



## A study of Joseon paintings: Symbolism and meaning in Korean folk art

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### ABSTRACT

Visual art has long served as a mirror of social and cultural life, reflecting not only aesthetic values but also collective worldviews. This study examines the symbolism in the Korean folk painting (minhwa) known as Tiger and Magpie (호랑이와 까치), which developed during the late Joseon Kingdom. This artwork is not merely a visual decoration but also conveys cultural messages, moral values, and the collective hopes of Joseon society. The research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method, using Erwin Panofsky's theory of iconography and iconology as the main analytical framework. Primary data were obtained from visual documentation in the National Museum of Korea (국립중앙박물관), supported by secondary data from books, journal articles, and relevant academic studies. The findings reveal that the tiger, often portrayed humorously, symbolizes the people's subtle criticism of government officials who appeared authoritative yet were fragile in reality. Meanwhile, the magpie represents the common people's voice, boldly addressing those in power. In addition, natural elements such as pine trees, clouds, and the sun strengthen symbolic meanings related to protection, prosperity, and harmony. Overall, the Tiger and Magpie painting reflects how ordinary people in late Joseon articulated social criticism, hope, and spirituality through visual symbolism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Visual art has long served as a mirror of social and cultural life, reflecting not only aesthetic values but also collective worldviews. Painting, as Setya (2019) explains, is a two-dimensional artistic activity that expresses lines, colors, textures, light, and space while conveying the artist's emotions. As cultural facts, paintings embody human perspectives, aligning with Tylor's (2018) view of culture as a complex whole of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, and customs, as well as Tran's (1999) notion of culture as a system of material and spiritual values shaped by human-environment interaction. Within this framework, painting becomes more than decoration—it serves as a record of human experience and cultural development. During the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), the flourishing of visual art was deeply shaped by Confucian ideals of morality and hierarchy (Haboush, 1999). Two traditions emerged: palace paintings, which reinforced social order and authority, and folk paintings or *minhwa* (민화), which reflected the lives of commoners in a freer, simpler, and more symbolic style (Kim, 2017). *Minhwa*, far from being merely ornamental, functioned as talismans, prayers, and subtle social critiques, embodying collective values and aspirations (Kim & Kim, 2010).

Among the many themes in *minhwa*, the “Tiger and Magpie painting (호랑이 와 까치)” became particularly popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Park, 2015). Tigers, often depicted with humorous or awkward expressions, symbolized satirical portrayals of rulers or officials figures who commanded formal authority yet could be ridiculed (Eom, 2004). Magpies, in contrast, symbolized joy, good news, and the optimistic voices of commoners (Lee, 2015). Together, the tiger and magpie embodied a symbolic narrative in which great authority was tempered by the resilience of ordinary people (Hwang, 2023). Beyond this social commentary, the motif also had a spiritual dimension: tigers were believed to repel evil spirits, while magpies heralded fortune and prosperity (Cho, 2012). This dual function, as both protection and hope, explains the motif's enduring presence in everyday life. Scholars have studied *minhwa* from various perspectives Eom (2004) on satire, Lee (2015) on spiritual symbolism, Kim (2017) on its egalitarian aesthetic but specific research on the Tiger and Magpie remains limited despite its cultural richness.

This study therefore focuses on the Tiger and Magpie motif to analyze its symbolic and cultural functions within Joseon society. Methodologically, it employs Panofsky's (1972) iconographic framework pre-iconographical and iconographical stages along with Cassirer's (1944) theory of symbolism to uncover the cultural meaning embedded in these images. Such an approach highlights that *minhwa* should not be reduced to decorative folk art but recognized as cultural documents expressing social critique, spiritual belief, and collective aspiration (Hwang, 2023). In this sense, the Tiger and Magpie paintings are both mirrors of daily life in Joseon and enduring cultural artifacts that contribute to our understanding of Korean folk art within broader cross-cultural discourse.

Based on the background, this study focuses on exploring the symbolic meanings within the painting “Tiger and Magpie (호랑이 와 까치)” from the late Joseon period (18th–19th century), with the main research question addressing how ordinary people expressed their life narratives through this work. More specifically, the objectives of the study are to identify the symbols that appear in the Tiger and Magpie paintings and to analyze how their symbolism represents the narratives and worldviews of Joseon society. Previous research has shown that *minhwa* is not merely decorative art but a medium rich in symbolism related to the social, spiritual, and cultural life of the people. Each study highlights different aspects, ranging from satire and spirituality, longevity iconography, cross-cultural interpretation, to the adaptation of *minhwa* in modern contexts.

Several relevant studies serve as the foundation for this research. The first is by Eom So Yeon (2004) entitled “The Symbolic Meaning of the ‘Tiger’ in Minhwa and its Social Contexts in Joseon Period”. This study discusses the role of the tiger in minhwa, which was not only depicted as a symbol of power but also with humorous and caricatural expressions, serving as subtle satire toward officials or elites who appeared dignified yet fragile. The second is Penny Bailey (2020) in “Korea’s Sipjangsaeng Iconography: The Quest for Longevity and Immortality in the Visual Arts of the Joseon Dynasty,” which examines the iconography of *sipjangsaeng* or the ten symbols of longevity widely used in both palace art and minhwa. Bailey explains that symbols such as the sun, clouds, mountains, pine trees, bamboo, cranes, and turtles were not merely decorative motifs but carried prayers for longevity, health, and fortune. The third is Jihye Park (2021) in “A Study to Reveal the Effects of Using Symbolic Meaning of Minhwa with People Having a Variety of Cultural Backgrounds,” which highlights how minhwa symbols are interpreted across cultures and shows that symbolic meanings can influence participants’ aesthetic preferences.

