.

¹⁶ Analysed data (textual data and images) were collected during the author's doctoral research in Japan (2013-2016). (Lazar 2018)

paint application, then introduce the characteristics and origins of the frescoes. Finally, she will analyse their cultural role in ancient East Asian artistic tradition.

The painting techniques are similar in both tumuli. The first step was to plaster the clay wall thickly (in the case of the Kitora tumulus kaolin was also mixed into the plaster). Next, the thin preliminary outlines of the model image were copied into the wall in ink. In the case of some of the frescoes in the Kitora tomb, the remains of thin scratch marks indicate that the model image was probably pressed onto the clay wall and the outlines of the model were carefully carved out with a spatula, then painted with a thin brush. From this step on, the procedure was the same: the colored dye materials were applied and finally, the dark outline was worked out in even greater detail with a thin brush. (Donohashi 2013:335) The artist(s) had to work quickly, as the final fresco is created by the setting of the plaster, layers of paint and ink – from that moment on no refinements can be done. In terms of the pigments and color treatment techniques used, the frescoes of the burial mounds of Asuka bear a strong resemblance to the late 7th century Buddhist frescoes in the Golden Hall of Hōryūji Temple and are also partly identical to the tumulus frescoes of Goguryeo. (Donohashi 2013:336)

Name(s) of the designer(s) and painter(s) of the Takamatsuzuka and Kitora tumulus are unknown. The size and themes of the frescoes are very similar in both tumuli. The themes are clearly of Chinese origins, but the different compositions, the details of the motifs, the painting style and the dye materials used suggest that the designer and artist may have been inspired by Korean culture to an equally great extent. In fact, there are some original Japanese innovations in the Kitora tumulus.

The refined coloring and the delicate lines in Takamatsuzuka tumuli give the human and beast-deity figures character and a sense of calmness. In contrast, the frescoes in the Kitora tumulus, especially the Four Guardians, are rougher, with powerful lines and radiating dynamics, as if all the figures were about to fly away from the walls. Now, let us take a closer look at the themes themselves.

Frescoes of the Four Guardians¹⁷



Figure 3: Images of the Four Guardians based on Japanese tomb murals¹⁸

¹⁷ They are termed in classical Chinese literature as Si Shen 四神 (four guardian deities), Si Xiang 四象 (four images) or Si Ling 四靈 (four spirits),

¹⁸ Digital lineart made by the author based on the original outlines of the frescoes of Takamatsuzuka tumulus and Kitora tumulus.

Both the Takamatsuzuka tumulus and the Kitora tumulus depict mythical figures with similar attributes. The Guardian of the East is a greenish-blue mythical dragon with sharp claws, an elongated red tongue and long horns. On its head, forelegs and hind legs, it has a thick mane and hair that is waving backwards, as if the dragon were flying swiftly. The Vermilion Bird resembles a pheasant with vermilion plumage, also depicted in flight. The long, thin body and snake-like neck of the Guardian of the West, decorated with black stripes, is not a lifelike representation of a tiger, but the sharp claws and fangs in its snarling mouth give the impression of a wild animal. The thick fur on its neck and limbs waves backwards. The Guardian of the North is a fusion of intertwined figures of a turtle with highly detailed shell pattern and an open-mouthed, dark-colored snake. The two animals face each other, the snake wraps itself once around the turtle. Grey, yellow, red, green and black were used to paint the snake in the Kitora tumulus, while the turtle in both tombs is yellowish in color.

In ancient East Asian tradition, the Four Guardians are four mythological creatures appearing among the Chinese constellations (lunar mansions) along the ecliptic.

They are the Azure Dragon (青龍) of the East, the Vermilion Bird (朱雀) of the South, the White Tiger (白虎) of the West, and the Black Warrior (玄武) of the North.

