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A Matter of Class: Sin Yun-bok's Depictions of *Kisaeng* as Participants of Everyday Life

The eighteenth century within the Korean peninsula, part of the extensive Joseon dynasty (1392-1910)¹, was marked by peace and prosperity after a long period of foreign invasions, war, and factional conflict. After centuries of negatively shifting political and social relations, intellectual and cultural life was flourishing beyond the walls of the palace. Despite prevailing differences in class and education, both the literary and visual arts rapidly developed. Works produced during this time mutually influenced one another, developed into vernacular understandings, and tended towards representing the native and the local, rather than foreign or imaginary subjects. A new nativist form of genre paintings—paintings depicting daily life often in a humorous or satirical manner—greatly developed as a visual beacon of Korean identity.² These genre paintings became quite popular within the rapidly growing art market which catered to both liberal members of the upper class—the traditional art-producing and art-possessing class—and the newly wealthy and relatively newly established *chungin*—“middle people”—class.³ Society no longer required the strong organizing power of Confucianism⁴ in the face of peace and prosperity, and dominant Neo-Confucian ethic, social structure, and politics, which had been established at the start of the dynasty, came under scrutiny by the *chungin* class. Negative shifts in political and social relations impressed upon Joseon by outside forces gave way to progressively shifting social and cultural relations internally.⁵ Late eighteenth century

¹ Kim, Yung-Chung, ed. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Seoul, Korea: Ewha Women's University Press, 1976. Pgs. 79-80.

² Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. New York: Weatherhill: Asia Society Galleries, Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1993. Pgs. 23-32.

³ Kim, Sung Lim. “From Middlemen to Center Stage: The Chungin Contribution to 19th-Century Korean Painting.” Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2009. Pg. 4-7.

⁴ Confucianism is a system made up of nested hierarchies in society where women are always at the bottom of any relationship. The four key relationships which govern society are: ruler and ruled, old and young, father and son, and husband and wife. Neo-Confucianism denotes the particular set of Confucian policies and social structures unique to the Korean peninsula, as opposed to Confucianism enacted in other nation-states of the same period. These terms are not necessarily used interchangeably, but do refer to a set of ideology dominant within the Korean peninsula during the Joseon dynasty and do not refer to the temporal development of Confucianism. Kim, Yung-Chung, ed. *Women of Korea*. Pgs. 79-80.

⁵ Lee, Peter H. *Sources of Korean Tradition: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*. Vol. 2. Introduction to Asian Civilizations; Variation: Introduction to Asian Civilizations. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, Ch. 4, and Allan, Elisa. “Double Standard for Feminine Ideals: What Korean Art Indicates about Gender Roles in the Late Joseon Dynasty.” Pgs. 1-2.

Korea was at the crux of its progression towards modernism.⁶ By the late Joseon dynasty, eroding traditional Confucian values were increasingly replaced with an interest in material and sensual pursuits. This shift was present in not only the increased production of art, but also in the forms that artworks began to take on.⁷

Perhaps this shift is nowhere more present than the genre scenes of Sin Yun-bok, especially in comparison to his most important contemporary, Kim Hong Do. Not much is known about Sin Yun-bok's life; however, there seems to be a general agreement especially in newer scholarship, that he was employed by *Dohwaseo*—the Bureau of Painting—and was likely dismissed for producing paintings that fell outside of the constraints of decorum for the royal court. Sin's work spanned a wide range of subjects, but he is best known for his satirical genre paintings of *kisaeng*—courtesans—and the indulgences of the upper class.⁸ Sin's representations of women in genre paintings present the further development of genre paintings in the late Joseon dynasty and should be explored in relation to the Joseon class structure. While these are paintings of women from the lower classes often juxtaposed with *yangban* men—ruling aristocrats—in scenes of recreation and entertainment, they were marketed to the newly wealthy members of the *chungin* class; Sin was a *chungin* himself.⁹ Sin Yun-bok's representations of *kisaeng* altered established conventions in late Joseon art. They are important examples of cultural production which take place outside of *yangban*-centric modes of production and criticize social construction in late-Joseon society. Because his class position allowed him the

⁶ Hwang, Kyung Moon. *Beyond Birth: Social Status in The Emergence of Modern Korea*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2004.

⁷ Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. Pgs. 199-200.

⁸ Because few of his paintings are dated it is hard to make definitive conclusions about his work in relation to his position at *Dohwaseo* and subsequent dismissal. Further, his works must be considered as if they were created within the same time frame and cannot be discussed in terms of artistic change over time except in a case where his two extant albums are being compared. Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day and the Iconography of Common Women Washing Clothes by a Stream." Pgs. 55-60.

⁹ It was not until recently that the *chungin* class was considered as having made significant social and cultural contributions to late-Joseon society beyond contributions made within the bounds of the *yangban* class' dominant cultural hegemony. Kim, Sung Lim. "From Middlemen to Center Stage." Pg. 2-4.

social space to develop the unique, alternative qualities of his work, Sin's representations of women point out the progressive nature of genre painting in the hands of the *chungin* class.

Sin Yun-bok's (b. 1758) *Women by a Crystal Stream* (fig. 1) presents three common women bathing and washing clothes in a private moment. While this is not an uncommon theme in genre painting in the eighteenth century, it marks a significant development in paintings of women.¹⁰ Sin's most important colleague, Kim Hong Do (1745-1806), advanced the theme termed by scholar Chung Saehyang as "common women washing clothes by a stream" beyond works by earlier genre painters in *Women Washing clothes by the Stream* (fig. 2) by painting these women as the primary focus of the painting. However, the voyeuristic act of the *yangban* man spying on the women from the rocks above them is different from that of Sin's *yangban* man.¹¹ Kim's *yangban* peers at the women from overhead, placing him visually above the women and thus hierarchically above them as well.¹² In contrast, Sin's *yangban* is painted as an intruder in the space of the common women. Not only are both the man and women placed on virtually the same spatial level in the picture plane, but the women are given the dominant space in the painting. Their facial expressions indicate discomfort combined with their guarded body postures. This is a theme which Sin advances in his most famous painting of *kisaeng*: *Women on Dano Day* (fig. 3). Most of Sin's extant paintings take women as their subjects, particularly *kisaeng*—identified by their clothing and their social activities within the works¹³—and presents them in a realistic manner which indicates important notions about their place within Joseon society.

¹⁰ Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day." Pg. 56.

¹¹ There were four social statuses in the late-Joseon period: the ruling *yangban* class, the *chungin* "middle people" class, the *sangmin* commoner class, and the *chonmin* "base people" class which consisted of slaves and those with despised occupations, such as *kisaeng*, or courtesans. Kim, Sung Lim. "From Middlemen to Center Stage." Pg. 2-4.

