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Ink Painting of Orchids among the Literati in the Qing and Chosŏn Dynasties¹

Herin Jung

Genres of cultural products have flowed in and out between China and Korea for thousands of years. It is well known that among these genres, the orchid was one of the most elegant subjects in ink painting. Although research has shown which types and how many works have been exchanged between the two countries, the ideas beneath the works deserve greater attention. The works of Kim Chŏng-hŭi 金正喜 (1786-1856) in the late Chosŏn 朝鮮 Dynasty are particularly valuable. Well known as a great calligrapher and erudite scholar, Kim profoundly explored art history and theory and was especially knowledgeable about successive painters of traditional orchid paintings, from Zheng Suonan 鄭所南 to Zheng Xie 鄭燮. Though he was most interested in Zheng Xie's works, Kim only selectively applied Zheng's ideas because of his strongly kept traditional literati morals, including an adherence to the strict morals of zhongyong 中庸, the Doctrine of the Mean. Another master in ink painting of orchids in the Chosŏn Dynasty was Cho Hŭi-ryong 趙熙龍 (1789-1866) who, although a member of the literati, did not belong to the scholar-official class. Cho resisted the traditional values of scholarship on literati paintings for more individual and worldly values, intending to follow Zheng's ideas but altering them instead. Kim and Cho seem to have admired different aspects of Zheng's ideas on orchid painting.

Introduction

Various kinds of cultural products, including social systems, thoughts, art works, and theories have flowed from China to Korea for thousands of years. Success in moving from one cultural ground to another cannot be realized just with a migration. Also required is an application or a change from their original forms. From this point of view, ink painting of orchids is notable as one of the phenomena that have involved a change of philosophy and process in its creation. Although many researchers have explored which works were exchanged between the two countries, the ideas embedded in those works, motives, purposes, detailed strategies, and results of application still need to be investigated. The relation among Zheng Xie 鄭燮 (1693-1765) in the Qing

¹An earlier draft of this article was presented on August 8, 2010 at the 18th International Congress of Aesthetics which was held at Beijing University, China.

Dynasty, and Kim Chǒng-hŭi 金正喜 (1786-1856) and Cho Hŭi-ryong 趙熙龍 (1789-1866) in the Chosŏn 朝鮮 Dynasty (1392-1910) shows how the ideas of painting in China were understood and modified in Korea during the late Chosŏn period.

The Idea of Ink Painting of Orchids in the Qing Dynasty: The Case of Zheng Xie

Zheng represents literati painters who struggled to establish their personality in the Qing Dynasty. He belonged to Yangzhou baguai 揚州八怪, a group of painters in Yangzhou province, who showed strong personalities on their canvas, sometimes seen as eccentric to his contemporaries. Yangzhou was one of China's most prosperous cities which provided its people with more chances for entertainment, including the arts. Also, the city's rapidly increasing wealth stimulated among its inhabitants the idea of personality and the freedom of expressing emotions beyond traditional morals. Such an environment presented Zheng with a dilemma; despite his status as a member of the literati class, he needed to sell his works to make a living. Therefore, he was pressured along with other artists in other genres of his era to express within his art his personality more than ever. It seems that it must have been difficult for him to both build his identity and sell his works while simultaneously catering to others' tastes.



Fig. 1. Zheng Xie, Wild Orchid. Ink on paper. Shanghai Museum.

The conflicting ideas mentioned above resulted in Zheng's rejection of one of the important moral rules in the literati's tradition, *zhongyong* 中庸 [the doctrine of the mean]. For example, he often let the orchids in his paintings imply an individual in agony, as shown in one of his poems: "Always in spring with thick roots and leaves / Let me grieve over not possessing scent alluring butterflies /With what shall I describe the spirit of Ling Jun 靈均 on *fu* 賦 [rhapsody] / I shall call the spirit to Xiang 湘 River for you" (Zheng, 1985, p. 175) (Fig. 1). As seen in this poem, Zheng focused on one of the orchid images, the abandoned gentlemen, identifying himself with Ling Jun, the author of *Chuci* 楚辭 [Songs of Chu]. It is for their orchid images, the abandoned gentlemen, that Zheng respected the works of Xu Wei 徐渭 and Gao Qipei 高其佩, both great painters of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, respectively (Zheng, 1985, p. 217).