The cult of the Four Guardians originates in totemic traditions. Currently, the oldest known depiction was found in Puyang, Henan province (5300 BC). From the Zhou dynasty (11th century BC - 3rd century BC), they were regarded as mythical spirits who ruled the segments of the sky. Early examples of this association can be seen on decorated grave goods from the Tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng. This was also the time when they became associated with the 28 ancient Chinese constellations (lunar mansions) - this early association attested to mainly by the tomb decorations in the Húběi province. (Hashimoto 1998:17; Lazar 2018: 20-23)

In Taoism, the Four Guardians have been assigned human identities and names. They have been closely connected with the *yin-yang* philosophy and have also been syncretized into the *wuxing* (Five Phases) theory¹⁹: directions, elements, colors, seasons and many other things were associated with the creatures, giving the belief a new, stable foundation. For example, the blue-green dragon symbolizes the eastern palace, the culmination of spring, represents the wood element and the beginning of the rise of yang and so on. Being intertwined with cosmological traditions, the Four Guardians became an increasingly popular part of the Chinese funerary traditions.²⁰

¹⁹ It explains the interactions and relationships created in phenomena that consist of fire, water, wood, metal and earth and lead to life, death, change and rebirth. It was combined with the yin-yang theory during the Spring and autumn periods in China and was developed into a comprehensive and logical view of the cosmos, which could be applied to every field of human society.

²⁰ The Four Guardians were represented not only in funerary traditions but also in warfare in the Warring States Period (ca. 453–221 BC).

Elements	Colors	Cardinal direction	Spiritual being	Directions	Yin/Yang
Wood	Blue/Green	East	Azure Dragon	East	Yin
Fire	Red	South	Vermilion Bird	South	Yang
Earth	Yellow	Central	Yellow Dragon	Central	Yang
Water	Black (Dark)	North	Black Warrior	North	Yin
Metal	White	West	White Tiger	West	Yang

Table 1. Correspondence with the Wuxing and yin-yang theory (Fung 1983: 22–26)

It was in the early Han period (206 BC - 220 AD) that the mystical traditions of the aristocracy, including the attributes of the Four Guardian and their Taoist cosmological role, were first officially unified. (Vampelj S. 2011: 41) The guardians were considered symbols that could exorcise evil spirits and bring good fortune. They were widely depicted on the backs of cast-bronze mirrors or carved on lacquer ware, bricks, tiles, and seals.



Figure 4: Motifs of Han tiles emblematically representing the cardinal directions²¹

How did Taoist cosmology and philosophy of nature shape ancient Chinese tomb decorations? The frescoes and reliefs had not only a decorative function, they were also an essential part of the cosmic space artificially created inside the tomb. According to Chinese ideas of the afterlife, the social status of the deceased person in the realm of the dead corresponds with their life on earth. It was important that the soul of a person of high rank should be protected and should live in harmony in the afterlife, and so the interior of the tomb and its iconographic design were created with a view to the *yin-yang* balance and the harmony of the Five Phases. This cosmological system of rules (陰陽五行思想) is detailed in

²¹ Owned by the author, these clay items are depicting round-shaped Han eave-end tiles (a particular piece of tile that is placed over the last tile in each line of tiles on the traditional Chinese roof) and are from the National Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan. Wadang tiles were important components of tiles in ancient East Asian architecture and served as protective and decorative functions.

the *Zhoubi Suanjing*²² (周髀算經) and the chapter 3 of *Huainanzi*²³ (淮南子-天文訓) and in other works as well.

Tombs during the Han period were built according to the *Tianyuan Difang* (天圓地方) concept of the *Gaitian* (蓋天) theory, with rectangular side walls and an "umbrella-like" hemispherical dome vault.²⁴ As a symbol of the yin-yang energies and the circle of the Five Phases, the ceiling was decorated with spiritual beings (e.g. the Four Guardians, Sky Horse, Zodiac signs), pairs of gods or culture heroes (e.g. Nüwa and Fuxi, Xiwangmu and Dongwanggong) and magical celestial motifs (e.g. sun-bird, moon-toad, stars), representing the eternal movement of the dual celestial world.²⁵ On the side walls and side chambers we can find portraits of the deceased person and his household. (Vampelj S. 2011:24) It was also customary to depict the spiritual beings and deities of the sky on the surfaces of grave goods.²⁶

From the Eastern Han period onwards, more complex tombs with multiple chambers were built, and the increased number of reliefs and tomb frescoes were created in different, more complex compositions. In the case of the Four Guardians, it can be observed that they were moved from the high plane of the ceiling to the lower plane or to the upper plane of the side walls.²⁷ This change can also be attributed to the new concept that in the Taoist cosmic worldview, the Four Guardians were no longer just the guardians of the sky and symbols of the cycle of the seasons, but their role was transformed to serve as a kind of guidance deity for the highborn aristocrats. We can find evidence of the new, enhanced roles of the Four Guardians as guiding spirits on inscriptions of grave goods (e.g. bronze mirrors) and in certain liturgical works of Chinese poetry such as the *Songs of Chu*²⁸ (楚辭).

