

The Enlightenment of Anti-Confucian Thought During the Late Chosen:

Study of Genre Paintings by Shin Yunbok and Kim Hongdo

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This paper examines the intimate balance between art and political change during a formative period of the late Choson Dynasty, from the late 18th century to the early 19th century. For years Korea maintained a rigid, Confucian social stratification. Most importantly, this meant that government administration was in the hands of the king and the ruling elite. However, during the 18th century, scholars began to modify traditional Korean Confucian morals to include ideas that accepted human nature as full of desire rather than stressing the importance of free will. Glimpses of such Anti-Confucian thought can be seen in the genre paintings found within this progressive period. The most recognized genre paintings of the time involved portrayals of the daily activities of rural communities. Paintings were based on real observations and depicted mundane activities such as potters making pots, children attending school, and women sewing. Kim Hongdo (1745–1806) perfected this branch of genre painting and elevated its position within the high court and even earned the acknowledgement of the king. Another major artist of genre painting is Shin Yunbok (1758–1800s). Both of these artists used their work not only as poetic expression but also as a form of satirical commentary on the corruption of the elite. The change in ideologies sprouting in Korea during the time encouraged these artists to portray Anti-Confucian ideals in their painting language. This paper aims to study how Shin Yunbok and Kim Hongdo's paintings reflect the changing political mood during late Choson period.

For years Koreans perceived their domestic agricultural-based economy as a stable and

self-sufficient system. From the yangban's perspective of the farmers, artisans, merchants, business and commerce were best appointed to those of lower status. A yangban's true focus was to remain only on self-cultivation and classical arts. The implication of such a system is that social mobility is difficult or nearly impossible. Social status and mobility was limited and carefully monitored by the aristocracy. In addition to there being social classifications, these classes were also legally bound. Those of the higher class were so committed to maintaining the social hierarchy that they even required each person to wear identification. However, during the 18th century, scholars began to modify traditional Korean Confucian morals. Glimpses of such reform can be seen in genre paintings within that formative period and my research looks into how Kim Hongdo and Shin Yunbok, two renowned artists of the time, included such modifications within their painting language.

Many art critics interpreted Sirhak-influenced art as an expression of anti-Confucianism and anti-feudalism, therefore a nationalist, populist art form has long existed in Korea from ancient times, but in the 18th century it achieved a newfound popularity. Advocates of the Sirhak movement generally argued for reforming the rigid Confucian social system, providing land reforms for peasant farmers, promoting Korea's own national identity and culture, encouraging scientific research and advocating technological trade with foreign countries. The Sirhak school of thought is often times credited for the modernization of Korea mainly due to their realistic and scientific methods of addressing social problems with the consideration of the general welfare of the people and human equality. Arguably, the influences of the Sirhak movement motivated Choson Korean painters like Kim Hongdo to depict the lives of common people engaging in their daily activities in the cities, marketplaces, or villages with a new sense of class

consciousness.

Because genre paintings aim to represent the daily scenes or the communal life of ordinary people, it is essential that these depictions be done through realistic expression and not through abstract or non-representational styles. Therefore one can conclude that realism is the most important element in genre painting. And this is also why genre painting is more reliable than any other type of painting as a form of historical documentation. Genre painting can be briefly defined as paintings showing the mundane affairs in the lives of commoners, the luxurious life of the nobility, the agricultural activities of the peasant farmers and the sexual exchanges between men and women. The scenes depicted by Kim Hongdo and Shin Yunbok of the late Choson period belong to this category of secular painting.

When examining Kim's work, one can see a subtle shift in his subject matter from his early works to his later, more well-recognized works. In his early works, it is evident that he regarded landscapes and houses as important backgrounds. In addition, he often painted scenes that depicted the lofty and decorous lives of members of the aristocracy at their request. Later in life, however, Kim Hongdo developed his own, more refined, painting style by removing the landscape and houses from the background and thus drawing attention to the activities of the middle class people. Therefore, it is believed that Kim painted most of the genre scenes with the landscapes or the houses while in his younger years and those works focusing on men and women engaged in their daily activities against a largely plain background were painted later after his artistic recognition within the court. This change in style was probably necessitated by a need to effectively find a balance between social recognition and social reality.

