

# Similarities and Differences in Bamboo Imagery in Chinese and Korean Folk Cultures

Tingyin Deng

Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, Sichuan 64300, China.

## Abstract

**Folk custom is to show culture via action or ceremony. We can learn cultural phenomenon and characteristics by folk custom, so there is an inseparable relationship between the culture and folk custom. Korean culture is a mixture of mainland culture in north China and ocean culture in south China, which enjoy connections and differences between them. This paper attempts to find a new opportunity for the cultural integration of China and Korea through studying bamboo imagery in Chinese and Korean folk cultures.**

## Keywords

**Folk custom, culture, bamboo imagery.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Folk custom is to show culture via action or ceremony. We can learn cultural phenomenon and characteristics by folk custom, so there is an inseparable relationship between the culture and folk custom. Korean culture is a mixture of mainland culture in north China and ocean culture in south China, and so does Korean folk customs. Generally speaking, the folk customs like northern folk customs have the characteristics of male cultural style in nomadic life, while the folk customs like southern folk customs have the characteristics of female cultural style from farming life.

South Korean scholar Chen Taixia believed that bamboo expressed in Korean language "tae" (대) originated in "tek", an ancient sound in southern China. What's more, bamboo was recorded in Classic of Mountains and Seas, Classic of South Mountains, Classic of West Mountains, Classic of North Mountains, Classic of East and Classic of Central Mountains. The distribution of bamboo plants in South Korea is not as wide as that in China, but bamboo also is dotted with everywhere in South Korea. In particular, Tanyang county, Jeollanam-do in South Korea, since 1999, it has held "bamboo festival" in the early May every year, carried out the ancient custom of "bamboo drunk day" that enjoys rich cultural connotation and is famous to the world. Bamboo has become a pervasive and profound cultural phenomenon, from instrumental cultures such as eating and living, production tools, writing tools and musical instruments to ideological cultures such as folk customs, literature and art, as well as personality and ethics, thus forming the bamboo cultural circle.

### 1.1. The Worship of Bamboo and the Imagery of Shamanism Ceremony in China

The content of bamboo worship includes bamboo totem worship and bamboo reproduction worship. Bamboo totem worship mainly shows typical ancestor worship phenomenon. For example, since the Han dynasty, the minorities such as the Yi nationality, the Miao nationality and the Tujia nationality have many stories about the legend of the king bamboo, whose common characteristics are that bamboo gave birth to the ancestors of this nation. The myths and legends about bamboo totem worship in ancient books are also fruitful. Bamboo

reproduction worship is another important manifestation of bamboo worship. Bamboo is evergreen and has short growth cycle and exuberant reproduction. Idioms such as bamboo shoots after a spring rain and something that has grown exuberant like a bamboo are used to describe the reproductive ability and vitality of bamboo. The distinction between male and female of bamboo reflects the reproduction of bamboo and the theory that man is an integral part of nature. Bamboo reproduction worship is reflected in many ethnic minority areas, such as Fujian, Zhejiang, and Sichuan, where ceremony of wish to shake bamboo girls is very popular.

### 1.2. Korean Imagery of the Holy Spiritual Medium of Bamboo

In the Korean Shamanism, bamboo is considered as a pathway and a resting place for the gods. The evergreen bamboo is endowed with the eternal imagery of life. It reaches high into the clouds and takes root deep down, just like the cosmic tree running through the upper, middle and lower worlds, so it is taken as the high ladder that gods use. Such being the cases, in the Shamanism ritual, necromancer used wizard tools made of bamboo to communicate with the god, realizing the communication between the god and human beings.



