

What Qi Does: Pungsu as Living Religion in Korea, with Comparative Perspectives from Taiwan and Okinawa

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Abstract:

This paper argues that Korean pungsu (風水) represents the most thoroughly religionized form of East Asian geomancy: a case where sacred cosmology achieved maximum social force not by remaining separate from secular institutions, but by being absorbed into them. Drawing on a fieldwork interview with Professor Park Jeong-hae (Hanyang University ERICA), supplemented by interviews with Professor En-Yu Huang (National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan) and Professor Aso Shinichi (University of the Ryukyus, Okinawa), the paper identifies three amplifying forces that made Korea distinctive: the classical geomantic vocabulary arrived through elite Buddhist monastic networks, giving it doctrinal depth from the outset; it was re-articulated through Neo-Confucian filial piety, transforming cosmological preference into moral obligation; and the specialist who interpreted it was absorbed into the Joseon state examination system, giving the jigwan (地官) legal authority that translated cosmological claims into property rights adjudicated in court. Rather than merely coexisting, these three forces amplified each other. The result was sansong (山訟, mountain litigation), a centuries-long institution in which sacred claims about the flow of qi through mountain veins were treated as grounds for property rights, and in which rival aristocratic clans litigated over the same grave sites for four hundred years. Taiwan and Okinawa serve as comparative mirrors: Taiwan shows what the cosmology looks like when the state is absent from its mediation, producing communal maintenance rather than legal contest; Okinawa shows what remains when all institutional carriers are destroyed, leaving the cosmology to survive in household objects. Korea serves as the anchor case in which all three forces operate simultaneously, with Taiwan and Okinawa functioning as controlled comparisons: Taiwan isolating the absence of state institutionalization, Okinawa the absence of any institutional foundation at all. Together, the three cases demonstrate that the intensity of a cosmology's religious life depends not on the strength of individual belief but on the institutional architecture that carries, amplifies, or destroys it.

Keywords — pungsu, feng shui, qi, sansong, jigwan, donggi-gameung, hyo, religion-secular boundary, lived religion, Buddhist geography, Buddhist-Confucian synthesis, East Asian religions, comparative religious studies

I. INTRODUCTION: THE AMPLIFICATION PROBLEM

"The ones who criticized pungsu most loudly," Professor Park Jeong-hae told me, "were the ones who spent the most money on the best sites for their parents." This observation captures

something that goes beyond irony or hypocrisy. It describes a religion operating at full social force: one so thoroughly embedded in the structures of obligation, competition, and institutional life that even its critics could not escape it. The question this paper addresses is why. Why did feng shui, the shared East Asian geomantic tradition,

achieve this degree of religious intensity in its Korean form, pungsu, when it produced something quite different everywhere else?

The answer requires a precise account of what “religious intensity” means in this context. Religionization, as used here, refers to the degree to which a sacred cosmology becomes embedded in and enforced by a society’s institutions, independent of how strongly individuals believe in it. Feng shui in all three societies examined here draws on the same classical vocabulary: the *Zang Shu* (葬書, Book of Burial) establishes that “qi rides the wind and scatters; it is bounded by water and stops,” and defines the ideal sacred site as the point where the four guardian formations converge to concentrate life energy. The *Qing Wu Jing* (青烏經) tradition extends this with the proposition that water is the blood and qi of the earth. This cosmological vocabulary traveled from China to Korea and Taiwan primarily through scholarly and monastic networks that engaged the texts directly; in Okinawa it arrived through Fujian popular transmission rather than textual scholarship, as discussed in Section 5. What each society did with what arrived — what institutional architecture it built around the shared vocabulary — determined everything about the religion’s social life.

The argument of this paper is that Korea is distinctive because three amplifying forces operated simultaneously and reinforced each other. First, the classical geomantic vocabulary arrived through Buddhist monastic networks, entering Korea not as folk practice but as elite religious knowledge transmitted by specialists. This gave it doctrinal depth. Second, the Joseon dynasty re-articulated that knowledge through the language of filial piety (hyo, 孝), transforming cosmological preference into a moral obligation that the Neo-Confucian ethical system required of all who took their ancestral responsibilities seriously. This made it mandatory. Third, the state incorporated the sacred landscape specialist into its administrative apparatus through the examination system, giving his interpretations legal authority — translating cosmological claims into property rights adjudicated in secular courts. This gave it coercive force. None of these three

forces alone would have produced what Korean pungsu became. Together, they amplified each other into one of the most institutionally powerful religious systems in East Asian history.

