Looking Past the Myth: The Private Ownership of Publicness[*]

Min-Jo Kim[**]

***Yuchijin-gwa Deurama-senteo* [Yu Chi-jin and the Drama Center]**. By Restoring the Drama Center to the Public. A Theater Community's Emergency Response Edition. Seoul: Theatre and Man Press, 2019, 264 pages, ISBN 9788957866894

When considering Korean theater trends in the 2010s, 2015 and 2018 stand out as two notable years. The events in these two years made the issue of publicness, which had previously only been sporadically examined, more pressing. The first incident, in 2015, is the conversation around the arts and the publicness of arts policies that was ignited when the Seoul Theater Festival failed the screening process for the Arko Arts Theater. At the time, debate around publicness of the arts was centered around funding and specifically, the government's role in funding the arts. Borrowing Hannah Arendt's term "koinon," Yang-gu Lee observes that the process for funding theatrical projects must exist publicly and open to any person involved in the project (Lee 2015, 127). Similarly, the Seoul Theater Festival story is an example of how introducing transparency and fairness in public decision-making requires a voluntary push. Subsequent revelations that the Seoul Theater Festival's failure to pass the Arko Arts Theater screening process was caused by censorship and nepotism in President Geunhye Park's administration fueled the debate. A narrative formed, in which a biased and violent government and their puppet institutions were pitted against artists who were committed to protecting their artistic freedom.

However, when we consider Arendt, who tells us that "everything in the world which is not our private property" is public, issues of publicness are not limited to a critique of institutions or policies. Publicness can happen in places where the state does not exist, or one might even argue that it is all the more crucial in places where the state does not exist. In contrast to this confrontation between an oppressive regime and its defiant citizenry, 2018 can be described as the

[*] This translated book review was originally published in the *Korean Journal of Arts Studies*. Min-Jo Kim. 2019. "Sayuhwawa Sinhwahwa Neomeoui Gonggongseongeul Sayuhada [Looking Past the Myth: The Private Ownership of Publicness]." *Korean Journal of Arts Studies* 25: 343-352. DOI 10.20976/kjas.2019.25.016 Thanks to Seong-hwa Ro for translating this article from Korean to English.

[**] Min-jo Kim is a lecturer at the department of the Korean Language and Literature, Seoul National University.

year that surfaced a completely different aspect of publicness. Revelations of the actor Myeong-heng Lee and director Yoon-taek Lee's sexual crimes triggered the #MeToo movement in the theater world. In particular, the sexual crimes that repeatedly took place in the Miryang Theater village painfully exposed the lack of transparency in the theater world and allowed those with power to treat others as their private property. It was a necessary reminder and rebuke to re-examine the norms and protocols within the "society" of the theater world.

The cancellation of the Namsan Arts Center rental contract in 2018 is another incident that fits this framework of overcoming the problems of publicness. This can be said to be related their efforts to regain their footing after being blacklisted, but is also correlated with the #MeToo movement and the challenge to privatization and mythification that was ignited by it. The process by which Chi-jin Yu, now legendary, privatizes the Drama Center is a narrative that does nott fit neatly into that of the state, the market or of society. The greatest virtue of *Yu Chi-jin and the Drama Center* is that it refreshes our view of all three and demonstrates how one might make an attempt at objectively understanding the chains of power. First of all, the articles in *Yu Chi-jin and the Drama Center* are contemporary critiques attempting to make sense of a problem that is occurring in the moment. In particular, the articles in Part 1 "The Publicness of the Drama Center" surfaces agile discussions for intervening in the emergency response to the normalization of the Drama Center as a public institution. The argument then organically grows in scope through the construction of critical arguments. Each researcher examines different types of documentation to investigate the context for the construction of the Drama Center and the process of its privatization. Through this, the Drama Center's history can be located within the operational processes of the combined and multifaceted power of the citizenry, the culture wars of the Cold War, and authoritarian power. In other words, *Yu Chi-jin and the Drama Center* does not content itself with providing a contemporary critique but aims at a broader scope of scholarship by meticulously placing the subject within an empirical historical context.

