IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME:
REDEFINING SOCIALIST REALISM IN POSTWAR NORTH KOREA

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In Search of Lost Time: Redefining Socialist Realism in Postwar North Korea

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ABSTRACT

This project examines developments in the field of visual art in the post-Korean War period of national reconstruction in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (1953-1960). In particular, I focus on the debates that arise within the emergent genre of Chosŏnhwa, a modernized mode of traditional painting in ink, that address the question of a North Korean mode of socialist realism. Based on editorial articles and round table discussion published in the art journal Chosŏn misul (1957–?) my project traces the dynamic positions held by artists, critics and historians on the relationship between the discourse of (socialist) realism and the role of Korea’s own aesthetic tradition within the development of a new mode of North Korean art in the socialist context. What transpires is a dynamic discourse on what constitutes or should constitute North Korean art in the contemporary era of socialism.
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Chapter One
Socialist Realism in a Contested Field

Introduction

In 1957, Kim Yongjun’s painting “The Dance (ch’um)” won the first prize in the category of Chosŏnhwa at the International Exhibition of Socialist Brotherhood in Moscow (fig. 1-1).¹ The subject of the painting is a female dancer, donning the traditional Korean attire of hanbok, with both her arms lyrically extended over her shoulders, revealing only her closed eyes, and her back slightly extended from the weight of her movement. The image of a woman caught in a moment of her art is set against a white background, save the traditional musical instrument only partially visible behind the woman to the right. The painting is a carefully executed work in the traditional medium of ink on rice paper and employs a minimal use of colour, depicting a subject that is at once recognizable as Korean. However, the image is also decidedly modern. The balanced proportion of the woman’s body, her unusual stance, and the undulating lines that suggest both movement and depth, all point to a composition that was created in dialogue with the wider discourse of modern art in the twentieth century.

This painting by Kim Yongjun was praised as one of the finest examples of Chosŏnhwa in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The work was celebrated not only for the dexterity with which the composition was executed, but also as an exemplar of national art in the postwar reconstruction of socialism. Accordingly,

the painting remains at the forefront of the canon of Chosŏnhwa in the art historical discourse of the contemporary DPRK today. But what were the criteria for Chosŏnhwa in the 1950s? What deemed this work an aesthetic feat over other works in the traditional medium of ink-and-brush painting? More precisely, what constituted Chosŏnhwa as an aesthetic category that was posited as simultaneously nationalist and socialist? This project will attempt to address these questions that were central to the development of the genre of Chosŏnhwa in this critical period of the postwar reconstruction of socialism.

The DPRK in 1957 can be described as a moment of transformation, one that sought to finally reconcile the jagged path towards modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, that included no less, decades of tension and upheaval under colonial rule (1910-1945) which itself was soon followed an ideological division of the peninsula. Thus, on the heels of a devastating civil war (1950-1953) that left both sides of the 38th parallel in ruination, both the DPRK and the Republic of Korea (ROK) were faced with the imminent task of rebuilding the nation after years, if not decades, of political and social turmoi. Alongside the urgency of providing housing for thousands of those displaced by the war, rebuilding infrastructure, nationalizing agriculture, in this period of postwar reconstruction, the visual arts were also construed as a critical site for realizing the socialist dream. Although ideology of socialism was the guiding principle under which the DPRK was founded back in 1948, the socialist enterprise – halted by the war and the chaos that ensued – was a project still in the process of becoming. This tumultuous history forms the backdrop of my inquiry, as I examine how the DPRK art world grappled with the questions of the nation, tradition, and socialism in their quest to
define a new mode of Korean art that would encapsulate both their past and the future, in the voice of the present.

The North Korean art world was not unique in facing an onslaught of questions about identity, nation, and art practice raised by conflict and colonization. These issues and the artistic approaches taken to them mirror similar developments throughout the globe during the mid-twentieth century. As such, the development of North Korean art can be understood as part of a larger process occurring throughout East Asia, Latin America and Europe. As a case study, the transformation of the longstanding traditional practice of ink-and-brush painting into a distinctly national and modern genre of Chosŏnhwa in the context of a shifting geopolitical order is particularly instructive. The struggle to (re)define Korean art in general, and Chosŏnhwa in particular, was a function not only of the competing interests and perceived rivalries between the North and South, and East and West, but also within its own domain of newfound space of the DPRK and the Socialist Bloc at large.

By focusing on Chosŏnhwa in its incipient stage, what follows is a critical analysis of one such articulation of this transformative process of redefining a new Korean aesthetics. The site of my inquiry is a panel discussion that was transcribed and published in the second issue of Chosŏn misul (Korean art), one of the earliest journals dedicated to visual arts in the DPRK. The emergent genre of Chosŏnhwa was the sole focus of the discussion and the debate that transpired among the diverse panel brings to light some of the most pressing questions of its day: How to define socialist realism? What constitutes tradition in this era of socialist modernity? How to visually express the “Korean essence”? The answers are as variegated as the panel and what we can glean
from this discussion is, at the very least, a snapshot of a discourse in the making, if not, a window into a dynamic artistic discourse at large.

My analysis of this debate is divided into two parts. The first of the two sections begins with a careful reading of how each of the panelists define the concept of realism in their attempt to propose new directions in the innovation of Chosŏnwha. What comes to the fore is the problem of tradition vis-à-vis different conceptions of modernity. By parsing the various ways in which the panelists define realism(s) and tradition(s) accordingly, I underscore the historical legacy of modernism in the postwar moment. The subsequent section focuses on the ways in which Korea’s own artistic tradition is invoked to posit a new definition of realism. Through a comparative analysis, I examine how the pre-modern practice of saŭi (寫意) is translated by the panelists, and in doing so I demonstrate the modernist underpinnings of their motivation.

As a way to contextualize my examination of the panel discussion in the ensuing chapters, the rest of this chapter will be devoted to explaining the genre of Chosŏnwha as it is presented in the art historical discourse of the DPRK today, followed by a literature review. I conclude this present chapter with an explanation of my approach to the topic of Chosŏnwha.

**Emergence of a Genre**

The category of Chosŏnwha, the modernized mode of traditional ink-and-brush painting, is touted as national art par excellence in the DPRK today. While the term itself, literally meaning Korean Painting, gained currency in the late 1950s in North Korea, the medium of ink-and-brush painting was the dominant mode in which painting in East Asia
was practiced until the late-nineteenth century and continued to develop into the twentieth century alongside the introduction of oil paint and Western techniques. In fact, until the mid-1950s, the term Tongyanghwa was used to differentiate the medium of ink from oil painting. The neologism of Chosŏnhwā and its manifestation as an overarching genre mirrors the ways in which Tongyanghwa was posited as an antithesis to oil painting’s Western origin and came to denote an encompassing category of all art executed in the medium of traditional ink-and-brush painting. Emerging from the rubric of Tongyanghwa, the category of Chosŏnhwā was conceived to be distinctly North Korean art – that is to say, it endeavored to distinguish itself from other competing practices in traditional ink that included no less practice in the same medium in the South, known as Han’gukhwā.