Compositions were able to further evolve both artistically and in terms of content during the Northern and Southern dynasties. The Four Guardians were dominant, large-scale motifs in the tombs of the Northern Wei (386-534) and Qi dynasties (550-577), but also appear in small numbers in the tombs of the Southern Qin dynasty (265-437). In addition to mythical spirits, court ladies, officials, snarling

²² Dated to approximately 100 BC, *Zhoubi Suanjing* is one of the oldest Chinese mathematical texts dedicated to astronomical observation and calculation.

²³ Compiled by scholars at the court of Liu An (of Huainan) in the 2nd century BC, it is a collection of various Western Han philosophical treatises and an articulation of statecraft. *Huainanzi* is a synthesis of works associated with the Daoist and Confucian tradition, as well as other foundational ancient Chinese texts.

²⁴ According to the *Tianyuan Difang* (天圓地方) philosophy, above the angular earthly world (the world of mortals) there is a hemispherical sky held up by 8 pillars (the supernatural world).

²⁵ A representative example is the Xi'an Jiaotong daxue tomb (西安交通大學壁畫墓) in Xi'an, built in the late Western Han period, and the Luoyang shaogou 61 hao tomb (洛陽燒溝 61 號壁畫墓) in Luoyang, dating from a similar period.

²⁶ Examples of tombs decorated according to these cosmological doctrines from the Han period include the Luoyang Yintun Mural Tomb (洛陽尹屯新莽壁畫墓), the Luoyang Qianjingtou tomb (洛陽淺井頭壁畫墓) and the Luoyang shaogou 61 hao tomb (洛陽燒溝 61 號壁畫墓), as well as the Xi'an Qujiang Cuizhuyuan tomb (西安曲江翠竹園西漢壁畫墓) and the Xi'an Jiaotong daxue tomb (西安交通大學西漢壁畫墓).

²⁷ E.g. Binwang tomb 邠王墓, Bu Qianqiu tomb 千陽縣漢墓, Huo Chengsi tomb 霍承嗣墓.

²⁸ It is an anthology of Chinese poetry traditionally attributed mainly to Qu Yuan and Song Yu from the Warring States period. The *Songs of Chu* derives its imagery from shamanistic ritual.

demons, Taoist immortals, equestrian hunting scenes, Buddhist floral motifs, stars and, for the first time, the 12 animal figures of the Chinese zodiac were painted on the walls and ceilings of the tombs.

From the end of the 6th century onwards, however, the patterns began to simplify, and by the time of the reign of the Sui and early Tang dynasties frescoes were only schematic images. From the 9th century, the placement of the frescoes and the symbolism represented by the spiritual beings changed: only the Azure Dragon and the White Tiger were favored, often depicted on the sides of the long corridor leading to the burial chamber. The Black Warrior and Vermillion Bird disappeared partially or completely from the walls of the burial chamber, but were sometimes used to decorate the coffin instead of the walls.

As Chinese culture spread widely in the Far East, the royal courts of many ancient states adopted the Four Guardians into their belief systems - with their own interpretations. The tradition of depicting the Four Guardians in the tombs of highborns spread in several waves and became popular in many regions. In the 5th century it spread to the ancient kingdoms of the Korean peninsula (especially to Goguryeo) and later to Japan, but it is also found in the decorated tombs built during the late Tang dynasty and later the Five Dynasties in present day Mongolia, Manchuria, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