¹² Chung, Saehyang. "The Daily Life of Commoners: Changing Image in Late-Choson Dynasty Genre Painting." *Korean Culture* (Winter, 1999): 20-21.

¹³ Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day." Pgs. 61-62.

Sin Yun-bok's genre paintings of *kisaeng* criticize the state of Joseon society while also suggesting the social position of the *kisaeng* and the manner in which she participated in everyday life. The significance of Sin's works should be considered through the complicated double standard set by the *yangban* for the behavior of women of differing classes. During the start of the Joseon dynasty, major reform policies and a new social order were introduced. This new system, referred to as Neo-Confucianism, called for social order and observance of practicality and modesty in political and social life.¹⁴ The status of traditional women—as opposed to those of low, *chonmin*-born status who lived outside of traditional societal structure—was marked by legal and social subordination to men in accordance with the prevalent Confucian ethic.¹⁵ One of the main organizing factors of Neo-Confucian Joseon society was virtually complete segregation of the sexes, especially for those of the upper classes.¹⁶ Confucian morals, most heavily applied to women of the upper classes, limited access that women had to public space and thus limited potential interactions with men outside their families.¹⁷ The virtues of obedience to one's husband and chastity were upheld over all other pursuits.¹⁸

Kisaeng were part of the lowest class, the *chonmin*—"servant" or "slave" class—and members of a state-organized system where they worked mainly as courtesans in late Joseon society. But at the same time, the occupation of the *kisaeng* allotted them the greatest amount of freedoms known to women of any social status in Joseon society. Throughout the Joseon dynasty, there were numerous demands that the *kisaeng* system be abolished because it conflicted with Neo-Confucian ethics and was funded by taxes inflicted on the greater public, while mostly

¹⁴ Kim, Yung-Chung, ed. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Pgs. 79-80.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Pgs. 89-91.

¹⁶ Park, Young-hai, ed. *Women of the Yi Dynasty*. Studies on Korean Women Series. Seoul, Korea: Research Center for Asian Women, Sookmyung Women's University, 1986. Pgs. 142-143.

¹⁷ Kim, Yung-Chung, ed. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Pgs. 81-85.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Pgs. 160-161.

serving the men of the upper class. Yet despite the political, social, and cultural problems that they posed for Joseon society, the system was never successfully eradicated. The social positions of the *kisaeng* and traditional woman were fundamentally different; *kisaeng* were almost the direct antithesis to the traditional Joseon woman. Women from different social classes were expected to behave in drastically different manners. They lived outside of the space of a traditional home, had access to public events, did not have to follow strict forms of dress, and were not required to suppress emotion or sexuality. Unlike traditional women, they were often educated in at least some of the Chinese classics, witty conversation, music, dance, and occasionally other art forms.¹⁹

What made the social position of the *kisaeng* especially difficult to maneuver was this double standard of behavior that the *yangban* class set for her. The *kisaeng* was meant to be everything that the traditional woman could not be: educated, witty, well-versed in the arts, sexually appealing, and beautiful in the public eye. Yet at the same time, she was still relegated to a social position at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, faced with the same stigmas as those who were common slaves.²⁰ Furthermore, Sin's images of *kisaeng* must be understood in relation to her social position, which equates visual representations of *kisaeng* as sensual and erotic.²¹ Unlike traditional Joseon women, *kisaeng* were not required to protect their chastity above all else; instead, they were marked by their presumed *lack* of chastity.²² Socially, sexual promiscuity was seen as part of a *kisaeng*'s duty as a government slave.²³ For Joseon men—primarily the *yangban* class—*kisaeng* were sought for their potential to provide romantic love along with sexual fulfillment and intellectual companionship outside of typically unfulfilling

¹⁹ Kim, Yung-Chung, ed. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Pg. 139-144.

²⁰ Suh, Ji Young. "Women on the Borders of the Ladies' Quarters and the Ginyeo House." Pgs. 137-145.

²¹ *Ibid*, Pgs. 137-138.

²² Maynes, Katrina. "Korean Perceptions of Chastity, Gender Roles, and Libido: From *Kisaeng* to the Twenty First Century." *Grand Valley Journal of History* 1, no. 1 (2011): Pgs. 6-8.

²³ Suh, Ji Young. "Women on the Borders of the Ladies' Quarters and the Ginyeo House." *Korea Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): Pg. 13

marriages. To these elite men, *kisaeng* appeared as exotic and unique women drastically different from their traditional, conservative wives. As such, *kisaeng* regularly interacted with powerful men and in many cases later became their concubines.²⁴

However, for the *kisaeng*, the relationship appeared quite different. The mark of a successful *kisaeng* was her ability to seduce men of the upper classes and present a façade of promiscuity. While not required by law, nor enforced by coercion, engagement in sexual activities was of great practical importance to these women and often functioned as a form of self-preservation. Securing a wealthy patron meant securing an emotional and material patron, which had the possibility of raising her social position if she were accepted as a patron's legal concubine. Because of the brevity of a *kisaeng*'s career, securing providence for later life was of great import, and thus sexual promiscuity was vital to the life of the *kisaeng*.²⁵ The personal freedoms given to *kisaeng* and the amount of time they spent with men of the upper classes meant that they were able to at least partially partake in activities in society. A good example of this is in various records of relationships *kisaeng* held with scholars and their appearance in stories and novels as heroines.²⁶ While this placed them socially in a space with a certain amount of influence on elite Joseon men, they were also relegated to the same social existence of those at the margins of society, existing as both social outcasts and influential participants in society at the same time.

These attitudes on the part of the *yangban* are reflected in literary and artistic forms, and in recorded performed poetry on the part of the *kisaeng*. In large part, the *kisaeng*'s prowess rested in her ability to absorb and imitate dominant *yangban* high culture and language.²⁷

Prominent discourses that represent the *kisaeng* come mostly from men of the *yangban* class as

²⁴ Maynes, Katrina. "Korean Perceptions of Chastity, Gender Roles, and Libido." Pgs. 6-8.

²⁵ Suh, Ji Young. "Women on the Borders of the Ladies' Quarters and the Ginyeo House." *Korea Journal* 48, no. 1 (2008): Pg. 13

²⁶ Kim, Yung-Chung, ed. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. Pg. 140-141.

