Ambivalent Representations of Nationalism and Regionalism in Early Modern Korean Art[1]

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This article critically examines the ambivalent representations of nationalism and/or regionalism embedded in early modern Korean art and its implicit and insidious connection to Japanese colonialism. Under Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), Korean artists started to study and practice Western-style modern art. Using Japanized Western art, a mixture of European Academic art and Impressionist style, early modern Korean artists often portrayed motifs connected with Korean cultural legacy or regional characteristics (*hyangtosaek*), and suggested an idealistic and conservative notion of nationalism (*minjokju-ui*). In this de-historicized space of modern art, an idealized Korean national identity seamlessly linked itself to a desire for modernization *(gundaehwa*) or a modernized future symbolized by Western art. In this way, colonial reality was completely absent from early modern Korean art. The idealized nationalism or regionalism disguised the one-directional flow of power from the colonizer to the colonized, and essentially paralleled the colonial government's cultural policy.

Keywords: nationalism, modernization, regionalism, Japanese colonialism, modern Korean art

Beginning of Modern Korean Art

In the early twentieth century, Western-style modern art was transplanted to Korea.[2] In 1909, when Ko Hui-tong (1889-1965), a former court official, entered

1. This study was supported by the Chonnam National University program Post-Doc 2006.
2. See Kim 1993:155. As early as the eighteenth century, Korean scholars introduced the knowl-

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the Tokyo Academy of Art (*Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko*) to study Western-style painting, the history of modern Korean art began (Kim 1993:155). The government-operated Tokyo Academy of Art laid foundations for Western-style painting in Japan. After Japan colonized Korea in 1910, the Japanese government encouraged Korean artists to study at the Tokyo Academy of Art by granting them special admission and scholarships.

During the thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule, no art school was established in Korea. When Ko Hui-tong graduated from the Academy in 1915, Korean newspapers welcomed him as "a pioneer of Western-style painting in Korea" (*Maeil sinbo*, March 11, 1915). Before the end of the decade, a group of Korean students including Kim Kwan-ho (1890-?), Yi Jong-u (1899-1981), and the first woman-painter Na Hye-seok (1896-1946), followed Ko Hui-tong's path. The Korean graduates from the Tokyo Academy of Art became leading artists in Korea.[3]

Bound up with colonial cultural policy, modern Korean art in the formative years imitated so-called Japanized Western art, a mixture of European Academic art and Impressionism. Ko Hui-tong's *Jahwasang* [Self-Portrait] (1915, fig. 1) and Kim Kwan-ho's *Haejilnyeok* [Sunset] (1916, fig. 2), two of a few remaining paintings from the period, embodied a mode of modern art in Korea. Ko Hui-tong's self-portrait shows generic Impressionistic facture: broken contours, simplified forms, loose brushstrokes, skirmishes of colors coarsely mixed on canvas, and a flat pictorial space overall close to the picture plane. Yet the modeling of the head, the area of the nose in particular, reflects the painter's familiarity with Academic drawing (Harding 1979:8). Kim Kwan-ho's *Sunset* shows a fuller version of Japanized Academic painting. The painting depicts a timeless narrative in the European tradition. Kim Kwan-ho fully modeled the two bathers, contoured them in wiry lines, and posed them in *contrapposto* with artificial gestures. The viewer's gaze, once eroticized by the bathers' bodies, slowly recedes along the oblique shorelines to a point in the distance suggested through

edge of Western-style art, and some Western artists like American painter Hubert Vos who painted a portrait of King Gojong visited Seoul during the nineteenth century. See also chapter two in Yi (1980) as well as Yi 1992: 51-60.

3. Sixty-nine Korean students graduated from the Departments of Western-Style Painting and Sculpture at the Tokyo Academy of Art until Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945.

the hazy atmosphere rendered in *chiaroscuro*. The painting shows repetitive and lateral spacing of the two bathers. Without a visual or conceptual hint of the bathers' frontal images, the painting oddly conveys a sense of optical immediacy. In the foreground, the pointed strokes of bright greens, barely staying within the drawn shapes of grass, highlight the painting's overall soft-hued texture.

