HOW TO SIT PROPERLY: TRADITION AND ART[1]

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Introduction

It is never easy to wade into the discussion of tradition. One can easily anticipate the knee-jerk retort, "Can we even speak of tradition in the 21st century?" Of course, there's also the perennial charge of reigniting hackneyed debates on Orientalism. Indeed, far from providing any semblance of clarity, the protracted discussions on tradition and Orientalism have only added more confusion to an already confounding issue. Moreover, faced with navigating the unrelenting forces of globalization that seek to mass-produce everything from politics to economics, arts, culture, and all the excesses thereof, the task of defining tradition seems all the more Sisyphean.

In this regard, Kim Su-yeong's venerated poem, *Colossal Roots* (1964) offers a valuable vantage point from which to reflect on the chaotic conditions that mark the concurrent discourse on tradition and Orientalism. It is in this poem that Kim first uttered the now ubiquitous apothegm, "traditions, no matter how filthy, are good." Against the backdrop of Western culture's unyielding dominance across the globe, this verse beckons a new approach to understanding tradition, especially that of a cultural Other. This paper is an attempt to explore the true scope

1 The Korean version of this essay was first published in the exhibition catalog for the exhibition *Anneun beop* [How to Sit Properly], curated by Lee Youngwook at Indipress, 2016. See Lee Youngook and Park Chan-kyong, *Anneun beop* [How to Sit Properly], exh. cat. (Seoul: Indipress, 2016).

of possibilities therein through a critical engagement with the field of contemporary Korean art. The following is Kim's poem, *Colossal Roots* in its entirety.

Colossal Roots

I still do not know how to sit properly.
Three of us happened to be having a drink. Two were sitting with
one foot resting on top of the knee, not cross-legged,
while I was sitting in southern style, simply
cross-legged. On such occasions, the other two being
from the northern parts, I adjust my sitting position.
After Liberation in '45, one poet called Kim Pyŏng-uk
used to sit like a Japanese woman, kneeling back on his feet
as he talked; but he was a tough one, he spent four years as a laborer
in an iron company while attending university in Japan.

I am in love with Isabel Bird Bishop. She was the first member of the British Royal Geographical Society to visit Korea, in 1893.
She saw the dramatic scene as Seoul changed in a flash into a world of women. As all the men vanished at the sound of an evening curfew gong. At that beautiful time, the only men allowed to walk in the streets were palanquin bearers,eunuchs, foreigners' servants, government officials. Then she described how at midnight the women disappeared, the men emerged and went swaggering off to indulge in their debaucheries. She said that she had not seen a country with that singular custom anywhere in the world.
The queen, Min, who controlled the world country,

could never leave her palace. . . .
Traditions, no matter how filthy, are good. As I pass Kwanghwamun intersection in central Seoul, I recall what mud there used to be along the eastern outer wall, and remember the days when, beside In-hwan's hut in the stream bed that's been filled in now, women used to heat cauldrons of lye and do their washing, and see those grim times as a kind of Paradise.
Since encountering Mrs Bishop, it is not so hard for me to put up with Korea, rotten country though it is. Rather, I am awed by it. History, no matter how filthy, is good.
Mud, no matter how filthy, is good.
When I have memories ringing more resonant than a shiny brass rice-bowl, humanity grows eternal, and love likewise.

While I am in love with Mrs Bishop, the progressives and socialists are all sons of bitches, unification and neutrality are all pure shit. Secrecy, profundity, learning, dignity, conventions, should all go to the security agency. Oriental colonization companies, Japanese consulates, Korea civil servants,
and ice-cream, too, should all go suck American cocks; but
chamber-pots, head-bands, long pipes, nursery stores, furniture shops, drug stores, shoe shops,
leatherwear stores, pock-marked folk, one-eyed people, barren
women, ignorant louts:
all these reactions are good,
in order to set foot on this land.
—If I compare the iron beams of the third Han'gang river bridge driven down underwater
with the huge roots I am putting down in my land, they

are merely the fluff on a moth's back,
compared with the huge roots I am putting down in my
land.

Compared with those huge huge roots that even I
cannot imagine,
suggestive of mammoths in horror movies,
with black boughs unable to entertain magpies or crows. . . .[2]

Inspired by Isabella Bird Bishop's impressions of Korea based on her brief visit to the peninsula with the British Royal Geographical Society in the 1890s,[3] Kim Su-yeong's poem is a meditation on his renewed appreciation for the history and traditions of Korea. The first line of the stanza begins with an innocuous yet befuddling confession, "I still do not know how to sit properly." It is an admission that seems to suggest a gnawing sense of cultural anxiety and confusion. By noting the different cultural norms for something as trite as "sitting" between North and South Koreas and Japan, the poem as a whole serves as a pretext for anchoring the politics of everyday life. Picking up from there, the second stanza echoes Bishop's description of Korea, its culture and customs, which she found so enigmatic and curious. Starting with the proclamation, "traditions, no matter how filthy, are good," the third stanza traces how the poet came to this revelation. In the final two stanzas that follow, we get a glimpse of what the poet means by history and tradition in concrete and visual terms. While hurling all sorts of colorful profanities and invectives towards institutions, ideologies, and discourses, he expresses genuine fondness for junk, detritus, fragments, and

2 Kim Su-yeong, "Ten Poems of Kim Su-yŏng," trans. Brother Anthony of Taizé and Kim Young-Moo, *Korea Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 131–53.

3 The book referenced by Kim Su-yeong is, Isabella Bird Bishop, *Korea and her Neighbors: A Narrative of Travel, with an account of the recent vicissitudes and present position of the country* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1898).

traces of countless reactions that will soon be forgotten and disappear into oblivion. The poem concludes by hinting at the ineffable reach of these unimaginable colossal roots, formed and sustained by these reactions.

Bishop's recollection of the waning days of the Joseon Dynasty was indeed filled with affection, but her vantage point was still that of a foreigner, an Orientalist tied to the imperial project. Nevertheless, galvanized by Bishop's writing, Kim Su-yeong becomes enamored with his own history and tradition for the first time. The paradox lies in the poet gaining appreciation for his own tradition and present situation only through the gaze of a stranger, his Other. This is suggestive in many ways, but particularly in its implication that the structure of subject (trans)formation occurs through the reciprocal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized Other. In other words, it allows us to see the tortuous entanglement not only of tradition and Orientalism, but also of the stifling discourses like colonialism, modernity, nationalism, and globalization that undergird modern Korean history. The complex interplay of these discourses has resulted in a shift in values [*umwertung*] that has in turn engendered profound misunderstandings and biases. It is at this critical juncture that we find ourselves struggling to find the true value of criticism.

Orientalism — Tradition

The institutional success of the genre of *Dansaekhwa* (monochrome painting) can be attributed to its dominance in the artistic seat of power (academia), as well as its ability to deftly navigate the flow of the art market by exploiting the zeitgeist of "modernization of tradition" or "East meets West." Yet there are still other factors to consider. Indeed, these works are aesthetically pleasing and decorative enough to adorn the walls of a sophisticated urban dwelling, showcasing the owner's refined taste alongside a respectable collection of antiques wares from the

Joseon period. (Surely, a Western abstract painting would seem out of place in this curated vision.) Perhaps on a more affective level, the concept of *muwijayeon* (abandoning oneself to nature) underpinning the ethos of monochrome may also serve as a palliative for the newly minted middle-class collectors who are struggling to keep pace with a rapidly expanding economy. And if people can go as far as to interpret Daosim as anarchism, then the arbitrary claim that monochrome paintings are somehow expressions of resistance to reality no longer seem as farfetched. To be sure, this observation is not one of sheer cynicism nor is it intended as a disparagement. Despite all the hue and cry, artists still churn out works that pander to Orientalism in order to gain a foothold in the global art market and seek institutional validation. Orientalism is not a mythical fallacy that simply falls apart under the scrutiny of logic and critique.

Indeed, earnest attempts to demystify or critique the ideological operations of Orientalism often wind up seeming oversimplified or prosaic. Of course, to actually move past the epistemological hegemony of Orientalism is not an easy feat. This is due to the continued existence of institutions and practices that reproduce Orientalist discourse, as well as the deep-seated envy for Western culture exacerbated by the traumas of colonialism. Moreover, there is the conceptual framework that has long equated modernity with the West, and which has served to persistently redefine tradition in terms of nationalism and anachronism. The task before us is, then, to delineate the different possibilities of postcolonial practices in the expanded landscape of globalization without falling prey to Orientalist discourse when we broach topics of tradition, the Orient, Asia, and so forth.

The Korean word for tradition, *jeontong*, derives from a Japanese neologism (*dentō*) from the Meiji period. As such, although the concept of tradition precedes this linguistic representation, the term itself is a product of modernity. In other words, the recognition of ideas and practices from the

past as "tradition" is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Since modernity was predicated on a new understanding of time with itself representing a rupture from the past, it was necessary to invent a term that could express the other side of the temporal equation: the continuity of time. It is not surprising then, that the Korean term for tradition, *jeontong*, would be a composite of the Chinese characters 傳 (to summon, propagate, or transmit) and 統 (unity, consolidation, uniformity), to mean a systematic transmission of ideas, customs and behaviors that have already taken place in the past.[4] However, Korea's encounter with modernity under Japanese imperialism meant that the concept of tradition was always already refracted through the warped prism of colonialism. Ultimately, then, it was Orientalism that mediated this process in concrete terms. In order to establish its own subjectivity, the West needed an Other against which to define itself. Through the dichotomy of the East and the West, the West was able to systematically project its own deficiencies onto its Other, and in doing so, justify its own superiority and dominance. The binary logic of Orientalism produced other dichotomies like civilization/barbarism, rationality/irrationality, reason/madness, normality/abnormality, and progress/stagnation.

However, in the Korean case, the dichotomy of civilization/barbarism proved to be the most decisive and affective, and has left an indelible mark on the modern collective psyche. (One could easily argue that attendant complexes of inferiority and shame are also symptoms of colonial trauma.) Therefore, it was inevitable that the discourse of tradition would manifest as a zero-sum confrontation between continuity and rupture. In other words, tradition has become either an object of complete disavowal or an object of compulsive desire that demands absolute reverence, preservation, and protection at all cost. Also referred to

4 Lee Byung Soo, "The Korean Modernity and Transformation of National Tradition," [in Korean] *Epoch and Philosophy*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2012): 317.

as the "double bind,"[5] this kind of schizophrenic attitude towards tradition is precisely the outward manifestation of an internalized Orientalism.[6]

On the other hand, the gaze that projected a sense of awe and wonder onto the Orient proved to be equally powerful.[7] In fact, the fundamental problem of Orientalism lies not in the exclusion or disregard for the Other, but in the attempt to fix, and therefore, delineate the Other in a particular way. In other words, Orientalism systematically denies the shifting reality of the Orient. Reduced instead to its cultural and aesthetic signifiers, the Orient is (re)discovered as a repository for myths and fables, a physical manifestation of the stasis of time.