North Korean publications point out that the specificities of the genre were developed between 1954 and 1966 in correspondence with the speeches made by Kim Il Sung on the subject. The distinct style of Chosŏnhwā in both formal qualities and subject matter, however, does not cohere until the late 1960s and even then, the genre would later evolve. Today, the category of Chosŏnhwā denotes all paintings composed in the traditional medium of ink-and-brush painting and encompasses a wide range of styles as well as subject matter, from political portraiture to natural and industrial

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2 For more on Tongyanghwa in the pan-East Asian context, see Aida Yuen-Wong, Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China (Honolulu, Hawai’i: Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).

3 Other comparables are Guohua in China and Nihonga in Japan. For a fuller discussion on the influence of Japanese Nihonga in the formation of Guohua, see Yuen-Wang, Parting the Mist.

4 Speeches on Chosŏnhwā can be found in Kim Il Sung, Kim Il Sung chŏnjakechip (P’yŏngyang: Chosŏn lodongdan ch’ulp’ansa, 1971), 53. Also Cho In’gyu et al., Chosŏn misul sa vol. 2 (P’yŏngyang: Kwahak Paekkwasajŏn Ch’ulp’ansa, 1990), 53.

landscapes, to scenes of everyday life in the socialist state (fig. 1-2, 1-3). The genre of *Chosŏnhwa* comprises the majority of art being produced in the DPRK, more than double the artworks done in the medium of oil paint. Beyond the sheer number of works executed in the medium of ink, the popularity of *Chosŏnhwa* can be seen in its influence onto other media as well, including oil painting, woodblock prints, industrial design, and even ceramics (fig. 1-4).

Over the course of six decades, *Chosŏnhwa* was established as a discursive genre which the DPRK proudly showcases as a demonstration of the famous adage, “nationalist in form, socialist in content.” The contemporary description of *Chosŏnhwa* outlines this dual desire to articulate socialism and nationalism as a unified visuality:

The beauty and elegance of *Chosŏnhwa* is directly connected to the drawing technique of our tradition, which is clear and simple. Such technique can be found, above all, in lines as the basis of describing the object and expressing it. In general, forms in *Chosŏnhwa* are distinct, and lines are a special expression method that shows the object's form, motion, volume, and space. Another character of *Chosŏnhwa* is that it reflects the original color of the object and that the color is clear, light, and soft. [...] With respect to composition, *Juche* ideology is demonstrated in *Chosŏnhwa*'s use of distinctive elements for form. *Chosŏnhwa* has developed a technique of stress and omission for the purpose to reflect the essence of the object intensively, and its character is that all the objects represented on screen, from the center to the details, are painted distinctly. [...] Today, the field of *Chosŏnhwa* comprises works that befit the contemporary ethos, and excellent works that preserve the superb characters and at the same time remove the flaws of the past, are not only demanded by the Party but also beloved by the people. Establishing itself on the ground of socialist realism, *Chosŏnhwa* has been enlightened and developed into a popular and revolutionary art, which is *nationalist in form and socialist in content*. In addition, *Chosŏnhwa* is actively serving to arm the mass with the sole ideology of our Party [*Juche*],

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 According to Jane Portal, Mansudae Creation Company, the government sanctioned art studio, has an ink-painting department of 150 artists, much larger than the oil painting department, which has 60 artists. See Jane Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea* (London: Reaction Books and The British Museum Press, 2005), 151. Also, according to the Annual Report under the category of North Korean National Art Exhibition, there has been almost 6-fold increase in submission of art works in the medium of ink from 1957 to 1990, in contrast to 20% decline in oil painting submissions.
that is, to arouse the working class to the revolutionary struggles and the project of [socialist] construction (emphasis added).  

According to this excerpt, Chosŏnhwa is described less in terms of concrete technical attributes or styles than in terms of ideological underpinnings of a DPRK society. When we consider one of most celebrated and widely circulated images executed in the medium of ink, “Evening Glow at Kangsun Steelworks” (1973) by Chŏng Yŏngman, the “national form” as articulated by the official stance is difficult to identify and remains elusive to us (fig. 1-5). Moreover, despite the shared label of Chosŏnhwa, it stands in sharp contrast to earlier works in the same medium. Nevertheless, scholars in both the DPRK and abroad have identified this work as indisputably North Korean.

**Literature Review**

Scholarly interest in North Korea has had a wide following both within the peninsula and abroad, but in the past few years, this interest has been more diffused to include research on North Korean art and culture. English scholarship has seen a handful of publications dedicated to the study of North Korean art. Most recent works include a compilation of essays edited by Frank Rüdiger, *Exploring North Korean Art* (2010), Sukkyong Kim’s *Illusive Utopias: Theatre, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (2010), and the journal article by Min-kyung Yun, “North Korean Art Works: Historical Paintings and the Cult of Personality” (2012). However, in terms of a singular treatment of Chosŏnhwa, currently there is only one published article by Frank Hoffmann

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7 “Chosŏnhwa,” *Munhak yesul sajŏn* (P’yŏngyang: Kwahak paekkwasajŏn ch’ulp’ansa 1989), 732-733. All translations are mine, otherwise noted.
entitled “Brush, Ink, and Props: The Birth of Korean Painting” (2010), included in the edited volume by Frank Rüdiger. Hoffman’s article outlines the development of the genre from its emergence in the late-1950s to the present. While his undertaking of *Chosŏnhwada* is an important contribution to what currently remains a nascent field of North Korean art scholarship in the West, Hoffman’s approach to the topic is a familiar and one that merely echoes existing South Korean scholarship on this topic. Therefore, in order for us to gain a better understanding of the art historical discourse of North Korean art in general, and *Chosŏnhwada* in particular, it is important to assess the South Korean treatment of the North Korean art history and criticism. Focusing on the topic of *Chosŏnhwada*, what follows is a historical overview of key texts in the Korean language that comprise the field of North Korean art research. This section is divided into three parts: the Cold War period, the transitional post-Cold War period of the 1990s, and finally recent trends in scholarship dating from 2000 and onward.

**Cold War Era**

The four essays that comprise *North Korean Art* (1979), are penned by the distinguished art historians Yi Il, Oh Kwangsu, Yu Chunsang, and Yun Myŏngno. Published by the National Centre for Reunification, these essays are one of the earliest examples of art historical scholarship pertaining to North Korean art and are divided by themes, two of which deal with the subject of *Chosŏnhwada* specifically.

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9 Yi Il, “Pukhan ūi sahoejuujŏk sosiljuŭi silssang,” *Pukhan misul* (Seoul: Kukt’ongirwŏn, 1979); Oh Kwangsu, “Han’guk misul ūi chŏn’ŏng yangsik kwa Pukhan misul – t’ŭkhi Chosŏnhwada rŭl chungsim ŭro,” *Pukhan misul*, (Seoul: Kukt’ot’ongirwŏn, 1979). Yi’s paper examines North Korean art through the perspective of “socialist realism,” whereas Oh questions the legitimacy of
First is Yi’s essay, entitled “Socialist Realism in North Korea” (Pukhan ŭi sahoejuūijŏk sasiljuŭi ssilssang), which begins with the premise that socialist realism is not a real artistic genre. According to Yi, socialist realism as established in the first Soviet Artists Congress of 1932, amounts to nothing more than insertion of socialist content into an uncritical appropriation of academic style. But for Yi, North Korea takes this charge a step further as their translation of socialist realism enters a new realm of dogma which has been tainted by the idolatry of Kim Jong Il. The central critique of Yi Il’s overview is of the official artistic policy espoused in North Korea: “nationalist in form socialist in content.” This pronouncement harks back to Kim Il Sung’s speech on art back in the 1950s and is credited especially with the rise of Chosŏnhwa as the official state sanctioned national style in the 1960s and onwards. The main characteristics of Chosŏnhwa, the ink and brush painting techniques, were proclaimed to be “strong yet beautiful and elegant,” and “clear and concise.” However, Yi Il questioned how such characteristics could aptly represent one’s independent artistic style, or could be deemed aesthetics of the Korean nation. He writes, “tradition transforms continuously in conjunction with regional, temporal, and other conditions” and “despite certain commonalities, [tradition] cannot be simply reduced to standardization or uniformity.”