Taiwan and Okinawa make the argument testable: each removes a force present in Korea and shows what changes in its absence. Taiwan had the same classical vocabulary and comparable transmission routes through Daoist and folk religious networks, but the state never incorporated the sacred landscape specialist, and the result was communal maintenance rather than legal contest: a sacred geography organized through temple networks and Daoist ceremonial life rather than property litigation. Okinawa had the vocabulary and some institutional introduction, but the institutions were destroyed by colonial annexation, war, and military occupation, and the cosmology now survives almost entirely in household objects: a stone lion on a rooftop and a tablet at the end of a road.

A note on the category of religion is necessary before proceeding. Most Korean, Taiwanese, and Okinawan practitioners and critics of pungsu do not classify it as their “religion” in the modern sense of the term. This paper follows Jonathan Z. Smith’s position that religion is an analytical construct scholars use to study how sacred cosmologies organize social life and Talal Asad’s insistence that the religion-secular boundary is historically constructed rather than naturally given. Pungsu is treated here as a religious phenomenon because it exhibits precisely the features religious studies is designed to analyze: a sacred cosmological claim about the structure of reality, a specialist class authorized to interpret that claim, and institutions that translate it into moral obligations and enduring social consequences. The jigwan is the clearest illustration of Asad’s pre-boundary configuration: a state that does not exclude the sacred from the public sphere but actively incorporates it, giving sacred landscape interpretation the force of legal fact. Whether Koreans call pungsu a religion is beside the point. What it does — how it shapes bodies, organizes institutions, generates four centuries of litigation, and structures family obligation across

generations — is the substance of what religious studies examines.

II. METHODS

The primary evidence of this paper consists of three fieldwork interviews conducted with three fieldwork interviews with professors who specialize, respectively, in the Korean, Taiwanese, and Okinawan geomantic traditions. All interviews were conducted in person, recorded with the consent of each participant, and subsequently transcribed by hand. Professor Park Jeong-hae (Hanyang University ERICA), whose research focuses on the historical development and logical foundations of Korean feng shui, was interviewed in person on July 5, 2025, at his department in Ansan, South Korea. Professor En-Yu Huang (National Cheng Kung University), whose research focuses on the built environment and spatial organization of historical Tainan, was interviewed on December 23, 2025 in person at his department in Tainan, Taiwan. Professor Aso Shinichi (University of the Ryukyus), whose research addresses the cultural history of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the transmission of Chinese knowledge systems to the Ryukyuan archipelago, was interviewed on July 8, 2025 in person at his department in Naha, Okinawa.

All three were conducted as semi-structured interviews, with prepared questions supplemented by follow-ups pursued on the spot as themes emerged. Each interview was recorded with the consent of the participant and subsequently transcribed by the author. The interview with Professor Park was conducted in Korean and lasted 87 minutes. The interview with Professor Huang was conducted in English and Mandarin and lasted approximately 84 minutes. The interview with Professor Aso was conducted primarily in English with brief exchanges in Japanese and lasted 32 minutes.

All quotations appearing in this paper are translated paraphrases rather than verbatim transcriptions. All three interview subjects were informed of the purpose of the research prior to the interview via cold email and have consented to the use of their names and institutional affiliations in publication.

III. THE CLASSICAL FOUNDATION: A SHARED GRAMMAR

Before the divergences can be analyzed, the shared grammar must be established — and that grammar is theological, not merely technical. The *Zang Shu*'s core claim is not primarily a rule about landscape selection. It is a claim about the structure of the universe: that a single substance, qi, flows through mountains, accumulates at correctly configured sites, and constitutes the vital force that sustains all living things. The xue (穴), the vital point where qi accumulates at maximum concentration, is the site where the cosmological order of the universe is most immediately present. Geomancy, in this foundational formulation, is a practice of access to the sacred structure of reality.

This cosmological grammar is shared across all three cases examined in this paper. The foundational texts — the *Zang Shu* and the *Qing Wu Jing* tradition — were transmitted to Korea and Taiwan through scholarly and monastic networks; in Okinawa, as Professor Aso Shinichi's testimony in Section 5 clarifies, the cosmological vocabulary arrived through Fujian popular channels rather than direct textual engagement. This qualification is analytically important: the divergences documented in later sections are not produced by different cosmological inputs but by different institutional architectures built around a shared — though differently received — vocabulary. Korea did not receive a superior or more elaborate version of classical geomancy. It received the same vocabulary and built a heavier institutional architecture around it.

IV. KOREA: THREE FORCES, ONE RELIGION

The first force shaping Korean pungsu was the manner of its transmission. Professor Park opened our interview with a historiographical argument that bears directly on why pungsu became what it did in Korea: "By the time Doseon appears in the historical record, pungsu is already present in Korea. The more likely explanation is that Korean monks who went to study in Tang dynasty China — particularly in the Jiangxi region, where geomantic theory was being systematized —

brought the knowledge back through Buddhist monastic networks. It traveled with Buddhism, not after it.”

