

## THE WAY TO FUKUSHIMA FROM SINDOAN

Cha Jeamin and Park Chan-kyong

## THE TRANSPLANTED GAZE, THE COLONIAL EYE

Cha Jeamin (hereinafter CHA): When we consider many of the artists mentioned in the essay “How to Sit Properly: Tradition and Art,” it is clear that there was an acute awareness of “self-Orientalism” as early as the 1970s. Quite some time has passed since their emergence. What has changed since then?

Park Chan-kyong (hereinafter PARK): It is my contention that the problem of self-Orientalism was endemic to *Dansaekhwa* (monochrome painting) in the 1970s. By contrast, the subsequent generation of Minjung art in the 1980s demonstrated a strong *minjokjuuijeok* (nationalist) tendency, which was grounded in anti-colonialism, but necessarily distinct from the Western notions of nationalism. In the case of *dongyanghwa* (Oriental painting), the less than welcoming reception from the contemporary art scene must have contributed to this reactionary mood. Given the situation, we can assume that they strove to overcome this dominating gaze through the genre of *dongyanghwa*. Moreover, there was also the growing gap between the city and the countryside, which became increasingly problematic, especially to those who had migrated from rural areas. Naturally, the concepts of tradition and the homeland demanded a critical attention. Though I only mentioned a few artists in the essay, this question can be extended to many more artists—certainly, enough to reexamine the whole of Korean art history through the keyword “Orientalism.” In other words, it is crucial to acknowledge that we have not been uncritically absorbed by Western art, but have

instead sensed a certain paucity and endeavored to resolve it. I assume that the young artists of today are also invested in this quest. It is plausible that what we deem dead might in fact be a living tradition. Put differently, like the poet Kim Su-yeong, perhaps to speak of estrangement could also mean to suggest that there's something that remains in tradition, whether consciously or subconsciously.

CHA: When I read Kim Su-yeong's poem *Colossal Roots*, I imagined the poet passing upon a group of women doing the laundry along a stream and depicting this very scene in the poem. In the 1980s, swept up in the mood of activism, the artists of Minjung art would frequently partake in drum circles replete with *janggu* and folk songs. Politically, this was also a time when the colonial situation was most pronounced in South Korea. The concerted effort to illuminate tradition was, in part, also propelled by the desire to ascertain a sense of autonomy vis-à-vis global powers. But now, the younger generation lacks any memory of this (proto) history of democracy, and as a result, rarely thinks about tradition.

PARK: That's inevitable. (Laughs.) I also grew up in an apartment complex in the Gangnam district of Seoul since middle school, so I don't have many memories of tradition either. At best, the tradition I encountered on a quotidian level was through *jesa*, the common ancestral rites during the holidays. What I want to emphasize is not so much the question of whether one has direct experience with tradition, although that shouldn't be dismissed, but rather how we might approach tradition in more temporally capacious terms. Rather than view tradition only as a culture of the past, I consider tradition as inherently present in the contemporary moment as well. It's important to take interest not in things artificially labeled as tradition, but rather in traditions that permeate our midst, even unbeknownst to us. In this view, the designation of "traditional culture" seemed too limiting, and so, I employed the term "*longue durée* tradition" in the essay "How

to Sit Properly," which was co-authored with Lee Youngwook. *Longue durée* is not only related to history but also to climate or geography; it's a concept that compels us to think about traces of customs and habits that are infused in our lives.

CHA: You mentioned Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady* in your essay "On *Sindoan*: Some Scattered Views on Tradition and 'The Sublime.'" You wrote, "There is part of me that suspects *Tropical Malady* to be yet another modern iteration of Orientalism, but at the same time, I am also strongly drawn to this sentiment." When I view works of art, I often find it difficult to distinguish which aspect is Orientalism and self-Orientalism, and wonder if this distinction is even possible.

PARK: In reference to Apichatpong's work, Benedict Anderson noted that it was not the villagers in the film who protested their representation, but rather the intellectuals that remained skeptical. Similarly, I myself have questioned whether my works are self-Orientalist or not. If the question is about whether elements of self-Orientalism can be delineated in concrete terms, I don't think this is an impossible task. But I do think that intellectuals have a habit of jumping to conclusions in these matters. As much as there are problems within Orientalism, problems also exist within the criticism of Orientalism. For instance, I've seen many cases of people quick to critique Orientalism without a seriously considering of the areas beyond the West. I think this is the most harmful effect of Orientalism. Even if the task of evaluating Orientalism comes with challenges and unforeseen risks, I believe we need more works that consider cultures and traditions beyond the West and the global North.

