

Article

Transcending Worldliness:  
*A Wagtail by Lakeside* by Jo Sok  
(1595-1668)

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“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul,  
and sings the tune without words, and never stops at all.”

—Emily Dickinson



**Figure 1.** *A Wagtail by Lakeside*, Collection of Frank S. Bailey, San Francisco, 48.3 x 40cm, ink and colors on silk

## Introduction

A single wagtail landing effortlessly on a rock by a secluded lakeside graces a painting in a private collection in San Francisco (fig. 1). Soft ink washes of varying tones define the bird's feathered body, while dark, incisive lines delineate its sharp beak and legs. Quick, sweeping strokes outline the angled shapes of the rock and the vertical water reeds growing in front of and behind it. Measuring 48.3 cm x 40 cm, this subdued ink painting displays a simple and intimate composition, well-controlled yet easy brushstrokes, and subtle and affected ink tonalities. Overall, a restrained elegance permeates the painting. Two seals are imprinted on the painting: a square seal in relief reading Changgang 滄江 in the lower left and a rectangular intaglio seal reading Maehwasuju 梅華壽主 in the upper right (fig. 2).

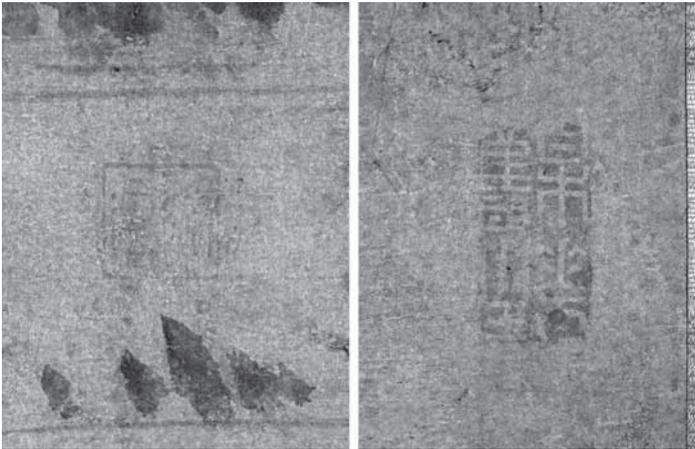
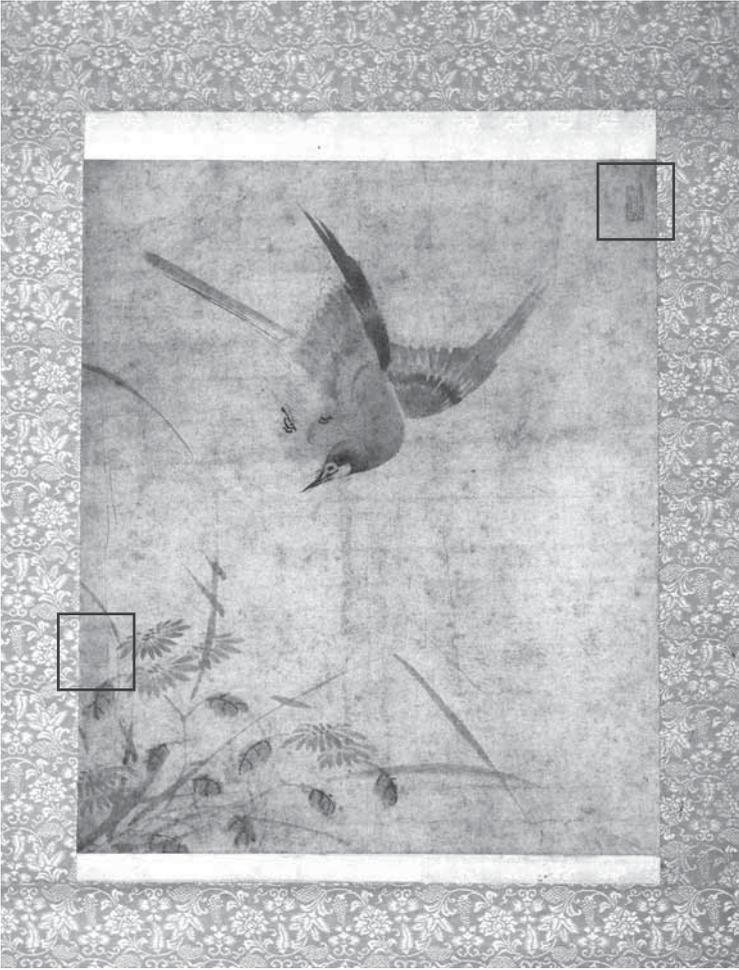
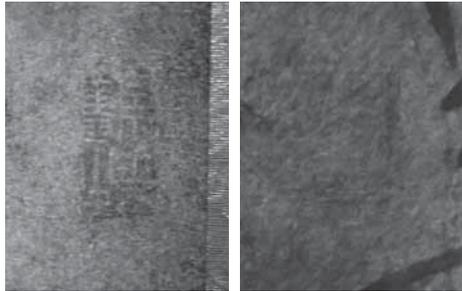


Figure 2. Seals in *A Wagtail by Lakeside*

Similar seals were found on an identically sized painting that surfaced more recently and was acquired by the same collector. It depicts a back-turned wagtail flying above a cluster of chrysanthemums (figs. 3-4). Painted with delicacy and ease against an empty background, a comparable refinement permeates this painting. The two paintings probably originated from the same set and are now united again by a single collector.