The significance of this transmission route cannot be overstated. Pungsu entered Korea not as a popular practice spreading through folk channels but as an elite religious knowledge transmitted by monks who had studied at the centers of Tang-dynasty learning. It arrived already integrated into a sophisticated cosmological framework, already attached to a professional class of practitioners, and already carrying the prestige of high learning. This is the first reason Korean pungsu achieved a doctrinal depth that folk geomantic practice elsewhere lacks: from the moment of its entry, it was embedded in literate religious networks that could develop, transmit, and elaborate its theoretical content across generations.

The Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) institutionalized this Buddhist foundation through the pibo (裨補) tradition. Buddhist temples and pagodas were strategically placed at points that geomantic analysis identified as cosmologically deficient, “supplementing” the landscape’s sacred health. Professor Park offered a characterization that illuminates what made this practice distinctively Korean: “In China, you read the landscape and find the right site. In Korea, in the Goryeo period, you read the landscape and then fix what is wrong with it. You build structures to correct geomantic deficiencies. The country itself becomes a patient under treatment.” The pibo tradition therefore transformed geomancy from a practice of reading sacred space into one of producing it. This is not passive site selection; it is the active production of sacred space through religious intervention. The geomantic tradition, through its Buddhist institutional carrier, had already acquired the capacity to transform landscape at a national scale before the Joseon dynasty added the second force.

Force Two: The Theological Core and Its Confucian Amplification

The theological mechanism at the heart of Korean pungsu is donggi-gameung (同氣感應, same-qi resonance). Its origin lies in the Wenyan

commentary to the Yijing, 同聲相應 同氣相求, “like sounds resonate with like sounds; like qi seeks like qi,” which describes the natural affinity between things that share the same vital force. In Korean pungsu, this principle was narrowed and reinterpreted into a specific burial doctrine. Professor Park stated it with precision: “The point is not just that the ancestor is at rest. The ancestor is still working. The quality of their work depends on where they are buried.” Indeed, the claim is not that a correctly sited grave benefits the site’s qi field in the abstract, or that the community living near the site benefits from its accumulated energy. The claim is that the ancestor’s corpse serves as a specific cosmological conduit: that the same-qi resonance between parent and child means that the qi that passes through the ancestor’s remains flows directly into the bodies of the living descendants, making them stronger, wealthier, more successful, or more fertile depending on the quality of the geomantic site.

As it developed under Joseon, this theology became more specific and more demanding than anything found in the Taiwanese or Okinawan traditions. It names a specific mechanism (same-qi resonance), a specific medium (the ancestor’s corpse), specific beneficiaries (the patrilineal descendants), and specific effects (fortune, health, social advancement). It creates a direct cosmological connection between the living and the dead that is simultaneously a theological claim about the structure of the universe and a practical obligation about what must be done to secure one’s family’s future.

The grave-centered character of Korean pungsu was not original to the tradition. As Yoon argues, dwelling-site geomancy for the living developed earlier than grave geomancy, and it was the adoption of ancestor worship and filial piety that turned geomantic attention toward the gravesite in the first place. The ancestral complex this paper treats as pungsu’s theological core is therefore itself a product of the second force: the Joseon dynasty’s re-articulation of geomantic cosmology through the language of Neo-Confucian filial piety, which helped turn the tradition toward the grave. Under Joseon, placing one’s parents in a geomantically auspicious site

became morally obligatory, an act of hyo (孝), the foundational virtue of the entire ethical system. This transformation produced the paradox Professor Park described: “The ones who criticized pungsu most loudly were the ones who spent the most money on the best sites for their parents.”

This paradox reveals an underlying structure beneath what looks like mere traditional practice. Yoon reaches the same conclusion: Koreans’ enthusiasm for grave geomancy was, he argues, “for the sake of their living descendants rather than their deceased ancestors, although they pretended that their primary motivation was filial piety.” Filial piety was thus both a genuine moral obligation and a socially accepted way of masking self-interest, which demonstrates how one could criticize pungsu and yet still be bound to practice it.

The amplification between the two is precise: donggi-gameung theology says that correct burial benefits the family; Confucian hyo ethics says that benefiting the family through correct burial is a moral obligation. Together, they create a system in which the sacred cosmological claim carries the force of filial duty. This is the mechanism that produced the intense competitive investment in auspicious sites that made sansong possible: an ethical system under which securing the best site for one’s ancestors was an obligation rather than an ambition.

