

The Representation of Gender and Social Class in Sin Yunbok's Two-Sword Dance

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ABSTRACT: This essay will explore how the painter Sin Yunbok used visual conventions to depict gender and class in his 1745 painting *Two-Sword Dance*. *Two-Sword Dance* was painted during the Joseon period of Korea (1392 - 1897) when Neo-Confucianism was the dominant ideology. Elements of Neo-Confucianism that are relevant to this work are the value placed on proper social relationships and the patriarchal structure of society. This paper will focus on the position of yangban (upper-class) men and women and gisaeng (female performers) in society as represented through Sin's work. In *Two-Sword Dance*, Sin depicts the societal and gender roles that were dominant in the Neo-Confucian Joseon society in three main ways. Firstly, the clothing of the figures demonstrates their position in society. Secondly, Sin uses the spatial separation of the yangban family and the gisaeng dancers to demonstrate the separate and hierarchical spheres in society. Lastly, the motion of the gisaeng and the stillness of the yangban women represent how, although part of a lower class, gisaeng were often afforded more social freedom than yangban women. This paper aims to provide a close reading of *Two-Sword Dance* and a clearer understanding of the role of gender and class in Joseon society.

KEYWORDS: Joseon period, Korea, painting, Social and Gender roles, Korean women, Sin Yunbok

This article will explore the representation of gender and social class in Sin Yunbok's 1745 painting *Two-Sword Dance* (fig. 1), painted in colour on paper and currently in the Kansong Art Museum in Seoul, South Korea. Sin Yunbok (ca. 1758 - after 1815) was known for his lively but unconventional paintings of everyday life, particularly of female performers.¹ He worked for the Court Painting Bureau but lost his post due to the controversial nature of his subjects.²

Two-Sword Dance was created in the Joseon period of Korea (1392 - 1897), which was dominated by the Neo-Confucian ideology. Confucianism originated in China from the teachings of Confucius (c. 551 BCE - c. 479 BCE). Neo-Confucianism emerged in the twelfth century CE, with the Chinese scholar Zhu Xi, whose ideas strongly influenced what would become Korean Neo-Confucianism.³ Neo-Confucianism was introduced to Joseon by Korean scholars who brought the ideology back from their travels to China and from their relationships with Chinese Neo-Confucian scholars.⁴ Neo-Confucianism was a complex and multifaceted belief system that came to be the dominant belief system of Joseon. Neo-Confucianism touched many aspects of daily life, from philosophical beliefs to daily routines. In relation to Sin Yunbok's *Two-Sword Dance*, I will be focusing on the social aspects of Neo-Confucianism, particularly in relation to the role of women. Relationships under Neo-Confucianism were strictly hierarchical, with those situated atop the hierarchy expected to act responsibly and morally to those below them.⁵ The "Five Cardinal Relationships" of Confucianism were between father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, old and young, and friends.⁶ Respecting social position and age was especially important in Joseon society.⁷ Women were viewed as subordinate to the men in their lives; the eldest male in the family held the highest social position.⁸ Not only were women viewed as lower than men in the Neo-Confucian hierarchy, female performers, or gisaeng, who Sin often depicted in his paintings, were part of the lowest class of Joseon society.



Sin's paintings of gisaeng, such as *Two-Sword Dance*, conflicted with the Neo-Confucian ideals of the Joseon period.⁹ Gisaeng were beautiful women who were highly skilled in singing, playing instruments, dancing, poetry, calligraphy, and painting; some also became popular for their wit and humour.¹⁰ Some accounts date the beginning of the gisaeng to the early Goryeo period (918 to 1392 A.D.),¹¹ while others date even earlier to the Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C. to 668 A.D.).¹² Girls were taken from the cheonmin class, the lowest social class, at around fifteen years old to train to be gisaeng, and typically worked from eighteen to thirty years old.¹³ During the Joseon dynasty, gisaeng trained at schools that taught music, dance, and literature.¹⁴ Before Sin's work, women, especially gisaeng, were rarely depicted in genre paintings.¹⁵ As gisaeng were considered to be part of the lowest class of Joseon society, they were subject to fewer restrictions than the women of the high yangban class. Unlike yangban women, gisaeng were able to have an education, be seen in public, and interact with men.

¹ Saehyang P. Chung, "Sin Yunbok's Kisaeng Imagery: Subtle Expression of Emotions under the Women's Beautiful Facade," *Acta Koreana* 10, no. 2 (2007): 75.

² Chung, 75.

³ Kevin N. Cawley, "Korean Confucianism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/korean-confucianism/>.

⁴ Cawley.

⁵ Cawley.