**Figure 3.** *Wagtail and Chrysanthemum*, Collection of Frank S. Bailey, San Francisco, 48.3 x 40cm, ink on paper



**Figure 4.** Seal in *Wagtail and Chrysanthemum*

These two recently surfaced paintings make new additions to the large body of bird paintings in ink bearing the seal Changgang, which was the penname of Jo Sok 趙涑 (1595-1668), one of the most celebrated bird painters of the Joseon 朝鮮 dynasty (1392-1910). An esteemed scholar of high virtue, he excelled in depicting plum blossoms, bamboo, and landscapes, but he is best known for his bird paintings, which received high admiration from his contemporaries. At present, over 57 bird paintings bear his attribution, including 25 in the National Museum of Korea, 26 in university and private collections in Korea,<sup>1</sup> four in the Tokyo National Museum, and two in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University. As records indicate that he seldom signed his works or imprinted them with any seals,<sup>2</sup> the seals in all shapes and sizes appear to be later additions. Although added posthumously, the seals are testaments of others' perceptions of his work and a tribute to his reputation in the genre; thus, they serve as useful clues to construe the nature of his works.

The most commonly acknowledged painting attributed to Jo Sok is *Magpies Resting on an Old Tree* 老樹棲鵲圖 in the National Museum of Korea (fig. 5). In a relatively large hanging scroll measuring 113.6 cm x 57.7 cm, a pair of reticent magpies along with a pair of loquacious sparrows are depicted resting on an old tree, with its branches spread dynamically across the picture's plane. Triangular-shaped leaves are stippled rhythmically along the branches, creating an energetic and cadenced play of complex patterns. This painting has been cited frequently as Jo's masterpiece, embodying innate Korean characteristics in its depiction of a familiar Korean natural scene.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, no seals are placed on this work, making it an exception among the bird paintings attributed to Jo Sok. Its stylistic disparity with his other frequently attributed painting, *Magpie on Plum Branch* 古梅瑞鵲 at the Gansong Art Museum (fig. 6), and its

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1. Four in Gansong Art Museum, four in Seoul National University Museum, two in Korea University Museum, one in Geonguk University Museum, and 15 in private collections in Korea.

2. In *Changgang yumuk* 滄江遺墨 (*Traces of Ink by Changgang*), his tenth descendent Jo Bong-gu 趙鳳九 states: "... although people revered and cherished Jo Sok, as far as painting and calligraphy were concerned, he made a rule to never imprint a seal." See I 1999, 40. This statement is indirectly confirmed by the pioneering art historian O Sechang's (1864-1953) compendium *Geunyeok insu* (*Collection of Korean Seals*), which does not list a seal for Jo Sok. See O 1968.

3. See Ahn 1983, 204-05; Choe 1994, 255-57; I 2008, 225-26.



**Figure 5.** *Magpies Resting on an Old Tree*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 113.5 x 58.3cm, ink and light colors on silk



**Figure 6.** *Magpie on Plum Branch*, Gansong Art Museum, Seoul, 100 x 55.5cm, ink on paper

close affinity to the works of the Ming academy painter Lin Liang 林良,<sup>4</sup> raises further skepticism about the credibility of *Magpies Resting on an Old Tree* as his representative painting. The majority of the works imprinted with the seals in his name, in fact, consist of a single bird set against a simple background in an intimate format, much in the manner of the aforementioned San Francisco set. While scholarship on the artist remains scant and the body of his authentic paintings is yet to be established, I argue in this paper that the San Francisco paintings, in fact, represent the mainstream of his bird paintings in ink.

This paper will analyze the San Francisco paintings within the stylistic and iconographic framework of Jo Sok's known bird paintings in ink, while also positioning the artist's activities against the cultural and historical background of seventeenth-century Korea. Jo Sok was a witness to, and a participant in, major

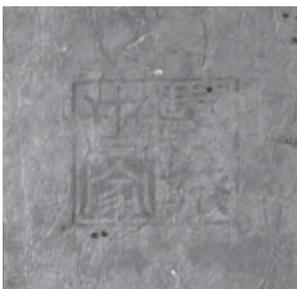
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4. Discussed in detail in Jang 2015, 67-96.

historical events in seventeenth-century Korea, which was one of the most tumultuous times in Korean history checkered by factional politics and foreign invasions under the shifting paradigms of the East Asian world order. Through the lens of the psychological and historical framework of the period, this paper will probe into the possible layers of meanings behind Jo Sok's bird paintings in ink. As carriers of his unspoken words, his bird paintings encapsulate the abiding ideals of a disheartened Neo-Confucian scholar during a period of uncertainty and turmoil in the mid-Joseon dynasty (1392-1910).

### The San Francisco Set and Jo Sok's Bird Paintings in Ink

Perhaps the most reliable sources of reference on which to ground Jo Sok's paintings are the albums compiled by the Jo family members. *Changgang yumuk* 滄江遺墨 (*Traces of Ink by Changgang*), compiled by Jo Sok's tenth descendent, Jo Bonggu 趙鳳九, was found in Japan and returned to the family in 1991.<sup>5</sup> Considered one of the reliable sources of Jo Sok's paintings, this album shows tags attached by the compiler identifying 12 bird paintings by Jo Sok and four by his son, Jo Jiun 趙之耘, who was a close follower of his father. Jo Jiun was also known as an exceptional painter, whose works provide us further reference from which to deduce the nature of Jo Sok's paintings. The Jo family seal, imprinted on each painting in the album (fig. 7), certifies the transmittance of the works within the family boundaries.