4.3 Force Three: The State, the Jigwan, and the Legal Transformation

The third force, and the one that distinguishes Korea most sharply from Taiwan, was the absorption of the sacred landscape specialist into the Joseon state apparatus. Under the *Gyeongguk Daejeon* (經國大典), the Joseon dynasty’s principal administrative code, the jigwan (地官, geomancer) was selected through the national miscellaneous examinations (japgwa, 雜科), held an official government position, and was responsible for the sites of royal tombs, palaces, and major state structures. This institutionalization did something absent from Taiwan and Okinawa: it gave the sacred landscape specialist state-certified authority, making his

interpretations of the flow of qi legally authoritative — admissible as expert testimony in court.

The mechanism is important to understand precisely. The jigwan’s state certification did not secularize his practice. It amplified it. When a person whose professional qualification consists of reading sacred landscape testifies in court, and when the court accepts that testimony as the basis for property rights adjudication, the sacred cosmological claim has not been separated from the secular legal domain — it has been incorporated into it. The religion-secular boundary was not drawn; the state actively prevented its drawing by encoding sacred interpretations within the legal framework. This is the institutional form that made sansong not just possible but legally actionable: once the jigwan testified that a given site possessed certain cosmological properties, those properties acquired the force of legal fact.

Professor Park’s account of royal tomb site selection reveals how deeply the three forces had been integrated into the political fabric of the dynasty. The procedure appeared to place sacred technical judgment above political preference: senior officials and jigwan specialists would survey candidate sites, rank them geomantically, and present options to the king. In practice, Professor Park explained, the process was systematically manipulated. “The jigwan who knew the landscape perfectly was the most politically valuable person in the room, because he could share what he knew, or not share it, and the king had no way to verify either way.” Officials with powerful family interests would identify the most geomantically potent site and decline to report it fully, keeping the sacred knowledge in reserve to protect their own clan’s nearby grave land.

More strikingly, Professor Park described a calculation that inverted the expected logic: sometimes officials deliberately recommended a weaker site for the royal tomb. “If you bury the king in too strong a place, his descendants become too powerful. The ministers want a king they can guide. So you find a good place — but not the best place.” This is sacred cosmological

knowledge being used as a tool of political succession management — an explicit recognition that the theological mechanism of donggi-gameung could shape the balance of power across generations. The religion was real, the politics was real, and the two operated through the same institutional framework.

What the Three Forces Produced: Sansong

When the three forces converged, the institution they produced was sansong (山訟, mountain litigation). Competing clans wanting to bury their ancestors in geomantically powerful sites would resort to tujang (偷葬, secret burial on another clan's mountain) or nukjang (勒葬, forced occupation of a site), triggering legal disputes adjudicated by courts that recognized cosmological claims as grounds for property rights. Sansong became so pervasive that it was classified as one of the Three Major Civil Suits (samdaesasong, 三大事訟) of the Joseon dynasty.

The case that captures the scale of this institution most vividly is a dispute between the Papyeong Yun clan and the Cheongseong Sim clan over a mountainside in Paju, Gyeonggi Province. Beginning in 1614 and unresolved until 2006, it recurred across nearly four centuries, and what was at stake throughout was the cosmological properties of a specific patch of ground. Both clans had produced multiple queens for the dynasty; neither would concede, because to concede the site was to concede the cosmological conduit that the site provided to their descendants. Professor Park's commentary on this case cuts to the heart of what sansong reveals about Korean religion: "These were not unreasonable people. They were highly educated scholars. But they genuinely believed that their family's future was connected to where their ancestors were buried. The litigation was not superstition. It was responsibility."

This is exactly what the three-force amplification model predicts. Donggi-gameung theology says the ancestor is still working. Confucian hyo ethics says ensuring the best possible conditions for the ancestor's work is a moral obligation. The jigwan's legal authority says a court will enforce your cosmological

property rights. Under these conditions, 392 years of litigation is not irrational behavior — it is the logical expression of a religious system that has been amplified into the institutional structure of everyday legal life.

The comparison with Japan is instructive here, and Janine Sawada's work on Tokugawa religion frames it: the social form a Buddhist-Confucian synthesis takes depends on who mediates it and within what institutional context. Japan had Buddhist sacred mountain traditions, Neo-Confucian ethical frameworks, and geomantic practice (onmyōdō). What Japan did not have was a figure equivalent to the jigwan — a state-certified specialist who translated sacred landscape interpretation into legal testimony. In Tokugawa Japan, disputes between shugendō mountain practitioners and onmyōji divination specialists remained within religious organizational boundaries; they were conflicts about who had the right to perform ritual practices on sacred mountains, not about who owned the mountain as property. The sacred stayed inside the religious sphere. In Korea, the jigwan brought it into the court. This single institutional difference — whether the sacred landscape specialist was inside or outside the state apparatus — produced entirely different religious social forms.