Japanized Modern Art

The loosely combined Impressionistic techniques and Academic art in both paintings demonstrated the Japanese preference at that time. Japanese artists who taught Ko Hui-tong and Kim Kwan-ho had learned Impressionism and Academic art in Paris (Yi 1992: 97). Seiki Kuroda (1866-1924), the first professor of Western-style painting at the Tokyo Academy of Art, had studied under the French Academic painter and well-known professor at the École des Beaux-Arts Raphael Collin (1850-1917). In his painting *Floreal* (1886, fig. 3) accepted in French Salon in 1886, Collin represented an Academic, mythic, allegorical theme in a natural setting filled with Impressionist bright light. In comparison, Kuroda's painting depicts a more contemporary subject matter with rougher brushstrokes. As observed in *Lakeside* (1897, fig. 4). Kuroda combined Impressionist brushwork with illusionist Academic conventions that French Impressionist painters had avidly rejected in favor of flattened forms and composition. In Japan, Kuroda's painting became popular as the first Western-style art to express a Japanese sensitivity (Kawaita 1976:71-112; Yamanashi 1995:74-89). Influenced by Kuroda's eclectic style, Kim Kwan-ho's *Sunset* won the grand prize at the graduate exhibition of the Tokyo Academy of Art in 1916, and later that same year, won a special prize at the Ministry of Education-sponsored Exhibition (*Bunten*, 1907-1919) in Japan. Like the French Salon, *Bunten* was the most important competition for young artists. The winners were guaranteed successful careers in the Japanese art world (Yun 1984:32).

With the sensual representation of the bathers, Kim Kwan-ho's painting challenged a conservative Korean society constricted for centuries by Confucianism. Despite the immediate report of Kim Kwan-ho's award in Japan, *Maeil sinbo*, the colonial government's official newspaper, did not reproduce *Sunset* "because it is a picture of naked women" (Yun 1988:148). But the newspaper's decision aroused no public reaction, which suggested a widespread indifference to

Western art or a conservative consensus regarding nudity as a subject of art.[4] On the other hand, Yi Kwang-su, the novelist who would publish Korea's first modern novel in the same newspaper the following year, acclaimed that Kim Kwan-ho "demonstrated the artistic genius of the Korean people in the world" (Yi 1916). His equation of Japan with "the world" revealed a colonized worldview. Yi Kwang-su seemed to regard Japanese colonialism as a way to modernize Korea. In fact, the colonial governor Saito Makoto supported Yi Kwang-su's ideas for renewal of the Korean nation and national culture (Park 1992:291). In this context, Kim Kwan-ho's painting, as well as Ko Hui-tong's, suggested Korean intellectuals' idealistic visions of the West or utopian hopes for modernization.

In Ko Hui-tong's *Self-Portrait*, the painter's look with a mustache and short hair represented a kind of new man who favored modern culture. For centuries, Korean men kept their hair and beards in accordance with the Confucian principle of filial piety. They wore their hair tied in a knot at the top of head (*sangtu*) and wore a hat. In 1895, King Gojong declared a law to cut *sangtu*, but it only brought about a nationwide opposition to modernization. After Korea was annexed by Japan, Confucian intellectuals were the majority in the resistance movement for independence. But pro-Western intellectuals like Ko Hui-tong voluntarily changed their hairstyle. These intellectuals considered modernization as a historical necessity, and passively tolerated the Japanese colonial rule. Later on, Ko Hui-tong revealed his motivation to be an artist:

> In our country colonized by Japan, nothing was possible. As a Korean, I could accomplish nothing. In my occupied country, frustrated and sad, I decided to be a painter as if I wanted to abandon my life. I was soaked in drink everyday. At first I learned Korean painting. But Korean painting was a mere copy of Chinese painting. I chose to study Western-style painting and left for Japan alone. (Ko 1954:181-2)

A member of a formerly prominent family, Ko Hui-tong chose to be an artist as

4. But in 1923, when Kim Kwan-ho exhibited another painting of a bather, *Hosu* [Lake], the colonial government again banned its reproduction in the newspaper. In Japan, nudity in works of art had been legally allowed since 1894. Seiki Kuroda's painting contributed to this change in modern Japanese art (Yun 1988:148).

an escape from colonial life (Yun 1984:21).