²⁷ Suh, Ji Young. "Women on the Borders of the Ladies' Quarters and the Ginyeo House." Pgs. 137-145.

kisaeng were not equipped with the ability to represent themselves in greater Joseon society. These depictions were idealistic and presented the life of the *kisaeng* as overtly happy and materially comfortable, if morally disdainful. The connection of *kisaeng*'s image to overt sensuality and eroticism meant that she was a visual symbol for archetypal materialism rather than an established individual. When the *kisaeng* did represent herself, it was through dominant *yangban* cultural forms, such as through short poetry form or music developed as forms of entertainment.²⁸ These socio-cultural norms were similarly impressed upon artists of the *chungin* class through their connections to both *yangban*, commoner, and *chonmin* classes. *Chungin* painters also played a role in constructing discourse representing *kisaeng* through paintings of them.²⁹ The *chungin* may have arguably been better equipped with the ability to understand the liminality of the *kisaeng* in society than other social classes because they held a transitional space in society as well, yet those crafting these discourses were still predominately male.³⁰

Sin utilizes images of *kisaeng* in his work to criticize the relationship between *yangban* and the rest of Joseon society. Scholar Lim Tae-sung argues that Sin Yun-bok makes his critique of the *yangban* class through disregarding the fixed relationship between image and text—here meant to be understood as established symbol—in Confucian aesthetics and instead establishes a system of dual symbolism in his genre scenes in which one symbol represents two meanings.³¹ Confucian aesthetics in formative arts traditionally places the greatest importance on the symbolism within a painting rather than on formal beauty. The ideology that can be drawn from the represented symbolic forms in the picture take much higher precedence than formal elements.³² By placing two directly opposed meanings together, Sin reflects contrasting images

²⁸ Suh, Ji Young. "Women on the Borders of the Ladies' Quarters and the Ginyeo House." Pgs. 137-138.

²⁹ Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. Pgs. 4-7.

³⁰ Suh, Ji Young. "Women on the Borders of the Ladies' Quarters and the Ginyeo House." Pgs. 137-138.

³¹ Lim, Tae-Seung. "Ridicule through Lotus." Pgs. 120-126.

³² Lim, Tae-Seung. "Paradigm Shifts of Regions and Icons: The Aesthetic Significance of Kim Hong-Do's Paintings." *Korea Journal* 46, no. 2 (July 15, 2006): Pg. 216.

of the *yangban*. This dual symbolism is used to criticize the *yangban* for their duplicitous behavior and to illustrate that the irrationality and self-indulgence of the *yangban* was made possible through Neo-Confucian ideology. Sin takes the image-text relationship of symbols crafted by Confucian consciousness and uses them to criticize those who uphold it.³³

The best example of Sin's use of this dual symbolism in his work is found in *An Evening by the Lotus Pond* (fig. 4). In this scene, three *yangban* and three *kisaeng* sit in a garden by a lotus pond while enjoying music. Here, the lotus contains two meanings. On the one hand, the lotus symbolizes the Chinese notion of the "superior man," a *junzi*, one who perfectly embodies Confucian learning. On the other hand, when juxtaposed with *kisaeng*, the lotus symbolizes female sexuality. Furthermore, as a symbol in painting, the lotus typically references the "sacred," but here in relation to the *kisaeng* it symbolizes the "profane." Similarly, the instrument that the *kisaeng* plays in typical painting signifies a "bosom friend," which evokes a sacred notion of close friendship, but here through its connection to entertainment it is made immoral. Finally, the *yangban* himself functions as dual symbol. He presents himself as a true literati—scholar-official of the *yangban* class—by partaking in delightful and sensual activities from which inspiration may be drawn for his scholarly work, outwardly symbolizing a literati. But by enjoying the company of women, rather than the company of nature, he proves himself to be a pseudo-literati, a man merely pretending.³⁴ By utilizing double meanings for single symbols, Sin creates a satirical scene in which he criticizes the hypocritical *yangban* behavior.

This painting is especially sensual because it demonstrates a *kisaeng*'s sexual freedom in the couple on the left. The man has removed his hat and sits with the *kisaeng* on his lap, his arms around her waist. While the other two *kisaeng* participate in less sensual affairs, the couple

³³ Lim, Tae-Seung. "Ridicule through Lotus." Pgs. 120-126.

³⁴ Ibid, Pgs. 122-130.

suggest not only the romantic desire vested in the *kisaeng* by the *yangban*, but also sexual desire. Significantly, this couple is centered over the lotus pond, another strong symbol of female sexuality. The *kisaeng* are thus made into idealized forms who are talented in conversation, music, and are sexually liberated. Yet, while the scene satirizes the *yangban* and presents erotic overtones, it also presents some semblance of Confucian decorum.

During the Joseon dynasty, paintings were meant to be viewed from right to left, and top to bottom. The most important element was meant to be viewed first, and was generally located either central to the work or towards the top corner of the painting.³⁵ In genre painting, as evidenced by Kim Hong Do's *Women Washing Clothes by the Stream* (fig. 2), a hierarchy of figures in the painting can be determined generally from their placement in the composition, with men of the upper classes often residing in the upper right-hand side.³⁶ Thus, in accordance with decorum, the standing *yangban* marks the male figures as hierarchically above the female figures, and though he is not situated in the traditional top right-hand corner, he is central to the scene while the female figures are located at the margins. However, the seated figures all sit on relatively the same plane. Further, the standing figure looks to the amorous couple, notifying us of their presence. It is the *kisaeng*'s participation in the *yangban*'s duplicitous behavior which suggests the *kisaeng*'s reality. The *kisaeng* relies on her relationship with *yangban* men for insurance of her future well-being. Yet, these are the same men who follow Neo-Confucian doctrine which proclaims the *kisaeng* system to be immoral, but which has created the conditions for its existence. The *yangban* are here presented as hypocritical, ridiculous men participating in acts that their supposedly modest lifestyles do not support.

³⁵ Allan, Elisa. "Double Standard for Feminine Ideals." Pg. 55, and Chung, Saehyang. "The Daily Life of Commoners." Pgs. 14-25.

³⁶ Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day." Pg. 67.