Many paintings by Kim Hongdo portray women drawing water from village wells and

washing clothes in streams. Women of the lower classes worked on farms and in the family either as the main rice winners or as helpers of their families, in addition to their homemaking responsibilities. Thus lower class women, in comparison to the women from nobility, had some freedom in the outside sphere, yet their dual roles as homemakers and rice winners imposed great physical and psychological burdens. In Korea's Confucian society, only the lowest class people engaged in service related jobs and so people in service positions were not respected. The service oriented nature of a women's jobs reflects their inferior status. Women's leadership and autonomy in the public arena were unthinkable as such activities would require her to separate herself from her family. They had no individual selfhood in the western sense. Kim's paintings, however, showed the warm camaraderie of lower class women as they exchanged words, and relaxed by the waters or as they engaged in their work together. In his later works it was broadened to include his satirical views of the idle upper class men to whom lower class women had become objects of desire. It can be concluded that Kim Hongdo strived to create positive images of common working women depicting them as selfless figures, who despite their low status in society, worked hard to find a balance between their public and private spheres.

Kim's painting *Women Washing by a Stream* gives a new sense of importance to female figures by de-emphasizing the male figures and using mountainous landscapes that act as physical lines to create social distinctions. Spatially, the mountainous region creates a secluded and isolated area in which the viewer is given the rare opportunity to see the unguarded and relaxed faces of these women. It is a time when these women are separated from their grinding labour and outside the restrictive walls of the conservative Choson society. In addition, Kim places the upper class individuals on a more elevated level and the commoners on the lower

ground. He made it a point to contrast the positive image of a hard working woman to that of the negative image of an idle and lazy upper class man. The yangban who has no more to do than to sit behind a table and read books is contrasted against the female who has arduous and physically taxing responsibilities. The man is shown hiding behind a boulder, observing the women by the stream, washing their clothes. The man is shown to cover his face perhaps illustrating how he is divided between his natural desire to view the women and the Confucian principles that prevent him from doing such a thing openly. In addition, the bright and animated facial expressions of the female figures were distinctive to Kim Hongdo's scenes. The women have broad faces and high cheekbones which brings out a sense of life and vigor. Paintings in Choson usually depict women with demure, small faces, with closed eyes and passive expressions. One can conclude that Kim Hongdo endeavored to show these working women as figures that are full of life, capable of handling both their maternal domestic activities and the hard work outside their homes.

The iconic image of women washing clothes by a stream is continued by Shin Yunbok as well. The stream in Yunbok's painting, *Women by a Crystal Stream*, serves to separate the contrasting activities of the lower class women and the upper class men. However, in comparison to Kim's painting, Shin was much less subtle about his distaste with upper class men. In addition, Yunbok incorporates a greater sense of realism and naturalism by exposing the bodies of the women. The inclusion of nudity in itself exposes the painter's negative attitude towards the Confucianism. Unlike Kim's cheerful and animated women, Yunbok's females are shown to be more self contained, reserved, and fully concentrated in washing their clothes. A mood of tension is created by their averted eyes and hardened expressions. This mood is undoubtedly due to the

disturbing intrusion by the yangban. Once again there is a negative light casted towards the upper class man who is shown carrying a bow and arrow. He has the privilege and luxury of time that allows him to idle his time away with archery. In addition the scene has many smaller details that refer to Confucian hierarchy. The male entering the scene is placed at the forefront and is very obviously divided from the lower class women by a physical line drawn through the center of the frame. Also, the oldest female of the group is placed at the farthest point of the frame and in the right corner. Yunbok's unforgiving satire was not limited to upper class men, however. In his work *At the Stream of Water*, he created a negative image of the religious sector of the late Choson court. By explicit use of a young buddhist monk as the male intruder trying to watch the women bathing, he is suggesting once again that human behavior and desires are not properly addressed within Confucian or Buddhist philosophy. In addition it shows his critical attitude towards the hypocrisy and the corruption of the religious clergy in view of the anti-Buddhist policy.