Unlike the modern art emerging in Europe, modern art in Korea had nothing to do with heroism about modern life (Baudelaire 1965:116-9). Most intellectuals gaining access to Western knowledge belonged to the upper classes of the last Korean dynasty. But these intellectuals could not have influential positions in the colonial society, which Japanese officials and Korean collaborators took over. Nonetheless, the former upper class families remained relatively untroubled by Japanese authorities, unless they participated in the independence movement. Moreover, Ko Hui-tong's statement that "Korean painting was a mere copy of Chinese painting" specifically indicated a systematic distortion of Korean culture conducted by the Japanese colonial government.[5]

Idealizations of National/Regional Culture

Ko Hui-tong's *Self-Portrait* and Kim Kwan-ho's *Sunset* also suggested a representation of national culture vis-à-vis a view of modernization in Korea under Japanese colonialism. Although the bathers in *Sunset* essentially were a copy of Western counterparts, the natural surrounding is the Daedong River at P'yŏngyang, now the capital city of North Korea (Yun 1988:147). Ko Hui-tong's self-portrait depicts the painter wearing a Korean outfit and holding a Korean fan. As the two painters depicted Korean motifs in Western-style painting, contemporary art criticism also began to discuss the proper relationship between "immigrated art" (meaning Western art) and traditional Korean art (Kim 1926:24). Art criticism of the time, mostly written by artists themselves, attempted to forge a new concept of art that could overcome both Western art and tradition.

The central issue was the expression of national identity, yet it was discussed from two opposing perspectives of aestheticism and leftist ideology. Artists championing aestheticism or the idea of 'art for art's sake' wanted to embody

5. For example, Japanese art historians such as Yanagi Muneyoshi and Tadashi Sekino characterized Korean culture, emphasizing its negative aspects. Even Choe Nam-seon, a respected poet and supporter of modernization, justified their colonial views, saying that Confucian culture had disturbed the progression of art in Korea. See Choe 2001:37. According to art historian Ahn Hwi-joon, Korean painting distinguishes itself from Chinese painting in many aspects. See Ahn 1980:1-11 and Ahn 1974.

Korean national identity (*Joseonseong*) by idealizing regional characteristics or colors (*hyangtosaek*).[6] The painter Na Hye-seok claimed:

> Having used Western palettes, brushes, and canvases, we have choices of Western styles and tools. At the same time, we must find expressions proper to Korea, expressions of individuality associated with the nation or regions, which are different from those of the West. (Na 1927:27)

The anonymity of the bathers in Kim Kwan-ho's *Sunset* colludes with the timelessness of an idealized regional landscape. But a Korean fan held by the painter in Ko Hui-tong's *Self-Portrait* becomes an object of cultural recollection, which seems to reduce the notion of nation to a collective cultural souvenir. This sort of object referring to old cultural legacy has frequently appeared in modern Korean art.

In fact, the jurors of the annual Korean Art Exhibition (*Seonjeon*), most of whom were Japanese artists, publicly announced the importance of regionalism in modern Korean art. In 1922, the colonial government founded *Seonjeon* as a counterpart to Japan's Imperial Exhibition (*Teiten*). *Seonjeon* lasted until 1944, a year before Korea's liberation from Japan at the end of World War II. Among others, Somei Yuki in 1927 and Itaro Tanabe in 1928 said that they expected more "regional colors" representing a regional peculiarity of Korea from submitted works to *Seonjeon* (Somei 1927; Tanabe 1928).

In the early 1930s, *Seonjeon*'s panel of jurors announced the representations of regional characteristics as an important criterion of evaluation (*Maeil sinbo*, May 20, 1931; Yamamoto 1934). *Gaeuleui Eoneunal* [A Day in Autumn] (1934, fig. 5) painted by Lee In-sung (1912-1950) was a canonical example. It won a special prize at *Seonjeon* in 1934. Winning special prizes for six consecutive years, Lee In-sung became one of the most successful painters in the history of modern Korean art. His paintings also won prizes at *Teiten*. For instance, *A Day in Autumn* shows a skillful description of figures and individual motifs. Yet the figures are awkwardly spaced against the rural background in a typical pose. The half-naked woman looks like a hybrid of a Gauguinesque primitive woman, with her heavy physicality depicted in localized colors and simplified shading,

6. Kim Chan-young, Kim Hwan, Kim Eok, Im Chang-hwa, Yu Pil-yeong, and Jang Do-bin also published art criticism based on aestheticism.

and a classical nymph holding a European-style fruit basket in an elegant pose. Despite the overall exotic ambience, a number of art critics and historians including Yi Gyeong-seong thought that the painting represented a proper Korean theme (Yi 1978:88). According to them, the painting shows the red Korean land which the Japanese also identified as a Korean element (Kim 2001:131). Representing apolitical themes associated with Korea in the style of modern Japanese art, Lee In-sung's painting ultimately conformed to a guideline laid out by colonial cultural policy for Korean artists. Later in 1938, Kengetsu Yazawa, a Japanese juror, specifically demanded works that "absorbed and digested superior techniques of the artists in the central art world" (meaning Japan) as well as represented colors, techniques, and conventions "proper to the peninsula" (meaning Korea) (Yazawa 1938).

