

Burglind Jungmann

Some characteristics and peculiarities of commemorative paintings of the Chosŏn dynasty

The very special genre of visual representation of *ŭigwe* 儀軌, records of court events of the Chosŏn dynasty, has been thoroughly explored by my distinguished colleagues, Professors Yi Sŏng-mi and Park Jeonghye, who have done the most extensive and in-depth research of both the existing visual and textual material. I would like to use my role as someone who is lesser acquainted with all the details and aspects of the material, my ‘outsider role’ so to speak, to raise some issues that distinguish this genre within the context of Chosŏn court painting and of East Asian conventions. *Ŭigwedo* 儀軌圖 are a type of ‘documentary painting’ (*kirokhwa* 기록화), that is, they were produced as a document of a certain event that was to be commemorated, and this character of ‘documentation’ and ‘commemoration’ was in fact the reason why we still have a fairly large body of such works. Rather than being collected as object of art, *ŭigwedo* were kept as records, just like historical texts. I would therefore like to extend the scope of my investigation a little and include other documentary paintings, done for the purpose of commemoration, which are not necessarily linked to *ŭigwe* records, but share similar characteristics and peculiarities. Let me first introduce some of the different types, formats, and contents of commemorative paintings, and the contexts of their creation. From there I would like to move on to the question of peculiarities and conventions of *ŭigwedo* which, in my mind, can only have developed within a certain framework of agency and function that was particular to the Chosŏn court.

Because we have lost most of the visual material of the 15th and 16th century it is uncertain whether paintings related to *ũigwe* were produced at the early Chosŏn court. There are, however, strong indications that the whole genre of commemorative painting grew out of gathering paintings of officials (*kyehoedo*, 契會圖) (figs.: two 16th c. examples to which I will come back later). As Professor Ahn Hwi-joon has found in his early groundbreaking research, the convention of gatherings of high officials started in the Koryŏ dynasty and texts inform us that paintings portraying the participants were also produced at the time.¹ Yoonjung Seo has demonstrated in her study of commemorative paintings commissioned by the Andong Kwŏn family that commemoration of court celebrations may have been inspired by this lineage in order to regain and solidify their power during the reign of King Sukchong.²

There is a very obvious relationship between text and image. In most cases the common characteristic element – which allows us to group them *kyehoedo* and *ũigwedo* into the genre of ‘documentary’ or ‘commemorative’ painting – and the most important part of all these works is the list of names and titles of high officials attached to the painting. Although the correspondence between text and image is a long-held tradition in East Asian painting, the case of Chosŏn commemorative painting is particular in that we do not have a ‘poetic’ but a ‘bureaucratic’ text here. In the case of hanging scrolls, the list is placed underneath the painting. On screens we usually find it on the right-hand side, on the last panel (fig: I’m showing

¹ Ahn Hwi-joon, ‘Literary Gatherings and their Paintings in Korea’, *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* VIII (1995), pp. 85-106.

² Seo Yoonjung (Sŏ Yunjŏng), ‘17 segi huban Andong Kwŏn-ssi ũi kinyŏmhoehwa wa Namin ũi chŏngch’i hwaldong’, *Andonghak yŏn’gu* XI (2012), pp. 261-296.

you an early example, *Gathering of Elders for Kwŏn Taeun*, d. 1690, and a rather late one *Banquet for Queen Dowager Sinjŏng*, d. 1868, the earlier a *kyehoedo*, the later an *ŭigwedo*). We also have horizontal scrolls, such as, Han Sigak's *Special National Examination for Applicants from Northeastern Provinces* (fig. with text) but they are comparatively rare. In yet another format, the album, it is placed on a separate sheet of paper. If we do not have any other textual information, these lists provide us with the names of the most important people involved in the event. In the case of the gathering of high officials we can be quite certain that the actual participants are listed. Since most of them had some standing in society and their biographies are known in some detail, these lists allow us to roughly date the painting when comparing their titles and the offices they worked in.

