

Book Reviews

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Danwon Gimhong-do Daejungjeok Ohaewa Yeoksajeok Jinsil [Danwon Kim Hongdo: Popular Misunderstanding and Historical Truth]. By Chang Chin-Sung. Seoul: Social Review Academy, 2020. 484 p. ISBN 9791189946562*

Professor Chang Chin-Sung (Seoul National University)'s new book *Danwon Kim Hongdo: Popular Misunderstanding and Historical Truth* (Social Review Academy, 2020) is a new academic book about Kim Hongdo (1745-after 1806). This is the third book about Kim Hongdo after Jin Joonhyun's *A Study on Danwon Kim Hongdo* (Yeolhwadang, 1999) and Oh Jooseok's *Danwon Kim Hongdo* (Iljisa, 2004). This is the largest number of research books on a single painter in South Korea, which illustrates the interest of Korean art historians in Kim Hongdo. Through this book, Chang made a bold new claim that Kim Hongdo was not the master of genre paintings, but the master of folding screen paintings. According to him, a widely known fact that Kim was a master of genre painting is a "popular misunderstanding," while Kim's mastery in folding screen painting was a "historical truth." Even though Chang uses the term "popular misunderstanding," what he really is referring to is his counterargument to existing academic evaluations of Kim Hongdo. His attention to Kim Hongdo's folding screen paintings has a refreshing perspective that we have not yet seen about Kim Hongdo.

It was foreign scholars rather than Korean ones who were first interested in Joseon Dynasty folding screen paintings. For example, Evelyn Becker McCune (1907-2012) in her 1977 book *The Inner Art: Korean Screens* first revealed that folding screens were a representative form of painting during the Joseon Dynasty (McCune 1977). From 1945 to the 1950s, she worked for an affiliated organization of the U.S. government and military as a Korea and Asia specialist, and in 1952, she was dispatched to Seoul to identify the collection of the National Museum of Korea and other war-destroyed Korean cultural

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heritage and then report her findings to the U.S. Library of Congress (Kim 2019, 89-93). The research conducted by Korean scholars came 40 years after the publication of McCune's book. In 2017, Kim Soojin comprehensively summarized the folding screen culture of the Joseon Dynasty in her doctoral dissertation at Seoul National University entitled "The Golden Age of Folding Screens: A Study of Screen Painting in Late Joseon Korea" (Kim 2017). In 2018, AmorePacific Museum of Art (APMA) presented representative folding screen paintings of the Joseon Dynasty at an exhibition *Beyond Folding Screens*, contributing to raising public awareness on the folding screen paintings (AmorePacific Museum of Art 2018). In addition to these works, Professor Chang put forward Kim Hongdo as the best painter of folding screen paintings in the Joseon Dynasty. Representative folding paintings of Kim Hongdo include *Gunseondo* (Taoist Immortals), *Haengryopungsokdo* (Pictorial Records of Travel), *Seowonajipdo* (Painting on the Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden), *Haesandobyung* (Folding Screen Paintings of Sea and Mountains), *Hwaseongwonhaengdo* (Royal Parade to Hwaseong Fortress), *Jubujasiyido* (Landscapes in the Spirit of Verses by Zhu Xi), and *Samgongbulhwando* (The Three Dukes). Most of them are portraits, such as a *sinseondo* (Taoist immortals paintings), a *pungsokhwa* (genre painting), a *gosa immunhwa* (figure painting of old stories), a *jingyeong sansuhwa* ("true-view" landscape painting) a *girokwa* (documentary Painting), and a *siuido* (a painting depicting poems or paintings of poetic ideas), while *Haesandobyung* is only a landscape painting. The genre of folding screen paintings is not so diverse.

Chang's new interpretation of Kim Hongdo is not limited to folding screen paintings. He boldly argues that Kim Hongdo was not only a top-notch painter in the late 18th century Joseon but also the best painter among East Asian painters at the time. According to him, between 1776 and 1806 when Kim Hongdo was active, there were no comparable painters to Kim Hongdo due to the fall of Qianlong Painting Studio in the Qing Dynasty and the decline of Japanese painters who showed the limitations of mannerism by passively succeeding Kano School's techniques and repeating the same subject matter. Kim Hongdo, he argues, had an advantage of his versatility that he excelled at all genres. Such diversity was very rare in East Asian painting history in the late 18th century.