The fourth study is by Hae Kyung Chung and Kyung Rhan Chung (2016) in “Korean Food Cultural Understanding in Korean Painting,” which analyzes the representation of food in Joseon paintings not only as visual objects but also as cultural symbols reflecting social structures. The fifth is by Hyun Joo Jang (2012) in “Development of Cultural Products Based on Minhwa the Joseon Dynasty: Focusing on Lotus Flower.” This article examines lotus flower paintings in minhwa and their potential for adaptation into modern cultural products. Jang explains that the lotus in Korean culture symbolizes purity, virtue, and reincarnation.

Taken together, these previous studies affirm that *minhwa* is not simply decorative art but is imbued with symbolism reflecting prayers, moral values, social criticism, and cultural identity. Eom So Yeon emphasizes satire and spirituality in tiger symbolism, Penny Bailey highlights the synthesis of Confucian and Taoist values in *sipjangsaeng*, Jihye Park underscores cross-cultural relevance, Hae Kyung Chung and Kyung Rhan Chung connect *minhwa* to social structures through food representation, while Hyun Joo Jang explores its potential as inspiration for modern cultural products. Collectively, these works provide an important foundation for further examining *minhwa*, particularly the symbolism of Joseon folk paintings as a form of visual communication that encapsulates social, spiritual, and cultural narratives.

### 1.1. Symbolism in Arts

Symbolism in visual art is an approach that employs visual elements such as form, color, objects, and composition to convey meanings that go beyond their outward appearance. These elements may represent spiritual, social, religious, or philosophical values embraced by the society that produced them. Herbert Read (1953) argues that symbols in art serve as a medium for expressing ideas that cannot be explained literally, functioning as a bridge between inner experiences and visual form, thereby enabling artists to communicate both emotional and abstract dimensions. According to Wiyatmi (2012), symbols in visual art may take the form of natural shapes, geometric patterns, colors, animals, plants, or human-made objects that acquire additional meaning based on cultural conventions.

In the context of traditional Korean art such as minhwa, symbolism functions as a medium of communication for the people to express prayers, aspirations, spiritual beliefs, and even veiled social criticism. For instance, the tiger is seen as both a guardian and a satirical figure representing authority; the magpie symbolizes good news; while the phoenix and lotus embody purity and rebirth. Furthermore, natural motifs such as animals, plants, and landscapes in Korean paintings

are used to articulate both philosophical meaning and aesthetic value. Through balanced compositions and delicate brushwork, these works not only depict harmony between humans and nature but also convey moral messages, spiritual reflections, and cultural values handed down across generations. Some of the objects frequently depicted in Korean folk paintings include the following. The tiger (호랑이) in Tiger and Magpie paintings serves as the central symbol with dual meanings. In Korean tradition, it is revered as a majestic creature that protects households and wards off evil spirits. However, unlike the court paintings that portray the tiger as dignified, folk minhwa often depict it with humorous or awkward expressions as a satirical critique of officials and the aristocracy. Thus, the tiger becomes both a symbol of protection and a medium of social criticism (Eom, 2004; Cho, 2012). The magpie (까치) symbolizes good news, joy, and optimism. In Korean culture, its appearance is considered an omen of happiness, while in minhwa it is often depicted atop a pine tree “mocking” the tiger. This symbol serves as an allegory of common people’s courage to speak against authority, reinforcing their moral strength (Lee, 2015; Han, 2014).

Next, the pine tree (소나무) represents longevity, steadfastness, and moral integrity. As part of the sipjangaeng (Ten Symbols of Longevity), it signifies endurance in life and the Joseon people’s prayers for family longevity, health, and happiness (Bailey, 2020; Kim, 2017). Clouds (구름) symbolize nobility, transcendence, and cosmic protection. In minhwa, they serve as a bridge between the human world and the spiritual dimension, emphasizing that human life exists under celestial guardianship (Yi, 2025; Kim, 2017). The sun (태양) symbolizes energy, vitality, and masculine power (yang), reflecting cosmic authority. In minhwa, the sun is also interpreted as hope for a bright future, protection, and prosperity for families (Bailey, 2020; Langer, 1953). The moon (달) symbolizes gentleness, tranquility, and feminine energy (yin). When paired with the sun, together they embody yin-yang harmony, cosmic balance, and life’s equilibrium. Its presence underscores the people’s prayers for universal balance (Cassirer, 1944; Yi, 2025).

Meanwhile, mountains or rocks (산) are regarded as sacred dwellings of guardian spirits (sansin) and symbolize stability, strength, and spiritual protection. In minhwa, they also reflect the Joseon people’s close relationship with nature as a source of life force (Hwang, 2023; Han, 2014). Bamboo (대나무) signifies flexibility, resilience, and honesty. Though pliant, it remains strong in storms. In minhwa, it complements the pine tree as a symbol of Joseon people’s morality, representing endurance against life’s hardships and oppressive authority (Kim, 2017). Earth or grass symbolizes fertility, abundance, and the interconnectedness of humans with nature. Its placement beneath the tiger’s feet emphasizes that minhwa are not only spiritual but also grounded in the everyday realities of common people (Han, 2014). Water (물), depicted as rivers, streams, or simple waves, symbolizes life, fertility, and continuity. As a vital agricultural resource for the Joseon people, water in Taoism and Buddhism also represents harmony, adaptability, and emptiness, making its presence more than decorative but reflective of cosmological beliefs about natural balance (Choi, 2013).