For court events that required special ceremonial, such as the birthday banquet for a queen, *ŭigwe* give us much more information, for instance, dates and details of the preparation of the event and of all the offices and people that were involved, including the names of court painters. Most interestingly, *ŭigwe* also contain illustrations of the place of the event and of details, such as the garments of the participants and the decoration used, or the dances performed. I am showing you woodblock-printed illustrations from *Mujin chinch'an ŭigwe* 戊辰進饌儀軌, *Ceremonial Record for a Banquet of the Year Mujin for Banquet for Queen Dowager Sinjŏng*, directly corresponding to the screen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (figs.), an illustration of Kangnyŏnjŏn 康寧殿, the hall in which the event took place (fig.), and images of the dances performed and the flower arrangements and musical instruments used (figs.). As in the case of the gatherings one might expect that all the participants are listed but this is not the case: the highest members of the royal family, Queen Dowager Sinjŏng

(Sinjǒng Wanghu 神貞王后) herself, King Kojong 高宗 and his father Hǔngsǒn taewǒngun 興宣大院君 are not mentioned. The list rather provides us with the names, titles, and offices of the highest officials who were in charge of organizing the ceremonies. It again corresponds to the list in the *ǔigwe* (figs.: lists on the screen and in the *ǔigwe*).³ The extant screens recording a much more important event in Chosǒn history, King Chǒngjo's *The Royal Visit to the City of Hwasǒng* in 1795, does not provide this kind of list, but we do have a corresponding *ǔigwe* (*Wǒnhaeng ǔlmyo chǒngni ǔigwe* 園幸乙卯整理儀軌) that gives information on the participants, the individual festivities, and the painters.⁴ Usually a certain number of such screens of different sizes were produced to be distributed to various government offices and individuals. Therefore several similar screens and also some separate panels, fragments of screens, are extant. Thus, apart from the close link between text and image, there are two other important characteristics of Chosǒn commemorative painting, the production of multiple copies and the collaboration of court painters.

There are also different types of commemorative paintings in terms of contents. Some of them show the actual scene of the event, others relate to the event in more allusive way, by showing 'ideal' landscapes. For the paintings of gatherings of high officials I am showing you again the two early hanging scrolls: *Gathering of Government Officials at the Fern Court* and *Gathering in the Hall of Literary Studies*. In hanging scroll on the right, we can see the Hall of Literary Studies, Tǒksǒdang, on the banks of the Han River. In contrast, the landscape on the left does not exist

³ For further information see Burglind Jungmann, 'Documentary Record versus Decorative Representation: a Queen's Birthday Celebration at the Korean Court', *Arts Asiatiques* LXII (December, 2007), pp. 95-111.

⁴ Park Jeong-hye (Pak Chǒnghye), *Chosǒn sidae kungjung kirokhwa yǒn'gu* (Seoul: Ilchisa, 2000), pp. 295 ff, the painters listed are Kim Hongdo, Ch'oe Tǔkhyǒn, Kim Tǔksin, Yi Myǒnggyu, Chang Hanjong, Yun Sǒkkǔn, Hǒ Sik, and Yi Inmun, all painters-in-waiting at the Kyujannnggak (303).

but the scroll shows a generic composition following the style of the famous 15th century court painter An Kyŏn, a formula that was very popular in the 16th century. As examples of *ũigwedo* we have already seen the *Royal Visit to Hwasŏng* and the banquet screen for Queen Dowager Sinjŏng as representations of the real event, and there are many other examples, but in contrast, there is also *King Hyŏnjong's Trip to Onyang for a Hot Spring Cure in 1667* (fig.), that strongly reminds us of compositions based on the Tang painter Wang Wei's (王維, 699–759) (now lost) depiction of his country retreat, the *Wangchuan Villa* 輞川圖. Another example is *King Kyŏngjong's Selection of Government Officials in 1721* (fig.). This is an interesting painting because it relates to a real event, as the list of participants proves, but bears a theme rooted in Chinese tradition and popular all over East Asia: the gathering of the Orchid Pavilion (Lanting) of the famous Chinese calligrapher Wang Xizhi (王羲之, 303–361) and his friends celebrating a spring festival. It follows the familiar iconography with most of the participants sitting alongside a stream and playing a drinking game of floating cups. In the pavilion on the right we usually find Wang Xizhi himself watching the scene from an elevated position. Here, however, the seat in the pavilion is empty, a peculiarity, to which I will come back later (circle). Another interesting detail is the simple depiction of a hall on the first panel, which apparently represents the place of the event (circle). There are tiny figures placed in the hall, a detail which is unfortunately hardly discernible in this illustration. It appears as if in both types of commemorative paintings, those of gatherings of high officials and of events involving the royal family we can find both, ideal and real scenes.