In this sense, according to Yi Il, “our” diverse and rich national identity (minjoksŏng) and

“national form,” Yu focuses on collective works of art through the binary of “individual and universal,” and finally, Yun outlines different technique, form, and genres found in North Korean art.

10 Yi Il, “Pukhan ŭi sahoejuūijŏk sasiljuŭi ssilssang,” 12.
12 Yi Il, “Pukhan ŭi sahoejuūijŏk sasiljuŭi ssilssang,” 12.
its colourful expression become hostage to and simplified under the dogma of socialist realism.  

Yi II’s critical position on North Korean art is echoed, if not, concreticized a decade later in the book, *North Korea’s Art* (Pukhan ūi misul) (1990), co-authored by Sŏ Sŏngnok. In line with his earlier thesis, the main claim of this book is that North Korean art and its privileging of the “narrative-centric position,” undercuts the formal qualities of its art. Probing deeper into the official line, Yi II argues that the search for national form in “realism” as opposed to national character – as prescribed by Kim Il Sung, is in itself contradictory from the start. According to Yi II, “realism, be it a reflection of reality or its re-presentation, can never become a national form (minjokjŏk hyŏng 'sik) in its own right.” In other words, for Yi II, socialist realism and national form can never be compromised.

The second essay to deal with the topic of Chosŏnhwa is by Oh Kwangsu, “Korean Art’s Traditional Style and North Korean Art – With a Special Focus on Chosŏnhwa” (Han'guk misurūi chŏnt'ongyangsikkwa Pukhan misul – t'ŭkhi chosŏnhwarŭl chungsimûro). This essay problematizes the “national form” by focusing on Chosŏnhwa as the state sanctioned national art. Oh Kwangsu begins by outlining the transformation of the discourse on Chosŏnhwa and identifies the turning point in its development to two speeches on art by Kim Il Sung in 1954 and 1965, whereby Kim Il Sung proclaimed to elevate the medium in 1954 and called for more a colourful development of the medium in 1965. Oh Kwangsu ascribes the pivotal shift in the practice of ink-and-brush painting to Kim’s 1965 speech where he called for the

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development of colour in the traditional medium. According to Oh Kwangsu, the North Korean art theory on colour is not equivalent to the creation of new aesthetics through dialectical progress, but instead, is no more than the product of Kim’s trivial aesthetic preference. However, he argues that Kim’s call for *Chosŏnhwa* to “evoke an aesthetic that is more flexible and soft, without harsh contrasts, but at the same time strong yet beautiful and elegant” have led to the tradition of ink and brush painting “eschewing of the cardinal laws of line and shadow, and instead relying solely on the technique of formless colour.” In addition to this so-called misappropriation of tradition, according to Oh, the dominance of *Chosŏnhwa* and its evaluation as the ultimate stylistic feat percolated into other genres of art, thereby effacing uniqueness of other media as well – a “tragic” turn of events indicative of socialism and (socialist) realism. Oh would go as far to charge North Korea of “distorting tradition and in turn obliterating the essence of Korean minjok.” As the title of this essay suggests, Oh separates the development of *Chosŏnhwa* from tradition altogether. For him, *Chosŏnhwa* is viewed an aberration that does not share the same lineage as traditional mode of aesthetics to be considered part of the same Korean tradition.

Written during the height of the Cold War the general approach to North Korean art is framed by the politics of its time. The tone of derision and even contempt in all four papers are not only symptomatic of its time, but simultaneously serve to legitimize and perpetuate the prevailing stereotype of the communist other. Moreover, as the product of

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16 Oh Kwangsu, “Han’guk misul ūi chŏnt’ong yangsik kwa Pukhan misul – t’ŭkhi Chosŏnhwa rŭl chungsim ŭro,” 71.
17 Oh Kwangsu, “Han’guk misul ūi chŏnt’ong yangsik kwa Pukhan misul – t’ŭkhi Chosŏnhwa rŭl chungsim ŭro,” 82-85.
18 Oh Kwangsu, “Han’guk misul ūi chŏnt’ong yangsik kwa Pukhan misul – t’ŭkhi Chosŏnhwa rŭl chungsim ŭro,” 90.
the National Centre for Reunification, the papers read more like a government sanctioned report than an academic inquiry into the artistic culture of North Korea. In other words, their findings are more politicized than art history. This is in part due to their holistic and ahistorical treatment of almost four decades of artistic production. Despite pockets of nods to historical developments (as was the case in Oh Kwangsu’s essay in particular), almost all of their analyses treat the entire corpus of North Korean art as a singular entity. Even when there are identifications of different modes of style, technique or even genre, these differences are understated to overemphasize the similarities within and between genres. The aim is to befit the common trope of all socialist societies as being homogeneous, or better yet, totalitarian in all manners. This premise is further concerted through the limited number of sources the authors chose to address in their research: speeches by Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and art theories that espouse an official stance. As a result, these works are read in conjunction with these texts and treated as literal manifestations of the purported doctrine.

It is not surprising then, that the two essays have been under scrutiny by subsequent art historians for being overtly anti-communist rhetoric and criticized for pandering to the initiatives of the Inter-Korea Policy. According to art historians Yi Yŏnguk and Ch’oe Sŏng’t’ae, *North Korea’s Art* (1979) “purposely distorts North Korean art to espouse a narrow-minded ideological goal,” and “based on a narrow premise of what constitutes North Korean art, materials are cherry-picked to abet this view.”19 These criticisms are both valid and necessary. Notwithstanding the obvious flaws in their work

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this initial study left an indelible mark on the subsequent scholarship on North Korean art.

Transition into the Post-Cold War Era

The end of the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a boom in North Korean studies that was decidedly different, if not, antithetical to the earlier generation of writings on North Korea. The anti-communist position, long held by scholars and cultural critics, was challenged by a new generation of writers who were deeply affected by the recent changes in both domestic and international politics. As the historian Yi Chŏngsŏk points out, these changes developed in tandem with the progressive movement known as “Proper Understanding of North Korea,” which sought to redress the myopia that plagued North Korean scholarship through a positivist and empirical approach to history. Spearheaded by left leaning progressive scholars, their interest in North Korean art coincided deeply with their activism in the political arena.