Then, The phoenix (봉황) in Korean tradition represents cosmic harmony, virtue, and legitimacy of authority. In minhwa, it is often depicted alongside the sun or moon, symbolizing yin-yang harmony and prayers for peace and prosperity (Park, 2017). The crane (학) is a symbol of longevity, wisdom, and purity. As part of the sipjangaeng, it is often depicted flying among clouds or standing beside pine trees (Bailey, 2010). The turtle (거북) is regarded as an immortal creature symbolizing longevity, endurance, and spiritual protection. In minhwa, it is often paired with water or plants, representing continuity of life (Gil & Kim, 2011). The peony (모란)

symbolizes prosperity, wealth, and familial happiness. In many hwajodo (flower-and-bird paintings), it is the central motif representing Joseon people's hopes for well-being (Han, 2014). The lotus (연꽃) is associated with purity, rebirth, and virtue. Influenced by Buddhist teachings, it symbolizes enlightenment (Jang, 2012). Fish such as the koi (잉어) symbolize fertility, abundance, and perseverance. The story of koi swimming upstream and transforming into a dragon represents achievement and success (Choi, 2010). Last but not least, the dragon (룡) is a symbol of power, rain, and good fortune. In minhwa, dragons are often painted with clouds or the sea, representing control over natural forces and prayers for abundant harvests (Park, 2017).

Symbols in art are not merely decorative elements but serve as representations of ideas that cannot be conveyed directly. Their functions include expressing spirituality, representing social values, delivering moral or critical messages, channeling hopes and prayers, strengthening cultural identity, and serving educational purposes. In the context of the Tiger and Magpie painting, each symbol—such as the tiger, magpie, pine tree, clouds, sun, moon, mountains, bamboo, earth, and even the tiger's facial expression—does more than enhance visual beauty; it communicates moral, spiritual, and social messages closely tied to the life of Joseon society. This demonstrates that minhwa is a complex and communicative form of folk art, functioning as a medium for aspiration, spiritual protection, and subtle social critique.

## 1.2. Theory of Iconography and Iconology

The fundamental framework for analyzing Joseon folk paintings lies in the methods of iconography and iconology introduced by Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), a German art historian renowned as a pioneer of iconological studies in visual art. Panofsky emphasized that works of art are not merely aesthetically pleasing images, but cultural products imbued with social, political, and spiritual meanings of their time. Iconography focuses on the identification, description, and classification of objects, figures, and visual symbols within a work of art, while iconology seeks to interpret the deeper meanings behind these symbols, including the broader social, cultural, and philosophical contexts in which they were created (Panofsky, 1955). In other words, iconography explains what is depicted, whereas iconology explores why and how it carries meaning.

Applied to minhwa, this dual approach enables layered interpretations. For instance, in the painting *Tiger and Magpie*, iconography identifies two central figures: the tiger and the magpie. Iconological interpretation then reveals that the tiger, though traditionally associated with power, is often portrayed in a caricatural and humorous manner in folk art as a subtle critique of the ruling elite, while the magpie represents good news and symbolizes the common people (Eom, 2004; Chung, 2016). Similarly, Park Jihye (2017) employed Panofsky's framework to analyze allegorical creatures such as dragons and phoenixes, which were interpreted as symbols of fortune and spiritual protection. These findings demonstrate that iconology is effective in uncovering the philosophical and cultural meanings embedded in minhwa.

In conclusion, iconography and iconology serve a dual function: first, as a method to identify and classify visual elements, and second, as a tool to unveil the deeper social, spiritual, and cultural narratives expressed through folk paintings. Their application to *Tiger and Magpie* highlights that minhwa is not merely decorative art but a visual medium of communication that conveys social critique, prayers, and the aspirations of Joseon society. The humorous depiction of the tiger, for example, transcends aesthetic value and serves as a reflection of the people's perspectives toward the ruling elite.

### 1.3. Minhwa and Its Characteristics

*Minhwa* (민화) refers to Korean folk paintings from the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) that differed from court art because they were created by anonymous artists and reflected the social, spiritual, and aesthetic aspirations of ordinary people (Kim, 2006; Lee, 2005). Its key characteristic lies in anonymity and collective expression, where symbolic meaning was valued more than the painter's reputation (Han, 2014). Beyond decoration, *minhwa* served multiple functions, such as protecting households from evil spirits, symbolizing good fortune in weddings, and offering prayers for family well-being (Choi, 2010). The symbolism embedded in these works was diverse: the tiger represented social critique, the phoenix and lotus symbolized virtue and harmony, the magpie embodied good news, while the *sipjangsaeng* represented longevity. Natural elements such as the sun, water, and clouds further reinforced cosmological views of life's harmony (Eom, 2004; Choi, 2010; Han, 2014).

Visually, *minhwa* is distinguished by its use of bright, contrasting colors, flat composition, and expressive style that resonated with common people (Kim, 2006). Motifs such as flowers, birds, the sun, and the moon reveal the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, reflecting the philosophical and religious values of Joseon society (Lee, 2005). Thus, *minhwa* can be understood as an anonymous, functional, symbolic, and expressive art form that served as a medium of visual communication, conveying prayers, hopes, social critique, and the worldview of the Joseon people (Han, 2014).

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with an iconographic approach as outlined by Panofsky (1972), which consists of three stages of analysis: pre-iconographic description to identify visual forms, iconographic analysis to interpret the meaning of symbols within the paintings, and iconological interpretation to situate the symbolism within its socio-cultural context. This approach is further enriched by Cassirer's theory of symbolism (1944), which views symbols as a medium through which humans express culture and worldview.

