

A Study of Li Saek's Poems on Paintings: A Comparative Approach

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I. Mutual Illuminations of Literature and Painting

It has been generally proved that literature and painting have much in common, despite the difference in their media and techniques, and that there are some significant parallels as well as direct influences between them: hence the approach to literature through painting may be a very useful method to elucidate its structure and meaning.

It is noteworthy that the Western World and China developed a similar theory concerning the interrelationship between literature and painting. Paintings did not flourish in Ancient Greek culture, but from the Hellenistic time when great importance was attached to sculpture and painting, poetry and the visual arts could be combined in the sense that both were products of imitation. Plutach's saying that "Painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture" implies the intimate relation of the two arts in this period.¹

In the Italian Renaissance although Leonardo da Vinci put emphasis on the visual rather than on literature, there soon emerged a theory of the balanced symbiosis of the two arts such as the Baroque style which was followed by the strict speciality of each genre similar to Classicism. At the turn of the present century, after the Romantic period in which the barrier between literature and music was removed, the study of literature in regard to the mutual illumination of the arts has been regarded as very much meaningful and fruitful.²

In Oriental cultures using Chinese characters, poets were usually multiply talented both in painting and in calligraphy. One of the literary modes developed by these "multiple talents" was "Poems Written on Paintings" (*Chewhasi* 題畫詩). Although Tu Fu and Li Po wrote some poems on

paintings, it was from the Sung dynasty that *Chewhasi* came to the fore. Literary men and painters of the Sung dynasty were not only interested in these two modes of art, but also held they were interrelated. Kuo Hsi (郭熙), a famous painter of Pei Sung said: "As mentioned before, a poem is a picture without form, a picture a poem in form."³ Su Tung-p'o, a little later, claimed: "Poetry and painting follow the same laws: it is by divine inspiration that they become pure and original."⁴ The change of interest from shape to sound in the relation of poetry and painting shows that *chewhasi* was already transferred from the domain of painters to that of poets. After Sung dynasty painting and poetry had formed a more intimate relation, and *Chewhasi* became a popular genre in the Yüan period.⁵

In the Western World, the study of literature through the visual arts laid its emphasis either on showing the common spirit of the time,⁶ or rather on elucidating the individuality of each genre.⁷ In the Oriental tradition, scholars retain interest in the harmonious effects occurring when artists paint and poets write poems on them.

II. The Background of the Appearance of *Chewhasi* at the End of the Koryo Dynasty

Chewhasi appeared for the first time in the middle of the Koryo dynasty when the enthusiasm for Su Tung-p'o was wide-spread among literary men. But writing *chewhasi* on a full scale seems to be connected with Yüan literature. First, *Chewhasi* was mostly written by those who either had chances to stay in Yüan China or passed the official examination given by the Yüan government. Li Che-hyun (李齊賢), Li Kok (李穀), An Chuk (安軸), Li Saek (李穡) all had companionship with the contemporary poets and painters of Yüan China. Li Che-hyun went to Yüan China six times and was associated with Chu Te-jun (朱德潤) and Chao Meng-fu (趙孟頫). In one of his *Chewhasi* he mentioned Chu Te-jun, Chao Meng-fu, T'ieh Kuan, Yüeh Shan, and Chang Yen-fu.⁸ An Chuk passed the official Yüan government examination in 1324, and was appointed as a government official. Li Kok passed the examination in 1333, and obtained a government post. The latter especially kept close friendship with the famous Yüan poets of the time. When he returned to Koryo, his Yüan friends presented poems of parting. Li Saek passed the examination under Ou Yang-hsien (歐陽玄) and was appointed at an official position as a historiographer. It seems that he was associated with Wu Chi (虞集), and Ou-yang Hsüan.

Thus, these literary men from Koryo with their background of Koryo painting would be accustomed to an artistic atmosphere.

Moreover, most of their *chewhasi* seem to have been produced during their stay in Yüan China. They include paintings such as Li Kok's "T'ang T'ai tsung Liu Chün T'u" (唐太宗六駿圖), "T'i Sung Chi Chiu Liu Chün T'u" (題宋祭酒六駿圖), "T'i Chung Szu I Shih Mu tan T'u Hou" (題中書驛史牧丹圖後). An Chuk's "Fan Ch'eng Hsiang Mai Chou T'u" (范丞相麥舟圖), "Po Yen Ch'eng Hsiang Fang Wen Chung Kung Yi T'ien Chai T'u" (伯顏丞相訪文正公義田宅圖), Li Saek's "T'i Fen Shang Ren Suo Hsü Shen Lung T'u Yü T'ung Nien Tseng Cho Chiao T'ung Fu" (題紛上人所蓄神龍圖與同年曾助教同賦), and "Yü Yeh K'ung Cha Fu Ch'ing Shan Pai Yün T'u" (與葉公昭賦青山白雲圖) may have been created in Yüan China, judging from the titles of paintings, or from the name of the person who chanted the poem along with the poet.

