When Was Modernism in Korean Art?

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Abstract

The issue of how to define ‘modern’ Korean art has been a subject of on-going debates within the Korean art community. There have been a number of chronologies of ‘modern’ Korean art history, which begin with different dates ranging from the 18th century; 19th century; 1876; the 1880s; the 1890s; 1894; 1909; the 1910s; 1915; the 1920s, and the 1930s to 1945. As yet, there is no consensus on the beginning date of modern Korean art.

One of the reasons for the instability in Korean historical periodisations of modern Korean art is that these periodisations have changed over time, according to the shifting approaches of Korean art critics and historians to the opposing historical views of whether modern Korean art was of ‘native origin’ or the passive consequence of impacts of external or foreign influences on Korean art. I will discuss further complex problems in the controversial chronologies and definitions of ‘modern’ art in Korean - in fact, South Korean – art history.

Introduction: How to Define Modern Korean Art

There have been a number of chronologies of ‘modern’ (kūndae) Korean art history, all of which begin with different dates ranging from: the 18th century; 19th century, 1876; the 1880s; 1894; 1909; the 1910s; 1915; the 1920s, and the 1930s to 1945. The terminal date of the modern period of Korean art has also varied from 1919; 1945; 1955; and 1956 to 1957, depending on their respectively corresponding definitions of ‘contemporary’ (hyŏndaehae) Korean art. As yet, there is no consensus on the beginning date of modern Korean art. Sometimes, the same critics have used several dating systems. To further complicate matters, there has also been a different argument (for example, Kim Yun-su 1975) that contemporary Korean art evolved without passing through the historical phenomena of the ‘modern’.

It should be pointed out here that the period after liberation and before the formation of the Republic of Korea in 1948 was the last time when Koreans could speak of ‘Korean’ (Han’guks) art as a whole. Ignoring this, South Koreans have freely used the category of ‘Korean’ art when, in fact, they are talking only about postcolonial South Korean art.

Problems: Competing Chronologies and Definitions of ‘Modern’ Korean Art

One of the reasons for the instability in Korean historical periodisations of modern Korean art is that these periodisations (often employed by the same person) have changed over time, according to the shifting approaches of Korean art critics and historians to the opposing historical views of whether modern Korean art was of ‘native origin’ (chasaighb) or the passive consequence of impacts of external or foreign influences on Korean art. The former view has been largely informed by the ‘internal’ (naejaejŏk) development theory,’ while the latter by ‘the external impact theory’ (oebu ch’unggyŏngnon). These theories

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1 Korean names are generally written with the family name first and then the given names. If the name of a person has been widely known outside of Korea in a different form, for example Yi Gyeong-seong [aka, Yi Kyŏng-sŏng], I have used the name by which he/she is internationally known.
were in fact generated by the South Korean national history circle as part of their competing responses to the postwar Japanese and Western claims that South Korea’s remarkable economic developments since the 1960s were a consequence of the Western-style modernisation of the colonial period as transplanted by the Japanese (Jung 2001, 193-219).

The Korean external impact theory is influenced and shaped by the colonialist Japanese theory of ‘stagnation’ (chóngch’ẹsong in Korean and teitairon in Japanese), developed by the German historical school-trained economist Fukuda Tokuzō (1874-1930), and the Western theories of modernity, modernisation and developmentalism. The Japanese theory of Korea’s ‘Asiatic stagnation’ (which echoed much of the Eurocentric Hegelian notion of Oriental stagnation) claimed that as a culture, Korea had always been dependent on intervention from the outside and as a society, especially in the Chosŏn period, had become stagnant with no growth. In short, the Japanese theory of Korean stagnation basically argued that Korea should be assimilated into Japan in order to escape its stagnation. This theory provided colonialist, and also postwar, Japan with the justification of its colonisation of Korea, by highlighting its role, not as a colonialist plunderer, but as a late-colonial developer who industrialised and modernised the underdeveloped Korea. From the 1960s, the Korean theory of ‘internal’ (naejajŏk) development—which is largely associated with the scholarship of the historians Kim Yong-sŏp (1931 - ) and Kang Man-kil (1933 - )—gained popularity among South Korean intellectuals who saw it as an alternative to the Western modernisation theory which, to their mind, provided imperialist Western countries and Japan with a justification for their colonial exploitations. According to the internal development theory, Korea had some ‘sprouts’ (maeng-a) of modernity in the late Chosŏn period, especially in the Korean intellectual movement of the early 17th to early 19th centuries, called Silhak (or Sirhak, translated as the School of Practical Learning), but such sprouts were destroyed by Japan’s brutal colonisation of Korea. The internal development theory has been contested by both domestic and international scholars, particularly for its weak empirical basis and its nationalist bias.