Unsurprisingly, such a Western perspective of the Orient has also seeped into the way Korean tradition has been conceived.[8] Here, too, tradition is understood as an immutable set

5 In his theory of metacommunication, the anthropologist and psychoanalyist Gregory Bateson describes the paradoxical situation of one message being negated by one or more conflicting messages as the "double bind." In viewing this kind of metacommunicative paradox as an explanation for schizophrenia, Bateson argues that the double bind presents a "no win" situation where contradictory messages allow no possibility for resolution. For example, the schizophrenic patient loses the ability to interpret and respond appropriately to metacommunicative cues when they are punished equally for either refuting or accepting the message (tradition, for example).

6 Although an obsession with the continuity of tradition should be seen a symptom of Occidentalism rather than Orientalism, given their antithetical relationship, this paper postulates Occidentalism as one manifestation of the internalization of Orientalism.

7 In his discussion of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Karatani Kojin makes the following observation: "But of equal importance is the way orientalism consists of a posture that glorifies those morally and intellectually inferior non-Westerners in terms of aesthetics. . . . Rather than being a contradiction, it is mutually complementary both to look down on the other as simply a scientific object and to look up to it as an aesthetic object." Karatani Kojin, *Nation and Aesthetics: On Kant and Freud*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel, Darwin H. Tsen, and Hiroki Yoshikuni (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 80.

8 It is worth noting that such an approach to tradition reflects the way

of aesthetics and cultural attributes, the most notable rhetorical example being the spirit of *han*, or the "beauty of sorrow."[9] In due course, tradition that was deemed barbaric was either expunged or excluded, while attributes that corresponded to the fantasy of the West were fixed and recast as *a priori* tradition through varying modes of mediation. Importantly, this *a priori* ascription led subsequent generations to treat tradition as a fetish for supplementing desire rather than as a living process

imperialists have long treated cultures of the non-West. Cultural anthropology, which has served to justify Western colonialism, has also tended to regard non-Western culture as being stagnant and existing in a temporal framework that is "out there," while simultaneously seeking to standardize these cultures through ethnography. Cultural relativism was introduced to critique and overcome cultural absolutism as such, but in failing to account for the ways in which the empire transformed its non-Western counterpart and vice versa, its emphasis on individual culture as a singular unit of analysis also proved to be problematic. In other words, in miming the West, we have begun to Otherize our own tradition. For more on this topic, see Kim Hyun Mee, *Guellobeol sidaeui munhwabeonyeok* [Cultural translation in the global era] (Seoul: Ttohanauimunhwa, 2005), 49–53.

9 Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961), also known by his pen name Sōetsu, has had tremendous influence on the historiography of Korean art and aesthetics. Despite garnering severe criticism for defining the aesthetics of the Joseon period as "beauty of sorrow," the enduring impact of his essentialist methodology on Korean art history remains under-scrutinized. Art historian, Cho Seon-ryeong attempts to address this caveat by employing Jacque Lacan's theory of the mirror stage to examine Yanagi's influence. According to Cho, Yanagi's towering influence lies in his role as the "father" who revealed the "image of the self" for the first time to Korean researchers. It was Yanagi who pointed out the voids and fissures (the demise and destruction of tradition) and ascribed an imaginary object as an antidote, which in turn engendered the compulsive quest for a homogenous aesthetic that was purportedly indigenous to the nation. Therefore, the question of whether an art object is inherently negative ("beauty of sorrow") or positive (familiar and effervescent) becomes irrelevant. This article was subsequently published under the same title. See Cho Seon-ryeong, "Yanagi Muneyoshi and the Imaginary Object of 'Korean Aesthetics,'" [in Korean] *The Journal of Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2017): 77–108.

through which continuity is communicated and reshaped.[10] In postcolonial South Korea, such a conception of tradition, which emerged during the colonial era, dovetailed with the nationalism of the developmental state to instate a developmental logic of tradition: "Let us revive the illuminating spirit of our ancestors today . . . and create a new history."[11]

This understanding of tradition has also had a profound influence on the arts. The internalization of the ethos of Orientalism led to the compulsive quest to (re)discover "tradition" and "authenticity," which, in turn, yielded only empty inquiries into "things Korean" and spawned meaningless aphorisms like "the encounter of tradition and modernity" or "modernization of tradition." Invented categories like the spirit of the literati, the "beauty of sorrow," or the purity of nature are prime examples of this concerted effort to retroactively ascribe origins to ideas,

10 On concepts of tradition operating within the realm of realpolitik, Chae Un writes: "Mediated by the West, or since the moment it was discovered by the West, things of the Orient could co-exist in the world only as an immutable or unproductive entity, which is to say, bound to the realm of the apolitical, the 'principle of aesthetics.' Ironically, it is precisely this over-emphasis on the apolitical that transformed this very logic into one that advocated for realpolitik." As concrete examples, Chae turns to the Japanese art critic Okakura Kakuzō (1863–1913), who identified the East aesthetically and proclaimed, "Asia is one," and the Japanese philosopher, Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), who propounded the significance of Buddhist origins in his theory on modernity. Chae Un, "Modeonijeum gihoekgwa orientallijeum" [The modern enterprise and Orientalism], in *Hangukmunhwawa orientalrijeum* [Korean literature and Orientalism] (Seoul: Bogosa, 2012), 98.

11 This is an excerpt from The Charter of National Education promulgated in 1968. In the case of Korea, the compulsion for seeking the continuity of tradition, which owes its diagnosis to Western Orientalism, is further complicated by the adoption of a distinctly Japanese brand of Orientalist discourse, which is simultaneously laden with Occidentalism. These competing discourses have, in turn, gradually merged with nationalism. For more on this topic, see Chung Yong-Hwa, "Korean's Formation of Modern Self and Orientalism," [in Korean] *The Korean review of political thought,* vol. 10, no. 1 (2004): 33–54.

customs, and things in order to articulate them as embodiments of essential Koreanness. Self-Orientalism emerges from precisely such a condition.[12] In short, this is a form of artistic strategy that wholly satisfies the needs of colonialism. Just as women in some patriarchal societies willingly heed the male gaze, the Orient, too, offers itself to the Western gaze as its enticing Other. Because the Orient lacks the necessary tools to evaluate itself, it discovers its own ontological value through the gaze of another.[13] For some time now, Korean artists have employed this strategy, either consciously or unconsciously, to target the Western art world. One can only assume that similar motivations lay behind Kim Su-yeong's decision to appropriate Bishop's gaze to reassess his own tradition.

Orientalism is, thus, neither a fallacy nor a myth. It is the manifestation of a hegemonic cultural system founded upon the concrete material conditions of inequality between nations, peoples, and regions under global capitalism. Based on a "partial truth," and supported by institutions that repeat and reproduce knowledge accumulated over centuries, Orientalism permeates the collective psyche of both the East and the West. Therefore, it would be unrealistic and frankly naïve to think that Orientalism can disappear so easily. As a discourse and an institutional reality, Orientalism is a discursive entity that courses through the capillaries of culture, leaving its indelible mark even on the

12 Self-Orientalism refers to a non-Western culture "adopting and absorbing the knowledge, perspective, and language of Western Orientalism to define, represent, and reproduce the self as a cultural Other." Lee Ji Yeon, "Questioning the Labeling Practice of National Cinema as a Genre and 'Auteur' Director as a Star," [in Korean] *Film Studies*, no. 30 (2006): 251–88.

13 Concrete examples of the Western gaze exerting palpable influence on Korean culture include the pressure among Korean artists to attain global recognition in the modern era (the Nobel Prize phenomenon) regardless of domestic reception, the shift in critical assessment based on one's recognition abroad (films that strategically tout international accolades), or works that conceptually sidestep the question of locality from the outset in pursuit of universalism.

realms of affect and taste.[14]

The problematic of tradition and Orientalism is most pronounced in the genre of *Hangukhwa*, or Korean painting.[15] As such, it is necessary to attend to the recent phenomenon of artists returning to the medium of traditional ink painting to consciously grapple with issues endemic to the genre. Artworks by Kim Bomin, Lee Eunsil, and Kim Jipyeong are notable examples in this regard. Even though their works incorporate materials, techniques, and compositional methods that are distinct to the genre, the final products feel different from what the convention typically allows.

14 Park Sohyun argues that the Orientalist desire to plunder and amass cultural artifacts was internalized by the colonial subjects themselves. For example, while the enthusiasm for Goryeo celadon wares was initially articulated by Japanese collectors, in the postcolonial era, these objects were stripped of its original colonial context, transformed into art objects, and imbued with new aesthetic values through the establishment of the national museum system. Park Sohyun, "How 'Goryojagi' Became 'Art,'" [in Korean] *The Korean Journal of Social Issues*, no. 11 (2006): 9–45.; Park, "'Asia'ui mijeok sobi: jegukjuuijeok munhwayesuljeongchaegui won-punggyeong" [The aesthetic consumption of 'Asia': The imperial origins of cultural policy], *Munhwa gwahak* [Cultural science], vol. 53 (Spring 2008): 385–400.

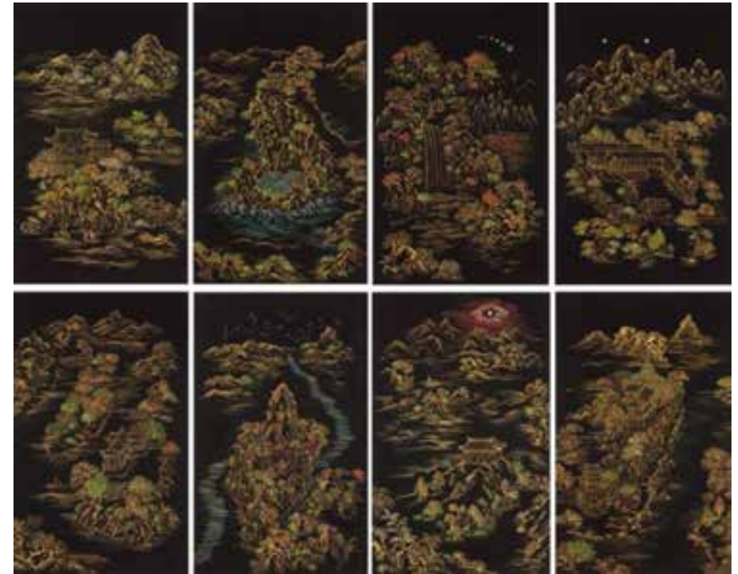
15 *Hangukhwa* (Korean painting) was referred to as *Dongyanhwa* (Oriental painting) until the early 1980s. While the term *Dongyanghwa*, which referred to traditional brush paintings, harkens back to the Japanese colonial period (1910–45), the conceptual underpinning of the genre can be seen as a product of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Japan's victory demanded a new worldview to justify its leading position in East Asia and enable its modernization project without the interference from the West. Against this backdrop, *tōyōshi* (history of the Orient/East Asia) was created, and in the same vein, the term and genre of *Dongyanghwa* emerged. Under the aegis of the colonial government, Joseon Art Exhibition was established to actively promote the genre, and the project continued into the post-Liberation era with the founding of departments dedicated to *Dongyanghwa* in major universities and colleges in South Korea.