Moreover, Zheng shared with these two painters another spirit, a will against tradition and authority in painting. Still, something that seems like a paradox occurred. According to the spirit shown by the earlier masters, following them meant denying them; just as the masters themselves had denied their earlier masters. In fact, Zheng abandoned half of his early learning from orchid painting masters, including even Shitao 石濤, whom Zheng most admired. Zheng explained that he was unable to emulate Shitao's works due to their difference in character, and for this reason he did not even feel the need to paint in a similar style (Zheng, 1985, p. 373). In the case of Zheng, the struggle to distinguish his personality from many other great painters' and also from Shitao's led him to announce: "I dare to say that I have not had any masters in fact and have just experienced the time of studying paintings out of ignorance. Just drawing a picture at the state where *tianji* 天機 [the mechanism of nature]² operates [inside me], I recognize there's neither present nor past in my heart" (Zheng, 1985, p. 374). For Zheng, the legitimacy of orchid painters in China rested in nothing less than expressing one's own personality (Zheng, 1985, pp. 373-374).

It can be understood that Zheng placed an emphasis on nature in order to show his personality more distinctly and set it against all kinds of authorities. He

²This word appears in the book, *Zhuangzi* 莊子 for the first time in China. Its literal meaning is "mechanism of nature." But in many other writings, it can refer to nature's power or its activities.

dared to reform ideas on the relation between tradition and nature which had continued for over a thousand years until then:

[When seeing bamboos early in the morning] I felt a desire to paint them, sensing some movement inside me. However, the bamboos in my mind were different from those in my sight. After grinding an ink stick and unfolding a piece of paper, [I experienced] the brush strokes changing the images in my mind, and the bamboos in my hand were also different from those in my mind. In summary [the old norms that] the conception is prior to the brushing explains the fixed rules [of painting. By contrast, my new thesis that] *qu 趣* is outside of the rules explains the mechanism of natural movement. Who can say it [my new thesis is applicable] just in paintings? (Zheng, 1985, p. 125)



Fig. 2. Zheng Xie. Bamboo after rain. Ink on paper. Tokyo National Museum.

Zheng set three images in three stages of creation: the image in sight, in conception, and on the canvas. Although the last one had been regarded as created by accident in the sense that it was out of painters' control, Zheng overturned the traditional view. For over a thousand years the literati had deemed that the image in the mind should be set before painting and the discrepancy between the images in the mind and on the canvas should be eliminated through the trained painter's hand skills. However, Zheng held the view that the discrepancy did not occur because of poor hand skills but rather was created by the mechanism of natural movement that acted beyond human intentions and rules. He called the realm beyond the rules *qu 趣*, a kind of beauty in art works, which is produced by the artist's personality beyond the senses.³

³Qu means the mood of an object, but in other contexts, it can also mean the inclination of the mind for a value.

Zheng contrasted *qu*, which he highly valued, with technical rules. To acquire *qu* on the canvas, he applied calligraphic brush strokes to his paintings through devoted practice.

The Idea of Ink Painting of Orchids in the Chosŏn Dynasty: The Case of Kim Chŏng-hŭi

Zheng's ideas on painting were known in the Chosŏn Dynasty in the 19th century. It is fortunate that they were recognized by Kim Chŏng-hŭi 金正喜 (1786-1856), who was a renowned scholar as well as a calligrapher and a literati painter. Kim enriched his knowledge on painting with the help of books published in the Míng and Qíng Dynasties, and antique works of painting and calligraphy in China from ancient times. He also received help from his friends, the literati in the Qíng Dynasty, such as Weng Fangkang 翁方剛, Ruan Yuan 阮元, Zhu Henian 朱鶴年, Zhang Shen 張深, and Wu Chongliang 吳崇梁, as well as many other scholars from Yangzhou 揚州, Changzhou 常州, and Beijing. In the realm of painting, he was especially interested in landscape and ink painting of orchids. For the latter, he ranked Zheng Suonan 鄭所南 and Zhao Mengjian 趙孟堅 in the Southern Song Dynasty, and Chen Yuansu 陳元素, monk Baiding 白丁, Shitao, Zheng Xie, and Quan Zai 錢載 in the Qíng Dynasty as the greatest painters. What he thought of ink painting of orchids is described below:

Ink painting of orchids is the most difficult [genre in painting]. Though there are many famous painters whose specialties are landscapes, plum trees, bamboos, and other plants and animals, there are few painters known for painting orchids....Zheng Suonan was the first renowned painter of orchids, and Zhao Mengjian was the best. Without unworldly and highly self-disciplined character, ink painting of orchids cannot be undertaken....Chen Yuansu, monk Baidin, Shitao to Zheng Xie, and Quan Zai in these days specialized in orchid painting and had outstanding characters. Because the grades endowed on the works depend upon painters' characters in general, their works shouldn't be evaluated just by their technical skills themselves. By contrast, those who start with the rules of painting deserve to be called stigmatized painters. (Kim, 1998, p. 245)

Kim Chŏng-hŭi emphasized much more than Zheng, such as certain criteria for describing orchids, especially the character and scholarship of the painters themselves. Although the well-cultivated character and scholarship of painters are not conditions necessary for painting beautiful or realistic objects, Kim

empowered such ideals over it. He asked painters to produce ideas inherent in the figures of the objects on the canvas, such as those formed from the literati's moral or philosophical perspective. He stressed many times that it was ideas including morals that defined literati painting, rather than the techniques or mood of the work (Kim, 1998, p. 254).

The next issue Kim raised was the method of attaining the idea inside of the shapes, and he suggested calligraphic brush strokes, which would help the painting move away from a mere visual resemblance of objects. Kim called the aesthetic properties brought forth by calligraphic brush strokes *shujuanqi* 書卷氣 and *wenzixiang* 文字香, which, according to Kim, brought Zheng's works to the level of enlightenment. These aesthetic properties were stressed more by Kim than by Zheng, as seen below:

Describing orchids is close to writing *lishu* 隸書, that is to say, describing orchids is possible just with *shujuanqi* and *wenzixiang*. The method of drawing is most strongly prohibited for describing orchids so that it's better not to use even a drawing brush stroke. The reason why fellows like Cho Hui-ryong 趙熙龍, although taught how to describe orchids by me, couldn't free themselves from painting is that they didn't possess *shujuanqi* and *wenzixiang*. (Kim, 1995, p. 151)



Fig. 3. Kim Chong-hüi. Orchid on the Mountain in the Nanmangch'öp. Ink on paper. private collection.

Shujuanqi and *wenzixiang* mean a kind of beauty originally produced by the scholarship of the literati painters, who have trained in calligraphy for a long time

to regulate the speed, the thickness, and the strength of strokes. For Kim, applying calligraphic strokes to painting orchids was more effective than for any other genres of paintings, and it was this application, he believed, that had led Zheng's works to be so successful. This belief was also in part due to the fact that orchid painting was mainly composed of just several strokes unlike paintings of other subject matters.

Furthermore, Kim stressed that specific rules of strokes for describing orchids were almost as important as moral rules. For instance, he asked a painter to follow the specific rules of *fengyan* 鳳眼 and *xiangyan* 象眼⁴ as sincerely as they would follow *wuziqi* 無自欺 [not deceiving oneself], which was one of the important moral principles in *Daxue* 大學 [Great Learning]. On another instance, Kim described Quan Zai as orthodox and in the state of *shen* 神, where nature was mysterious and imperceptible to ordinary people. This was possible with the help of two specific rules of strokes for describing orchids, each called *zuohua* 左畫 and *sanzhuan* 三轉. These rules were originated in the Yuan 元 Dynasty by Zhao Mengjian 趙孟堅 and Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫, respectively.⁵ Kim's ideas on orchid painting appear to be quite close to Zheng's in that they shared the lineage of great painters of orchids, pursued the idea beneath the figure, and applied calligraphic brush strokes to painting. However, such an assumption may be invalid considering that Kim's scholarship emphasized only *some* of Zheng's ideas.