The Three Forces Today: A Religion That Never Left

The deepest evidence for the three-force model is not historical but contemporary. The sacred cosmological logic that drove sansong for four centuries has not been fully secularized. The South Korean Supreme Court, in an en banc decision on January 19, 2017, reaffirmed punmyo kijikwon (分墓基地權, grave-site customary property rights) as a real right under customary law, citing "the existence of customs and practices based on the burial-centered funeral culture." The Constitutional Court upheld this in a 7-to-2 decision in November 2020. The legal structure that the jigwan's state certification built in the fifteenth century is still actively maintained in the twenty-first.

But the most striking evidence of the tradition's persistence is not in courts. It is in

bodies. Professor Park's account of contemporary pungsu practice provides the kind of evidence that no legal record or institutional document can supply: the living texture of a religious system so thoroughly internalized that it presents itself not as religion but as common sense.

This is what Robert Orsi and Meredith McGuire call lived religion: the sacred operating in bodies, places, and everyday habits rather than in doctrine or professed belief. Studied this way, pungsu is most visible not where people affirm it but where they enact it without naming it.

The vocabulary of *myeongdang* (明堂, auspicious site) has migrated intact from Joseon *sansong* petitions into modern real estate listings. Apartment units with the "right" orientation and topographic relationship to surrounding features are marketed as *myeongdang* properties and command higher prices. "The terminology is the same as what was used in *sansong* petitions four hundred years ago," Professor Park noted. "Only the context has changed. The buyers may not think of themselves as pungsu practitioners, but they are making the same spatial calculations."

The bodily dimension is more intimate and more revealing. Korean apartments are overwhelmingly built to face south, not purely for sunlight, but because south-facing orientation is the fundamental geomantic prescription for living spaces. And within those south-facing apartments, Professor Park observed, a significant proportion of Korean people still orient their sleeping bodies away from the north, on grounds they cannot usually articulate explicitly. "You ask them why," he said, "and they will say 'it just feels wrong to sleep that way.' They don't explicitly cite pungsu." Rather, people have internalized the cosmological orientation so thoroughly that it presents itself as common sense rather than belief." This is the deepest form of religious internalization: a cosmological orientation so embedded that it operates below the threshold of conscious belief, producing spatial behavior without requiring religious identity.

Perhaps the most striking contemporary practice Professor Park described concerned pregnant women. Across social classes and educational levels, there persists a widespread

practice of advising pregnant women to avoid places where yin energy (*eum-gi*, 陰氣) is concentrated — certain old grave sites, deeply shaded valleys, specific buildings associated with death — on the grounds that the unborn child, understood cosmologically as a being of pure yang vitality, is vulnerable to imbalance. "This is pungsu operating directly on the body," Professor Park said. "Not a belief held in the mind. A set of spatial prohibitions practiced on a pregnant woman, structuring where she can go and what landscapes she can occupy." The *donggi-gameung* theology that made the ancestor's burial site a moral obligation has extended its logic into the living body of the next generation before it is even born.

What these contemporary practices demonstrate, taken together, is that the three-force amplification produced a religion with remarkable staying power. *Donggi-gameung* theology is embodied in sleeping orientation and pregnancy spatial practice. The *hyo* moral obligation persists in the continued investment in ancestral grave maintenance and the felt sense that one's family's well-being is connected to how one's ancestors are situated in the landscape. The legal institutionalization persists in Supreme Court rulings. None of these require explicit religious identification. All of them constitute what Orsi has called the "everyday miracles" of lived religion — the sacred operating in the middle of ordinary life, shaping bodies and spaces without announcing itself as religion.

V. TAIWAN: THE SAME VOCABULARY, WITHOUT THE THIRD FORCE

Taiwan, specifically the port city of Tainan, offers the clearest comparative demonstration of what Korean pungsu would look like without the third force — the state's incorporation of the sacred landscape specialist into its legal apparatus. Professor En-Yu Huang, an architectural historian at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan, described a geomantic tradition that shares the Korean classical vocabulary but generates a fundamentally different social form because the institutions that carry it are fundamentally different.

Retrospection, Not Prescription

The first difference Professor Huang identified is diagnostic of the entire Taiwan case: Tainan was not designed according to geomantic principles. It grew organically as a port settlement, shaped by trade, migration, and topography across four colonial periods — Dutch, Zheng/Koxinga, Qing, and Japanese. The geomantic interpretation came afterward. “What you see when you look at Tainan’s feng shui is not a plan — it is a reading. The city was built, and then people figured out how to read it cosmologically.”