Let's examine the specifics of each argument. The first article in Part 1, Mi-do Kim's "The Drama Center Controversy" lays out ways in which the book is a product of public intelligence. Kim records the process in which public maintenance is created and public opinion is formed. When examining the three public debates which took place, it's possible to see that as each new source and issue is added, our perspective on the history of the Drama Center becomes more complex. In the first public debate, the issue of the sale of the land at the time of its construction and the process for securing funding from the Rockefeller foundation came to the fore, while in the second debate, accusations of using Japanese colonialist or American cultural colonialist frameworks as convenient expedients were made. Finally, in the third

debate, the statement by Public Maintenance who supported returning the Drama Center back to society were read. Kim provides us with an index for the investigations into the Drama Center and also demonstrates a profound understanding for the book's focus on contemporary critiques and scholarship.

The following articles by Sook-hyeon Kim, Ok-ran Kim, Shi-hyeon Cho, Yi-jeong Noh each contribute to historicizing the privatization of the Drama Center. Their common concern is eloquently encapsulated in Yi-jeong Noh's words.

> We must question again, within a social context [...] not as part of an individual's biography or mythification, or as a record of that mythification but the time has come for us to question through the lens of the contemporary social context and documentation. The narrative of the Namsan Drama Center's construction must be told for the sake of the public (137)

It accurately encapsulates the confrontation between the mythification of Chi-jin Yu as an individual and historicization, as well as that between the power plays of privatization and the public critiques.

The issue at the core of the Drama Center controversy is that of public property becoming private property through unprecedented means. To objectively understand the course of events that resulted in the current situation, it is necessary to name all the different subjects relevant to the Drama Center. To this end, the researchers have delved into and examined documentation from various relevant disciplines. Sook-hyeon Kim examines the Drama Center's position from 1961 to 2007 and responses to the Drama Center's positions from the theatre world. Yi-jeong Noh examines documentation from the managing institution, the Korean Research Institute for Dramatic Arts Foundation and highlights evidence of corruption in its administrative operations. Furthermore, Shi-hyeon Cho shares a detailed investigation utilizing publicly available records of land donations and building registers to look at the way power operates when property passes from the state to private ownership, and in the legal and administrative processes involved. Ok-ran Kim utilizes the Hoover archive for Asian Foundation records to take a fresh look at Cold War cultural colonialism and Chi-jin Yu's funding from the Rockefeller foundation.

Naturally, the articles inevitably have sources in common and some content is repeated throughout. It is true that when considering the structure of the book, one could wish that there was a clearer demarcation between the different scholarly contributions to help reduce repetitive content. However, the repetition of the arguments does help to provide connections between the different scholarly approaches. Notably, each author appears to have been stimulated by the other work, with each article expanding on the previous one. For example, when relating

the first public debate about the Drama Center, Cho recalls that he was prompted to look at the fact that the site of the Drama Center used to be the seat of the Japanese colonial government by Sook-hyeon Kim's paper (82). In this way, the collaborative communication between the authors and their participation in creating public intelligence and expanding public consciousness demonstrate its value and importance.

Sook-hyeon Kim's "The Drama Center's Historical Significance and Publicness Debate" describes in detail the theatrical field in 1962, when the Drama Center first opened. At the time, the Wongaksa had not been rebuilt since it had been burned down in 1959 and the Shigongwan was the only performance space exclusively for theatre, so the construction of the Drama Center inspired hopes for a "place to call home (Geun-sam Lee)" for Korea's theatrical community. Kim emphasizes the cross-national and cross-cultural range for the project's funding and support. Kim cites a newspaper article covering one representative example: a chair donation project sponsored by Chairman Jeong-hee Park and former president Bo-sun Yoon. We also learn that financial difficulties continued to beleaguer the Drama Center. The consequence of Chi-jin Yu's appeal for theatre rejuvenation funding was that the budget for all national theatre projects was allocated solely to the Drama Center. Although Kim doesn't pursue this particular instance deeply, it is impossible not to note the issue of limiting representation in a single individual.

For a single individual should symbolically wield power, it follows that an individual symbolically wields power on behalf of a whole society. Chi-jin Yu occupied an important position in the theatrical circles of a newly emancipated Korea, where many of the key players during the colonial era had left for the North. It may also have been inevitable for him to be considered symbolic of South Korean theater, considering his leadership before and after reconstruction in developing a theater purely for theatrical performances, after his return from his investigative tour of America. However, as Kim points out, accusations that the Drama Center was already like Chi-jin Yu's personal property (39) and that the venue fees were too high for performers (40) were being made as early as 1960, suggesting that the operations of the Drama Center were proceeding without consulting the wider theater community. In short, although Chi-jin Yu emphasized his symbolic role as a leader while gathering funding and resources, once those were secured his actions were not consistent with his self-identified role. The cleft between a self-appointed leader and an appointed leader that is typical in young democracies is evident in the history of the Drama Center.