One of the earliest and most vociferous scholars to lead the initiative towards a new understanding of North Korean art was Yun Pŏmmo, who emphasized the importance of historicizing this moment of transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era. According to Yun, the end of the Cold War provided the context for this change,

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20 Notable on the international front was the fall of the Berlin wall (1989), which marked the end of the Cold War in the West and the subsequent reordering of global politics. But more importantly, it was the dramatic changes within the peninsula, led by the increased momentum of the democratic movement and its socio-cultural equivalent, the Minjung movement that provided the context for shift in attitude towards North Korea. In particular, the former president No T'aeu’s decree on July 7, 1988 calling for a more diplomatic relationship with the North and the rescinding of censorship placed on North Korean artists and writers in October of the same year, along with easing of North Korean sources, albeit in limited means, were significant political changes that facilitated this turning point in academia and beyond.

21 Yi Chŏngsŏk, Saero ssŭn hyŏndaе Pukhan ŭi ihae (Seoul: Yŏksabip’yŏngsa, 2000), 89-94.
and the alternative to the Cold War ideology is what he called, “the third world perspective” – a shift in discourse away from the polarizing worldviews of Cold War politics to (re)inscribing historical subjectivity of those who are marginalized by dominant powers.  

He sees the division of the peninsula not only as the product of Cold War, but also the politics therein reinforcing this divide. The only way to overcome this ideological and political divide for Yun, is through a new approach to understanding North Korea that underscores the commonality of the Korean nation rather than ideological differences. As a result, he saw the study of North Korean society and its cultural production as a necessary means towards reunification. If the preceding scholarship was conducted to impose and amplify the difference between the two cultures, progressive scholars such as Yun sought to underscore their commonality by postulating a definition of the nation that precluded the state. In the same volume, Yun published his first research on North Korean art entitled, “North Korean Cultural Policy and Ideology on Art” (Pukhan ūi munyejŏngch'ae kwa misul inyŏm) (1990). Here, he identifies three aspects of North Korean cultural policy that went hand in hand with the Juche ideology: party, labour class, and public. In Yun’s perspective, “chŏngjaron” and “sokdojŏn,” the two theories on art espoused by North Korea’s cultural policy are mutually constitutive and laid the foundation for the artistic iteration of Juche ideology. Yun also focuses on the development of Chosŏnha in this paper and sees “scenes of

22 Yun Pŏmmo, “Che 3 segye misul ūi chaeinsik,” Che 3 segyeŭi misul munhwâ (Seoul: Kwahak kwa sasang, 1990), 43.
23 Yun Pŏmmo, “Che 3 segye misul ūi chaeinsik,” 43.
24 Yun Pŏmmo, “Che 3 segye misul ūi chaeinsik,” 43.
25 This was the basic premise for Minjung Movement. For more on the relationship between the Minjung Movement and art, see Han Jin, Modernization and Nationalism: The Rise of Social Realism in South Korea (1980-1988), (PhD diss.: City University of New York, 2005).
26 Yun Pŏmmo, “Pukhan ūi munyejŏngch'ae kwa misul inyŏm,” Che 3 segyeŭi misul munhwâ (Seoul: Kwahak kwa sasang, 1990), 126.
colourful and cheerful landscapes and portraits with bright expressions” comprising the bulk of this genre. He argues that this is in part a reaction against the traditional art of the *yangban* class, which was dominated by representations of unrealistic subject matter.\(^{27}\)

Yun Pŏmmo’s decidedly positive, if not, bordering on apologist tone, gets retracted in his subsequent article, “Uniqueness of North Korean Art and the World of *Chosŏnhwa*” (Pukhan misul ŭi t'ŭkching kwa Chosŏnhwa ŭi segye) (1993). Written three years later, here, Yun’s earlier theory on “third world perspective” is replaced by a new approach, which emphasizes the importance of historicity and correction of perspective before undertaking of any critical analysis of North Korea. He asserts that “outright dismissal of North Korea without taking into consideration the society as a product of its exceptionalism is inherently flawed.”\(^{28}\) Instead, what is required of researchers is an objective understanding of its history and unique social formation before engaging in any type of criticism. With this in mind, Yun identifies the exceptionalism of North Korean art to be embodied in the genre of *Chosŏnhwa*, and its unique development into what it is today. For Yun, the most dire of problems in North Korean art is in the exceptional status *Chosŏnhwa* has come to assume over the years under the auspices of Kim Il Sung and later, Kim Jong Il. Compared to his earlier writing, this article takes on a more sober tone in analyzing North Korean art, and this is due to his attempt at a more objective criticism. Despite a deeper probing of the art field through a more nuanced and critical reading of North Korean sources, Yun’s claim for exceptionalism in North Korean art reproduces

\(^{27}\) Yun Pŏmmo, “Pukhan ŭi munyejongch'aeck kwa misul inyŏm,” 127.

\(^{28}\) Yun Pŏmmo, “Pukhan misul ŭi t'ŭkching kwa Chosŏnhwa ŭi segye,” *Pukhan yŏng'gu* (1993), republished in *Han'guk kũndae misul – sidaesŏng kwa chŏngch'esŏng ŭi t'amgu* (P'aju: Han'girat'ŭ, 2000), 462.
the same spatiotemporal distancing that anchored the writings by the earlier generation, albeit with different intention and inflection.

Wŏn Tongsŏk whose article was featured in the same volume edited by Yun, “North Korea’s Juche ideology and Juche Art” (Pukhan ū Juche sasang kwa Juche misul) (1990), examines the relationship between art and Juche ideology. Written in a similar vein, but Wŏn’s position is decidedly more critical than that of Yun Pŏmmo’s. Wŏn begins his examination with the premise that “in order to understand North Korean art, one must understand its society, and in order to understand North Korean society, one must recognize the ideological policy on art that animates this society.”

Wŏn Tongsŏk identifies the anti-formalist stance of North Korean art theory as its founding principle. Whereas formalism in western abstract art sought to separate content from form, Wŏn notes that North Korean art espouses the opposite, that is, an emphasis on content over form. As a result, art is evaluated in accordance to its historicity as well as for its narrative content and subject matter. According to the author, this led to the gradual elimination of literati style landscape paintings and its place, the revival of colour painting (彩色畫). But the problem, as Wŏn states, lies in not only the elevation of Chosŏnhwâ at the expense of marginalizing other modes of art, especially the medium of oil painting, but also the technique of Chosŏnhwâ becoming the frame of reference for all art, thereby effacing all traces of individual style distinct to each medium. As later art historians have pointed out, most of these writings on North Korean art from 1989 to 1990 did not have direct access to visual materials and this is evident in their over-

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reliance on official texts rather than images themselves.\textsuperscript{31} This proved to be a serious limitation to their research, which was acknowledged by Yun Pŏmmo and Wŏn Tongsŏk to certain extent.