**Figure 7.** Seal on paintings in *Changgang Yumuk* (*Traces of Ink*), Private Collection.  
Photo by Cheeyun L. Kwon

5. It belonged to a collector in Osaka and was retrieved by Professor Gim Uihwan of Tezukayama University. The return of the painting was first disclosed in an article by *Donga ilbo* on Aug. 22, 1991. For details, see I 1991, 60; 1997, 48; 1999, 39-40.



**Figure 8.** Album painting in *Changgang Yumuk (Traces of Ink)*, Private Collection, 35.6 x 25.3cm, ink and colors on paper.  
Photo by Cheeyun L. Kwon

The first among the 12 bird paintings by Jo Sok in the album depicts a wagtail landing on a rock by the water, surrounded by water reeds and wild flowers (fig. 8), which compares very closely to the San Francisco painting in question. The virtually identical composition and the similarly supple brushwork are discernible, despite some damaged areas. The album is smaller, measuring 35.6 cm x 25.3 cm with added flower motifs intermixing with the reeds in a more stylized composition that emphasizes the counterbalancing diagonals. Compared to the airy depiction of the San Francisco painting, where the focus is primarily on the bird, the tightly and mechanically arranged motifs within the picture frame of the album suggest a later date.



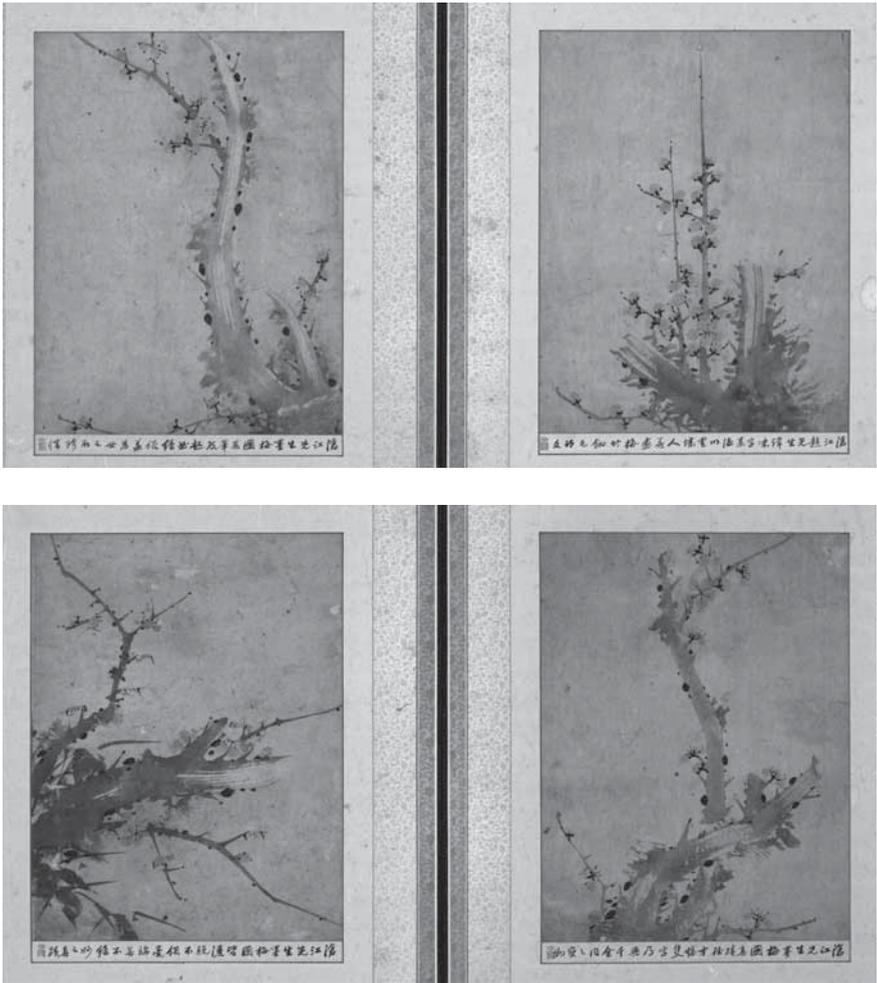
**Figure 9.** Attr. Jo Jiun (b. 1637), *Wagtail on a Lakeside Rock amidst Blossoming Pinks*, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Louise Haskell Daly Fund and Ernest B. and Helen Pratt Dane Fund for the Acquisition of Oriental Art. 1994.110, 30.4 x 25.6 cm, ink on paper

The Arthur M. Sackler Museum in Cambridge, MA, possesses another painting that is almost identical to the album painting in the *Traces of Ink by Changgang*, and it has a tag identifying Jo Jiun (fig. 9). While maintaining the album painting's composition, the Sackler painting is stylized further by the accentuation of the counterbalancing diagonal thrusts of the sharply bent leaves of the reeds. The head of the wagtail has been lifted up at a tighter angle, and its tail has been tilted upward to increase the tension. The pauses in the brushwork of the reeds restart with greater emphatic thrusts, revealing a later hand adding personal gusto to the original composition. This painting, if indeed by Jo Jiun, confirms his close following of his father's style, yet also reveals his own personal temperament. As such, the aforementioned three paintings reveal a stylistic progression from the San Francisco painting to the album and then to the Sackler painting.



