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The history and features of Korean genre paintings

Genre paintings deal with sosi pungsok (a collection of Korean folk customs), mingan sinang (folk beliefs), and the lives of ordinary people. Paintings of scenes from everyday life are depicted in a generally realistic manner, therefore the genre paintings are regarded as official records.

Korean genre paintings originated in ancient times, and describe various kinds of subjects up until the Chosun dynasty (1392–1911). For instance, gobsan byeokhwa (mural paintings in ancient tombs) of the Three Kingdoms period, or angakkwa (drawings incised on rocks) depicting religious themes, and Binjuang do (飆風七月圖類, Song of Pin) of Koryo (918–1391) and Sangang haengsil do (三絳行實圖類, Illustrated Conduct of Three Bonds) of Chosun were produced for political reasons.1

Some Korean documents show the differences between the subjects of politics and religious beliefs. Genre paintings depicting middle-class life, as well as the nobility, started to appear in the early Chosun and prevailed late in that period. In the early 18th century, genre paintings described the ordinary people involved in work and recreation, and some paintings, featuring erotic themes, appeared in the late 18th century. This can be shown by the genre paintings painted by Hong-do Kim (金弘道, 1745–1805) in his twenties, and Yun-bok Shin (申弘福, 1758–1820) in his forties. From the 19th century onwards, daily life became the main subject.

This change of subject matter can be attributed to economic development. Due to economic growth, Seoul became urbanised, and a broad range of new painting subjects (素材) became available. The country became so prosperous that people, including jang in (中人, middle-class man) and commoner, had the means and leisure to collect works of art.2 Japan’s Momoyama period (桃山時代, 1573–1615) reflected clearly this tendency.3 Warriors, who were retainers of the lord, merchants, and painters, gathered around the castle and formed a city, and such a city is called a yakamaichi (城下町, castle town). Since the open-door policy, some Japanese genre painting, and Yokohama woodblock prints,4 depicting the lives of foreigners appeared. This is slightly different from what happened in China and Korea, but it is very interesting that somewhat similar changes took place simultaneously in the three countries.

There are several reasons and theories for the popularity of genre paintings: As a manifestation of self-consciousness; as a manifestation of anti-Sinocentrism (朝鮮中華思想); as an influence of kyungakdo (耕織圖, farming) and needlework) from China; and as an anti-hang-loose attitude (無逸精神).5 In the early 18th century, the genre painting reflected sadaebo (士大夫的, Korean scholar-official) taste and thought (獻念的). After that, the style of genre painting became more realistic (現實的) and suited to the taste of ordinary people (庶民的).

This article focuses on the paintings by Hong-do Kim and Yun-bok Shin, who were Chosun’s leading genre-style painters. It is hoped that this comparative research into various aspects of the two characteristic painters will make a significant contribution to the study of traditional Asian art.

Paintings by Hong-do Kim and Yun-bok Shin

Hong-do Kim, along with Kyun Ahn and Seung-up Jang, are known as the three leading genre painters. Hong-do Kim specialised in various kinds of subjects such as landscapes (風景山水畫), figure painting, flowers, animals, and religious figures. He was the best among thirty government artists,6 and basked in royal Jeong-jo (1776–1800) favour. Though he was not of high social standing, Jeong-jo appointed him to be a hyeon-gam (縣監, country magistrate) of Young-pung (延壘) province. Relatively few of Yun-bok Shin’s official records have come to light. Perhaps it is because there were fewer of them originally, since he was supposedly removed from the role of government artist because his work was judged to be obscene, and he lived in seclusion.

3 Seong-mi Lee (translator), History of Japanese Paintings, yekyung, 1992, pp. 207–236.
6 Ju-sok Oh, Danwon Hong-do Kim, 2006, p. 34.
Composition of line and field

Hong-do Kim followed the sadoebu’s brushwork which was done in a traditional and idealised manner, but the subject matter was drawn from trivial incidents in the lives of ordinary people. Some of Korea’s greatest genre paintings were executed by his creative features. These will be discussed here.

Each of Hong-do Kim’s works was usually painted on the format of a rectangle with height exceeding width. This type of field provided little white space. He adopted various but simple compositions, for instance; (1) is an X composition, (3) is a zigzag composition, (4) is a row composition, (6) is a cross-compound composition, and (17, 18) are circular compositions. He painted with a strong and powerful line. Remarkably, he had the ability to quickly record impressions through sketching. Without using an eraser to remove rough construction lines or to correct lines, his sketches, drawn with bold and elongated lines, demonstrate his great ability.