Kim Bomin, *Jaedong*, 2010, tape, colors and ink on linen, 100×80 cm

Kim Bomin creates works that can be described as "incongruent landscapes." For example, *Jaedong* (2010) is a depiction of an urban landscape of Seoul executed in the traditional medium of ink on mulberry paper. Despite evoking a certain antiquated sensibility, the composition as a whole seems to upend our expectation of *Hangukhwa*. The main reason for this anomaly lies with the mountain depicted in the upper right corner. The stylistic juxtaposition between the mountain, which adheres to a traditional stylistic convention, and the urban landscape, which employs a relatively modernized technique, creates a tension within the visual field. The incongruence here seems to derive from a temporal gap, but the connotation of this discrepancy is more complex than it appears. We can read this as a visualization of anachronism, which is to say, the manifestation of the past in the present. However, depicted in this way, the mountain seems

closer to an afterimage of some indistinct past lingering in one's mind than any concrete trace of history that exists in reality. We can interpret this anachronism as an expression of latency, or the return of the uncanny. But what exactly is being returned or expressed? Perhaps it is a visual representation of something that has yet to be elucidated or cognized, but which lies dormant in the deep recesses of the *Hangukhwa* genre (and anything that would seem to constitute an *a priori* Oriental aesthetics, for that matter). Or alternatively, it could be read as an image of an ideology that is, in spite of its obsolescence, neither dead nor alive. The mountain in the distant plane, thus, begets more questions: What is the subject of *Hangukhwa*? Is it based on reality or imagination, the past or the present? How does style and technique affect the rendering of the past and the present? In other words, what is the relationship between style and historicity? Is it even possible to confront reality through this particular mode of representation? These are precisely the questions that constitute the *a priori* of *Hangukhwa*. Not only does Kim's painting grapple with a complex set of issues to begin with, it raises still more upon a closer scrutiny. And they are, indeed, questions that challenge the conceptual foundation of the genre of landscape painting (*Hangukhwa*), its different modes of reproduction, and the aesthetics of traditional ink painting as a whole.

At first glance, Lee Eunsil's work looks like a typical example of *Dongyanghwa*, traditional ink painting. However, if we look past the carefully executed ethereal landscape, a wholly different narrative emerges, defying our expectation of the genre. For example, the work is laden with explicit sexual allusions, stories that reveal a dark and sordid underbelly of society, or lingering traces of harrowing events in history. They are subjects, narratives, and affects that are utterly incompatible with, and indeed systematically excluded from, the aesthetic realm of *Dongyanghwa*, which has long privileged themes like nature and quietude. Here, the aesthetic canon is subverted and turned inside and out.



Kim Jipyeong, *Gwanseo Palgyeong* (關西八景), 2014, gold powder, pigment on Korean paper, 53×33 cm (8)

Meanwhile, Kim Jipyeong approaches the genre from a different angle. Her recent works incorporate an array of traditional techniques, materials, styles, and iconography that has been hitherto dismissed as frivolous or vulgar by the canon of *Dongyanghwa*, such as Buddhist and shaman paintings, gold leaf landscape paintings, and folk art.[16] Of course, Korean artists affiliated with *Chaesaekhwa* (colored ink painting) have long employed a similarly diverse repertoire, but in their cases, they either repeat the same conventional themes (birds and flowers, or ten symbols of longevity), manipulate their practice to fit the ideology of *Dongyanghwa* (despite it being an inherently different genre), or adopt popular tropes and motifs in the hopes

16 It is important to note that the structure of the Joseon Art Exhibition, which was organized into three categories (*Dongyanghwa*, oil painting and sculpture, and calligraphy), necessitated and likewise played a crucial role in the suppression, exclusion, and marginalization of many forms of traditional art practices.

of contemporizing the genre. Despite their best efforts, the over-emphasis on technique and materiality has led to the repetition of mere clichés. Unlike her contemporaries, Kim Jipyeong is less interested the practice of representing the genre than reinterpreting the desires that sustained these practices in the first place—the desire for beauty, utopia, and dreams etched in the golden landscapes, the Buddhists and shaman paintings—against the needs of the present. In other words, she borrows the visual language of the past to enunciate the dreams and ideals for a beautiful world in the present tense.

Although their approaches may differ, all three artists are collectively engaged in a kind of "self-reflective inquiry" into the genre. In other words, they probe the underlying mechanisms that constitute and sustain *Hangukhwa*, and essay to conceptually overthrow those conventions through their own practice. Because the knowledge and value ascribed to traditional arts, especially *Hangukhwa*, has already been deemed *a priori*, tradition has been extricated from the reality of everyday life. As such, their subversive gambit is to gesture a break from the taxidermic conditions that have systematically reified the lived life of tradition into signs, apothegms, and even duty. By problematizing the ways in which the discourse of *Hangukhwa*, and *Dongyanghwa* by extension, continues to privilege the Orient at the expense of historicity through the rhetoric of Asianism,[17]

17 "Asianism" (*dongyangjuui*) is an ideological perspective that dates back to the early twentieth century. It privileges Asian cultures and demands racial solidarity as a defense against Orientalism and Western expansionism. In China, Asianism manifested as a call to return to a Sinocentric worldview. Meanwhile in Japan, the emphasis was placed on its newly attained leadership position, and in Korea, it was articulated through the rhetoric of cultural nationalism that underscored continuity of tradition. Asianism as a discourse gained traction among Asian intellectuals who, after having witnessed the devastating toll of the Great War and the Great Depression, sought to proclaim Asian superiority. Asianism became an influential discourse in the 1930s, especially in the realm of art and literature. In the Korean context, Asianism appealed to traditional brush paintings

their radical intervention brings to the fore the underlying mechanisms of Orientalism and ultimately exposes its myth. Indeed, their shared positionality as a cultural Other informs their strategies, which is to say, it speaks to the self-consciousness of *Dongyanghwa*. Therefore, it is not surprising that their bid to escape this bind would entail not only subverting the hardened narratives and mannerisms of *Hangukhwa* through an appropriation of its iconic tropes, but also expanding the contours of the genre through the resurrection of forms and practices that have long been excluded from the canon. This is only the first step, however, in dismantling the internalized structures of Orientalism and releasing tradition from its grasp.

Tradition — Colossal Roots

"Traditions, no matter how filthy, are good," proclaims Kim Su-yeong. More than a mere observation, it is an exhortation that beckons a wholly different approach to tradition. One cannot help but wonder, however, why Bishop's words would have such a profound effect on Kim, for whom the culture and customs of the late Joseon dynasty would have been anything but strange and enigmatic.

The curiosity with which Bishop observes Korea and its traditions comes as a surprise to the poet, whose hardened gaze has only seen filth and repulsion in them. Beset with lingering shame and plagued by the fresh wounds of colonialism, he had sought only to erase the past from his memory by banishing it to the deep recesses of his subconscious. But Bishop's words, her curious gaze, afford him a new set of eyes. Bishop's Orientalist vantage point was set at a distance that may have been more

and demonstrated proclivities for themes and styles prevalent in the literati tradition. In the arts, the discourse of Asianism continued well into the postcolonial period. See Kim Hyun-sook, "Orientalism in Korean Modern Art," [in Korean] *Journal of Korean Modern & Contemporary Art History*, vol. 10 (2003): 7–19.

objective and realistic than his own, which remained trapped in its own reflection. The poet suddenly realizes that he was wrong to expunge from his memory this past and all the traditions therein. He comes to understand that no matter how filthy they may seem, traditions cannot be defiled, and no matter how cruel or dire, the past cannot be eradicated.[18] With memories now decoupled from shame, the poet finally recognizes that the past is contiguous with the self. And so, he exclaims, "Traditions, no matter how filthy, are good."

In the poem, memories gradually unravel and turn into fragments of recollections, and scenes of the present overlap with impressions from the past:

> As I pass Kwanghwamun intersection in central Seoul, I recall what mud there used to be along the eastern outer wall, and remember the days when, beside In-hwan's hut in the stream bed that's been filled now, women used to heat cauldrons of lye and do their washing, and see those grim times as a kind of Paradise.

The poet perceives through the senses a past that lingers in his memory, his body, and in reality. And after some rumination, he recognizes that his existence is not only congruous with this past, but also, in fact, conferred by it. Furthermore, he realizes that he

18 Through unexpected encounters, traditions that had once been extinguished from memory (the past) emerge from their confinement and reappear like ghosts. In his early poem, "A Photograph of My Father," Kim Su-yeong describes how he had failed to confront the photograph of his deceased father, and instead, resorted to furtive glances from afar. Why couldn't he look at the photograph? Here, the absent father stands in for tradition. Although he may be physically absent, the father *cum* tradition lingers as an uncanny force. Invisible yet palpable, his ominous presence suffocates the poet's emotional realm. Kim Hong-jung refers to this kind of re-emergence of repressed tradition as "phantom-tradition." Kim Hong-jung, *Maeumui saheohak* [Sociology of the heart] (Seoul: Munhak dongne, 2009), 370–71.

can become whole only when he remembers, beckons, and accepts the traditions as his own. And so, he declares that, it is no longer "so hard for me to put up with Korea, rotten country though it is. Rather, I am awed by it." And as long as the "memories [are] ringing more resonant than a shiny brass rice-bowl," he assures us that "humanity grows eternal, and love likewise."

The poet's reawakening hinges on the difficult task of "remembering" what had been hitherto repressed: history and traditions.[19] And the reconciliation of these memories is the touchstone upon which reconsideration of the past, of its histories and traditions, can begin.[20] Almost three decades since Kim Su-yeong penned *Colossal Roots*, the urgent task of "remembering" also became a powerful motivation for the practitioners of the Minjung art movement.[21]

19 As Homi K. Bhabha contends, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present." Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.

20 According to Leela Gandhi, "The emergence of anti-colonial and 'independent' nation-states after colonialism is frequently accompanied by a desire to forget the colonial past." She refers to this "will-to-forget," which manifests as "the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start—to erase painful memories of colonial subordination," as "postcolonial amnesia." However, she points out that the profound economic, cultural, and political damage inflicted by colonialism cannot be so easily erased, and instead, "the perverse longevity of the colonized is nourished in part, by persisting colonial hierarchies of knowledge and value which reinforce what Edward Said calls the 'dreadful secondariness' of some peoples and cultures." By describing conditions of postcoloniality as a "self-willed historical amnesia," she posits that "the colonial aftermath calls for an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the tasks of remembering and recalling the colonial past." Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 1–22.

21 Unfortunately, the current scholarship on Minjung art has yet to explore this topic in earnest. For one exception see, Bak So-yang, "Forgetting and Remembering in Postcolonial South Korea: The minjung politics and art of the 1980s and 1990s," [in Korean] *Journal of History of Modern Art,* vol. 18 (2005)" 43–72.