⁶ Cawley.

⁷ Cawley.

⁸ Cawley.

⁹ Chung, "Sin Yunbok's Kisaeng Imagery," 74.

¹⁰ Committee for the Compilation of The History of Korean Women, "Women Entertainers: The Kisaeng," in *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient times to 1945*, 3rd ed. Translated by Yung-Chung Kim. (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 1982), 142.

¹¹ Chung, "Sin Yunbok's Kisaeng Imagery," 76-77.

¹² Byong Won Lee, "Evolution of the Role and Status of Korean Professional Female Entertainers (Kisaeng)," *The World of Music* 21, no. 2 (1979) (2007): 75, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43560608>.

¹³ Lee, 76.

¹⁴ Chung, "Sin Yunbok's Kisaeng Imagery," 77.

¹⁵ Chung, 88.

Two-Sword Dance depicts various social groups of Joseon society. The group that immediately draws the viewer's attention is the gisaeng in the middle. These two women, dressed in vibrant clothing with a sword in each hand, twirl in the center of the gathering, their forms creating harmony and balance with each other. The women face opposite directions, their bodies curving towards each other. The slight curve of their swords reflects the curve of their bodies. Both women wear sweeping garments in vivid shades of blue, red, purple, and green, which convey their rapid movement as they ripple and flow, seemingly swept up in the wind currents around their moving bodies. Their bright clothing and dynamic movement make them the focus of the painting. The next group, above the two central women, are four men and two women watching the entertainment. These men and women are part of the yangban (upper-class). Three of the men wear the black gat, while the man on the far right wears a gat in a pale beige shade. The ladies' hair is swept up into large puffs, and they wear different shades of blue hanbok.

Their pale clothing and motionless posture visually differentiate them from the gisaeng. The next social class is seen in the smaller figure in white robes to the right of the yangban, perhaps a servant. Lastly are the figures of seven male musicians, between the dancers and the viewer. These men hold instruments, indicating their status, and wear blue garments, except the man on the far left, who wears white. The men wear black gat hats, creating a visual rhythm that breaks up the mostly pale colours of the composition. The clothing, placement, and motion of the figures vary depending on their social group. To limit the scope of this paper, I will focus on the yangban men, the yangban women, the gisaeng, and the interplay between them; the two groups of women were strictly separated, but the male yangban could move in between. In Two-Sword Dance, Sin uses visual conventions to reflect the social and gender roles of Joseon society, particularly through clothing, positioning, and motion.

Clothing, Colour, and Headwear

In Two-Sword Dance, Sin demonstrates differences in class through the clothing of the figures. During the Joseon period, clothing demonstrated the social position of the wearer through elements such as colour, material, pattern, and style.¹⁶ A Joseon viewer would have been able to understand how the colour of the clothing and the headwear of the figures demonstrated their class. As well, the special costume of the sword dancers demonstrates their gisaeng status.

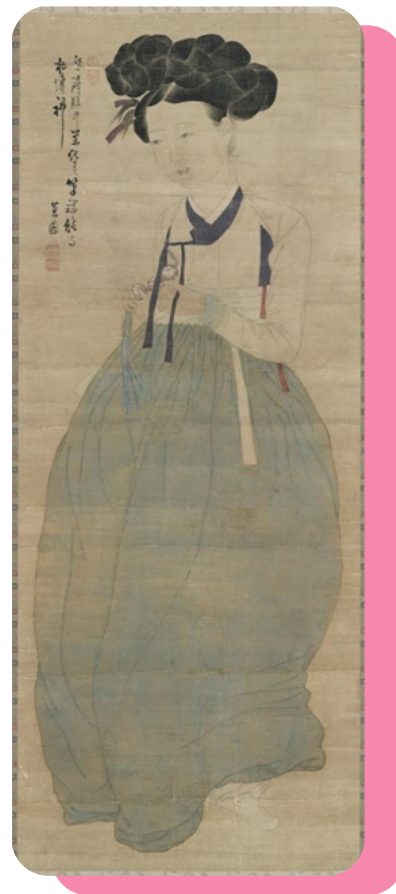


Figure 2. *Sin Yunbok, Portrait of a Beauty, Late Joseon Dynasty. Ink and colour on silk, 114 × 45.5 cm. Collection of Kansong Art and Culture Foundation.*

The women at the top left of the painting are identifiable as yangban through the colour of their clothing and its decoration. The basic structure of women's clothing in the Joseon period was the jeogori (jacket) and skirt.¹⁷ Women of the higher classes wore white jeogori with coloured trims along the seams of the collar, underarms, and sides, known as the *samhoejang jeogori* ("triple-trimmed jacket").¹⁸ The women's jeogori in Two-Sword Dance is trimmed along the collar and wrists, and although the underarm seams are hidden, it seems likely that they are wearing *samhoejang jeogori*. The women also decorate their jackets with *norigae*, tasselled ornaments.¹⁹

Like the dress of the women in Two-Sword Dance, shades of blue dominated women's everyday clothing in the Joseon period.²⁰

¹⁶ Committee for the Compilation of *The History of Korean Women*, "Costume," in *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient times to 1945*, 3rd ed. Translated by Yung-Chung Kim. (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 1982), 145.