This retrospective character is the opposite of the Korean pattern. In Korea, the jigwan selected sites before construction, his prognostic authority making the sacred prior to the secular act of building. In Taiwan, the city existed first; the geomantic interpretation followed, giving existing structures cosmological significance they were not designed to carry. Professor Huang showed this in the cartographic record: comparing Tainan maps from before and after Qing dynasty wall construction (ca. 1723–1736), he identified a systematic pattern of topographical idealization — the hills and waterways surrounding the city had been subtly repositioned in post-wall maps so that the city appeared to sit on a more nearly perfect geomantic axis. “The map is making an argument,” he said. “It is arguing that this city is correctly placed, that the land itself authorizes its existence here.”

Where Korean pungsu made the sacred prior, selecting the site before the act, Taiwanese feng shui made it subsequent: reading the existing arrangement as already sacred. This difference is not incidental. It reflects the absence of a state-certified prognostic specialist who could establish the sacred order before the fact. Without the jigwan, the cosmology does not precede and shape the material world; it follows and interprets it.

Maintenance, Not Litigation — The Key Contrast

The second and more consequential difference is what Professor Huang confirmed when the comparison with Korea was put to him directly: “There is no court case in Taiwan like sansong. The feng shui of Tainan is not something you litigate. It is something you maintain. The daoshi

maintains it. The community maintains it together, through the jiao, through the processions, through the offerings at the temple.”

This statement is the comparative heart of the paper. It identifies precisely what the third force — state institutional incorporation — produces in its presence and absence. In Korea, because the jigwan’s sacred interpretations carried legal force, the natural tendency of competing families to claim the same cosmological resources produced litigation: the courts became the arena in which sacred cosmological disputes were settled. In Taiwan, because the daoshi (hereditary Daoist priest) operated entirely outside the state apparatus, his sacred authority organized communal life — temple territories, Daoist jiao procession routes, guild networks, the periodic renewal of the community’s relationship to its water deities — but produced no mechanism for legal contest. The sacred and the commercial organized each other through the Five Water Immortal Kings (Shuixian Zunwang, 水仙尊王) at Shuixian Temple, whose temple the merchant guilds installed at the harbor mouth where the classical water cosmology’s qi concentration was highest. The result was not litigation over who owned the site but collective maintenance of the sacred order the site embodied.

“The procession is the city reading its own cosmological body,” Professor Huang said of the jiao ritual — the periodic Daoist ceremony in which priests led processions through the old canal-alley network, following routes that historically traced the city’s functional waterway geography. “Every time the priests walk the old canal routes, they are tracing the dragon veins one more time. Keeping the qi moving.” Maintenance rather than adjudication. Communal renewal rather than legal competition. This is what the cosmological vocabulary generates in the absence of the third force — a sacred geography organized through collective ritual practice rather than through property rights.

The 1992 Hai’an Road redevelopment failure — when construction struck an unexpected groundwater layer and was abandoned — illustrates what happens when the communally maintained sacred order is threatened without a

legal mechanism to defend it. “In the neighborhood,” Professor Huang recounted, “people said the water qi resisted. The water deities protected their territory. The project failed because it was cosmologically wrong.” The community interpreted the failure theologically and organized sustained resistance to further redevelopment on that basis — but through cultural heritage campaigns and collective memory, not through property litigation. The sacred defended itself communally because it had no legal arm.

VI. OKINAWA: WHEN ALL THREE FORCES ARE ABSENT

Okinawa completes the comparative demonstration by showing what happens when not just the third force but all stable institutional carriers are removed. Professor Aso Shinichi, a cultural historian at the University of the Ryukyus, began our interview with a correction of the most common assumption about Okinawan feng shui: “The shisa and the ishiganto are not ancient. They begin to spread widely in the eighteenth century. Not gradually from time immemorial — but in a specific historical period, for specific reasons.”

That period was the Ryukyuan royal court’s selective adoption of Chinese spatial cosmology as a governance technology. The Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879) navigated its existence as a small maritime state caught between the Chinese tributary system and Satsuma domain control. In the eighteenth century, drawing on Fujian Chinese cultural models, the court adopted geomantic practice as part of a wider administrative reorganization. The crucial difference from Korea, as Professor Aso specified, was structural: “In Korea, you have the jigwan — a state-certified specialist, a professional class, an institutional structure that produces and reproduces the tradition over generations. In Taiwan, you have the Daoist priests, the temple networks, the guild organizations — a stable institutional infrastructure. In Ryukyu, this was never built. The practices were introduced, but the institutional infrastructure was not replicated. There was never a stable specialist class.”

