



Minhwa (Folk Art)

Demonstration

Do-Hee Morsman

U-M Nam Center for Korean Studies

Adapted from:
Kee Soon Song
President, Korean Folk Art Association
Copyright (April 2011)



Lecture Topics

- What is *Minhwa*?
- Types of *Minhwa*
- Morando 모란도 (Paintings of Peonies)
- *Minhwa Practice*

What is *Minhwa*?

- *Minhwa* (“folk painting”) is an invaluable part of Korea’s cultural heritage and conveys the mythology, religion, and views of the Korean people.
- *Minwha* represents the artistic expressions of individuals who created paintings to decorate palaces and homes and to celebrate joyful family occasions, such as weddings and sixtieth birthdays.
- It has been said that the tradition of folk paintings has lasted so long because *minhwa* “touched the soul of the Korean people.”

Minhwa

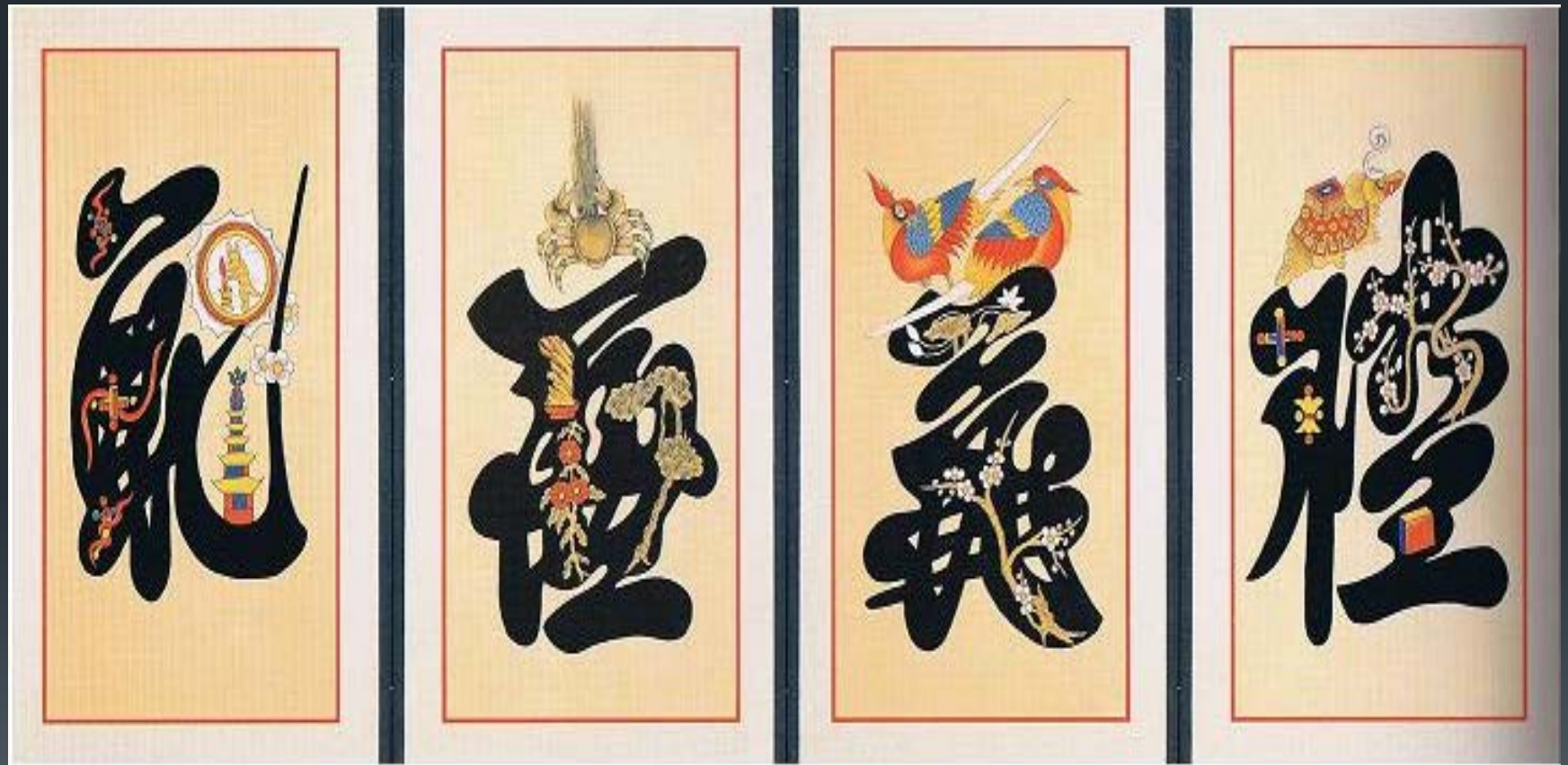
- Because the dates and artists of *minhwa* were largely unknown, their art was treated as being of little value. However, *minhwa* is now recognized as a valuable art form and one that represents the life of the Korean people during the Joseon dynasty.
- The unknown artisans who created folk art had an optimistic outlook on life. In their agrarian society, they perceived a miraculous order of the universe that they attempted to express.
- They used symbolism to express their feelings of happiness, anger, love, and delight in everyday life.
- Humor and satire are important elements of the paintings.

