

THE SECULAR TASTE IN KOREAN “EIGHT VIEWS OF XIAO-XIANG” FOLK PAINTINGS

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1. Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang* painting was originally created by the Song dynasty painter Song Di, and according to Shen Gua's *Mengqi bitan*, the titles of its scenes are: *Geese Descending to Level Sand*, *Sails Returning from a Distant Shore*, *Mountain Market*, *Clearing Mist*, *River and Sky*, *Evening Snow*, *Autumn Moon over Dongting*, *Night Rain on Xiao-Xiang*, *Evening Bell from a Mist-Shrouded Temple*, and *Fishing Village in the Evening Glow*. The images were then transmitted to Korea and Japan in the Southern Song, remaining extremely important in the literature and art of China, Japan and Korea from the 12th to the 19th century.

Along with around a dozen other articles I have previously written, this article is part of my research on the Eight Views of Xiao-Xiang, in which I study its representation in the 19th century Korean folk paintings.

The term “Folk Paintings” was created by Yanagi Muneyoshi(1889-1961), a Japanese folk art researcher who was also a learned aesthetician. During their times, artists of the folk paintings were regarded as mere craftsmen, and they bore a social status way lower than that of the literati and court painters. Their works of art were relatively simple and unadorned, enriched with lively colours and often used to decorate screens and cupboards. The themes of the paintings include landscape sceneries, the nature, fables, religious depictions, and also illustrations that express the peoples' wish for a peaceful life, free of calamities.

Precisely due to its secularity and commercialized nature, artists of folk paintings bore a lowly social status and were never taken seriously by the academics and art collectors. In the past decade, however, things took a turn and collectors began to find it difficult to obtain such paintings. Universities, along with both privately and publicly funded art museums also started collecting these paintings. Amongst these organizations, the Choson Folk Art Museum houses the largest collection.

The Choson Folk Art Museum is located at Youngwol-gun, Kangwon-do of Korea. Over a span of more than twenty years, curator Oh Suck Hwan collected over three thousand folk art paintings. The museum took three years to build and attracts approximately forty thousand visitors per year, since its opening on the 29th of July, 2000.

Over the past eight years, the museum has been expanding gradually. Besides the exhibition of the 19th century folk art paintings on the first floor, there are also exhibitions of contemporary folk art paintings on the second and third floors, many of which were winning pieces in competitions. Viewing the exhibition in accordance from the first to the third floor leads one along the path of history, with the succeeding generations of folk art paintings unveiling before our eyes.

This essay will proceed to discuss the secular taste displayed in folk art paintings, based on the four categories of the 19th century “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” paintings, which are presently housed in the Choson Folk Art Museum.

2. *Xiao-xiang*, quoted from the title “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*”, refers to two rivers in the Hunan Province, namely the Xiao and Xiang rivers. The names of the rivers were often combined in poetry, used in reference to the entire region of Hunan, including the area north of *Dongting* Lake and even as far as the Yangtze valley and the southern parts of China.

The “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” was initially a theme used exclusively within the circle of literati and scholar-bureaucrats. It

expresses the misery suffered by an individual, whose obstacle-ridden political career forces him to leave his homeland; or it may tell the story of malicious political attacks that leaves him misunderstood by the ruler and therefore, sent to exile – all too similar to what was expressed in *Chuci*, by *Qu Yuan*. Such cries of unjust are common in traditional Chinese literature. The expression of misery through paintings of landscape sceneries is a form of art that first appeared at the end of the 11th century.

Contrary to what was described above, “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” can also convey the optimism as seen in the works of *Zhuangzi* and *Tao Yuanming*, in which their emotional detachment and pursuit of a Utopian vision can be observed. This, however, was not as well expressed in China as it was in Korea. In China, the imagery in “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” is mostly about the longing for their hometown and a sense of solitude. The Koreans, on the other hand, chose an entirely different approach. Rather than wallow in sorrow, their sanguinity is manifested in their yearning for paradise.

As such, it is understandable that the theme of “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” is absent in Chinese folk art. It lacked symbolic meaning among the commoners, as they were unable to identify with the sorrow experienced by the literati. In Korea, poetry and paintings on the “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” since the 12th century depict beautiful sceneries, which is congruent with the people’s hope for bliss.

Despite the stringent bureaucratic system and vast differences brought about by social stratification, the Korean commoners in the 19th century enjoyed economic prosperity that boosted their industries. They imitated music, theatre and art of the aristocracy, and at the same time, developed a different taste that was widely popular among themselves. This is the distinguishing characteristic of Korean folk paintings – a combination of refinement and a popular aesthetic taste.

3. Taking the paintings in the Choson Folk Art Museum as examples, the following points illustrate its differences from Chinese paintings.