In this respect, the screen of *Gathering of Elders for Kwŏn Taeun*, dated 1690, is particularly important, because it amalgamates both types of iconography. Whereas we see Kwŏn Taeun

and the other participants sitting together in a pavilion, as if it were the real place, their surroundings resemble that of a fairy land: we see a Chinese garden setting with a terrace embraced by a carved balustrade, garden rocks with peonies, a banana tree, and female servants clad in Chinese costume. The surrounding landscape is similarly pieced together from elements of ideal landscapes.

From this several questions arise: was the choice between the real or an ideal scene for a commemorative painting a free, random choice of the person who commissioned the painting? Or was it governed by the purpose of the screen? Or do we have a certain development over time, for instance, from paintings that show ideal scenes to those of real scenes? Our example of ideal and mixed scenes, *King Hyōnjong's Trip to Onyang for a Hot Spring Cure* (1667), *Gathering of Elders for Kwōn Taeun* (1690), and *King Kyōngjong's Selection of Government Officials* (1721) all date to the latter half of the 17th and to the early 18th century, whereas the depiction of real scenes seems to have gained more ground in the late 18th through early 20th centuries.

An interesting case, showing that very different kinds of screens can relate to the same event, are screens commissioned in relation to the illness and recovery of a crown prince, later to become Emperor Sunjong (1874-1926, r. 1907-1910), who contracted small box in late 1879.⁵ Two extant screens show the event in the familiar format of a court documentary, similar to the *Banquet for Queen Dowager Sinjōng* (fig.: Kodaie example). However, a screen of the *Ten Symbols of Longevity* has also been preserved that includes a list of officials, mostly physicians

⁵ Pak Ponsu was able to verify the date and circumstances of the screen through historical documents, see her 'Origōn taehakkyo pangmulgwan sojang sipchang saengbyōngdo yōn'gu', in *Kogung Munhwa* II (2008), pp. 11-38.

who were responsible for the young prince's recovery. The two documentary screens were created for the official celebration of the crown prince's recovery in 1879. They give a record of the event, list a group of high court officials, and show the tiny throne of the five-year old prince – who is, of course, invisible – in front of a screen of the Ten Symbols of Longevity. The *Ten Symbols of Longevity* (fig.) screen can be dated to 1880; the physicians commissioned it in commemoration of their own successful work.⁶ Due to the research done by Pak Ponsu we know that the queen sponsored several celebrations but it is unclear whether she commissioned the screen in order to thank the doctors or whether they themselves were the patrons of the screen and commissioned it in relation to a celebration, or as a memento of their successful work.

Let me summarize the characteristics of Chosŏn commemorative paintings seen so far before I start to look at more peculiar aspects. They were commissioned from early on by groups of high officials, privately or in their official functions, as 'documents' to commemorate certain events in their lives. These 'documents' were kept in the family in order to demonstrate the high standing of a family member to later generations. We have indeed more evidence of commemorative paintings than of other paintings genres of the early Chosŏn dynasty, a period of which a vast amount of visual material has been lost, due to the importance they were given within the social structure that emphasized the lineage and the close relationship between education and high social standing. Even when it comes to proper *ŭigwedo*, such as the screen for Queen Dowager Sinjŏng's sixtieth birthday (fig.), the screen gives evidence of the high

⁶ Pak Ponsu, 'Origŏn taehakkyo pangmulgwan sojang sipchang saengbyŏngdo yŏn'gu', in *Kogung Munhwa* II (2008), pp. 11-38.

officials who were involved rather than focusing on the person who is honoured. This is, of course, another indication of how strong bureaucrats were at the Chosŏn court.