In Shin Yunbok's painting, *Two Lovers Under a Moon*, a man and a woman are standing beside each other. The man and woman are shown to be having a rendezvous in a dark alleyway late at night. The man is clothed in a full length white robe and a large hat, indicating his status as a wealthy noble man; a yangban. Also, he is wearing a form of footwear made from leather which is embellished with light green decorative elements at the tips and heels. The woman is also from a wealthy upper-class family, her head is covered with a blue hood, and she is wearing a coat with purple bands on the collar and the hems of the sleeves. She is also wearing leather shoes. In contrast to the females found in his earlier paintings, this woman's face is only partly revealed and her eyes are averted seemingly hiding her embarrassment. Her demure expression

alone illustrates the fact that she is from nobility. Behind the couple is a stone wall which occupies a large portion of the frame. A short poem is written on the wall addressing the intimate exchange between a man and a woman. The short poem also includes a timestamp which indicates that the couple scheduled to meet together after the publicly enforced curfew has passed; at a time when everyone should be inside their respective homes. Under strict Choson society, males and females were to be separated at a very young age, except if they were family relatives. In addition, if an upper-class lady intends to travel outside her realm, she must not only travel under a hood but also bring a maid for assistance. In light of all these restrictions, the yangban and the upper-class lady are having an illicit reunion under the moonlight. Shin Yunbok aims to reveal the futility of these harsh rules and regulations under the Confucian system that defy innate human desires. Also, the explicit usage of an elite man and an elite woman also serves to show the hypocrisy of the nobility, those who created the regulations to begin with. And it also shows that the lower class people are not typically the ones that violate the codes of conduct.

Kim Hongdo's, *Threshing Grains*, is another painting that includes many anti-Confucian elements. The painting portrays six workers positioned latterly from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner of the frame. The three younger men thresh the bundle of rice plants, which a middle aged worker, positioned at the center of the frame, carries on his back. The oldest of the laborers, in the lower left corner, sweeps the floor as the younger workers scatter the grains. The workers' facial expressions carry a sense of joy and vigor that add to the festive mood of the harvest time. However, the bodies in contrast to the face expressions are distorted to show the laboriousness of their manual work. The togetherness and camaraderie between the

workers of all ages is felt through the realistic and overall circular positioning of the figures. Again, Kim intentionally sets aside the upper right hand area to draw a figure, an upper class man, reclining and enjoying the threshing scene at his own comfort. He has a long pipe in his mouth and jar of alcoholic drink placed in front of him. He may be the landlord because within the painting frame, he is given a considerable amount of space but is not highlighted as the central subject matter. The painter does not draw attention to this figure although his elevated position marks his higher social rank. Thus, this picture may convey a lazy and unproductive image of the aristocracy.

Tiling depicts the tasks involved in the construction of a building. Similar to *Threshing Grains* and his other paintings involving labor, Kim creates a clear distinction between the workers and the overseer, both by difference in their attire and spatial positioning. The lower class workers are depicted shirtless, hair disarray and with rolled up sleeves and pants. In contrast, the nobleman wears a hat and has a long robe that hangs over his pants, which signifies a higher social rank. The animated and spirited portrayals of the lower class that Kim Hongdo created in this scene convey the optimistic mood and vibrant yet simple lives of the laymen. The man that is standing has one of his eyes closed in an attempt to accurately measure the pillar that he is working on. He is occupied in a more advanced and technical work and therefore is shown to be dressed appropriately in white and differently from the other workers. He is not wearing shoes from made from straw so he can be considered a middle-class citizen. The carpenter working beside him is wearing straw shoes, an indication of lower status. The four barefoot men with the most expressive faces are from the lowest class. The man tiling the roof is playfully throwing a tile in the air. The painting once again captures the warm and simple joys of working

with fellow neighbors; something the overseer is not included in.