**Figure 10.** *Wagtail on Plum Branch*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 54.8 x 33cm, ink on paper.  
Photo by Cheeyun L. Kwon

The diagonally positioned wagtail appears to have been a prototype frequently employed by Jo Sok and was combined with a variety of settings. A hanging scroll in the National Museum of Korea shows a similarly posed wagtail on plum branches (fig. 10). The close similarity of the wagtail's pose suggests that perhaps its prototype was derived from a painting manual, yet its combination with plum branches may have been an invention by Jo Sok.



**Figure 11.** *Plum Branches*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 33 x 25.3cm each, ink on paper

Plum was a favored subject of Jo Sok, who also painted it as a single subject. The several album paintings of plum now mounted as an eight-fold screen (fig. 11)<sup>6</sup> and a hanging scroll (fig. 12)<sup>7</sup> in the National Museum of Korea bear the attribution to Jo Sok. The swift delineation of the main trunk in “flying white,” the contrasting dark dots along the trunk and branches, and the plum blossoms

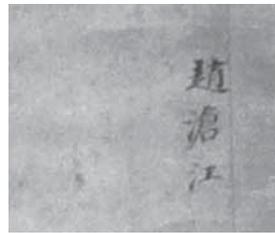
6. These paintings have an added inscription in the bottom, probably added later, that attribute the works to Jo Sok.

7. An inscription in the upper right corner, probably added later, reads “Jo Changgang” (fig. 13).

delineated with a star-shaped core are shared stylistic features of his plum paintings. The combined wagtail and plum iconography is replicated by his son, a delicate example of which is found in *Yeongsacheop* 永思帖 (*Album of Abiding Thoughts*) compiled by Jo Sok's great-grandson in 1720 (fig. 14).<sup>8</sup> Jo Jiun's equal predilection for the plum motif is aptly evident in his pseudonym "Maechang" 梅窓, which translates as "plum window."



**Figure 12.** *Plum Branches*, National Museum of Korea, 90 x 56cm, ink on paper



**Figure 13.** Detail of *Plum Branches*

8. The album contains two landscape paintings, two bird paintings, a bamboo and thorn branches in snow by Jo Sok, and eight bird paintings and a fan painting by Jo Jiun. For illustrations, see I 1999, 108-09.



**Figure 14.** Attr. Jo Jiun, *Wagtail on Plum Branch*, in *Yeongsacheop (Album of Abiding Thoughts)*, 24.1 x 18.1cm, ink on hemp

In addition to plum, Jo Sok also often combined the wagtail with the rest of the four noble plants, namely the chrysanthemum, bamboo, and orchid. The second painting in the San Francisco collection, *A Wagtail Flying over Chrysanthemums* (fig. 3), is a case in point. A flying wagtail makes a sharp head-turn above a delicate cluster of chrysanthemums, and the crisscrossing diagonals created by the bird's tail and wings are echoed by the chrysanthemum branches in the lower left corner. The placement of the motifs against an empty background in a diagonal direction is a compositional formula shared with his previously examined paintings. The rather dramatic pose of the bird is replicated by other paintings attributed to him, as well as by his son Jo Jiun as is evident in the *Album of Abiding Thoughts*.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Illustrated in I 1999, 114, fig. 19; 109, fig. 7-4.



**Figure 15.** *Wagtail and Chrysanthemum*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 33 x 26 cm, ink on paper

The wagtail is combined with chrysanthemum in a slightly varied form in the aforementioned album painting now mounted as an eight-fold screen in the National Museum of Korea (fig. 15).<sup>10</sup> With wings spread wide in parallel form above a cluster of chrysanthemums, the bird is positioned frontally in equal proportion to the flowers below. Again, the two motifs appear to be arranged artificially as symbolic patterns dictated by compositional concerns rather than realistic sketches of nature. Jo Jiun also combines the wagtail with chrysanthemums in his painting found in the *Album of Abiding Thoughts*.<sup>11</sup>

The eight-fold screen also shows the bird combined with orchid leaves (fig. 16), which again appears as a willful placement of the two motifs rather than a realistic scene, as the thickness of the branch would not be able to withstand

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10. The painting is the third from the left of the eight-fold screen that includes two grape paintings by Song Min-go 宋民古. Discussed in I 1997, 46-47.

11. Illustrated in I 1999, 109.

the weight of the bird in reality. The rather short tail of the bird,<sup>12</sup> probably the result of a miscalculation on the part of the artist who painted the orchid leaves first without leaving enough space for the tail, can be deduced to have been meant to look like the wagtail in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum painting (fig. 17). Attributed to Jo Jiun, it shows similar stylistic features in its pose and the delicately delineated dark accents at the tip of the bird's wings. The gist of these two paintings is again captured in a *Wagtail on a Lotus Branch* painting in *Hwawon byeoljip* 畫苑別集 (*Album of Painting Garden*) (fig. 18), previously observed as a fine attribution to Jo Sok (I 1991, 59-60; 1997, 45-46). The well-controlled sweeping strokes that capture the winking moment of the bird's landing on the lotus branch have been praised as one of the superlative paintings of the genre (*ibid.*).



**Figure 16.** *Wagtail on Orchid*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 33 x 26cm, ink on paper

12. There was an observation by an anonymous reader that the bird depicted in this painting, with a shorter tail, is a *baksae*, or great tit. Great tits, however, usually have a dark area around the eyes with a white cheek in the lower area only.



