

Western Influence on Korean Painting of the Late Chosŏn Period

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From the Three Kingdoms period on, Korean culture developed its uniqueness while receiving continuous stimuli and influence from continental Chinese culture; in turn, it had a significant impact on the development of Japanese culture. Viewed from the larger context of world culture, cultural exchange among the three East Asian nations presupposed a certain degree of homogeneity. However, the contact with the Western civilization and culture through Christianity in China beginning in the first half of the 16th century, and in Korea by way of China during the late 17th century, meant a clash of two quite different civilizations, Western and East Asian.

Such a "clash of civilizations," to borrow Huntington's term, can be discerned in the writings of the Chinese literati of the Ch'ing period and in those of their Korean counterparts of the late Chosŏn period, who took Western culture as a "shock". This paper examines the process of the reception of Western influence on Korean paintings of the 18th through the early 20th century before Korea was fully exposed to Western culture. Documentary evidence of contacts as well as actual works of art in which the Western influence is evident will be the main objects of examination.

From the beginning of the history of painting in the West and in East Asia, there existed a fundamental difference in what a painting should represent. Unlike in the West, where the aim of painting was to reproduce faithfully the outward appearance of figures or objects, that in East Asia was to capture the universal truth or spiritual aspects. In the Northern Sung period, this emphasis on capturing metaphysical concepts in painting developed into the theory of literati painting in which the painter's heaven bestowed talents which, coupled with his high social standing and scholarly achievements, were considered most important in producing a good painting. This basic approach to painting has governed Korean painting throughout its long history.

The cause of the "shock," that is, what was so drastically new to the Korean viewers, of the wall and ceiling paintings of the Jesuit Church in Yenching was their eye-fooling realistic representation of figures, animals, and other objects. The difference between the Western and East Asian painting methods can be defined in three different aspects: linear perspective, atmospheric perspective, and the depiction of the three-dimensionality.

Since contact with the West in China preceded that in Korea by about a century and a half, it is instructive to examine the initial reaction of the Chinese and see how the influence of Western painting took shape in the late Ming and early Ch'ing paintings. Pioneering research on this subject by such Western scholars as Michael Sullivan and James Cahill is introduced along with other recent publications on the subject in China, Korea, and Japan.

The first Western painting brought to Korea was the *Image of Christ*, which was included in the items Crown Prince Sohyŏn (1621-45) brought back from Yenching after his 8-year stay in the city from 1636 to 1644. His sudden death in the following year abruptly stopped further contact with Western art in Korea.

It was in the 18th century that the interest in Western art and culture was resumed. The main force behind it was the attitude of scholar-officials of the School of Practical Learning (*sirhak*) who visited Yenching as envoys to the Ch'ing court and witnessed the Western culture imported by the Chinese. Their travel diaries constitute the best sources of information on Korean reaction to Western culture at that time.

Other *sirhak* Scholars such as Yi Ik (1682-1764) and Chŏng Yak-yong (1762-1836) who had never visited Yenching also expressed their reaction to the new culture which they came into contact through books on Western geometry, science, and perspective translated into Chinese by Jesuit missionaries. They were also able to see Western paintings and engravings brought to Korea by the emissaries.

The following passage from Yi Ik's *Sŏngho Sasŏl* tells us a great deal about the contemporary situation.

Recently, most emissaries to Yenching have brought back Western paintings and hung them in the center halls of their homes. When looking at these paintings, one should close one eye and, with the other eye, stare at them for a long time so that the buildings and the walls reveal their true shape. Those who study these paintings in silence say, "this is due to the wonderful techniques of the painter. Because the distance between the objects is clearly described, one should look at the painting with only one eye." Even in China, this kind of painting never existed before.

Yi Ik also showed his interest in Western geometry and its relation to perspective drawings, as well as painting objects based on actual observation.

These days, I am reading Euclid's *Geometry* translated into Chinese by Matteo Ricci. There it says, "the function of geometry is to help represent on two dimensional surface objects such as cylinder and cubic columns in three dimensional appearance by correctly observing with one's own eyes and determining the distance, level, and the degree and by giving light and shade. Geometry also helps one to be precise about measurements of distances and things in order to represent true shapes. It enables one to see big from small representations, to see far from closer representations, and to see a ball from a circle because the convexity and concavity is indicated.

It should be noted that all these *sirhak* writers strove to find solutions to contemporary social and political problems from the knowledge based on history, geography, natural science, agriculture, and technology, rather than from abstract philosophical thoughts. With such basic attitude toward things in nature, it was natural for them to be receptive to the life-like realism of Western paintings.