Without a stable specialist class, the practice had no institutional mechanism for reproduction — no way to train successors, certify practitioners, or maintain doctrinal coherence across generations. Subsequent history removed even the informal carriers. Japanese annexation in 1879 abolished the royal court. The Battle of Okinawa in 1945 killed tens of thousands of civilians and destroyed the physical and social fabric of communities. American military occupation from 1945 to 1972 then imposed a new spatial order, expropriating land and introducing American urban planning models. Through these successive destructions, whatever institutional structures had supported geomantic practice were dismantled.

“After annexation, the Battle of Okinawa, and American occupation,” Professor Aso said, “what survives of the geomantic tradition? The shisa survives. The ishiganto survives. Not because anyone made a deliberate decision to preserve them — but because they were small enough and domestic enough that no colonial power bothered to suppress them. They fit on a rooftop. They stand at a road end. No one needs to authorize them.”

Professor Aso described the shisa and ishiganto as persisting in a form that requires no specialist, no ritual organization, no doctrinal knowledge, and no institutional authorization. “A family puts a shisa on the roof because their neighbors have one, because their parents had one, because it feels protective. They may not be able to explain the cosmological theory. But the object is doing its work.” This is the outer limit to which geomantic cosmology can be reduced and still survive: the object, deployed by households without institutional mediation, carrying the cosmological logic in material form even after the doctrine, the specialists, and the institutions that once organized it have been destroyed.

The contrast with Korea could not be sharper. In Korea, the three amplifying forces produced an institution, *sansong*, whose legal residue persists in Supreme Court rulings and whose theological residue persists in the sleeping orientation and apartment preferences of people who have never used the word *pungsu*. In Okinawa, the absence of those forces, followed by their active destruction,

produced objects. Both are evidence of the same underlying cosmological claim about qi and sacred space. The difference in their social form is entirely a product of institutional history.

VII. WHY KOREA: THE THREE-FORCE AMPLIFICATION THESIS

The comparative evidence from Taiwan and Okinawa allows the three-force amplification thesis to be stated precisely. Korean pungsu is the most thoroughly religionized form of East Asian geomancy not because Koreans believe more intensely than Taiwanese or Okinawans, and not because the classical cosmological vocabulary is more sophisticated in Korea than elsewhere. It is because, among the cases examined here, Korea is the one in which all three institutional forces operated simultaneously and amplified each other.

TABLE I
THE THREE AMPLYFYING FORCES: KOREA< TAIWAN and OKINAWA COMPARED

Force	Korea	Taiwan (Tainan)	Okinawa/Ry ukyu
1. Elite religious transmission (via textual/mon astic networks)	✓ Tang-dynasty monastic networks; doctrinal depth from entry	△ Daoist/folk religious networks; depth in communal ritual theology, not ancestral cosmology	✗ Fujian popular transmission; shallower textual engagement
2. Moral obligation (Confucian hyo)	✓ Hyo makes correct burial mandatory; criticism and practice diverge	△ Confucian influence present but not the primary moral framework; Daoist/folk religion dominant	✗ Not operative; Ryukyuan indigenous moral frameworks dominant
3. State institutionalization (legal authority)	✓ Jigwan: state-certified specialist; sacred claims = legal evidence	✗ Daoshi: outside state apparatus; no legal authority	✗ Court adoption without institutional reproduction; no stable specialist class

Result	Property litigation (sansong); embodied daily practice; 2017 Supreme Court ruling	Communal sacred maintenance; temple-guild network; no litigation	Household protective objects (shisa, ishiganto); no institution, no doctrine
Primary interview	Park Jeong-hae, Hanyang Univ. ERICA (2025)	En-Yu Huang, NCKU Tainan (2025)	Aso Shinichi, Univ. of the Ryukyus (2025)

✓: Fully operative
△: Partially operative
✗: Absent
Note. Rows mark analytical distinctions rather than rigid historical separations. Forces One and Two intersect, as discussed in Section 3.2. Based on fieldwork interviews with Park (2025), Huang (2025), and Aso (2025).

The table makes the amplification logic visible. Korea has all three forces. Taiwan has the first but not the second or third — it has the doctrinal depth of Buddhist/Daoist transmission without the moral obligation of Confucian hyo and without the legal authority of state incorporation. Okinawa has a weakened version of the first force (popular transmission rather than elite monastic networks) and neither of the other two. Across these three cases, the number of forces present aligns with the intensity of institutional religious life: while the combination of the three forces produces litigation, codification, and embodied daily practice, the presence of a single weak force produces objects.