Chang's argument that Kim's mastery of folding screen paintings and that he was the best painter in East Asia were based on the view that Kim was a versatile painter at various kinds of painting in addition to genre painting. The fact that Kim Hongdo showed outstanding skills in various genres has already been mentioned by Kang Sehwan in "Danwongi" (meaning "A Story of Danwon" as Danwon is Kim Hongdo's pen name) as follows:

Past and present painters were often good at only one genre, not multiple ones, but Kim, who was born in our country, has studied diverse paintings since childhood, so there is nothing he cannot master. From figures, landscapes, Taoist immortals and Buddha, flowers and fruits, birds and insects, and to fish and crab, Kim creates excellent works that are incomparable to those of previous masters. Moreover, he is particularly good at Taoist immortals painting and flower/bird painting, and these works alone are good enough to be the best in his generation and pass his legacy on to future generations. Kim also thrives on depicting local characters and customs in Korea, such as studying scholars, merchants, travelers, women, farmers, silkworm rearing women, layered doors and houses, and trees of rough mountains and fields. His refined descriptions are so natural without any flaws, whose talent has not been seen in the past (Kang 2010, 364).

This book addresses six subjects that Kim Hongdo drew well: figures, landscapes, Taoist immortals and Buddha, flowers and fruits, birds and insects, fishes and crabs, and local custom scenes. Modern art historians, such as Jin Joonhyun and Oh Jooseok, have expanded the scope of Kim Hongdo research by emphasizing that Kim was not only good at genre painting but also various other paintings. Professor Chang also made his argument based on their opinions.

This book, in this circumstance, attempts several new interpretations of Kim Hongdo's paintings. It is significant in that the book expands the academic discourse of Kim Hongdo's painting. However, despite these strengths, his new argument raises several questions.

Firstly, he fails to define the problem of "popular misunderstanding," one of the key topics in the book. I read the book with anticipation that the author will deal with this issue exclusively because he raised a strong claim at the beginning. But until I reached the last page, I could not find his analysis of *Danwon Pungsokhwacheop* (Album of Genre Paintings by Kim Hongdo), especially an argument that the book is not the original but a replica of his original work. Even if Dr. Lee Dongcheon and Professor Kang Kwansik have already dealt with this issue in their research, it was questionable how the author could resolve "popular misunderstanding" without his own analysis of *Danwon Pungsokhwacheop*. In addition, the book did not challenge enough the deep-rooted stereotype that "Kim Hongdo is a genre painter." It seems that the author simply denies the existing theory by ignoring it. Therefore, even though his new argument was impressive, there was no evidence to support it.

Kim Hongdo began to be considered a genre painter in the Japanese colonial era; thus, it is not just a "popular misunderstanding." His reputation as a genre painter became firmer with the release of Kang Sehwang's writings, *Pyoamyugo* (Choi 1979). According to Kang

Sehwang's "Danwongi," Kim Hongdo was good at various paintings, but among them, Kang Sehwang's most appreciated painting was definitely Kim's genre painting. Although Kang acknowledges that Kim's Taoist immortals paintings and flower/bird paintings were sufficient to be conveyed to future generations, he highly praised Kim's genre paintings as having "unparalleled skill." Kang Sehwang's praise for Kim's genre painting was not limited to "Danwongi," but also re-emphasized in "Danwongi, Uilbon" as follows:

Furthermore, [Kim Hongdo] is excellent at genre paintings, so there is no one who is not amazed at his talent and acclaims him for his refined depiction of everyday lives of people, streets, ferry, stores, test sites, and theaters, once he touches the brush. This is why the world praises Kim Saneung (Kim Hongdo's child name)'s talent. How can he do this without his own mysterious acquisition of the truth through his truly brilliant insight and mysterious enlightenment? (Kang 2010, 369-370).

As for Kim Hongdo's genre painting, not only Kang Sehwang but also many other modern art historians evaluate it as his representative work. Kim Hongdo's genre painting peaked in the late Joseon Dynasty, which became a genre that led the painting circle in the late Joseon Dynasty. *Danwon Pungsokhwacheop* is a work that many people admired and cherished for a long time. Even if this book is a replica of Kim's original created by a later generation, I believe that this work does not lack any elements in grasping the outstanding aspects of Kim Hongdo's genre paintings. Professor Chang spends a significant portion of his book to explain *Chaekgeori* (Books and Things) and *Horyeopdo* (Hunting Scene), paintings only cited in written records, by citing similar works related to them. Yet he did not fully analyze *Danwon Pungsokhwacheop*, which was the main subject of criticism of his book. The history of the discussion about *Danwon Pungsokhwacheop* is by no means short to ignore as an outdated opinion. Even if it is a replica, it is a work that reflects the appearance of the original, hence, I think *Danwon Pungsokhwacheop* should be included in his discussion to fairly analyze Kim's genre painting.