¹⁷ Committee for the Compilation of *The History of Korean Women*, 146.

¹⁸ Tae-ho Lee, "Aesthetic Awareness of Women in Old Paintings," *Koreana* 32, no. 4 (2018): 16.

¹⁹ Lee, 17.

²⁰ Lee, 16.

Blue skirts also demonstrated that a woman was married.²¹ A popular choice of dress was “a white jacket and an indigo blue skirt . . . reminiscent of cheonghwa baekja, white porcelain with cobalt blue designs, which was popular at the time.”²² This shows that clothing was representative of wider societal tastes and conventions. To identify the clothing of the yangban women in Two-Sword Dance, we can compare it to another painting by Sin: *Portrait of a Beauty* (fig. 2). In this painting, the yangban woman also wears a triple-trimmed-jacket, light blue skirt, norigae, and similar hairstyle to the women in Two-Sword Dance. By identifying the similarities between the dress of the women in the top left of Two-Sword Dance with *Portrait of a Beauty*, the women’s dress can be classified as that of the yangban class.

Gisaeng clothing differed from that of yangban women. This difference is heightened in Two-Sword Dance, as the gisaeng are wearing sword dance costumes. Costumes for these performances were made up of brightly coloured jeogori and skirts, as well as elements of military dress, notably the jeonbok (military long vest), jeondaek (military belt), and jeollip (military hat)²³. The military aspects of sword dance costumes were slowly integrated into the performance, creating a sense of androgyny.²⁴ The gisaeng in Sin’s painting are distinguished from the yangban women through their clothing, particularly in the bold colours, the use of military elements, and the sense of androgyny they portray.

Hair and headwear were also indicative of class in the Joseon dynasty. Yangban women spared no expense on their hair and often wore large wigs.²⁵ Although kings Yeongjo and Jeongjo, who reigned during Sin’s lifetime, attempted to suppress the use of wigs, the fashion for big hair is still visible in Sin’s work.²⁶ For men, the black gat was part of the proper attire for noblemen.²⁷ The man on the right of the top group is not wearing the gat, but rather the chorip, made from woven grass or bamboo.²⁸ This type of hat indicates the age of the male figure, as

it was worn by boys who were too young to wear the traditional black gat but had passed their coming-of-age ceremony.²⁹ The sword dancers wear jeollip (military hats), which indicates their role as performers and separates them from the other figures in Sin’s painting.³⁰

Space in Society and Painting

Although the gisaeng system conflicted with the values of the dominant Neo-Confucian ideology of the Joseon dynasty, it was not eradicated – likely because of the influence gisaeng held over government officials as well as the concern that without gisaeng government officials might turn their affections to the wives of commoners.³¹ Gisaeng were a way for the yangban man to enjoy what he was denied by the Neo-Confucian family system, such as erotic desire and intellectual stimulation.³² Successful gisaeng had many qualities that a proper yangban woman was denied, such as “artistic excellence, beauty, and sex appeal.”³³ Joseon gisaeng were strictly regulated and were not allowed to become part of the yangban class through marriage.³⁴ As gisaeng status was hereditary, even if the daughter of a gisaeng had a yangban father, she would still grow up to be a gisaeng.³⁵ Gisaeng could not be part of the Joseon family system; yangban men could not marry gisaeng, and yangban women could not interact with them.³⁶ Gisaeng lived on the fringes of society and were often not allowed marriage or a family.³⁷

The separation of gisaeng from the world of yangban women and men, and the ideal Neo-Confucian family, is demonstrated in Sin’s work. The gisaeng are spatially separated from the yangban family in the painting. As revealed by their blue clothing, the yangban women are married, and as the man on the far right is younger (as indicated by his chorip hat), he is likely one of their sons. This group represents the ideal of the Neo-Confucian family, something gisaeng were denied. While the yangban spectators watch the gisaeng performing—aside from the man directly to the left of the women—the performers do not meet their gaze.