Research on North Korean art in the late 1980s and early 1990s marked a significant shift in both rhetoric and approach from the earlier writings featured in \textit{North Korean Art} from 1979. The blatant anti-communist ideology that framed earlier research was problematized by the new generation of writers, who sought to eschew the Cold War bias for objective scholarship. However, this proved to be more an assertion than demonstrated through their research. Almost all the writings come to the same negative, value-laden and sweeping conclusion as their predecessors – that North Korean art is “uniform and monotonous,” “remains hostage to ideology,” “ignores form for the sake of narrative content,” and is “no more than propaganda of official art.” As was noted earlier, one of the main reasons for such continuity was due to limitations in sources, not necessarily what became available, but what the authors chose to consult. Moreover, just like their predecessors, most of the authors in this period also treated the North Korean art field as undifferentiated both in historic and qualitative terms. Even if there were differences, as evinced by different types of genre, they chose to rely on the official text to guide their reading of the visual material. I believe this is, in part, symptomatic of a presentist reading onto the past and an over reliance on text that expounds the all-encompassing ethos of the \textit{Juche} ideology. Rather than approaching these texts with a healthy dose of skepticism, the authors subscribe to the written theories without question, and instead, imbue these texts with absolute authority. Even in some of these authors

\textsuperscript{31} See Yang Hyŏnmi, “Pukhan misul yŏn'guŭi hyŏnhwang kwa kwaje,” \textit{Han'guk yesul chonghakkyo nomunjip} vol. 3 (2000).
attempt to salvage North Korean art from the binding Cold War ideology, the postulation of North Korean particularity as something exceptional and unique unfortunately reproduces the same Orientalist logic they endeavoured to break away from.

In this context, the work of art historian and critic Ch’oe Yŏl stands out as an anomaly. Best known for his support for the Minjung Art Movement in the 1980s, Ch’oe incorporates a more direct approach to challenging the deep-seated anti-communist ideology that underpinned South Korean scholarship. He emphasized the urgency of a truly objective art historical methodology when dealing with North Korean art, that is, facilitating an understanding of the North Korean art field (both production and consumption) as a whole, and engaging in the aesthetic discourses that abound at the most elemental level.  Ch’oe’s Yŏl starting point is the questioning of the conventional wisdom that “all North Korean artists internalized the prescriptions of the Party and practiced accordingly (emphasis added).” As he sees it, a better understanding of North Korean culture shares the same goal of “national cultural movement,” which seeks to foreground the ethnic nation (minjok) to emphasize the power of collectivity” and “the building of national (minjok) culture with the goal of imminent reunification in mind.” According to Ch’oe, the failure to take this into consideration would mean relegated the study of North Korean culture to satisfying mere curiosity at best, or at worst, further cleave the two states.

Ch’oe Yŏl suggests that art fields that emerged in both Koreas after the division should not be considered as two distinct and separate expressions of one nation; rather, he

32 Ch'oe Yŏl, “Pukhan misul ŭi naeyong kwa hyŏngsik,” Han‘guk kŭnhyŏndae misul sahak – ch‘oe’eyŏl misul sajŏnsŏ (P’aju: Ch’ŏngnyŏnsa, 2010), 738.
33 Ch'oe Yŏl, Minjung misul ŭi iron kwa silch‘ŏn (P’aju: Tolbægi, 1991), 252.
34 Ch'oe Yŏl, “Pukhan misul ŭi naeyong kwa hyŏngsik,” 730.
posits that we should understand these differences as varying modalities within the same (one and only) national form, conveying only different aspects, levels, and speed of development. As an advocate and an activist for the Minjung Art Movement, it does not come as a surprise that Ch’oe’s theories on Minjung Art which places the unity of the ethnic nation over the governing state, percolates into his work on North Korea, and vice versa. For example, his analysis of North Korean art focuses on the artist collectives and art for the masses. North Korea’s theory on collective artworks – that “collective works of art seek to remove the seeds of outmoded ideas such as individualism and selfishness, liberalism and conservatism, passivity and mysticism,” Ch’oe Yŏl assertion is not inherently different from theories on collaborative art espoused by the cultural movement in South Korea.

Ch’oe Yŏl’s assessment of North Korean art theory is not entirely positive. He finds contradiction in their rejection of the tradition of landscape paintings as remnants of feudalism. He points out that court painters like Kim Hongdo (b. 1745–1806) from the Chosŏn dynasty, who is both revered and popular in the North, was not only indebted to this tradition, but also devoted much of his practice to the art. But for Ch’oe, what remains at stake is the development of realism and its place in contemporary society. As Ch’oe sees it, realism can only be understood historically, from its beginnings in the nineteenth century, to its transformation in the colonial era, to what it is and could become in the future. The emphasis on realism as an historical accumulation brings

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35 Ch'oe Yŏl, Minjung misul ūi iron kwa silch'ŏn, 286.
36 For more on the Minjung Art Movement in the 1980s, see Han Jin, Modernization and Nationalism: The Rise of Social Realism in South Korea (1980-1988), (PhD diss.: City University of New York, 2005).
together two aspects of Ch’oe’s research, socialist realism of North Korea on the one hand, and the Minjung Art of the South on the other.

To be sure, Ch’oe Yǒl’s writings on North Korea is not without problems: it is overtly politicized, even more than Yun, and at times his arguments are overstrained to posit a deliberate link between North Korean art with the political aesthetics of Minjung Art. However, Ch’oe’s methodological concerns – historical objectivity, social history of art – seem well ahead of his time and even prescient. As others have pointed out, Ch’oe’s sobering call for the future direction of art history in South Korea was made years after the excitement and curiosity surrounding the novelty of North Korean art of the early 1990s subsided. After the string of articles, exhibitions, and criticism by both pundits and amateurs alike flooded the art scene, the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s witnessed a slowing down of the momentum in scholarly engagement with North Korean art.37 However, after the respite, starting in the mid-2000s, the field of art history began to see a new trend in the study of North Korean art, and it is to there most recent works on North Korean art we turn next.

**Recent Trends since 2000s**

The most notable shift in the scholarly field of North Korean art was a methodological one that sought to de-politicize scholarship from the earlier generations. One of the most ambitious publications to mark the new turn in North Korean art historical scholarship in South Korea was Yi Kuyŏl’s book, *50 Years of North Korean...

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37 There are several reasons for this sudden fatigue, including the waning of Minjung Cultural Movement, return of the anti-North Korean sentiment following a nuclear crisis, and to a lesser extent, the socio-economic changes in the domestic front spawned by the Asian financial crisis.
Art (Pukhan misul 50 nyŏn) (2001). Not only was it the first monograph of this length dedicated to North Korean art, but it was also a comprehensive study of North Korean art from the end of the colonial period to the present, accompanied by an impressive number of illustrations in colour. As the author notes, “this book seeks to provide a historical overview of the development of art in North Korea in the past 50 years by considering the institutional organization and party policy, the absolutism of Kim Il Sung’s doctrine, historical examination of status of artists and artworks, the emergence of Juche realism in the 1970s, and the shift in artistic policy under the leadership of Kim Jong Il.”

By employing all available North Korean archives accessible in South Korea, Yi Kuyŏl strives to present all the primary visual sources in the most objective way. As a result, this book remains the most comprehensive overview of North Korean art.