Silhak was in fact not a 17th or 19th century term. It was established under the Japanese occupation around the 1930s by nationalist colonial Korean historians and scholars who wanted to interpret the loosely associated Chosŏn Korean intellectual movement of these centuries as a progressive nationalist modernising force working against the presumably Sinicised and unpractical mainstream Chosŏn Neo-Confucianism (Im 2000, 42). From the 1960s, these earlier nationalist interpretations of Silhak gained increasing acceptance from the postcolonial Korean historians who eagerly sought to undo the influences of the ‘colonialist Japanese historical perspectives’ (sinmin sagwan) on Koreans’ understanding of their own past. It is arguably the internal development theory-influenced Korean desire of the 1960 to 1980s to counter the colonialist Japanese claims about the ‘stagnated’ and ‘declining’ feudal Chosŏn society that led many postcolonial Koreans to claim the Silhak as the beginning of an indigenous modernity. However, there has been an ongoing dispute within South Korean scholarly circles over the actual nature and significances of the Silhak.

In the field of Korean art history, the leftist nationalist art critic and painter Yun Hŭi-sun (1946) was probably the first to interpret the supposedly Silhak influenced Chingyŏng-sansu (has been translated as the ‘True-View landscape’) paintings of Chŏng So'n (1676-1759) as a ‘nationalist’ (minjok) style, developed ‘independently’ (chajujŏk) from Chinese influences (Plate 1, Chŏng So'n, Kŭmgangsan or ‘the Diamond Mountains,’ 1734, Ink and light colour on paper, 130.7 cm x 94 cm, Collection of the Leeum Samsung
Museum of Art, Seoul). Inspired by Korean history circles’ nationalist interpretations of the Silhak, in the late 1970s and 1980s, Minjung art critics (for example, Yi 1991, 208-18) argued that in Korea, long before the early 1900s, certain ‘inherent’ (naejaejok) aspects of modernity had already appeared in the Silhak influenced Chingyong sansu and the Korean genre paintings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Minjung circle also tried to identify a kind of home-grown modernity in these art developments which they thought were an expression of anti-Confucianism, anti-feudalism and middle class consciousness, therefore a nationalist, populist and progressive art, compared to the Sinicised high art of the mainstream elite class (for example, Choi 1991, 230-2).

Genre painting (Pungsokhwaw) has long existed in Korea from its ancient times, but in the 18th century it achieved a new high and unprecedented popularity (Ahn 1993, 310-367). Arguably, the influences of the Silhak movement supposedly prompted Choson Korean artists like Kim Hong-do (1745-c.1818) to depict the lives of common people engaging in their daily activities in the cities, marketplaces, or villages with a new awareness. The Silhak philosophy also supposedly inspired Choson Korean artists like Chong Son (1676-1759) to become keenly aware of their own country’s natural beauty. Chong Son visited famous scenic sites in Korea and made outdoor sketches. By incorporating these sketches and his own personal brush techniques, he created a new distinctive painting style which became known as Chingyong sansu. From this aspect of Chong Son’s work, Chingyong sansu has been interpreted by the advocates of the Silhak theory as a radical departure from the prevailing conservative, tradition-bound Choson art practice which repeatedly produced conceptual and idealised landscape paintings based on the styles established by earlier Korean and Chinese masters and virtuosos, or Chinese painting manuals.