While this suggestion is subtle on the part of Sin, it is emphasized by how relationships function within Neo-Confucian society where the self is not endowed with worth as an individual being, but instead an individual's existence is determined by the relationship they have with others.³⁷ While the *kisaeng* face insecure lives, they are also shown to have some semblance of social freedom through their relationship to the *yangban*; perhaps not so dissimilar is the relationship between Sin's *chungin* status and the personal freedoms he possesses in his position between the *yangban* and the lower classes. Partaking in leisurely activities while enjoying nature scenes shows that the *kisaeng* women have the freedom to practice their art and even to inspire the *yangban*, who went on such outings for the sake of inspiration in their own work as literati artists and writers. This theme is even more evident in *A Boat Party on the Clean River* (fig. 6). Scholar Elisa Allen argues that in this scene the *kisaeng* are represented as the ideal boating companions for an outing meant for the *yangban* to escape the isolation and reality of the city. This is a sort of spiritual and intellectual outing rather than an outing for pure enjoyment in which the *yangban* literati seek inspiration from nature. The river in the painting symbolizes a break from the "shores" where reality waits and so it references a high mindedness. It is significant then that the *kisaeng* should function as companions to the literati.³⁸

By this argument, the *kisaeng* functions as an inspiration and a suitable intellectual for the purposes of the *yangban*. She is not merely a pretty curiosity, but instead is a worthy companion to the *yangban* men. However, the *yangban* still function in this work in the same way the *yangban* function in *An Evening by the Lotus Pond* as a dual symbol: they are outwardly respected literati, but their immodest actions point out the discrepancy in their supposedly modest lifestyle. These *yangban* flirt with *kisaeng* on a leisurely boat ride, an activity not

³⁷ Lee Sook-in. "Transforming Gender Relations through Intimacy." *Korea Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2002): Pg. 47.

³⁸ Allan, Elisa. "Double Standard for Feminine Ideals." Pgs. 37-38.

uncommon to literati at the time,³⁹ but they do little in the scene to suggest their activities are actually productive for their scholarly lives. All of the *yangban* are more interested in their *kisaeng* companions than in their natural setting. Whether the *yangban* in the painting thought their outing was excusable for the sake of high minded escapism or not, they still prove that the dominant Neo-Confucian doctrine which they uphold publicly is what lends them the freedom and privilege to partake in the companionship of *kisaeng* privately. Similarly, the *kisaeng* is simultaneously shown as possessing great social freedom while also reliant on the *yangban* cultural norms she has learned for her stability in society. The relationship between different classes in Joseon society is certainly an important theme of Sin's work.

In *Holding a Drinking Party* (fig. 7), a *kisaeng* pours drinks for a group of *yangban* men in the middle of the day, which implies that they have neglected their posts to visit the *kisaeng* house. While most of the men wear normal daily clothing for *yangban*, one wears the robes and pointed hat of a scholar. The image is seen from an elevated vantage point indicated by the line of roofs at the bottom of the painting, meaning the viewer is sees the scene from above, where they can spy on the drinking party. Similarly to *An Evening by the Lotus Pond*, this painting pokes fun at the *yangban* who present themselves as literati—especially the man dressed as a Confucian scholar—but who do not behave as such. Thus, following Lim's method, the *yangban* in this painting can similarly be described as the dual symbol which refers to both the literati and the pseudo-literati who pretends to embody the life of a true scholar. The *yangban* men neglect their duties as officials while the *kisaeng* fulfills her duty by entertaining the men. This image leaves the viewer to question the *kisaeng*'s role in this scene. To what degree is the alluring *kisaeng* to be blamed for the behavior of the officials? She is laboring while the *yangban* play. She is stigmatized for her status as a low class woman, yet obligated to entertain the same

³⁹ Allan, Elisa. "Double Standard for Feminine Ideals." Pgs. 37-38.

yangban class who disdain her. Whether the Joseon viewer would have recognized it and given it further thought or not, this scene particularly emphasizes the role of the *kisaeng* as government slave: she is employed by the same men she is serving, but her life is supported by the taxes of the public made up of mostly commoners. The *kisaeng* fulfills her duty as government employee while the officials who remain in power do not. Sin thus makes his criticism of the *yangban* double standards clear.

Sin Yun-bok's *Women on Dano Day* (fig. 3) is perhaps one of the most remarkable examples of Korean genre painting from the Joseon dynasty. Scholar Chung Saehyang argues in regard to the iconography of "common women washing clothes by a stream" that while *Dano Day* is influenced by a number of pictorial sources, there are no visible traces of imitative borrowing.⁴⁰ In this scene a group of *kisaeng* is celebrating Dano Day, a holiday marking the end of planting season in the agrarian society when men and women would take time off from their labors to relax and refresh themselves before the start of summer. The women bathe, braid their hair, and ride on a swing in the setting of a real Korean landscape—an element which links it to growing interest in nativist themes in art—stationed on a deeply sloping hill among rocks and trees. Bright colors liven the scene as two young monks spy on the women from behind the rocks. The *kisaeng* climbing onto the swing directs the viewer's eye to her as she commands the scene with her action. Movement throughout the scene is emphasized by large and small diagonals, such as in the lines of the rocks and shapes of the trees.

Dano Day is particularly remarkable in that it displays a total disregard for Confucian hierarchy instilled in painting. The women are the focus of the work, while the only male figures—young, boyish Buddhist monks—are relegated to the background. With this extremely unconventional composition, Sin makes clear his conscious effort to convey the *kisaeng* social

⁴⁰ Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day." Pg. 66.

position. The most important space in the painting, the upper right-hand corner, is given to the *kisaeng*, with the woman on the swing taking the greatest notice. She is wearing bright attire and maintains a powerful, composed stance as she climbs onto the swing. Her companions behind her are relaxed, enjoying the warm weather. The eye of the viewer then goes to the traditional common woman entering the frame from the bottom right. She functions in propping up the side of the painting with her position on the hill. While her breasts are bared, she has a rugged appearance and acts as contrast to the delicate figures of the *kisaeng*. In following the diagonal of the hill down to the stream, the viewer comes across four women bathing.

These women are the most shocking aspect of the painting, though as Chung points out, they are painted with a sense of Confucian decorum. Only one of the women is shown in a frontal view, yet her arms mostly cover her nude body.⁴¹ While to the Joseon viewer these women would appear sensual and even erotic, they are doing nothing which might suggest this. Their nudity is a result of their bathing. The standing woman, however, is another matter. While her actions do not necessarily make her erotic, her stance would be shocking to the Joseon viewer. The viewer only sees a profile view of her, but her body is quite visible. Most remarkably, her face is turned towards the viewer, unaware that she should be ashamed of her nudity. This provocative figure has no known precedent in Korean painting. Furthermore, each woman takes on an individualized posture and has been painted with qualities that suggest unique personalities. However, their facial expressions reveal a sense of restraint. Despite the holiday, they are not joyful, but rather resigned. By painting the women in this manner, Sin suggests both the freedom given to the *kisaeng* and the instability of her position.

