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**A Tiger's Divine Wisdom and the Uneducated Commonfolk: *Minhwa's*  
Extraordinary Abilities of Dynastic Upheaval**

Upon an initial glance, "Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie" (see fig. 1) may leave a first impression fitting of its deceptively simple arrangement of bright-eyed magpies perched upon a tree's greenery, wearing joyous smiles to match that of the smiling tigers beneath them. However, the more one comes to observe this painting, the more that curious subversions of the expected come to light, whether it be through the magpies' positions of safety from their predators below, or the tigers' mysterious expressions of foolish smiles in their predicament. This subversive nature of "Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie" only reveals more curious mysteries and questions to be asked the further one researches into its origins: Why is the animalization of the tiger and magpie significant in context of their sociocultural, human counterparts? Does the subversion of the typical predator-prey hierarchy within this work mirror a similar upheaval of the laws that governed artistic and political expression through the Korean commonfolk's creation of *minhwa*? Why were the people in power within Korea (the literati, Japanese occupiers, religious officials) so intent on claiming these animal symbols and forms of expression for themselves - what power were the oppressed able to hold over their oppressors?

**The Korean tiger as it appeared in artworks of folk creation was significant as a**

messenger of sacred wisdom that, in its religious and cultural value to all social classes, transcended the class boundaries of a hierarchical nation. This operation of an animal symbol of deceptive power outside of the boundaries of traditional society enabled the uneducated Korean commonfolk to express political criticism through *Hodo*, or paintings which drew upon the Korean tiger's sacred spiritual power and multiple interpretations. A fluidly organic symbol, tigers as depicted within *minhwa*, or Korean folk art, were a means of elevating class consciousness and providing freedom of expression in a nation and world that continues to impose their own meanings of *minhwa* even today. Despite attempts from religious, political, and academic "authorities" to impose their own forms of meaning upon works not their own, *minhwa*, especially those featuring tigers, were inherently revolutionary works of art that reject a singular perspective or definition, in this way reflecting the spirit of the proud Korean people who have created a culture of resistance, societal criticism, and political activism.

"Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie" is best understood in its origins once one knows of the historical and cultural context surrounding its creation in Korea's Joseon Dynasty. Beginning in 1392 and spanning nearly five centuries in length, this most famous of Korea's dynasties possessed an uniquely comprehensive level of cultural influence over its ruling subjects (even for an empire) which has continued to inform the societal standards of Korea to this day. Founded by King Yi Seong-gye, the Joseon Dynasty's

rise to power was catalyzed by that of the dominant China's Ming Dynasty, to the extent that Seong-gye himself was only able to ascend the throne through showing his devotion to the Ming Dynasty's Confucian ideals. Korea's Confucianist alliance with this neighboring kingdom may have offered security, but with the Manchurian conquering of China came a new Ch'ing Dynasty and ensuing political turmoil. Invaded time and time again and forced to become a subservient state to China, Korean high officials responded to this complete loss of control by turning towards conservative, isolationist policies; promoting Confucianism more than ever for the strictly structured hierarchies of power it upheld, Korean aristocracy looked inwards to regain their political standing (Moes 16). Neo-Confucian policies of economic segregation and social class thus became embedded within Joseon society, with the *Yangban*, rich aristocrats born of a corrupt meritocracy, given financial and political privileges over farmers, merchants, and others whom they dismissed as having nothing of value to contribute to society.

The Joseon aristocracy's hyper-focus on maintaining superior status and influence radiated towards not only politics, but all aspects of Korean society - the educated and powerful declared education to mandate legitimacy, in the sense that those born without access to education had nothing of legitimate worth to contribute to Korean art forms and other means of expression. This standard of "worth" is telling of the *Yangban's* belief that a cultural product was only allowed value so long as it did not threaten their own superiority and sense of security. What these aristocrats did not foresee was how the Korean common folk, independent of the rules that governed high

society's idea of value, were in a revolutionary yet ordinary way creating power of their own - enter the *minhwa*!