Minhwa

- Folk paintings are grouped into two major categories of folk belief: wishing for good luck and repelling evil spirits.
- Every folk painting contains people's wishes for happiness.
- Folk paintings have two underlying themes: longevity and blessings for all people.
- Koreans believed in the *yin* and *yang* and that people's life included both good and evil.
- They also believed that *minhwa* could have shamanistic powers to protect them from war, disease, and famine. Paintings of animals could drive away evil spirits.

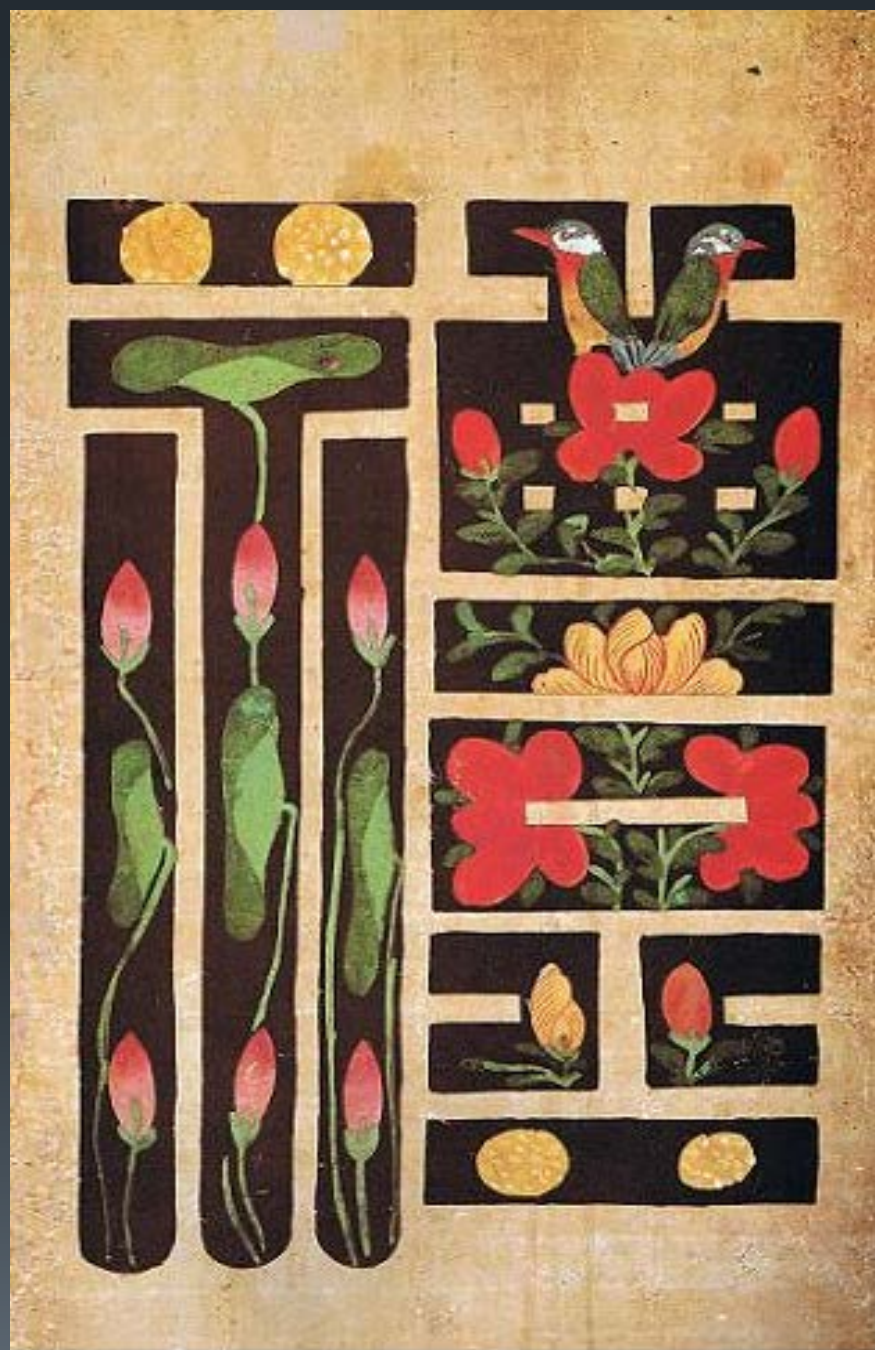
Paintings of Characters

문자도 (*Munja-do*)