Min Joung-Ki, *Embrace*, 1981, oil on canvas, 112×145 cm. Private collection

Let us turn to Min Joung-Ki's 1981 oil on canvas work, *Embrace*. Depicted from neither reality nor memory, the scene is a composite of visual manifestations of latent memories, which, not unlike tradition, are imbued with a spectral presence. The painting centers a couple in passionate embrace, but their illicit encounter takes place in a strange and uncanny setting. Perhaps, one can conjecture that it is somewhere by the East Sea, but otherwise, it is a surreal landscape: a barbed wired fence line the bottom edge of the frame;[22] to the right of the couple stands a stylized pine tree; a pavilion sits precariously atop a cliff; and a wooden sailboat drifts in the distance. Put succinctly, this is a scene of confrontation between past and present, more specifically, tokens of tradition verses the reality of division culture. The pavilion, the pine tree, and the sailboat were popular motifs of Korean tradition in eighties kitsch, and although Min had most likely appropriated them for their kitsch value, he

22 Even in the early 1980s, the dating culture in South Korea was highly circumscribed. It was not uncommon for young couples to seek privacy behind barbed wires of military complexes and more than a few cases of have been reported.

does not duplicate them faithfully either. As products of kitsch, these motifs are typically used to signify an ideal place or some purported utopia of a bygone era. But in this composition, the pavilion is hardly grandiose. Instead, it is rendered unsightly like a haunted house atop a rocky cliff, and the sinewy pine tree, reminiscent of shaman totems, exudes a similar feeling of unease. Meanwhile, the sailboat, which seems improbably far from the foreground, causes a temporal dissonance that exacerbates the already palpable tension within the composition. Unlike the Gwanghwamun intersection that animated Kim Suyeong's memory of "the mud . . . along the eastern outer wall, [and] the days when . . . women used to head cauldrons of lye and do their washing," the traditional motifs here do little to affirm the continuity of time. In Min's painting, conventional markers of tradition assume a ghostly presence, like a pall over the greyish blue landscape, triggering an overwhelming sense of estrangement. As such, the intimacy between the couple is threatened not only by the political reality of the present, but also by tradition. Moreover, we are left with the suggestion that the entire picture, down to the intimacy of the couple's embrace, could just as easily sink back down into the realm of contemporary kitsch from which its motifs are drawn.

Oh Yoon's *Vindictive Spirits* (1984), by contrast, is an exemplary exercise in the task of "remembering." In this painting, the hitherto repressed or ineffable memories of the Korean War are articulated with the utmost clarity. It pictures a cacophony of subjects: victims of massacres, disabled veterans, mad women, wandering sprits and skeletons, a military marching band replete with flags and banners, propaganda leaflets, amulets, and crows. Rendered entirely in *obangsaek*, the five cardinal colors of the Korean traditional color spectrum, the procession of ghosts, skeletons, and the wounded are flanked by scenes of devastation, panning before one's eyes like a staged theatre production. Although this work can be considered as an altarpiece of sorts, one section of the work is left incomplete; only outlines of

figures and shapes are visible, and the edge of the canvas is left unstretched and rolled up. In choosing to depict the scene as a panorama, the artist is gesturing towards a continuum—a state in which the task of "remembering" remains incomplete.

Oh Yoon, *Vindictive Spirits*, 1984, oil on canvas, 69×462 cm. MMCA Collection

A gesture such as this offers to us a new perspective on tradition. It does so by first revealing the concept of tradition as an invention that has been internalized through the aforementioned double bind. Instead of accepting this view of tradition as a fixed concept or an object to be wholly refuted or preserved, however, it presents tradition as a continuous, unceasing process of integration and contention. In other words, it regards culture, especially one that predates modernity, as something that will eventually disappear, or else serve as a template from which tradition can be (re)claimed and (re)invented according to the needs of the present. In this view, tradition becomes coterminous with its "substance" or "content," or as a thing that can be either destroyed or fabricated at will. Which is to say, tradition is determined by its content, or "content-tradition."[23] Throughout the course of one's lived life, however, things from the past

23 For more on "content-tradition," see Kim Hong-jung, *Maeumui saheohak*, 365–67.

are constantly transformed and transfigured by what succeeds them, and tradition hews along the same continuous flow of sequences.[24] Buoyed by the currents of time, tradition is not limited to visible entities such as artifacts, rituals, ceremonies, or others objects that commonly fall under the rubric of "traditional culture." Rather, it also encompasses invisible traditions that are sustained subconsciously through the routines of everyday life, like the rhythms and senses of the quotidian, the protocols of interpersonal relationships, or the deep-seated worldviews that one cultivates over time. And despite superficial breaks or disruptions, traditions are continually accepted, transformed, and transmitted between individuals and across communities over generations. In other words, tradition exists in the *longue durée*,[25] and Kim Hong-jung calls this the "*longue durée*-tradition."[26]

24 Even if tradition has undergone several transmutations, we recognize it as tradition based on certain external similarities (not unlike familial resemblance). Thus, on the surface at least, tradition seems continuous. Park Young Mi, "Issues of Tradition in Philosophy of Park Zhong Hong 1," [in Korean] *Epoch and Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2015): 22.

25 Here, the concept of *longue durée* borrows from Fernand Braudel's conception of *longue durée* as a historical temporality. According to Braudel, history cannot be reduced to a mere collection of events. Instead, he emphasizes the plurality of time that exists below the surface of linear conception of historical time. In his model of plural time, Braudel identifies three temporalities: first is the short term of the event, which transpires through the will of the individual; second, cyclical time or the *conjoncture*, a structural time of intermediate duration; third, *longue durée*, whose historical structure extends beyond human history. Taken together, this conception of plural temporalities allows examination of spatially and temporally complex historical phenomena. See Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

26 According to Kim Hong-jung, "content-tradition" constitutes only a fraction of the breadth and depth of the entirety of tradition inherited by a given society. The "*longue durée*-tradition," by contrast, indicates this capacious scope of tradition. At first glance, "content-tradition" seems to be unrelated to tradition in the *longue durée*, but it is, in fact, conditioned by it. As a strategic reconstruction of traditional elements, the success of specific elements of tradition as "content-tradition" is determined by the degree of acceptance by the public,

Naturally, some traditions disappear while others remain relatively unchanged, and many other elements persist through transformation. However, tradition itself is not something that can disintegrate or disappear into the ether. Therefore, it would be a mistake to understand tradition as a physical corollary of some amorphous pre-modern culture and fix it as a synecdoche for this culture *in toto*. In spite of countless disruptions and repressions, pre-modern practices and customs were sustained through repetition and transformation, and through encounters with modern life these practices evolved into "modern-traditions."[27] The task remains for us, then, to recognize tradition in the *longue durée* and in doing so, actively seek to reconfigure tradition in the present tense.

Kim Su-yeong attends to precisely to this mode of tradition:

the ones who bear the *longue durée* of tradition. In a similar vein, Eric Hobsbawm notes: "Yet we may as well note immediately that conscious invention succeeded mainly in proportion to its success in broadcasting on a wavelength to which the public was ready to tune in. Official new public holidays, ceremonies, heroes or symbols, which commanded the growing armies of the state's employees and the growing captive public of schoolchildren, might still fail to mobilize the citizen volunteers if they lacked genuine popular resonance." Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 263–64.

27 Traditional elements become transmuted through modern life in various ways. For example, despite the concerted effort to expand the capitalist market under colonialism, the number of traditional marketplaces has increased thanks to rural residents invigorating the marketplace as a new regional center. Despite fluctuations in the capitalist economy, pre-modern modes of traditional economy persisted. On the one hand, tradition adapts to the conditions of capitalist economic order through creative reinventions. On the other hand, in refusing to succumb to the new economic order, it functions as a conditional force that transforms the system. Lee Byung Soo, "The Korean Modernity and Transformation of National Tradition" [in Korean], 319–21. See also, Jo Hyeong-guen, "Colonial Differences and Variations as an Internal Outside of Modernity," [in Korean] *Society and History,* vol. 73 (2007): 385–418.

the *habitus* of tradition,[28] that is, tradition in the *longue durée*. This is tradition that has long been excluded by forces of modernity for its inferiority and obscurity, in spite of which it has persisted through transformations. Traditions are, thus, the colossal roots that bear the weight of memories in the multitude. Compared to these huge roots, "the iron beams of the third Hangang river bridge driven down underwater . . . are merely the fluff on a moth's back." It may be difficult to imagine such colossal roots in any concrete form. But if you dare, "the progressives and socialists," and all their banter about "unification and neutrality," or "secrecy, pro-unity, [and] learning," seem pathetic compared to these colossal roots. It's "all pure shit." Those folks who cling to ideologies, apparatuses, and conventions are "all sons of bitches." They fail to see the colossal roots as a lifeline, and instead, seek to ruin and obliterate it. Unlike his adversaries, the poet covets a myriad of "reactions" like, "chamber-pots, head-bands, long pipes, nursery stores, furniture shops, drug stores, shoe shops" and so on. They are neither novel nor impressive, but these useless items—as worn out, inert or insignificant as they may seem—are the very traces and fragments that bear memories, and indeed, the physical marks (and markers) of tradition in the *longue durée*.

The objects of Kim's fancy are filthy indeed, but this is beside the point. Whether we deem it splendid or sordid, good or bad, tradition always already precedes us. Such a binary framework, then, reveals less about tradition than it does about its own arbitrary, post-hoc nature. Tradition is, above all, a mammoth of inevitable continuum. The poet imagines the "colossal roots" of tradition as a continuous chain of endless reactions.[29] Those

28 Pierre Bourdieu's concept of tradition as *habitus* corresponds to tradition in the *longue durée*. Piereu Bureudioe [Pierre Bourdieu], *Jabonjuuiui abituseu* [Habitus of capitalism], trans. Choi Jong-chul (Seoul: Dongmoonsun Publishing Co., 1995), 17. See also, Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

29 Kim Hong-jung refers to the various iterations of the conventional

"huge, huge roots," which evade even the poet's imagination, are "suggestive of mammoths in horror movies, with black boughs unable to entertain magpies or crows." "In order to set foot on this land," the poet must recover the chains of lost time from oblivion. Only then can he put the huge roots down in this land, his land.