Kim Hongdo's *Weaving a Mat*, as the title suggests, shows a man weaving a straw mat on a loom while his wife spins the thread. The painting shows a hardworking and diligent lower-class family consisting of the father, mother, and son. The positioning and arrangement of the human figures is once again important when considering Kim's scenes. While the man is occupied in weaving a straw mat in the lower side of the frame, his wife spins thread on the left side. The son is seated away from his parents reading a large book out loud to himself. The spatial positioning of the figures reflects the Confucian hierarchy in a nuclear family; the man is portrayed in the front, the woman in the middle and the child in the distance. Even though a clear Confucian structure is shown in this painting, one can argue that the portrayal of the properly functioning family, where even the man works alongside the wife, casts a positive light on lower class families. Despite the laws and principles taught through Confucian texts that speak of the ideal man or the ideal wife, people travel outside of those teachings in order to survive and bring food to the table. Once again pointing to the faults and follies of the Confucian school of thinking.

During the Choson Dynasty, the civil service exams were held for wealthy noblemen because Confucian principles emphasized learning and education through traditional texts. The civil examinations required a high-degree of mastery of classical language and Confucian texts. Even though many yangbans spend the entirety of their childhood and adulthood studying these classical texts, they were still unable to become degree-holders. Therefore, the civil service examination created a hierarchy which sharply divided the Choson society into two groups: the

qualified and the unqualified. It was a fundamental need of the aristocratic elite to maintain this absolute division and to keep the common people ill-informed. By examining Kim Hongdo's painting *Slicing Tobacco*, one can see the clear division between the educated and the illiterate. A lower-class male laborer, spatially arranged in a lower level, is shown listening to the vocal readings from a fellow educated worker. In this scene, only the middle-aged man is shown to have literacy but the contents of the book are being shared with all four workers. For the lower class workers, the act of reading had little to do with education but more with entertainment. Kim perhaps aimed to reveal the ways in which the aristocracy institutionally oppressed the lower class. This form of oppression is also revealed in his painting, *Divination Sign*. In this painting, a woman walks past two shamans that are attempting to find people to perform their rituals on. The manner in which they are drawn indicates the marginalization of their work and their expressions show a sense of desperation. In the early 15th century, as Choson began officially adopting Confucian and Neo-Confucian ideologies they began to eliminate other forms of belief. To the ruling elite shamanism and mudangs who practice such rituals contradicted all their scholarly texts. To them, these indigenous belief systems posed a threat to their school of thought. Their suspicious attitude towards shamanistic spiritual work soon stemmed into a policy of oppression. They not only levied heavy taxes on shaman practices but also dismissed mudangs as uneducated social outcasts.

Lastly in one of Shin Yunbok's most famous paintings called *Sword Dance*, Shin portrays two kisaeng women, performing the sword dance, for a group of yangban men. Once again, the segregation of the Choson class system is clearly evident by the spatial positioning: the yangban occupies the upper left, the court musicians play their instruments laterally along the bottom, and

the kisaeng women perform their sword dance in the center. The painter was clearly a protestor against the social and religious standards of the time, striving to reveal the dividing realities of that time.

It is very interesting to compare and analyze the work of Kim Hongdo and Shin Yunbok because both of the artists expressed similar scenes in different ways according to their own distinct ideas of how the Choson society should be shaped. As the political situation changed, the mainstream philosophy also changed, and influenced genre paintings. When Kim Hongdo was at the peak of his career and socially recognized, Choson society was politically, economically, and culturally based on the Sirhak movement. A wave of reasoning and science blew past Choson. When Shin Yunbok was thriving artistically, political stability began to waver and the corruptions of the ruling elite was becoming more and more exposed to the public. The yangban were adamant on maintaining their power and the commoners remained impoverished. Because of the stark realism portrayed in genre paintings, they can be seen as historical records. One can analyze these paintings to achieve a better understanding of Choson's culture and overarching values. Both painters elevated the position of genre paintings during the Choson period to a high level. Because of the unforgiving manner in which they criticized Confucianism, their ability to express themselves in their own unique refined style, and lastly their immense appreciation for that which is oppressed, forgotten, and mundane, Kim Hongdo and Shin Yunbok can be considered the most influential and progressive painters of the Choson dynasty.

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