CHA: Binary concepts such as culture/savagery, rationality/irrationality, and reason/madness are a product of modernity, and of course, this framework also gave rise to the problematic notions of the savage and irrationality, which

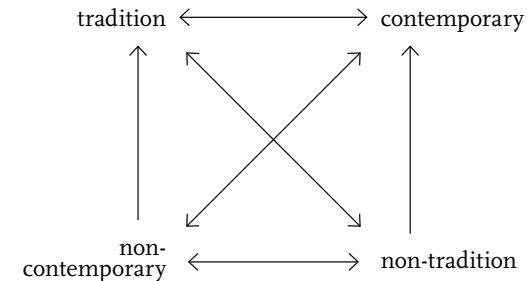
demands redress. I wonder, then, how we can separate modernity from these aspects, or if this disengagement is even possible. Given this predicament, where do you think the balance lies?

PARK: We should keep the good and discard the bad, but there is also a need to complicate what is inherent in it. When Kim Su-yeong claims that traditions are filthy, he means it. He recognizes the incompetence, irrationality and oppression embedded in traditions. But still, he sees value in them, and this means that they are important. In the end, this is a story about time. Before we parse what is good or bad about tradition, perhaps Kim is imploring us to think about the ideological underpinnings of systems of value that exist in the first place. All too often, a value of tradition is measured against the yardstick of today's standards. Especially in the field of art, we are reluctant to challenge the norms and standards of modernity that are articulated by the West.

CHA: I suppose, then, the tradition of patriarchy may or may not qualify as tradition.

PARK: Confucian patriarchy is, of course, an unsettling tradition. Conversely, Korean shamans were mostly women, and unsurprisingly, shamanism was a tradition oppressed by Confucian patriarchy. I think these kinds of aspects are important. There is a diagram called the "Greimas Semiotic Square," postulated by the semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas. According to this chart, the concept of tradition is placed in opposition to the contemporary and non-tradition. In a similar vein, there is no binary relationship between the non-contemporary and tradition, and also between non-tradition and the contemporary. In the end, there are four corresponding vertices. Frederic Jameson placed emphasis on the fourth vertex, which, depending on the criteria, could indicate the non-contemporary or non-tradition. The sign of non-tradition is in contraction to tradition but it does not necessarily form a complementarity with the contemporary. For

instance, shamanism can belong to either non-tradition or the non-contemporary, since it is not contemporaneous and is also excluded from tradition.



Furthermore, it is also vital that we don't perceive history chronologically. In art history, we are taught that one thing happens after the next, and so on. But in reality, what is created anew is, at times, a revival of what precedes it and this is how the past gains significance. For instance, Dada is not simply what preceded Surrealism, but rather, a movement that gained prominence retroactively through Surrealism. In other words, it is not that there is an inherent strand, or "root" that connects tradition with the here and now, but that the contemporary moment discovers something from tradition,.

CHA: In what aspects can we speak of tradition in Korean art?

PARK: We live in a globalized world. Since globalization operates within a dynamic axis, to bring up tradition is, in a sense, a subtle way of criticizing this hierarchy. Of course, there are many aspects that comprise this hierarchy, and tradition is one among them. I'm embarrassed to admit, but I used to admire Gustav Klimt when I was in high school, and Henri Matisse during my studio days. I was thrilled when I finally acquired Holbein Watercolors, and thought it would be cool to carry them around in my art toolbox. But once I entered college, I was expected to produce works in the tradition of Western avant-garde art. If

you are serious about art, you naturally get absorbed in Western culture, and so, to practice art means to practice Western art. But no one seems to doubt this assumption. Perhaps it's because it would be too vexing to do so, or that everyone is too busy. But once you go to the West, you are constantly asked, "Why won't you do art of your own, or of your own people?" You say, "Ah, is that so?" and begin searching for an identity, and end up falling back into self-Orientalism.