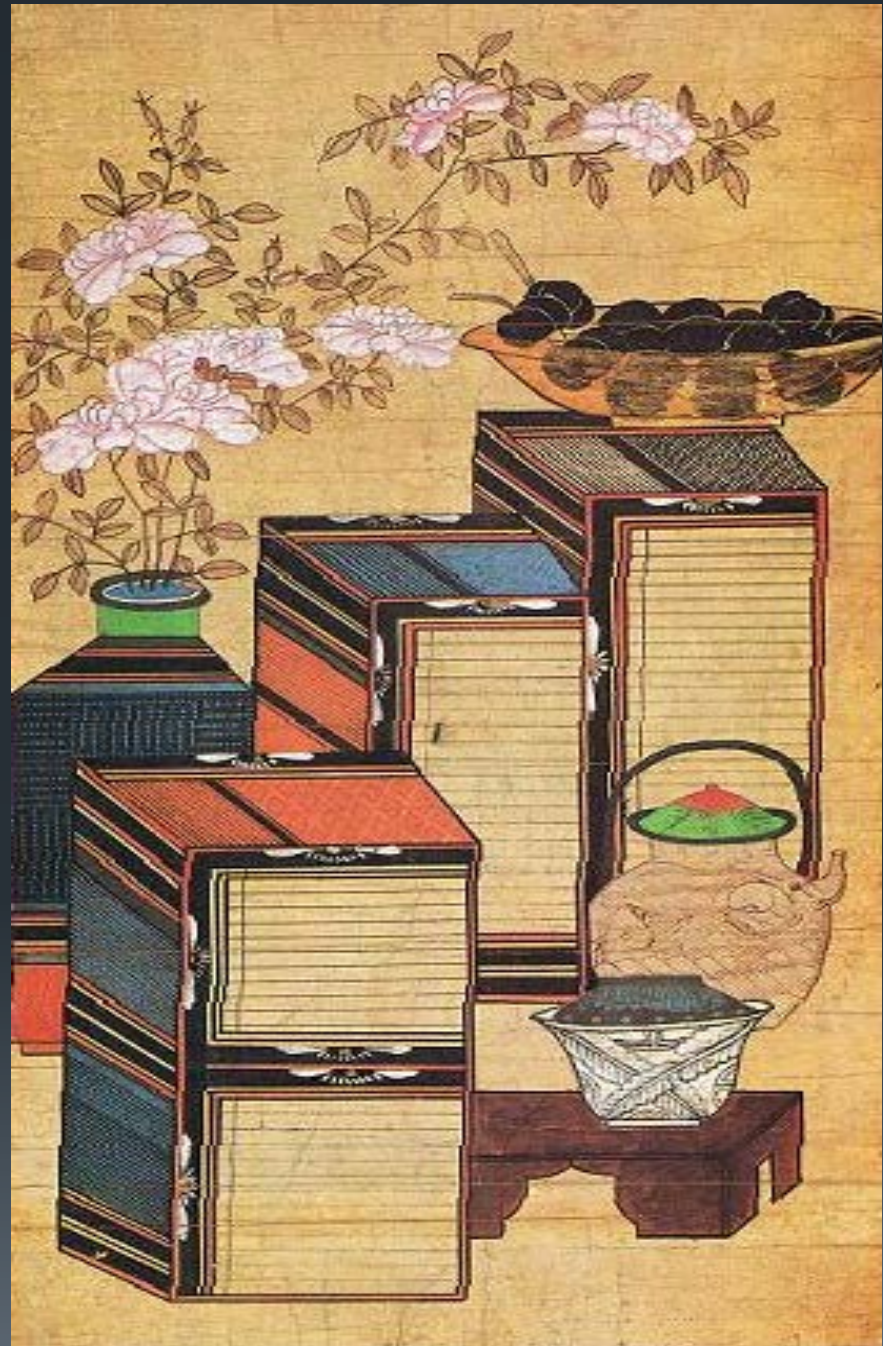
Munja-do

- Painters of munja-do thought painting Chinese characters would help them achieve their goals and provide important lessons that they needed to learn.
- Through the characters, the artist conveyed Confucian beliefs, such as filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty, a sense of honor, and righteousness.
- Some *munjado* were known as *hyojedo*. These particular paintings conveyed the eight moral principles of filial piety. The artists included images of specific characters, utensils, plants, and animals that were thought to represent these principles.



Paintings of the Study 책가도 (*Chaekka-do*)

- Paintings of bookshelves and stationery conveyed the wishes of scholars to gain more knowledge and wisdom. They are a reflection of the lives of learned men during the Joseon dynasty.



Ten Symbols of Longevity

십장생도 (*Sip-jang Saeng-do*)



Sipjansaeng Symbols



These paintings arranged ten symbols of longevity into a pastoral landscape depiction of paradise:

1. Sun
2. Clouds
3. Rocks/Mountains
4. Water
5. Pine trees
6. Bamboo
7. Mushrooms of Immortality
8. Red-crested cranes
9. Deer
10. Turtles

In some instances, fish, the moon, and peaches also symbolize longevity.

Paintings of Lotus 연화도 (Yeonhwa-do)



