Export Paintings as Art and Agency: 
Re-assessing Export Paintings of China and Korea

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Export paintings or trade paintings commonly refer to pictorial works that depict indigenous images across a variety of subject matters including people, landscapes, and objects with the purpose of being sold to foreign customers and overseas markets. Export paintings were typically made between the eighteenth century and the early twentieth century in so-called “non-western” nations such as China, Korea, India, and the Philippines.1 Such products emerged with the expansion of international trade between those nations and the Euro-American countries. Such products were purchased by foreign travelers and circulated in their home countries, introducing the “unknown” world to Euro-Americans.

Export paintings are often understood to reveal exoticized views of so-called “western” visitors toward “non-western” countries by unveiling the modernistic practices that emphasized racial, cultural, and national differences. Local painters are known to have incorporated requests of Euro-American customers and reflected their taste when creating such imageries. Because of this, export paintings are often attested as instillations of Orientalist ideologies with the claim of self-objectification of one’s culture. However, it can be simplistic to generalize export paintings of multiple nations through one framework without considering different social, historical, and artistic journeys that the countries took. To explore various ways to view the genre of export paintings, this paper discusses Chinese and Korean export paintings and compares their trajectories in scholarship, commercial history, and subject matters. In doing so, this paper aims to highlight the roles of export painters who responded to the fluctuating periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in China and Korea.

Chinese export paintings, or “wai xiao hua” in Chinese, are discussed and displayed more than export paintings of other countries, mainly due to their extensive production and wide circulation. Scholars first studied export paintings as part of the overarching history of Chinese export art that included porcelain and furniture which had been popularly sold to foreign countries since the sixteenth century. For the past few decades, scholars have researched Chinese export paintings as an independent topic and have interpreted them either as depictions of what foreigners wanted to see or “documents that provided an insight into the local traditions, customs and daily life.”2 However, the recent scholarship strives to challenge the prevailing notions and to implement different methodologies in studying the genre. For instance, Guangdong Museum’s publication discusses Chinese export paintings within the commercial and manufacturing history of other export commodities.3 Highlighting the intricate qualities of Chinese export paintings, contemporary scholars also urge to shift the understanding of the objects from mere historical records to creative artworks as Hongsheng Cai states such works were not “vulgar” but “elegance.”4

Compared to Chinese export paintings, Korean export paintings, “su-chul-hwa” in Korean, have been studied considerably less as a comprehensive research topic, leaving a large gap in the scholarship on the genre. The research on Korean export paintings is heavily focused on one export painter, Kim Jun-geun (active late nineteenth century), whose works illustrate the daily lives of Korean people (Figure 1). Scholars have surveyed a wide range of Kim’s paintings and stressed their popularity amongst Euro-American consumers. More recently, scholars began to pay considerable attention to colonialist and Orientalist narratives that were projected by Euro-American imperialists and embedded in Kim’s images.5 According to Shin Sunyoung, Kim’s paintings were used by “westerners” to assert their racial superiority and pursue a mission to “civilize” the people of the “non-west.”6 As such, it is widely construed that Korean export paintings are consequences of the imperialist initiatives of “the west” that purposefully accentuated vulgar imageries of working-class commoners in a “non-western” country. Although this remains a viable interpretation, it should not be the sole approach to studying the complex layers intertwined in export paintings produced by Kim Jun-geun and other Korean painters from the late nineteenth century. Rather, the commercial history of Korean export paintings needs to be discussed whilst paying attention to the artistic quality of each artwork.

The comparison of the commercial history of Chinese and Korean export paintings allows evaluating the extent to

1 Although I try to best avoid using the terms “western” and “non-western,” I intentionally use the terms in quotation marks when discussing and/or questioning the epistemology.