**Figure 1.** Korean Shamanism. Source: Internet

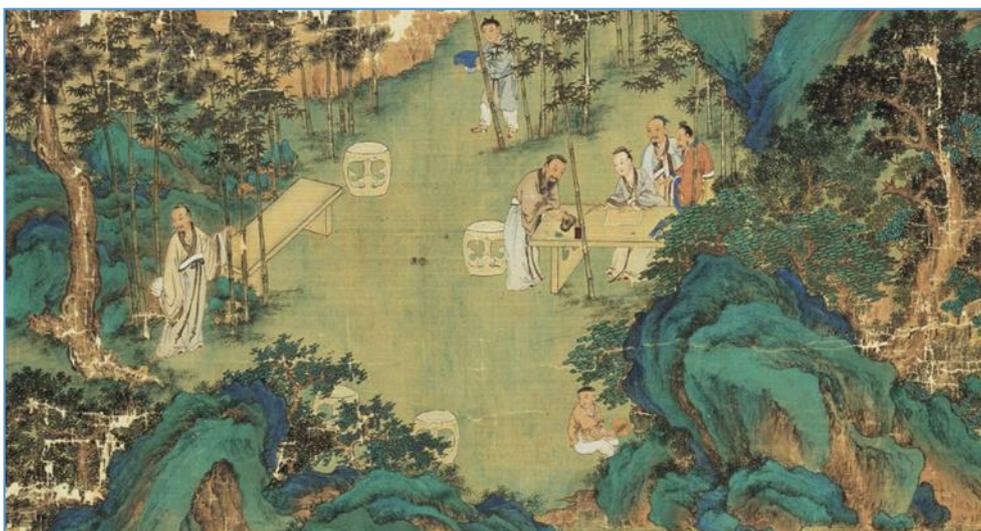
The most typical device in Korean Shamanism is the magic pole that is made of bamboo including the long pole and the short pole. Different regions have their own different names and styles of the poles. In the west coast of South Korea, people used “Feng bamboo (봉 죽)” in Fengyu fete. In the east and south coast of South Korea, people used “Tianwang pole(천 왕 대)” in Bieshen fete. In the Jizhou island, people used “big pole (큰 대)” in Yingdeng fete.

In these Shamanism rituals, the function of the pole is a passage for the gods up and down and a place for them to stay after their arrival, as well as a symbol of sacred areas. In Bieshen fete and Yingdeng fete, the silk ribbon connected to the altar hall by the upper part of the pole is the "bridge" where the god comes from the pole in the altar hall, so the wizards also called it the "bridge". The short pole, used in different ceremonies, is used as a symbol of the gods, and its function is basically the same as the long pole. In these Shamanism rituals, people used bamboo branches to set up channels for gods and the dead. The distinction between gods and the secular world is more primitive and straightforward, which shows the imagery of the holy spiritual medium of bamboo in a full manner.

### 1.3. Chinese Bamboo Cultural Tradition and Gentleman's Character

In the bamboo culture circle of East Asia, bamboo, with its unique character and charm, plays an important part in the literati's aesthetic vision and value system. Bamboo imagery has become a significant theme in elegant culture and upper culture.

During the Wei and Jin dynasties, Ji Kang, Ruan Ji, Shan Tao, Xiang Xiu, Liu Ling, Wang Rong, and Ruan Xian were known as the seven sages, who often traveled bamboo forest and got along well with each other. Plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum have always been known as the four gentlemen in the flower, due to their tall, straight and enduring characteristics in winter. The ancients often used them to describe gentleman's characters, such as the manner of contenting with poverty, the spirit of self-improvement and the mind of tolerance.



**Figure 2.** Seven sages in bamboo forest. Picture source: Internet

Bamboo does not wither and shows the color of green that gives a person a kind of vibrant call. Green is simple and easy with vitality; it is earthy and elegant with grace; it has hoary breath with comfort and simplicity. These personality traits evolved from the imagery and characteristics of bamboo itself are pursued by people. Zhu Geliang in the Advice to My Son said: One can't show high ideals without simple living; one can't have lofty aspirations without a peaceful state of mind, which is consist with the bamboo indifferent to doing nothing.

Bamboo can suffer from frost, snow, wind and rain. It can stand between heaven and earth, with upright and unyielding characters, so many gentlemen to pursue it. The personality character that emerges from the bamboo's backbone is deeply reflected in the Confucian ideal personality. Mencius said: No fortune shall corrupt my soul; no poverty shall dampen my will and no power shall suppress my pride.

Bamboo is upright, free and easy. Its image characteristics reflected magnanimous and tolerant personality that is the pursuit of people. The gentleman image of bamboo has a great regulating effect on people's life and their self-cultivation, as well as a purifying effect on people's spiritual world.

### 1.4. The imagery of prosperity of bamboo in South Korea

Compared with the Chinese bamboo cultural tradition and the gentleman character, in the daily life of the Korean people, bamboo shows the images of longevity, auspiciousness, filial

piety and close relatives, and exorcism of ghosts and evil spirits due to the outstanding charm and unique character of the bamboo.

In the Korean people's life, bamboo, as a common decorative pattern on furniture, clothing, daily appliances and other items, is endowed with the imagery of longevity.