²¹ Youngjae Lee, “The Research of Costume on Shin, Yun-Bok’s Painting in Late Chosun Dynasty,” *Journal of Fashion Business* 14, no. 3 (2010): 54.

²² Lee, “Aesthetic Awareness of Women in Old Paintings,” 16.

²³ Ga Young Park, “Androgyny of Sword Dance Costumes in the Joseon Dynasty,” *International Journal of Human Ecology* 15, no. 2 (December 2014): 25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.6115/ijhe.2014.15.2.23>.

²⁴ Park, 30.

²⁵ Committee for the Compilation of The History of Korean Women, “Costume,” 150.

²⁶ Committee for the Compilation of The History of Korean Women, 150.

²⁷ Lee, “The Research of Costume on Shin, Yun-Bok’s Painting in Late Chosun Dynasty,” 58.

²⁸ “Chorip,” *Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture*, National Folk Museum of Korea, accessed December 14, 2022, <https://folkency.nfm.go.kr/en/topic/detail/7206>.

²⁹ “Chorip.”

³⁰ Park, “Androgyny of Sword Dance Costumes in the Joseon Dynasty,” 25.

³¹ Committee for the Compilation of The History of Korean Women, “Women Entertainers: The Kisaeng,” 139.

³² Ji-young Suh, “Women on the Borders of the Ladies’ Quarters and the Ginyeo House: The Mixed Self-Consciousness of Ginyeo in Late Joseon,” *Korea Journal* 48, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 144.

³³ Suh, 144.

³⁴ Lee, “Evolution of the Role and Status of Korean Professional Female Entertainers (Kisaeng),” 75-76.

³⁵ Chung, “Sin Yunbok’s Kisaeng Imagery,” 77.

³⁶ Committee for the Compilation of The History of Korean Women, “Women Entertainers: The Kisaeng,” 144.

³⁷ Chung, “Sin Yunbok’s Kisaeng Imagery,” 74.

The gisaeng are denied the agency of looking either at the yangban above them, the musicians below them, or directly at the viewer. Their gazes are confined, which creates a space cell that boxes them off both from the rest of the group and from the viewer. They are separated from the other figures both by their positions and their gazes, reflecting how they were in a separate social space in their lives.

Motion and Freedom

Despite being part of the lowest class of Joseon society, gisaeng were able to transcend the Neo-Confucian restrictions on women in various ways. For example, they were the only group of women who were educated.³⁸ According to Confucian thought, “there are four virtues women should possess: First, not being too intelligent; second, not being too eloquent; third, not being too beautiful; and fourth, not being too dexterous.”³⁹ As gisaeng were expected to be charming women who were often renowned for their wit, the role of the gisaeng conflicted with all these values. Unlike other classes of women, gisaeng were permitted to leave their homes, interact with men, and attend public events.⁴⁰ While yangban women held a higher position in society, their lives were highly restricted by the dominant Neo-Confucian ideology. Through this lens, the gisaeng had more freedom.

The representation of motion in *Two-Sword Dance* demonstrates how the lives of yangban women were often more restricted than those of gisaeng. The yangban women in the top left sit in stillness, their legs tucked beneath their large skirts and hidden amongst the puffy drapery. The motion of their bodies is hidden by their clothing which shows their rank. In contrast to the stationary yangban women, the gisaeng twist and turn, their swords cut through the air, and the peacock feathers on their hats bend. Even their delicate feet show their precarious movements. The sword dance was taught at special gisaeng training schools; the women’s ability to perform this dance demonstrates their education, something the static yangban women lack.⁴¹ Therefore, their dynamic motion is representative of both the increased education and social freedom of the gisaeng compared to the lives of yangban women.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of Sin Yunbok’s *Two-Sword Dance*, we can see how the artist depicted the different social roles of the yangban women, yangban men, and gisaeng. The Neo-Confucian ideology of the Joseon period strictly prescribed how the Joseon people were to act. Those who lived outside of the structure delineated by the Neo-Confucian order, such as the gisaeng, struggled on the fringes of society. However, in many ways, the gisaeng had more opportunities and freedom than the women of the yangban class. Sin shows these complex relationships between class and gender in his work through clothing, positioning, and motion. Works by genre painters such as Sin reveal the structure and everyday life of Joseon society, and how distinct social groups interacted with each other.

³⁸ Chung, 78.

³⁹ Suh, “Women on the Borders of the Ladies’ Quarters and the Ginyeo House,” 143.

⁴⁰ Committee for the Compilation of *The History of Korean Women*, “Women Entertainers: The Kisaeng,” 140.

⁴¹ Park, “Androgyny of Sword Dance Costumes in the Joseon Dynasty,” 25.

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