Paintings of Lotus

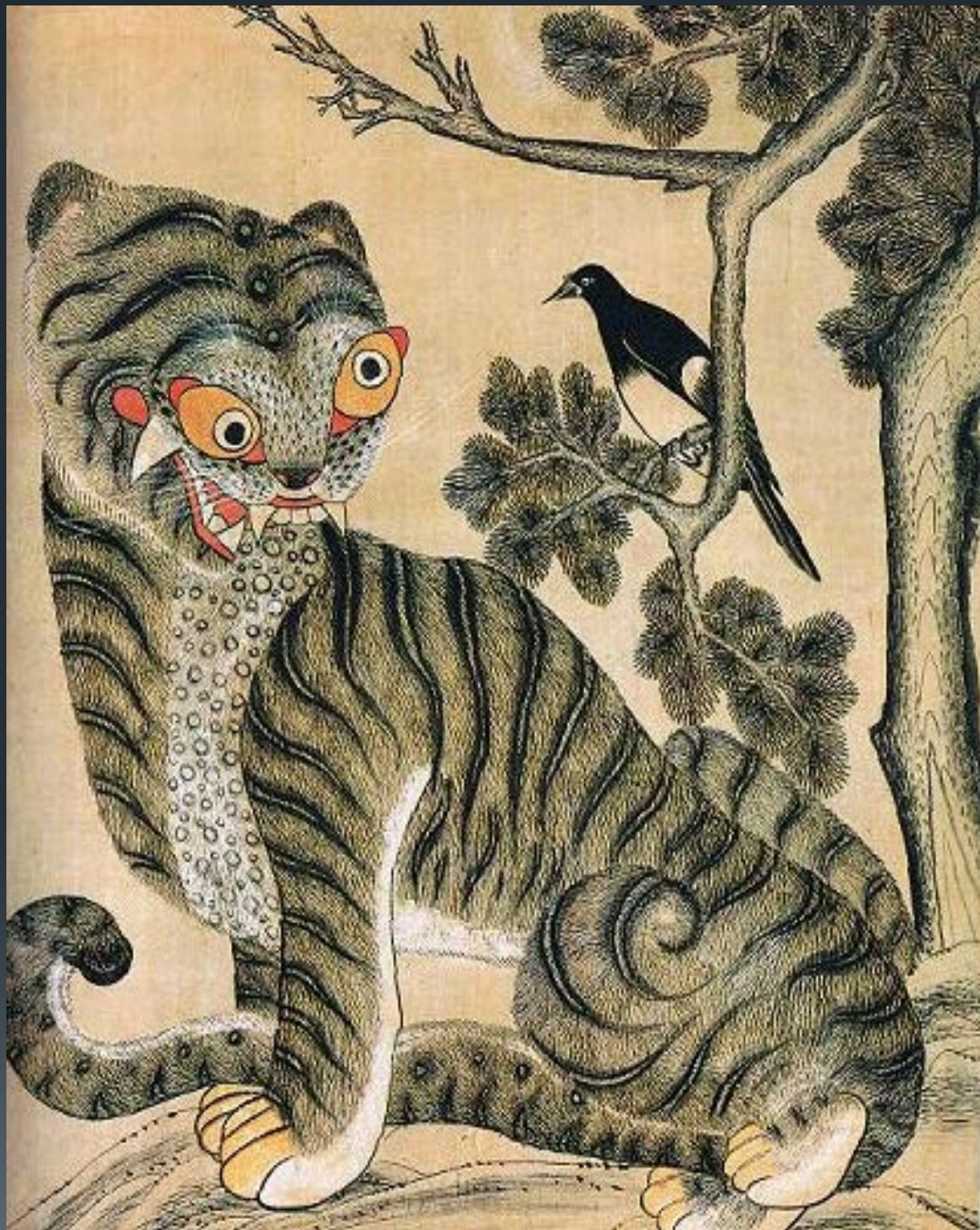
- Folk painters favored the lotus as much as peonies. If the peony represented wealth, the lotus represented the true gentleman. In Japan, the lotus was associated with Buddhism, but in *minhwa*, it represented the true gentleman, a classical scholar with a noble character.
- Although the lotus is the most important feature of the paintings, images of birds, fish, and insects can be included. Ducks are portrayed in pairs and signify happiness in the family and love between husband and wife. When one duck dies, the other never mates again.
- Lotus paintings were often used for decorative purposes and evoked a feeling of freshness and pleasantness.

Flowers & Birds

(Hwajo-do)

- *Hwajo-do* portray the harmony between flowers and birds, both of which were adored by Koreans.
- All types of birds are included in these paintings, appear in pairs, and sometimes include their offspring.
- It was common for newly married couples to include these paintings in their rooms.





Paintings of Tigers & Magpies 호작도 (*Hojakdo*)

- Many paintings of tigers refer to ancient folk tales. All Koreans grew up hearing these stories that were sometimes amusing and sometimes scary. A painting of a tiger and magpie at New Year's would convey that the tiger would keep the evil spirits away and the magpie would bring good news in the coming year.

Paintings of Tigers

- Tigers were believed to prevent national disasters, such as fire, floods and wind.
- Tiger skin, bones, claws, and whiskers could exorcise mystical powers.