However, the art historian Ahn Hwi-joon (1993, footnote 58 on page 148) had already pointed out as early as 1984 that the development of Chong Son’s True-View landscape paintings was, in fact, influenced by the Chinese Southern School painting style which arrived in Korea in the mid-Choson period and gained a huge popularity in the late-Choson period (1700-1850). In addition, a recent study (Pak 2002, 137) argues that imported Chinese prints of the Ming period also provided a stimulus to this development. Further, according to one (Chong 2000, 114-163) of new Korean examinations of the unprecedented development of Korean genre painting in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, part of the real impetus for this development came from China, especially its Ming and Qing woodblock prints. Another study (Yi 2004, 66) argues that the flourishing of Korean genre paintings in the late 18th and early 19th centuries should not be treated as an isolated or uniquely Korean historical phenomenon, but one of the common developments occurring in other part of Asia such as China, Japan and Vietnam from 17th to 19th century. These examinations suggested that the prevailing nationalist misconceptions about the purely Korean elements of the 18th century True-View landscape painting were, in part, a result of the lack of cross-cultural and comparative studies of Korean art history.

Meanwhile, it is worth pointing out that much of these on-going competing explanations about the earliest indigenous modern art development in the 18th century

2 In fact, in the 18th century, Sansuyu or an excursion to famous scenic places was a poplar recreational activity among Choson scholar gentlemen. The Kungongsan or Diamond Mountains with twelve thousand needle-pointed peaks, stretching from the north central part of the Korean peninsula down to the East coast of Korea, was one of the most visited places by Choson Korean literary figures and painters. Chong Son and his patron, for example, went there. The Kungongsan painted in 1734 by Chong Son is one of the most famous pictures of this subject.
Korea were premised on the allegedly universal but Eurocentric notion of modernity, which Koreans had been taught to revere as the ultimate goal of Korean history. Rather than trying to apply the concept of modernity, which was unknown to the Chosŏn Koreans of 18th century, in order to enrich our understanding of the Korean art development of this century, we need to reorient our contemporary understandings within the 18th century Korean contexts. To begin with, contemporary Korean interpretations of the ‘realism’ (sasiljũi) of the True-View landscape painting are somewhat misguided. Looking at the frequently quoted works in Korean discussions of the True-View landscapes, for example, the famous Diamond Mountains (Pl. 1) by Chŏng Sŏn, the putative founder of this painting style, one can easily see that this 18th century Korean artist’s pursuit of reality is clearly different from that of any representative European artist of the 19th century Realism. The meanings of the ‘true view’ (chingyŏng) need to be understood in the context of the Neo-Confucian aesthetic philosophy of 18th century Chosŏn Koreans. The 18th Korean century concept of true view had little to do with an attempt to create objective representations of the external world. It was rather a unique 18th century Korean interpretation of the Neo-Confucian and Taoist notions of truth (chin) which informed what late Chosŏn painters considered to be the true nature (sŏng) or the truthfulness (saŭi) of their painting subject (Kim 2002, 200, 204-5).

The external impact theory basically explains how Korea (in fact South Korea) achieved its current impressive (mainly economic) growth through adopting and transplanting Western-style modernisation. According to the logic of the external impact theory, Korean history was little more than the sum of shifting dominant foreign influences on a more or less passive society and culture, flowing from China, then Japan and from America or what Koreans vaguely called the ‘West.’ From the 1970s, the external impact theory has been increasingly criticised in Korea (and elsewhere in the so-called ‘Third World’) as being too Eurocentric. Despite the repeated Korean criticisms of the theories of stagnation, modernisation and external impact, all of these ideas continued to influence postliberation Korean understandings of and writings on various modern developments in Korea. Examples of this in the field of Korean art history are the periodisations of modern Korean art that use the Kaehang (literally, ‘opening ports’) event of 1876, the year 1909, 1910, 1915 and other dates associated with the first Korean encounter with Western art influences as the beginning point of the modern period.

