

# The Aesthetics and Origins of Taepyeong-seong-si-do as an Urban Genre Masterpiece

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## Abstract

The urban genre artwork known as Taepyeong-seong-si-do has provoked substantial scholarly interest within the field of East Asian art due to its detailed representation of an animated castle town bustling with mercantile pursuits. Despite the dearth of conclusive details surrounding its origin including the date of creation, the artist involved and its formal title, this artwork has secured its standing as an exceptional illustration of artistic mastery. The purpose of this paper is to undertake a thorough theoretical analysis of Taepyeong-seong-si-do and to unravel its unique attributes and unexplored facets. Moreover, this study seeks to illuminate the origins and influences of the Chinese aesthetic, visible in the portrayed attire and architectural elements. By undertaking this multifaceted examination, this study is expected to make a substantial contribution to the comprehensive understanding of Taepyeong-seong-si-do.

Keyword : Taepyeong-Seong-Si-do, east asian painting, aesthetics, configuration

## 1. Introduction

As an urban genre painting, Taepyeong-seong-si-do presents a vivid portrayal of a bustling castle town immersed in a multitude of intricate commercial activities. However, the historical records fail to provide any conclusive information regarding its date of production, authorship or even an official title. Nevertheless, Taepyeongseong Fortress emerges as an extraordinary testament to the artistic finesse prevalent in East Asia distinguished by its meticulous brushwork and intricate depictions of characters and architectural structures. The focal point of this painting revolves predominantly around the representation of individuals engaged in diverse commercial pursuits and the immersive environments that surround them.

As shown in [Fig. 1], this artwork employs a bird's eye view as its principal perspective to effectively captures the dynamic commercial landscape housed within the buildings it depicts. The name literally means the city of great peace so it offers a comprehensive panorama of commercial activities ranging from those conducted within established structures to the impermanent establishments and even

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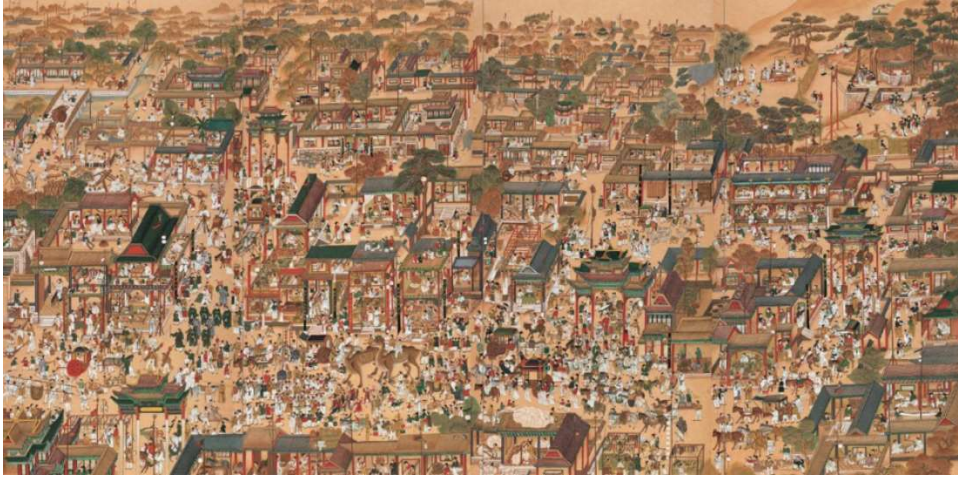
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unlawful enterprises. Notably, Taepyeong-seong-si-do stands apart from other works of similar subject matter by providing intricate depictions of commercial spaces infused with a vibrant and celebratory ambiance.



[Fig. 1] Taepyeong-seong-si-do (8 widths, 113.6x49.1 cm each, silk color, late Joseon)

Recent studies have been conducted to interpret its artistic significance. Among them, a lantern fair (deungsì) was studied including the prevalence of luxury goods, diverse lantern types and the significant presence of women and children align with historical records of the lantern festival [1]. The structure, form, color, context and typography in this artwork was also examined to indicate that it was symmetrically arranged for balanced aesthetics and used color to maintain emotional stability by avoiding visual disruption [2]. The artwork was valued to depict the dynamism between rural and urban life, past and present and divine and secular, all set in a prosperous cityscape to foster national prosperity and defense [3]. However, despite the painting's inherent significance, a comprehensive analysis of its commercial spaces and the perceptions they convey has thus far remained unexplored.