By comparison, Yun-bok Shin used a rectangular canvas, with width exceeding height, which gave him the advantage of more open white space. Yun-bok Shin adopted a hybrid compositional style [see 5, the upper area is a row composition and the lower part is a cross composition, which he used most usually. In (7), the river functions as a slanting line, which vitalises the static figures (see 9). Though horizontal composition provides stability, with both figures and houses on the space make the painting look cramped. (12) and (14) are too-complicated as compositions. Yun-bok Shin stressed the contours of the human body by drawing them with a more solid line than the fabric folds. This method results in a more realistic style. Moreover, the folds of the central figure’s fabric tend to be less bold than those of the figure at the edge (see the man’s back on the left side of 5, near the edge, and the man closest to the edge of the left side of 12). Their fabric folds are rendered in a stronger style than elsewhere. As a whole, the paintings of Yun-bok shin, whose favourite theme was gisaeng (female entertainers analogous to Japanese geisha), are depicted with more delicate and feminine line than those of Hong-do Kim, whose genre subjects were usually men.

Colour

According to eumyang ohaeng seol (陰陽五行), Taoistic yin-yang and five elements theories, five colours, such as yellow (黃), red (紅), blue (青), black (黑), and white (白) were mainly used, and Yun-bok Shin’s genre paintings confirm this. In his paintings, men, mostly yangban (literati), wore black and white clothes: white dopo (gentleman’s robe) and black keukrip (黑笠, a traditional cylindrical Korean hat), white simui (深衣, overcoat), black yegwan (禮巾, a hat for Confucian scholars), and white changot (a kind of dopo) and black gwon (冠, coronet). This black and white combination goes well with people like the Koreans, who have a significant contrast between hair and skin colours. The white overcoat and the black hat bring to mind the image of a crane that is symbolic of a noble personal character.7

7 Gi-sook Gum, The dress art of Chosun, Ryunghwadang, 1994, p. 67.
2 The Village Blacksmith (鍊冶)
HONG-DO KIM

3 Fishing at the Seashore (漁場)
HONG-DO KIM

5 Collecting Alms on the Road (路上托鉢)
YUN-BOK SHIN

6 Collecting (施主)
HONG-DO KIM

8 Washer Women at the Stream (漂母)
HONG-DO KIM

9 Curiosity in the Early Spring (春色滿園)
YUN-BOK SHIN
The complementary colour scheme was used in painting women’s dress, such as noksuheongsang (緑衣青裳, green upper garment and blue skirt, 9);8 baeksuheongsang (白衣青裳, white upper garment and blue skirt, 6, 7, 14, 15), and noksuheongsang (緑衣紅裳, green upper garment and red skirt).9 A woman (far right) is seen wearing a brownish-green jangdol10 in (5), in which her blue skirt comes with a red gureum (riboon), its complementary colour. In (12), the colour of the woman’s dress and its complementary colour of the pine tree highlight the woman. The use of a complementary colour scheme is seen not only on the dress but also in dancheong,11 box,12 and wrapping cloth,13 which show the Korean colour preferences.

Hong-do Kim’s genre paintings are mostly white, which originated from the Puyo period.14 Hong-do Kim painted the ordinary people who wore white clothes. There are yangan wearing heukrip, but those black hats do not affect the overall colour scheme because they are not the main subject (15, 17).
The main theme

Hong-do Kim’s works are divided into four categories according to the main themes: First, the unprecedented works portraying the labouring commoner’s life in a humorous and realistic way (see 1, 2, 3, 15); second, the accurate paintings of everyday life depicts in a realistic manner (see 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 16, 19); third, descriptions of education (see 13, 17); and finally, the paintings of ordinary people at play (see 18, 20, his masterpieces).

Yun-bok Shin’s paintings employ a powerful eroticism. He usually painted scenes in which Suabi enjoy boating with gisaeng (3), or a figure is shown drinking and playing a musical instrument.