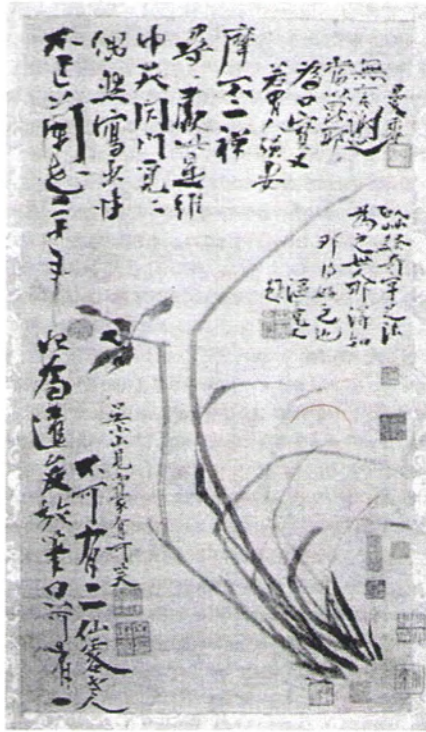
Why did Kim set aside Zheng's other ideas on painting? There are clues inside Kim's *Nanmangch'öp* 蘭盟帖, an album of orchid paintings with poems, where Zheng's six poems for orchid are cited. It is worth paying attention to which of Zheng's poems Kim chose or omitted. All the poems in the album only describe orchids lyrically and never against the Doctrine of the Mean. All the images of orchids in the poems Kim chose are of a man of virtue or a flower beyond the reach of the mundane world. For example, he recited the former in

⁴These terms indicate the shapes on the canvas, each similar to the eyes of Chinese phoenix and those of elephants. These shapes are made by two orchid leaves crossing each other (Fig. 3).

⁵*Zuohua* 左畫 and *sanzhuan* 三轉 each mean a technique of brush stroke moving from the right to the left and the turning of the brush three times to describe an orchid leaf (Fig. 3). These two techniques were created by Zhao Mengjian 趙孟堅 and Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 in the Yuan 元 Dynasty, respectively.

the sixth poem, "There is a flower seclusive and faithful / Just deep in fog not caring for success in the world / Worrying that a woodcutter would open up a road to the flower / I covered it with a high mountain." And in the ninth poem, intending to exclude any ideas of belonging to the mundane world, "A muse down to the cloudy mountain last night / Broke branches and scattered their flowers / Can common branches and leaves in the world feel easy among the flowers?". Kim left out images of agony and resentment, which constituted a majority of Zheng's poems. These images are closer to another tradition whose origin is *Chuci* 楚辭 [Songs of Chu], which is full of painful emotions. This tradition is opposed to Kim's preference for *zhongyong*, a concept that tends to deny an expression of extreme emotions in favor of a more calming sense of peaceful equilibrium.

The difference between Kim and Zheng mentioned above can be explained by their different cultural environments. One of the significant differences is that unlike in the Qing Dynasty, there was no authentic lineage of orchid painters in the Chosŏn Dynasty who had an outstanding ability to describe orchids with great character and scholarship. Authentic painters meant morally sound ones duly faithful to *zhongyong*. Kim judged them from the criteria of the literati's tradition. The other difference is *shidafu's* 士大夫 responsibility for morals, politics, and arts in the Chosŏn Dynasty, which seems heavier than that in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. For instance, Chŏngjo 正祖, the king in the late 18th century, forbade the import of what were considered vulgar novels from the Qing Dynasty, such as *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅 [The plum in the golden vase] and *Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳 [Tale of the water margin], and the literati class in Chosŏn were not permitted to read them openly. At that time no open cultural consensus existed in Chosŏn as it did in the Ming and Qing Dynasties which stressed the importance of expressing personality in one's art works. The famous literary schools in Ming and Qing, so-called *Shenyunpa* 神韻派 and *Xinglingpa* 性靈派, both emphasized the importance of emotion, and were relatively unconcerned with scholarship and morals in poems. In this way, the Ming and Qing Dynasties did not extend their influence into the Chosŏn Dynasty.



Kim Chông-hûi. Non-Dual Chan Orchid. Ink on paper. Private collectio

Of course, Kim regarded aesthetic properties called shenyun 神韻 [mysterious harmony] or tianqu 天趣 [the beauty of nature] as more important than rules in painting. He recognized that such properties were indeed the exclusive attributes of art, distinguishing the arts from knowledge and morals. These properties indicated the highest level of painting. Kim recited a poem about the ultimate level of painting he had envisioned:

Having not described an orchid for twenty years,
 I described its nature by chance.
 What I have sought and sought for with the door closed,
 That's what Weima called non-dual chan 禪. (Kim, 1986, p. 256)

