

Portrait of a Goryeo Official by a Jiangnan Painter in the Mongol Yuan Dynasty: A Study of Chen Jianru's "Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon" of 1319

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Abstract

"Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon," currently in the collection of the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, was done by a renowned portrait artist, Chen Jianru, who was active in Hangzhou during the Mongol Yuan period. King Chungseon of Goryeo (personal name Wang Jang, reigned 1298, 1308-1313) commissioned this painting of considerable research value in the history of Chinese and Korean art. The present study first begins with a reexamination of King Chungseon's trip to Putuo Mountain in 1319 and his calling upon Chen Jianru to do a portrait painting of the Goryeo official Yi Je-hyeon (1287-1367) as a way to explain the background of this work. What follows is a stylistic analysis of "Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon" as a means to understand its production concepts and schematic tradition and to discuss how the artist portrayed Yi Je-hyeon as a Confucian gentleman. Finally, from the image-making and pictorial arrangement of the painting, the author concludes that the patron and the sitter aimed to fashion the image of a first-class Confucian scholar from Goryeo and to reveal that Goryeo cultural attainments compared favorably with those of other racial scholars in the Mongol Empire at that time.

The present study takes "Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon" to be the product of cooperation among the patron King Chungseon, the sitter Yi Je-hyeon, and the artist Chen Jianru. For the idea behind Yi's portrait, King Chungseon was most likely influenced by trends in portrait painting at the Mongol Yuan court and inspired by the tradition in China and Korea of rulers commissioning portraits for meritorious officials. Then, through the new technique mastered by Chen Jianru for portraiture in the Jiangnan region, "Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon" as it appears today came into being. The so-called new method of portraiture in Jiangnan refers to the inclusion of various objects in the portrait related to and symbolizing the spirit and thinking of the sitter. "Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon" not only successfully conveys the essence of this Goryeo sitter as a Confucian scholar, the large size of the painting that makes it suitable for display also hints at the important status of

the patron, King Chungseon.

The research in the present study testifies to two important ideas. The first is that analysis of "Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon" shows that by the 1320s, a new method of portraiture by Jiangnan painters had matured. The other is that the status of both the patron and sitter for "Portrait of Yi-hyeon" are exceptional in that it represents a Goryeo scholar portrait commissioned by a Goryeo king while in Yuan China ruled by the Mongols. The purpose and function of "Portrait of Yi Je-hyeon" are worthy of further study and for consideration in terms of Sino-Korean cultural and artistic exchange.

Keywords: Mongol Yuan, portrait painting, Goryeo, King Chungseon, Yi Je-hyeon, Chen Jianru, Sino-Korean cultural exchange

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