In Korea, before the Choson period, Buddhist culture formed the mainstream. But in the Choson period, things were as they had been in the era of Confucian culture, and there were many points of departure from the previous period. Confucianism had less advantages to offer than Buddhism. The samgangojul (三鶴五倫) is the representative life guidance of the Choson period, and samgangojul duties are bokujingang (父為子鞠), goonwisingang (君為臣詰), hoonboogang (夫為婦範), oyun (五倫 relations are goonwisingang (君臣有義), hooyubul (父子有親), bokujingang (夫為子鞠), jangpyunseo (長幼有序), and hooyubul (朋友有信). Among these parental virtues related to the genre paintings, two can be described: bokujingang (父為子鞠), which means that the wife serves the husband, which probably explains how society was dominated by the patriarchal system; and bokujingang (夫為婦範), which means husband and wife have their own distinctions, and their own obligations. While men are enjoying entertainment with the gisaeng, as shown in the paintings of Shin-yun Bok, wives had to live a disciplined life, giving birth, raising children, and holding memorial services in a restricted area because they could not go out freely. See (5), in which a woman is wearing a jangol to cover her face when she ventures out in public. The custom of veiling was adopted only when the Choson period, when the culture was strongly influenced by Confucianism. Jangol takes the form of a dopo or skirt (see 21). In (5, 6, 12) women are wearing jangol, but their lewd way of dress reveals that they are gisaeng.
Judged by the baby on her back, the woman in (10) is a
communer. Hong-do Kim and Yun-bok Shin expressed
the same subject in different ways, each with his own
distinct idea. A boat was one of the subjects in both
Hong-do Kim’s and Yun-bok Shin’s paintings. The boats
in Hong-do Kim’s are just a form of mass transit where
everyone gets on board (4). On the contrary, the one in
Yun-bok Shin’s is a pleasure boat (22). In Hong-do Kim’s
painting, liquor is for refreshment after, or in the middle
of the workdays (16). However, in Yun-bok Shin’s paint-
ing, drinking liquor is just for fun (14). Taho (pitching
arrows, 12) and bowshot training (13) means play and edu-
cation for both artists.

There are four categories of rank in the Chosun period:
Sanbi (土), farmer (農), technician (工), merchant (商). The
main theme of Yun-bok Shin’s painting is the decadent
amusements of high-ranking people (士), but that of
Hong-do Kim’s is either a farmer (農夫, 1, 15), a smith
(丁, 2), or a woman going into a shop (商) with her baby
on her back (10). These differences between Hong-do
Kim and Yun-bok Shin result from the different political
environments in which they lived.

In the Jeong jo period, when Hong-do Kim was thriving,
the Silhak, which put a high value on labour and education
(農工商) was in control, and influenced Hong-do Kim’s
brushwork. After Jeong jo’s death, Soon jo replaced him as
king. During his reign, when Yun-bok Shin was thriving,
political stability, achieved by Tanggyeong-chaeok (equali-
sation policy), plummeted. Yankun, who were tormented
by doubt about politics, relied on the philosophy of Doga
(Taoist thought). By describing high-ranking people as
playing with gisaeng, rather than devoting themselves to
study or politics, he criticised them indirectly.

Analysis of the symbolism in genre paintings

(1) and (16) show agricultural affairs. (1) describes the
spring season before sowing. A pair of cows is plowing in
a traditional way. The right angle leading from the plow
to the cows, the cows with the tips of their noses raised,
the forceful expression of the lines of the clothes, and the
muscles of the cows, tell that it is difficult to engage in
farming. On the contrary, elsewhere two men weeding a
field with a three-pronged fork, delight in farming. (15)
depicts threshing rice after harvesting.

See the village blacksmith (2), in which a man is holding
hot metal with a pair of tongs, two smithies are taking
turns hammering it, and another is blowing the bellows
behind the hearth. Another one is grinding a newly-made
sickle. All of them are working vibrantly. Unlike his other
paintings, this has a broad white space, and uses the de-
vice of audience gaze where all the figures depicted are
looking at one object.

See a fishery (3), in which people catch fish using the
changing tide. A group of ducks is flying diagonally, and a
boat is approaching a barrier in the water to put the fish
to earthenware pots. A pot cooling on the boat gives the
sense that the workers are expecting a hearty meal. The
scene of several men looking out of the boat arouses a
smile. The spectators could feel a vast tract of ocean, a
sea wind, and a merry conversation between fishermen.
(4) describes a transit of the river. By depicting work ani-
mals together among seated humans, seems to suggest
through this painting that there is no distinction of rank.

Women are shown making a donation to a Buddhist
priest (6). Buddhism was shunned and Buddhist priests
ran away to deep in the mountains. When they came
down to where the commoner’s lived, women usually do-
nated money or rice to them. Women are shown doing
their laundry and washing their hair (7, 8). While shielding his face with a fan, a yangban is stealing a glance in Hong-do Kim’s painting to the women. In comparison, in Yun-bok Shin’s painting, a yangban he describes is intentionally turning to look at them. He also showed that women were not afraid to be naked in public.