Paintings of Dragons 황용도 (Hwanggyong-do)

- The dragon symbolized protection from evil forces together as it represented the king and royal authority.
- While sharing characteristics with Chinese and Japanese dragons, the ones depicted in Minhwa always have four claws.
- King Munmu told his heir on his deathbed :

"A country should not be without a king at any time. Let the Prince have my crown before he has my coffin. Cremate my remains and scatter the ashes in the sea where the whales live. I will become a dragon and thwart foreign invasion."

Four Guardian Deities Wall Paintings in the Goguryeo kingdom tombs



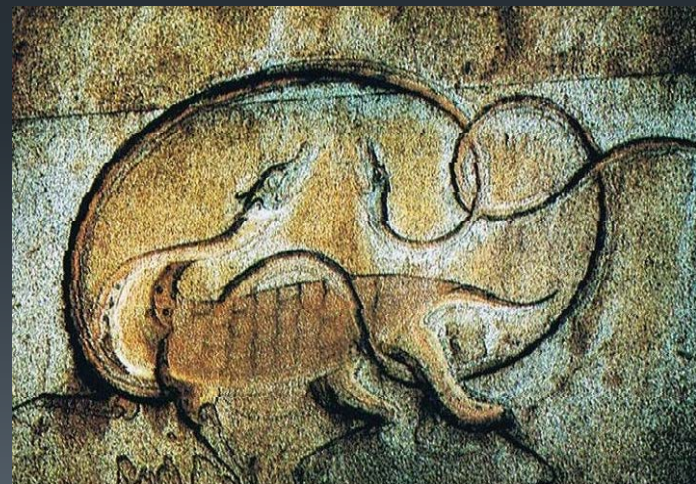
East Blue Dragon



West White Tiger



South Red Phoenix



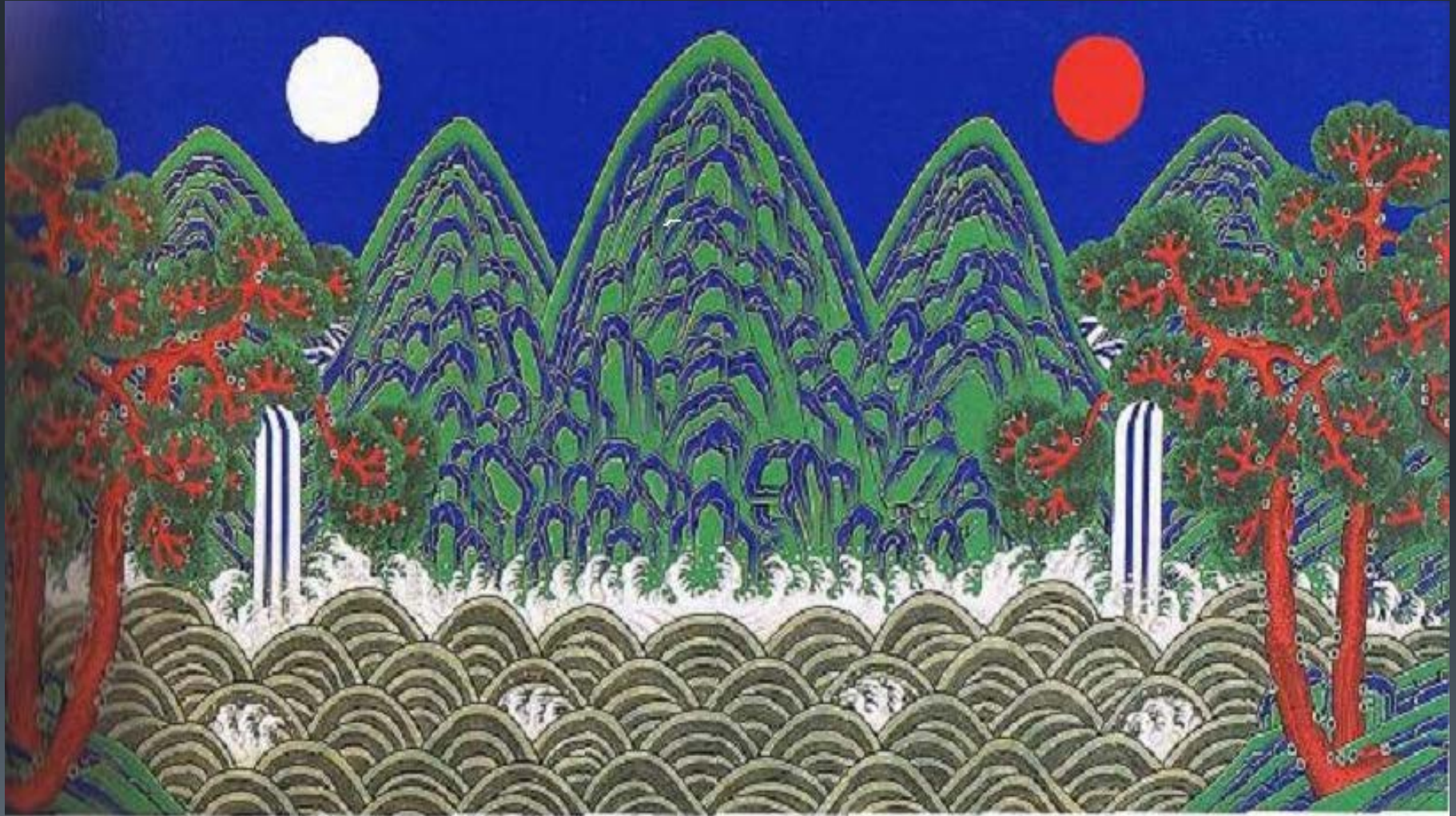
North Black Turtle

Minhwa Beasts

- The Green Dragon of the East appeared often with the White Tiger of the West, showing the dragon ruling the skies and waters and the tiger roaming the land and mountains. The scene in itself portrayed the great principles of heaven and earth and *yin* and *yang*.
- Most of the dragons in folk paintings are the Green Dragon that is known to chase away evil spirits and the Cloud Dragon that was believed to bring rain.
- Green dragons were used as decoration in royal palaces, such as in a painting on the ceiling of the Kyongbok Palace. These paintings symbolized the authority and dignity of the King, and were believed to chase away evil spirits and bring happiness.
- Phoenixes also came to represent yang and the queenly authority.

The Sun, Moon & Five Peaks

일월오봉도 (*Il-wol O Bong Do*)



Sun, Moon, & Five Peaks: *The Royal Screen*