**Figure 17.** *Wagtail on a Bramble*, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum Louise Haskell Daly Fund and Ernest B. and Helen Pratt Dane Fund for the Acquisition of Oriental Art, 1994.109, 34.7 x 25.5cm, ink on paper



**Figure 18.** *Wagtail on a Lotus Branch*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 29.4 x 17cm, ink on paper.  
Photo by Cheeyun L. Kwon

Wagtails are also combined with bamboo in several of his attributed paintings. One example in the collection of the National Museum of Korea shows the back view of the bird, with its head sunk into its shoulders, perched

weightlessly on a thin bamboo branch (fig. 19). In a sedentary manner, it faces upward toward sparse bamboo clusters depicted in diluted ink tones. Although this hanging scroll is in a poor condition, the dark accents at the tip of its wings and the thin straight line that accentuates the tail are features that are shared with the previously examined paintings attributed to Jo Sok, including the San Francisco *Wagtail by Lakeside*. Other examples of bamboo combined with wagtail are often attributed to Jo Sok,<sup>13</sup> a combination that was carried on by Jo Jiun, as evident in the *Album of Abiding Thoughts*.<sup>14</sup> As such, Jo Sok appears to have enjoyed combining the wagtail with the four noble plants, a tradition that was continued by his son, thereafter becoming subjects often associated with the two painters. Rather than realistic depictions of everyday nature, Jo Sok's paintings thus come across as medleys of symbolic motifs, much in the tradition of literati painting.



**Figure 19.** *Wagtail on Bamboo Branch*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 54.8 x 33cm, ink on paper.

Photo by Cheeyun L. Kwon

13. A similarly posed wagtail with bamboo is found in album format in the National Museum of Korea, measuring 21.2 cm x 31.7 cm, whose authenticity needs further examination. A wagtail painting with bamboo, in a different pose, is also found in the album of *Traces of Ink by Changgang*.

14. Illustrated in I 1999, 109, fig. 7-2.

Another subject often associated with Jo Sok is *Bird in Sleep on Wintry Branches*, several examples found in the National Museum of Korea and Seoul National University. Among them, the 46.5 cm by 29.5 cm painting on paper at the National Museum of Korea successfully captures the lonesome mood of a wintry night (fig. 20). A faint moon looms in the background, silhouetted by the craggy leafless branches on which the bird perches deep in sleep. The twisting winter branches are delineated by dynamic broad washes of ink, reminiscent of the plum branches attributed to Jo Sok in the eight-fold screen (fig. 11). While the tail of the bird is shortened again due to the protruding branch below, the dark accents at the tip of the wings follow the previously examined stylistic conventions associated with Jo Sok. Surrounded by darkness and cold, a forlorn desolation permeates this painting.



**Figure 20.** *Bird in Sleep on Wintry Branches*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 46.5 x 29.5cm, ink on paper. Photo by Cheeyun L. Kwon

As observed above, the majority of Jo Sok's works in family albums and bearing a seal in his name depict solitary birds, with very few exceptions. This tradition was faithfully followed by his son Jo Jiun, who reinforces the stylistic convention established by his father. This feature distinguishes Jo Sok from his

contemporary, I Jing 李澄 (1581-?), who most often painted birds in pairs.<sup>15</sup> What reasons exist for Jo Sok's predilection for solitary birds and what could they possibly imply? An examination of his life's trajectory within the historical context of seventeenth-century Korea, and the recorded testaments by his contemporaries, provide a possible explanation of the personal dimension of his wagtail paintings in ink.

## Jo Sok in Early Seventeenth-century Korea

Jo Sok was born to an illustrious family of scholars at the end of the sixteenth century when Neo-Confucianism, the founding ideology of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), had reached new depths of intense intellectual inquiry among preeminent scholars in their elaboration on Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) theories of human nature. Private academies in the rural areas, known as *seowon* 書院, were the centers of discussion and offered an independent learning environment unlike the state-managed public school system that adhered to a confined curriculum. Toegye 退溪 I Hwang 李滉 (1501-1570) and Yulgok 栗谷 I I 李珣 (1536-1584) in particular reached new depths in their elaboration of the Neo-Confucian philosophical discussions.<sup>16</sup>

Jo Sok's father, Jo Suryun 趙守倫 (1555-1612), was a student of Ugye 牛溪 Seong Hon 成渾 (1535-1598), an eminent scholar and close friend of I I, who opposed the views of I Hwang and whose followers came to constitute the Western faction in the mid-Joseon political arena.<sup>17</sup> While the number of official positions in the central government remained limited, the bursting growth of the literati population in the provincial regions in the sixteenth century resulted in increased competition. Confrontation and conflict among the different schools based on their regional strongholds became inevitable, leading to a social phenomenon of intense factional strife during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>18</sup>

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15. For illustrated examples of I Jing's bird paintings, see Gim 1997, 36-42.

16. For further discussion on this topic, see Bary and Kim 1985.

17. He was the author of *Ugye jip* 牛溪集 (*Collections of Ugye*), a compilation of Seong Hon's teachings.

18. On the social impact of the emergence of Neo-Confucian literati, see Wagner and Shultz 1984,

After holding several official posts, Jo Sok's father moved his family to a small, idyllic village in South Chungcheong province when the country had been marauded by the military raids of the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣 秀吉 (1536-1598) in 1592. Upon Jo Sok's birth, he gave his son the pseudonym Huion 希溫 in the hopes that he would become as accomplished as the famed Song 宋 historian Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086).<sup>19</sup> A precocious child talented in literary verse, Jo Sok grew up learning the Neo-Confucian classics from his father, passing the preliminary state examination at the age of 17.