The elements which suggest the *kisaeng*'s reality are subtle. The voyeuristic act of the two monks could be easily read as the reason for the *kisaeng*'s discomfort. However, Sin may

⁴¹ Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano." Pg. 68.

have also been painting the unhappiness and sorrow felt by *kisaeng* women in their insecure social position. These women are painted in a private moment and are participating in activities for themselves, rather than serving the men of the upper class as in some of Sin's other paintings. Chung suggests that the liminal social position of the *kisaeng* can almost be read in the painting. One group of *kisaeng* is stationed at the bottom of the hill while the other is at the top, almost as if Sin wanted to present them as moving between the culture of the upper class and their position in the lowest class with relative freedom.⁴²

Perhaps Sin meant to further emphasize this notion through their corresponding states of dress. The women at the bottom of the hill are participating in the private everyday activity of bathing, merely women performing a daily task as lower class women who have the freedom to bathe outdoors. The women at the top of the hill are also participating in common activities, but they are fully clothed in their bright attire, beautiful creatures even in their private moment. This impression is heightened all the more by the traditional common woman who enters the painting in the middle of the two groups from the bottom right-hand corner. She provides a sort of visual division between the two groups of women, as if marking the commoner class in between the *chonmin* status of the *kisaeng* and the *yangban* class the *kisaeng* serves. However, I suggest this with a certain amount of caution. The scene is meant to be humorous to some degree and, as Chung points out, by including the boyish monks Sin has minimized the vulgar effect while still retaining satirical intent.⁴³ *Women on Dano Day* presents *kisaeng* in a private moment and suggests the instability of her life, but was ultimately painted for the sake of material enjoyment of the Joseon men who had the wealth to buy artworks.

⁴² Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day." Pg. 67.

⁴³ Ibid, Pg. 68.

Allen argues that Sin's images of *kisaeng* do not necessarily suggest the *kisaeng* reality, but instead suggest a reality that remains unacknowledged in art, a depiction of these idealized women as living far less-than-ideal lives. His images reveal the double standard of expectation for *kisaeng* set by *yangban* elitism. Yet they remain idealized figures and Sin does not adequately present their reality: this double standard of behavioral expectation is not what Sin necessarily aims to show. Sin Yun-bok *instead* presents his figures in this manner to criticize the double standard of *yangban* behavior: they simultaneously proclaim the *kisaeng* system immoral and utilize it to the full extent. Sin's idealized *kisaeng* allow him to criticize the hypocritical *yangban* for their stance on open sensuality while suggesting *kisaeng* reality.⁴⁴ Though he hints at the social insecurity and fluctuating identity of the *kisaeng*, his images only concretely present *kisaeng* as beautiful, interesting women without showing the true hardship these women faced. Furthermore, his greatest concern is satirizing the men of the upper class, rather than promoting social change for women of the lowest class. Even though these works still function within many accepted conventions for painting the idealized female form, and as Allen argues thus did little to alter the social position of these women by altering attitudes toward gender within Joseon society, their socio-cultural significance should not be diminished.

Though to the untrained eye these works fit comfortably into the spectrum of traditional Korean painting, they are remarkable enough to still be regarded as pillars of Korean genre painting from the Joseon dynasty. I argue that despite the incongruity between artistic intent and actual socio-cultural impact, Sin's works are still significant in their criticism of the *yangban* class. By criticizing the hypocritical *yangban* stance toward sensuality, he leaves room for the viewer to consider other duplicitous behavior enacted by the *yangban*. Among them is the double standard of behavior set for *kisaeng* and the traditional woman.

⁴⁴ Allan, Elisa. "Double Standard for Feminine Ideals." Pgs. 58-59; 72-76.

Further, because Sin's paintings are unique and push boundaries of Confucian aesthetics as well as genre painting, these works are especially important to consider in relation to later genre paintings and are solid examples of social and aesthetic progression in late Joseon dynasty painting. Sin's paintings of *kisaeng* step beyond academic and earlier genre paintings to not only begin including these low-class women in Joseon visual vocabulary, but depict them beyond rote idealization as participants in daily life; they are not representatives of their occupation, but are instead women who work as entertainers. The difference is quite subtle, but regardless Sin's *kisaeng* mark a shift in representation of the *kisaeng* archetype. These works present alternative conventions for genre painting, exemplify shifting attitudes in Joseon society, and perhaps give voice to a growing social—and particularly female—discontent.

Genre painting was initially developed by a *yangban* man named Yun Tuso out of a similar school of thought as new true-view landscape painting, popular among literati painters: the *Shirhak* School.⁴⁵ The *Shirhak*—"Practical Learning"—school was an intellectual movement which promoted valuing the native landscape, culture, and the "morally untainted" common people.⁴⁶ The *Shirhak* school of thought was popular among progressive *chungin* and *yangban* scholars, and emphasized an empirical approach to assessing and solving problems for the sake of social and economic reform.⁴⁷ Although, painters of the *yangban* class started genre painting tradition, it was painters of the *chungin* class, like Kim Hong Do and Sin Yun-bok, who developed it to its full extent.⁴⁸

The group of artisans and technicians which made up the *chungin* class existed between the *yangban* elite and the commoners, allowing them a certain level of flexibility in their social interactions and access to a greater range of experiences. This allowed them to act as

⁴⁵ Chung, Saehyang. "The Daily Life of Commoners." Pgs. 14-25.

⁴⁶ Allan, Elisa. "Double Standard for Feminine Ideals." Pg. 2.

⁴⁷ Chung, Saehyang. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day." Pg. 58.

⁴⁸ Chung, Saehyang. "The Daily Life of Commoners." Pgs. 14-25.

intermediaries between people who would not have likely connected otherwise. At the same time, they had limited political opportunities and were not recognized by the *yangban* as contributors to cultural production. They were the main beneficiaries of increased trade between Korea, Japan, and China in the late-Joseon period as a relatively newly established hereditary class, gaining wealth through their occupations as technicians and artisans, and through private trade made possible in part by their access to education in Chinese classics and the arts. The result was often the pursuit of cultural activities.⁴⁹ The wealth and education of the *chungin* helped them gain social power and allowed them the social space to challenge dominant Confucian elitism, leading to the further break down of ideological power within Joseon society.⁵⁰

The link between genre painting and the *Shirhak* School meant that early forms of genre painting depicted idealized images of commoners in a manner which promoted their “untainted” morality in the face of increasing materialism within society. However, these earlier scenes did little to depict the reality of the hard life of the lower classes, as they utilized idealized images of commoners to provide commentary on the morality of society, rather than depict commoners’ lives correctly.⁵¹ By choosing to paint *kisaeng*, Sin diverged from earlier forms of genre painting. Earlier genre paintings followed certain forms for the depiction of commoners in line with Confucian decorum, which calls for the presentation of women in a discreet manner and never includes potentially sensual or erotic themes.⁵² Thus, Sin Yun-bok’s scenes quite significantly take up the women of the lowest classes, especially the *kisaeng*, as their subject within an art world guided by strict Confucian ethics and aesthetics.

