The Broken Link:
Chinese Painting Albums and Manuals in Late Chosŏn Korea (1700-1850)

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Trends in Eighteenth-Century Chosŏn
After a series of invasions by Japan and China between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Chosŏn Korea began to reorganize its economy and society, and it finally regained a level of stability and prosperity by century’s end. The population was growing fast, the economy had expanded to an unprecedented degree, and the rigid system of social hierarchy was also beginning to be challenged. As these changes swept society, there emerged simultaneously a number of artistic innovations. For students of Korean art history, the eighteenth-century carries special significance. It represents a point of divergence between old and new, between pre- and early modern, when original and unprecedented artistic expression suddenly burst on the scene and quickly became established as a major trend in the Korean art world.

This may be traced to a group of artists, including Chŏng Sŏn (1676-1759), Kang Hŭiŏn (1710-1764), and Ch’oe Puk (1721-1769), who established a genre of landscape painting that took real scenery as its primary motifs. (Figs. 1, 2) Prior to this so-called “true-view landscape” (Chin’gyŏng sansu,) landscape painting had principally derived from either Chinese monumental landscape or Zhe School, where mountains and rivers from imagination or established models were transmitted onto the picture screen. The new form instead delivered actual landscapes of Chosŏn, places where the artists themselves had visited in person. Next came a number of artists of the late Chosŏn period, who devoted their talents to recording images from the daily lives of various social classes. These included Yun Tūsŏ (1668-1715), Cho Yŏngsŏk (1686-1761), Kim Hongdo (b. 1745), Kim Tūksin (1754-1822), and Sin Yun-bok (b. 1758), all of whom created idiosyncratic paintings of agrarian labor, the cultured leisure of the literati class, scholar/courtesan romances, and humorous incidents of daily life.¹ (Figs. 3, 4) In addition, the serene and simple landscapes of Chinese literati taste were also popularized among late Chosŏn elites. Altogether these three genres of paintings have often been marked as characteristic of late Chosŏn art, and accordingly many scholars have endeavored to interpret their historical functions and meanings.

Previous scholarship has leaned heavily upon the political situation of the time, wherein Chosŏn elites began to recognize their own cultural superiority, a development brought on by the collapse of Ming China in 1644. In the absence of an heir to real Chinese tradition, Chosŏn took upon itself a new identity as “the last bastion of civilization.” As a result, Chosŏn artists turned their attention inward and sought programs for their art from among their own landscapes and people.² More recent scholarship, pointing out that both true-view landscape and genre paintings were also found in China and Japan of that era, have tried to understand this phenomena in light of a broader cultural matrix. However, in the process of seeking historical proofs to build their arguments, they have often over-emphasized and misinterpreted the role of late Ming culture (1550-1644) in eighteenth-

¹ An Hwi-jun (Ahn Hwi-joon), Han’guk hoehwa ui chŏnt’ong (Seoul: Munye Ch’ulp’ansa, 1988), 142-152 and 250-367; Kim Wonyong and An Hwi-jun, Sinp’an Han’guk misulsa (Seoul: Seoul National University, 1993), 281-308.
century Chosŏn. While problematizing certain interpretations made in the recent scholarship, this paper will offer alternative explanations of how and why late Ming Chinese cultural programs were adopted and reproduced in the early modern Korean art world.

**Late Ming Painting Albums and Manuals**

Recently, grappling with the impact of Chinese painting manuals and albums on late Chosŏn art has become a primary scholarly pursuit and a key interest in the field of Korean art history. For example, in a painting by Chŏng Sŏn, we find an undeniable reference to a motif from one Chinese painting manual, *Jiēzǐyuàn huāzhuān* (The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting), which was initially published in 1679. (Figs. 5, 6) The general pose and size of the standing figure as well as the shape and angle of the pine tree he holds onto, strongly suggest that Chŏng Sŏn, the eighteenth-century Korean master artist, consulted this Chinese model. In addition, it was not Chŏng Sŏn alone who consulted Chinese publications. His student, Sim Sajōng (1707-1769) copied illustrations from a Chinese album, *Gushi huapu* (Master Gu's Painting Album).³ (Figs. 7, 8) Here, Sim has condensed the horizontal span to a square format; yet, tall trees fronting hills, an expanse of water, distant mountains, and the truncated mountain top on the left side of the screen makes it difficult to deny the link between these images. What is interesting is that Sim did not try to hide his source material; instead, he announced that he had copied from such books in his paintings’ colophons.⁴ This suggests the unique status of Chinese art books in the early modern Korean art world. The example of literati master artist, Yun T'usŏ (1668-1715) provides a fair understanding of their function and meanings. As the eighteenth-century art critic, Nam T'ae-ŭng (1687-1740) related,