Fitting with the highly stratified nature of Korean society, what was considered by the ruling class as the “legitimate” art form was only a small subsection of the diversity of artwork actually produced throughout the Joseon dynasty. Called *literati*, or court, paintings, these works of art were displayed in palaces and gave their artists prestige within the royal court but were thus highly regulated - as Kumja Kim explains, the King himself had jurisdiction over how *literati* paintings must be executed, with meticulous attention to detail and subdued use of color (Kim 332). Becoming a court painter meant rigorous training at the Bureau of Painting, proficiency in as many “themes” of work as the King saw fit (e.g. genre, building, Scholar's Accoutrements, etc.), and intense quarterly painting competitions to curry royal favor (Kim 334). Given the inherent exclusivity of this “accepted” form of artistic expression, it is no surprise then that the *Yangban*'s chosen paintings, despite being their perceived “norm”, were not the works most often seen in reality. No, the vast majority of art produced in the Joseon Dynasty were in fact *minhwa*, otherwise known as Korean folk art, of which category of art “Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie” belongs to.

*Minhwa* paintings were the antithesis of court paintings in every sense - their influence on Korean culture was an extraordinary instance of independently fostered egalitarianism in an otherwise hierarchical society. Works of art created by the Korean common folk, what importance *minhwa* had to their creators and audiences is argued by Dr. Kumja Kim, to be attributable to “a universal human desire to have what others

have” - in other words, ordinary Korean people were just as appreciative of their cultural heritage as the scholar-gentry above them, and wished to have paintings to call their own (Kim 357-8). Whereas court paintings could only be created by those trained and permitted to do so, *Minhwa* paintings were the work of the uneducated and required no threshold of learning for their creation (Eom 2). Uninfluenced by the stringent guidelines required for the subjects of court paintings, *Minhwa* were painted with bold, impressionistic colors and expressed the qualities of the land and people which created it (Moes 131). Unlike the exclusive rarity of court paintings, only found in royal palaces, *minhwa* were sold in the streets and displayed in ordinary homes. Depicting everything from hundreds of butterflies in *Paekjobdo* paintings to fish and crabs in *Ohaedo* paintings, *Minhwa*'s themes were not instructed by the King's orders but were rather a reflection of the flora and fauna seen in an ordinary Korean's everyday life (Yoon 187-88, 194-196). In further contrast to court paintings, which were influenced by the individual will of the King, *minhwa*'s artists were entirely anonymous; never penning a single name to their works, Korean folk art was in this way a representation of a broader **social consciousness** of the Joseon dynasty's common people (Eom 1). This difference in perspectives highlights the key distinction between folk paintings and court paintings; whereas *minhwa* gave representation to the beauty and meaning found in the everyday, viewing these life moments with the utmost importance, court paintings were more focused on a type of “ideal,” a vision of the King removed from the experiences of all the populous below him.

As the rapidly growing popularity of folk paintings indicated, the ordinary Korean was not to be dismissed as a determinant of worth; *minhwa*'s elevation of ordinary experiences into works of art gave commoners' daily lives new meaning and a universal appeal. Eom So Yeon connects this upheaval of the status quo directly to an evolution of Korea's social classes by the late Joseon period, which she asserts to be a period of time wherein the thriving commoner economy and new religious thoughts (expanded upon in a later paragraph) gave rise to a new social class (Eom 2). Seeking a new form of art independent from the court paintings excluded from commoners' possession, *Minhwa* became highly valued in this newfound economic upturn for reasons that may at first seem contradictory - a lack of scarcity, yet high cultural value within the majority of the Korean populace. Where this high cultural value arose was fascinatingly in *minhwa*'s roots as not an art form made to a King's tastes, but an art form of symbolic relevance within the folk legends and customs of the common people. The *Ohaedo* paintings were hung in expectant mothers' households for the fish pictured symbolized prosperity and happiness of offspring, and *Paekjobdo* paintings were said to bring about harmony with nature as its butterflies and flowers symbolized a happy marriage in Korean folklore; *Minhwas* contained symbolism that was easily recognized and relevant to the Korean people who grew up in environments where the wisdom of folk stories was highly valued. It is the practical, purposeful uses of *Minhwa* in its everyday applications and widely understood meanings that enabled Korean folk paintings to transcend the class boundaries that decided an art form's "value." This upheaval of the power of the *Yangbans* as arbiters of societal value is significant in its signaling of a monumental

shift in Korean society, as those without the advantages of formal education now could operate in a different sort of language of success - connecting to the desire of the Korean commonfolk to see the folk stories of their lives as represented and respected regardless of their social class.