CHA: The truth is, I, too, have never seriously doubted the concepts of "Western art" I was taught in school. Not because it is burdensome, but because it is quite awkward and difficult to think of "Korean or Asian art" as an antithesis to "Western art." But it still begs the questions: What constitutes mainstream and non-mainstream art? Are we still working in a country where anti-colonial issues remain unresolved? Are there works that are fundamentally untranslatable? What is the significance of such works?

PARK: On postcards, many times we write not only the title of the exhibition but also our names in English only. That's colonial culture in a nutshell. Now, if we say that this is a reflection of a universal, global culture, rather than a colonial culture, then I see this as a clear indication of colonialism's successful integration into global culture. It could never work vice versa since global culture is not based on the local. That is why the West commonly uses the term "Western art," but Korea is reluctant to use the terms "Korean art" or "Asian art." This is a characteristic of coloniality. As such, it becomes difficult to even pose questions in this regard. It goes like this: If the West is the world of our belonging and English is the dominant language, then what of colonialism? By denying the question from the outset, the task of colonialism would seem to be already complete.

CHA: The contention that English names in brochures are indicative of colonialism might not resonate with those who

identify themselves as cosmopolitan. Nevertheless, I think it is meaningful to expand the discussion of culture in terms of the imperial dynamics undergirding capitalism, rather than imperialism in the militaristic sense.

PARK: Yes, South Korea is simultaneously post-colonial and sub-imperial. It's not strange that one can be both. But what happens when a nation that has yet to shed itself of cultural colonialism becomes an arbiter of global capitalism? A nightmare. Indeed, isn't this already the case? On a separate note, I believe there are very few things that are inherently untranslatable. Some things may be patently difficult to translate. However, I read the term "untranslatable" as an all too convenient justification for hastily relinquishing difficult jobs. The overcoming of obstacles of translation and striving for universality, requires more than just the effort of an exceptional translator. Indeed, it's a vexing task that demands a lot of time.

#### SYMPATHY AND SANCTITY

CHA: In *Sindoan* there is a tracking shot that seems to usher the viewer into a deep and dark place, and in *Anyang, Paradise City* there is a scene of a director falling into the bushes as he wades through a forest. Similarly, *Citizen's Forest* shows a procession of spirits in the woods, seemingly navigating us through the mountain, and *Way to the Seung-ga Temple* also depicts a mountainous journey. I couldn't help but feel that those tackling the rugged terrain all seemed so exhausted. Why are they all in the mountains?

PARK: Regardless of one's age, I think the motivation to hike is generally the same for most people. We seek the mountain for the fresh air and the exercise, as well as to escape from the daily grind of city life. Daoism and Zen (*Seon*) Buddhism, which has also been influenced by Daoism, are both ancient concepts in East Asia. And, for the shamans, too, the mountain deity is held in the highest esteem. Nevertheless, modernization in Korea, which was

propelled by colonialism, was accompanied by the transformation of nature into a battlefield. While the military forces captured the highlands and dug up mines, the partisans, too, turned to the mountain for refuge. In turn, the mountain has also become a haunting site riddled with ghosts. It is for precisely this reason that the mountain is so prevalent in my works, but this was most acutely felt when I was making *Sindoan*. Scattered throughout the mountain are traces of prayers. Many people make the trek in the early hours to pray, but it is usually women, which is also true for worshippers in Buddhist temples. Regardless of the shamanistic implication, people tend to turn to the mountain when they are overwhelmed by problems in the secular world. My interest lies in this kind of desperation.

CHA: Films such as *Sindoan*, *Anyang*, *Paradise City*, and *Manshin: Ten Thousand Spirits* deal with not only *habitus* in the traditional sense, but also *habitus* as a religious practice.

PARK: I was physically ill and emotionally distraught when I was working on *Sindoan*. It felt like I was standing at the edge of a cliff, penniless and without a future. . . . This is not uncommon, and many turn to religion during such times of duress. During this period, I would get recurring dreams about a rocky mountain. It may sound trite now, but to put it frankly, it was a process. Shortly thereafter, I became curious as to why people prayed in the mountains. So I started to look into this practice in earnest. There is a strand that runs through Korean society that is deeply intertwined with religion. The same could be said for Christianity. The more I looked into this matter, the clearer it became that religion was an outlier in the narrative of Korean modernity. This convinced me that religion could be one way to explain the inconsistencies of Korean modernity. I began to think my personal experiences were never entirely personal.