The use of the Kaehang as the demarcation of the modern period of Korean history has had a critical effect. It gave many Koreans a profound impression that the alleged first arrival of Western influences in Korea utterly restructured the course of Korean history by splitting it chiefly into its pre-modern and modern era. Consequently, it has generated an imagined ‘discontinuity’ (tanjŏl) of native traditions in the mind of contemporary Koreans. The application of the Kaehang demarcation to the field of Korean art history is now increasingly contested for its weak causal connection with the actual developments in the field of visual art. Importantly, the Kaehang theory blinded Koreans to the facts about pre-1876 Korean exposure to Western cultural influences. The transmission of Western influences to Korea had in fact occurred, long before Western ships reached Korean shores, through the country’s cultural exchanges with China and other Eastern countries. For example, although rather faint, one can see an evidence of Greek (via Gandharan) influences on a realistic representation of the main Buddha sculpture of the mid-8th century at the Sŏkkuram Grotto in Kyŏngju, the ancient capital of Silla.

Many Korean art critics and historians have taken the year 1910 to mark the advent of the ‘modern’ and, in a sense, modernism in Korean art. The Korean archaeologist and art historian Ko Yu-sŏp (1905-1944) was the first to suggest the year 1910 as the start of
modern Korean art history. Ko (1941) argued that before 1910 in Korea, there was no ‘art’ (misul) in a modern sense, so modern art emerged in Korea only after 1910. However, it was the ‘first’ Korean modern art critic Yi Gyeong-seong (1919 - ) who popularised the 1910 as the advent of modern Korean art. In 1968, he drew the following chronology which has been most frequently quoted by Koreans:

a. The Period before 1910
b. Modern Period
   The Period of Beginning (1910-1919)
   The Period of Search (1920-1936)
   The Period of Darkness (1937-1945)
c. Contemporary Period;
   The Period of Confusion (1945-1951)
   The Period of Transition (1952-1956)
   The Period of Settlement (1957-1970)

[Taken from an English adaption of Yi’s 1968 essay, “Han’guk k’undae misul 60-nyôn-ŭi munjedŭl” (The Problems of Korean Modern Art in 1960), Sindonga (October), in Yi 1972, 126]

Yi constructed this bold chronology, by recapitulating his earlier arguments of 1959. In 1959 (62-85), he had argued that as a result of Korea’s ‘Oriental backwardness’ (echoing the Japanese notion of Korean stagnation), its modern art began late in 1910. Later, he (1968, 111) traced the beginning of Korean modern art back to 1909 when the first Korean Western-style painter Ko Hei-tong (1889-1965) began to study oil painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in Japan. In other words, Yi equated the genesis of modern Korean art with the advent of Sŏyanghwŏ or ‘Western-style painting’ in Korea. However, the starting date of Ko’s study in Japan has been disputed. For example, according to the historian Kim Young-na (1992, footnote 4 on page 277), Ko commenced his study between 1909 and 1910. Other writers (for example, Yi Ku-yelo 1992, 88) on modern Korean art history dated the beginning of Sŏyanghwŏ in 1915 when Ko returned to Korea after his study in Japan. Importantly, the chronologies of the modern period of Korean art by using the dates of 1909, 1910 and 1915 all suggest that the path of Sŏyanghwŏ had laid the foundation for the genesis and development of modern Korean art.

The conceptual foundations of Yi Gyeong-seong’s chronologies of modern and contemporary Korean art display the influences of both the internal development theory and the external impact theory. For example, in 1959 (83-4) he argued that Korea had shown its own attempted ‘anti-feudal’ modernisation through the Kabo reform in the 1890s but that attempt was sadly ‘discontinued’ (tanjŏl) by the nation’s loss of sovereignty, thus the ‘distorted modern’ (oegokdoen kŭndaе) Korean art was tragically born under the Japanese colonial regime. His arguments were premised on the acceptance of the colonial Japanese notion of Asiatic stagnation, and he repeatedly used this premise in his writings on modern Korean art. Inspired by the Korean historical circle’s interpretation of Silhak, in 1973 (40) Yi had considered the late 18 century as the beginning of modern Korean art. But, a year later, he resorted to his earlier dating of 1910. Yi’s formulations and conceptions of modern Korean art have been reproduced by younger Korean critics in their own writings (for example, Oh 1990, 174-5, 187-8).