3 Victoria and Albert Museum et al., 18-19 shi ji Yangcheng jing wu: Ying-guo Weidooliya Abote bo wu yuan cang Guangzhou wai xiao hua [Souvenir from Canton: Chinese export paintings from the Victoria and Albert Museum] (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 2003); and Guangdong Sheng bo wu guan, Yi qu tong hui : Guangdong Sheng bo wu guan cang qing dai wai xiao yi shu jing pin ji [Chinese export fine art in the Qing Dynasty from Guangdong Museum] (Guangzhou: Ling nan mei shu chu ban she, 2013), 10–13.


which foreigners influenced the export painting industry in each country. The production of Chinese export paintings started in port cities in China, such as Guangzhou, Macao, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, when the country’s commercial trade with Europe and America was flourishing in the mid-eighteenth century. Due to this historical background, Euro-Americans who visited and lived in China have been typically regarded as the major players in the development of export paintings, especially with the projection of their taste and the selection of subject matters. Marcia Reed notes that export paintings “depicted Chinese subjects in a manner adapted to Western taste and expectations.” Craig Clunas also states that export paintings “do not reflect Chinese artists’ own aesthetic norms” and “were produced solely for foreign customers.” However, although these assertions underline the customer-object relationship, it is important to think about the position of foreigners in eighteenth-century Guangzhou where the export painting market first emerged in China.

The distinctive setting of eighteenth-century Chinese trade and commerce indicates that foreigners may have had less impact on the production of Chinese export paintings than what is generally construed. In the mid-eighteenth century, Guangzhou became the central place for production and sales of export commodities because the Chinese government designated it as the sole port city that allowed foreign countries to operate trade in accordance with the single-port policy of 1757. Since then, other sets of restrictions were put forth, controlling the commercial activities of foreigners in the land of China. For instance, foreign officers had to stay in a small district to the north of Guangzhou by a factory area called Thirteen Hong Street, where cargoes of foreign companies, mostly European, were collected and distributed (Figure 2). Chinese merchants, also known as Hong merchants, owned the factory buildings and the land in the area and oversaw both commercial and daily activities of foreign traders to maintain their good behaviors in the country. Paul Van Dyke even asserts that Europeans had no control over what was to be purchased or sold in Guangzhou, which was far different from how foreigners typically maintained dominant roles in most of the port cities in other Asian countries.

Contrary to the Qing court’s proactive, authoritative role in the eighteenth-century trade scene, the court of Joseon Korea (1392–1910) could not exert such power when parleying with foreign nations in the nineteenth century. Abandoning its long-standing so-called isolationist position, groups of Joseon officials urged to expand its diplomatic and commercial relationships with foreign countries. While Korea held a lukewarm attitude towards the interchange, warships and trade vessels of foreign countries, such as Japan and France, frequently appeared on the coasts of Korea. They plundered and initiated gunfire to the territory of Korea at times. Under such military pressure, Joseon finally conferred and agreed to sign the Treaty of Ganghwa, also known as the Japan–Korea Treaty in 1876. In accordance with the fifth article in the treaty, Joseon opened the ports of Wonsan and Incheon in addition to that of Busan to Japan.

The series of treaties between Korea and foreign nations embraced less restrictive regulations on foreigners’ activities in Korea compared to the rules applied to foreigners in China in the eighteenth century. For instance, according to the second clause of the fourth article in the United Kingdom-Korean Treaty of 1883, “British subjects shall have the right to rent or to purchase land or houses, and to erect dwelling, warehouses, and factories.” The sixth clause of the same article also states that “British subjects shall be allowed to go wherever they please without passports within a distance of 100 Corean li [approximately twenty-six miles] from any of the ports and places open to trade.” With the relative freedom to live, travel, and operate businesses in the Korean peninsula, foreigners might have been able to intimately engage with residents and artists and make close observations of their domestic lives. Possibly due to this reason, large volumes of Korean export paintings consist of detailed depictions of daily scenes of Korean people. In all likelihood, foreigners would have been able to exert impact on the selection of subject matters in Korean export paintings, although such interpretation needs further examination.