Third, even *chewhasi* which were definitely produced in Koryo, were written on the paintings by Yüan painters. There is a *chewhasi* by Li Saek, containing the artist's name like Chang Yen-fu (張彥甫). Chang Yen-fu, a taoshih (道士) from T'ai I Chiao (太一教), who studied Tao (道) from Hsüan-te Chen-jen (玄德真人), was famous for his elegant taste and skill in painting.⁹ Li Che-hyun also left a poem on 'Cloudy Mountain' by Chang Yen-fu.

As is well known, Yüan China has been regarded as a literary dark age under Mongolian oppression. During this period, however, artists rather devoted themselves to arts alone without paying attention to political matters. Therefore, painting could reach its highest development in the Yüan period. Besides, there were many literary men who were multiply talented in poetry, calligraphy, and painting, and they all contributed to this combined art-form. Thus Chao Meng-fu, Chieh Hsi-szu and Wu Chi all left many *chewhasi* pieces.¹⁰

Among these *chewhasi* works, mountain-river paintings number the most, since Yüan China was the time when mountain-river paintings flourished. Their style was outstanding, and their technique reached its height of development, and they were even said to have excelled landscape poems.¹¹

However, it is not generally known whether or to what degree the poets of Koryo were good at painting except in few cases like Li Che-hyun, though it is clear that Koryo painting established its own peculiar style of considerably high standard through the inter-influences of Sung, Yüan and Koryo dynasties.¹² It is unfortunate that paintings on which Li Saek wrote

poems did not survive. Considering René Wellek's view that "the most central approach to a comparison of arts is based on an analysis of the actual objects, and thus of their structural relationships,"¹³ the present study of *Chewhasi* without reference to paintings must inevitably have its limit.

III. The Relation between Poems and Paintings in *Chewhasi*

Concept of Painting

Li Saek left a total of 21 *chewhasi*, half of which were written on mountain-river paintings, but it is unknown whether he was also good at painting. His *Chewhasi* seem to have been written down directly on the picture.¹⁴

One of the special characteristics of Li Saek's poems written on mountain-river paintings is that he identifies paintings with real landscapes. Thus, the readers of Li Saek's *chewhasi* can not directly tell whether the poet composed his *chewhasi* with the experience of actual observation of real landscapes or just with the experience of looking at others' paintings. It seems as if the poet placed himself somewhere inside the paintings rather than looking at them from a distance. The following poem entitled as "Blue Mountain and White Clouds" is one example in which the author treats the paintings in accordance with a real landscape.

The mundane world looks vast, and it is likely to melt my spirit.
Alone I am standing between heaven and earth, when it is getting
dark.

At a glance I get to know there is a way down from mountain.
I am willing to pass cloudy gate with a pigweed stick.

風塵漠漠暗銷魂，獨立乾坤日欲昏。一望便知山下路，好攜藜杖過雲門

It seems as if Li Saek really came to the place in the painting, and when we read this poem without knowing the title, it becomes difficult for the readers to judge whether the objects about which he sang in the poem are real nature or imagination.

This is very different from the Yüan poets' attitude toward painting. In most cases they show a complete detachment from the landscape depicted

in paintings in the phrases meaning "I see the painting." This indicates that the objects the poets depicted were paintings, not real landscapes. The following poem is a typical work showing Yüan poets' attitude toward paintings.

I missed my feet in the mundane world for ten years,
 I forgot there are white clouds in the mountain.
 Looking at the picture suddenly, I could but doubt it might be a
 dream.
 In front of cold flowers and falling leaves my thought turned
 complicated.

十年失脚朱紅塵，忘却山中有白雲。忽見圖畫疑是夢，冷花落葉思
 紛紛。

Nature represented as "Blue Mountain and White Clouds" reminded the author of this poem of a world entirely forgotten. The poet certainly felt conflict between the world in which he lived and nature, but the poet gives a clue to the readers to indicate that the landscape he mentions is just a painting, in the phrase "looking at the picture suddenly."

There is another type of poem written on mountain-river paintings concerning the life of a hermit. Li Saek did not care to distinguish between the real landscape and an imaginative one in paintings. And he even expressed his wish to visit the hermit.