CHA: When I watched *Citizen's Forest* as part of the 2017 exhibition *Annyeong* 安寧 *Farewell*, the title helped me easily

recognize the subject of the film as the tragic victims (“the deceased”) of modern and contemporary history. Because to honor the dead and to bid a proper farewell is ultimately a demonstration of respect for life, I embraced the significance of the title of the exhibition.

PARK: Those responsible for the Sewol Ferry disaster failed to do their jobs properly. The same could be said for the government, the press, the marines, the skipper, the school, and the religious institution. Once you recognize this, you begin to connect the situation to the “I,” and question yourself as well. Am I doing my job right? Am I swindling other people? Hounded by these thoughts, I couldn’t bear to talk about the incident. Whenever a problem arises or a disaster occurs, we are tormented by the thought of it being somehow connected to ourselves. We can trick ourselves to thinking we have extricated ourselves from the problem or disaster by fiercely criticizing the situation, but I didn’t want to succumb to that. We often say that we are a community of grief. Though communities are difficult to sustain, I wonder if one that can withstand the test of time is one that is united by grief. Even though it may be difficult, without a shared ground in grief, there is no limit to criticism and condemnation. Perhaps this is why “sanctity” is so crucial. It’s not about the sacred truth, but about holding onto the impossible (the death of others) when we are confronted with the limits of the secular world.

CHA: Is sanctity the belief in something greater than things of material value? Can you elaborate more on the importance of sanctity and rites? Can we see *Citizen's Forest* as a kind of a rite?

PARK: This is how I would roughly summarize my thoughts on this topic. First, we can define modern society as “secular” or “desacralized.” Under the ethos of desacralization, the concept of time as progress gained significance, along with labor, the individual, and the nation. The scholar Charles Taylor



Park Chan-kyong, *Citizen's Forest*, 2016, 3 channel video, b&w, ambisonic sound, 26min 6sec, film still

referred to this phenomenon as “exclusive humanism.” Here, exclusivity denotes the primacy of human prosperity. I think this kind of Western Enlightenment and “civil society” has reached its limit. Nuclear and the ecological crises offer decisive evidence in this respect. Hate, violence, and terrorism as well. In this predicament, we can at best prevent the good values accomplished by the Enlightenment, such as freedom or equality, from turning into instruments of violence. Ultimately, we are searching for values that can transcend modern notions of the individual or progress, and indeed, values found in religion, like love and mercy, seem to be just that. Neither institutional constructs nor state interventions, these values are purposeless and unconditional. Because higher values are realized when historical time comes into contact with transcendental (or sacred) time, they cease to be manifest through the linear time of history alone. I believe there are limits to how much we can rely on state-sanctioned violence, such as the law, prison, surveillance, and punishment, to resolve our problems. The same goes for the mandatory quarantines and disinfection campaigns waged against the minority for the wellbeing of the majority. They all emphasize the primacy of secular “life” by forestalling death. By contrast, rites are the communal pledge to not expel the absolute Other (death, spirit, etc.). Of course, religious rites have degenerated over the course of history. Perhaps this is why we need art.

CHA: Socially, a rite is a sanctioned time that permits the absolute Other to join the community during the course of the rite. Is it because it would be difficult to control the absolute Other in the realm of the everyday? I wonder if the key to establishing rites as art may not lie in thinking of rites creatively and anew, beyond convention. What might be the difference between a genuine interest in rites (an investment in recovering sanctity) and rites as a fetish?

PARK: Yes, it does seem so. To tell the truth, I don't think art

can encapsulate sanctity or replace rites. And I have a feeling one shouldn't attempt it, either. However, rather than dismiss the form of rites as mere superstition, I would say that it is a place one can take refuge from a modernity centered on the individual or "self-identity." We also shouldn't take rites and rituals too solemnly. In fact, they tend to coincide with festivals. In contemporary society, it seems that both rites and festivals are constantly relegated to the private sphere. Contemporary art, too, has also been pushed aside to the private sphere, but compared to other things, I think it still possesses the public value of rites, rituals, and festivals.