The poet's visualization of tradition in the *longue durée* as "colossal roots" posits an interesting implication for the issue of representation. There are only scant intimations of its form in Kim's poem, but it is clear that Kim's "colossal roots" does not share the same overtones as the popular aphorism, "deep rooted trees do not waver in the wind."[30] Kim Hong-jung's analysis offers an alternative model: the rhizome. Kim writes, "As signs of the past, pieces of waste and junk form a net and spread outward infinitely like a rhizome."[31] Another image is the grotesque form alluded to in the verse, "mammoths in horror movies/with black boughs unable to entertain magpies or crows."[32] But here, the

mode of tradition as "rhizome-tradition," and identifies three defining traits: 1) rather than substantiating the past as a universal tradition, it understands the formation, connection, flow, and transformation of tradition as a continuous process of integration and contention. In other words, tradition is subject to constant changes to its character as it manipulates the past into the present, and as such, remains eternal by establishing rapport with the present. 2) Matters of tradition discovered through such a continuous process are not the artifacts preserved in time, but the refuse and detritus destroyed and forgotten over time. By exposing tradition as a symptom rather than a symbol, it serves as an antidote to the fetishization of tradition. 3) By reimagining tradition as discarded waste, it can finally become an object of recollection. For Kim Su-yeong, tradition is not a gift, but a mere void in his consciousness, amnesia from colonization, a "lost time" to be found again. Kim Hong-jung thus envisions the "colossal root" not as a vertical root of an ordinary tree, but as a network of nodes spreading horizontally outwards. Kim, *Maeumui saheohak*, 381–82.

30 Suffice it to say, Kim Su-yeong's conception of tradition stands apart from conventional modes of nationalism or their notions of tradition.

31 Kim Hong-jung, *Maeumui saheohak*, 378–82.

32 The image of a mammoth is interesting for the glimpse it offers into the neo-Gothic imagination of the poet. In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freund introduced the concept of *das Unheimlich*

preceding refrain, "Compared with those huge, huge roots that even I cannot imagine," insinuates that, in the end, it would be impossible to capture it. Instead, we can only assume that it exists in the realm of the sublime.[33] Therefore, "colossal roots"

(the uncanny) as a theoretical framework to explain the symptoms of repetition compulsion. This concept of the uncanny captures the feeling of encountering something that is both familiar and unfamiliar, much like the childhood home or the place of origin to which one returns after a long respite. For places like Korea, where life was under constant threat by a succession of traumas starting from colonization and war to rapid modernization, the past and the traditions therein are often left behind as ghosts, like the faintest of memories which elicit familiarity and fear simultaneously. As such, they are often banished to the realm of the unconscious. But such repressed memories can return abruptly without warning. For Kim Su-yeong, the return of the repressed is invoked through the image of the "colossal root," which is no less strange and grotesque. This is because all the fragments, indeterminate forces, and incoherent details are responses to the aforementioned psychological state of disconnection. If we can appropriate Freud's psychoanalytic term to this particular aesthetic condition, perhaps we can call it the "colonial uncanny."

33 Sublime is "[a]n aesthetic concept which entered mainstream European thought in the 18th century. As a category it was distinct from, though often discussed in conjunction with, the Beautiful and the Picturesque, both in relation to aesthetics and, in Britain, to landscape gardening. It originally derived from rhetoric and poetry, and gained wider currency after the translation (1674) into French of the Greek treaties *On the Sublime*, attributed to Longinus (1st century AD). The major work in English on the subject was Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) in which the Sublime was differentiated from the Beautiful by virtue of its ability to evoke more intense emotions through vastness, a quality that inspires awe. Travellers came to visit wild and rugged mountainous regions such as the Alps, Snowdonia, and the Lake District in search of the emotional thrills provided by the Sublime, and artists such as J. M. W. Turner responded to the demand for such imagery. Subjects from Homer, Milton, and Ossian were also considered suitable subject-matter in this context. Whereas Burke had considered the Sublime as an external force inherent in the properties of certain objects and nature, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, most famously in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), internalized it and focused on the individual response, his contention being that the Sublime came from within the human psyche. A number of theorists and artists of the later 20th century have shown revived interest in

is not merely a figurative metaphor for traditions. Rather, in its aggregate quality, uncanny appearance, and irreproducibility, these roots are indicative of tradition in the *longue durée*.

Shin Hak-Chul, *History of Modern Korea–Geumgang*, 1996, oil on canvas, 260×130 cm. MMCA Collection

In a similar vein, Shin Hak-Chul's works also invite a deeper engagement with this task of formally conceptualizing tradition

the Sublime." Michael Clarke, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 238–39.

in the *longue durée*. Through his critically acclaimed *History of Modern Korea* (1996) series, he has consistently grappled with the question of "remembering," alongside problems that confront the visualization of tradition, history, and the past.

This series of works takes on a myriad of figures, events, and narratives of modern Korean history and visualizes them in a truly uncanny and phantasmagoric way. Let us examine Shin's 1996 composition from the *History of Modern Korea* series as an example. Set against a stark black backdrop that evokes outer space, it depicts a swarm of black and white figures billowing out from heaps of corpses scattered on the lower part of the frame like "mammoths in horror movies." What would compel the artist to render modern and contemporary history in this way? Perhaps Shin, like Kim Su-yeong, had also experienced an epiphany when he was confronted with the memory of his past, when he began to imagine the contours of this history, *our* history. It was in this moment of mnemonic eruption, in the shock and the uncanniness of it all, that he was finally able to envision the endless tragedies, figures, and voices of sorrow and despair that fill an infinite sky like so many specks of dust. Perhaps in this moment of reckoning, he might have intuited how these disparate elements could comprise a single continuum. Despite noting all the different forces acting on this continuum and the distortions caused by it, he might have also imagined a certain dynamism that would, nevertheless, persist. Would he not arrive at an impasse, then, upon realizing that this infinite continuity and eternal flow would be impossible to reproduce? In refusing to settle for less than apt visual metaphors, Shin takes on subjects that are "unimaginable," if only to foreground the very impossibility of this task. Thus, rather than confirm or deny any particular form, we are invited to imagine an impossible form. Perhaps, then, if someone were to attempt a visual representation of "colossal roots," wouldn't this be one way to do it?

Traditions — Modernity

The way we recognize and imagine tradition is intricately bound to our conceptions and interpretations of modernity. If we take heed of Kim Su-yeong's exhortation to recognize tradition as a continually changing process, and through it, recover all that has been repressed and cultivate its "colossal roots," we have no choice but to venture beyond the conceptual boundaries of modernity as we know it.

The broad assumption posits modernity was a Western creation that has been disseminated to the rest of the world. According to this view, also known as *diffusionism* or "diffusion theory," modernity figures as a universal *telos* wherein modernization becomes synonymous with Westernization.[34] It expresses modernity (and its putative values like Enlightenment, rationality, historical experience, capitalism, autonomy, and so forth) as the manifest goal for *all* civilizations. As such, the cultures and traditions of the non-West are expected to be subsumed under the universalizing enterprise of modernity and eventually disappear.[35]

However, despite its enduring purchase, many scholars have challenged this theory through various criticisms exposing its inherent flaws. In their critical assessment of European Enlightenment, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno

34 *Diffusionism*, or more precisely *Eurocentric diffusionism*, presupposes that Europeans were able to attain modernity and world dominance due to inherent qualities of race, environment, culture, mind, or spirit, and that progress for the rest of the world resulted from the diffusion of Western civilization. James M. Blaut, however, challenges this enduring belief by arguing that the diffusionist model of the world is, in fact, grounded in the ideology of colonialism. See James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993).

35 It is common for Western civilizations to internalize their own superiority and see themselves from a position of the center. However, the civilizations of cultural others have yet to be afforded the same type of universal positionality. See Yu Jae-geon, "An Identification of 'the Other' in the Modern West and Eurocentrism," [in Korean] *History & the Boundaries*, vol. 46 (2003): 32.

assiduously show how the Enlightenment worldview was, on the one hand, fundamentally rooted in irrationality, and on the other hand, how it has been instrumentalized in the indiscriminate domination of nature and society. Michel Foucault describes how modern scientific knowledge has systematically excluded madness (of the Other) in order to constitute the rational (Western) subject. And in so doing, he demonstrates how the Enlightenment claim to rationality is nothing more than a rhetorical cover for the political and economic hegemony of the West. From a socioeconomic perspective, Immanuel Wallerstein traces the origin of the global capitalist system to colonialism, echoing Étienne Balibar's contention that the formation and development of the modern world is inherently connected to colonial expansionism and systems of exploitation.

Still, critiques of modernity have become even more radical and capacious in recent times. In this regard, the renewed engagement with the question of modernity through the problematic of coloniality of knowledge by Latin American scholars Enrique Dussel, Anival Quijano, and Walter Mignolo is particularly noteworthy.[36] By exploring the intersection of coloniality and subjectivity from a peripheral position, they seek to untangle the colonial matrix of power from the grips

36 Here, it is important to distinguish between "coloniality" and "colonialism." If colonialism presupposes "colonial situations" enforced by the presence of a colonial administration and a political governing order in a given historical period, coloniality refers to the "colonial situations" in the present period despite the eradication of the colonial administrative body. Following Anibal Quijano, Ramón Grosfoguel defines "colonial situations" as "the cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racialized/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations." See Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 211–23. See also, Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction: Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking," *Critical Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 155–67. Also see, Kim Yong-gyu, "Transmodernity and the Ecology of Culture" [in Korean], *Kokito*, no. 70

of Western hegemony. Put simply, their postulation is that modernity equals coloniality, and as such, there is an urgent need to propose a new kind of critical theory. They do this by emphasizing how modernity, irrespective of its European origin, was ultimately constructed in a dialectical relationship with its non-European counterpart, albeit through colonial aggression.[37] At the same time, they assert that while modernity retains the rationality of liberty, it has simultaneously been built on genocidal violence against its Others from the outset.[38] In this

37 In recent times, Eurocentrism has become an important subject of scholarly inquiry. Much of the research on this topic emphasizes the crucial role colonialism has played in the emergence of a global capitalist market, and shifts our attention to the various ways in which the colonial experience enabled the modernization of the West. For example, James M. Blaut undercuts the common belief that Europe was more advanced and progressive prior to the beginning of the period of colonialism, and instead, offers a geographical explanation for this imbalance. He argues that it was Europe's proximity to the Americas and the spoils of colonialism that allowed Europe to rise, while contributing to the underdevelopment of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Meanwhile, Andre Gunter Frank shifts the focus to the flourishing Asian market prior to the 1800s and examines the tributary system of the Sinosphere to argue that China was the "center" of the world economy. Sidney W. Mitnz, on the other hand, shows how the Caribbean colonies played a decisive role in European accumulation of wealth even prior to the rise of capitalism. Fredric Jameson argues that it was neither the French Revolution nor the Enlightenment, but the European conquest of the Americas that occasioned the epistemological break that marked the beginning of modernity. See James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993); Andre Gunter Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 65–88. For a pithy overview, see Jo Hyeong-guen, "Colonial Differences and Variations as an Internal Outside of Modernity," 393–96.