Compatibility of Nationalism/Regionalism and Colonialism

The Japanese jurors' promotion of regionalism in modern Korean art reflected colonial policy, in which the colonized was given a status of the marginal in relation to the colonizer as the center. According to Chungmoo Choi, a US-based Korean scholar who organized an international conference accompanying the second Kwangju Biennale "Unmapping the Earth" in 1997, Japanese imperialism copied "a pastiche of the European Enlightenment" in an attempt to justify its colonization of Korea (Choi 1993:77-102). The discourse of Enlightenment in Europe authorized a scientific construct establishing racial hierarchy and the self/other binary opposition with non-Europeans as the inferior other. This opposition made it possible for colonizers to "shed the humanity that they inscribed on themselves and over which they had claimed a preemptive monopoly" (Choi 1993:84). Japan aligned itself with the Western superpowers, and projected itself onto Korea as a purveyor of modernization in Asia (No, No, Han, Kwon, and Seo 1997:359-60). Through a pastiche of Western colonialism, Choi argued, Japanese imperialism launched and justified its colonial project to capitalize Korea in the name of the Enlightenment and modernization. Imperial Japan assimilated Korea "under the banner of the 'one-bodiment of [civilized] inner land [that is, Japan] and [the uncivilized, hinterland] Korea" (Choi 1993:85). According to Choi:

> Korea was embodied as a part of Japan's national body only to extract

> human and natural resources from the former so that it could satisfy the needs of metropolitan Japan as a capitalistic body—but never be nurtured with the fruits harvested through the body's accumulation of capital. Colonized Korea became the organs without a body, and Japan the body without organs. Thus the colony as organs was dismembered from the body, under the schizophrenic reality of colonialism, the capitalistic machine operating in a dismembered yet interconnected relationship. The grotesqueness of this type of interconnectedness is characteristic of imperialism: power flows only in one direction in a vain attempt to satisfy the insatiable desire of capitalism. (Choi 1993:85)

Idealized representations of the regional or national characteristics of colonized Korea in Japanized Western-style art concealed Korea's subjugation to Imperial Japan's capitalist expansionism, and engendered the illusion of "one-bodiment" between Korea and Japan. Put differently, by equating Japanese colonialism with a utopian vision of modernization, modern Korean art intoxicated colonial viewers. In the de-historicized space of modern art, Korean national identity idealized through cultural legacy or regional characteristics seamlessly linked itself to a modernized future symbolized by the West or Western art. In this way, colonial reality was completely absent from modern Korean art. The idealized Korean national identity disguised the one-directional flow of power from the colonizer to the colonized, and essentially paralleled the colonial government's cultural policy.

Critiques of Regionalism

However, leftist artists and critics knew of the limitation of regionalism as an expression of nation. Among them, the sculptor Kim Bok-jin (1901-1940) actively published art criticism and reviews of exhibitions. In 1925 he became a founding member of KAPF (In Esperanto, Korea Artista Proleta Federatio), the first leftist organization for writers and artists in Korea. Because of his activities related to KAPF, he was imprisoned for over five years during Japanese rule. In an article published in 1926, he discussed the concept of art from the leftist standpoint:

> Art belongs to the superstructure of the society. So when the social infra-

> structure—economic system, politics—has changed, art itself must undergo self-disintegration, self-drowning. (Kim 1926:24)

Thus, for Kim Bok-jin, traditional art was not an alternative to "immigrated art." He further argued:

> Regional characteristics, upon which Korean art has depended most in fighting against immigrated art, are now changing because capitalism and immigrated taste have been destroying regional borders. In this way the single and only weapon of Korean art is getting eaten up day by day. (Kim 1926:24)

From this critical perspective, Kim Bok-jin reviewed one of Ko Hui-tong's landscapes on display at an annual exhibition of the Painting and Calligraphy Association (*Seohwahyeophoe*), of which Ko Hui-tong himself was a founding member, as "an unhappy marriage between painterly styles of Impressionism and calligraphic brushstrokes of literati painting (*muninhwa*)" (Kim 1925). He also cynically viewed No Su-hyeon's painting *Il-wan* [Free Day], on view at the same exhibition, as a work of "harmony between Korea and the West, which represents a Western child (body, face, and skin color) in Korean woman's clothing" (Kim 1927).

