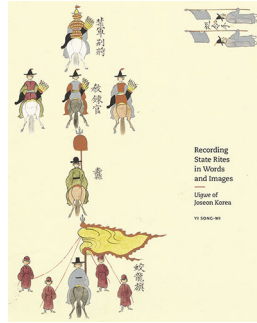


# YI SONG-MI, *RECORDING STATE RITES IN WORDS AND IMAGES. UIGWE OF JOSEON KOREA*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2024, 556 pages with 415 color ill., ISBN: 978-06-91-97390-6 (Hardback).



Reviewed by  
Burglind Jungmann

The importance of records of court ceremonies (*uigwe*) for the research of visual culture of Joseon Korea (1392–1910) cannot be overestimated. About a quarter of the surviving *uigwe* (Yi Song-mi discusses various English translations of the term on p. 25) are illustrated and, together with their texts, provide detailed insights into life at court and the status of the court's members, its hierarchies, etiquettes, and finances. More importantly, they also allow glimpses at the skills and obligations of Joseon artists and craftspeople. Yi Song-mi has done research on *uigwe* for decades and published books and articles on the topic in Korean and English; *Recording State Rites in Words and Images* is therefore a most valuable addition to the growing literature on Korean visual and material culture.

Although many early records have been lost, close to one thousand *uigwe* are still extant. From this abundant material Yi has chosen the most significant ones for each of her chapters, from the earliest surviving from the early seventeenth century to records of the early twentieth. Within this historical range, the material is extremely diverse, as the author explains in her introduction: some *uigwe* consist of only one volume, while a most detailed one on the construction of the Hwaseong Fortress (1801, discussed in

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL  
3-2024, pp. 773–777

<https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2024.3.106587>



chapter 8) contains nine volumes and may be considered a jewel of architectural history. The majority of *uigwe* is hand-written and hand-painted, and six copies were usually produced: one of highest quality for “royal viewing”, the others for government institutions. Yet, of the most famous *uigwe*, commemorating King Jeongjo’s trip to his father’s tomb in 1795 (discussed in chapter 7), 102 copies were published in 1797, printed with movable type and containing woodblock-printed illustrations.

The book comprises three parts, each of which has several chapters. In Part I, Yi Song-mi follows the strictly hierarchical Confucian order of court ritual, dedicating one chapter each to the Five Rites of State that were proscribed in the *National Code (Gyeongguk daejeon)* of 1474: Auspicious Rites (*Gillye*), Celebratory Rites (*Garye*), Rites for Receiving Envoys (*Billye*), Military Rites (*Gullye*), and State Funeral and Related Rites (*Hyungnye*). In Part II, she moves on to *uigwe* for other important state events, such as the production of royal portraits, and in Part III to a discussion of the relationship between *uigwe* and art history. Tables inserted into every chapter give the reader a clear orientation of dates, contents, and additional information, for instance, the iconography and function of paintings within the ceremonial context. In addition to her analyses, Yi also describes places where rituals were conducted, how and when they changed, and provides photographs if the location has been restored. What makes these records even more interesting for the art historian is the fact that they give the names of crafts people involved, their compensation, and the commissions of various paintings, paraphernalia, and ornaments for the ceremonies. Most *uigwe* illustrations in Part I show parades (*banchado*) whereas those for Part II, especially if dating from the late eighteenth century onward, may include landscape and architectural scenes, but also detailed depictions of paraphernalia, dances, musical instruments, silken flower ornaments, or construction machinery.