As the Korean kingdom Goguryeo (37 BC–668 AD) developed, it laid claim to the most extensive realm in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast China in the 5th century. Goguryeo tomb murals vibrantly depict lifestyles of its period, the Four Guardians and other images. They were presumably inspired by the Buddhist painting tradition of the cave temples of West China (e.g. Dunhuang) and the highborn tombs of the Northern Wei Dynasty. (Donohashi 2013:299) The images of the Four Guardians can be found most often in burial mounds with lantern roofs, where they were not depicted at the highest point of the ceiling but on the upper level of the side walls close to the ceiling – following Wei practices. From the late 5th century and early 6th century onwards, they became the dominant motif on the four walls of the burial chamber around the capital Pyongyang (e.g. Susanri tomb 栗水里古墳, Honamri sasin tomb 湖南里四神塚). Four Guardians frescoes from the first half of the 7th century supplanted all other images from the side walls. As seen in the Gangseo Tombs (江西大墓, 江西中墓), their enormous size filled the entire wall surface. The popularity of these motifs lasted until the mid-7th century, however with the fall of the kingdom in 668, the tradition of Four Guardians frescoes on the Korean peninsula ceased to exist. (Saotome 2005, Azuma 1999)

Although there are examples of the use of the Four Guardians as decorative motifs on ritual objects in Baekje, the Chinese tradition of decorating burial mounds has not spread as widely as in Goguryeo. One reason for this was that Baekje, a kingdom with strong maritime trade, did not have close relations with the Northern Wei dynasty but with the Southern Qin dynasty, where the depiction of the Four Guardians was also not widespread. There are currently 2 examples of the use of the Four Guardians, of which only

6th century Tomb No. 6 of Songsan-ri tombs (宋山里古墳群 6 号墳) in Gongju has all four deities on the side walls. Moreover, it is the only case that such painted figures have been found in a brick chamber tomb. After plastering mud or mortar on the spots in the four sides where the murals were to be drawn, the murals were painted with whitewash; the figures of sun and moon were also painted on the south wall.

Japanese tradition of the Four Guardians

Buddhist monks, scholars, artists and war refugees, mainly from Baekje and later Goguryeo, arrived and settled in Japan in several waves during the 5th – 7th centuries. The tradition of the Four Guardians was gradually introduced into the culture of the Japanese court, probably together with the teachings of cosmology, as learned from Taoist philosophical texts, classical philosophical and scientific works from China. Japanese envoys intermittently sent to the capital of the Sui and Tang dynasty, new books and illustrations arrived in the country. The importance of the symbolism of the Four Guardians in this period in Japan is well illustrated by the influence of the Shijin Sōō concept (‘correspondence to the four deities’ 四神相応) of Chinese geomancy.

According to the original Chinese funerary customs, the Four Guardians were always to be depicted in a specific arrangement, in a way that ensured the circulation of the yin and yang dual forces and the Five Phases. This cosmic arrangement (陰陽五行) means that they are placed on the right wall of the chamber (based on the cardinal direction they rule) and face in a certain direction. In addition, each one of them must wear the color assigned to that particular cardinal direction. A special characteristic of the Japanese Four Guardians paintings is that their vivid colors show clearly their role in the theory of Five Phases, unlike the frescoes of Goguryeo, which do not show the symbolic colors.

The head of the White Tiger on the western wall of the Takamatsuzuka tumulus faces south, i.e. left – same as in all known Chinese and Korean tombs except one (General Erzhu Rong 爾朱襲墓). In contrast, the White Tiger fresco in the Kitora tumulus faces the Black Warrior on the north wall, i.e. right. With this change, the Four Guardians appear to 'move' clockwise: the Black Warrior (right) faces east, the Azure Dragon (right) faces south, the Vermillion Bird (right) faces west, and the White Tiger (right) faces north. It can be assumed that while at the end of the 7th century Japanese artists still followed the traditional Chinese rules of representation, but later, when the Kitora tumulus was built they had already interpreted the symbolism of the Four Guardians from a unique Japanese perspective, thus changing the composition of the frescoes. (Donohashi 2013:334)