The mechanism connecting the forces to the outcome is also precise. Force One (elite religious transmission) gives the cosmology its textual sophistication and a specialist class capable of elaborating doctrine over generations. Without it, as in Okinawa, the cosmology has insufficient depth to generate stable institutions — it can spread as practice but cannot consolidate as a tradition with ongoing doctrinal development. Force Two (Confucian moral obligation) universalizes the cosmological practice across the entire society by making it mandatory rather than optional. Without it, as in Taiwan, the cosmology organizes those who choose to participate — the merchant guilds, the temple communities, the

households that maintain the shisa — but does not compel everyone. Force Three (state institutionalization) gives the cosmological claim coercive force by translating it into legal rights. Taiwan again shows the consequence: disputes over sacred sites are resolved communally, through the authority of the Daoist priest and the pressure of community norms, rather than through legal adjudication. Only when all three forces operate together does the cosmology achieve the degree of social force that makes 392 years of litigation over a patch of ground not merely possible but rationally required.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of the paper's argument deserve acknowledgment. The most fundamental is scope. The comparison is built upon three cases and does not extend to mainland China, which is the origin point of feng shui's development. The paper positions sansong as the distinctive product of Korea's three-force amplification, but Tristan Brown's *Laws of the Land: Fengshui and the State in Qing Dynasty China* (2023) documents feng shui grave litigation in Qing dynasty China, litigation that was argued in court and woven into imperial law. This shows that legal disputes over graves were not unique to Korea, and a fuller account would need to specify what distinguished the Korean case. Additionally, the factual basis of the paper substantially relies on the theoretical knowledge extracted from expert interviews and classical textual sources rather than ethnographic observation of practitioners. This weakens the contemporary claims about sleeping orientation and myeongdang pricing, which rest largely on a single interview and lack further corroboration. Finally, the discussions of Taiwan and Okinawa are underdeveloped compared to Korea, both in the length of the interviews and in the depth of the analysis. They are sufficient to establish the comparison the argument requires, but they lack the grounding in secondary sources that the Korea case draws upon.

IX. CONCLUSION: THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

This paper began with a paradox: the people who criticized pungsu most loudly spent the most money on the best grave sites. That paradox is now explicable. When a cosmological claim is simultaneously theologically specific (the ancestor is still working), morally obligatory (hyo demands the best possible burial), and legally enforceable (the jigwan's certification makes the cosmological claim a property right), criticism is simply beside the point. You can think pungsu is superstition and still be required by the moral and legal architecture of your society to take it seriously. That is what three amplifying forces operating simultaneously produce.

Korean case generates a principle that extends beyond East Asian religions: the intensity of a religion's social life depends not on the strength of individual belief but on the institutional architecture that carries, amplifies, or destroys it. Belief alone, even sincere and widespread belief, does not produce four centuries of litigation and Supreme Court rulings. What produces that is belief plus moral obligation plus legal authority — the three forces that Korean pungsu assembled, and that no other geomantic tradition in East Asia assembled in the same configuration.

Taiwan and Okinawa are not addenda to this argument; they are its comparative leverage. Taiwan confirms that the classical geomantic vocabulary and even the Daoist institutional carrier are not sufficient for the Korean outcome: without the jigwan's legal authority, the same cosmology generates communal maintenance rather than legal contest, sacred geography sustained by collective ritual rather than by property rights. Okinawa confirms that without any stable institutional carrier, the cosmology retreats to its minimal form — an object on a rooftop, doing its work without doctrine, without specialist, without institution. The geomantic claim is the same in all three cases. What each society built around it made all the difference.

The methodological implication deserves emphasis. This argument would not have been possible without the three fieldwork interviews.

No legal record documents what it feels like to believe that your ancestor is still working. No institutional history captures the moment when a pregnant woman avoids a shaded valley because the cosmological logic has been so thoroughly internalized that it presents itself as common sense. No secondary literature explains why there is no Taiwanese equivalent of sansong with the directness of an architectural historian who has spent a career reading Tainan's built form. Professor Huang could ask himself, on the spot, what legal institution would organize this sacred geography if the Daoist priests were replaced by certified government specialists. These are the questions that only fieldwork — only the discipline of going to the people who carry the tradition and asking them from the inside how it works — can answer.

What the three interviews reveal, when read together and against each other, is the architecture beneath the religion. The shisa on the Okinawan rooftop, the jiao procession through Tainan's alleys, the 392-year lawsuit in Joseon Korea — all three are expressions of the same cosmological claim about qi and sacred space. What made Korea's expression into a legal institution that shapes apartment prices and Supreme Court rulings in the twenty-first century was not more devotion, not a superior cosmology, not a more sophisticated tradition. It was three institutional forces that happened to operate simultaneously and to amplify each other over five centuries of history. Remove one and you get Taiwan. Remove all three and you get Okinawa. Keep all three, and you get a religion that never left.

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