Of central focus in “Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie” are the Korean tigers who face the viewer heads-on, at once equally imposing and intriguing in nature. Within the universal folklore of the Joseon Dynasty, the Korean tiger was especially revered and feared for its dangerous, mysterious qualities. Professor Edward R. Canda describes the etymology of the Korean *Horangi*, or tiger, to derive *Ho* from “tiger” and *Rang* from “young boy”, “a rural boy...one free from upper class training”; he therefore reveals the Korean perception of tigers to be rooted in this duality of danger and innocence and a distinct separation from the class system that otherwise governs humans (Canda 25-26). Both “tiger” and “boy” at once, the tiger experiences a relationship with humanity that is shrouded in ambiguity; a hunter and yet the hunted, a Chinese proverb states that “Koreans hunt the tiger half of the year and are hunted by tigers the other half (Canda 26).” Fierce and deadly, Canda argues that the tiger is only able to be truly controlled once dead; once so, he lists evidence of the adoption of its power by Koreans posthumously, as the spiritual “tiger-power” a tiger possesses is fundamental to their folklore-influenced perception of the tiger as a being of mysterious power. Interestingly, although the fascination with tigers extended across class boundaries, the wielding of this “tiger-power” in a physical sense was financially limited to the wealthy. Highly in demand, tiger pelts were displayed by the elite in their best showrooms, and the King’s

guardsmen wore hats made of a tiger's cheeks and whiskers throughout the Joseon Dynasty (Canda 27). The *Horangi* with its cultural significance was a dominating figure within Korean society, and through the commodification of its symbolism formed an association with Korea's highest, richest classes.

However, what is important to note is that the Korean tiger's mythos was ultimately a product of the Korean people's folklore - the stories of the common people were what elevated its dominance from a worldly figure to a mythological ideal. As the *Horangi's* cultural significance was created by the common people and built upon their stories, the Korean tiger was in a way an embodiment of ordinary Korean's worldview, a worldview which could evolve along with its creators. While the privileged of Korea had jurisdiction over the *mortal* aspects of a tiger, the body it leaves behind, the *Horangi's* qualities of ambiguity and dominance over the *immortal* world of folklore were the common folks' to utilize in expressions they saw fit. Through *Hodo*, or *minhwa* paintings of Korean tigers, the ordinary, uneducated people usually unable to express themselves politically could take advantage of the *Yangban's* strong association with the tigers they coveted to express criticism of their political superiority over the lives of the lower classes. Painting these dangerous tigers as innocent creatures with ridiculous expressions and grinning smiles, the *Hodo* paintings often featured magpies - a stand-in for the common folk - perched above them in pine trees in what was a reversal of the hierarchy that had defined the lives of the Korean people. This ability to weaponize the *Yangban's* financial and societal clout against them illustrates the hidden practicality of creating *Minhwa*. Through the expression of political criticism in an art form dismissed



by the wealthy, ordinary Koreans could minimize danger to themselves while regaining a secret dominance over the animal *Horang's* "tiger-power" to transcend human class boundaries, in this manner truly embodying the tiger's admired qualities of deception and power reversal.

With this new view of the secret political expression available to commoners through Korean folk paintings, "Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie" may now be viewed as the penultimate example of this tiger-like power of deceptive criticism. Once potentially seen as a simple scene depicting two tigers glaring up towards two observing magpies, the subjects' positions and the tiger's curious smiles are now eminently of importance towards understanding this minhwa as a sort of *political cartoon*. Supposedly fear-inducing, dangerous creatures, the tigers' foolish appearances subvert expectations and strike little fear in the viewer and magpies both. This is entirely intentional - the viewer thus sees the tiger through the magpies' astute eyes, who look down upon their predators in a reversal of the predator-prey hierarchy. As an analogue to the commoners and *Yangban* of the Joseon dynasty, these animal representations of the lower classes' perceptions of their superiors is revealing of a revolutionary deconstructing of the social hierarchy's importance upon the mindsets of the common folk; we view the tigers through the magpies' perspectives for the usefully unknowable creatures they are, and the unknowing humans who they represent.