Secondly, his claim that Kim Hongdo was the best painter among all contemporary Chinese and Japanese painters is inspiring as a Korean art historian, yet difficult to fully accept. Chang may make such a claim because he is a scholar who specializes in both Chinese and Korean art history. However, given that each country has its own art history and trends, it is questionable whether it is fair to consider only the period when Kim Hongdo was active when comparing his accomplishments to other East Asian painters. The second half of the 18th century was the period when the Kano School declined in Japan while Kim Hongdo was active. If the author wanted to compare Kim to other

East Asian artists, wouldn't it be fair to at least compare Kim Hongdo with other representative painters from the Edo period and the first half of the Qing Dynasty? It is necessary to consider the time difference among countries because the cycles of the rise and decline of art trends are slightly different by country. His comparison in this book is somewhat like comparing the brightness of the night in the United States and the day in Korea at the same time without considering the time difference. In addition, Chang used the variety of Kim's paintings as a reason to prove Kim Hongdo's superiority over other East Asian painters, but diversity alone does not automatically guarantee artistic value. For instance, An Gyeon is revered as one of Korea's top three painters with his single piece *Mongyudowondo* (Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land), and Jeong Seon is evaluated as a representative painter of the late Joseon Dynasty with a single genre *jingyeong sansu* ("true-view" landscape). Like this, there are many examples in which one artwork or one genre of work is enough to sufficiently imprint an artist in painting history or art history.

Thirdly, Chang denies the existing theory that Kang Sehwang was Kim Hongdo's teacher. Over the years, scholars widely accepted that Kim Hongdo was a student of Kang Sehwang, based on a passage in "Danwongi" that "[Kang] praised Kim's talent and taught him how to draw since young Kim lost his baby teeth" (Kang 2010, 367). However, Professor Chang reinterprets this phrase as Kang Sehwang only briefly teaching Kim Hongdo as a child how to hold a brush and the simple technique necessary to draw, thus Kang was never his real mentor. Rather, he argues that Kim Hongdo was a genius who learned how to paint on his own.

So far, research on Kim Hongdo has been divided into two speculative thoughts on the issue of Kim Hongdo's hometown. Some claim that Kim Hongdo was born in Ansan while others claim that he was born in Seoul. Professor Byun Youngseop, Dr. Jin Joonhyun, and Yoo Chunhyung insisted that Ansan was Kim's hometown (Byung 2016, 86-89; Jin 1999, 17-18; Yoo 2004, 179-213), whereas Oh Jooseok suggested that Kim was born in Seongsan-dong, Mapo-gu, Seoul (Oh 1998, 56), and Professor Yi Taeho proposed a district under the Supyo Bridge in Seoul (currently, Cheonggyecheon 2-ga) (Yi 2013, 139-151). Professor Chang is following Oh Jooseok's view.

However, Kang was Kim's teacher regardless of Kim's age if Kang taught Kim. Kang also supported Kim throughout his entire life and maintained a steady and special relationship with Kim until his death. Therefore, Kang Sehwang served as a teacher, supporter, and critic of Kim Hongdo. Kang Sehwang and Kim Hongdo had a relationship close enough to be described as a special bond. It is necessary to reconsider Kang Sehwang's special relationship with Kim Hongdo described in "Danwongi."

My relationship with Saneung (Kim Hongdo's child name) has significantly changed three times. At first, I praised his talent and taught him how to draw and paint since young Kim became my student. In the middle, he lived in my house and stayed with me in the morning and evening when I worked as a government officer. Later, I felt like we became colleagues in the art world. There is a reason why Saneung asked me to write for him rather than others (Kang 2010, 367).

Kim Hongdo had been engaged in creative activities with Kang Sehwang for the first half of his life from childhood to his late 40s. In addition, when Kim Hongdo asked for criticism, he did not go to other people aside from Kang. As a result, many of Kim Hongdo's works, including genre paintings, have Kang Sehwang's criticism (Kang 2010, 367; Byun 2016, 400-423). Simply put, Kang Sehwang was more than a teacher to Kim Hongdo. Therefore, it is difficult to accept the claim that Kim Hongdo has succeeded in self-study, ignoring his relationship with Kang Sehwang, which has been revealed by various studies and sources.

In short, this book newly evaluates and compiles Kim Hongdo's works under the keyword *byeongpunghwa* (folding screen painting). It focuses on Kim Hongdo's representative folding screen works to examine his oeuvre. Although the author's interpretation that Kim Hongdo was the master of folding screens is likely to be controversial depending on the perspective, his book contributes to an important issue of folding screen painting that enriches the discourse of Korean art history. I hope that this book stimulates more research to clarify the value and significance of folding screen paintings during the Joseon Dynasty.

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