The data sources are divided into primary and secondary. The primary data consist of visual documentation of folk paintings featuring the Tiger and Magpie motif, preserved in the collections of the National Folk Museum of Korea and the National Museum of Korea, including digital versions accessible through the official websites of these institutions. The secondary data include books, journal articles, and relevant academic publications, such as those from the Journal of Korean Art and Archaeology, the Seoul Journal of Korean Studies, and the Korean Studies Information Service System (KISS), which provide theoretical support and historical context regarding the development of *minhwa*, symbolism, and Joseon society. Through this method and data, the study aims to present a deeper understanding of the symbolic meanings within the Tiger and Magpie paintings and their relevance to the everyday life of the Joseon people.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Findings

#### 3.1.1 Identification of Symbols in Tiger and Magpie (호랑이와 까치)

The Tiger and Magpie painting (호랑이와 까치) is one of the most popular types of *minhwa* (Korean folk paintings) from the late Joseon Dynasty. The composition is typically simple, featuring a tiger with a distinctive expression, a magpie perched on a pine tree, and natural elements such as rocks. However, behind this apparent simplicity lies a rich layer of symbolic meaning.

Through these visual symbols, the people of Joseon not only expressed their worldview but also subtly conveyed social criticism.

### 1) The Tiger (호랑이)

The tiger has long occupied a significant place in Korean cultural imagination. It is regarded as the ruler of the mountains, a spiritual guardian, and at the same time, a fearsome creature that humans both respected and feared. In royal court paintings (*gungjunghwa*), the tiger was depicted as majestic, realistic, and dignified a symbol of royal authority. However, in *minhwa*, particularly in Tiger and Magpie paintings, the tiger appears humorous, with exaggerated and disproportionate features, resembling more of a clown than a sovereign. This transformation reflects the frustration of commoners toward corrupt officials who, instead of protecting the people, oppressed them (Eom, 2004). For the common people, the tiger in *minhwa* ceased to represent a divine guardian or majestic beast; it became a reflection of the bureaucracy and aristocracy who had lost their integrity. The tiger's comical face served as subtle satire, suggesting that government officials were not as wise as portrayed in the Confucian state ideology. Thus, the tiger became a metaphor for rulers who were physically imposing yet morally weak. By portraying the tiger humorously, the Joseon people could express social criticism indirectly, turning the painting into a safe symbolic language. The tiger thus embodies a narrative in which the rulers are no longer feared but ridiculed.

### 2) The Magpie (까치)

The magpie was a familiar bird in the daily lives of Joseon commoners. It was believed to bring good news due to its loud call, often heard in the morning, and its proximity to human settlements. In Korean culture, the magpie symbolizes joy, hope, and the arrival of auspicious tidings. In Tiger and Magpie paintings, the magpie is usually depicted perched atop a pine tree, facing the tiger. This visual hierarchy where the small bird is positioned higher than the large tiger carries profound meaning. Despite its small size, the magpie represents the voice of the common people, who could metaphorically “mock” or “speak out against” corrupt officials represented by the tiger. Thus, the magpie becomes a symbol of the moral and vocal strength of ordinary citizens. In the folk narrative, the magpie acts as a messenger or commentator, laughing at and even scolding the tiger who has lost his authority. Through this symbolism, the people of Joseon emphasized that truth and courage did not depend on physical size or social status, but on the moral strength to resist injustice.

### 3) The Pine Tree (소나무)

The pine tree has long been a central symbol in Korean art, representing resilience, longevity, and loyalty remaining green throughout the harshest winters. It is also associated with Confucian virtues such as honesty and integrity. In *minhwa*, pine trees are rendered simply, often with curved trunks and coarse brushwork, yet their symbolic meaning remains intact. The pine represents unwavering moral character and steadfastness amid hardship. Within a society oppressed by corruption, it reflected the steadfast spirit of the common people. In the Tiger and Magpie paintings, the pine reinforces the idea that, though materially poor, the people of Joseon possessed moral richness. It provides a visual and symbolic backdrop that elevates the magpie's role as the moral conscience of the populace standing taller and purer than the corrupt elite.

### 4) The Rock (바위)

The rock is a simple yet essential element in Korean natural landscapes. In folk tradition, it symbolizes endurance, stability, and resilience. Rocks are frequently included in *minhwa* to give compositional balance and solidity to the painting. In Tiger and Magpie compositions, the rock is often positioned at the base, near the tiger. The common people interpreted it as a metaphor for

their own perseverance amid the heavy burdens of taxation, forced labor, and social oppression. The rock serves as a silent reminder that, despite being crushed by authority, the people remained unbroken. Together with the pine, the rock symbolizes the collective strength and moral steadfastness of the Joseon populace contrasting sharply with the fragile morality of their rulers. Though voiceless, the rock's presence adds profound meaning, representing the people's quiet endurance in the face of exploitation and adversity.

### 3.1.2 Visual Characteristics and Painting Techniques of Tiger and Magpie (호랑이 와 까치)

The Tiger and Magpie painting (호랑이와 까치) holds significance not only for its symbolic content but also for its visual characteristics and painting techniques. As part of *minhwa* (folk painting), this work demonstrates a style that diverges greatly from *gungjunghwa* (court painting). Its visual simplicity and seemingly naive technique are not the result of technical limitations, but rather a distinctive form of cultural expression that reflects the worldview of the common people. The painting's flat composition, bold outlines, and natural pigments such as black, red, green, and blue applied on *hanji* (traditional Korean paper) emphasize expression and symbolic communication over realism. Unlike the court painters who pursued anatomical accuracy and refinement, *minhwa* artists focused on conveying humor, emotion, and moral lessons.