Bamboo is also common in Korean rituals of life. When people engage according to the traditional marriage custom, the man should write the date of birth on the paper, split the green bamboo tube, put it in the middle, and finally close the bamboo tube with the green red thread, sending it to the woman's home. The woman will decide the wedding date in line with the date of birth of both parties, which is called "Nacai". When holding a wedding, a pair of vases with bamboo and pine branches will be placed on the wedding table. The green bamboo branches mark the loyalty of love and good luck in life.

The filial piety imagery of bamboo depends on the funeral custom in Korea. In ancient times, when people's father died, people used a bamboo cane, called ju cane. Funeral rites in Korea have followed this tradition since ancient times. According to the eastern philosophy of the round heaven and the square earth, the round bamboo pole symbolizes the father, and the square planate wood or willow symbolizes the mother. The firm and straight bamboo marks the strong and strict father of an iron fist in a velvet glove.

Bamboo also has the auspicious imagery of exorcising evil spirits in folk customs. There is a folk custom of tiger worship in South Korea. The picture of bamboo tiger with the theme of tiger roar in bamboo forest is one of the representative folk paintings in South Korea. The bravery of tiger and the mystery of bamboo forest complement each other, making it the most popular picture of avoiding evil spirits in South Korea. On New Year eve, there is a custom of hanging bamboo sieve and bamboo colander to drive ghosts and pray for good luck.

## 2. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The color, shape, character and charm of bamboo constitute its outstanding natural quality. Bamboo is integrated into beliefs and customs, and is personified and deified, taking shape a multi-dimensional imagery system while meeting people's practical and aesthetic needs.

In the Shamanism, a primitive religion, in South Korea, bamboo is considered to be a heaven ladder running through the upper, middle and lower worlds, and is the passage of gods up and down and a place to stay for gods. It is endowed with mysterious imagery of holy spiritual mediums, which is similar to Nuoyi, China's customs ceremony, of religious imagery. It is both a ritual implement, and a technique of expression about ideology, forming the primitive belief level of cultural imagery. Compared with the Shamanism culture of South Korea, China has also developed the bamboo worship, dispelling evil spirits and avoiding ghosts and other diversified consciousness attachment, which has penetrated into all aspects of beliefs and customs.

The bamboo imagery in Korean folk culture originated from the philosophical thinking where man is an integral part of nature in the eastern culture. The theory holds that the heaven and the earth are coherent, that man and nature are isomorphic, and that all natural things and human events are interlinked with each other, with similar attributes and connections.

It connects bamboo with life and society, and integrates bamboo into various folk beliefs, endowing bamboo with cultural connotations. Meanwhile, human values, concepts and expectations can be represented through bamboo. The same ends but different means: the Chinese present this metaphor as literature, painting, personality and morality while Korean represent it as life-like scenes such as longevity, auspiciousness, filial piety, close relatives.

In the contemporary era, as people attach high importance to the sublimation of culture and the improvement of aesthetics, bamboo cultural tradition has been more and more popular. It has been widely used in various fields of daily life, such as home design product packaging and

arts and crafts, as well as in personal aesthetic cultivation, including literature, painting, personality and morality. Bamboo subtly changes people's way and attitude of life. Bamboo has a profound impact on people's life and social development in both folk culture value and aesthetic implication.

Author profile: Deng Tingyin (1983 - ), a female lecturer, is from Zigong, Sichuan. She got the master of landscape architecture in Chongqing University, and is studying PhD candidate in Mokwon University, South Korea. Her main research direction is environmental design.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Zheng Xiyuan. The characteristics of Korean traditional culture from the perspective of folk custom [J]. Journal of Guizhou Institute for Nationalities (philosophy and social sciences edition), 2005, 92(4): 10-15.
- [2] Zhang Guoqiang. A study on bamboo imagery in Korean folk culture [J]. Northeast Asian Studies of Foreign Languages, 2013, 1 (1): 92-96.
- [3] Lin jun. Spiritual connotation of Chinese bamboo cultural tradition [J]. Journal of Nantong University (social sciences edition), 2014, 30 (5): 84-88.
- [4] He Ming, Liao Guoqiang. Chinese bamboo culture [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2007.
- [5] Li Shidong, Yan Rong. Research on some basic issues of Chinese bamboo culture [J]. Journal of Beijing Forestry University (social sciences edition), 2007, 6 (1): 6-10. (in Chinese with English abstract)