CHA: *Citizen's Forest* is a representation of figures that appear in Oh Yoon's *Vindictive Spirits*, who you also described as the "subaltern."

PARK: If we bring up *minjung* (the people), it gets instantly categorized. At the very least, the subaltern is not a social group projected by intellectuals. We consider Oh Yoon as a Minjung artist, but I don't think Oh thought of *minjung* in such a categorical way. And yet, I still wanted to cling on to this notion. If I could grasp something, anything from it, wouldn't it be something like the grass in Kim Su-yeong's poem, *Grass* (1968)? But now, I'm starting to think that these concepts might be old, nostalgic, and even naive. For this reason, I think images of people in Lee Ungno's *People* (1986) seem more contemporaneous than figures in my work. Here, the people seem free, independent, yet still connected.

CHA: You filmed some scenes of *Citizen's Forest* in slow motion. I wonder if it was an attempt to make the figures seem spectral, or to convey a sense of wandering. I ask because when a subject that is already an Other, is made to look ghostly, there is a risk of double Othering.

PARK: I actually wanted to make *Citizen's Forest* like a painting. I wanted the video to emulate the experience of viewing a

painting, analogous to the slow temporal experience of perusing a landscape on a long scroll painting. The spirits in *Citizen's Forest* are rather disinterested, for they are not there to frighten people. It's as if they are already aware of our indifference to them as modern beings. The pace of the film is irrelevant, because it is about whether the gaze, which may or may not be objectifying, is either projecting or superimposing. I think I employed the technique of slow motion to make people focus on subtle movements. Movements including walking, eating, and dressing do more to underscore the presence of a character than any meaningful words or actions. Slow motion carries a kind of cliché in how it embellishes things to look "grandiose," but I think it is still effective in the right hands. At any rate, filmic time is different from time in reality.

CHA: In the exhibition *Annyeong 安寧 Farewell*, I noticed a few differences between the two floors. If the images from *Citizen's Forest* on the first floor seemed to evoke a dreamscape, images from *Way to the Seung-ga Temple* on the second floor looked as clear and direct as any photograph I could have taken earlier that day. The *Bright Stars* (2017) series on the second floor were works in paintings, which I had not seen for a while.

PARK: I used items from a shamanistic ritual called *myeongdu* for *Bright Stars*. Ursa Major is painted on the back. This is how I, from today's perspective, envision the people of the olden days, when they used this object, to have imagined outer space. Indeed, there would also be decorative aspects. I was quite fond of *Bright Stars* in the exhibition but people seemed skeptical. They may have accused me of being a sell-out.

CHA: The term "selling-out" is not only a critique of commercialization, but also an expression of cynicism towards "things." When I learned that *myeongdu* has come to signify an object in communion with a deity, the face of



Park Chan-kyong, *Bright Stars 4* (top: front, bottom: back), 2017, in collaboration with Kim Sangdon, *myeongdu, dancheong* (traditional multicolored pigments) on a birch plate, 82.6×57.6 cm

a guardian spirit, and a mirror of a shaman, I felt wholly different about the object and saw it in a different light.

PARK: Of course, I would be lying if I said that the work's commercial potential didn't occur to me, but that was hardly a motivation. What concerned me more was the notion of the "real." The tradition I wish to discuss exists in "reality." It is neither a sign, nor an illusion, nor is it memory. So I even came up with the term "real-traditions." Here, the "real" does not correspond to anything tangible, but instead, to the realm beyond symbols and signs, and so, when it is successful, it begets a certain degree of discomfort and uneasiness. It is unpleasant because it disrupts the existing order of signs. I guess the message was successful, because it didn't do very well on the market.

#### THE SUBLIME OF ROMANTICISM, THE HORIZONTAL SUBLIME

CHA: Would you say that the sublime means enlightenment in a religious sense? I don't think I have ever encountered a truly sublime subject. It is difficult to grasp the concept of the sublime, because we assume that it's a feeling akin to witnessing a majestic waterfall or the power of crashing waves.

PARK: I first learned about the sublime through the German theologian Rudolf Otto. He hones in on the kind of spine-tingling experience one comes across every now and then. You know, like when we watch a really good horror film.