38 Echoing Jameson, they also postulate that modernity in the West began with the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus under the Spanish flag in 1492, rather than the French Revolution

sense, the positivist notion of modernity is nothing more than a kind of irrational myth that serves to conceal the violent process of colonization. In other words, it is nothing more than a product of Eurocentrism.[39] For this reason, coloniality *cum* modernity should not be understood as a distillation of ideology or values, and instead, grasped as a truly global phenomenon.[40]

Such postulations are possible because they are spoken from the position of the Other, by those who have been systematically silenced and erased by the myth of modernity. By attending to "colonial differences" construed by the dominant imaginary of the West (and acquiesced by the rest),[41] they call for a new global history that can address (and thus redress) this imbalance of power. This is predicated upon the view that modernity rests on

or the Enlightenment. Their contention is that the modernity of the sixteenth century has had direct bearing on the modernity of the eighteenth century. Which is to say, the arrival of Columbus marks simultaneously the beginning of the formation of European modernity, as well as the global colonizing process. As such, this decisive moment should not be understood not as a positive "discovery" of others, but rather as the beginning of concealment, a denial of mass extermination of others.

39 Eurocentrism refers not only to the view that Western civilizations are not only inherently superior to the rest, but also to a universal positionality from which to evaluate other cultures. Yu Jae-geon, "Geundae seoguui tajainsikgwa seogujungsim juui," 32.

40 Gang Nae-hui, "Hangugui singminji geundaeseonggwa chunggyeogui beonyeok" [Translating colonial modernity and its impact in Korea], *Munhwa gwahak* [Cultural science] 31 (2002): 74–97.

41 Whether it was the colonizer or the colonized, the fact that both sides of the colonial divide demonstrated little faith in the modernization project in the colony, or at worst, expected it to fail speaks volumes about the meaning of colonial difference. Whether it was the Japanese collaborators who yearned for assimilation despite recognizing its impossibility, or Japanese colonial officials and scholars who, in spite of the official doctrine, fundamentally doubted Korean assimilation, they all point to what Homi Bhabha calls the contradictory form of colonial ambivalence, "Be like me," "Don't be like me" that inevitably process "its slippage, its excess, its difference." Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 122. See also, Jo Hyeong-guen, "Colonial Differences and Variations as an Internal Outside of Modernity," 404–6.

the material conditions of a colonial world order dating back to the sixteenth century and sustained by the reproduction of its hierarchies (coloniality of power).[42] Indeed, under the pretense of a civilizing mission, the very same colonial power structure had denounced indigenous cultures and their way of life as "insignificant," "barbaric," and "uncivilized," and deemed it antithetical to the purported aims of modernity. Nevertheless, the traditions and cultures of (post)colonial subjects didn't disappear, nor was it ever possible for them to do so.

According to the philosopher Enrique Dussel, the cultures and values of these Others endure because they form a relationship of Otherness or alterity that cannot be fully integrated into the logic of modernity (coloniality).[43] This is why

42 Modern history has always privileged Europe by chronologically dividing the world through an abstract notion of time. As a result, the countless heterogeneous temporalities of lived lives have been reduced to homogenous empty time, which was invariably set by the West. However, modernity has used both homogeneity as well as differentiation to propel its own agenda. If we regard modernity as a category of temporal distinction, then the distribution of different temporalities across space have led to a notion of asynchronicity for certain regions (modern West versus premodern non-West). The linear historical time of modern history has successfully suppressed and marginalized other temporalities that do not follow the *telos* of modernity. See Jo Hyeong-guen, "Colonial Differences and Variations as an Internal Outside of Modernity," 393–96.

43 Emmanuel Levinas's work on the ethics of the Other (and Otherness) began as an attempt to overcome the violent implications of Western metaphysical tradition. Enrique Dussel develops his own thesis by embracing Levinas's concept of the Other. If Levinas conceived the external world of the subject as the West, or more specifically Europe, then Dussel approaches alterity from a different angle. In order to shift the focus away from European modernity and Eurocentric positionality, he casts his critical lens towards the Third World and seeks to historicize the experience of the marginalized (laborers, farmers, sexual minorities, etc.). See Jo Yeong-hyeon, "Ellike duselui haebang jeongchi cheolhake daehan yeongu: saengmyeong, huisengja geurigo minjung gaenyeomeul jungsimeuro" [A research on Enrique Dussel's philosophy of liberation: Concepts of life, victimhood, and the nation], *Korean Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 30, no. 1 (2011): 295–322. For a more, see Enrique Dussel, "Philosophy of Liberation, the Postmodern Debate, and Latin American Studies," *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 335–49.

cultural traditions can still retain their vitality and regenerate through transformations and metamorphoses. For Dussel, the task of transcending modernity begins with a mode of critical engagement he calls "transmodernity," which involves recovering the rich cultural values that these Others possess.[44]

In contrast to Western modernity's esoteric conception of universality, transmodernity strives for "diversality," a more capacious understanding of universality grounded in "the epistemic potential of non-Western epistemes."[45] And through this process, transmodernity strives to complete the project of liberating the periphery—a task left incomplete by modernity. In other words, transmodernity re-founds the project of human emancipation by promoting political, economic, sexual, pedagogical and religious liberation. Moreover, as the dominant world system reaches its limit, transmodernity is, especially for those excluded from the totality of the system, the only ground on which liberation can be sought.[46] This means that all the

44 See Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 137–38.

45 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge: Modernity, Empire, Coloniality," *City* 8, no. 1 (2004): 30. Moreover, "transmodernity," according to Dussel, rejects the Eurocentric rationality of critical modernism, but at the same, seeks to uphold the best of European thought with the different reason of the Other. Dussel contends, "To overcome modernity, one must deny its myth. I seek to overcome modernity not through postmodern attack on reason based on the irrational incommensurability of language-games. Rather, I propose a transmodern opposition to modernity's irrational violence based on the reason of the other." Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995), 137. See also, Kim Yong-gyu, "Transmodernity and the Ecology of Culture," 149–50.

46 Dussel identifies three limitations: first, the destruction of the global ecosystem; second, the destruction of humanity (the displacement human labor by technology); third, the inability to comprehend the

traditions and cultures of the oppressed Others can finally realize their potential by reclaiming the narrative of history in their own voice.

At the end of the *Colossal Roots*, one finds an interesting passage:

> in order to set foot on this land.
> —If I compare the iron beams of the third Hangang river bridge driven down underwater
> with the huge roots I am putting down in my land, they are merely the fluff on a moth's back,
> compared with the huge roots I am putting down in my land.

What if we read "the third Hangang river bridge" as a symbol of modern civilization? What if we read the recurring phrase, "with the huge roots I am putting down in my land," as an exhortation to recuperate repressed traditions so that one may live a better, a more fulfilling life? If so—and if it is indeed possible to restore traditions in the *longue durée*—perhaps we can then conclude that even a monolith of modernity is nothing more than the mere "fluff on a moth's back." Through these similes, we can see how Kim Su-yeong's impassionate call to reassess tradition converges with decolonization of knowledge that Dussel, Quijano, and Mignolo have pursued decades later. In their respective ways, they imagine the infinite possibilities of cultures and traditions hitherto dismissed and disavowed by modernity as "barbaric," "trivial," or "backwards." It is precisely in these traditions, consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history, that they find great hope and promise for liberation.

In this regard, Choi Jeong Hwa's practice offers an intriguing case study. His works have drawn no shortage of interpretation

cultures, values, and economies of those who have been historically excluded and marginalized since the outset of modernity. See, Kim Yong-gyu, "Transmodernity and the Ecology of Culture," 146–47.

and criticism, but if there's room for more, we propose to read his practice as an inquiry into the emancipatory potential of traditions in the hybrid cultures of the Third World.

Choi Jeong Hwa, *Plastic Paradise*, 1997, installation, size variable. © Choi Jeong Hwa

In Choi's works, the city is almost always at the forefront. However, it is not a modern city in the ordinary sense. It is a city that brings into high relief the capillaries of globalization shaped by the flow of peoples in and across boundaries of nation-states. In other words, it is the megacity of the Third World where material conditions of modernity and postmodernity exist concurrently (Seoul being the exemplar). As a denizen of this hybrid world, Choi is privy to all the facets of this bifurcated life, including the desires and frustrations, the pleasures and pains, the truths and lies of his compatriots. Moreover, he is acutely aware of the different dynamics of power, desire, institutions, language, signs, and spectacles that manifest under these contradictory forces. Still, the essence of his work lies in his keenness for *things*. In these things, he senses the multitude of life converging, colliding, and coexisting, and eventually he teases out a kind of energy flow that can only be called vitality. This is, according to Choi, "the strongest and the darkest [sediment

of the thing], what remains after everything else gets filtered out." In other words, it is the vital force that refuses to perish. It survives by penetrating into things, by resisting artifice and objectification, by holding out against a semiotic regime which threatens to subsume everything into signs. Indeed, Choi's ultimate goal is to visualize this vitality.

Choi begins his project by amassing objects that betray this sense of vitality in his environment: "I see my work there, too!"[47] Then, these objects are reconfigured, reassembled, and reorganized. Through the process of (re)composition and rearrangement, Choi seeks to reanimate the vital force lying dormant in the object and bring it into full view; he would often say that the found objects are "colorful," "crowded," or "shiny." However, the things that are profoundly interesting to Choi remain underestimated, marginalized, ignored, and eventually forgotten by those who lacks the emotional breadth required to see this vitality. Therefore, the artist endeavors to reinvigorate the senses by making vitality the centerpiece of his works. There are various ways to achieve this effect. At times, he stacks objects vertically or disperses them in all directions. Other times, he suspends them from above, displaying them in a sequence, or haphazardly scattering them. Sometimes smaller objects are enlarged or combined with other objects for greater effect. At times, they take over an entire space or part of a wall. Other times, they are reconfigured, from heavy to light, organic to inorganic, real to ersatz. In other words, Choi's methods are as varied as his objects: reconfiguration, integration, accumulation, expansion, exaggeration, combination, transformation, and transposition.

What demands further attention in Choi's practice are the different principles that undergird his varying methods. First and foremost, the method of repetition is most pronounced. Through repetition, Choi applies signs of life that are inherent in the

47 Choi Jeong Hwa and Kim Misuk, "'Jeogido nae jakpumi inne' daehwa (1992)" ["There's my work, too" conversation (1992)], in *Gaseum* [Mind] (Seoul: Ga-in Design Group, 1995), 185.

objects themselves. However, this mode of repetition differs from the kind of repetition seen more often in contemporary art, which denotes latent symptoms of psychological compulsion.[48] Instead, Choi's method induces a sense of the infinite expansion of time and space, a flow of energy or enlivenment. That is, his repetition is an allegory for the ubiquity of an endless creation of this vital force. Another is his method of comparison. Although his work seeks to amplify the vitality that is inherent in the object, this is heightened through a contrast with its surrounding environment. Choi is always keen to consider these effects when choosing the location for his installations. To be sure, this can be seen as an attempt to create conflict, but his method not only foregrounds the vital forces that remain obscured through recontextualization, but also confronts the artificiality of that system. The last thing to note is his method of transposition. This method is connected to his desire to lift the veil on the structures of affect that are imposed on objects. It is for this very reason that Choi creates hybrid objects (such as inauthentic objects that looks authentic, nature that looks unnatural, or high-brow that looks low-brow) by upending various semiotic pairings (real/ersatz, high/low, heavy/light, organic/inorganic). By imitating and penetrating the veneer of refined desire and the tastes of consumer society, Choi's chimeras expose and thus dismantle the discourse that perpetuates (class) boundaries and the false pretense of their attendant structures of feeling.