Among *chewhasi* by Li Saek, there are poems which reveal the fact that the poetic objects in the painting were imaginative rivers and mountains, not real objects of nature. What is interesting is that he really feels pity for himself when he realizes his situation chanting a poem toward a painting.¹⁵ He could maintain peace of mind as long as he identified the content of a painting with a real landscape, but once he was conscious of the reality that he was just chanting his poems in front of paintings, he became pathetic. This makes a great difference from the perspective of Yüan poets to the extent that the latter found a pleasure for looking at the painting itself.

Appreciation of the painting

Li Saek has his own perspective in apprehending the atmosphere of a picture. He does not present the composition of the painting visually. In

general, he does not depend on sensuous perception. His poems written on mountain-river paintings are not pictorial in their description but give us an impression that he was simply reconstructing his intuition for the painting. In his "Green Mountain and White Clouds," for instance, although it is not known to whom this painting is attributed, it must be admitted that he apprehended it very differently from the Yüan poets. Wu Chi's poem written on "The Green Mountains and White Clouds" by Kao Yen-ching indicates remoteness, inaccessibility, and calmness,¹⁶ but according to Wang Chin the green mountain and white clouds points the world opposite to the mundane,¹⁷ and to Chieh Hsi-ssu it represents a peaceful and leisurely nature.¹⁸

In contrast Li Saek, in his poem, expresses a vast, gloomy, and even fearful feeling. Moreover, the poet also attracts our attention by stressing a solo image in the mountains, trying to find a way out of the mountains: it would, as it were, be a way to the mundane world. Since this poem seems to have been produced in his youth, it shows his conflict at the time hesitating between this world and nature.

As Li Saek reflects his way of thinking in his appreciation of paintings, his poems written on mountain-river paintings are not pictorial in their depictions. In his "Green Mountain and White Clouds" cited above, he does not give precise details of a natural scene but just suggests vastness of background and spiritlessness. He tended to ignore minor objects depicted in the vast space of painting. It might be due to his attitude of de-emphasizing the 'shape.' In his poem he tells us heavy dependence on forms deprives nature of naïveté.²¹ Such an attitude is closely connected with the general conception of painting in China. The best painting uses both the forms and absence of forms.¹⁹ Likewise, Ching Hao (荆浩) said: "faults in painting are of two kinds: those dependent on shape and those independent of shapes."²⁰ In other words, what is precious in painting are the images that forms of nature have produced, not the likeness of outer form. The shape Li Saek disapproved might be outward likeness, and it might be a reason why his description of scenery of painting is so unspecified.

In this regard it is no wonder Li Saek shows a tendency to be in favor of abstraction rather than concrete expressions such as 'vast', 'boundless', 'vague', and of sunset, or darkness as a time background. Such description can hardly be considered visually immediate.

His disinclination to concrete details of landscape in a picture results in his frequent use of auditory expressions. In actuality he regards auditory

expressions more highly than close objective resemblances. As a matter of fact his *chewhasi* are full of auditory images.

Besides, the time background shown in his *chewhasi* is not often stationary. He describes from a painting the flow of time dynamically through change of action such as hiding and walking, or the change of natural phenomena such as rain, twilight, moon, and white clouds.²² All these aspects show he did not apprehend painting concretely and directly through visual perception, but idealistically and indirectly by inference. This might be one reason he did not mention theory and method of painting in his *chewhasi* at all.

IV. A Comparative Study of *Chewhasi* and Poems Chanting Real Nature

In the Yüan period, *chewhasi* were produced in abundance. The quality of *chewhasi* produced in this period is said to excel that of nature poems. Li Saek wrote a great number of nature poems: in fact it is very difficult for us to trace the relationship between *chewhasi* and nature poems.²³

Above all there seems to be no great difference between them, since Li Saek, as already mentioned, regarded the painting as a living reproduction of nature and described it as a sense of concordance. Additionally, the conflict of choosing between nature and mundane world appears in both his nature poems and *chewhasi*.

What attracts our concern mostly is that the poet did not apprehend the natural scenery concretely: although it is true that the nature poem was described with visual and tactual images, and that often the colors of landscape like blue, green, or feelings like the wind through the pine trees appeared, he, nevertheless, liked to apprehend nature with vagueness, a sense of concordance, and did not keep an objective distance from nature.

Unlike Li Saek, Yüan poets show the tendency to grasp nature with pictorial structure. It indicates that they are indulged in the painting so deeply that they see nature through the pictorial viewpoint.

However, what Li Saek depicted is just the general, unchanging features of the scenery, composed of pine tree, moon, river and wind. This might be the reason why he liked to chant about green mountain such as "A Song of Green Mountain," "A Song of Blue Mountain and White Clouds," poems depicting unspecified mountains.

Some of his nature poems were written after returning to his home,

according to his annotation, even if it is not seen in the title. And there are also poems recollecting a real landscape he once visited, poems entitled as 'recollecting' (憶). In these poems he is willing to use auditory images, and the description is idealistic and suggestive, just like his *chewhasi*.