However, in terms of the topic of Chosŏnhwa more specifically, Pak Kyeri’s research stands out for her historical engagement with art on a micro-level as well as her structural analysis of the visual material. Her earlier full-length study is “A Study on the Theory of Art of Kim Il Sung-ism” (Kim Il Sŏng chuŭi misul ron yŏn’gu: Chosŏnhwa sŏngnip kwajŏng ŭl chungsim ŭro) (2003), is a detailed analysis of debates that abounded leading up to Kim Il Sung’s now infamous speech that called for “the development of Chosŏnhwa through the emphasis on colour.” According to Pak, this period was marked by the theoretical struggles between the critics Kim Yongjun and Ri Yŏsŏng, who advocated the continuity of tradition on the one hand, and the reinterpretation of tradition, respectively. This debate was foundational to the development of Chosŏnhwa and the contention between the two critics led to the division of traditional modes of ink painting into types – landscape painting and colour painting. Kim, who was an ardent traditionalist

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38 Yi Kuyŏl, Pukhan misul 50 nyŏn (P'aju: Tolbaegi, 2001), 20.
in support of the landscape tradition, was charged as a reactionary and was relegated to the margins of the North Korean art world. As a result, Pak writes, “the tradition of landscape painting was framed as remnants of feudalism and gradually eliminated altogether, thereby paving the way for the rise of portrait centered colour paintings (in traditional ink) that employed western mode of painting (shading and perspective) to become the stock character of Chosŏnhwa in the Kim Il Sung era.”

Pak Kyeri’s other major research, “Treatise of Fine Art of Kim Jong Il-ism and Change of North Korean Fine Art: with an Emphasis on 'the Method of Painting without Drawing Outline' of Chosŏn Painting” (Kim Jong Il chuŭi misul ron kwa Pukhan misul ūi pyŏnhwa – Chosŏnhwa molgolpŏp ūl chungsim ūro) (2003) shifts the focus to yet another moment of seismic shift in North Korean art. In her reading of the Kim Jong-Il era, Pak Kyeri traces the stylistic transition from colour field painting to portraiture in formless ink paintings. Pak notes that the attitude towards formless ink painting takes a dramatic turn in the late 1960s and into the early 1970s; despite its dominance in the preceding years, this mode of painting was now regarded as being feudalistic, which in turn led to the revival of the tradition of landscape painting in the art world. According to Pak, this shift occurred in part due to the desire to diversify stylistic options for contemporary artists working in the medium of ink. She writes, “the hitherto disregarded tradition of landscape painting and its diverse technique was revived in order to provide a wider mode of expression for the artists to choose from.”

Pak Kyeri’s research stands out for her careful reading of official texts, not necessarily against the grain but seeing within it the subtle nuances. Rather than broaching the topic of Chosŏnhwa as an undifferentiated and ahistorical genre, her historical engagement is one that brings to the fore the dynamic discourses that surrounded the production of art.

Three decades since the first scholarly publication on North Korean art, the state of the field of North Korean art has evolved in various trajectories. The blunt rhetoric of Cold War ideology is no longer the parlance with which North Korean art gets narrated and serious attempts have been made by scholars to push the field forward. Recent trends in the study, especially in South Korea demonstrate this most clearly. However, English scholarship on North Korean art still remains in its infancy, especially with respect to inquiries into the early moment of the DPRK, before the rise of Kim Il Sung and Juche ideology. Indeed, this is also true for the field in Korean language scholarship.

My project began with my asking how art and artists functioned in the postwar DPRK, a period of socialist reconstruction before the emergence of the cult status of Kim Il Sung and Juche ideology swept the society. How did the cultural elites define national identity against the backdrop of a socialist modernity? How did they negotiate Korea’s colonial legacy in this struggle for definition of a new Korea in the post-division era? What is socialist modernity and how was it envisioned by the people of DPRK during this moment of transformation? These are some of the overarching questions that have framed my approach during the process of my research.
By focusing on the postwar moment in the late 1950s as site of my inquiry, my goal was to examine the cultural discourses that transpired as part of the larger process of realizing socialist modernity in its incipient stage. Rather than approaching this moment as a precursor to the rise of Kim Il Sung, I examine this period of reconstruction with all its potential in mind. More specifically with respect to production of culture, it is my goal to situate the North Korean art field within the broader discourse of a global modernity. For these agents of culture, the North Korean art world did not exist in isolation. Rather, artists and writers were fully aware of their positionality within the global ebb and flow of history. As much as North Korea’s capitalist counterpart sought to create artwork that was modern without the ideological qualifier of “capitalist,” North Korean elites also sought to create works that captured the modernist ethos beyond the borders of the Korean peninsula or the Eastern Bloc, but with the world in mind. Thus, my aim is twofold: first, to situate North Korean art as part and parcel of the larger discourse of modern art; second, by underscoring the dynamism of the postwar period I seek to undercut the dominant narrative of particularism ascribed to the DPRK. With these problematics in mind, my project is an investigation of one such site where discourses converged and ideas contested in the quest to define the past and envision a future through the lens of the present.
CHAPTER TWO

REDEFINING (SOCIALIST) REALISM THROUGH CHOSONHWATradition’, by the way, I take to be not some aesthetical sort of cultural gene but a specifically discriminating view of the past in an active and reciprocal relation with a developing set of dispositions and skills acquirable in the culture that possess this view. \(^{41}\)

Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*

Introduction

In 1957, the first issue of *Chosŏn misul* (Korean Art) opens with an editorial piece entitled, “The Path for Our Art: Presenting the inaugural issue of *Chosŏn misul*” (Uri misul ūi naagal kil: *Chosŏn misul* Ch’ang’ganho rŭl naenoŭmyŏnsŏ), penned by the renowned oil painter and art critic Chŏng Kwanch’ŏl. In a celebratory tone, the editorial piece heralds a new era in the visual arts and lays out not only the aims of the journal, but also the future direction of the visual arts in the new republic. Chŏng Kwanch’ŏl begins the piece as follows:

In the historic atmosphere that the first five year plan for the economy of the people has been launched, Korean Art has taken the first step as an organ of the Korean Association of Artists, thanks to the deep care of the Korean Labour Party and the government of the DPRK. Was there any time under Japanese rule when, like today, cheers of joy, inspired and wise, engulfed the mountains and fields of our country? […] In retrospect, the achievements of our art for the last 10 years, which was completely rooted in the cultural policy of the party, are shining brightly. Towards a more brilliant development of our arts, the third convention of the Korean Labor Party and the general meeting in August suggested all the tasks

that will embody, more faithful, deep, and high, the heroic struggle of the Korean people and their proud living and beautiful inner world. [...] Our art has to keep developing a resolute ideological struggle that opposes counter-revolutionary bourgeois art theory, and by firmly establishing the socialist realism techniques, our art will fight against all kinds of expressions of naturalism and art for art's sake. [...] This would be achieved only by the effort of artists themselves who will penetrate deeply into the creative labor and real life of workers in order to grasp the essence, and learn their thoughts and emotion through experience, and express it through the active and touching form. 42

Ch’ong Kwanch’ŏl’s piece, beginning with words of gratitude to the Korean Labour Party and generously peppered with rhetoric of socialist optimism, reads like any other editorial writing one would expect from the DPRK. However, if we take a closer look at Ch’ong’s writing, there is a clear emphasis on historicity and the critical juncture that his contemporary moment finds itself within the telos of history: the publication of Chosŏn misul is, first and foremost, aligned with the five-year economic plan, the colonial past is acknowledged albeit as a distant memory, and finally, envisions what the visual art of future ought to look like under socialism. The present moment is what anchors both past and the future, and according to Ch’ong, the goal of art is then to convey this presentness with unflinching faithfulness to the doctrines of socialist realism.