Yun T'usŏ did not know about painting, nor had he received any lessons. [However] when he was still a boy, he accidentally saw *Gushi huapu* and *Tongshi huapu*. Thenceforth, he was devoted to mastering the programs of these books by copying every detail until his paintings would exactly match those in them.⁵

It is hard to believe that Yun T'usŏ practiced only with these books and had no other help. Still, the bottom line is he used the Chinese books as legitimate guidebooks for the practice of art.

Furthermore, manuals and albums were consulted as a reliable source of information about artists and their work. After appreciating the Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) album owned by his colleague Ch'oe Han'gyŏng, Hŏ Mok (1595-1682) left following colophon:

> During the Tianqi year (1621-1627), I once saw the *Gushi huapu* and learned that Wen Zhengming's brushwork is exquisite and his poetry, calligraphy, and paintings are all superb enough to be cherished. It has been a few decades since Gu's album was lost during the wars. I wished I could see Wen's works in Chosŏn [again]. Finally, I found one in Ch'oe's collection.⁶

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³ Regarding *Gushi huapu*'s impact on Chosŏn, see Song Hye-kyŏng, “*Gushi huapu* wa Chosŏn hugi hwadan,” (MA Thesis: Hongik University, 2002).

⁴ In a painting titled “Samyang kaet'aeto,” Sim left a colophon reading “In emulation of *Gushi huapu*.” In another painting of his, “Sansŏng ponapto,” now housed at Pusan Municipal Museum has a colophon written by Kang Sehwang (1713-1791). It says, “The painting of “a Mountain Monk Amending his Robe” is [originally found at] Jiang Yin’s work in *Gushi huapu*. Here, Sim Sajōng’s rough sketch delivers its meaning and shape. This is quite amazing.”

⁵ “Yun Tu-sŏ” in Nam T'ae-ŭng, *Ch'ŏngjak hwasa*. The copy of *Gushi huapu* Yun used is housed at his family collection in Haenam, South Korea.

The manual’s small size, simplified brushwork, and lack of any color, since it was produced in woodblock print format, all seem to suggest a critical limitation for displaying the true quality of the paintings by this sixteenth-century Chinese artist. (Fig. 9) But Hồ Moku recognized Gu’s album as a legitimate resource for learning the paintings of this specific Chinese master.7 This record also testifies to the fact that leading critics in late Chosŏn recognized the merit of Chinese painting manuals and albums as authentic and normative media for artistic evaluation.

In addition, the print media consulted by Korean artists were not limited to painting albums and manuals. Illustrations in tour guides, local gazetteers, and daily-use encyclopedia (Riyong leishu) were also appropriated by late Chosŏn artists. For example, Yun Tusŏ’s son, Yun Tŏkhŭi (1685-1715), consulted a Chinese encyclopedia, Sancai tuhui (Collected Illustrations of the Three Realms), for a painting of the Daoist figure “Zhongli Quan.”8 (Figs. 10, 11) Works that carried images of actual landscapes in China, in particular, Sancai tuhui (1607), Haijing qiguan (1609), Mingshuantu (1633), and Taiping shanshuitu (1648), have been recognized in recent research as sources of inspiration and reference that led to the emergence of Korean true-view landscape painting.9 Accordingly, a number of late Chosŏn artists were noted for having consulted Chinese painting manuals and albums. Those names include Yun Tusŏ, Chŏng Sŏn, Cho Yŏngsŏk, Sim Sajŏng, Kang Sehwang (1712-1791), and Kim Hongdo, most of whom became innovators in Chosŏn art in terms of new styles and subject matter.10 It appears that every genre of late Chosŏn painting, whether landscape, figure, or bird-and-flowers, refers to forms of expression adapted from Chinese sources.11

Art historians seem to be competing to find more and more examples of just such cultural transmission. To a degree, this line of inquiry has been productive for recognizing and promoting Chinese print media as a legitimate part of Korean art historical research. However, in the process, they have tended to over-simplify and so misinterpret the mechanisms of cultural exchange. I would argue that, perhaps counter-intuitively, the Chosŏn artists’ active use of Chinese manuals actually suggests a complicated relationship between the two cultures. Things were not as simple as they may appear.