The documentary character of these scrolls and screens also overwhelms the 'art' character of the paintings. We seldom find evidence of the painters who produced the painting, and the set iconographies and restricted court style leave no room for any individual traces of the artists' brushes. Like other large court projects most commemorative paintings were done in collaboration. In another study, I have emphasized the extremely low standing of court painters within the official hierarchy. From the beginning of the dynasty they were just regarded as craftsmen and were poorly paid.⁷ They came under attack by censorate officials whenever a king wanted to promote his favourite painter to a higher office. Apart from their low standing the overall appreciation of painting was also low, because in the Confucian concept of the hierarchy of the arts painting ranged at the bottom, lower than philosophical works, poetry, and calligraphy.⁸ The preference of text over image, writing over visual representation is felt in many of these works.

This finally brings me to the discussion of some visual peculiarities of Chosŏn commemorative painting. When I did research on the *Banquet for Queen Dowager Sinjŏng* at LACMA (fig.) a few years ago, I found some very odd aspects: 1) the uneven composition, 2) the diagrammatic layout of the celebrations, and 3) the aniconic representation of certain participants. None of

⁷ Burglind Jungmann, *Pathways to Korean Culture: Paintings of the Joseon Dynasty, 1392-1910*, London: Reaktion Books, 2014, pp. 44-48, 208-211, 245.

⁸ According to the *Zhou Li*, six arts were to be mastered by the elite, proper decorum, music, archery, horse riding/charioteering, reading and writing, and arithmetic. Later, the Northern Song encyclopedia *Taiping yulan* included painting. See Hong Sunpyo, *Traditional Korean Painting* (Seoul: Ewha Womens University Press, 2010, p. 53.

these three characteristics make sense in a visual representation of the screen format. As for the first, the uneven composition: of the three celebrations two are spread out on two panels each, whereas the third occupies three panels. The second celebration, in the middle, is the actual birthday party for the queen. It took place in the same hall, the king's residence at Kyöngbok Palace 景福宮 Kangnyŏnjŏn 康寧殿, as the third celebration, a reception of the king for the high officials who had been in charge of the events. The actual birthday party – and the only of the three events in which Queen Sinjŏng herself was present – thus occupies less space than the celebration for the officials on the left. Moreover, the hall on the left appears much larger than the one shown in the first scene on the right, which is Kŭnjŏngjŏn 勤政殿, the throne hall. But in reality Kŭnjŏngjŏn is much larger than Kangnyŏnjŏn (see [photographs](#)). This confirms what the list already indicates, that the officials are the agents behind the project considering themselves more important than the queen, even more important than the king whose throne hall should have been the largest building on the screen, both for its actual size and for its importance for the kingdom.

Second, the diagrammatic layout of the scenes is another peculiar visual effect because it collides with the function of a screen. The small figures and their positions can only be appreciated from close by, thus such configurations make sense for an album or a handscroll, but less so for a hanging scroll and even lesser for a screen, because both are usually appreciated from a certain distance. Good example of a successful visual effect to be appreciated from afar are the screen of the *Ten Symbols of Longevity* ([fig.](#)), that I introduced before, and even more the screens of the *Sun, Moon and Five Peaks* ([fig.](#)) which were placed behind the king's throne. Moreover, as 'document,' the screen format does not make sense

either, because a screen is much more difficult to store than any scroll or album which, if closed, need only a small space in a cabinet. An old photograph gives also evidence that such banquet screens were indeed used as decorative backdrops; hence we may assume that these screens were made for display. We have already discussed the close relationship between the *ũigwe* illustrations and representations on the screen, but that alone cannot be the solution to the problem. Any other representation would have been possible and more successful – unless those who put the screen on display had another interest, that of demonstrating their place within a social diagram. Historical research has shown that Chosŏn Confucian scholars followed in the footsteps of their Song dynasty idols in explaining matters of the world and the cosmos in diagrams, at a time when this form had already been abandoned in China.⁹ (figs: explanation of Zhou Dunyi's (AD 1017–1073) *taijitu* by Yi Hwang in his *Sŏnghak sipto* (聖學十圖, 1568) and a diagram of a celebration at Injŏngjŏn, Changdŏk Palace, from *Kukcho sok oryeũi sŏrye* 國朝續五禮儀序例 (국조속오례의서례) of 1744).