The flow of vital energy Choi seeks to visualize gestures towards the emancipatory potential of Other(ness) as articulated

48 In Choi's practice, there are works that incorporate large-scale vinyl balloon figures (flowers, robots, animals, crowns) engaging in repetitive actions (inflating and deflating). In these cases, the repetition produces an effect that is different from his other works that seek to amplify the inherent vitality of an object. Nevertheless, here too, the repetition stands in stark contrast to the repetition of something that is latent. Instead, the repetitive, cyclical movement of opposing forces, generation and repression, evokes an eroticism through which the power of creation is revealed.

by the poet Kim Su-yeong and Dussel. Choi has an intuition for the emotional and cultural unity that imbues vernacular traditions (such as, Buddhism, shamanism, Daoism, and folk culture). This allows him to find vitality in all sorts of things, from mass-produced blankets and curtains, to countless other disposable goods and household items abandoned in dumpsites. By homing in on the emotional contours of these mundane objects, Choi harnesses their latent emancipatory potential as an antidote to the emotional lassitude plaguing society today.

Traditions in Cultural Translation

Published in 1964, Kim Su-yeong's poem *Colossal Roots* cut a stark figure against the celebratory backdrop of "modernization." Of course, this national mood was itself set against a string of upheavals following in the wake of Korea's colonial liberation, from the Korean War to the April Revolution of 1960 and Park Chung Hee's military coup d'état of May 16, 1961. This moment also marked the beginning of a concerted effort to develop national culture in the name of national unity. In this respect, Kim's poem is remarkably prescient for proffering a corrective to the disingenuous, albeit nascent, rhetoric of tradition as promulgated by the state. What is even more striking is the extent to which Kim's proposition still resonates today.

Why, then, do his words still ring true? On the one hand, it is because the situation remains unchanged. As a mechanism of amnesia, the equation of "modernity = extinction of tradition" continues to hold a unique purchase on the collective psyche. On the other hand, things have changed. Kim's exhortation was, indeed, too ahead of its time. Had we not lived through the gross perversion of tradition at the hands of the developmental state—that is, a botched attempt at preserving tradition that had already been robbed of life and crushed by the weight of a broken system—would his words still have urgency? And what if, after finally attaining modernity for ourselves, we realize that it was

not as imperative or alluring as we had once thought?

Nevertheless, Kim's insight continues to have an imaginary pull because it speaks to the present, shifting contours of cultural topography under the sweeping forces of globalization. The scope of cultural diversity we now encounter on a daily basis is historically unprecedented. Interactions and traversals between cultures have now become a way of life for many of us. Moreover, if we were once able to foresee certain changes or conflicts on the horizon, cultural clashes now confront us without any warning. However, it is also important to note that these encounters are no longer mediated by the nation-state, which has long served as a buffer between the locality of everyday life and the world at large. This is because globalization has systematically disrupted the once sacred and seemingly impermeable borders of nation-states, as well as the national cultures sheltered within them. Meanwhile in Korea, consistent attempts have been made to delineate the boundaries of the nation-state and its national culture, if only to purport an essential particularity or positive distinction against the perceived threats of globalization. At the same time, this quest for national culture was also accompanied by the systematic erasure of differences within existing culture. But now, it has become clearer by the day that these boundaries are merely incidental artifices of history. We are beginning to see fissures in the façade of a unified national culture, and through these cracks we can sense a cacophony of forgotten cultures clamoring to be heard as they brim to the surface.[49] Traditions, which evolve endlessly over the course of time, flow out of the mind and the body, and like a long awaited shower after a dry spell, bring colossal trees back to life. If Kim's premise has a unique purchase today, it could be for this very promise.

In light of the accelerating trends in globalization, we

49 For more on this topic, see Kim Yong-gyu, "The Politics of Hybridity and In-Betweenness in the Post-National Period: A Critical Reading of Homi Bhabha," [in Korean] *The Journal of Criticism and Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2005): 29–33.

can no longer approach questions of acculturation or cultural conflicts through the binary logic of empire and its colonies, or perceive them in terms of a clash of civilizations. In the twenty-first century, we find ourselves living in an interconnected world where peoples and things move fluidly across cultural and national borders, and through this process different cultures adapt and are adopted by others. From the quotidian to the low and the high, transcultural flows have become the reality of our times. As such, Arjun Appadurai argues that, "The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that can no longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries)."[50] As part and parcel of this global cultural economy, tradition also demands a new conceptual framework with which to grasp its shifting role and tenor.

The emerging theory of "cultural translation" offers valuable insight in this regard. By understanding cultural encounters as a mode of translation, the theory of cultural translation aims to foreground the mechanisms through which new meanings are produced in this process. Since the colonial era, the Korean culture industry has been plagued by the twin stigma of Orientalism and cultural transplantation. Of course, there were plenty of works that could be deemed necessarily crude appropriations or unequivocally Orientalist. And yet, caught between the trappings of the logic of Orientalism on the one hand, and the fiction of an essential national culture on the other, the task to devise a theoretical framework that could adequately analyze problems of cultural adoption and adaptation has been perpetually deferred. In this respect, the theory of

50 As such, to explore the disjuncture that exists between economy, culture, and politics, Arjun Appadurai examines the relationship among five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 32–33.

cultural translation allows us to attend to the question of cultural interactions and transferences from a more discursive angle.

The theory of cultural translation can be summarized as follows: 1) All translation is ultimately a practice in cultural translation. 2) Cultural negotiations that occur through cross-cultural encounters and interactions can also be regarded as a practice of (cultural) translation. 3) The inherent meaning of the language, behavior, and values of other cultures are grasped from the position of the translator, and in doing so, new meanings are created. 4) Translation does not take place in a vacuum, but is attendant upon various mechanisms of power (such as colonialism, semi- or anti-colonialism). Therefore, there is a certain degree of bias or intentionality in all translations. 5) Cultural translation does not adhere to the equivalence paradigm, for it does not view translations as finite texts. In other words, it acknowledges that translation is, in a sense, an impossible task. However, the emphasis is not in the final product (impossibility), but in the process of negotiating cultural differences. 6) New meanings are generated from gaps that exist between cultures. Therefore, cultural translation produces new subjectivities and sensibilities by destabilizing fixed notions of a culture. 7) Fidelity is the core value underlying all modes of translation. However, in cultural translation, fidelity does not refer to the degree of exactness to the original text, but to the dangers that come with risking such "colossal, painful, and explosive love ... for the other culture."[51] In conclusion, cultural translation is a practical activity that sets in motion a process of continual renewal through endless iterations of differences.

Bahc Yiso's works, especially those produced during his sojourn in the United States (1982–94), usefully reframe the dilemma of "encounterism" through the analytic of cultural

51 Jeong Hae Ook, "Munhwa beonyeogui sajeok jeongae yangsanggwa uiui" [The historical development and significance of cultural translation], *Segyeui munhak* [World literature], vol. 36, no. 3 (2011): 345–57.

translation.[52] Although Bahc was acquainted with Western culture as an avid fan of pop music, even working as a DJ in cafes during college, the impact of experiencing this culture for the first time, as a foreign student no less, was significant. It is plausible that he experienced many shocking and candid "encounters" during his stay. On the one hand, Bahc was an object of scrutiny and translation by the host culture, but on the other hand, he was also translating the host culture as a means of gaining acceptance. But through this process he realized that cross-cultural exchanges and translations are full of misunderstandings and errors. The extent to which Bahc grappled with the question of cultural translation—whether translation can ever attain exact equivalence, or whether mistranslations and misrecognitions are an inevitable part of this process—is betrayed in his works from this period.

In the case of Bahc's *Untitled* (1994), we have a work that takes cultural translation as its main topos, and in so doing, questions the very possibility of cultural translation itself. The work consists of a baseball bat that is sliced in half vertically and placed in an elongated, glass laboratory vessel filled with soy sauce. Needless to say, the baseball bat is a potent symbol of American culture, and soy sauce is an equally ubiquitous source of traditional Korean cuisine. Is this about American culture meeting traditional Korean culture? Of course, this work also implies other binary confrontations, such as masculinity/femininity, sports/food, solid/liquid, and West/East. Moreover, both substances are undergoing a chemical process of marination or preservation (a natural process) inside a laboratory vessel (a scientific instrument). One wonders what will become of this process after some time has passed. Will the soy sauce seep through the bat? Will nothing come of this experiment, or will it create a unique hybrid? Is Bahc trying to convey a message

52 Bahc Yiso proposes the term "encounterism" to convey the dominant rhetoric, "the encounter between the West and the East," or "the meeting of tradition and modern," which emerged during the 1970s from discourses on "Koreanness" and "contemporizing tradition."

through this experiment, or is he merely showing us this process? Or, did he devise this instrument to simply trigger a reflection? Perhaps his aim was just that: to provoke questions and entertain different possibilities.

Bahc Yiso, *Untitled*, 1994, acryl case, soy sauce, baseball bat, 114×20 cm. MMCA Collection

Capital=Creativity (1986) is an exemplary work in this regard. According to Bahc, this is a "translation" of Joseph Beuys's 1983 work, *Creativity=Capital* [*Kreativität=Kapital*]. But is it possible to "translate" an artwork? While it is easy for us to imagine how works that appear similar are conceived and executed (through replication or appropriation, for instance), it is quite difficult to fathom a work of art as a mode of translation. Is there a minimal threshold for equivalences in visual, aesthetic terms to make an artwork translatable? Naturally, there would be some corresponding elements, but the degrees of interchangeability that could enable translation remain doubtful. As such, translation of an artwork would seem fundamentally

impossible in practical terms. However, by turning the logic of translation on its head, Bahc demonstrates how he has come to understand cultural translation as a practice. From the outset, translation is presented as an impossible task. It is only untranslatability that becomes legible through translation. Put differently, it becomes an inquiry into differences and resistances to transference and transformation. By presenting countless images that are similar (in terms of theme and style) but still unequal and inexact, he seems to visualize this mode of "translation."