Yeon provides context to Korea's changing religious landscape in the late Joseon period, wherein the civilian classes realized the limitations of the Confucian doctrines that defined their social class. Just as *Minhwa* rose to prominence because of its

popularity with the lower class, Shamanism and Buddhism, integrating aspects of Korean folklore, were means of constructing a “collective consciousness” and sense of safety within the lives of a Korean populace which had realized the failings of its national religion (Eom 1). One means of integrating Korean folklore into Shamanistic ideology was the positioning of the *Horangi* as a sacred messenger for the Mountain God. In Phyllis Chang’s thesis, titled *The Mountain Spirit: A Shaman Theme in Folk Painting*, she expounds upon the nature of the Korean tiger as a divine messenger of Korea’s Mountain God, whose importance in relaying messages from heaven to Earth as such that the *Horangi* was often called “The Mountain Prince (Chang 18).”

Describing the nature of the tiger as a spiritual conduit further, Professor Canda lists in his summary of professional interests “Korean social welfare in relation to Korean philosophy and religion”, which belies the sociocultural lens through which he evaluates the role of the Korean tiger not only a cultural touchstone, but also as a sacred religious symbol. Arguing that the Korean tiger is more than an “extraordinary, powerful, and dangerous” animal, Canda asserts that the trickster tiger of folklore serves the role of a **hierophant**, or “one who manifests the sacred in a conscious and controlled manner (Canda 22).” Describing the abilities of the tiger, as a conduit between humanity and the heavens, to be according to Jungian archetypes part god, human, and animal - subhuman and superhuman - Canda claims that the trickster is a force beyond control, who in fact embody the uncontrollable mysteries of daily life, especially aspects that are disconcerting or frightening (Canda 22). That the fierce impression a tiger imposes, with its animalistic qualities, only contributes to this sense of fear from a lack of control

illustrates how this animal's ability to be beyond human understanding has reigned over humanity's imaginations and fears. Spiritually significant as a messenger of divine wisdom beyond the control of typical human power structures, the *Horangi's* religious importance parallels its political importance as its ability to mask political resistance was also beyond the control of the Korean *Yangban* it represented. In a kind of ironic justice, the sacred messenger of wisdom was most fully realized as a vehicle for expressing the thoughts of the uneducated commonfolk!

Similarly to how Korean commonfolk compartmentalized tigers as a way to reverse the political hierarchy, the Korean scholar-gentry compartmentalized and dismissed *Minhwa* as the work of the uneducated and the unrespected. However, the difference lies in the power dynamics at play - as the social class with the most wealth and political influence, the *Yangban* were able to condescend *Minhwa* explicitly, claiming the work to be "childlike" in nature and lacking in technical skill. This dismissal of Korean folk art was not limited to merely Korea's upper classes, but extended outwards towards the educated of the occupying and neighboring countries. Most significantly, with Yeon's revelation that the term *minhwa* itself was coined by Yanagi Munayoshi, one may be brought to wonder how this uniquely Korean, informal art form was named by a Japanese elite art connoisseur. Moreover, according to Chief Curator of Gwacheon Museum Yoon Yeolsu, what Yanagi meant in his definition of "folk paintings" was in fact cheap, *Japanese* souvenirs sold in Japanese streets (Yoon 9). This misidentification of the word *minhwa* has remained even as time has clarified its origins, which perfectly illustrates how the actions of those who defined Korean folk art

still have reverberating effects to this day; perceptions continue to shadow others in the present, just as they did in Korea's past. What does it mean for a country's art to be defined as the art of another's? Phyllis Chang contributes to this conversation through relaying how Korean art has historically been judged in accordance with Chinese beauty and quality standards, deemed "crude and rough" in terms of designs and brushwork (Chang 39). Warning of the potential consequences of displaying *Minhwa* in museums and galleries without the proper context, she informs that "(as) this is occurring, the spirituality and context of these sacred objects are being removed and taken out of the hands of the very same people who they were intended to be produced for (Chang 103)." Eom, Yoon, and Chang all suggest that Korean folk art has been subject to many attempts of definition by "more educated" scholars, rather than the artists themselves. With this new perception granted on the events of the past through the lenses of the present, the criticism of political elites by commoners through *minhwa* becomes *poetic justice* through its reclaiming of ownership over the meanings of their artistic and political expression!