This theory is supported by several important examples from the 7th-8th centuries. Firstly, as far as we know, there are no tomb frescoes in ancient China or on the Korean peninsula where all the Four Guardians face the same direction, i.e. only the right or only the left. Although from the late 700s

onwards, under the influence of Chinese Zodiac symbolism, the Four Guardians also began to 'circle' on the backs of bronze mirrors from the Tang dynasty, the White Tiger and the Azure Dragon on these bronze mirrors from the 7th century still face the same direction: southwards. So no circular movement can be observed here. (Donohashi 2010:52) But what about the Japanese examples? In Japan, the pedestal of the cast-bronze Yakushi Triad (in Yakushiji, Nara) was decorated with Four Guardians figures (697), and it was around this time that special banners with motifs of the deities (四神幡 - also with roots to Chinese customs) started to appear in the most important state ceremonies of the imperial court. In 756, a Japanese bronze mirror decorated with the Four Guardians and the Chinese Zodiac was deposited in the collection of the Shosoin of Nara. In 762, a manuscript containing a sketch of a bronze mirror pattern, also of Japanese design, was deposited in the same treasury, showing three of the Four Guardians with exception of the White Tiger. Although the nature of the Four Guardians motifs on the ritual banners is unknown, the decoration of the Yakushi Triad, which was (presumably) made at the same time as the Takamatsuzuka tumulus, does indeed show the Guardian of the West facing south (left), same as in the tumulus in question. By contrast, on the Japanese bronze mirrors from 756, all the Four Guardians (and Zodiacs) face to the right and the composition suggests a circular movement, same as in the Kitora tumulus. In the sketch of the manuscript from 762, we can also observe the illusion of circular movement to the right. In the frescoes of the Kitora tumulus, built in the early 8th century, the Four Guardians begin to 'circulate' almost a century earlier than in the Chinese bronze mirrors, and there are no frescoes of the same symbolics in Chinese or Korean tombs, so the new arrangement of the Four Guardians in the Kitora tumulus is a contemporary Japanese tomb-art innovation. This innovation was probably later reflected in all the other depictions and was later in line with Tang design.

It is worth pointing out another puzzling fact here. Both the tiger and the dragon of both Japanese tombs have the tail of the animal wrapped around on the hind legs, and the very end of the tail is curled up. This characteristic can be seen in all but one of the Japanese Four Guardians depictions²⁹, and is therefore a common depiction in Japan. In contrast, it does not appear at all in the tombs of the Korean peninsula, and in China there are very few analogies, and they are not usually related to funerary art. (Donohashi 2010:46) At present, we know of only one example in China where this design has been used as a funerary fresco: in the tomb of Tang General Su Dingfang (蘇定方墓), who died in 667, has the tail of the White Tiger wrapped around his right hind leg. Later, in the 8th and 9th centuries, the rare depiction appears on the occasional carved tombstone, the entrance to a few burial chambers or some bronze mirrors, but it does not become popular, the classical depiction remaining more common.

²⁹ On the pedestal of the Yakushi Triad (697), decorated with the Four Guardians, the tails of animals were depicted rising above the legs, as in Chinese and Korean designs of the same period.

Frescoes of court ladies and officials

On both the west and east walls of the burial chamber of the Takamatsuzuka tumulus, 4 human figures are depicted on each wall alongside the corresponding Guardian. The subject matter of the frescoes is of Chinese origin. Portraits of the deceased and his household first appear in the tombs of the Northern dynasties. Under the influence of the Northern Wei dynasty, the tombs of the 5th and 6th century Goguryeo also have a number of colorful murals of the deceased and his household wearing



clothes of the same period. Later, in the Tang period, the tradition of the depiction of the deceased disappeared altogether, but pictures of parading court ladies and officials appeared on both sides of the wall of the corridor leading to the burial chamber, together with the Guardians of the East and the West. (Donohashi 2013: 369) Highborns always carried ornate fans or other ceremonial instruments (e.g. the tomb of Princess Yongtai 永泰公主墓, the tomb of Crown Prince Jiemin 節愍太子墓).