Decorative purposes

The Chinese versions of “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” were typically painted on hanging scrolls, hand scrolls and folding fans. They were not meant for public display, but rather, for personal appreciation of art. Hanging scrolls were not necessarily displayed all year long; while folding fans were items that the literati brought around with them. Hand scrolls can be viewed by unrolling them towards the right, and then kept by rolling it up along the length of the table.

On the other hand, the Korean folk paintings on “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” were mostly painted on album leaves and screens, with the ones painted on screens making up the largest number. Album leaves, as its name suggests, can be viewed by opening them up like a book. Screens were used to separate parts of a room, or simply to furnish and decorate. Not only were they practical, they were also used for public display. As such, paintings on the screens are usually uncomplicated, accompanied by explicit themes and good visual effects, thus producing a beautiful piece of art.

Beautiful colours and rustic strokes

The Chinese “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” paintings were popular only among the literati and members of the imperial court. They were mainly painted with black ink and variation of colour was rare. Absorption of ink on the paper or silk was of great importance; if properly managed, it should produce great effects – especially subtleness that express meaning beyond words.

As Korean folk paintings emphasize more on its decorative purposes, a gorgeous array of contrastive colours were often used, and they represent the bliss and happiness of the commoners. The strokes applied were bold and unrefined, almost immature or even similar to those used in books of model paintings.

The originality and hybridity of the “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” titles

As one can tell from its name, the “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” paintings depict eight different sceneries. However, the Korean “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” folk paintings included titles

and content that was originally absent in the Chinese paintings, producing “Ten Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” instead.

Examples of the additional titles are “Crying Dragon in Huang-Lin” and “*Evening Cloud* of Cang-Wu”. They tell the story of *E-Huang* and *Nu Ying*’s undying love for their husband, Emperor *Shun*, which led them to suicide when he died in the *Cang-Wu* Mountains during his journey to the south. This is related to the belief that *Shun* Emperor was the ruler of the *Dongyi* people, and that the Koreans were of their descent. The Chinese “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” paintings also tell the story of *Shun* Emperor and his wives, but their emphasis, however, is on political harmony, rather than mythology.

There are also a few of the folk paintings which did not include all the eight sceneries in “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*”. To make up for it, paintings depicting Tang Poetry were added. *Li Bai*’s poem, “A Drink with the Recluse in the Mountains” is one example, with a part of the poem inscribed by the painting – “As I savour the wine and your heartwarming company, wild flowers blossom and, indulgingly, we down one cup after another.” There is also *Du Mu*’s poem, which says “In the midst of the sorrow, I ask for the way to a tavern and the young shepherd boy points to a distant village.” These paintings are indeed very different from the Chinese “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” paintings.

(4) A combination between the “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” and folk paintings

Besides the eight or ten subtitles that were altered from its traditional Chinese form, changes were also made to the content of individual “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” folk paintings.

For example, the folk painting “Autumn Moon over Dongting”, which was originally a part of the “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*”, has a phoenix painted into the picture, in addition to the elements that were already present - the moon, the *Dongting* Lake and the *Jun* Mountains. The phoenix was adapted from another Korean folk painting, called the “The Phoenix on a Chinese Parasol Tree”.

Some researchers believe that Koreans are descendents of the *Dongyi* people, and that the picture of a phoenix is a representation of the race. As the *Shun* Emperor was supposedly the ruler of the *Dongyi* people, it becomes apparent that the illustration of phoenixes in Korean palaces and the presidential residence today is a symbol of power and authority. Phoenixes rest on Chinese parasol trees, thus inspiring “The Phoenix on a Chinese Parasol Tree” painting.

In my opinion, the phoenix that was added into the “*Autumn Moon over Dongting*” painting was adapted from the term “The Red Phoenix Facing the Sun”. Quoting *Shanhaijing*, it says that “Phoenixes are born in the Red Cave of the extreme south.”, thus giving rise to the name “Red Phoenix”. And since the Red Cave faces the sun, it is apparent how the term “Red Phoenix Facing the Sun” obtained its name. The phoenix bears the imagery of the sun, and therefore, the phoenix and the sun is a common combination in Chinese folk paintings and paper-cut art works. Replacing the sun with the moon, which is well known for its reference to “Autumn Moon over Dongting”, thus gives us the exceptional “Autumn Moon over Dongting” painting.

4. In conclusion, the Korean “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” folk paintings had on one hand inherited the art of the original Chinese paintings, while on the other hand created a style of their own, after it was first introduced into the country in the 12th century. The Korean styled folk paintings are free and unrestrained; whether in form, brushwork, lines, colour and subtitles, they are very much dissimilar to the “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” paintings produced by Chinese literati.

Of all the paintings, the “*Autumn Moon over Dongting*” with a phoenix painted in it is exceptional. What was originally a sun was replaced with a moon instead. Not only does this preserve the significance of phoenixes in the Korean culture, it also incorporates the culture of the Chinese literati. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Korean “Eight Views of *Xiao-Xiang*” folk paintings are indeed an excellent combination of the literati’s refinement and the beauty of popular culture.