In "The Privatization of the Namsan Drama Center" Yi-jeong Noh articulates the causal relationship between distorted representation and privatization as follows.

> During the construction of the theater and its subsequent privatization, the managing institution, the Korean Research Institute for Dramatic Arts repeatedly delineated their public role as a theater community as well as the national Korean community when presenting their case during discussions, citing the need for national cultural development and the urgency for developing theater. This appeal effectively killed any opposing arguments and both society and state were repeatedly used to create special exception [...] However, the end result of those discussions was Chi-jin Yu and the Seoul Institute of the Arts, a private school (136-137).

Notably, the focus of Noh's article shifts from Chi-jin Yu to Korean Research Institute for Dramatic Arts and the members of the Korean Research Institute for Dramatic Arts.

The shift from identifying an individual's misuse of power to identifying an institution's missteps is a meaningful one. Firstly, a focus on legal records and documentation allows a more objective analysis than is possible when limited to investigating the biography of an individual. It is a "shift from mythification to reading history" that is a foundational premise for an empirical methodology. Secondly, by tracing the process with which the ownership of the Drama Center moves from the foundation to the school reveals the motivations driving its privatization more clearly. Noh differentiates the non-profit organization created to receive funding from the Rockefeller Foundation from the for-profit academic organization established in 1964, and cites the various steps taken to ensure the Drama Center would remain a family legacy. In his well-known 1966 interview with *Hangook Ilbo*, Chi-jin Yu claims that the Drama Center will never be privatized and legally has no recourse to do so, a claim which is directly contradicted by the facts. Noh analyses the 1964 application and articles of incorporation to establish an academic institution to reveal the Seoul Institute of the Arts as the managing body of the Drama Center, with the Drama Center as a for-profit asset. In other words, the legal means for privatization were already being laid. Noh's studies provide hard evidence for what was only rumor in the 1960s: preparation for the privatization of the Drama Center.

If the focus of Noh's investigation is the building itself, Shi-hyeon Cho's "Yaejang-dong, 8-19" looks at the issues of transferring ownership of the site on which the center was built. It is not hyperbolic to describe the transformation of the Drama Center from public property to private property as seemingly magical. Likewise, Cho puts aside Chi-jin Yu the individual to focus on persona documenta. The sheer amount of documentation available makes it difficult to define a single thesis for this article. However, the crux of the argument is that an authoritarian government created the ideal conditions for the privatization of the Drama Center. This is evident when examining the sale of the

Drama Center's location, Yaejang-dong, 8-19. The acquiescence of the original tenant, The National Science Museum suggests government coercion. At each instance of issues arising around sale negotiations or in making payments, the Jeong-hee Park's government appears like a deus ex machina, in a manner typical of authoritarian governments.

Ok-ran Kim's "Drama Center: Cold War Cultural Ideology and the Capitalist Process of Privatization" looks at the Chi-jin Yu related documents at the Hoover Archive in Stanford University, locating the Drama Center issue in the context of Cold War studies. The thrust of the paper is that given the funding provided by the Rockefeller Foundation, the foundation itself must necessarily be considered to re-examine the networks created between America and Korea during the Cold War period. Citing a contextual article, Kim provides the background for Chi-jin Yu's funding, pointing out that post 1953 and the Eisenhower administration, America actively pursued long-term anti-communist policies through indirect involvement with private organizations (Kim 2018).

> After the Korean war in 1950, South Korea's geo-political role as an Asian bastion of anti-communism grew, and it was necessary to nurture home-grown voices to broadcast the virtues of the "free world" as a foil for Russia, China and North Korea. As the pre-eminent director in post-colonial Korea and successfully repatriated through right wing theater activities, Chi-jin Yu became the focus of funding and support from the American military, The United States Information Services (USIS), and private foundations (Kim 2018, 137-138)

However, Kim goes beyond an analysis of the Rockefeller Foundation's funding to examine how the foundation's intentions become refracted through Chi-jin Yu's personal ambitions. The Rockefeller foundation wanted to build a small, experimental theater modeled on the National Theater and local theater movements in America. However, due to the issues caused by Chi-jin Yu's ambitious scope and development plans, the Rockefeller foundation was unable to fully fund the Drama Center alone. Citing the Rockefeller's annual reports, Kim surmises that if the Drama Center had been constructed according to the original proposal, there would have been no financial blockers or a need for justifications. Chi-jin Yu was appropriately identified as an important agent within the American and Korean Cold War network, but in terms of the construction of the Drama Center he was unable to successfully complete his mission. Kim Ok-ran attributes the distortion to "Chi-jin Yu's excessive business ambition, impulsive changes in plan, and his methods of enlisting personal support through his political and financial networks."(66) These reasons conclude that Chi-jin Yu's preference for personal executive decision-making over the more public

process of alignment is at fault, and that choosing him was the wrong turn that led to the privatization of the Drama Center.