CHA: Yes, I know what you mean by spine-tingling experience. But I thought the sublime was an experience much more intense and grand. The Japanese philosopher Ataru Sasaki describes the sublime as a smoke screen that obfuscates one's ability to think, a moment of mental incapacitation.

PARK: Ataru Sasaki would be correct if we understand the sublime simply as an overwhelming experience. But if we say that



the sublime is nothing more than an impediment to cognition, I would think that such an assumption is also nothing more than a conceit of the Enlightenment. Of course, it is necessary to exercise critical thinking at all times, but if we fail to acknowledge the limits of our own logic, we will inevitably undermine all the achievements of modernity. In spite of our hubris, I see the sublime as sign from an otherworldly realm directing us to what remains of the “non-modern.” Listening to myself, it all sounds like cultish blather.

CHA: We generally associate the sublime with Romanticism, but there is also the sublime of terrorism. In recent cultural criticism, the concept of the sublime has been under attack for embracing the spectacle.

PARK: Of course, I’m not suggesting that everything about the sublime is good. What I mean is that when different facets of tradition come together to form an intuitive whole, it goes beyond aesthetics and enters into the realm of the sublime. “Traditional culture” is generally understood in aesthetics terms. Since tradition is not inherently imbued with the sublime, when we intuit or encounter tradition in bits and pieces we feel disconnected. Ink paintings from the Northern Song period are filled with images of majestic landscapes. This is the kind of the sublime that humbles the viewer. By contrast, Francisco José de Goya, who is perhaps the most notable figure in Western Romanticism, drew many gruesome scenes of the war. Rather than indulge in the affect of the sublime, Goya’s paintings confront the site of the sublime. So, what really matters is the type of the sublime.

CHA: Yes. The relationship between tradition and the sublime makes sense to me when I think about *gut* (shamanistic ritual). You get a feeling that’s not necessarily aesthetic, but *something*. (Laughs.) *Black Out* comes to mind as a work that exemplifies what you would call the Romantic

sublime. Can you explain the concept of the sublime through another work of yours?

PARK: *Small Art History* (2014, 2017) also began with an interest in thinking about the sublime differently, which is to say, not vertically. I think there is something uneasy about the vertical sublime. An example of horizontality would be the shaman chant, Bari-degi, or *The Abandoned Princess Bari*, which is so long that it takes the whole day to complete it. In this song, the paradise is found not in the sky above but beyond the rivers and the mountains. In a way, it is more about the person’s journey than the destination, not unlike the *Odyssey*. We can also find in Korean folk art tradition certain narrative elements like sustained temporality, plot devices like fate and chance encounters, stories of overcoming adversity, and so on.

CHA: Still, can narratives be horizontal? The story may seem to progress laterally, but how do you account for psychological tensions that may arise?

PARK: To put it simply, if there are mountains with towering, majestic peaks like the Alps, there are also mountains of undulating hills that seem to stretch out for miles on end, like the ones common in Korea. And apart from the mountain, there is the horizon. There is also the expanse of cosmic time. Whenever I listen to *pansori* (musical storytelling) or shamanic chants, I am reminded of this horizontality. In this sense, the “horizontal sublime” is also a strategic term. This is because the sublime has always been associated with Christian thoughts and the verticality therein, like the land of God, the fallen angel, the resurrection, and the insurmountable summit. As you said, a narrative cannot be simply horizontal. Most likely, it would have attributes that are both vertical and horizontal. Nevertheless, this sense of endlessness, the continuity of time through repetition and enduring gravitational force seem more dominant in shamanic chants and myths. If you look at the folk painting, *The Diamond Mountains* (1800s), you’ll be able to see what I mean. Which is to

say, this is an inversion of the vertical sublime into the horizontal sublime.

CHA: The Chinese classical text on mythology *Shan Hai Jing* (Classic of Mountains and Seas) comprises disparate descriptions in lieu of a traditional narrative, which allows one to start reading from any page. This makes me want to look for more instances of the horizontal sublime in Asian narratives.

#### ASIAN FANTASY

CHA: Did you first use the term “Asian Gothic” in the introduction to the exhibition *Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers* as part of the SeMA Biennale Mediacity Seoul 2014? I’m wondering if “Asian Gothic” means something akin to a cultural expression of Asian religions.