The visual characteristics of *minhwa* arose largely from the social conditions of the Joseon period. Folk painters, or *minhwa hwaga*, were not formally trained professionals sponsored by the royal court but ordinary citizens who created paintings for household use, rituals, or spiritual protection. Their artistic freedom allowed for expressive exaggeration and symbolic storytelling (Kim, 2017). The humorous depiction of the tiger, for instance, served as a subtle critique of corrupt officials and elites who had lost their moral integrity. For the common people, such distortions were intentional rather than unskilled transforming the artwork into a visual language of satire and resistance. This use of humor and symbolism allowed *minhwa* to communicate complex social messages in a way that was accessible and safe from censorship.

In conclusion the simplicity of *minhwa* should not be seen as a weakness but as a deliberate aesthetic and cultural strength. The Tiger and Magpie painting exemplifies how non-realistic, expressive forms could engage the imagination of ordinary viewers while conveying profound moral and political meaning. The tiger's distorted face became a parody of authority stripped of dignity, while the small magpie placed higher in the composition symbolized the moral superiority and rising voice of the people. In this way, the artwork transcended mere decoration it became a mirror of Joseon society, reflecting both the hardships and the resilient spirit of its people. The humor, symbolic depth, and accessibility of *minhwa* have ensured its endurance as one of the most powerful cultural icons of the Joseon era.

### 3.1.3 The Culture of Tiger and Magpie Painting (호랑이 와 까치)

The painting "Tiger and Magpie" (호랑이 와 까치) serves not merely as decoration or an artistic object but also as a significant socio-cultural medium for the people of late Joseon. It functioned as a collective expression of the common people, a channel for subtle social critique, and a symbol of hope for a better life. This socio-cultural role reinforces the painting's position as an integral part of the everyday narrative of Joseon society.

During the late Joseon period (18th–19th centuries), the social and economic conditions of the people were extremely harsh. Heavy taxation, forced labor systems, and weak governance led to widespread suffering among the lower classes. Meanwhile, officials and aristocrats lived in

luxury, exploiting their authority for personal gain. In such circumstances, the people sought alternative ways to express their grievances and frustrations.

Because voicing criticism directly toward government officials was dangerous, the people turned to cultural symbolism, particularly through *minhwa* paintings, as a safe yet effective medium of expression. Therefore, the socio-cultural function of Tiger and Magpie emerged from the people's need to channel their aspirations, critiques, and hopes indirectly. For the commoners of Joseon, the painting was not simply a depiction of a tiger and a small bird; it represented their social reality. The humorous tiger symbolized corrupt and unworthy officials, the magpie represented the brave voice of the common people mocking the authorities, while the pine and rocks stood as emblems of morality and resilience.

By understanding these symbols, the people perceived the painting as belonging to them rather than to the royal court or the aristocracy. It became an integral part of folk culture displayed in homes, used in rituals, or simply enjoyed as a form of meaningful entertainment. This painting strengthened the identity of the common people as a community with its own voice, even when that voice was often silenced. As a narrative medium, the "Tiger and Magpie" painting serves several functions. First, the painting allowed the people to express criticism toward the government indirectly; in other words, as a subtle social criticism. The comically depicted tiger served as an easily recognizable satire that everyone could understand, yet it was difficult for authorities to use as grounds for punishing the artist or the owner. Second, the magpie, symbolizing good news, provided reassurance to the people that despite enduring hardship, the future could still bring positive change; as a symbol of collective hope. The painting conveyed optimism and reinforced the will to persevere. Third, created by the people and for the people, *minhwa* paintings reinforced collective identity. This artwork demonstrated that the Joseon commoners had their own unique way of interpreting the world distinct from that of the royal elite. Fourth, in daily life, the "Tiger and Magpie" painting was often placed in homes as a protective charm. The tiger was believed to ward off evil spirits, while the magpie brought good fortune. Thus, its symbolic function is multi-layered religious, social, and political at once.

### 3.1.4 The Historical Context of Late Joseon

To fully understand the symbolism within the "Tiger and Magpie" painting, it must be situated within the historical context of late Joseon Dynasty Korea (18th–19th century). This period was marked by the weakening of royal authority, the increasing burden on commoners, and the growing influence of foreign powers. These conditions shaped how the people perceived government officials and created the need to express criticism and social narratives through folk art such as *minhwa*. The symbols in "Tiger and Magpie" did not emerge in a vacuum. The comical tiger, the magpie representing the people's voice, and natural elements like pine trees and rocks all arose as responses to the concrete realities experienced by the Joseon populace. In other words, this painting is a historical product a reflection of the social, political, and cultural conditions of its time.

#### 1) Political Context: The Decline of Royal Authority

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Joseon Dynasty experienced significant political decline. Royal power weakened, while aristocratic factions *sadaebu* and bureaucratic officials prioritized personal interests over public welfare. Corruption became widespread, turning the ruling class into a burden rather than a model of virtue. For the common people, these officials were no longer intimidating figures; they appeared powerful in rank but morally small. This

historical background explains why the tiger a traditional symbol of power was depicted humorously, with exaggerated features representing officials who had lost their dignity.

### 2) Social Context: Heavy Taxation and Public Hardship

The commoners of late Joseon endured severe economic hardship. Excessive agricultural taxes, forced labor for state projects, and social obligations led to long-term suffering. Frequent natural disasters, famines, and epidemics further worsened their condition. In such circumstances, the people sought ways to express their pain and frustration. The magpie in *\*Tiger and Magpie\** functions as a symbol of the people's voice, mocking corrupt officials. Through the image of a small bird daring to ridicule a large tiger, the people asserted that their voices could not be silenced, even when oppressed socially and economically.

