

Sonamu, *Pinus densiflora*

JILL MATTHEWS¹ writes about the Korean red pine and discusses its cultural significance and cultivation.

The Korean red pine 소나무 (*Pinus densiflora*) is widely regarded as the national tree of Korea. The same tree is known as Japanese red pine in Japan. It is endemic throughout the Korean peninsula, and adjacent parts of China and in Japan, where fossil traces have been found dating to the beginning of the Pleistocene Era. Its Korean name, *sonamu*, means 'supreme tree'. The tree is even mentioned in the Korean national anthem:

*As the pine tree atop Namsan² stands firm, unchanged through wind
and frost, as if wrapped in armour, so shall our resilient spirit.*

Many other species of pine tree are cultivated in modern Korean forests and gardens, notably Japanese black pine (*Pinus thunbergii*); Korean white pine (*P. koraiensis*) the source of pine nuts, *jat*, in Korean cuisine; Japanese stone pine (*P. pumila*) and Japanese white pine (*P. parvifolia*), however, these pines are not seen as commonly in traditional Korean gardens, and none of them have

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¹ Jill Matthews is principal designer of Greenleaf Garden Design and author of *Korean Gardens – Tradition, Symbolism and Resilience*, Hollym, 2018.

² Mount Namsan is a small mountain in central Seoul, which is considered to be very significant to the geomantic energy of the main royal palace.



photograph © Jill Matthews

Opposite, a typical solitary red pine in a Confucian scholarly retreat garden, Bogildo island, South Korea.

Right, a solitary *Pinus densiflora* at the entrance to Myeongdong cathedral, Seoul.

the same deep cultural significance in contemporary Korea as the Korean red pine. At least two internationally renowned Korean photographers have published entire books of photographs of Korean red pines³.

Symbolism

Traditionally the Korean red pine is one of the ten symbols of longevity, *Shipjangsaeng*, the others being: the sun, mountains, water, clouds, rocks / stone, mushrooms of immortality, white cranes, deer and turtles. As such it appears frequently in all forms of Korean visual art and literature. Representations of the Dangun creation myth about the semi-divine origin of the Korean people almost invariably include a Korean red pine and the earliest surviving Korean tomb paintings include trees, which appear to be *sonamu*. The fact that old red pines develop a characteristic bark pattern, which resembles the shell of an old turtle, doubles their metaphoric value as a symbol of longevity.

Red pines are particularly associated with Confucius because they remain green and do not shed their leaves in winter and so represent constancy and righteousness. The main pavilion in Confucian scholarly retreat gardens and in Confucian academies, known as *seowon*, almost invariably has a single red pine growing to the right side of the entrance.

In these gardens this custom of planting a single red pine contrasts with the other common practice of planting two ginkgo trees at the entrance to the garden, also seen as a symbol of Confucian wisdom and probity. So deeply ingrained is this practice that today many red pines are planted at the entrances

³ See Suk, Jae-sik, *Pine Trees in Korea – Aesthetics and Symbolism*, Hollym, 2017. Also the several exhibitions and publications of Mr Bae Byung-U at: www.bbuart.com/biography/ [accessed March 2020].



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to Seoul high-rise buildings. There is also a fine single red pine to the right hand side of the main entrance to Myeongdong catholic cathedral in Seoul as well as a whole grove at the entrance to the national parliament building.

Red pines are also said to symbolise the long life of those dwelling in the land of the immortals, and recluses who have withdrawn from society and returned to nature to pursue the Daoist quest for immortality. They are also often used as a literary allusion to longevity in common Korean aphorisms such as 'the pine tree lives 1,000 years' and 'the pine tree and the Chinese juniper never grow old'.

Many Korean red pines are cultivated in the landscaped forests surrounding the major Buddhist temples in Korea, particularly on the slopes of the protective mountains behind the main temple complexes. The ritual walkways leading to these temples are fringed by forests of various kinds of trees, however it is at the base of the red pines among them, where pilgrims create the votive heaps of pebbles as they pass.

Every Buddhist temple has a small shrine, *Gak*, at the rear, which is dedicated to a shamanistic figure called a *San shin* or 'mountain spirit' or 'mountain god', thought to be a survival from the earlier animist beliefs that pre-dated the arrival of the more formal religions of Buddhism and Confucianism in Korea. Frequently these shrines are situated in front of stands of red pines and often there is a single aged specimen at the door of the shrine. Paintings of the *san shin* can be recognised by his inevitable companions—a tiger and a Korean red pine.

So we see the tree is intimately associated with the Korean origin myth and shamanistic, Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian observance.

Association with royalty

In addition, the Korean red pine is cultivated in royal Korean gardens, including



Votive pebbles and red pines on a ritual walk to a Buddhist temple in Korea.



A *san shin* or 'mountain god' with his invariable companions – the tiger and the Korean red pine.

tomb⁴ and palace gardens in both Seoul and Gyeongju where its natural habit of crooked growth is exaggerated by careful husbandry. A good new example of this style of landscaping using red pine is in the restored garden next to the throne hall in the Deoksugung Palace in Seoul. Here a whole copse of red pines has been transplanted recently, with metal guy ropes encouraging the romantic distortion of their trunk and branch structures.



Korean red pines newly transplanted at Deoksugung Palace in Seoul.

⁴ The 40 Joseon dynasty royal tombs in and around Seoul together comprise a UNESCO World Heritage site. Red pines abound in all of the parks surrounding these tombs.



Red pines on symbolic islands in Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul.