PARK: I must have first used the term back in 2007, since “Asian Gothic” appears in the essay “On *Sindoan*: Some Scattered

Views on Tradition and “The Sublime.” Rather than Asian religions, it refers to the appearance of gothic culture in postwar or postcolonial societies when tradition is reconfigured in the contemporary moment, as I have mentioned earlier. “Gothic” here does not mean the Goths of antiquity, but rather the gothic genre of nineteenth-century literature and modern Romanticism; the elements of the grotesque in gothic novels such as Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* (1818) or in Emily Brontë’s works. The grotesque comes from the disparity between form and content. There are quite a few artists working with this trope in Southeast Asia. You can easily find elements of the grotesque in Japanese popular culture, especially in manga and film. I see it in China as well. For instance, Lu Xun’s works are riddled with the grotesque.

CHA: I think you used the term “Korean fantasy” before. During its release, *Manshin: Ten Thousand Spirits* was also introduced as a “Korean fantasy,” oscillating between fantasy and reality. Though Manshin Kim Keum-hwa is



Anonymous, *The Diamond Mountains*, 19th century, ten-fold folding screen, 123 × 594 cm. Private Collection. Photo: © Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art

now deceased, doesn't the film deal with the story of an actual figure? Which aspect of the film can be described as "fantasy"?

PARK: When you enter a shrine, you see paintings of shamanic gods gracing the walls. There are all kinds of gods there. I see these images as representations of fantasy from a bygone era. Many shamans are immersed in this world in of fantasy. They go on with their daily lives, but they interpret reality through their connection with gods, and so, they take their dreams seriously. I was curious about this. What kinds of images did they envision? For example, how did people from the past imagine outer space? What about paradise? Utopia is a Western concept, born out of sudden developments in technology. I once asked a worshipper of Donghak (Eastern Learning) to describe paradise to me. He went on to say, "A mountain over yonder, a pavilion, something about a pillar in a house with intricate roof tiles, and so on." He was only a generation ahead of me.

CHA: So is it your contention that an aggregate of such images, imaginations, or fantasies can constitute a cultural heritage?

PARK: Yes, I think those are crucial elements. Those things have lasted a long time. There's a hall set up like a shaman museum called Geumseong-dang near my parent's place. I told my mother to pay it a visit because I thought it would be fun, but she said no. When I asked why, she said she found the whole place ghostly and unsettling. The eerie dread implies the remnants of something. If the space is generic enough to not trigger such affect, then it means that there is a disconnection. As soon as I say that the paintings of shamanic gods are no different than ones found in coffee shops, the disconnection would be complete. We live in a Westernized culture—we wear suits, eat pasta, and drive cars, so I wonder if there's any point in even talking about what constitutes a nationalist and whatnot. But then again, is this not the task of art and literature? When we think of our growing

commodity fetish and the dizzying speed with which things circulate, the importance of art becomes even clearer. It's more than just a material relic of civilization. Besides, art is fun. For instance, we enjoy reading African or Latin American novels.

CHA: Perhaps, it is because Latin America had experienced an extended period of war and colonization, and because reality itself was in shambles, that magical realism was possible. Even though the history of colonization was shorter, I think there are experiences that are particular to the Korean peninsula.

### 3.11 FUKUSHIMA

CHA: The triple disaster of 3.11 in Fukushima came as shock to everyone, but you mentioned elsewhere that it had a particularly profound effect on you.

PARK: The news clips of the tsunami sweeping through the city felt like movie. I even surprised myself. With the news of the meltdown at the Daiichi nuclear reactor, I wondered why the only victim of the atomic bomb had developed a nuclear plant in the first place. The answer was so improbably simple that it bordered on the ridiculous. They suffered from it, so they developed it. This is yet another example of the cycle of colossal violence. In other words, the tragic case of Fukushima lies precisely in the repetition of national violence on such a global scale. And in this sense, issues like *Datsu-A Ron* ("Leaving Asia"), the Pacific War, and the US Occupation are still relevant.

CHA: You submitted a work related to the Fukushima disaster for the MMCA Hyundai Motor Series 2019 exhibition. Can you share it with us?

PARK: Yes. This is a video work incorporating autoradiography, which is an imaging technology invented by the photographer Kagaya Masamichi and Dr. Mori Satoshi of the University of Tokyo. Autoradiography is an optic technology that visualizes

marks of radiation on an exposed subject. The autoradiographic image of a butterfly is one among them, a subject from Fukushima bearing traces of radiation.