A misfortune, however, befell the family when his father was implicated for plotting treason against King Gwanhaegun 光海君 (r. 1608-1623) and he died in prison, a victim of torture. This incident, recorded in history as "the imprisonment of Gim Jikjae 金直裁," involved over 100 people in the alleged plot to overthrow the king. Most of them belonged to the Western faction that had initially opposed the accession of King Gwanhaegun to the throne, and they were watched closely by the king, who had contended against several other young princes with the support of the Greater Northern faction (*daebukpa* 大北派). After his accession, King Gwanhaegun led successive campaigns to eliminate many of his potential threats. Jo Sok was 18 years old at the time of his father's death, and his oldest brother led the family but was so agonized with grief that he died five years later.

This sudden incident that shook the family had a major psychological impact on the budding young scholar, who, overcome with grief and anger, discontinued his studies for the state examination and the pursuit of an official career. His son Jo Jiun 趙之耘 (1637-1691) wrote:

He was so agonized and deeply grieved by the unwarranted tragedy that he abandoned his ambitions for officialdom and discontinued his studies for the state examination. He did not step out the door of the house or speak in laughter with anyone. When he would go out, he would be overcome with feelings of injustice and boil with reprisal at the thought of being surrounded by the enemies. (*Pungyang Jossi serok* 1981, 650)

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204-08; Choi 2002.

19. Sima Guang is one of the greatest Chinese historians who served under the Song Emperor Shenzong 宋神宗 (r. 1067-1085).

After a long period of reclusion and vigilance, Jo Sok finally saw the injustice of King Gwanghaegun's 15-year rule end when the Western faction, long grown discontent at being ruled out, rallied for his deposition and succeeded in allowing King Injo 仁祖 (r. 1623-1649) to accede to the throne. King Injo was a young prince who had escaped persecution and had grown to build a power base with the Western faction. Comprised of the followers of I I and Seonghon's teachings, the Western faction had pursued *realpolitik* at the time of the Hideyoshi invasion, but later turned to be fundamental adherents of Zhu Xi's philosophy emphasizing propriety and righteousness. King Injo's ascendency to the throne marked a major shift of power to the Western faction, who ruled for a century. Many in Jo Sok's circle who participated in King Injo's campaign rose to prominent positions as meritorious subjects, but Jo Sok, who had also been involved in the deposition efforts, walked out of the palace doors as soon as the mission was accomplished. According to his son, he refused to be recognized for his involvement in the deposition efforts for fear of later becoming a target of retaliation (*Pungyang Jossi serok* 1981, 650). Nonetheless, King Injo bestowed upon Jo Sok's father a posthumous meritorious title, and the sixth-level rank on Jo Sok, which he attempted to decline without success.

Although his long-held chagrin was redressed by the overthrow of the king responsible for Jo Sok's father's death, another personal tragedy followed only a year after the enthronement of King Injo. I Gwal 李适 (1587-1624), a fellow member of the Western faction who had participated in the deposition efforts but was dissatisfied with the level of reward he received, rose in rebellion to take over the court. King Injo fled the palace to the city of Gongju 公州, upon which Jo Sok immediately mobilized troops to assuage the rebellion, succeeding in stabilizing the situation. During the incident, however, a close childhood friend named Gim Wollyang 金元亮 (1589-1624) who had initially brought I Gwal into the deposition expedition was brought under suspicion of collaboration, as he initially denied I's involvement in the rebellion. Gim was jailed and later executed by the court. With the loss of a close friend who had stood by him through difficult times, Jo Sok grew increasingly wary of the volatility of central politics and resigned from his position the year after.

The following years were checkered by short-term holdings of provincial posts and intermittent times of freedom. In 1627, Jo Sok accepted a magisterial position in Deoksan 德山, South Chungcheong province 忠清南道, where he governed with fairness, but resigned only two years later as the local clans made

a false accusation against him based on their discontent in not getting their way, and began the use of forcible means. As soon as he heard of this intrigue, Jo Sok immediately moved with his elderly mother to Seoul, where he remained without a position until 1634. During these times of leisure, he is recorded to have travelled, painted, and attended *gyehoe* 契會 meetings with his friends. Records that he painted birds also start appearing from this time:

In the autumn of King Injo's eleventh year (1633), while in Seoul without any engagement, I painted wild geese, herons, and chrysanthemums in ink. I then asked Yu Hu 裕後 (1599–1660) to compose a poem.

On February 25 of the *gapsu* 甲戌 year (1634), we gathered in Samcheong-dong 三清洞 (in Seoul) for a drink. Several friends holding office...arrived earlier. I was last to get there....Jeongryang 正郎, Jipyong 砥平, and Dosa 都事 could not drink, so the rest drank it sweet. Too drunk, Nojik 魯直 fell off the horse twice. Neither could I hold myself straight, so I returned home early after helping Nojik get on his horse. (*Pungyang Jossi serok* 1981, 664-65)

Jo Sok resumed the post of prefectural magistrate of Impihyeon 臨陂縣 in North Jeolla province 全羅北道 shortly thereafter, but only two years later peace was again shaken by the newly established Qing's 清 capture of the royal members. Unlike King Gwanhaegun, who was more realistic in handling the northern frontiers, King Injo adhered to a pro-Ming 明 loyalist policy advocated by the Western faction, which had consequences on the national front. Feeling threatened by Joseon's adversary stance, the Jurchens 女眞 launched their first attack in 1627, and as King Injo refused to recognize the suzerainty of the newly established Qing state, Emperor Wanli 萬曆 led the second invasion in 1636 and captured King Injo's queen and sons. The surrendered King Injo was forced to sever ties with Ming and to recognize Qing as the suzerain state, while the crown prince and his brother were taken hostages by the Qing army. Those who had adamantly stayed loyal to the Ming within the Joseon court were seized by the Manchus and executed. The exhaustive battles with the Jurchens, before the country had even time to recover from the devastating Hideyoshi invasions, left the country in a most demoralized and physically challenged state in the 500-year history of the Joseon dynasty.