Rethinking the Evidence
Critical in the study of painting manuals is the discrepancy in their readerships between early modern China and Korea. In this regard, one of the most discussed publications, Gushi huapu, also known as Lidai minggong huapu, provides useful clues. Compiled by a minor court painter, Gu Bing (fl. 1594-1603), and printed by the commercial publisher Shuangguitang of

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7 Another example of this kind is found in a note left by Ch`oe Yŏng-sŏk. It reads, “The lovingly lustrous painting of Suokchŏng [by Chŏng Sŏn] carries the brushwork of Jing Hao’s (c. 855-915) painting in Gushi huapu. The work of “Wŏltan” has the sense of inward distance as in Li Cheng’s (919-967) painting. “Hwasŏng apŏ-ri” is simple and elegant as the Wen Zhengming painting in my nephew’s collection.” Original text is quoted in Ch`oe Wan-su, “Kyŏmje Ch'ın'gyŏng sansuwha ko,” Konsong Munhwawon 35 (1988): 44.
Hangzhou in 1603, it was a collection of biographies and paintings of 106 artists up to the late Ming period. This publication was to provide its readers with a summary history of Chinese master artists and their works. As Robert Hegel has noted, such books were guides for the relatively uninitiated viewer of paintings, from which he could absorb a modicum of art historical knowledge. In this regard, Gushi huapu was a commercial venture designed to be marketed to the rapidly growing reading public.

The shoddy program of Gu Bing’s album has already been discussed by many modern scholars. Editorial errors are found throughout the text and also in its pictorial attributions. Its textual contents are not at all authentic or original; instead, they are mostly copied from Xia Wenyan’s (act. 14th c.) Tuhui baojian of 1365. Many of the illustrations in the volume do not match the styles and subject matter attributed to the painters it presents. For example, Shen Zhou (1427-1509), a literati master painter celebrated for his composed and idyllic landscape style, is associated with a painting of flowers and insects (Figs. 12, 13) while a painter from the Wei/Jin period, Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344-406), is introduced with a poetic and delicate landscape of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1270), a style that appeared and became popular almost a thousand years after his death. (Figs. 14, 15) These inaccuracies suggest that the book was created for middling or aspiring urban art hobbyists of late Ming China. It was highly unlikely that any leading scholars of the time, such as Dong Qichang (1555-1636) or Chen Jiru (1558-1639), would have accepted this book as a legitimate reference for developing art historical discernment. On the contrary, some of these books were criticized for their pandering to low and philistine taste.

Korean scholarship seems to agree that this album was introduced to Choson in the early seventeenth-century, thus soon after its publication. I do not dispute the dating of its introduction, however, one of the primary grounds for this dating needs further discussion. The album has two prefaces, one composed by a rather shadowy figure, the other written by Zhu Zhifan (1548-1626), a member of the highest degree-holding elite, who was also famed for his painting skill. He visited Choson in 1605. Although it was primarily for a diplomatic mission, he also earned a fortune on that trip by trading his own paintings and calligraphy for lucrative furs and ginseng. Historians of Korean art understand this visit to have been the earliest occasion of the Gushi huapu’s introduction to Choson. As author of one preface to the manual, they claim, he must have brought this manual with him. However, this is an absurd claim, for the following reasons.

Furthermore, the book could have functioned, as Craig Clunas has explained, as a “buyer’s guide” to help readers tell genuine paintings from false attributions. See Craig Clunas, Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 139-146 and Robert Hegel, “Painting Manuals and the Illustration of Ming and Qing Popular Literature,” The East Asian Library Journal, 10, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 57-58.


J.P. Park, “Ensuring the Public Eye: Painting Manuals of Late Ming China (1550-1644) and the Negotiation of Taste,” (PhD Dissertation: University of Michigan, 2007), Chapter II and “The Publisher’s Dilemma: The Cultural Discourse of Book Illustration in Late Ming China,” Chinese Historical Review, 26, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 25-49.

Song Hye-kyoung, 61-73.