The Korean art historical periodisations of the modern period of Korean art that used the year 1876, 1910 and other dates associated with the earliest Korean reception of Western arts, unintentionally, have generated the following popular Korean perceptions. It has been often believed that only through external stimulus, or the earliest Korean assimilation of Western influences, that modern Korean art was born. In other words, the history of modern Korean art has been merely a history of ‘yiip’ or ‘importations’ (Oh
of the modern arts of Western origins which happened initially via the Japanese filter and then has been occurring more directly from America and other Western countries. Another significant outcome of the unreflective art historical periodisations using the dates related to the presumed first Korean contacts with Western art influences is that, despite the apparent continuation of various traditional Korean art forms, many contemporary Korean studies and writings of post-Chosŏn Korean art tend to concentrate on Western-influenced Korean art developments (Yun 2000, 15). In other words, the alleged first arrival of Western art influences in Korea has been the point d’appui of any discussion of modern and contemporary Korean art history.

Some Korean art critics, for example the influential critic Oh Kwang-su, used the term ‘contemporary’ (hyŏndaе) in place of the ‘modern’ (kŭndaе). In his influential book of 1979 (the 7th ed. 1992, 8), A History of Korean Contemporary Art (Han’guk hyŏndaе misulsa), Oh categorised all diverse Korean arts from the 1900s to ‘the present’ (the 1970s when the book was written) as ‘contemporary.’ According to him (idem), the application of the concept of the modern to the Korean art of the 1900s to pre-1945 was ‘too problematic,’ particularly in a chronological sense. This was, in his view (idem), because from the beginning of the 20th century, Koreans had received the various 19th and 20th century Western art trends haphazardly and selectively and thus this period contained indiscriminately ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ elements together. However, this statement, according to Oh himself (ibid. 13), should not be misinterpreted as a simplistic equation of ‘modernisation’ (kŭndaehwa) with ‘Westernisation’ (Sŏguhwa). Yet, Oh himself did not seem to be entirely free from the prevailing Korean view that regarded modernisation as synonymous with Westernisation. For example, according to the ways in which he described the historical progress of Korean art since the post-1900s in his 1979 book, Oh appeared to have evaluated the more directly Western influenced developments of postcolonial Korean art rather more positively than those developments resulting from colonial Koreans’ indirect exposure to Western arts via colonialist Japan.

The conflicting Korean chronologies of modern Korean art history are a result of the varying Korean definitions of modern Korean art. There are several unexplored reasons for this problem. Some of these reasons lie in the conceptual foundations of the current ambiguous Korean definitions of modern Korean art. An obvious one is the unexamined validity of the applications of the historiographic frameworks, borrowed from the field of national history, to art historical analyses of Korean art. Writers of modern Korean art history, using these categories, have often blurred distinctions between the art historical usages of the terms, ‘modernity,’ ‘modern’ and ‘modernism’ and the general meanings of ‘modernity’, ‘modern’ and ‘modernisation’.

Another problem arises from the limitations of the Korean applications of Western terminologies and theoretical frameworks in historicising the various art developments of 20th century Korean art. Some Korean art critics and historians (for example, Yi 1973, 64-65) have occasionally acknowledged the fact that the developments of modern Korean arts took different paths from those of modern Western arts. Further, since the late 1960s, Korean art critics and historians have repeatedly commented about the problems of the Korean uses of Western references in explaining the historical developments of modern and contemporary Korean art. But they themselves have continued to use Western-style terms, concepts and theories in their writings on Korean art. This is because there is as yet no satisfactory alternative Korean conceptual framework which would allow Koreans to reexamine the modern period of Korean art on its own terms. As a result of this, many Koreans continue to evaluate and judge various modern and contemporary Korean art
developments from the standpoint, and through the paradigms, of Eurocentric world art history.

Having accepted the authority of the supposedly most advanced Western arts as the key source of the legitimacy of the modern identity of Korean art, for example, the prominent art critic Lee Yil (1932-1997) argued:

[W]e have to make a precise definition of what modernist art means in the context of modern Korean art. Unless we do, modern Korean art becomes an orphan [my italics] in international art history. … While contemporary Korean art has been distancing itself from Western trends, it has been trying to establish a solid position in the world. This is one of its ambitions, and to achieve this urgent task, Koreans must establish their own identity. [Taken from Lee Yil, “On Working with Nature,” in Biggs et al. 1992, 14, 16. I have revised this English translation in the light of the original Korean.]