A yangban, flushed with wine, is secretly trying to hold a woman’s hand (9). A conversation is described between a man bearing a barrel of salted shrimp, and a woman carrying a round basket on her head, with her baby on her back (10). If (9) is a scene of an adulterous relationship, (10) is one of conjugal affection.
The common theme of (11, 14, 15, 16) is liquor. (11) is titled *jumak* (酒幕), where commoners drop in and take a rest having food and wine. A man is wearing a rough bamboo hat, and a middle-aged woman holding a purse is taking out some money to pay the owner. Judged by the length of the proprietor’s upper garment, which comes down to her waist, the period is mid-18th century. An early outdoor spring scene is shown in (14), with *yangban* listening to court musicians performing, and *gisaeng* serving them. The ages of the *yangban* and the decorum of this event tell that they are of high rank. (22) satirises the *yangban* playing with *gisaeng*. Like (14), (15) describes in a critical manner a drunken *yangban*. He is lying down while supervising hard-working (打作, harvesting) commoners. (16) depicts farmers happily having food and wine, and wearing white clothes. In this picture they are painted more lightly than in other of his paintings. While waiting, the woman bringing food to them is feeding her baby. She infuses this painting with life.

In a scene in which a pupil is being punished, the pupil is crying. The teacher, who is wearing *bongun* (帽子, a hat) and *yubok* (儒服, a dress for Confucian scholars) is containing his laughter (17) but his clothes are shaking. One of his pupils is tipping the answer, another is laughing. There are various reactions. Their hair is braided, except for one whose hair is tied up into a *sangto* (top knot). *Sangto* style signals that he is a married man. Primary education was taken care of by the establishment of *seodang* (書堂, private school) for elementary education. Retired Confucian scholars went to their hometown and taught the sons of *yangban* wanting to enter the public service via *gwango siheom* (civil-service examination). The commoners’ sons got the opportunity to study at *seodang* in the late Chosun dynasty.

A *ssirum* (wrestling) scene (18) is showing one of the most typical Korean folk games. Cheering spectators, and a vendor who seems not to be interested in that game, make an incomplete circle around the wrestlers. With his lips tightly closed and his checks flushed, one man is straining to heave the adversary to the ground. The other is still balancing himself on one leg, but is about to lose. The wrinkles on his forehead show how close he is to that.
Joy and grief alternate in the spectators. Hong-do Kim lowered his sight to that of the spectators, and described the fever of the game both vividly and realistically. This is one of the most characteristic paintings of the Chosun dynasty.

As already mentioned, (17, 18, 20) are circular compositions. A dancing child transfigures the circular composition (20), which brings an indescribable charm to the painting. The group of musicians sitting in a circle harmonises with another of the dancing child below. There would be the sound of various musical instruments. The movement of the dancer’s feet and arms is very dynamic, and a movement of the flowing waistband indicates that he has just turned. (19) shows the marriage customs of those days. The bridegroom is wearing samogwandaes (絹闊冠帶, wedding shirt). Preceded by a pair of wild geese and a lantern made with blue fabric, and followed by a nanny, he is taking a white horse to the bride’s house. (21) shows an excursion. A servant is carrying a gajii (架子) on which a gisaeng is riding. Fall foliage on dishevelled hair suggests an autumnal mood.

Conclusions

It is very interesting to compare and analyse the work of Hong-do Kim and Yun-bok Shin because they expressed the same material in different ways with their own distinct ideas. As the political situation changed, the mainstream philosophy also changed, and influenced genre paintings. When Hong-do Kim was thriving, everything was flourishing politically, economically, and culturally based on the Sixhak. Labour was highly valued.

When Yun-bok Shin was thriving, political stability plummeted. Yanban, tormented by doubt about politics, relied on the philosophy of Doga (Taoist thought), and the common people were impoverished. By describing high-ranking people consort rings with gisaeng, rather than devoting themselves to study or politics, he was indirectly criticising them. As already mentioned, genre paintings are often used to signal contemporary values, life, and culture. Through analysing genre paintings, is a good way to understand food, clothing, shelter, and types of work of the period.

Both painters elevated the genre paintings of the Chosun period to a high level. By expressing themselves in their own way, with quick appreciation of each subject, their accurate descriptions, and consummate ability, make them the principle painters of the Chosun dynasty.

26 A travelling platform for the master.