There are also examples of older twisted red pines on two of the three islands in the lake surrounding the Gyeonghoeru pavilion within the Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul. Twisted red pines abound throughout the Secret Garden, which surrounds the nearby Changdeokgung Palace complex.

An entire forest of red pines protects the Joseon royal tomb complex in Gangnam in Seoul where they are said to symbolise the wish for longevity of the Joseon dynasty despite the death of individual family members of the dynasty entombed there.

Red pines in these royal gardens frequently appear in groups of three especially on artificial islands in garden ponds. Here they may be understood to represent earth, man and heaven and hence the essential complementarity of the universe. Another explanation is that in this context they symbolise the Daoist quest for immortality and the three sacred mountains worshipped before any of the more formal religions came to Korea.

Red pine timber was the core construction and reconstruction material for all these Joseon era palaces and garden structures, a tradition that continues today in the ongoing reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul. In the completely restored King's audience hall, the centre of the palace, there is a magnificent screen behind the throne adorned with some of the symbols of royalty and longevity. Prominent among these are Korean red pines.



Korean red pines, symbols of royalty and longevity, painted on the screen behind the Joseon dynasty throne in Gyeongbokgung palace, Seoul.

Individual revered trees

Individual specimens of some types of trees are revered by Koreans. Known as *Dangsan*, great powers are attributed to these special trees and much effort is spent to protect them, should modern developments such as dams or housing or roads threaten them. Commonly, *dangsan* are zelkovas or ginkgos but may also be red pines. According to Korean shamans a *dangsan* tree is a respected sacred place where heaven, earth and human beings meet, so they are at the centre of the universe. Most are sited at the entrance to or at the centre of traditional Korean villages. Perhaps the most highly honoured tree of all is the Jeongipum red pine tree, which has been growing by the roadside leading to the Beopjusa temple in Chungbuk province for almost 600 years. It is said that in 1464 an ailing King Sejo was being carried towards the Temple in a palanquin to seek a cure, when his way was impeded by the branches of this tree. When he remonstrated, the tree immediately lifted its branches and enabled the royal party to proceed.

King Sejo was so impressed by this deferential action that he granted the tree the status of administrative Senior Rank 2 on the spot⁵. Today the tree stands ancient, solitary, tall and beautifully shaped, with a trunk clear of branches to well above palanquin height. Its upright stance is supported by at least eight metal poles. It makes a special place to linger en route to the Temple even today.

Cultivation

The red pine has been regarded as a major timber tree in Korea for at least 1,000 years. Throughout the last Korean dynasty, Joseon, which lasted for

: ⁵ Yoo, Myeong-jong, *Temples of Korea*, Discovery Media, 2009, p 122.



The Jeongipum pine, Beopjusa temple, an Honourable Minister in King Sejo's court.

518 years until 1910, the Court administration had a separate forestry department⁶ that was responsible for the sustainable management of the royal forests so that there was always an adequate supply of good timber for construction and reconstruction of royal buildings and for the production of ceramics. In addition, the monarchs decreed that plantations of red pines should be maintained at military bases along the Korean coast, to facilitate the construction and repair of its navy ships whose essential role was to defend the realm against Japanese pirates and full scale invasions. Trees at least 100 years old were preferred for this purpose.

⁶ The Korean National Arboretum, a thriving and major institution in Korea today, is the natural successor of the Joseon dynasty forestry department.

As we have already seen red pines are traditionally cultivated in the landscapes surrounding Buddhist temples, where in addition to their symbolic role, they serve the practical purpose of construction and restoration of wooden temple buildings.

In some areas of Korea, red pines grow with the naturally twisted and distorted habits much admired by gardeners, whereas in others they are renowned for their straight and upright stance so valued by craftsmen for the building of palaces and ships and for sculpture.

So how can it be that Korean red pines are valued both for being twisted and for being straight? There is an interesting theory about this⁷. It seems there may be more than such obvious factors as terrain and geography at work here. It is suggested that near ancient centres of Korean civilization such as royal capitals or temple or tomb complexes, all the straight upright specimens have been so consistently logged for construction purposes that the only specimens which survived long enough to reproduce, were those which were too twisted to be useful as timber. Thus over many hundreds of years, a process of human assisted natural selection has taken place. Certainly it is true that there is a preponderance of twisted red pines in the forests near the tombs and former palaces in Gyeongju, the capital of the Silla dynasty for 1,000 years until 952AD, and the straight red pine required as timber by the current restorers of the Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul has to be felled in remote forests such as those at the foot of Mount Seorak in Gangwon-do province.

When all the above instances of the symbolic and practical uses made of the Korean red pine in Korean culture, both past and present, are considered, it is no wonder that the Korean name for the tree, *sonamu*, is spoken with reverence by Koreans and the tree holds a special place in their hearts.

Where to see Korean Red Pines

- Three palace gardens in Seoul: Gyeongbokgung, Changdeokgung, and Deoksugung
- Joseon royal tomb parks in Seoul: especially Donggureung, Seolleung and Jeongneung
- Confucian academies: especially Dosan seowon
- Buddhist Temples: especially landscape surrounding Unmunsa, Haeinsa and Bulguksa⁸
- Wooden Buddhist sculptures in National Museum of Korea in Seoul
- Paintings in *san shin* shrines in many Buddhist temples
- Paintings on royal throne screen in Gyeongbokgung Palace
- Modern plantings in front of many high rise buildings in contemporary Seoul.

⁷ Young Woo Chun, *Forests and Korean Culture*, BooksHill, 1999, p. 124.

⁸ Both Haeinsa and Bulguksa temples are UNESCO World Heritage sites.