Lee’s anxiety about the insecure identity of contemporary Korean art is resonant in the following argument of Oh Kwang-su (1992, 202):

[H]aving been born with the fate of a recipient, not an originator, how to reduce the initial time gap with the developments at the origin became the foremost concern of Korean art from the contemporary period. There, the developments of an original method of expression and ‘spirit of plastic arts’ (chohyeong chongsin) emerged as the immediate tasks.

The arguments of Lee and Oh reveal how these art critics and other Koreans felt it was necessary to ‘place’ Korean art, even as a self-described ‘late’ peripheral member, within the Western-centred global artistic ecumene. Further, in order to ‘objectify’ Korean art history, in their minds, the cultural specificity or particularity of modern Korean art had to be delocalised from its own historical context and integrated into the ‘universal’ narratives of world art history, which they paradoxically acknowledged as predominately Western. In this way, they could emphasise Korean artists’ desire and will to catch up with the advances of modern Western art as a key motivating force in Korean art’s self-transformations that resulted inexorably in the births of ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ Korean art. Further, they (for example, Yi 1974, 65-66; Oh 1990, 181) claimed that what they identified as the belatedness, ‘involuntariness’ and ‘discontinuity’ in the process of the drastic transformation of Korean art, from its ancient traditional past to its modern era, constituted the historical ‘specificities’ (t’ucksusong) of modern Korean art. Yet, no one has elaborated this claim further. There remains an unexplored critical question about the real significances of these Korean specificities and their actual effects on the continued developments of modern Korean art.

Another reason for the lack of widely agreed Korean definition of modern Korean art lies in the unresolved question of how to restore a meaningful historical continuity of contemporary Korean art with its allegedly broken, ancient traditional past. Oh Kwang-su (1990, 173) once argued that the Korean understanding of modern Korean art history should begin with an examination of the responsive developments of Tongyangghwa or post-Chosŏn traditional Korean ink painting to the relentlessly changing modern world. And (as if responding to Oh’s argument), the eminent art critic Yi Ku-yeoel, in his 1992 book of A Study of Modern Korean Art History (Kündae Han’guk misulsa-ŭi yǒn’gu), began his analysis of the Korean art of the 1910s to 1960s with a detailed discussion of the various responses of late Chosŏn Korean traditional painters to new and unprecedented dramatic changes in Korea since the 1880s. Further, Yi’s book emphasised how late Chosŏn Korean artists continued their inherited pictorial traditions, whilst trying to modernise them. Yi (1992, 48) acknowledged that such an attempt at modernisation was certainly associated with these artists’ exposure to the Western arts brought into Korea
after 1910, as well as to the modernised forms of Japanese traditional paintings. Yet, this modernising move, in his view (idem), was clearly motivated by their conscious will to creatively maintain their inheritance.

However, until recently, Yi Ku-yeol’s approach to the writing of modern Korean art history did not resonate in later Korean art historical writings. The Korean art community also seldom remembered that Yi Gyeong-seong, in his influential 1974 book of *A Dissertation on Modern Korean Artists* (Kŏndae Han’guk misulga nongo, 1992 edition, 7), had in fact already argued that the genesis of modern Korean art should begin with the traditional ink painter An Chung-sik (born in Chosŏn period of 1861 and died in 1919), a lone figure standing on the edge of the boundary between the modern and Chosŏn period. The reasons that the arguments of Oh, Yi Ku-yeol and Yi Gyeong-seong failed to change the popular Eurocentric Korean assumptions about modern and contemporary Korean art lie in the ways in which these critics themselves and other writers have normally narrated the history of modern and contemporary Korean art. The typical account of modern Korean art history began with the earliest Korean exposure to Western art influences. Sometimes, this account was accompanied by a brief mention of the Silhak-influenced, indigenous proto-modern art movement in the 18th century. Then, the rest or a large proportion of the account was allocated to a lengthy discussion of the formations and developments of Sŏyanghwa or ‘Western-style painting’ and sculpture. In his 1972 book of *A History of Korean Contemporary Art*, Oh Kwang-su appears to have tried to keep a balance in terms of the proportions that he allocated to the discussion of Tongyanghwa (traditional Korean ink painting of the post-Chosŏn period) and to that of Sŏyanghwa. Yet, his overall representation of the history post-1910 Korean art gives an impression that the author has paid a more attention to the developments of modern Western-style Korean arts than that of traditional painting. This imbalanced focus overshadowed the important fact that not only the emergence and developments of new Western-styles of Korean art, but also the major changes within the continuing traditional Korean painting also constituted the major historical developments which gave rise to the modern and contemporary periods of Korean art.