Part III – for art historians probably the most important part of the book – is divided into “Polychrome Screen Paintings for Joseon Palaces” (chapter 9) and “Joseon Court Painters, Artisans, Entertainers, and Other Workers” (chapter 10). Adhering to the occasion, court painters produced large decorative eight-, ten-, or twelve-fold screens of symbolic contents (“polychrome screens”) that were used as backdrops and room dividers. In addition, special “documentary” folding screens were produced as mementos of the event, illustrating important stages of the ceremonies, and showing in miniature detail the decorative screens in their applicable position and function, such as the *Five Peaks* screens placed behind the king’s throne. In general, these screens bear neither dates nor signatures or seals. Despite their high technical and artistic quality, and their obvious function at court, they have often been subsumed under “folk painting” (*Minhwa*). More recently, they are referred to as “decorative painting”. Yi explains that in Korean, rather than *jangsik* (장식 裝飾, “ornament”) the term *jangeom* (장엄 裝嚴, “solemn, magnificent”), which is also used in Buddhist art, would be

more fitting, and suggests “polychrome screens” as the appropriate English term.

In chapter 9, Yi follows the court hierarchy in discussing first screens made for the king, palace ladies, and crown princes, then those representing banquets, and under each of these subchapters lists the genres used for the respective court members and their ceremonies. She then discusses the iconography, symbolism, and stylistic development of each genre. The lists of data she collected from *uigwe* – dates, the person for whom the ceremony was performed, the type of ceremony, the painting genres used, the format and placement of screens – are not only the basis for her discussions but provide convenient overviews and a wealth of additional information. For instance, for eight royal weddings of kings and crown princes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, large screens of the *Ten Symbols of Longevity* and of *Flowers and Grasses* were produced to be placed in the wedding ceremony hall and screens of *Peonies* and *Lotus Flowers* to be placed in the bridal dressing room. Starting with the wedding of King Sunjo in 1802, new genres were introduced, such as the *Happy Life of (Tang General) Guo Ziyi*, the *Banquet of Xiwangmu (the Daoist Queen of the West)* and *One Hundred Children (Boys)*. Such information is particularly enlightening because it provides contextual evidence for European collections, such as the Grassi Museum in Leipzig which owns high-quality paintings of the *Happy Life of Guo Ziyi*, *Flowers and Grasses*, and *One Hundred Boys*. The considerable number of similar screens in North American collections confirms that those anonymous colourful paintings were particularly favoured by early visitors to Korea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We also learn that many genres appeared in relation to different events and were placed in different contexts, such as *Five Peaks* screens, which adorned not only the throne, but were also employed at kings’ funerals and placed behind portraits of kings in ancestor halls. More astonishingly, *Peonies*, which signify wealth and nobility, not only adorned the living quarters of palace ladies but also played a role in funerals. Symbols of different religious and legendary origin were combined to fulfil wishes for good fortune, happy marriages, and abundant offspring, such as in the case of *Lotos* screens. The lotus, which grows out of a muddy pond to produce beautiful untainted blossoms, symbolizing the Buddhist idea of purity, was combined with pairs of birds and shoals of fish to symbolize conjugal felicity and fertility. In addition, an overlap between the genres in terms of pictorial elements, such as architectural or landscape elements or groups of figures, is also in evidence.

While *uigwe* provide solid information on favoured iconographies and the function of these paintings, Yi depends on extant screens for her assessment of the stylistic development of each genre. These, however, can be neither accurately dated, nor directly linked to a specific *uigwe*. Exceptions are those of the last category, namely banquet screens, which were made primarily for the birthdays of queens. In contrast to the decorative paintings discussed

earlier, they visualize the event itself, and on one panel present a list of the names and official positions of the most highly ranked participants, a list that also appears in the corresponding dated *uigwe*. Eschewing symbolism, these panels may rather be read as social diagrams that confirm the prominent place of the participants within the court hierarchy. However, a very special feature of these screens is that the king, queen, and other high members of the court, although present at the ceremonies, are not depicted. Empty thrones or place mats in front of screens signify their places: an aniconic representation, otherwise only found in religious art.<sup>1</sup>

Yi Song-mi, whose early education and research was in Chinese and Korean literati painting, is used, like many of her generation, to tracing the symbolism, iconographies, and compositions to Chinese sources. While the symbolic contents of polychrome screens produced and employed at the Joseon court can almost exclusively be traced to Chinese origins, their iconography and compositions, as Yi writes, are unique creations not to be found in China. For instance, while each symbol of the *Ten Symbols of Longevity* can be found in Chinese lore, no such combination can be found in Chinese art. In fact, Lee Ufan, the famous artist and collector of *Minhwa* whose collection includes decorative court painting and is now housed at the Musée Guimet in Paris, has suggested that these polychrome paintings were more representative of Joseon art than ink paintings.