Sin’s colleague, Kim Hong Do, was the most prominent painter at court. However, Kim, too, was considered a member of the *chungin* class in the rapidly changing late Joseon dynasty.

⁴⁹ Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. Pgs. 199-200.

⁵⁰ Allan, Elisa. “Double Standard for Feminine Ideals.” Pg. 2.

⁵¹ Chung, Saehyang. “The Daily Life of Commoners.” Pgs. 14-25.

⁵² *Ibid*, Pgs. 14-16.

He painted every kind of artwork required of the royal court, including highly important portraits of the king and crown prince, paintings recording special events, and literati paintings. He was also respected for his humorous genre scenes. Scholar Lim Tae-sung remarks that both Kim and Sin were “pseudo literati,” aware of the conventions of literati painting and occasionally producing literati-type works while also painting a myriad of works that fell outside the purview of literati painting, partaking in social activities deemed unfit for a scholar, as well as functioning within the *chungin* class.⁵³ Yet the differences in Kim’s and Sin’s works are certainly visible. Most importantly, Kim’s works followed most of the conventions established in earlier genre painting, including certain precepts of Confucian decorum which Sin’s works lack. They carry a different tone as well, especially because Kim’s works do not contain images of *kisaeng*, who are visually coded as erotic, and instead present the commoner class as a beacon of morality.⁵⁴

In Kim Hong Do’s *Women Washing Clothes by the Stream* (fig. 2), Kim’s observance of Confucian decorum is obvious in the hierarchical positioning of the *yangban* over the traditional common women,⁵⁵ as well as in the relaxed and jovial manner with which the women carry on their work. These hardworking, rough women are archetypes from Joseon society’s Confucian moral code.⁵⁶ The viewer would naturally start at the corner where the *yangban* man hid, down to the women laboring by the stream. The women are unaware of the man, and so they sit in relaxed postures with their clothes rolled up around their waists. Despite how difficult their daily labor is, they appear at ease with it, enjoying the companionship of one another. Their facial expressions are bright as they wash their clothes, and the woman in the back braids her hair and her child reaches for her.

⁵³ Lim, Tae-Seung. “Paradigm Shifts of Regions and Icons.” Pgs. 209-211.

⁵⁴ Chung, Saehyang. “The Daily Life of Commoners.” Pgs. 19-22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 20-21.

⁵⁶ Chung, Saehyang. “Sin Yunbok’s Women on Dano Day.” Pg. 59.

Here, the voyeuristic act of the *yangban* is quite different than that of the *yangban* in Sin's works. The women in *Women Washing Clothes by the Stream* are not *kisaeng*, and thus are not immediately associated with sensuality or eroticism. Further, they are performing wifely duties expected of their status and the child in the scene heightens this effect by representing the woman as a mother, respected in society for having fulfilled her ultimate wifely duty. Thus, the *yangban* is the only figure who can be ascribed with immoral behavior.⁵⁷ Kim presents a scene where collective labor is celebrated and common women are represented as ideal female laborers in contrast to the voyeuristic *yangban* who spies on them. The *yangban*'s immorality heightens the joyful, moral labor of the women. The vivid brushwork and light touches of color enhance the figures by giving them a sense of realism and vitality.

Kim's *By a Well* (fig. 5) is painted in a similar manner. Common women are seen socializing at the well while retrieving water for their domestic tasks, while a *yangban* man guzzles water from the jar of one of the women. The Joseon viewer's eye would start with the women in the corner and move towards the center of the painting where the *yangban* stands drinking water and then to the other two women. The *yangban* man, known by the *gat*—hat of a *yangban* man—in his left hand, stands partially undressed by the well. He guzzles water after begging it from one of the common women as his rotund belly pokes out of his shirt. All three women look away from the man with their bodies turned and with facial expressions of discomfort. Meanwhile, the woman behind him waits her turn with a displeased expression, perhaps thinking ill-thoughts of the boorish man keeping her from her labor. Though less obvious than the former painting, Kim displays a similar interest in the industrious, moral common woman in contrast with a less moral *yangban* man. This is meant to be a humorous scene poking fun at the careless *yangban*. Kim is far more intent upon instilling a sense of

⁵⁷ Allan, Elisa. "Double Standard for Feminine Ideals." Pgs. 34-36.

morality of the lower classes in his work than Sin, more closely following moral conventions expected of paintings. Further, Sin's works focus more on landscape elements rather than rely on the white space that Kim uses to suggest figural placement, and Sin's figures possess a greater sense of realism, which make them that much more bold. Most importantly, the most obvious difference between the work of Kim and Sin is that Kim did not paint scenes of *kisaeng*. Unlike Kim, Sin also did not necessarily paint female archetypes, as evidenced by the *kisaeng* in *Women on Dano Day* (fig. 3) and the female figures in *Women by a Crystal Stream* (fig. 1).

Because Kim was a proponent of the *Shirhak* School, to say that many of his genre scenes present the virtues of the lower class people is valid. Allen argues that in Kim's work, in a manner similar to Sin's work, the artist's socio-political intent for the works and their actual socio-political impact are likely different. While his intent is to advocate for a greater appreciation of women in congruence with his promotion of better valuing of the lower classes, the manner in which he paints the lower classes in idealized conditions and presents women as idealized figures removed of their harsh living conditions may have instead perpetuated the low status and expected gender roles of women by idealizing women in a manner strictly in line with Confucian ethics. Also similar to Sin, Kim criticizes the *yangban*. Allen remarks that Kim contrasts his idealization of traditional common women with *yangban* to ultimately point out the moral decay of the *yangban* class. Despite openly teasing and criticizing the *yangban* in his works, Kim remained an extremely prominent painter, eventually being offered a position as a magistrate which was quite a feat for a court painter. What made Kim different from Sin was his role as a *Shirhak* scholar, which allowed him to assert that his genre paintings were done in the spirit of *Shirhak* values. By placing his criticism within the bounds of the "accepted iconography"

of *Shirhak* values, Kim was able to retain his respect and position in *Dohwaseo* while also promoting economic and administrative reform.⁵⁸