Introduction to Korea of the Christian faith in the late 18th century also resulted in importation of the Western illustrated books and paintings from China. However, the severe persecution of Christianity by the Chosŏn court caused the destruction of all the material evidence from that time. Those remaining today in the Museum of Christianity at Sungsil University in Seoul mostly date from the 19th century.

None of the Western paintings which had been brought to Korea by emissaries to Yenching seem to have survived to date. However, scholars who visited Yenching such as Hong Tae-yong (洪泰永, h. Tamhŏn 1731-1783), Yi Ki-ji (이기지, h. Iram 1690-1722), Yi Tŏk-mu (이덕무, h. Ch'ŏngjangwan 1741-1793), Pak Chi-wŏn (박지운, h. Yŏnam 1737-1805) all expressed in their writings amazement upon seeing the wall and ceiling paintings in the Church in Yenching built and decorated by the Jesuit missionaries in the service of the Ch'ing imperial court.

The following is a passage written by Yi Ki-ji, the son of the Prime minister Yi I-myŏng under King Sukchong, who accompanied his father when I-myŏng went to Yenching in 1720, and left the "Record of Western Painting" (서양화기) in which he vividly described the wall painting in the Jesuit Church in Yenching.

On the wall of the Church, there is an image of Christ. One person is standing amidst the clouds wearing a red garment; several other persons appear and disappear in the clouds. Some of them are all naked, some exposing only the upper body, and still others stick out only their faces out of the clouds. Also there are people with two wings growing out of their bodies. Their eyes, eyebrows, mustaches, and hair all looked like those of living persons, their noses are high, their mouth, hands and feet, plump, and their garments hang loosely as if one could pull and bend. . . . At first, upon entering the hall and looking at the wall, it appeared that there was a big niche on the wall. It is filled with clouds and people, and I became dizzy with the illusions of ghosts and spirits which turned into phantoms. But upon closer examination, I realized that it was a painting on the wall. It is hard to say that human technique reached this level.

Also, the wooden members of the painted architecture cross one another creating shadows, corners, sharp edges, and spaces so that one can turn around the corner and hide in the space behind. . . There are myriads of birds, animals, fish, and insects, all drawn so precisely as if alive. Even without names written next to them, one can distinguish their kinds. One can almost dash to them and grab them in ones hands.

Sadly, these wall paintings are all but gone now, so we cannot determine the accuracy of these descriptions. However, there remains in a building called Chüanchin-chai (춘신채) in the northeastern corner of the Forbidden city, wall paintings and ceiling paintings which apparently date from the first half of the 18th century and presumed to have been done by Jesuit missionaries working with their Chinese assistants. These paintings show distinctive realistic renderings of flowers, birds, and architectural members with the application of geometric perspective.

Pak Chi-wŏn, in his famous literary piece, *Jehol Diary* (Yŏlha ilgi) recounted how, in amazement, he and his companions stretched out their arms and

pulled their heads back as if to receive the falling *putti*, or babies, from the cloud-shrouded ceiling of the church. Yi Tök-mu wrote that he could not distinguish the chained dog painted on the door of a church he visited from a group of living dogs seated in the shade below the door. To borrow their words, in the Western paintings they saw, the sky was painted blue, and the human figures looked alive and moving, as if trying to peep even into one's inner thoughts, and as if trying to whisper into their ears.

Korean paintings of the late Chosŏn period in which the influence of the Western painting techniques can be clearly discerned will be examined. Portrait paintings and other figure paintings, animal and bird paintings, landscape paintings, bookcase paintings, and the court documentary paintings all displayed a certain degree of Western influence in the use of chiaroscuro, linear and atmospheric perspectives, and the resulting sense of realism. *A Fierce Dog* by an unidentified artist shows a high degree of verisimilitude in the depiction of the dog's fur and a much greater sense of three-dimensionality than had previously been seen in Korean animal paintings. That is to say, some contemporary Korean paintings actually support the documentary evidence.

Works by court painters such as Kim Tu-ryang (김투양, 1696-1763) (fig. 72), Pyŏn Sang-byŏk (변상벽, 18th century), Kim Hong-do (김홍도, 1745-after 1806), or the *chung'in* (정인) painter such as Kang Hui-ŏn (강희원, 1738-before 1784), and the literati painters such as Kang Se-hwang (강세황, 1713-1791), Pak Che-ga (박제가, 1750-1805) (figs. 75, 76), Yi Ŭi-sŏng (이위성, 1775-1833), and Sin Kwang-hyŏn (신광현, 1813- ?) all showed the artists' varying degree of interests in Western painting techniques. Works by unidentified artists also display unmistakable traces of influence of the new techniques.