The third oddity found in all Chosŏn commemorative paintings is the aniconic representation of certain participants. Interestingly, these ‘phantom’ participants, the king, regent, queen and other female members of the royal family, and the wives of high officials belong to different groups in society, different in gender and social standing, and thus their non-appearance must have different reasons. The aniconic representation of the king, the empty throne in front of the screen of *Sun, Moon and Five Peaks* (detail, fig.) is particularly intriguing if compared to

⁹ Michael Lackner, “Les diagrammes d’analyse textuelle: une pratique savante de la tradition chinoise, in: Christian Jacob (ed.), *Les lieux de savoir, vol. 2: Les mains de l’intellect*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2011, pp. 824-844, and “Diagrams as an Architecture by Means of Words: the Yanji tu”. In: Francesca Bray, Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann and Georges Métaillé (eds.): *Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China. The Warp and the Weft*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 341-382.

Chinese commemorative paintings, for instance, a detail of Emperor Qianlong from Yao Wenhan's, *An Imperial Banquet at Ziguang Hall*. Qing emperors proudly presented themselves to the public on such commemorative scrolls and on portraits done by their European painters whereas portraits of Chosŏn kings were strictly confined to ancestor ritual and otherwise inaccessible (figs.: *Qianlong on Horseback*; *Portrait of King Yŏngjo*). As Professor Yi Song-mi has shown, the production, transport and installment of king's portraits were also recorded in *ŭigwe*, a clear indication of the sacredness of these paintings in the Chosŏn concept of kingdom and rulership. The aniconic representation of the king can be understood in the same way: the king was sacred, the mediator between the realm of his rulership and Heaven, and thus it was inappropriate to show him together with 'ordinary people.' This explains, of course, the empty seat in the painting of *King Kyŏngjong's Selection of Government Officials in 1721*. The Chosŏn concept does, however, not apply to the Chinese point of view onto Chosŏn. Hence a Chinese artist Zheng Yu (fl. 18th c.) depicted 'King Yŏngjo receiving a communiqué of the Qing Emperor,' in an album leave of 1725 on the occasion of the visit of Qing envoy Akedun to the Chosŏn court (fig.). Since the envoy represents the Qing emperor he is even slightly larger than the king.

The absence of female members of the royal house and other ladies of high standing cannot be explained in the same manner as that of the ruler. Whereas their husbands, fathers or brothers who held offices would be shown – in the company of low-born *kisaeng* - they are only represented by empty cushions (details, LACMA screen). Their visual absence can only be explained by the strict Confucian laws of women's chastity. As we all know, in the late Chosŏn

dynasty women of high standing had to cover their whole body and face when they left their houses ([detail Kim Hongdo screen, Paris](#)).

All of the characteristics and peculiarities investigated so far point to a genre that drew from various sources, textual and visual. Combining contemporaneous Chosŏn circumstances with ideals of Chinese antiquity, it was carefully constructed to suit the philosophical and political concepts of elite government officials. All of the sources discussed so far were rooted in East Asian visual concepts, but could there also be a connection with ideas and visual concepts coming from Europe?