Jo Sok was witness to these years of prolonged battles and the humiliating consequences of the East Asian order in turmoil. A painting named *The Gold Box* in the National Museum of Korea (fig. 21) bears a colophon stating that Jo Sok was commissioned to paint it by royal decree in the spring of 1636<sup>20</sup> before the second attack of the Jurchens. The subject is based on a legendary account of the birth of Gim Algi 金闕智, the founder of the ruling house of the Silla 新羅 dynasty (57 BCE-935 CE).<sup>21</sup> Painted in the colorful blue-and-green landscape style, the painting depicts the legendary appearance of the infant Gim Algi in a gold box under a tree next to a cock. If the date of this painting is correct, the revival of a Korean historical subject during the times of foreign threat reflects King Injo's efforts to raise internal morale by reminding the country of its ancient origins. The fact that Jo Sok was summoned by the court to paint a subject with such gravity bespeaks of his reputation as a scholar-painter and the esteem with which he was regarded. In terms of style, it was not uncommon for a literati painter in Joseon to paint in the blue-and-green landscape style that followed the example of such Chinese scholar-artists as Zhao Mengfu. Such literary figures as Sin Jam 申潛 (1491-1554) and Yun Duseo 尹斗緒 (1669-1715) also left works in the blue-and-green style.<sup>22</sup>

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20. The colophon, written by minister Gim Ikhui 金益熙 (1610-1656), reads: "This painting is based on the ancient story of Gim Algi 金闕智, the progenitor of the Silla King Gyeongsun 敬順. A baby boy was found in a gold box hanging from a tree with a white rooster crowing underneath, who was given the name 'Gim' 金 by King Seok Talhae 昔脫解. The boy later became Gim Algi who succeeded King Seok to become king. His descendant King Gyeongsun dedicated the country to the Goryeo 高麗 kingdom that bestowed upon him the title Gyeongsun (Gentle Reverence). The king ordered to paint this in the spring of 1636 based on the History of the Three Kingdoms 三國史. Written by the Minister of Interior Gim Ikhui and painted by the Officer of the Fourth Rank Jo Sok by royal decree" (*Wang ui geul i itmeun geurim* 2008, 10–11).

21. This legend is recorded in *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (*Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*) (1285) and *Samguk sagi* 三國史記 (*History of the Three Kingdoms*) (1145).

22. For example, there are *Searching for Plum Blossoms* 探梅圖 by Sin Jam and *Jindan Falling from a Donkey* 陳博墮驢圖 by Yun Duseo. For illustrations, see *Cheongnok sansu* 2006, 11; 18.



Figure 21. Jo Sok, *The Gold Box*, National Museum of Korea, Seoul, 105.5 x 56cm, ink and colors on silk

The impact of the prolonged wars with the Jurchens was devastating. Jo Sok described the ghastly situation as follows:

How could one battle with low army provisions and people starving everywhere? It is deplorable! My body is sick and so is my horse, thus [I] cannot join the battle, but [I] am gathering provisions to send off while staying in Cheonan 天安. (qtd. in I 1999, 9)

While he provided indirect help when the country was at war with the Jurchens, as soon as he heard that King Injo had surrendered and his family had been taken hostage, he gave up his post and returned to Seoul:

Thus I heard that the court has agreed to accept the amity (from Qing). The king has returned to the palace and the army of the enemy to the north.... The sight of the battle grounds laid with corpses is abhorrent. How my heart breaks! (ibid.)

These short statements and his participation in the painting project ordered by King Injo speak of his commitment to responding to a national crisis. While taking action when needed, Jo Sok also had a cautious and reserved demeanor and seldom expressed his opinion outwardly. His contemporary, Song Siyeol 宋時烈,<sup>23</sup> wrote:

His outer demeanor seemed very gentle and polite, but his inner mind very clear and dissatisfied with anything or anyone in this world.... Only he could pretend not to know anything when he actually knew everything, pretend not to be capable of anything when he actually was capable.

He was modest about his scholarship and striving to carry it into action, shunning away from mere mindless theories and debate with others.... When people raised their voices arguing over major issues, he remained silent pretending not to hear them, but kept a clear discernment in his heart of what was right and wrong. (*Pungyang Jossi serok* 1981, 644-47)

He would not clash against or follow, as if flying away leaving no traces.

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23. He was a foremost figure of the Western faction who was a tutor to King Hyojong (1619-1659).