Comparing the history of early trading with foreigners in China and Korea, it is analyzed that export paintings of the two nations developed in varying conditions. In eighteenth-century China, foreign individuals were not likely able to actively negotiate their power to reflect their tastes and demands in...
the making of export paintings given the restrictions they faced. They could not freely leave the restricted area that was assigned to them and were not able to control what was to be sold for the export market in Guangzhou. On the other hand, the treaty documents between Korea and other countries from the late nineteenth century indicate that foreigners were able to travel around the country and live with the Korean population.\(^{15}\) Within the circumstance, they could enjoy more freedom to interact with local people, possibly including export painters who would be able to produce images that foreign customers wanted. Whether this can be seen as an adaptation of “western tastes and ideologies” remains a question to be answered.

In addition to investigating the status of foreigners during the time of the production of export paintings, it is instrumental to look at the commercializing methods of export paintings in China and Korea. The export painting market in China cannot be discussed without mentioning New China Street in Guangzhou. Under the government order, a marketplace for foreigners was newly formed near the factory area in 1760. The street was called “New Street” or “New China Street.”\(^{16}\) It became the central place where export painting studios were populated and where foreign customers visited to purchase export paintings. The street scenes were popular subject matters depicted by both Chinese and European artists, as found in the rendering of the studio of the renowned export painter Tingqua (active 1840–1870), located on New China Street (Figure 3). In the image, multiple artists are working in the painting studio, showing the workshop-style production system of export paintings. It is recorded that export artists collaboratively produced images as one artist focused on each element in the paintings, such as trees, figures, and houses.\(^{17}\) Considering the highly centralized marketplace and production system for export paintings, it is worth presuming the role of the Chinese government in producing and disseminating export paintings by providing a platform where Chinese artists could engage with Euro-American buyers. Later, export painting markets began to spread to other cities, such as Macao, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, with the expansion of new trade routes throughout the country and the revision of trade regulations. Therefore, a wider variety of export paintings from the regions became available for purchase.

Unlike the Chinese export painting market, which left a wealth of visual and textual resources, there is little information known about where exactly export paintings were made and sold in Korea. Nonetheless, it can be assumed by looking at the popular marketplaces of the time and the cities where export painters lived and worked. Marketplaces for foreigners were formed in port cities such as Incheon, Wonsan, and Busan, that were newly opened in Korea in the late nineteenth century. Kim Jun-geun is known to have been active in Wonsan as many of his paintings bear the inscription, “Kim Jun-geun of Wonsan.”\(^{18}\) In addition, American ethnographer Stewart Culin (1858–1929) wrote that Kim was an artist in the village of Choryang near Busan in his book that included Kim’s illustrations.\(^{19}\) In Choryang, there was a settlement for Chinese nationals with the Qing consulate established in 1884. Therefore, it is presumable that Kim Jun-geun may have learned about Chinese export paintings, which had been already produced for about a century, through Chinese immigrants living in the neighborhood. Culin also recorded that Kim’s illustrations included in his book were “executed in 1886 upon the order of Miss Shufeldt, daughter of Rear Admiral R. W. Shufeldt, U. S. N.”\(^{20}\) This implies that Kim possibly moved between the port cities where he could meet new clients and gain resources for his export painting business.

It seems that export paintings were made and sold not only in the port cities but also in the capital of Korea, Hanyang (present-day Seoul). It is recorded in the Report of the National Museum that twenty-eight drawings by Han Jinwoo (dates unknown) were collected in Seoul, Korea, in 1885.\(^{21}\) The object provenance indicates that the twenty-eight works by Han Jinwoo cost 200 ryang (currency of Joseon), which was not cheap at the time.\(^{22}\) Although the original works are missing, the copies show that Han replicated the popular genre paintings by the celebrated eighteenth-century painter Kim Hongdo (1745–after 1806) (Figure 4).\(^{23}\) Many Korean export paintings were purchased and collected individually rather than being exported in large quantities. Because of this, scholars often argue that Korean examples should not


\(^{16}\) Paul A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok, Images of Canton Factories, xviii.


\(^{18}\) Wonsan is a port city on the eastern side of the Korean peninsula.


\(^{20}\) Culin, Korean Games, v.