In the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris there is a painting of a catholic ceremony which has striking similarities with late Chosŏn commemorative paintings. In his recent research art historian Lianming Wang identifies it as *The Procession of the Feast of the Sacred Heart in Front of the Beitang Church*, done in color on Korean paper by an anonymous Chinese painter, probably in the 1760s.¹⁰ The symmetrical composition arranged alongside a central axis, the arrangement of buildings, the gate at the bottom followed by the courtyard and culminating in the main building, surrounded by corridors that seem to follow the principle of one-point perspective as the courtyard becomes narrower towards the upper part of the painting and, of course, the figures which are arranged in an almost symmetrical order and conduct a ceremony are all resemblant of *ŭigwedo*. The Chinese painting is somewhat more successful in evoking space: the gates in the front are larger in size in comparison to the main building and the shading of the roofs is more pronounced. However, as Dr. Wang has demonstrated in his

¹⁰ Wang, Lianming, "Church, A 'Sacred Event' and the Visual Perspective of an 'Etic Viewer': An Eighteenth-Century Chinese Western-Style Painting in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France," *Face to Face*, pp. 371-399.

research, the proportions of the figures, buildings and trees do not quite match. He therefore deduced that rather than one of the Jesuit painters of the Qing Court one or more Chinese painters working outside the court produced this painting. According to him illustrations in Catholic books translated into Chinese might have been an inspiration, such as a woodblock print from *Sheng yuehan xian tianzhu er yun* 聖若翰先天主而孕 (*John the Baptist was born prior to the birth of the Lord of Heaven*), done in the 17th century by Giulio Aleni (1582-1649). Here we have a similar arrangement of courtyards and buildings in a vertically elongated format, but the use of the linear perspective is more pronounced and the large figures of spectators at the bottom who point at the ceremony emphasize the impression of spatial depth.

However, another source of inspiration might have been other traditions closer to home. A Buddhist painting of the early Chosŏn dynasty, depicting *Scenes of the Life of the Buddha*, uses similar devices of perspective (fig.). (That its composition is not strictly central and symmetrical as the ones shown before is due to the topic, episodes that happened at different places in and around the palace.) An interesting common characteristic of all these paintings is that they all show simultaneously scenes that happened consecutively in time. This is true to the life of Prince Siddhartha who became Buddha Shakyamuni, the ceremonies at the Catholic church in Beijing, but also the dances performed in front of the king, the regent and high officials in screens such as the *Banquet for Queen Dowager Sinjŏng*.

We know that Chosŏn envoys sought the acquaintance of Jesuit priests at the Qing court and roamed the markets of Beijing to buy books and paintings which they took home to Seoul.

Because very little religious material has been preserved in Korean collections we can only suspect that many works imported in the eighteenth century were later destroyed during the Catholic persecutions.¹¹ Chosŏn court painters could also have seen paintings similar to *The Procession of the Feast of the Sacred Heart* during their sojourn in the Qing capital, and made sketches of them. But we see that there were also East Asian traditions on which Chosŏn court painters might have built and for the moment, rather than arguing for a close relationship between any of the examples, I would like to opt for inspiration from different models – much like the drawing of various textual and visual sources in my earlier discussion – that led to the development of a new and unique genre of Chosŏn painting. What is most interesting, however, is the fact that the comparative examples are all religious paintings. Together with the aniconic representation of figures – also a device that can usually be found only in religious painting – it shows that Confucian ideas of court ceremonies were conducted and commemorated with religious fervor.

Ŭigwedo give evidence of the extremely influential role of high government officials at the Chosŏn court. This is demonstrated by the strong relationship between ‘bureaucratic’ text and image and the recording of their names. They decided the schedule and procedure of ceremonies, oversaw the compilation of *ŭigwe* and the production of *ŭigwedo*. It is also most likely that the visual representation of gatherings of high officials, *kyehoedo*, set the stage for the emergence of *ŭigwedo*. However, we also sense a strong agency on the part of court painters who were able to draw from multiple traditions: themes of Chinese antiquity,

¹¹ Yi Song-mi found that the book-burnings already started under King Chŏngjo. See her *Searching for Modernity: Western Influence and True-View Landscape in Korean Painting of the Late Chosŏn Dynasty*, Lawrence and Seattle: Spencer Museum of Art and University of Washington Press, 2015, p. 15.

diagrammatic representation deriving from cosmology, and possibly European inspired Chinese illustrations and native religious works.