This was first suggested by Hô Yong-hwan, “Gushi huapu yôn’gu,” Sôngsinyônu gu nommunjip 31 (1991): 281-302.
Late Ming publications typically list the names of famous scholars as their editors or collators; but it often seems that such attributions are false. The names of two acclaimed writers of the time, Chen Jiru and Li Zhi (1527-1602), are listed as contributors in the prefaces of dozens of late Ming books, but these men can actually be associated with only a very small number of these publications. Both Gu Bing and Zhu Zhifan lived in Beijing around 1600. Thus, it is not impossible that Zhu did actually write the preface. As only a minor court painter, Gu Bing would have lacked the social and cultural prestige needed to promote the work so he may have needed to include a preface by an established cultural luminary. Again, considering the book’s low quality, it is hard to imagine that Zhu Zhifan would have wished to have his name associated with the production of Gu’s album; thus, I am skeptical that he brought this manual to Choson during his visit.

Then, how are we to understand the eagerness of Choson’s leading artists and critics to seek out this album? None of Choson master artists and literati members who commented on this book appears to have been aware that Gushi huapu and other illustrated art books were popular publications aimed at the urban middle class or social upstarts in China. And this is not an isolated example of a cultural gap. The primary concern of late Ming artists and critics, the debate on Dong Qichang’s Southern/Northern School theory, did not figure in the writings of Choson literati until almost a century later. As the modern scholar Yi Song-mi has suggested, Choson elites’ understanding of Chinese art and theory was mostly limited and fragmentary until the late eighteenth century. In short, the active interest of elite Choson artists in late Ming Chinese manuals suggests Choson Korea’s lack of understanding of China. The so-called Chinese “influence” in early modern Korean art is thus not as straightforward or unidirectional as it has described in recent studies.

Cult of the Late Ming
The critical problem with this “influence” based analysis is its disregard for the historical peculiarities of a given time and place; thus it tends to interpret any changes in a society as a consequence of outside forces. This over-extension of “influence” is definitely a fixture in recent scholarship of later Korean art.

During the eighteenth century Choson Korea was able to fully recover from the devastations caused by consecutive wars of the first half of the seventeenth century. The state successfully reinvigorated agriculture, which sustained the fast-growing population and fostered commercialized agriculture and trade in foodstuffs. Prosperity brought stability.

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10 Craig Clunas, Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 110. See also Frederick Mote and Hung-lam Chu, Calligraphy and the East Asian Book (Boston: Shambala, 1989), 189-192.
20 Craig Clunas, Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 139-140.
21 Furthermore, Yi Ho-min (1553-1634), the minister of Rites, visited Beijing in 1608 and found a copy of Gushi huapu at a bookstore. His note does not indicate any previous occasions when he saw the album. During Zhu’s visit to the Choson court, Yi was the official who oversaw diplomatic protocols for Zhu. Thus, if Zhu actually brought this album to Choson, he must have been the first one who had access to it. For Yi’s note on Gushi huapu, see Yi Ho-min, “Hwabo kyöbal,” in Obongrip 8.
22 Cho Yong-sok, Kwanjago-go 3.
economic development, and further urbanization in the major cities. In the meanwhile, an emerging urban elite began to turn their attention to cultural activities.

As recent scholarship has pointed out, late Chosŏn was the time when literati cultural activities, such as poetry, painting, music, and tourism, were taken up by people outside the traditional elite class; they extended to the larger urban populations and even the female quarters. Many of the middle-class technocrats who worked as official translators, medical doctors, and government clerks, whose positions were often hereditary, used their upgraded economic and social status to enjoy artistic leisure activities. Among them, highly talented writers and painters were almost equally recognized as members of the literati class. Other members of the middle class, such as Hong Setae (1653-1725), Yi Onjin (1740-1776), and Kim Kwangguk (b. 1725), built large collections of art while associating with leading literati of the time. The fashion of art collecting became so popular that soon it even reached commoners and young boys in rural areas. The democratization of artistic leisure, however, was not looked on favorably by everyone. Some prominent cultural critics noted that most people pursued the fame and fashion of art without genuine interest or understanding.

Historians of Korean art also interpret these new cultural developments as an outcome of the impact/transmission of late Ming culture. Most of the trends popularized in eighteenth-century Chosŏn, such as holding literati gatherings, the construction boom in private gardens, art collecting, and the popularization of art beyond the traditional elite class, have also been recognized as the types of cultural progress made during the late Ming period. This scholarly observation, although it recognizes the historical parallel between Chinese and Korean societies, does not push the analysis far enough. Their claim suggests the cultural changes of late Chosŏn were mostly brought on by the culture of late Ming. But the similarity between early modern China and Korea was not the consequence of cultural transmission; instead, it must be understood as overlap in the historical development of these two countries as they moved toward a recognizably modern form of society.