Despite his extensive theoretical explorations, Kim Bok-jin's sculptural works never embodied the Marxist ideology. He entered the Tokyo Academy of Art and studied Western-style sculpture. In 1925, he became the first Korean sculptor to win a prize at the Japanese Imperial Art Exhibition. Figure 6 shows his famous wooden sculpture *Baekhwa* (1938).[7] It won a prize in the 1938 *Bunten*, the Ministry of Education-sponsored Exhibition in Japan. Kim Bok-jin represented the protagonist of a play adapted from a Korean novel of the same title written by Pak Hwa-seong (1904-1980). In the novel whose historical setting belongs to the feudal Korean dynasty of Goryeo, Baekhwa is a typical anti-colonial heroine. The actress who assumed the role of Baekhwa in the play was the actual model for the sculpture.

7. Except for a Buddhist sculpture Kim Bok-jin was commissioned to design for the Kumsan Temple, only photographs of his sculptures remain today.

The figure's upright standing pose and symmetrical composition in the sculpture create a sense of severity. The soaring verticality provides the subject with monumentality, although the sculpture's actual size is not known. Sustaining the sculpture's verticality crossed once by the horizontal placement of the arms, the imaginary central line leads downward from the coronet, through the nose, to the hands put together, and to the skirt's pleated lines. The multiple vertical movements recall the flutings on the columns of ancient Greek temples. The sculpture's geometric structure certainly recalls archaic *kore* figures or early Classical sculptures.[8] But in Kim's sculpture, the skirt's pleats are individually detailed in a more naturalistic manner. The pleats' short and irregular waves tend to dematerialize the sculptural corporeality. At the same time, they substantiate the subtle movement caused by the body underneath, and conceptually parallel the individualized facial features.

The iconography of the sculpture refers to no specific social class. Rather, the figure seems close to a fictive image of a goddess wearing a coronet decorated with flowers and appearing in Korean fairy tales and legends. Without imposing a leftist perspective, the sculptor combined the figure's individual physiognomy with timeless iconography, archaic severity with naturalistic details, and a meditative pose with a monumental composition. Within a neutral arena deprived of historicity and social reality, Kim Bok-jin offered a model that could embrace both regional characteristics and idealistic national identity, not unlike the formalist artists. Along with Kim Bok-jin, the painters Kim Yong-jun (1904-1970), Im Hwa (1908-1953), Yun Hi-sun (1902-1947), and Park Mun-weon (1920-1974) practiced art criticism from the standpoint of leftist ideology, yet none of their remaining paintings represent socially critical content.

With Korea's liberation from Japan, conservative Korean artists came to dominate the art world under the newly established South Korean government supported by the United States. In 1949, *Kugjeon* (national art exhibition) was founded in place of Seonjeon, yet with no substantial change. The painters Ko Hui-tong and Lee In-sung joined the first *Kugjeon* jury.[9] Most of the jurors had been previously awarded prizes in Seonjeon. These Korean jurors also selected Academic realist and Impressionist works with apolitical subject matter. As the most significant stage of modernization took place in South Korea after the end

8. See, for instance, *Aegina*, Temple of Aphaia, west pediment, Athena, marble, c. 490 BC.
9. Other members included Yi Jong-u, Jang Bal, and Do Sang-pong.

of the Korean War, Korean artists in the south of the divided country continued to represent, implicitly or explicitly, modernization and idealistic nationalism as a dominant "ideology," a collective pattern of imagination and belief most often imposed on various representations (Clark 1984:8), in an increasingly ambiguous economic and cultural boundary between South Korea and the West.

Illustrated Figures

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1. Ko Hui-tong, *Jahwasang* [Self-Portrait], 1915. Oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul.
2. Kim Kwan-ho, *Haejilnyeok* [Sunset], 1916. Oil on canvas, 127.5 x 127.5 cm, Academy of Art, Tokyo.

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3. Raphael Collin, *Florial*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 110.5 x 191.0 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Palais Saint-Vaast, Arras.
4. Kuroda Seiki, *Lakeside*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 69.0 x 84.7cm, Kuroda Memorial Hall, Tokyo.

5. Lee In-sung, *Gaeuleui Eoneunal* [A Day in Autumn], 1934. Oil on canvas, 97x162cm, Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul.
6. Kim Bok-jin, *Baekhwa*, 1938. Wood, size and whereabouts unknown.

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