The comparison between the work of Kim and Sin shows how *chungin* painters developed artistic forms to suit their needs both within and outside of academic painting, and thus how differently *chungin* artists could function within their class experiences in relation to greater society. Kim floated between the world of state-sanctioned painting and painting for the private market; meanwhile, Sin presumably spent most of his career painting for the latter. Sin's works fell outside the conventions of earlier genre painting and his work was certainly rejected by the arbiters of formal, academic painting. It was not that Sin painted *women* in formal art which got him assumedly dismissed from *Dohwaseo*, but the way that he painted them: Sin's works mainly depict *kisaeng* and include many elements which suggest sensuality and eroticism.⁵⁹ Paintings of commoners, especially women, were perceived as unsuitable for painting forms of the literati, *kisaeng* doubly so.⁶⁰ From the early Joseon dynasty, the royal court was the main center for artistic patronage and as such set the conventions for the production and style of works in this period. *Dohwaseo* was established early in the period and provided support to the firm institution of Neo-Confucian ideology through court-commissioned projects. The painters of *Dohwaseo*, and more generally in Joseon society, were considered part of the *chungin* class because they belonged to an artisanal field and could not take exams for appointment in civil or military office, especially in the latter part of the dynasty when secondary social statuses had more formally solidified.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Allan, Elisa. "Double Standard for Feminine Ideals." Pgs. 63-68, and Oh, Chu-sok. *The Art of Kim Hong-Do: A Great Court Painter of 18th Century Korea*. Chicago, IL: Art Media Resources, 2005. Pg. 43-45.

⁵⁹ Lim, Tae-Seung. "Ridicule through Lotus: The Anti-Confucian Discourse in Shin Yun-Bok's Painting Language." *Korea Journal* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 116-35.

⁶⁰ Chung, Saehyang. "The Daily Life of Commoners." Pg. 16.

⁶¹ The bureau did require examinations for employment, but these examinations were outside of the official state examination system, which highlights how these painters were perceived as far less important within the court by the *yangban* class. The *chungin* could not take official government examinations, and thus were vastly limited in how much they could actively influence politics from within the system. Hwang, Kyung Moon. *Beyond Birth*. Pgs. 106-112.

Academization of painting in the Joseon dynasty was a product of institutional policies and aesthetic concern for the ruling elite. The position of painters as producers of state-sanctioned culture meant that their work was highly conventional. This work strictly followed Confucian aesthetic conventions and depicted specific imagery in line with official state-rhetoric. This included the omission of any imagery depicting people in social classes outside of the *yangban*, and any *yangban* outside of official state events. Literati forms were also produced in accordance with the courtly pursuit of Confucian scholarship and promotion of modest living. These works are generally contemplative paintings of plants, symbolic animals, imaginary landscapes, and newer true-view landscapes.⁶² Sin's genre paintings were not conventional.⁶³ While Sin's works did observe some manner of decorum in the representation of women, exemplified by their placement within the picture plane, and their semi-modest postures and dress, they did not observe Confucian decorum to the degree that even previous genre paintings had, such as those of Kim Hong Do.⁶⁴

The development of genre painting was linked with the development of an art market. The erosion of traditional Confucian values and subsequent replacement with an interest in material and sensual pursuits included increased interest in the buying and selling of artworks.⁶⁵ Greater shifting ideologies present in the eighteenth century Joseon dynasty are similarly present in the genre scenes painted by *chungin* painters like Sin Yun-bok. Lim argues that Sin's work was mostly popular among the "pseudo-literati" of the *chungin* class. The elements of Sin's

⁶² The true-view landscape form was one of the newer nativist painting types being developed at this time. Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. Pgs. 54-55.

⁶³ There are plenty examples of court-approved works which present court life for the sake of recording important events, many of which Kim Hong Do painted. Cambon, Pierre, and Joseph P Carroll. *The Poetry of Ink: The Korean Literati Tradition, 1392-1910*. Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux: Musée National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet, Association pour le Rayonnement des Arts Asiatiques, 2005. Pgs. 206-215.

⁶⁴ Chung, Saehyang P. "Sin Yunbok's Women on Dano Day." Pgs. 55-70, and Chung, Saehyang. "The Daily Life of Commoners." Pgs. 14-25.

⁶⁵ Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. Pgs. 199-200.

paintings which criticized the *yangban* class appealed to a public who was tired of *yangban* elitism.⁶⁶

Growing interest in materialism within society gave way to an art market where works were increasingly treated as commodities and new forms of art were produced to meet the demands of the market. A rise in consumer culture and an increase in artistic activities meant that artistic pursuits were no longer exclusively part of the *yangban* world. The “commercial literati painter” emerged, challenging earlier distinctions between amateur-literati painters and court painters. These *chungin* artists produced works beyond the confines of earlier traditional artistic conventions, breaking from literati tradition to produce works for a commercial market. Joseon painting no longer circulated around official state cultural avenues, but instead saw its greatest progression outside of these *yangban*-centric modes. Artistic production was no longer a matter for any single social class, though this is not to say that the development of art was simple or linear. Rather, the relationship between social class and the production of the visual arts in Joseon society should be viewed as intimate.⁶⁷

Because Sin likely produced most of his work just within the bounds of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, and because he was part of the *chungin* class, his works are especially important to consider in relation to his class status. His work functions as evidence of shifting attitudes towards art production and could only have been possible for him to produce within the context of his own class status. Sin’s class-specific cultural experiences as a member of the *chungin* class are what gave him the space in which to create these works; he participated in and marketed his works to the ever-increasing middle-class, satirized the upper-class, and painted the lower-class in an unprecedented manner. Sin was familiar with court painting and

⁶⁶ Lim, Tae-Seung. “Ridicule through Lotus.” Pg. 131-132.

⁶⁷ Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. Pgs. 200-201.

literati painting of the dominant *yangban* high culture, and had a large degree of social mobility as *chungin* in which he could interact with people of all classes while also existing within a somewhat similarly liminal space as the lower classes. The social position that he had gave him access to many facets of society inaccessible to the lower classes or undesirable to the upper class. The socio-political changes happening within society, coupled with the greater conditions of prosperity, allowed him room to criticize the upper class while still gaining profit.

As seen in the satirical class-centered themes of Sin's paintings, his status as a *chungin* painter was not the only matter of class at play. Sin's subtle depictions of *kisaeng* as participants of everyday life point out two greater themes at play in the late Joseon dynasty: they are strong visual evidence of rapidly shifting social relations and are important examples of cultural production taking place outside of *yangban*-centric modes of production which point out the progressive nature of genre painting in the hands of the *chungin* class. Scholar Kyung Moon Hwang argues that the achievements of secondary status groups on the late-Joseon period, such as the *chungin*, were a precursor to Korean modernity.⁶⁸ This a complicated argument to make, but one which is visible in art of the period.