- Depicted in solid colors, *Sun, Moon, and Five Peaks* appear on a huge six panel-folding screen. The sun on the right and the moon on the left symbolized the monarchy's constant good governance. Such paintings not only symbolize the royal presence, but also represent a promise from heaven of ancestral blessings on his descendants.
- These magnificent screens were originally displayed in the palace; however, after the fall of the Joseon dynasty, some of them came to be in the possession of ordinary households.

Portrait of King Gojong (1852-1919)



- The screen was one of the most important elements of the throne hall. The red sun represents the king as the *yang*, the positive male principle, while the white moon represents the queen as the *yin*, the negative female principle. These two principles make the universe work.
- When the king sat in front of this screen, he appeared to be at the pivotal point from which all force emanated and to which it returned.

Common Minhwa Symbols



- Fire – benevolence
- Grain – life
- Mountain – dignity
- Magpie – harbinger of good news
- Pheasant – fidelity
- Bamboo and pine tree – longevity
- Chestnut – filial piety
- Peony – wealth
- Turtle – endurance
- Unicorn – mercy
- Lion – power
- Duck – fidelity
- Deer – honor and success in one's studies
- Peach – longevity
- Pomegranate – plentiful offspring

Paintings of Peonies

모란도 (*Moran-do*)

- Peony paintings were among the most popular minhwa subjects. For its color and beauty, the peony blossom was regarded as a symbol of wealth. Images were found on folding screens that were used to decorate wedding halls, rooms for newlyweds, and in the *anbang*, the women's quarters, of *yangban* (educated/upper class) families.



8 Panel Screen of Peonies