Figure 5: „Asuka Beauties”³⁰

The richly colored portraits of the court ladies (known as "Asuka Beauties" 飛鳥美人) and the portraits of the officials in the Takamatsuzuka tumulus were clearly influenced by the tomb frescoes of the Tang dynasty. The figures, who appear to be talking to each other, wear colorful noble dress as they parade, holding ornate period fans and a ritual staffs. The joyful ceremonial nature of the frescoes suggests a major court ceremony that could actually take place in Fujiwara-kyō. The composition is very similar to the fresco in the tomb of Tang Princess Yongtai, as if it were a miniature copy, however there is one difference: the ladies and lords are dressed differently.

It is assumed that the dress of each figure reflects the court fashion of Asuka of the time. If we observe the full kimono, we can see that this dress pattern also appears on the embroidered artwork 'Tenjukoku Shūchō Mandala'³¹ (天寿国繡帳). Furthermore, the frescoes of the court ladies of Susanri tomb in Goguryeo from the late 5th century also show a similar style of dress (long-sleeve jackets and skirts with folds and stripes of many colors). Although the Japanese composition on the western and eastern

³⁰ This Japanese postage stamp (part of "Asuka Archaeological Conservation Fund - Takamatsuzuka Kofun Tomb Murals" stamp set, issued on 26th March, 1973) is owned by the author.

³¹ Originally made in the Asuka period, it is the oldest known example of embroidery in Japan and was created in honour of Prince Shōtoku after his death in the 7th century. In the Edo period, remains from the original textile and parts of its replica made during the late Kamakura period (late 13th century) were gathered into the present form. Currently, the embroidery is in the collection of the Nara National Museum, but remains the property of the Chūgū-ji temple.

chamber walls was clearly influenced by the traditions of the Tang dynasty, the particular coloring and the style of the clothing clearly show that it was created from a Japanese perspective. Moreover, the clothing of the Japanese court ladies suggests that the strictly regulated court fashion for men and women in the Asuka period may have been inspired by the slightly earlier fashion of Goguryeo. (Donohashi 2010:18)

The depiction of celestial bodies (the sun, the moon and stars)

Ancient Chinese astronomy was both philosophical and astrological. By the Han empire, concepts of the cosmos were changing basically from that of the Four Quarters (四方) to the Five Phases and yin-yang (陰陽五行), with a place for emperors to act as an essential pivot in the interlocking relationships of Heaven, Earth and Man. The astronomers of the emperors not only tracked the passage of time by the movement of the moon, but also kept careful records of celestial phenomena for political divination. It was believed that any change that occurred in the heavens would also occur in the mortal world. (Smith 2015:11) The Moon's zodiac was designed based on her position in relation to significant star groupings. These are the 28 lunar mansions (二十八宿). According to the Han cosmological doctrines, the four regions of Heaven were ruled by the Four Guardians, and the 28 lunar mansions were divided so that each Guardian had 7 of them to rule. (Hashimoto 1998:16)

Numerous grave goods, stone carvings and tomb frescoes testify to how this system was woven into the funerary traditions of East Asia. The tradition of depicting the celestial bodies in burial chambers started around the 3rd century BC and was later passed on to Goguryeo and Japan.

On the completely flat ceiling of the Takamatsuzuka tumulus, the lunar mansions are depicted in 4 groups, as they belong to each deity according to the cosmological principle. The ceiling is dotted with small bits of gold leaf, which are in turn joined in various patterns by red lines in such a way as to represent star charts. In the centre of the area enclosed by the lunar mansions ('Purple Forbidden Enclosure') are the North Star and the stars known in Chinese as the "Four Advisors" (四辅).

The celestial map in the Kitora tumulus, created on a not entirely flat granite slab, consists of 68 constellations (about 350 stars of different sizes). It shows the stars in astonishing detail, including the 28 lunar mansions and even a part of the Milky Way. All stars were made from gold leaf and then connected by red lines. In the central part of the ceiling, 4 red lines organise stars and the visible celestial paths of the Moon and Sun. This high level of astronomical knowledge clearly originated on the East Asian continent, and was most likely introduced to Japan during the 7th century by Korean scholars.