V. Conclusion

I have confined this paper to the study of *chewhasi* without referring to the paintings involved. Therefore, I could not deal with the structural harmony of paintings and poems aside from the aspect of their meanings. The study of the relationship is possible only during the time of the Chosun dynasty as the actual paintings on which poems were written are still extant.

However, there are some points of significance in this study: first, we can safely acclaim Li Saek to have been a precursor in the history of *chewhasi* of the Koryo dynasty. Second, this study may hopefully be a preparatory survey of the history of the *chewhasi* of the Chosun dynasty when it reached its highest quality. In addition, since Li Saek's *chewhasi* deeply reflect his spiritual ideal, conflicts and the background of his ideas, they can help us apprehend his poems more deeply and clearly.

Moreover, it is worth noting that painting provides him with inspiration to compose poems. He confessed in his poem "Returning Home on Horse Late in the Evening" his pleasure for finding the fact that he, though getting old, was still able to produce a new poem relating to the painting of a folding screen.

The characteristics of Li Saek's *chewhasi*, which emerged clearly through the present comparative study with Yüan *chewhasi*, appear to be very closely bound up with his conception of nature and art: what concerned him most was not the visual world, whether it was real or imitative, but the unchanging world represented as wind, river and pine tree. This attitude toward nature and art may be related to the thought of Zen which he got acquainted with by his intimate association with Zen Buddhists. It is clear that both his *chewhasi* and nature poems are filled with symbolic substance. Such a concept might be applied to the later *chewhasi*, since there was no sign of pictorial expression from either the nature poems and *chewhasi* in the early period of the Chosun dynasty. We can safely conclude that there were some influences from Yüan China in the appearance of *chewhasi*, but the objects and mode of descriptions went their own respective ways.

Notes

1. Ulich Weisstein, "Literature and the Visual Arts," *Interrelations of Literature* ed. Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (N.Y., 1982).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 253-256.
3. *Collections of Theory of Paintings in China* (ed. Liu Kun), p. 640.
4. *Collections of Poems by Su Tong-p'o* vol. 11.
5. Pao Keun-ti, *Study of Yüan Poems* (Young Lions Publishing Co., Taipei, 1978), p. 51.
6. Helmut Hatzfeld's *Literature Through Art* (N.Y., 1952) can be an example.
7. Mary Gaither asserts that the significance of *Principles of Art History* by H. Wofflin "lies in the discovery that one can not simply borrow the basic concepts of one art medium and apply them to another even of the same period, though one may find both art forms containing common elements." Mary Gaither, "Literature and the Arts," *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective* ed. Newton P. Stallnecht & Horst Frenz, Revised Edition, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 196.
8. Li Che-hyun, "Cloudy Mountain by Chang Yen-fu."
9. Wu Chi, *Tao Yuan Hsueh Ku Ru* (Collections of Literary Works by Wu Chi) vol. 3.
10. Pao Keun-ti, p. 52. Tai Li-chu, *Study of Literature and Arts of Chao Ming-fu* (Hsuehhai Publishing Co., Taiwan, 1986), p. 80.
11. Pao Keun-ti, p. 60.
12. An Hui-chun, "Interrelation of Painting Between China and Koryo and Early period of Chosun Dynasties," *Asian Journal* (v. 13, 1979, 11, Seoul), pp. 141-170.
13. René Wellek, *Theory of Literature* (N.Y., 1956), p. 119.
14. In his poem "Mountain-River Painting" Li Saek wrote: "I ask those who see this painting later not to get rid of my poem on it."
15. Li Saek, "Mountain-River Folding Screen."
16. Wu Chi, "Blue Mountain and White Clouds," *Tao Yuan Hsueh Ku Ru* vol. 1.
17. Wang Chin, "Blue Mountain and White Clouds," *Collections of Mr. Wang's Literary Works* vol. 6.
18. Chieh Hsi-ssu, "Blue Mountain and White Clouds," *Collections of Chieh Hsi-ssu's Literary Works*, vol. 3.
19. Osvald Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (Hong Kong, 1963), p. 35.
20. *Collections of Theory of Paintings in China*, p. 606.
21. Li Saek, "Mountain-River Folding Screen"

The poetic lines are clear & fresh, & do not raise dust,
 Heavy dependence on forms deprives the nature of naïveté.
 Deep in Mountain where white clouds are piled,
 How many people might be able to describe noise of monkey.

詩句清新不惹塵，因形賦物奪天真。白雲千障重重處，
 寫出猿聲幾有人。

22. Li Saek's poem "Mountain-River Painting" might be the example.
23. Pao Keun-ti, p. 59.