The purpose of this paper is to address this critical gap by delving into the production background, purpose and distinctive characteristics of Taepyeong-seong-si-do. By undertaking a comprehensive examination of this artwork, the paper aims to focus on its historical and cultural significance as well as its contributions to the broader understanding of East Asian art. Through a meticulous analysis of the painting's composition, thematic elements and interpretative possibilities, this paper will offer a comprehensive understanding of the remarkable significance of Taepyeong-seong-si-do within the context of East Asian art history.

## **2. Production and purpose of Taepyeong-seong-si-do**

The National Museum of Korea is home to an extraordinary artwork titled Taepyeong-seong-si-do, believed to have been created during the late Joseon Dynasty by an unidentified artist. Classified within the urban genre, this painting presents a virtual representation of a castle town by skillfully depicting an array of distinctive buildings and figures across its expansive format of eight large folding panels. Each panel measures 113.6cm in height and 49.1cm in width with the artwork executed on silk canvas using vibrant pigments. The public debut of Taepyeong-seong-si-do took place during the Genre Paintings in Joseon Dynasty exhibition at the National Museum of Korea in 2002. The title of Taepyeong-seong-si-do(太平城市圖) derives from the characters Tae (태:太) and Pyeong (평:平) inscribed at the bottom of the third panel [4].

The painting encompasses a diverse range of significant urban establishments including castles, military training grounds, religious sites, residences and commercial facilities. Its primary function likely revolved around governance to serve as a means of inspection and administration of the various areas under the political influence of the highest authority. On April 24, 1792, King Jeongjo issued an order for civil ministers from the Gyujeongguk Library including Park Je-Ga to view the original painting and submit poems within a three-day period. His poem vividly depicted a myriad of objects and bustling commercial activities as if he had personally witnessed the vibrant markets of the capital. The market portrayed in his poem represented Park's imaginative interpretation of King Jeongjo's aspirations to construct a new town. The original map displayed to King Jeongjo's officials served as the foundation while it appears that Park Je-Ga and the appreciative bureaucrats contributed their own imaginative elements when creating and submitting the imaginary map. It is widely believed that Taepyeong-seong-si-do was ultimately completed by referencing various situations depicted in the map [5].

The substantial influence of China's Cheongmyeongsanghado (清明上河圖), a painting illustrating the thriving capital Gaebong during the Northern Song Dynasty, cannot be disregarded in understanding the backdrop of Taepyeong-seong-si-do's production. As shown in [Fig. 2], numerous copies of Cheongmyeongsanghado were produced during the Ming and Qing Dynasties and subsequently entered South Korea during the late Joseon Dynasty to elicit great curiosity among scholars and artists of that era. The level of detail and meticulousness in the painting is remarkable with hundreds of human figures, animals, buildings and natural elements intricately depicted. The painting provides valuable historical insights into the daily life, culture and urban development of ancient China. Its meticulous

attention to detail, realistic depiction of daily life and panoramic composition have influenced Korean artists in capturing scenes of Korean society and landscapes.



[Fig. 2] Cheongmyeongsanghado in Song Dynasty

A comparative analysis between later copies of Taepyeong-seong-si-do and Cheongmyeongsanghado reveals a plethora of shared subjects and affirmed the interconnectedness of the two artworks. Taepyeong-seong-si-do accommodated and adapted the essence of Cheongmyeongsanghado to suit the specific circumstances of the Joseon Dynasty [6].

### **3. Interpretation of Taepyeong-seong-si-do**

#### **3.1 Elements**

Taepyeong-seong-si-do presents a vivid depiction of approximately 2,120 individuals actively engaged in diverse activities. Within the artwork, these individuals can be observed inhabiting houses, mingling within crowds or processions and undertaking a wide range of occupations encompassing crafts, construction, agriculture, military affairs and notably, commerce. The meticulous portrayal of the people imparts a sense of realism to capture the vibrant chatter and dynamic presence of a multifarious populace. Of particular significance are the commercial spaces that prominently feature throughout the painting are a myriad of shops where diligent shopkeepers attend to their businesses amidst a constant flow of customers.