One would call this “clear thinking and protecting one’s body.” (*Pungyang Jossi serok* 1981, 656; 660)

Clearly, having lived through the vicissitudes of turbulent internal strife and external attacks, Jo Sok appears to have adopted a prudent and reserved public attitude, keeping his thoughts to himself. Reticent and vigilant, he appears to have found refuge in the pleasures of the literati arts instead, collecting avidly the works of ancient art and epigraphy, and abiding by the mores of a virtuous Neo-Confucian scholar. His *Geumseok cheongwan* 金石清琬 (*A Clear View of Epigraphy*) is an early work on epigraphy in the Joseon dynasty. His high reputation and passion for the calligraphic art is attested by his contemporary Song Siyeol:

There was not much that Jo Sok liked, except for literary and ancient writings which he collected assiduously. He would sometimes choose a composition or a piece of calligraphy; sometimes a figure or an ancient and rare piece. (*Pungyang Jossi serok* 1981, 669-71)<sup>24</sup>

Bak Yunwon 朴胤源 also wrote:

Thus I heard. The old man Changgang excelled in calligraphy and painting, reaching a divine level. People would fight to own a work by him, which were greatly treasured. Even one painting or one letter of his was considered equaling to a thousand gold pieces. His letters were true expressions of his heart, while his paintings reached the heavens. (qtd. in O 1928, 133-34)

His distinction in poetry, calligraphy, and painting was such that a contemporary admirer, I Sik 李植 (1584-1647), compared him to Wang Wei 王維 and Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 of China:

[Jo Sok is as] pure as white clothing and as gentle as a bowstring. He possesses talent in all the three arts, just as the old Zheng Qian 鄭虔 (of Tang 唐). How shall the Bureau of Printing accept such an uncontaminated scholar! His virtue is probably known even in the far reaches of the countryside. Wang Wei was skilled in poetry and painting. Zhao Mengfu

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24. This was reprinted from *Songja daejeon* 宋子大全.

was said to excel in painting over poetry. Who should ascertain the pleasure of viewing in leisure a landscape [by him] with a fine inscription? (qtd. in O 1928, 532)

As such, Jo Sok was admired for his unsullied virtue that transcended worldliness and his accomplishment in all three arts. After the passing in 1649 of King Injo, to whom Jo Sok upheld the utmost loyalty, he was called several times to take such highly influential posts as tutor to the crown prince, head of the surveillance branch, and chamberlain of the newly acceded King Hyojong 孝宗 (r. 1649-1659). He repeatedly declined on the grounds of his health. Suffering from arthritis and eye ailments, his late years are described as those of a renunciant who took less interest in his own well-being, considering his body “a piece of wood” and sleeping on cold floors without proper garments. I Seon 李選 (1632-1692), son of a longtime friend who is known to have compiled a now-lost compendium of Jo Sok’s works, wrote:

Every time I saw him, the house was empty and solitary without signs of having had a meal, but he was always insouciant. His only passions were painting and calligraphy, his hands never resting from searching an ancient masterpiece or fine calligraphy. The writings and paintings that came out of his brush tip were all exquisite, cherished by all as treasures. With his skill, nothing would have been unattainable. (qtd. in O 1928, 133)

After his death, King Sukjong 肅宗 (1674-1720) called him “a man not of this world” and bestowed upon him eulogistic titles and a royal grant to his family to conduct memorial services.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Living during a time of fierce factional politics to which his family fell victim and the turbulent historical tribulations in seventeenth-century Korea,<sup>26</sup> Jo

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25. For further information, see *Sukjong sillok* 肅宗實錄 (21<sup>th</sup> year) 7:11; *Pungyang Jossi serok* 1981, 654.

26. For further discussion on factional politics involving the provincial scholars in Joseon, see Wagner 1974.

Sok remained aloof from a path of officialdom in the central government and transcended the less-than-ideal reality by immersing himself in the fundamental arts of the literati. For a man of few words, disengaged from disappointing reality, painting was perhaps the medium through which he expressed his ideals more freely, as the carriers of his unspoken words. Among his contemporaries, he became an icon of the unperturbed, free, and talented scholar who produced paintings of exquisite caliber. It thus comes as no surprise that so many paintings now bear his attribution.

The two wagtail paintings in the San Francisco collection are fine additions to the existing body of bird paintings attributed to Jo Sok. Sharing stylistic and iconographic features with the many remaining works bearing his seal and the album paintings in the Jo family collections, they rank among the most refined examples of the genre. Although Jo Sok has hitherto been better associated with magpie paintings, the intimate scenes of solitary wagtails combined with the four noble plants as examined in this paper actually comprise the mainstream of his bird paintings.

The wagtail translates to “halmisae” in Korean, meaning “granny bird.” The bird was often compared to an aged person in Korean popular culture, and could therefore be affiliated with the artist himself in his old age. Combined with the four noble plants, the paintings represent the ideals of an aged literati who has transcended the vicissitudes of history. Set by a secluded lakeside, it has unlocked the bird into a free natural setting, perhaps as the ultimate embodiment of Jo Sok’s unbound soul.

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## Abstract

Cho Sok (1595-1668) remains an unmatched bird painter in ink of literati background from the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). Today, over 57 paintings in private and public collections around the world bear the seal of his penname, Changgang. This article focuses on two newly surfaced wagtail paintings in ink in San Francisco, arguing that such depictions of solitary birds in ink actually form the mainstream of his bird paintings. While positioning them within the stylistic and iconographic framework of his known works, it also explores their possible meaning through the psychological lens of the artist and the historical context of the period. A witness to the major historical events in seventeenth-century Korea, one of the most tumultuous times in Korean history noted for factional politics and foreign invasions under the shifting paradigms of the East Asian world order, his bird paintings encapsulate, as symbols of his unspoken words, the abiding ideals of a disheartened Neo-Confucian scholar.

**Keywords:** bird painting, wagtail, Joseon literati painter, seventeenth-century Korea, Neo-Confucian scholar, ink painting