Kagaya Masamichi and Mori Satoshi, *Butterfly*, 2012, autoradiograph

CHA: There is an interesting account of representation in Jacques Rancière's *The Future of the Image* (2003). Rancière pointedly criticizes the culture of silence with regard to representing the pain of others after the Auschwitz. He contends that artists should still strive to represent suffering inasmuch as it is ineffable, since refusing to do so is tantamount to eluding reality. The book traces theories of representation from Plato to Aristotle. Why is it crucial to visualize radiation? I think it's important to represent the invisible; to bring into existence what may not even exist in our present reality.

PARK: We may not be able to see or touch radiation, yet it surrounds us. Because the gravest risks are diminished by this very invisibility, to make radiation visible is especially important. Of course, such visualization could also exaggerate its threats. Unfortunately, this kind of exaggeration is used to demarcate safe zones from danger zones. Another difficulty I encountered was the issue of describing the effects of radiation on nature. When I visited Fukushima last April, I was struck by the overwhelming beauty of the natural landscape, especially in the northeastern part of Japan. This was the first time I truly experienced the profound gulf between what is seen and what is known. The sky was clear and the air was remarkably fresh. Nevertheless, our Geiger counter was off the charts. In this sense, there is no representational device more apt than the Geiger counter. Although the machine is capable of quantifying the risk of radiation, it cannot compute the sense of disconnect between the scope of its power and the beauty of nature that persists in spite of it. For this reason, I would say that there are limits to representing only the damage of radiation. The disaster of radiation begets a different kind of issue in representation than the Auschwitz. This is violence on a nuclear level. In a way, the triple disaster in Fukushima is closer to terrorism insofar as there was no specific target; like collateral damage, the majority of victims were anonymous. Although autoradiography visualizes radiation, it is not a complete representation, for it can trace the effect only up to a certain level. The technology of representation is, then, defined by its own limitations, and like financial capital it is endowed with a highly abstract power. I believe it is this novel mode of power, mathematical and emotionless, that epitomizes violence in the contemporary era.

CHA: Many contend that only the experts can solve the nuclear issue, since it requires a high-degree of knowledge and expertise. For this very reason, I think it makes sense to visualize radiation even at the most basic level. Although

we are still grappling with complex questions, the priority should lie in understanding the nature of the disaster itself.

PARK: Yes, there is a saying, “It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism.” We are quick to imagine disasters before all else, and indeed, disasters play to our emotions. When an artist takes up the subject of disaster, there is an implicit posturing that suggests that they are to be taken seriously, that they are just. I find that a bit off-putting. Justice shouldn’t be monopolized, so I think would be more prudent to focus on the difficulty of articulating justice rather than claiming exclusivity.

CHA: The phrase “justice can’t be monopolized” reminds me of the last scene in *Manshin: Ten Thousand Spirits*, where Numse (the childhood nickname of Manshin Kim Keum-hwa) carries out a shamanic ritual, the *soegeolip*. Rather than focusing on an exceptional individual, I thought that the scene highlighted the solidarity of the common people.

PARK: The bells or knives used by the shaman are made from the pieces of metal collected during the *soegeolip*, so in a sense, the shaman reciprocates the alms back to the community. People form bonds through the sound of the bell, which is literally an alloy of metallic objects donated by each household. The meaning of offering in shamanic culture is completely different from the kind of indulgences practiced in contemporary religion, where prayers are carried out in a strictly individual dimension. Although *gut* has become more individualized today, in the past *gut* used to be a communal activity, like a village festival. This wouldn’t be possible today. People say that the Pride Parade is the closest thing we have now to a traditional festival, and although I have yet to attend one, I suppose this is true. I’m glad there’s something like that.

CHA: The word “love” is ubiquitous in popular music, but this conversation prompted me to think about a different

kind of love—love made possible by the convergence of historical time and transcendental time. It feels like our dialogue was in the spirit of Numse, who exchanged metals to bind a community. Thank you for the conversation.

PARK: Thank you. It was my pleasure.

(The interview took place in July 2019.)

Translated from Korean by Lee Hojong