Koreans’ Eurocentric view of their own country’s modern and contemporary art has been reinforced by the customary concentration of Korean accounts of modern and contemporary Korean art history on tracing and identifying the Korean parallels with the evolutionary patterns in the history of modern and contemporary Western arts. This discussion is usually accompanied by an emphasis on Korean artists’ positive efforts to embrace Western art influences, their selective choices of certain Western art trends and their modifications of these imports, all of which somehow led to the ‘original’ or ‘Koreanised’ (Han’gukjŏk) developments of modern Korean art. These explanations are rather unsatisfactory, as they are simply asserted, without any demonstration of how the artists achieved a distinctive ‘Korean’ originality in their art work. More often than not, the unified emphasis by Korean art historical writers of modern and contemporary Korean art on the originality and Koreanness of modern and contemporary Korean art were generated as a reaction to the continuously haunting Japanese claims about the allegedly Sinicised inauthentic traditional Korea art.

The concentration of Korean art historical writers on the task of identifying Korean parallels with Western developments was primarily guided by the assumption that modern art was essentially derived from the Western origin, and that non-Western cultures including Korea simply adopted it. Therefore, modern Korean art is one of many localised versions of that singular Modernism found throughout the non-Western countries. Through this understanding of the general art historical process, the postcolonial Korean
art community contextualised its collective desire to gain a wider global recognition of the excellence and originality of Korean art within a global cultural war. Long before Huntington’s (1993) warning of the clash of civilisations, the post-war Korean art community envisioned this imaginary war. In that battle, the Korean art community projected itself as a belated peripheral participant, being pitted against the Japanese with a significant advantage of several decades of prior experiences, or against the entire Western art world. This fictional global struggle for national prestige led Korean writers of modern and contemporary art history to dwell on the binary framework for formulating the national identity of Korean art vis-à-vis the exaggerated, essentialised and generalised differences of modern Western art.

There is no doubt that in the history of modern and contemporary Korean art, Korean artists have achieved remarkably original artistic achievements. To delineate the true nature of these achievements, one must first critically examine the prevailing assumption about the involuntary transition of Korean art from its traditional past to its unfortunate modern beginning. In fact, there is no proven evidence that the Korean assimilations of foreign influences in the 20th and early 21st centuries were forcibly imposed by the external forces like the Japanese colonial occupation. It is more likely that Korean artists (either individually or in a group) during these periods freely embraced and transformed these external influences, according to their own complex needs and varied conditions. What we can refer to as originality, a truly Korean quality or an indigenous modernity in Korean art, would emerge when we shed light on such a complex internal dynamic. In order to gain a new insight into that complexity, first, we need to free our thinking from the confines of identity politics. This would allow us to enrich our understanding of cross-cultural influences, beyond the simplistic one, premised on the assumption about the one-way transaction between Korea/peripheral passive recipient and the West/the origin/the donor/fixed point of reference.