\(^{21}\) The drawings were collected by J. B. Bernadou (1858–1894) who was sent to Korea as a US naval officer and collected ethnographic and visual materials at the request of the Smithsonian Institute in the United States. For more information about J. B. Bernadou’s activities and the anthropological collecting scenes in nineteenth-century Korea, see Robert Oppenheim, “Anthropological Collecting Networks in Late Nineteenth-Century Korea,” in An Asian Frontier: American Anthropology and Korea, 1882–1945, ed. Robert Oppenheim (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 46–72.


\(^{23}\) The copies were painted by American artist W. H. Chandllee (1865–1955) and published in Otis T. Mason, “Corea by Native Artists,” Science vol. 8, no. 183 (August 1886): 116.
be called “export paintings.” There may be another term to better describe the object type, but the categorization of “export art,” such as export porcelain and export furniture, has been widely used regardless of the modes of commerce and production. In addition, Chinese export paintings were also often sold individually and made-to-orders. Therefore, the term “Korean export paintings” continues to be used in this paper despite the existing debate.

In the initial phases when export paintings first developed in China and Korea, the formation of new marketplaces for export commodities allowed painters to meet foreign clients and artists and exchange information. The Chinese export painting market was operated with a more centralized system led by the Qing government. The government also attracted many export painters to New China Street with the establishment of artists’ studios, which enabled the mass-production of Chinese export paintings. Compared to this, the Korean export painting market was loosely organized in multiple locations of marketplaces where export painters moved around to find more opportunities to sell artworks. Both modes of production and business operation suggest that local artists actively participated in the art-making business, seeking to maximize the profits under different circumstances. This also implies that local artists played an agentive role in the markets of export paintings in China and Korea.

In Korea, genre paintings by eighteenth-century masters such as Kim Hongdo and Shin Yunbok (1758–1814,), were copied by nineteenth-century artists and often sold overseas. In addition to the example by Han Jinwoo mentioned above, the British Museum houses a genre painting album completed by a monk painter Mun Hyesan (active 1875–1930) (Figure 5). This work is a copy of Kim Hongdo’s celebrated genre painting album. Mun put his own seal, manifesting his claim as the artist of the album. Such an action suggests that these kinds of images were not considered copies but artworks of art made with the learning of old imageries at the time.

The late-nineteenth-century painting series created by a Korean artist in the collection of the GRASSI Museum of Ethnography in Leipzig is another example that combined the styles of eighteenth-century masters, such as Kim Hongdo and Kim Deukshin (1754–1822), with contemporaneous painting techniques (Figure 6). One painting in the series that portrays a scholar on horseback being accompanied by a servant displays an analogy to Kim Hongdo’s tranquil depiction of a similar scene (Figure 7). One can find repetitive components such as the composition of descending figures and the inclusion of the nightingales on the trees, albeit with differences in specific details and stylistic approaches. At the end of the inscription in the nineteenth-century painting, the artist added a descriptive phrase in classical Chinese, writing gimaja, meaning a horseman. The seal of hwasu may refer to the artist’s pen name, but it is unknown who the artist was. This painting insinuates a stylistic feature of nineteenth-century Korean paintings that combined a contemporaneous technique that colored certain elements vividly with a well-known subject matter from the eighteenth century.