For chapter 10, Yi again compiled data from *uigwe* with astonishing results and insights into the duties and social standing of artists and craftspeople at court, details which cannot be found elsewhere. The records mention the numbers and the professions of those involved in the processes of production of works for each given event, including painters, scribes, mounters, craftspeople who worked with wood, metal, jade, oxhorn, and textiles, as well as seamstresses and female entertainers. For instance, the *uigwe* for the construction of Hwaseong Fortress and its palace records that 1,807 people in twenty-two different trades were employed. Of the painters mentioned by name, only about a third were already known from other historical and literary sources. As for other professions, names were scarcely recorded. Reflecting Confucian thinking on gender, male participants were recorded with surname and given name, while female workers and entertainers, such as those performing dances, were mentioned only by their given name. Ladies of high social standing, on the other hand, were recorded by their maiden family name and the rank of their husband, hence without given names. Almost all items produced are recorded as having been the result of collaborations by several people. Yi gives the example of wooden containers for ritual items, which involved wood- and metal-work specialists for the fittings, lacquerers, and painters. From detailed descriptions of such boxes and their con-

1

For a discussion of one such example, see Burglind Jungmann, Documentary Record versus Decorative Representation. A Queen's Birthday Celebration at the Korean Court, in: *Arts Asiatiques* 62, 2007, 95–111.

tents, extant receptacles can sometimes be identified and dated, for instance the container for a jade book marking the elevation of a queen in 1661 (p. 421, fig. 196). This beautiful red lacquer box decorated with gold-dust painting of the “Four Gentlemen” plants is just one of the book’s well-chosen photographs of extant objects, palanquins, flags, seals, and more that provide an impression of the items required to better understand the *uigwe* illustrations. Another especially noticeable investigation made by Yi is that into the salaries of the different people involved in the work. As is known from other sources, most court painters did not receive a regular salary, but compensations for specific commissions. *Uigwe* record the awards for different professions, mostly paid in rice and cotton; information again conveniently compiled by Yi in a table (p. 442). Interestingly, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries awards could also include an elevation in social standing for those of the lowborn class, a class that included slaves, but also dancers, singers, or musicians (p. 443).

We may, in fact, call banquet screens and the illustrations found in *uigwe* a kind of “bureaucratic art”. A strict Neo-Confucian ideology had been implemented at the beginning of the Joseon dynasty and during the dynasty’s first two centuries permeated every practice at the court so that ritual became of prime importance. Stern Confucianists had little regard for the arts. We therefore have only scarce records of private and even palace collections. The status of court painters was that of craftsmen, on a level with other technical professionals. Hence their main occupation was to produce portraits for ancestor rituals, paraphernalia for court ceremonies, and sketches for woodblock-printed illustrations for didactic books and other court publications. Even though some court artists, such as Kim Hongdo, are better known for their “literati style” ink paintings, Yi’s research provides an idea of their official real duties.

Yi Song-mi’s book is a most significant contribution to the field because it discusses material that reflects important aspects of how the Joseon court functioned. It also gives evidence of how the interpretation and practice of Confucianism in Joseon Korea distinguishes itself from contemporaneous China and Japan. Although certain aspects of *uigwe* and related material have been discussed in exhibition catalogues and research articles, there are no book-length studies on the topic. Almost encyclopaedic in its detailed discussions and with a glossary rich with further information, *Recording State Rites in Words and Images* is well-structured and provides a kaleidoscopic view of Joseon elite culture. The many illustrations are well-chosen and of high quality, and Princeton University Press has to be congratulated for the book’s design.