The artworks produced especially by the *chungin* artists of the eighteenth century present a sense of Korean intellectual self-sufficiency and cement a new Korean identity, establishing the conditions necessary in the realm of the arts for Korea's progression towards modernism. The rejection of highly conventional qualities of court painting and the cultural hegemony of literati painting in Sin's works are what perhaps make them a prized example of traditional Korean art. Sin rejects the traditions of the *yangban* and presents alternative conventions by which to create genre scenes. Thus, these works also reject many elements of Korean art which had been drawn from Chinese sources. They are strong examples of the nativist forms celebrated until the end of

⁶⁸ Hwang, Kyung Moon. *Beyond Birth*. Pgs. 345-351.

the dynasty by artists and a public increasingly dissatisfied with the crumbling social and economic policies of Confucianism.⁶⁹ Though liberal members of the *yangban* class developed genre painting in Korean art, it is the artists of the *chungin* who advanced it.⁷⁰ Sin Yun-bok's genre paintings of *kisaeng* are example of the markers of pre-modernism present in late Joseon dynasty art.

⁶⁹ Kim, Hongnam. *Korean Arts of the Eighteenth Century: Splendor & Simplicity*. Pg. 75.

⁷⁰ Chung, Saehyang. "The Daily Life of Commoners." Pg. 14.

Images

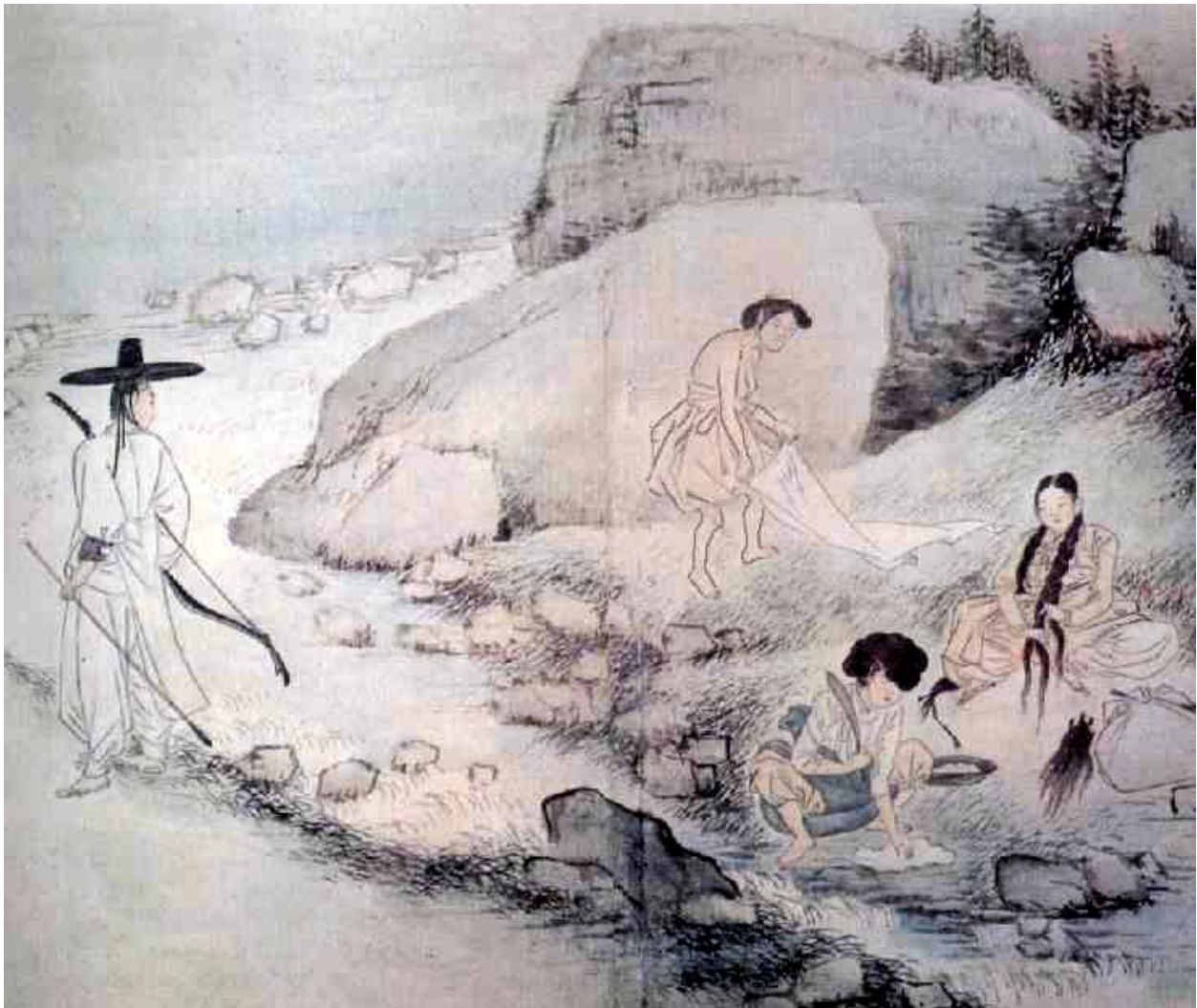


Figure 1

Sin Yun-bok (b. 1758), *Women by a Crystal Stream*, 18th century, Late Joseon, album leaf, ink and light color on paper, 28.3 x 35.2 cm, Kansong Art Museum, Seoul



Figure 2

Kim Hong Do (1745-1806), *Women Washing Clothes by the Stream*, 18th century, Late Joseon, ink and colors on paper, 28 x 24 cm, National Museum of Korea, Seoul



Figure 3

Sin Yun-bok (b. 1758), *Women on Dano Day*, 18th century, Late Joseon, album leaf, ink and light color on paper, 28.3 x 35.2 cm, Kansong Art Museum, Seoul



Figure 4

Sin Yun-bok (b. 1758), *An Evening by the Lotus Pond*, 18th century, Late Joseon, album leaf, ink and light color on paper, 28.3 x 35.2 cm, Kansong Art Museum, Seoul



Figure 5

Kim Hong Do (1745-1806), *By a Well*, 18th century, Late Joseon, ink and colors on paper, 28 x 24 cm, National Museum of Korea, Seoul



Figure 6

Sin Yun-bok (b. 1758), *A Barge Scene on the River*, 18th century, Late Joseon, album leaf, ink and light color on paper, 28.3 x 35.2 cm, Kansong Art Museum, Seoul



Figure 7

Sin Yun-bok (b. 1758), *Holding a Drinking Party*, 18th century, Late Joseon, album leaf, ink and light color on paper, 28.3 x 35.2 cm, Kansong Art Museum, Seoul

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