If the Drama Center is the protagonist of Part 1, in Part 2, it is Chi-jin Yu, the pro-Japanese collaborator. Part 2 captures the scholarship around the pro-Japanese works produced by Chi-jin Yu. Where Part 1 compiles the results of the public discussion supervised by public maintenance, Part 2 brings together previously published works. This reflects the focus on a field of study dedicated to objectively understanding the space in Korean theater history created by pro-Japanese plays rather than contemporary critiques. In "Modern Theater and Pro-Japanese Plays in the 1940s", Sang-woo Lee refutes the idea that Chi-jin Yu was coerced into pro-Japanese work but in fact voluntarily created a Modern Theater to produce plays like *Heukryeonggang*. In "Producing *The Date Tree* and Erasing Pro-Japanese Narratives" Jin-Ah Lee looks at *The Date Tree* as a work that pushed the limits of Gukchaekgeuk(pro-Japanese theater), the Japanese cultural indoctrination effort, and shows how it was re-produced after liberation as the nationalist works *Bulggott*(1952) and *Waessawoa?*(1957) by erasing pro-Japanese elements and adding a nationalist overlay. In "*Bukjindae* and Chi-jin Yu's Pro-Japanese Works" Jeong-suk Lee breaks down *Bukjindae* as a piece commissioned by the Daehwasook, the Japanese group for cultural ideology, to indoctrinate Koreans in pro-Japanese ideologies. Lee argues that Chi-jin Yu's nationalist works share an internal logic with his pro-Japanese work and therefore are an organic evolution.

In short, Part 2 demonstrates Chi-jin Yu's opportunistic adoption of ideologies, from his voluntary collaboration with the Japanese colonial government to his era of right-wing nationalism. Part 2 picks up on areas that were not fully explored in Part 1 and provides detail and context for how Chi-jin Yu came to be considered the father of Modern theater in South Korea. However, as Part 2 is a re-publication of previous discussions, it does not provide any fresh perspectives and at times its connection with Part 1 feels tenuous.

Whether driven by the power of the colonialism, authoritarian power, or the power plays of the Cold War, Chi-jin Yu used his remarkable political astuteness to survive within the South Korean hegemony. The scholarship in *Yu Chi-Jin and the Drama Center* show the history of how he used theater and publicness as an alibi for inexorably widening the realm of his private power. However, if one can agree that if it is dangerous to mythicize Chi-jin Yu as an individual, one must also acknowledge that it is also dangerous to attribute the privatization of the Drama Center entirely as his responsibility as an individual. If publicness is not a top-down concept enforced by governments but arising from society as a whole, it is the responsibility of every citizen to guard against the privatization of public property by any single individual or organization. It has been decades since the Drama Center became privately owned by Chi-jin Yu and his family: that the theater

world has been unable to publicly discuss recovering the Drama Center should be a matter of painful reflection for everyone in the theater community. It is to be hoped that the conversation begun by *Yu Chi-jin and the Drama Center* will continue to expand.

References

Cho, Dae-yop. 2012. “Transition of Modernity and Restructuring of Publicness－Logic of Social Constructive Publicness and Structure of Micro Publicness.” *Korean Journal of Sociology* (June).

Choi, Yoon-woo. 2015. “The Failure of venue rental in the 2015 Seoul Theater Festival and The Issue of Publicness in the Theater Industry, and Remaining Tasks.” *Korean Theater Journal* 76.

Kim, Ok-ran. 2018. “Chi-Jin Yu and America, Drama Center and Cultural Cold War.” *Korean Studies* 51.

Kim, So-yeon. 2015. “Social Debate and Publicness in the Arts.” *Korean Theater Journal* 79.

Lee, Yang-gu. 2015. “Theater Resource Policy and Publicness, and the Problem of Responsibility.” *Performance and Theory* 59: 343-352.

Restoring the Drama Center to the Public. A Theater Community’s Emergency Response Edition. 2019. *Yu Chi-jin and the Drama Center*. Seoul: Theatre and Man Press.