Such an attempt to reference old imageries can be found in Chinese export paintings as well. One of the examples is a painting album depicting labor scenes such as weaving and tilling, in rural areas of China. Copying the styles of Song-dynasty (960–1279) paintings of weaving and tilling, labor genre paintings were actively commissioned by Qing emperors “as a means to substantiate in permanence the dynasty’s dedication to a classically informed, prosperous, and benevolent reign” in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as stated by Roslyn Lee Hammers. Eighteenth-century export paintings similarly illustrated such scenes, alluding to the possibility that the images may have been encouraged by the Qing government to promote its stability and diligence to viewers in other countries. There are similarities in the composition and the layout when comparing the nineteenth-century export painting by Wu Jun (dates unknown) (Figure 8) with one of the woodblock prints from Imperially Composed Pictures of Tilling and Weaving made by court painter Jiao Bingzhen (1689–1726) under the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722; reigned 1662–1722) (Figure 9). The painting by Wu Jun replicates the use of architectural elements for the image composition as shown in the eighteenth-century woodblock print by Jiao Bingzhen. Moreover, Wu Jun’s version embodies an even more idealized depiction of the weaving scene with the rendering of a more refined and decorative building compared to the humble setting illustrated in the work by Jiao Bingzhen. Chinese export artists modified certain elements possibly to make the images more appealing to foreign customers who wanted to see an idealized image of China. Although such a copying method can be seen as diminishing the originality of an artwork, export paintings that replicate or make references to earlier artworks reveal local artists’ in-depth understanding of traditional paintings and painting techniques. If one evaluates export paintings based on the originality and the rarity of artwork, they may fail to properly measure the artistic value and the rich history embedded with Chinese and Korean export paintings.

This comparative study of Korean and Chinese export paintings expands the scholarly discussion on Korean export paintings that have been limitedly interpreted within a theoretical lens. In the period of such uncertainty, artists of both Chinese and Korean export paintings did not simply embrace foreign customers’ interests and requests but rather employed a variety of methods to create and sell their artworks more effectively and efficiently. They integrated stylistic approaches, techniques, and subject matters rooted


in the long-lasting visual traditions of China and Korea with the combination of multiple sources that were available at the time. Therefore, export paintings should not be separated as “low” or “commercial” art distinguished or separated from “high” or “elite” art and need to be discerned in the broader context of East Asian art history. Back to my original question—whether export paintings are images of self-objectification with the instillation of Orientalist ideologies—I assert that export paintings were not consequences of such theoretical dialogues but timely responses to the period with the influxes of various people, objects, and ideologies, which coexisted with what had been already there. I further argue that such excessive focus on the theoretical interpretation of export paintings often undermines the artistic value of the objects and the agency of the makers.

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Bibliography


Figure 1: Kim Jun-geun (Korean, Dates unknown), Seesaw, late nineteenth century, ink and color on silk, 28.2 x 46 cm (11 x 18 in). National Folk Museum of Korea. Image: National Museum of Korea/E-Museum.
Figure 2: Attributed to Guan Zuolin (Spoilum; Chinese, active 1765–1805), *A Close View of the Foreign Factories (Detailed)*, about 1807, oil on canvas. Hong Kong Museum of Art. Image: Wikipedia Creative Common.
Figure 3: The studio of Tingqua (Guan Lianchang; Chinese, active 1840–1870), *Shop of Tingqua*, about 1830, gouache on paper, 18 x 26 cm (7 x 10.2 in). Peabody Essex Museum. Image: Wikipedia Creative Common.
Figure 4: W. H. Chandlee (American, 1865–1955), *Copies of Han Jinwoo’s Genre Drawings*, about 1886 (original drawings were made before or in 1885). Image: Otis T. Mason, “Corea by Native Artists,” *Science* vol. 8, no. 183 (August 1886), 116.

Figure 5: Mun Hyesan (Korean, active 1895–1910), *Genre painting album* (detail), late nineteenth or early twentieth century, ink and color on paper, album: 36.1 x 32.2 cm (14.2 x 12.6 in); leaf: 32.2 x 24.5 cm (12.6 x 9.6 in). The British Museum.
Figure 6: Korean artist (unknown), *Genre Painting*, nineteenth century, ink and color on paper, 64.4 x 42.1 cm (25.4 x 16.5 in). GRASSI Museum of Ethnography in Leipzig.
Figure 7: Kim Hongdo (Korean, 1745– after 1806), *Listening on Horseback to a Nightingale Singing*, late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century, ink and color on paper, 117 x 52.2 cm (46 x 20.5 in). Kansong Art Museum. Image: Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea.
Figure 8: Wu Jun (Chinese, dates unknown), *Preparing Warp Yarns*, 1870–1890, watercolor and ink on paper, 41 cm x 30.3 cm (16.1 x 11.9 in). Victoria and Albert Museum.