The social situations of late Ming and late Chosŏn society were undeniably similar. In late Ming, the increased population, rapid urbanization, and economic growth also provided the foundation for a fluid and flexible status system, free of legal barriers to status mobility. Traditional status system was longer in play and this is why and how “alternative” qualifications to sustain one’s claim to elite status were so avidly pursued in late Ming society. Cultural activity, then, was thought of as a repertoire that provided its practitioners with the means to create the sense of superiority and maintain social networks which set them.

24 Yi Se-yŏng, “Chin’gyŏng sidae ūi kyŏngje,” Kansong Munhwawon 50 (1996): 92-101. Starting from 1650s, the population began to re-increase with an unprecedented speed. By 1680, Chosŏn had recovered the population of the pre-war period of 14 million and by the end of eighteenth-century, it reached its apex of over 18.5 million.


28 Song Hŭigung, “Chosŏn hugi ūi yaeo ahoedo,” Misulsu hokpo 24 (2005): 63; Chang Chin-Sung, “Chosŏn hugi Sain P’ungsok’wa wa Yŏga munhwawon,” Misulsu nokdon 24 (2007): 267-272. However, a group of modern literary scholars in Korea have produced outstanding observation. For example, An Dae-hwi has aptly argued that there was no direct link between late Ming xiaopin and late Joseon so-pum literature.
apart from the majority of population. For the emerging urban elites in early modern China, art collecting provided a channel by which they could transform their monetary power and status into cultural and thus social prestige.

The social structure of late Chosŏn was very much like this. The rigor of the traditional hierarchical system in particular was seriously challenged. The top echelon of society, the yangban class, was losing its prestige as an elite status. Statistics show that in the late seventeenth century yangban represented only 8.3% of the population in Taegu, but that number soared to 34.7% in the late eighteenth century, and even to 65.5% by the mid-nineteenth century. Then, could it be mere coincidence that in this era of Korean history art collecting became established as a popular leisure activity among urban elites? Just as happened in late Ming China, art became a special and alternative device by which a prosperous late Chosŏn urban public could display thus claim their cultural superiority.

In sum, the structural parallels between these two societies definitely allow us to approach cultural phenomenon of late Chosŏn art from a new angle. When we recognize a pattern of development like that of Chinese society in Korean history, we need not interpret it to be the result of socio-cultural exchange. The scholarly model of Chinese “influence” has dominated the field of Korean art history for too long. We have reached a point where we should reassess it, before it becomes an unquestioned assumption in the study of the entirety of the development of Korean art.

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32 Late Chosŏn literature also shows very close affinities to that of the late Ming: pursuit of originality, popularization of informal essays, and challenges to traditional styles. Regarding these similarities, however, An Tae-hoe warns against interpreting them as the result of the cultural impact of late Ming onto Chosŏn literary field. See An Tae-hoe, “Yi Yong-hyu sop’um-mun ūi mihak;” 18-segi Chosŏn chisigin ū munhwa ūisik (Seoul: Hanyang University, 2001), 229.
Figures

(Fig. 1) Kim Hongdo, *Mountain Kâmgang*, 1734.

(Fig. 2) Kang Huiŏn, *Inwang Mountain*, 18th c.
(Fig. 3) Kang Hŭn, A Literati Gathering, 18th c.

(Fig. 4) Kim Hongdo, A Wash place, late 18th c.
(Fig. 5) Chông Sôn, A Scene from "Tao Yuanming Returning Home," 18th c.

(Fig. 6) “Lingering by a solitary pine, reluctant to leave,” Jiezi yuan huazhum, 1679.
(Fig. 7) Sim Sajong, Landscape in style of Ni Zan (1301-1374), 18th c.

(Fig. 8) Ni Zan (1301-1374), Gushi huapu, 1603.
(Fig. 9) Wen Zhengming (1470-1599), *Gushi huapu*, 1603.
(Fig. 10) Yun Tōkhū (1685-1715), Zhongli Quan, 1732.

(Fig. 11) "Zhongli Quan," Sancai tuhui 三才圖會, 1607.
(Fig. 12) Shen Zhou, *Gushi huapu*, 1603.

(Fig.13) Shen Zhou, *Solitary Angler on a Wintry River*, 1484.
(Fig. 14) Gu Kaizhi, *Gushi huapu*, 1603

(Fig. 15) attributed to Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344-406), *The Nymph of the Luo River*. 