Figure 6: Ceiling of the Kitora tumulus³²

The Kitora star map is not a purely symbolic representation of heaven, as in the case of the Takamatsuzuka tumulus, but is based mostly on accurate observations: it represents the actual state of the sky at a given time, as recorded from a given location. There are many questions about the model of this star map, as there is no known source that depicts the sky in such detail before the end of the 7th century. Moreover, no similar work of art has remained intact anywhere in the world. This is why the ceiling fresco of the Kitora tumulus is now considered to be the oldest star map in the world. (Hashimoto 1998:13-14) Several archaeoastronomical theories have been proposed in the past 20 years for when and where the sky depicted on the map was recorded. According to an older theory the star map may date back to the 1st century AD and may have been recorded in the area of present-day Xi'an. More recent research has identified Pyongyang, the capital of Goguryeo, as the place of origin of the model star map, and records show that a famous star map carved in stone existed in the kingdom, but was destroyed when Goguryeo fell (668). As mentioned earlier in this paper, we know from the Nihon Shoki that in 602 the Korean monk Kanroku went to Japan to teach and brought books on astronomy and astrology to the Japanese imperial court. It is possible that he was the one who introduced the Japanese court to the star map used as a model for the ceiling fresco in the Kitora tumulus, and it is also possible that this model was a copy of the famous star map of Goguryeo. (Miyajima 1999)

The images of the sun and moon symbolize the cycle of time. According to Taoist cosmology, the Sun was correspondent with the East, yang energy and the Azure Dragon, while the Moon was correspondent with the West, yin energy and the White Tiger. While in China and the Korean peninsula the sun and moon motif was never depicted on the side walls of the burial chamber, in the Japanese Takamatsuzuka tumulus these images appear above the Azure Dragon and the White Tiger frescos, close to the ceiling

³² Photograph was taken by Zsófia Imai for the author at „Kitora Tumulus Mural Museum – Shijin no Yakata” (キトラ古墳壁画体験館 四神の館). (2018.08.01.) Used with permission.

plane, surrounded by green mountains and red clouds. This 'landscape style' painting bears a resemblance to some of the details in the mid 7th century paintings of the Tamamushi Shrine. In the Kitora tumulus, these symbols are on the east and west sides of the descending edge of the ceiling, acting as a frame to the star map of unparalleled detail – but they are not a part of it. Here, too, the sun and moon motifs, painted in gold and silver, emerge from a sea of clouds, but the representation of the clouds is different. There is more space between the pale red lines with blurred red painting and rough green mountain peaks in the background, creating a more lifelike, foggy effect. This style of painting with color transitions was probably introduced to Japan under the early Tang dynasty, and can also be seen in the background of Buddhist frescoes in the Golden Hall of the Hōryūji Temple.

The 12 Chinese zodiac signs

According to the Chinese lunar calendar, time consists of the endless circle of 60-year cycles. An entire 60-year period is defined by two independent cycles: Celestial Stems of the wuxing and the yin-yang forces and the Earthly Branches of the 12 zodiac signs. At the beginning of each lunar year, a different animal takes over and rules the following year. According to Taoist cosmology, each zodiac sign has a corresponding element, a cardinal direction, a Guardian, a color, and also carries the yin or yang characteristics. This system of association changes every 12 years and ends and starts again in the 60th year.

In China, it was first during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589) that the artistic tradition of displaying the 12 zodiac signs along with the Four Guardians in the tombs of aristocrats was first developed. (Donohashi 2013:354) In the tombs of the northern Wei and Qi dynasties, they can be seen exclusively in animal form painted on the ceiling (e.g. the tomb of Prince Lou Rui of Northern Qi). Later, several standing or sitting tomb figures with human bodies and animal heads, wearing clothing of officials and sometimes holding small ritual staffs, made of earthenware were found in the floodplain of the Yangtze River and in northern and western China dating back to the Sui and Tang dynasty. This pictorial innovation appeared in the capital Chang'an and Luoyang only very late, from the mid to late 8th century. The Tang bronze mirrors are also worth mentioning, where the zodiacs appear exclusively in animal forms from the 8th century onwards. The depiction of the Dragon sign is very similar to that of the Japanese Azure Dragon and some of its Chinese predecessors, as it often has its tail wrapped around its hind legs.