Throughout the composition, large buildings are scattered across various locations, each contributing to the overall visual landscape. These buildings typically consist of a central courtyard by either singular or multiple structures. Adjacent to the roads, one encounters both single-story and two-story buildings with

their interiors readily visible through open storefronts that are proudly displaying an array of merchandise. Furthermore, within a single building, a diverse array of stores can be discerned. The storefronts facing the road function as shops while the rear sections of the buildings offer glimpses into scenes of livelihood effectively exemplifies the intricate interplay between commercial and residential functions within a complex spatial arrangement [7].

### **3.2 Picture configuration and expression technique**

In the artistic composition of Taepyeong-seong-si-do, the entire landscape and townscape are skillfully rendered from a bird's-eye perspective to employ a parallel diagonal composition. This visual strategy creates a panoramic-style representation that encompasses not only mountains and rivers but also an intricate network of buildings, interconnected roads and even a flowing brook that traverses the town. Moreover, the canvas comes alive through the inclusion of numerous characters engaging in distinctive behaviors that vividly capture the diverse facets of daily life [8].

Taepyeong-seong-si-do comprises a heterogeneous array of spaces with the commercial area assuming a prominent role within the painting. Furthermore, residential areas, recreational spaces, administrative offices, military zones and religious sites are all depicted to signify the convergence of various functions within this comprehensive representation. Each area is characterized by distinct architectural elements including pillars, decorations and a varied color palette that transcend the boundaries of realism and mundane routine. Monumental structures such as pailou (Chinese architectural arch) are frequently integrated into the composition [1].

The parallel diagonal line technique employed in Taepyeong-seong-si-do is noteworthy. Rather than engaging in meticulous preliminary work, the unknown artist directly distributed and allocated areas within the painting to occasionally accentuate the original functions of buildings in relation to the roadside and pailou in a manner that deviates from strict realism. As the depicted space represents a virtual realm rather than actual structures, the height of floors beneath the same roof exhibits variation. Furthermore, the artist continuously augmented the architectural elements by painting over features such as guardrails, station poles and designs on the ink lines of the buildings. This process serves as a significant clue that suggests Taepyeong-seong-si-do is not a mere reproduction of a model work but rather a composition imbued with distinct architectural elements and the artist's own conception of the depicted spaces [8].

### **3.3 Area configuration**

### **3.3.1 Military area**

Taepyeong-seong-si-do portrays the military area commencing from the entrance of the castle gate to delineate a clear boundary with the adjacent river. Within this section, the painting depicts tower buildings, soldiers engaged in training exercises, military tents and personnel. Of particular note are the scenes illustrating soldiers partaking in various martial arts practices including masawoldo (馬上月刀), lancer (騎槍) and horseback archery (騎射). These depictions bear resemblance to the illustrations found in Muyedobotongji (武藝圖譜通志), a comprehensive martial arts manual published in 1790 during the reign of King Jeongjo authored by Lee Deok-Mu, Park Je-Ga and Baek Dong-Su.

### **3.3.2 Agricultural and Residential area**

Adjacent to the military area, in the second panel beneath the bridges, a combination of agricultural and residential imagery is presented. In the Joseon Dynasty which placed agriculture as a paramount policy altars were installed outside the palace. It was customary for the royal family to cultivate farmland within the palace grounds and it served as an exemplar for the populace and promoting agricultural practices. However, as commercial activities gained prominence not only within the castle town but also beyond its confines during the late Joseon Dynasty, agricultural areas gradually diminished. Privately owned fields and those dedicated to supplying crops to the palace progressively disappeared. Reflecting this changing landscape, the scope of the agricultural area depicted in Taepyeong-seong-si-do is limited. Scenes of hoeing, plowing and milling are depicted within a confined space and with only a small number of individuals engaged in dry-field farming.