Further distorting the already misunderstood *Minhwa* are many Western scholar's interpretations of Korean folk art, which paint all forms of Korean art under a broad brush in a perspective of *minhwa* lacking in nuance and historical context. Research fellow Eom's claim that "we often approach *minhwa*, born amidst the traditions of the past, from the viewpoint of Western art theory" emphasizes the incongruity of perspectives brought about through looking at Korean art of the past

through a modern, Western lens in an example of **reverse telescoping**. Dr. Kim Kumja Paik is currently Curator Emerita at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Beginning her article with the subheading “Misconceptions”, Kim’s overall purpose in writing “Re-Evaluating Court and Folk Painting of Korea” is to clarify and distinguish differences between folk and court paintings that may have been previously overlooked by a Western audience. Delving into detail on the intended uses of each, Kim’s descriptions of the King-enforced, meticulous style of court painting used for court screens and the picture-within-picture “Scholar’s Accoutrements” paintings paint (haha) a clear contrast with the loose and flowing folk paintings favored by the Korean commoners. The focus of this article the misunderstandings brought about by **scholarly translation** is fascinating and has made me consider the extent to which I, as one lacking in cultural knowledge of Korea, truly understand about *minhwa* from reading solely English sources. *Minhwa* itself has gained a deeper meaning in my research with the knowledge that although *min* means “people”, it has been misconstrued by many Western scholars without access to Korean historical or personal scholarship to define Korean folk paintings as all bright-colored work by the people of Korea (Kim 342). Kim summarizes the unintended consequences of globalization without the full picture nicely, stating that “Moreover, in the interconnected world we find ourselves in today, it might be useful for scholars writing in their native language to keep in mind how their use of certain words will hold up when translated into another language or languages (Kim 359).”

Seen through the perceptions of secondary scholars of *minhwa*, “Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie” becomes entirely distorted from the intentions of its primary creators, the common Korean people of the Joseon dynasty. Subject to both mistranslation and misinterpretation and mistaken for creations belonging to other nations, what these interpretations of *minhwa*’s meanings do not perceive is how crucial the commonfolk’s religion and folk tales, their shared culture, are to fully understanding “Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie”’s origins as a manifestation of the will of the Korean people. Unable to perceive Korean folk paintings through any eyes but their own, the many scholars who have attempted to define *minhwa*’s importance for themselves may find better fortune and understanding through instead taking the time to listen to the paintings’ animalized subjects, whose significance to the folk tales that defined their people tell stories that speak of a truth untold - the truth beyond abstract ideas, found in the everyday of life which are known by all.

Despite the many attempts at controlling how *minhwa* should be perceived throughout centuries and countries, the Korean tigers present within so many of these works retain their subversive, symbolic meaning to this day. Many examples can be found of the Korean tiger’s continued endurance as an animal embodiment of the Korean people. From its status as Korea’s Olympics mascot in both the 1988 Seoul and 2016 Pyeongchang Olympics, as the namesake of the KIA Tigers baseball team, as a focal point in Korean-sung songs such as Agust D’s “Born Tiger,” and as Korea’s national animal itself, it is evident that the tiger’s importance as a mainstay of Korea’s

culture and Koreans' self-image has only grown more publicly prominent with time.

What this suggests is that in spite of the many attempts to obscure the Korean tigers' true meaning by the select few in positions of power, the spirit of the Joseon Dynasty's Korean common folk eventually prevailed in defining tigers and *minhwa* through the perceptions of their folk stories' creators. This reversal of hierarchical expectations and restoration of ownership of the tiger's sacred power is emblematic of the Korean people the tiger represents, to whom its abilities to transcend class structures and redefine meaning remain as practical and relevant in these current times of political and societal revolution as the *minhwa* were for its ordinary storytellers.

### Appendix



Fig. 1. Anonymous. "*Minhwa - Tiger and Magpie*". 19AD, Museum of Konkuk, South Korea.

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