Although the increasing self-awareness and interest in things Korean on the part of the late Chosŏn scholars led to the development of true-view landscape painting (*chingyŏng sansu* (정경산수)) in the late 17th and the early 18th centuries, it should also be pointed out that the new trend in Korean landscape painting owed a great deal to the practice of the actual observation of nature on the part of the painters and to the realism of Western painting. The height of the development of true-view landscape painting in Korea exactly coincides with that of the Western influence on Korean painting.

Ch'aekkŏri [책고리], or the bookcase painting, which became in vogue since the beginning of the 19th century, shows an interesting case of the adoption of the linear perspective system. Documentary evidence informs us that Kim Hong-do also excelled in this genre. Although none of the paintings now remaining display perfect understanding of the Western geometric perspective system, some attributed to Yi Hyŏng-rok (이형록, active late 19th century) show a convincing rendering of space with shading and 'pseudo-geometric perspective.'

Court documentary paintings clearly show the tension between the aspiration for adoption of the new perspective system and the desire to maintain the traditional parallel perspective combined with the bird's eye view. Since the primary purpose of documentary painting is to record the visual facts of an event as precisely and clearly as possible, the application of the perspective system which induces the diminution of

figures and objects in space is sometimes deemed inappropriate. Therefore, even within one folding screen, each panel shows a different degree of adoption of Western perspective. Such a case is the 8-fold screen painting recording King Chǒngjo's (1777-1800) historic visit to his father's tomb in Hwasong in 1795. The last two panels (figs. 94, 95) do reflect a greater degree of Western influence in the use of both the linear and atmospheric perspectives while the other six panels still adhere to the traditional parallel perspective system.

Due to the re-emergence of the traditional literati painting in the mid-19th century, the Western influence seems to recede somewhat in the area of landscape painting. However, in all genres of paintings, the basic attitude of the direct observation of objects to be depicted seems to have taken root. For example, King Kojong (1863-1907) and his Crown Prince sat at least 50 times for the painters when their portraits were painted. This represents a phenomenally increased opportunity for the painters to observe the model directly compared to that of the earlier royal portrait painters for whom the kings sat only a few times.

Despite the initial enthusiasm on Western realism among scholars and painters in the early 18th century, it failed to radically change the traditional mode of painting in Korea. One can think of several reasons for this failure. First of all, the commitment to values of traditional painting, both in spirit and techniques, seemed an insurmountable barrier to most painters of the late Chosŏn period. Traditional respect for calligraphic brush-strokes which were considered to be the expression of the painter's personality seemed to have reasserted its strength over the need for realistic representation of the subject depicted.

Second, the waning of the Western influence in Chinese art of the post-Ch'ien-lung period (1736-1795), which resulted from the withdrawal of the Jesuit missionaries from the court, also seems to have had an indirect effect in Korea. It was also about this time that the first large scale persecution of Christianity, known as *Sinyu pakhae* (the persecution of the year *sinyu*, i. e., 1801) took place in Korea, wiping out traces of Western art and culture.

Third, with the exception of a few, a majority of Korean literati who wrote of the wonders of Western painting were not themselves painters. Their writings and the paintings they brought had a great impact on the contemporary art scene, to be sure. However, if more of them had been painters themselves, the situation might have been quite different.

Finally, many painters who initially showed positive responses to Western painting techniques were painters belonging to the court bureau of painting. Due to the fundamentally conservative nature of the court bureau, the painters, especially when they produced documentary paintings, had to adhere to the regulations of the court which allowed them little freedom.

At the end of the 19th century when the Chosŏn Kingdom began to have formal diplomatic relations with the Western nations, and after the Japanese annexation of

Korea in 1910, a new wave of influence of Western art came by way of Japan. After the end of the Second World War, many Korean artists went to Paris and to the United States to study Western art firsthand. In reaction to the flood of Western influence on Korean art in the 20th century, Koreans began to look back on the value of Korean traditional art once again. It was in 1966 that a group of Korean painters in their 20s and 30s formed the Association of Korean Painters (*Han'guk-hwa hoe* 한국화회). They also coined the term *Han'guk-hwa* (한국화), or Korean traditional painting. Prior to that time, traditional ink painting was simply called *Tongyang-hwa* (동양화), meaning oriental painting as opposed to Western painting. Therefore, the creation of the term *Han'guk-hwa* should be understood as a positive sign of the growing self-awareness on the part of the Koreans amid the influx of foreign cultures.