In the first two lines of the poem Kim suggests what is important in describing orchids. The nature of the orchids does not belong to just the realm of techniques nor of rules. This is why he could describe orchids successfully despite

abandoning them for 20 years. Still, what should not be forgotten is that the ultimate stage can be reached only after practicing technical rules. As Kim stated, “[the ultimate stage] can only be attained after lots of practice. The one left after attaining nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine is the most difficult to get to....The one is neither possible with human efforts nor impossible with them” (Kim, 1998, p. 269). This passage refers to the distance between the level of human practice and the level of enlightenment in the arts. At the ultimate stage, the nature of the orchid is non-dualistic, where all the discriminations, such as technique versus non-technique and rule versus non-rule (including the realms inside of the rule and outside of the rule) perish. The figure of the orchid in Fig. 4 is different from that of an ordinary orchid which is described by following rules and techniques only. The underlying idea of such a usual figure of the orchid can be easily inferred. However, this underlying idea appears to be even stronger and clearer when the usual figure of the orchid is deformed and thus becomes unusual as is the case in Fig. 4.

Hence, we see that Kim’s ideas on painting have two opposing sides. On the one hand, Kim tried to expand the idea beneath a figure away from its individual meaning toward more universal ideas of nature through his disciplined scholarly practice. On the other hand, his practice reduced art’s autonomy against morals and thoughts, allowing scholarship to enter the realm of paintings, too. Kim never admitted paintings that lay outside of the literary and scholarly norms he set, which was difficult for painters with different class backgrounds to accept.

The Idea of Ink Painting of Orchids in the Chosŏn Dynasty: The Case of Cho Hŭi-ryong

Cho Hŭi-ryong 趙熙龍 (1789-1866), well known for prose and painting in his days, belonged to *yŏhang’in* 閭巷人, another name for the middle class (中人) under the scholar-official class. He wrote several anthologies of poems and prose, including *Hanwahŏnjejapjon* 漢瓦軒題雜存 (Cho, 1999, Vol. 3) which included 262 writings on paintings. This anthology shows he was against some of the traditional values of literati painting and tried to build his strong personality, justifying worldly values in his paintings. He firmly believed that great orchid painting could be done without scholarship which would be accumulated after years of training, as was insisted by the scholar-official painters like Kim. For him, scholarship is necessary only if it helps to enhance the craft of his painting:

Describing an orchid is possible after a painter has read ten thousand books, whose qi comes to occupy his intestines and stomach and flow out to his ten fingers as a result. Can I do it without having read books in the world? Anyway, I wouldn't fall down to the world of ruined painters. (Cho, 1999, Vol. 3, Article no. 3)

Cho refuted Kim, who had declared that a painter would fall down to the group of ruined painters, if he did not possess profound learning from 10,000 books. What Cho denied was the excessive authority upon the arts, which the literati had formed over time and had forced even the middle class to follow. Such a relation between scholarship and art was not an idea of the middle class but for the scholar-official class. Cho wanted a personality more liberated from the norms of the Doctrine of the Mean than Kim would permit: "Describe bamboo with furious qi and describe orchids with delightful qi." It is insightful but less than "delights and laugh, rage and reproach, all [of which] are to be changed to writings." (Cho, 1999, Vol. 3, Article no. 43)

The beginning sentence of the above passage was written by Li Rihua 李日華 in the Ming Dynasty. Cho approved of a painter expressing all the emotions, including rage and reproach, which Confucianism rejected on the ground that they were too far removed from the Doctrine of the Mean. The reason why he did is described below:

I wrote hundreds of poems watching whales with their mouths open and turtles romping around at the seashore. I never repeated poems which had been built all from sorrow, torture and uneasiness. The poems turned out to be apricot trees, orchids, stones and bamboos with my ten fingers. I couldn't stop it (them?). I vented a grudge inside me by brushing as my hand went, which let qi of ink be splendid and made me realize the pure and lofty idea unexpectedly. Only this is the way to overcome all my sufferings. (Cho, 1999, Vol. 3, Article no. 19 & 22)