Importantly, our understanding needs to be accompanied by comprehensive research on the significant effects of modern Japanese, Western, and other foreign art influences on the major art developments in modern and contemporary Korean art history. We also need to reconsider the assimilation of Western art influences from the perspective of the active participation of Korean artists in those assimilations, rather than hastily assuming their work simply constituted a Korean submission to Western cultural domination. In other words, we should scrutinise the prevailing conception that it was through adopting and assimilating the advanced modern artistic modes of the West that Korean art history could integrate itself (otherwise orphaned) into the predominately Western oriented world art history. This does not mean a denial of the fact that from the early 20th century, Korean art has been intertwined with, and an inseparable part of, an increasingly globalising international art world. The point of departure here is that one should pay more attention to abundant demonstrative instances of the creative outcomes of various Korean artists’ transformations of their absorbed foreign (whether modern Western or modern Japanese) art influences, which had been already integrated into a new Korean tradition, and thus into a part of the history of Korean art. It should be pointed out here that all assumed cultural origins are mythological in nature, and these ‘origins’ always are subjected to continual refashioning. Korean art has continuously assimilated various external influences, by translating or transforming them into its own form of life. This kind of self-transformation involving a creative synthesis of indigenous traditions and new imports did not start in 1876 with the Kaehang event as conventionally claimed, but from its mythical and imagined beginning in the third millennium B.C.
The assumption of contemporary Koreans about their own discontinued native tradition is partly derived from a Korean essentialist notion of tradition, which tends to regard ‘tradition’ (chŏnt’ong) as something unchanging and immutable. That assumed discontinuity is also, up to a point, an effect of the industrious Korean endeavour to assess and validate modern Korean developments objectively in an international context, by using the Western-style terms, categories, classifications, paradigms and criteria. Many Koreans thought that their demonstration of the parallels and similarities between Korean and the benchmark Western developments guaranteed objectivity. This is perhaps why the Korean practice of adopting Western-style terminologies, rather than inventing Korean ones, did not pose a problem for these writers. For the same reason, they have felt no need to re-evaluate the meaningfulness of the granted importance of those parallels and similarities in a locally specific context and also a comparative Asian context. In fact, many of the Western style terms that are used in Korean art historical writings are actually derived from their prior Japanese translations. This was because most of the early Korean pioneers in the modern-style disciplines of visual arts, art criticism and art history studied under the Japanese either in imperial Japan or in colonial Korea. In colonial and postcolonial Korea, these Koreans became influential figures in their respective fields and many of them taught in universities, thereby transmitting the Japanese translated Western terminologies to younger generations of Koreans. These historical facts prompt a re-examination of the translatability of the borrowed Western terminologies in a comparative East Asian context.

CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR A FUNDAMENTAL RETHINKING

A critical outcome of the Korean adoption of the modern Western-style definition of art is that some of the continuing traditional arts like calligraphy, which do not fit into that definition, have been excluded from the Korean discussions of modern and contemporary Korean art history until recently. Another outcome led influential Korean scholars like Ko Yu-sŏp (1941) to claim absurdly that before 1910, Korean art was nothing but folk art-ish (minyejŏk), as it was not an art in a modern sense which existed for purely aesthetic appreciation, free from its religious and utilitarian functions. Ko’s definition of art here echoes the ideologically constructed 19th century European modernist notion of the autonomous value of art. In his all encompassing generalisations about the pre-1910 Korean art as folk arts, we can trace certain influences of the colonial Japanese connoisseur Yanagi Muneyoshi (also known as Sōetsu; 1889-1961) and his scholarship on Korean art. It is now well known that Yanagi’s (1976, 122-3, 125, 144) conceptualisation of the essential aesthetic characters of Korean art was largely grounded on his personal liking for a certain type of Chosŏn ceramics, especially those made by nameless craftsmen (as distinct from singular artists). The cosmopolitan imperial urban intellectual Yanagi praised and advocated the positive aesthetic values of traditional Korean folk arts and crafts, which he thought could be an antidote to ‘inauthentic’ modernity (Bernard Leach, “Introduction,” in ibid). In contrast, the colonial scholar Ko seemed to have perceived folk arts pejoratively as a typical product of an unsophisticated, backward pre-modern society. An important argument here is that when Ko argued about the non-existence of ‘art’ (misul) in pre-1910 Korea, he was simply looking through the wrong categorical lens. Such an inadequacy in the application of the modern Western definition of art to all of diverse Korean visual arts prompts a rethinking of modern and contemporary Korean art history.

REFERENCES
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