### 3) Cultural Context: Confucian Values and Popular Resistance

Confucianism served as the official ideology of the Joseon Dynasty, emphasizing hierarchy, loyalty, and obedience to rulers and officials. However, for ordinary citizens, these values became increasingly disconnected from reality. Officials who were supposed to embody moral integrity instead represented hypocrisy and corruption. Through *minhwa*, the people practiced symbolic resistance. They mocked the tiger (officials) and elevated the magpie (the people). By including pine trees and rocks symbols of moral steadfastness the painting conveyed the message that true Confucian values such as honesty, loyalty, and perseverance resided among the commoners, not the elite.

### 4) Foreign Influence and National Crisis

By the 19th century, Joseon faced growing external pressures from China, Japan, and Western powers. Foreign intervention in trade, politics, and religion exacerbated the internal crisis. The kingdom grew weaker, and the people felt increasingly abandoned. Within this context, "Tiger and Magpie" can also be seen as a reflection of collective uncertainty. The weakened tiger may symbolize the Joseon state grand in tradition but fragile in the face of foreign influence while the persistent magpie represents the moral resilience and hope of the people amid rapid change.

The Joseon populace understood that their suffering was not merely a matter of fate but a consequence of governmental failure. Therefore, "Tiger and Magpie" should not be viewed merely as a decorative artwork but as a cultural medium through which the people expressed their views on contemporary realities.

This painting functions as a cultural document that records the lived experiences of late Joseon society. It tells the story of how the people mocked corrupt officials, remained steadfast despite oppression, and perceived their weakening nation. Through simple yet profound symbols, the commoners constructed an alternative narrative one that differed from the official chronicles of the royal court.

#### 3.1.5 The Tiger and Magpie Painting as a Medium of Symbolic Communication

After examining the symbolism, visual characteristics, socio-cultural functions, and historical context of the late Joseon period, it can be concluded that "The Tiger and the Magpie" served as both a medium of social critique and a people's narrative reflecting the commoners' perception of their socio-political reality. The painting functioned as a safe and effective symbolic form of expression through which the people voiced their discontent toward corrupt officials who had lost their moral integrity. The tiger, depicted with a humorous face, acts as a satire of the ruling elite who were no longer worthy of respect, while the magpie symbolizes the voice of the common

people who dared to speak despite living under oppression. Elements such as pine trees and rocks reinforce the image of moral strength and resilience maintained by the people amidst injustice.

More than a mere aesthetic creation, “The Tiger and the Magpie” represents a cultural legacy that embodies the creativity and courage of the Joseon people in confronting oppression. The painting not only ridicules the ruling class but also affirms the solidarity, hope, and moral strength of the people as the true guardians of cultural values. As a part of *minhwa* (folk painting), this work transcends its historical context, standing as an enduring symbol of how the people used visual language to speak, resist, and preserve their collective identity.

### 3.2. Discussion

#### 3.2.1 Symbols in the Tiger and Magpie (호랑이 와 까치) Painting.



Figure 1. Tiger and Magpie Painting – Overall View

The painting “Tiger and Magpie” (호랑이 와 까치) represents one of the most powerful examples of Korean folk painting *minhwa* during the late Joseon Dynasty. This painting functions not only as home decoration or a marker of celebration but also as a medium through which common people expressed their views on the socio-political conditions of their time. In this context, the symbols present in the painting are highly significant because they represent the perspectives, critiques, and cultural narratives of the common people. In Figure 1., which serves as the object of this study, four main symbols can be identified: tiger (호랑이), magpie (까치), pine tree (소나무), and rock (바위). These four symbols create a complementary visual composition, presenting a clear narrative about the relationship between the people and the authorities.

##### 1) Tiger (호랑이)

The tiger occupies the most prominent position in this painting. Historically in Korean art, the tiger has long symbolized strength, mountain protection, and authority. In court or official paintings, tigers were often depicted as powerful, majestic, and fearsome. However, in folk *minhwa*, the meaning is transformed. The tiger is depicted with a comical and caricatured facial expression, bulging eyes, a snarling mouth, and awkward body posture. This transformation reflects a symbolic shift for the people: the tiger no longer represents a protector or authority figure but rather a

corrupt official or ruler who has lost respect. By portraying the tiger humorously, the Joseon commoners expressed their disappointment with a government that failed to protect its people. Eom So-yeon (2004) emphasizes that this transformation of the tiger in *minhwa* is a deliberate satire used as a safe means to critique authority. In the figure, the tiger is positioned beneath the branch where the magpie perches. This composition visually communicates that the officials are no longer above the people but are instead humbled and even ridiculed. The tiger's yellowish-brown body with distinct black stripes still hints at its inherent power, but its facial expression negates any sense of authority. Thus, the tiger in this painting represents a direct social critique of officials and kings deemed unworthy of respect.

## 2) Magpie (까치)

The magpie appears small in size but dominates symbolically. In Korean tradition, the magpie is considered a bringer of good news, a friendly bird toward humans, and often associated with the joy of the people. In this painting, the magpie perches on a branch, gazing toward the tiger with an expression as if mocking it. The magpie symbolizes the voice of the common people. Its smaller size compared to the tiger does not diminish its power because its higher position carries symbolic meaning: the people possess moral superiority over corrupt rulers. Haboush (1999) explains that the Joseon people often used humor and symbolism in art as a means to express critique. The magpie in this painting embodies that critique: the voice of the people daring to mock the authorities, simultaneously representing hope and resilience amid social suffering. The magpie also reflects how the people perceived their place within the social structure. Although lacking political power or material wealth, they possessed moral elevation that made them feel superior to unjust officials. The magpie perched high on the branch reinforces the cultural narrative that the strength of the people lies not in material power but in the moral legitimacy they uphold.