### **3.3.3 Commercial area**

The commercial area is showcased from the entrance of the castle gate in the eighth panel. Although the commercial activity portrayed may seem modest in scale, it occupies a significant expanse in front of the castle gate. Earnest commercial transactions commence in the sixth panel. Within the expansive commercial area, vibrant commercial activities are vividly depicted both within buildings and along the roadside including instances of illicit commercial trades. The commercial buildings assume diverse forms such as squares and the letter B and the space is utilized in various ways with commercial transactions taking place in areas facing the roadside, courtyards and other settings. While the roadside areas primarily focus on commercial activities, the interior spaces within clusters of buildings or on upper floors emphasize handicraft manufacturing or other forms of production.

### **3.3.4 Religious area**

The segment identified as the religious area is situated at the rear of Taepyeong-seong-si-do. Vague depictions of towers, flagpoles and buildings accompanied by the presence of clouds and mist serve as background elements. It is believed that the imagery of towers, reminiscent of those found in Beijing, played a role in visualizing the creation of Taepyeong-seong-si-do, as mentioned in records of annual events related to the painting's organization and the allocation of diverse areas within it.

### **3.3.5 Social gathering (Ahoe) area**

The designated social gathering area in Taepyeong-seong-si-do captures scenes of open-air social gatherings taking place on a hilltop, prominently featured in the first panel of the artwork. This particular segment exhibits the incorporation of certain elements derived from social gathering paintings originating from the late Joseon Dynasty. Noteworthy among these elements are the inclusion of natural features such as pine forests, rocks and bamboo groves and it contributes to the authentic ambiance of the depicted scene. Moreover, the depiction incorporates artificial components such as straw-roofed pavilions and platforms to evoke a sense of deliberate construction and design.

Within the social gathering area, a deliberate distinction is made to emphasize elegance and popularity and set it apart from other architectural structures. This distinction is achieved through careful attention to landscaping techniques including the arrangement of vegetation and the installation of doors or folding screens crafted from tree branches. These features not only add aesthetic appeal but also serve to demarcate separate spaces within the social gathering area. The division between male and female sections is symbolized by a rock positioned on the left side of the screen, supplemented by the presence of additional doors, further enhancing the spatial organization and functional allocation within this area of Taepyeong-seong-si-do [2].

## **4. Discussion**

Unlike other sketches of castle towns, Taepyeong-seong-si-do is notable for its depiction of an idealized version of the town rather than a real landscape. The piece is characterized more by Chinese architectural styles than those from the Joseon Dynasty. This divergence can be traced back to the historical interactions between Joseon and China during the 18th and 19th centuries. These interactions largely due to diplomatic missions brought Chinese influences into Joseon and led to the integration of Chinese architectural elements into their culture. Taepyeong-seong-si-do was created during a pivotal time when buildings influenced by Chinese design were being built and this artwork serves as a reflection of the transformative period of architectural interchange.

In addition, in the annals of Joseon Dynasty artwork, few pieces focus on varied commercial activities as Taepyeong-seong-si-do does. With Seoul's evolution into a significant metropolis during the rule of Kings Yeongjo and Jeongjo, it transformed into a nexus of economic, cultural, educational and political activities. The later stages of the Joseon Dynasty saw an expansion of the distributive economy with goods from across the nation and imported items from Japan and the Western world pouring into Seoul. The painting subtly reflects a favorable view of urbanization and commercial expansion. Furthermore, the illustration incorporates advanced Chinese products and knowledge that were gleaned through diplomatic missions from Joseon.

The fundamental characteristics of the castle town depicted in Taepyeong-seong-si-do align with the new town construction plan of Hwaseong promoted by King Jeongjo. Although it does not precisely mirror the specific construction of the new town, there is a shared ideal to build a commercial town. Taepyeong-seong-si-do portrays a realistic utopia to express desires for commercialization, access to advanced knowledge and products, the establishment of new towns and an era of peace, all within a festive atmosphere that is unconcerned with the challenges of daily life and set against the backdrop of the late Joseon Dynasty.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Taepyeong-seong-si-do visualizes a conceptual ideal space that does not exist in reality and constructs mosaic-like scenes with diverse contexts. This paper examined to provide an explanation of the unique nature and production of Taepyeong-seong-si-do with focus on its distinctive characteristics and implications of the presence of Chinese-style clothing and buildings in the artwork. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, this paper contributes to the ongoing research on Taepyeong-seong-si-do through the exploration of its historical context, artistic techniques and thematic implications.



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