It was also from this period that the use of zodiacs in tomb decoration became popular in Silla, which enjoyed good relations with the Tang court. The tombs of General Gim Yu-shin and King Gyeongdeok, buried in the mid-8th century in Gyeongju, are decorated with stone carvings of the defending animal figures in human form, dressed as generals and holding weapons. This ornamental technique (influenced

by Buddhist art) was used on 9 other royal tombs in addition to King Gyeongdeok's in Silla during the 8th-9th centuries. (Lim 2017:2)

Zodiacs rarely appear in royal tombs of Baekje, but when they do it is only on tombstones placed at the entrance to the corridor and they are not depicted nor in animal or anthropomorphic form, only with their names carved in Chinese characters on the back of the tombstone. The most famous example is the tombstone of King Muryeong of Baekje, who died in 523.³³

The six frescoes of zodiacs that survive in the Japanese Kitora tumulus (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Horse, Dog, Pig), dating from the early 8th century, are completely unique in the period. At present, we do not know of any tomb frescoes from the 7th-8th centuries in the East Asian region that depict mythical animals in anthropomorphic forms with weapons in their hands, either in China or in the Korean peninsula (Donohashi 2013: 300).

We can presume that originally 12 paintings were made, but only 6 of them remain more or less intact, of which the Horse and Tiger zodiac is currently in the best condition. Underneath the paintings you can still see the scratch marks left when the contours of the original model drawing were carved into the wall. This technique was often used in the decorated tombs of the Tang period.

Originally, 3 frescoes may have been placed on each wall according to cosmological rules. The mythical figures have a human body and wear a simple noble kimono, but have an animal head, and hold either an ornamental weapon or an actual weapon (e.g. a spear). They are depicted in a standing position on the lower level of the side walls. Each group of zodiacs is placed under one of the Four Guardians according to the traditional cosmological order. In addition, each zodiac wears the color that corresponds to the cardinal direction and Guardian to which it belongs. This unique style of representation, which was born in Asuka half a century before the reliefs in Silla, are influenced by the tomb art of the Sui dynasty and early Tang dynasty and lies somewhere between the artistic styles of the two regions. Some elements of it, such as the symbolic colors the zodiacs wear and the pairing of anthropomorphic figures with the Four Guardians, can be considered a completely unique Japanese interpretation. (Donohashi 2010:38-39) This unique Japanese representation of the Chinese zodiacs lived on in Japan: in the iconographic manual *Kakuzenshō*³⁴ (覚禅鈔) from the late Heian - early Kamakura period, the Buddhist Twelve Heavenly Generals (十二神将) were depicted wearing clothing of court officials, holding weapons but with animal heads.

³³ This data is primarily based on personal viewing experience of the author during her fieldwork in Gongju (including a visit to the Gongju National Museum), South Korea in 2014, but the main text of the 2013 Japanese edition of the Gongju National Museum Catalogue („Midokoro”) was also consulted.

³⁴ Consisting of Shingon mikkyo teachings and rituals, "Collected Notes of Kakuzen" was compiled by the monk Kakuzen (覚禅) between 1183 and 1213.

Summary

This paper has reviewed the development of the funerary art of the Japanese aristocracy in the Kofun and Asuka periods, including an intercultural context in which the origin, function and evolution of the representational tradition of cosmological symbols of decorated burial mounds of Asuka were examined. Although wall paintings were made in various regions of Japan as early as the second half of the 6th century, from an art historical and cultural historical perspective, two burial mounds in Asuka can be considered outstanding: the Takamatsuzuka tumulus and the Kitora tumulus. The ceiling and wall decorations of their burial chambers are remarkable examples of the intercultural exchange process between Japan, Chinese dynasties and the states of the Korean Peninsula. Analysis of all frescoes revealed a developed correlative cosmology (yin-yang and wuxing) which manifests its concrete image in symbolic codes of individual iconographic motifs. The paintings of both tumuli are eloquent proof that Japan was already an integral part of the cultural circulation between the ancient East Asian countries in the Asuka period - not only as a Buddhist state, but also as an empire with a strong cultural identity in its roots. Many of the foreign doctrines and cultural elements adopted by the court were absorbed into ancient Japanese traditions (e.g. tomb art) and presented in a distinctively Japanese interpretation.

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