Fig. 5 Cho Hui-ryong. Orchid and Stone. Ink on paper, National Museum

The above confession is about Cho's three years of experience of exile on a solitary island. During that time he suffered from an overwhelming grudge for being falsely charged. Afterwards, he realized two new things about emotions. One is that he succeeded in recovering a peaceful mind by expressing his emotions in his works to his satisfaction until they were exhausted, not through restraining them. Another is that expressing the emotions to his satisfaction helped him to return to a peaceful mind rather than to spoil him. The way Cho reached a peaceful mind is different from the strategy of the Doctrine of the Mean that Kim would have chosen. In fact, Cho had a deeper affinity to the more complex, profane, and mundane world than to the transcendental one. He once compared an apricot tree and orchid to the *Shiji* 史記 and the *Yumagyöng* 維摩經, respectively. The former is a history book describing in rich detail the mundane world and containing all kinds of emotions of the people in it, whereas the latter is a Buddhist scripture describing the transcendental world and

encouraging one to be detached from all kinds of emotions. In the same context, he said the apricot tree was similar to prose and the orchid to a poem. What he thought about the relation between the two becomes clearer from his remarks that for a poem on orchid painting, a quatrain with five characters in each line is more suitable than an old poem with seven characters in each line (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6). He seems to imply that the orchid, farther from the mundane world than an apricot tree, is closer to symbols and metaphors. It is in the same way, he confessed that it was hard to feel peaceful after drawing a few lines to describe an orchid which would take up the entire space on the canvas and whose finished work, *Yumagyöng* 維摩經, respectively. The former is a history book describing in rich detail the mundane world unlike other genres of paintings, could not be revised. Therefore, he asked painters to purify themselves before describing an orchid, as if they were in front of a Daoist ritual service. He also asked them to keep the rules more strictly in describing an orchid than in describing an apricot tree, bamboo, or pine tree.



Fig. 6 Cho Hüi-ryong. Pair of Red Apricot Trees. Ink on paper. Private collection.

However, what Cho loved at heart was not an orchid; he would not leave the world where he suffered a lot of injustices and the emotions evoked by them. Cho had two goals. One was not to leave the world but live in it with a stronger personality. He believed such engagement in the world would help him not to be disturbed so much by it. Cho frequently said that he attempted to discover his distinct personality by trying to overcome the influence of previous masters, whom he had, nonetheless, honored and respected. He believed that it is impossible for anyone to make his innate personality the same as that of another (Cho, 1999, Vol. 3, Article no. 171). This explains why Cho put Zheng's idea in practice by not following his paintings. Instead, Cho made nature his teacher, similar to what Zheng had mentioned in his explanation about bamboo paintings. Cho tried to find out the aspects of nature that had eluded great painters of the past (Cho, 1999, Vol. 3, Article no. 183). He believed himself to be able to develop his distinct personality on the "new and distinct" aspects of nature.

Cho's second goal was to share his works with ordinary and illiterate people. He was proud of being the first painter to hand out flower paintings to people so that even fishermen and children would come to talk about paintings (Cho, 1999, Vol. 4, Article no. 9; Vol. 2, Article no. 20). He did not want paintings to be created solely by and for the scholar painter. Thus, he tried to expand the autonomous sphere of painting into the personality of this world, instead of trying to expand its meaning to the entire universe.

Conclusion

The orchid has a special meaning in the culture of Northeast Asia. It is a metaphor for the literati who struggled to keep their moral spirit, resisting all kinds of temptations in the secular world. The literati painters comforted and encouraged one another with orchid paintings. This tradition, it is said, was noticeable from the Southern Song Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty, although it underwent some changes during this period. In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, the idea that the representative painter, Zheng Xie, held focused on both intensifying the personality beneath the figures of orchids on the canvas and honoring the different styles of the great masters. Zheng identified the spirit of the masters of orchid painting as no more than their personalities and struggles to differentiate themselves from the great orchid painters of the earlier

period. Zheng's idea transmitted to Chosŏn, where it was applied in two different ways: in the first case, the personality was set aside for the establishment of fundamental rules. Kim Chŏng-hŭi emphasized the cultivation of character and the scholarship of painters, and held propositional technical rules almost as moral imperatives. What he demanded was possible or favorable to literati painters who could afford to cultivate character and scholarship, and apply their calligraphic techniques to painting which they had acquired years of training and practice. Kim's orchid paintings never implied strong emotions, such as resentment against offensive actions by other people or indifference that others showed to himself. In other words, his paintings never broke the moral rule of the literati, zhongyong.

In the second case, Cho Hŭi-ryong's ultimate goal was to express his own personality, not to convey the morals of the literati-officials. He, too, adhered to the spirit of Zheng Xie; however, he held a strong passion for establishing his own personality by denying Zheng Xie. He wanted his personality to exist fully *in* the human world. Therefore, he preferred the apricot tree to the orchid not for a morality which could only be realized outside the mundane world but for his own personality in the world.

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