## 3) Pine Tree (소나무)

The pine tree in Korean culture symbolizes longevity, steadfastness, and loyalty. It frequently appears in folk art as a representation of spiritual strength. In “Tiger and Magpie”, the pine tree is depicted with a sturdy trunk and deep green foliage, forming the backdrop for the magpie. Its presence is not merely decorative but serves as a moral foundation supporting the voice of the people. In the context of late Joseon, the pine tree represents the enduring values of the people even amid a fragile political environment. It demonstrates that the people's critique of officials does not arise from mere resentment but from solid moral conviction. Kim (2017) emphasizes that the use of pine trees in folk art highlights the close relationship between the people's moral values and their cultural expression. In Conclusion, the pine tree reinforces the symbolism of the magpie. The people not only dare to mock the officials but do so grounded in moral principles, implying their loyalty to justice even when the state fails to uphold it.

## 4) Rock (바위)

Another element in the painting is the rock situated at the bottom. The rock appears simple and static, yet sturdy. Symbolically, rocks often represent steadfastness, stability, and resilience. Its presence adds depth to the narrative of “Tiger and Magpie”. The rock can be interpreted as representing the Joseon people who continue to endure social and political hardships. While appearing passive, they possess remarkable resilience. Palais (1996) notes that the people of late Joseon often suffered from oppressive taxation policies, yet they persevered through solidarity and cultural practices. In the painting, the rock symbolizes this endurance: the people remain unbroken despite oppression and injustice. Additionally, the rock reinforces the symbolic critique

of officials. If the tiger (officials) appears ridiculous, the people (rock) appear steadfast. This contrast shows that although the commoners lack formal power, they constitute the true foundation sustaining the life of the state.

### 3.2.2 Symbolism of the Painting Harimau and Magpie (호랑이 와 까치) in Late Joseon Society.

#### 1) Late Joseon Society

Symbolism in the “Tiger and Magpie” painting is closely linked to the socio-political conditions of late Joseon (18th–19th century). The artwork reflects public anxiety over governance that had deviated from Confucian ideals. Through simple yet meaningful symbols, people found a safe way to express social criticism without speaking directly (Haboush, 1999).

#### 2) Criticism of Officials and the Government System

Late Joseon was characterized by *sedo jeongchi*, a political system in which royal power was controlled by noble families marrying their daughters to the king. This created opportunities for corruption, nepotism, high taxation, forced labor, and injustice. In the painting, the tiger symbolizes officials or even the king, depicted humorously to convey social critique, while the magpie, perched higher, represents the courage of common people to mock rulers (Eom, 2004).

#### 3) Symbolism and Social Critique in Historical Context

The painting reflects concrete historical conditions, including oppression through heavy taxation, unequal land distribution, and popular uprisings like Hong Gyeong-rae in 1812. The arrival of foreign influences from Qing China, Japan, and Western missionaries compounded public frustration. The humorous tiger metaphorically represents a government unable to respond effectively, while symbols like the magpie, pine, and rock reflect the resilience of the people (Palais, 1996).

#### 4) Cultural Narrative and Popular Identity

Beyond political critique, the painting carries a cultural narrative showing how people perceived themselves. The magpie represents ordinary people with a strong moral voice, the pine symbolizes steadfastness and loyalty, and the rock signifies endurance. The artwork affirms the moral legitimacy of the people, even in material poverty, as the true bearers of Confucian values (Kim, 2017).

#### 5) Symbolism as Safe Critique

Since open criticism of officials or the king could lead to severe punishment, folk art became a safe medium for protest. Through humor, satire, and symbolism, paintings like “Tiger and Magpie” function as a “hidden transcript,” allowing people to express political discontent subtly but effectively (Haboush, 1999).

### 3.2.3 Social Critique and Governance in the Painting Harimau and Magpie (호랑이 와 까치).

#### 1) Late Joseon Society

The Tiger and Magpie painting reflects the socio-political conditions of late Joseon (18th–19th century) and functions as a cultural document expressing the hidden voices *hidden transcript* of common people. Through simple yet meaningful symbols, it conveys sharp social criticism of officials, governance, and the weakening state (Haboush, 1999).

#### 2) Public Dissatisfaction with the Government

In the painting, the comical tiger symbolizes officials who have lost authority. While historically the tiger represented a protector and moral guardian, in *minhwa* it is a satirical representation of incompetent and self-serving officials. The magpie represents common people, perched higher to show moral superiority despite social subordination, reflecting popular resistance through humor and symbolism (Haboush, 1999).

### 3) Critique of the Sedo Jeongchi System (제도 정치)

The painting critiques the *sedo jeongchi* system, in which royal power was controlled by noble families through marriage alliances, fostering corruption and nepotism. Heavy taxation, unfair land distribution, and forced labor increased public suffering. The tiger embodies officials' failure to govern, while the magpie mocks them as a form of resistance (Eom, 2004).

### 4) Social Context: Economic Crisis and Popular Uprisings

Economic hardships, including high taxes and food distribution issues, fueled social unrest. The 1812 Hong Gyeong-rae Rebellion exemplified popular frustration with injustice and corruption. Even when suppressed, these sentiments persisted culturally, expressed safely through symbolic folk art like "Tiger and Magpie". External pressures from Qing China, Japan, and the West compounded public disillusionment, reflected in the painting's imagery (Palais, 1996).