Bahc Yiso, *Capital=Creativity*, 1986, acrylic on paper, 50×81 cm. Gift of Yiso Sarangbang

In this work, the focus is foremost on the object of translation, the title of Beuy's work, *Creativity=Capital*. For his work, however, Bahc intentionally changes the order to *Capital=Creativity*. In addition, the word "capital," translated into Korean as *jabon*, is depicted in a larger font and set in a gold-colored Korean folk typeface. The markedly different aesthetics and feel of Bahc's work is an effect of translation—of text and also material and media techniques. In the work, Bahc also includes a pithy sentence that reads, "I translated a work by Joseph Beuys from Germany." There are different motivations at

work in Bahc's composition. One is to illustrate the mechanisms of cultural translation. Another is to demonstrate his concept of an ideal condition for cultural translation. If we could add one more, he seems to be gesturing towards both the allure and perils of emulation and imitation when it comes to the cultures of another, especially that of the West. Of course, there are other dimensions to this work that demand fuller analysis, but we can summarize Bahc's principles as follows: 1) Primary goal is to understand the inherent meaning of the text in translation (*Capital=Creativity*). Which is to say, translation is an act of love. 2) Actively immerse yourself in the language and culture of your target audience, to whom the meaning and love is addressed. 3) Misrecognition and mistranslations are inevitable. Even though translation is an impossible task, translate faithfully. 4) In this process, new emotions and meanings will emerge from creative misreading. As such, it is not only the object of translation that will be reinterpreted, but also culture (as demonstrated by the folk typeface). 5) Translator's intent will always guide the translation process, but must be made as transparent as possible. 6) Acknowledge that a work is a product of translation. (Which is not to say that one must always include name of the translator.) 7) If the translator fails to heed these points, the translation can end up as a conduit of power or simply arbitrary, thereby compromising the ethics of translation. Governed by these tenets, Bahc's work *Capital=Creativity* is not only a translation of Beuys, but also a work that seeks to generate new meanings by reinterpreting his own (Korean) culture through the prism of cultural translation.[53]

53 For a critical examination of Bahc Yiso's work through the question of cultural translation, see: Kim Hyundo, "Du gyeobui jipyeong - bangmowa bagisoui hagye gyeongheom" [Doubling horizon: Bakmo and Bahc Yiso's art school experience], in *Dongsidae hangungmisurui jihyeong* [Mappings of Korean contemporary art] (Seoul: Hakgojae, 2009), 112–45; Choe Gyu-seong, "A study on issues of translation and cultural identity in Bahc Yiso's works" [in Korean] (MA diss., Hongik University, 2010).

The works that seek to enact “encounterism” can also be seen as attempts at cultural translation. As a reaction against extreme manifestations of revivalism or modernism in art amid the shifting cultural landscape, popular discourses on “East meets West” or “encounters of tradition and modernity” gesture to a kind of translation in their own way. However, such an affirmative attitude towards translation is markedly different from that of Bahc. First of all, cultural translation according to “encounterism” strives for integration or harmony through the encounter between East and West, or tradition and modernity. Cultural differences are noted, but there is an underlying assumption that synthesis is a possibility. In short, there is not a trace of critical reflection on the abysmal chasm of difference between cultures, the inevitability of misinterpretation, or their inherent “untranslatability.” Another point of divergence is the role of the translator in this mode of translation. In “encounterism,” the translator assumes a spiritual presence with her invisible hand. Of course, “encounterism” also emphasizes the role of the translator, but her inconspicuous performance, neither secular nor practical, fails to generate a third meaning from the differences and deviations between the two cultures. Rather, it manifests as a mere performance of harmonious integration of cultures without a genuine engagement. Translation as such succumbs to a tautology of false equivalences and in the end, risks abnegating encounter altogether.

As pointed out earlier, the fundamental problem of Orientalism lies less in the exclusion of the Other, than in the epistemology that produced the immutable category of the Other to begin with. Rather than destabilizing the binary logic of Orientalism, “encounterism” perpetuates it by seeking to transcend it. If so, can we interpret “encounterism” as a practice of mistranslation in the absolute?

Bahc’s composition *Simply Weeds* (1988) stands apart from the two aforementioned works. If cultural translation offered the thematic focus for the other works, this ink painting puts it into

Bahc Yiso, *Simply Weeds*, 1988, india ink on paper, 25×58 cm. Gift of Yiso Sarangbang

practice. However, the scope of translation here is more complex. Bahc’s image is a translation of the traditional iconography of Four Gracious Plants (*sagunja*), a motif of literati culture that has since receded from contemporary visual culture.[54] More specifically, it is a reinterpretation of *Buliseonrando*, a famous ink painting by the celebrated calligrapher and artist, Chusa Kim Jeong-hui (1786–1857). Here, the object of translation is Bahc’s own culture, not that of an Other. By replacing the Sino-Korean script—a marker of feudalism, which has long been associated with the genre—with the vernacular Korean script, Bahc makes the work speak the language of the present.[55] As a result, the antiquated tradition of the literati gains a new lease on life and

54 Principally, tradition refers to the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. However, quotidian use of the term encompasses not only long-established customs or beliefs, but also traditions that no longer exist, those in the process of disappearing, or those that have been transmuted. The confusion that arises from its multiple usage reflects the general lack of understanding of tradition in our current state of affairs.

55 In losing their connection with the present and gradually disappearing into oblivion, certain traditions become simply a phenomenon of the past. In this way, the past is reconfigured as a culture of the other. To translate one’s own past as a cultural other has different implications from cultural translation in general, but even here, the basic principle of cultural translation—the possibility for new meaning in the impossible task of translation—still applies.

transforms into a living tradition. At the same time, translation also takes place at the level of genre. By contemporizing the traditional iconography through the vernacular script, Bahc simultaneously translates the literati conventions of traditional ink painting (self-cultivation), as well as the modern conventions of Western oil painting (self-reflexivity). From the gap between the two, a new type of painting is born. Neither traditional *Dongyanghwa* nor modern Western painting, *Simply Weeds* finds its own footing in the "contemporary."[56] Cultural translation is a journey from one world of tradition to another, navigated by the subject-I in the present tense.[57] If a culture is understood exclusively in its own terms, transmission or translation becomes impossible. By contrast, cultural translation operates within a universal magnetic field that always already connects one locality to another. In an era of globalization where the present is delineated by different cultural forces, cultural translation transcends the binary framework of center and periphery, and ushers in a new space for contact and meaning. This new space is where *Simply Weeds* exists.

Conclusion

> I yearn for my homeland (return to the homeland),
> Everywhere is my homeland (acquiesce the foreign land),
> Homeland, foreign land, it's equally unfamiliar. (I have neither a homeland nor a foreign land, everywhere is a homeland and a foreign land.)

The relationship between art and tradition is truly diverse and multifaceted. In the realm of art, the task of reviving tradition

56 Kim Hyundo, "Du gyeobui jipyeong - bangmowa bagisoui hagye gyeongheom," 118–19.

57 See Jeong Hae ook, "Judiseu beoteulleowa munhwa beonyeogui gwaje" [Judith Butler's task of cultural translation], *The Journal of Criticism and Theory* 20, no. 1 (2015): 144–47.

is not limited to the representations or reinterpretations thereof. As an inherent force of iconoclasm, art is a visual manifestation of the redistribution of senses. Therefore, it is inevitable that tradition, which is at once a sensibility and a language, a culture and a worldview, would intervene in the process of contemporary art making and reveal itself as an alluring target. The ways in which tradition manifests in individual works, however, can vary greatly. For example, if there are works that seek to reanimate traditions in the *longue durée*, there are also those that aim to reinterpret popular imageries or motifs of tradition (such as folk tales) into the vernacular. Sometimes traditions are invoked through the revival of techniques, materials, and genres, while other times, it is the conscious awareness of tradition that becomes the main motivation behind the work. For these reasons, this essay did not focus on different manifestations of tradition in specific works, or attempt to postulate a general theory of tradition. (Not that this would even be possible.) Instead, our objective was to challenge certain assumptions by seeking new ways of understanding tradition, particularly through contemporary artworks that consciously grapple with the question. In lieu of a comprehensive analysis or a historiography, the essay has been a discursive exploration of the enduring connection between art and tradition in contemporary Korean art.

Needless to say, there are many more artworks, theories, and questions to consider. In this regard, it is necessary to retrace our steps and recast the works from earlier decades through a similar critical lens. For instance, the later works of Pak Saeng Kwang would be ripe for such an endeavor. There is also an urgent need for an appropriate reassessment of Minjung art and other modes of contemporary art that grapple with the question of the nation (*minjung*) through the problematic of coloniality. Likewise, there is a need for a deeper and more discursive engagement with so-called traditional genres like *Hangukhwa*, which has long been assumed as the sole heir and arbiter of tradition. Above all, it is incumbent upon us to attend to the phenomenon

of the reemergence of "tradition" as a critical motif among contemporary artists beyond the scope of this essay.[58] If anything, this crowded field represents a clarion call for new approaches to tradition, modernity, and Orientalism.

Kim Su-yeong begins *Colossal Roots* with a despondent admission: "I still do not know how to sit properly." In the first stanza, we get a glimpse of the anxious poet awkwardly mirroring the posture of his acquaintances. The disquietude is almost palpable. But then again, the restlessness that comes with sitting is probably just the tip of the iceberg. How does one stand properly? Think properly? Exist properly? The ensuing chaos and ruptures threaten the very fabric of everyday life. Perhaps this is how Kim sees tradition under the rubric of a dysfunctional system: refracted through a distorted prism, a tradition robbed of life and ethics, without hope or redemption. In other words, rather than seeing the break from tradition as an opportunity to propel the nation forward, the poet decries the death of tradition as a harbinger of instability and bedlam on the ground. Is our predicament any different than Kim's?

The task before us is, then, to reawaken the tradition that has been severed and oppressed from our memories, and feel it with all our senses, for this is how the future comes into view. With this mind, let us take a moment to reflect on the poet's professed love for Isabella Bird Bishop, the Orientalist. Kim's confession is kind of a paradox. The crisis of his homeland can only be seen and heard through the poetics of love for an Other, Bishop. And so, the hierarchy between the homeland and the foreign land disappears; the unfamiliar becomes familiar and the familiar, unfamiliar. But until then, one must not give up on

58 In addition to Rho Jae Oon, there are other artists who also integrate Daoist narratives within new media. Works by Kim Sangdon, Im Heung-soon, Song Sanghee, and Jo Seub stand out in particular for adopting Korean folk traditions like shamanism to redress with the wounds of modern Korean history. For Lee Bul, Yee Sookyung, and Bae Young-whan as well, the concept of "tradition" has figured as an important motif in their oeuvres.

the homeland. Otherwise, the Other (land) will continue to elude you. This demands a dual perspective.[59] In this respect, art is the medium best suited for suturing the ruptures of history through the continuous thread of tradition. Perhaps this quest may be the very ground on which to cultivate new art forms that are at once rich in sensuous detail and endowed with critical depth.

Translated from Korean by Minna Lee

59 Terry Eagleton begins his essay on nationalism with the following quote: "'Nationalism,' remarks an African character in Raymond Williams's novel *Second Generation* (London, 1964), is in this sense like class. To have it, and to feel it, is the only way to end it. If you fail to claim it, or give it up too soon, you will merely be cheated, by other classes and other nations.'" Eagleton cites Williams's character to emphasize not only the use value of nationalism, but also its indispensability in its own renouncement. In a similar sense, to embrace tradition and locality is to emancipate oneself from traditional and locality. Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment," in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 23.