### 5) Cultural Narrative: Popular Identity and Moral Authority

Beyond critique, the painting conveys a cultural narrative. The magpie symbolizes the moral voice of common people, pine represents steadfastness, and rock signifies endurance. These elements emphasize that, despite oppression, the people retain moral and spiritual strength, highlighting their true authority compared to corrupt officials (Kim, 2017).

### 6) Concealed Social Criticism

Criticism in the painting is indirect due to the risks of openly challenging authorities. Symbols such as the comical tiger, laughing magpie, pine, and rock act as a "hidden transcript," allowing people to voice discontent safely while preserving clarity of meaning (Haboush, 1999).

## 3.2.4 Social Function of the Tiger and Magpie Painting (호랑이 와 까치)

The painting Tiger and Magpie (호랑이와 까치) holds significant social functions within late Joseon society. Unlike court art, folk art emerged to fulfill the spiritual, social, and psychological needs of common people, with each symbol in the painting directly reflecting everyday experiences (Eom, 2004). Its ritual and spiritual role is evident in the belief that the tiger could ward off evil spirits while the magpie brought good news, which is why the painting was often placed at doors or main rooms as a symbolic "house guardian." The educational function is expressed through the visual relationship between the tiger and the magpie, teaching the moral lesson that great power does not necessarily equate to righteousness and that the voices of ordinary people remain important in social life (Haboush, 1999). Furthermore, its social and psychological functions are highlighted through the use of humor, allowing people living under a hierarchical system to mock officials safely, reinforcing solidarity and providing collective entertainment as a form of coping. Therefore, Tiger and Magpie serves as a multifunctional medium: a ritual protector, a tool for moral education, and social entertainment, which has contributed to its enduring presence in Korean folk tradition.

## 3.2.5 Folk Narrative in the Painting Tiger and Magpie (호랑이 와 까치)

The Harimau and Magpie painting can be understood as a visual text conveying the narrative of the Joseon common people. Unlike official records, which primarily present the perspectives of the

court and the aristocracy, this painting reflects the views of ordinary society. The narrative embedded within it can be divided into several layers.

#### 1) Narrative of Power

The tiger, traditionally a symbol of strength in court art, is depicted humorously and foolishly in *minhwa* as a subtle critique of officials. Humor serves to symbolically undermine the authority of rulers without direct confrontation (Eom, 2004; Kim, 2018).

#### 2) Narrative of the Common People's Voice

The magpie, although small, is positioned higher than the tiger, representing the courage of ordinary people to voice moral truths despite lacking political power (Choi, 2010). This emphasizes that the people's voice is significant and brave.

#### 3) Narrative of Spirituality and the Cosmos

Natural elements such as pine trees, mountains, rocks, the sun, the moon, and clouds function symbolically, reflecting the people's connection with the cosmos and their hope for protection, fertility, and fortune. The painting acts as a kind of "visual prayer" (Yoon, 2016).

#### 4) Narrative of Social Strategy

Humor in the painting functions as a social and psychological strategy: by laughing at officials, people relieve frustration, foster solidarity, and maintain dignity through art as a form of non-verbal resistance (Haboush, 1999; Lee, 2011).

#### 5) Collective Narrative of the People

All visual elements together create a collective narrative of the Joseon commoners, reflecting their experiences in confronting authority, preserving their voice, maintaining a cosmic connection, and transforming suffering into laughter. The painting serves as a historical document of the people, not merely decorative art (Park, 2015).

### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the Korean folk painting *Tiger and Magpie* (호랑이와 까치) contains a variety of symbols that reflect the worldview and philosophy of the Joseon society. The recurring symbols include the tiger, magpie, pine tree, bamboo, mountain, clouds, sun, and moon. Each of these visual elements serves not only as decoration but also carries profound meanings. The tiger is perceived as both a protective figure and a humorous representation of corrupt officials or rulers, while the magpie symbolizes good news and represents the voice of common people. The presence of natural elements such as pine and bamboo conveys moral integrity and the hope for longevity, whereas the clouds, sun, and moon emphasize the spiritual dimension and the balance of the cosmos. When interpreted through an iconographic and iconological approach, these symbolic elements reveal that the "Tiger and Magpie" painting functioned as a medium of communication through which the people expressed their social aspirations and worldview. The artwork conveys subtle criticism toward authority, embodies prayers for protection and prosperity, and reflects the humor and optimism of the Joseon populace. Thus, *minhwa* can be understood not merely as a form of decorative art but as a mirror of the social and spiritual life of ordinary people, passed down through generations.

This study acknowledges certain limitations, particularly in accessing authentic *minhwa* collections and the scarcity of Indonesian-language scholarly references. Nevertheless, it is expected to contribute to the enrichment of art studies, especially in the field of Korean folk painting. For

scholars and researchers, future studies may explore other types of *minhwa* such as *Chaekgado* or *Hwajodo* to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of Korean folk art symbolism. Furthermore, comparative studies with folk art from other cultures could provide new perspectives on the role of symbols in the visual communication of traditional societies. For the general public, understanding the symbolism in *minhwa* is essential to enhance appreciation for folk art as a cultural heritage that is not only aesthetically beautiful but also rich in spiritual and social values. Finally, for the development of Korean Studies in Indonesia, the results of this research may serve as a valuable reference for deepening the understanding of the interrelationship between art, culture, and society during the Joseon era. This approach is expected to produce more contextual and in-depth analyses. Moreover, academic collaboration with Korean cultural institutions such as museums or art research centers would be highly beneficial for obtaining authentic and relevant primary data. Through these efforts, the study of *minhwa* can further develop as a meaningful contribution to East Asian visual culture studies, particularly in the context of cross-cultural understanding.

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