But what exactly is this contemporary moment – a lens, through which the past is assessed and the future envisioned? North Korea in 1957 was in a moment of transformation. On the heels of a devastating civil war and a year into the five-year plan, North Korean society found itself in the midst of a whirlwind of changes. 43 The concerted goal of establishing a socialist state transpired against the backdrop of the

ensuing Cold War on the international stage. There was also the added urgency of shedding the remnants of its colonial past within the peninsula vis-à-vis the South, a matter both imminent and critical. In this moment of postwar reconstruction, visual art was construed as an important site for implementing the political ideology of socialism.44

Chŏng’s editorial to the inaugural issue of Chosŏn misul echoes the importance of this artistic enterprise when he writes: “Chosŏn misul will become one of the key elements in successfully realizing the tasks that are ahead of us.”45 And to achieve this goal, aesthetic principles of socialist realism are marked as the most representative and effective mode of art to visually articulate the socialist present. In fact, ever since the North Korean Workers Party (NKWP) gained political power in 1946, under the auspices of the Soviet occupation, socialist realism was pronounced as the only acceptable mode of aesthetics in the new state.46 While the Soviet Union provided the template for the structure and edifice of cultural policy, the translation of socialist realism in the DPRK

45 Chŏng Kwanch’ŏl, “Uri misul ŭi naagal kil,” 3.
46 More precisely, DPRK adopted V. I. Lenin’s advice in his famous article, “The Party Organization and Party Literature,” as the axiom of its literary policy: “Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.” Taking into account that the Red Army represented the decisive voice in molding North Korean political structure during the post-war period, one would not be surprised to find out that Soviet Influence was quite pervasive in the newly born system. Consequently, A. Zhadanov’s interpretation of socialist realism became the guiding rule of the literary control framework of North Korea. (Zhadanov demanded that writers “must produce an educational literature, intelligible and acceptable to the people, saturated with the ideas of the Party and loyal to the program of the Party”). For more on the role of Soviet Union in the cultural front, see Lim Hyun-soo, “Soviet Influence on the Literary Control Policy of North Korea, 1946-1950,” Sino-Soviet Affairs 12.4 (1989), 177-193.
was neither singular nor passive. Rather, the famous adage, “realist in form, socialist in content,” which became the shorthand definition for socialist realism, took on a distinctly local inflection in the DPRK: “nationalist in form, socialist in content.” However, like its earlier iteration, the interpretation of this decree was hardly as uniform as one may be led to believe, especially in the DPRK with its own storied legacy of aesthetic practices and reception that includes the tumultuous encounter with modernism under colonialism.

What constituted socialist content? What did nationalist form entail, and by extension, what made a form realist? But the most urgent question remained: what was socialist realism in this newly constructed space called the DPRK?

The answers to these questions were varied and the difficulty with which socialist realism could be visually articulated was exacerbated through the category of tradition. How to consolidate Korea’s own aesthetic heritage with the socialist realist discourse of the contemporary moment? Furthermore, socialist realism had its own legacy to contend with vis-à-vis the broader category of realism that preceded the ideological scion of socialist realism in 1930s Soviet Union, as well as realism’s own historical manifestation within the Korean peninsula. Realism, to be sure, was one of the most contested notions


49 Here, I am referring to the category of realism as historical accumulation that which harkens back to its earliest iteration in visual arts and literature in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century to its practices during the colonial period of early twentieth century to what realism entails after modernism. Included in this broader historical understanding of realism is also the genre of socialist realism. For a clear overview of realism in the visual arts, see Linda Nochlin, Realism (London: Penguin Books, 1971); in literature, see Nancy Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); with respect to realism in colonial Korea, see Sunyoung Park, “Colonial Origin of Korean Realism and Its Contemporary Manifestation,” positions: east asia cultures critique 14.1 (2006), 165-192.
in twentieth-century Korea and elsewhere. Long before artists and art critics of the DPRK upheld the imperative that “art reflects life,” artists and writers of earlier generation had already propagated a new form of visual and literary art to recapitulate lived experiences in its immediacy. Therefore, what comes through in their endeavor to redefine socialist realism through the prism of the nation is necessarily a return to the broader discourse of realism and the longstanding question of how to define a new Korean realism in the global art context.

The task at hand for the art world in the postwar DPRK was, then, twofold: firstly to create a visual lexicon that would be simultaneously legible as Korean and socialist, and secondly, to redefine a realist tradition that was in accordance with modernist vision of socialism. The challenges confronting the arbiters of culture came to the forefront most poignantly in the debates that centre on the emergent genre of Chosŏnhwa. What we find in the period leading up to the articulation of Chosŏnhwa as a decidedly national aesthetic category is a diverse and contested field in its own right, demonstrating a broad spectrum of pictorial language that resisted an easy definition. What follows is a close reading of one of these sites of conversation that brings to the fore the aspiration and apprehension that characterized this early moment of a socialist state in the making.

Published in the second issue of Chosŏn misul the panel discussion entitled “Tradition and Innovation of Chosŏnhwa” (Chosŏnhwa ŭi chŏnt’ong kwa hyŏksin), from 1957 offers a window into the dynamic discourse of this period. The 24-member panel comprised key figures in the North Korean art world – from artists working in the

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medium of traditional ink to those working in oil, to art historians and critics alike. Divided into two parts, tradition and innovation, the discussion meditated on not only the future direction of the Chosŏnhwa as an aesthetic category, but also the question of how to deal with tradition against the backdrop of a new ethos of socialist modernity. The conversation that transpired in the panel discussion speaks to the ambiguity, or rather, the long legacy of realism within the peninsula that precedes the division. What is striking is the variegated ways in which socialist realism was defined by each participant; equally striking, or perhaps more revealing, is the curious absence of the concept of socialism in their definition of realism. While ideology is invoked by some as means to differentiate the past from the present (socialist era), in terms of what is to be accepted into the canon of North Korean art history, the criterion of socialism is much more elusive. This is in stark contrast to what would later become the dominant rhetoric with which socialist realism would be defined and practiced in North Korea (Juche Realism).\textsuperscript{51} Thus, what comes through in the ambiguous definitions of realism, and Chosŏnhwa by extension, are the multiplicity of answers to the question of how to image and imagine a new socialist state.

**PART I: So many realisms to choose from**

The panel discussion begins with the task of defining tradition through the lens of realism. What begins as a critical reevaluation of tradition veers organically, if not necessarily, towards problematizing the category of (socialist) realism itself. Art critic,\textsuperscript{51} On Juche Realism see Nam Chaeyun, “1960-70 nyŏndae Pukhan Juche sasiljuũi hocwha ŭi inmul chŏnhyŏngsŏng yŏn’gu,” Han’guk kŭnyŏndae misul sahak 19 (2007), 114-138; Pak Mirye, “Pukhan Juche misul ŭi suryŏng hyŏngsanghwae e kwanhan yŏn’gu,” Nambuk muhwa yesul yŏn’gu 4 (2009), 75-114.
Han Sangjin opens the discussion with the following statement: “I believe the question of what aspect of our classical heritage should be preserved and how is key here.” The prominent oil painter Min Pyŏngje contextualizes Han’s point more specifically to what is at stake in the new socialist moment. He writes:

The term classics could entail works from the past in totality but what we are talking of today refers to the creation of outstanding works from the past; thus the problem is what to accept in accordance to the methods of realism. Should we accept only works in realist mode, or consider all works of art from that past that are outstanding, or even if they are deemed outstanding should we disregard it if it falls outside of [socialist realist] direction of today? The question of canon, that is, what constitutes great art, is invariably one that brings ideology to the fore. Not surprisingly, none of the participants contest “realism” as the defining method with which North Korean art and art history should be narrated. However, there is little consensus in how each interprets the ideological underpinning of realism or its formal expression. For Min Pyŏngje, outstanding works of art from the past are realist in that they are already filtered through the taste cultivated by socialism. He writes: “I believe that what we deem classical or outstanding already convey socialist elements [soyo] (emphasis added).” Works from the past that preceded Korea’s socialist revolution do not pose a threat in defining what constitutes realism of his contemporary moment. Rather, Min Pyŏngje places his emphasis on extracting realist elements from the past artworks and relegates the task of imposing the contemporary understanding of realism onto the past both anachronistic and unnecessary. He continues:

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52 Panel Discussion, “Chosŏnhwa ŭi chŏnt’’ong kwa hyŏksin” (Tradition and Innovation in Chosŏnhwa), Chosŏn misul 2 (1957), 12-18.
We cannot say whether *Kangsŏ Taemyo Sasindo* is realist or not. That is why I believe we cannot simply determine whether one is realist or anti-realist. It is my contention that what is realist, or to what extent realist elements are included, is what needs to be problematized. Things of the past, especially classical works should not be measured against the standards of realism today. When considering the problem of fantasy, if these images are of the people *[inminjŏk]*, can it not be realist? If allegories or legends are alive with people’s sentiments, that should be deemed realism (fig. 2-1).  

Min Pyŏngje’s more inclusive position towards tradition was echoed by other members on the panel, including Kim Yongjun, one of the earliest champions of *Chosŏnhwa*. For Kim the defining character of realism lay not necessarily in the subject matter, but rather in the relationship between the artist and the subject. Realism is practiced through a deeper understanding of the subject, that is, its inner character. He writes, “When we consider *Chosŏnhwa* from the past, for example, *Kangsŏ Taemyo Sasindo*, can we say that because it does not depict reality realistically, it is not realist? But if the composition is based on careful examination and observation (by the artist) we should see it as realist.”  

For the panelist and art historian Ri Yŏsŏng as well, subject matter does not solely merit the status of realism. Though, staking out a different position than Kim Yongjun, Ri Yŏsŏng’s criterion hinges on the formal quality of the artwork. According to Ri, the artistic feat of Buddhist sculpture of *Sŏkkuram* elevates the subject beyond the realm of the occult to realist: “To transform granite stone into a form of man wherein you can feel his body heat, in this respect, the successful merging of form and content makes this work realist (fig 2-2).” In other words, as long as the work conveys the real in the phenomenological sense, then the work is realist.

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Despite the more discursive view of tradition in light of a more expansive pronouncement of realism, both spatial and temporal, other panelists disagreed. For someone like Kim Musam, a fellow panelist and art connoisseur, the aesthetic category of realism was and should remain uncontested. He asserts: “The broadening the category of realism in order to enrich the classics seems to be Ri Yŏsŏng’s opinion but I can’t agree with this point. One cannot impose when there is nothing for the sake of enrichment.”

Similarly, others proposed a view of realism that sought to redefine the real in terms of an uncompromising “order of mimesis,” including Kim Ch’angwon, another notable practitioner in the medium of ink-and-brush painting. He writes: “Images of lies should not be depicted. Images of dragons or angels are ideological products of the past so even if they resemble animals in real life, they do not exist in reality, and thus I see it as anti-realist. What I want to deem realist is materialization of what is observable with our own eyes.” While differences in the worldview of the present to that of the past was conceded by others, for Kim this past was rendered incompatible with realities of his contemporary moment, and as a result, imposing the category of realism onto the past was not only anachronistic, but also intellectually and morally reprehensible. Such a radical view was not necessarily new in the history of (socialist) realist discourse.

59 The term “order of mimesis” is drawn from Christopher Prendergast, The Order of Mimesis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1-3, 25-34. Also see David Der-wei Wang, Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernity’s in Late Qing Fiction, 1949-1911 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 45-46, Wang defines the term as “a moral and formal imperative to regulate or even ‘police’ the way one sees and writes the real in the name of objective representation.”
51 Earlier architects of socialist realism, who was later branded and dismissed as reactionaries included the avant-garde artists Kazimir Malevich, who in protesting the Communist Party’s attempt to secure and save old Russian art works wrote the following: “Life knows what is doing, and if it is striving to destroy one must not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us. In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of
fact, this call for a clear break with tradition was the dominant discourse of modernism since the late-nineteenth century.  

**East versus West?**

But the question remains, how should Chosŏnhwŏ look to reflect the contemporary ethos of the postwar socialist DPRK? If tradition is rendered problematic, how do you transform a medium that was ideologically constructed as antithetical to the modern, and yet still convey contemporaneity without sacrificing its form? At the centre of this debate is the value of the Western mode of painting in the development of Chosŏnhwŏ. Western modes of painting are here confined to the medium of oil paint and the discussion centers around the technical merits of oil painting vis-à-vis the traditional aesthetics of ink-and-brush painting. Should ink painting emulate oil painting in order to better convey three-dimensionality? If so, does the technique of oil painting, a decidedly foreign medium and styles, lend itself to the translation of the “Korean character” into traditional medium of ink? The question of style and form returns to the earlier problematic of tradition, and here, two competing views emerge. On the one hand there

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are those who embrace the technique of oil painting and propose a synthesis of styles in the development of Chosŏnhwa, while, on the other hand, there are those who find ample examples in the Korean painting tradition for a realist innovation.

According to panelists like Ri Yŏsŏng, there is much to be gleaned from the tradition of oil painting, and more importantly, this openness towards incorporating technique of another medium is not in opposition to the continuing legacy of Chosŏnhwa. With respect to the advancement of conveying three-dimensionality in oil painting, Ri writes: “This is why Western art’s techniques of expression should be studied and simultaneously we should examine the paintings of our ancestors more profoundly to develop the genre in its own right. This is why ancestors are not merely ancestors of our forebears, and thus we need to rethink it as works of art with a unique form of expression.” Ri Yŏsŏng’s consideration of tradition of oil painting in the development of Chosŏnhwa is in line with his earlier definition of realism. More revealing, however, is his attempt to incorporate the tradition and practice of what has hitherto been understood to be outside the parameters of Eastern art. Be it the European master Rembrandt or Chinese literati painter Ren Bo-nian (任伯年), for Lee, all constitute the same tradition that is instructive to the development of Chosŏnhwa (fig. 2-3, 2-4).

For Kim Musam as well, there is value in looking outwards to develop Chosŏnhwa as a realist genre. He writes, “This is why today we identify and improve its positive aspects and likewise, in the realm of art, we should supplement what lacks and improves it.” The lack Kim Musam invokes here is none other than what he views as the failure of the traditional mode of ink-and-brush painting to capture “three-

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64 Panel Discussion, “Chosŏnhwa ūi chŏnt’ong kwa hyŏksin,” 12-18.
dimensionality” as sufficiently as the medium of oil paint. His standards for realist aesthetic is here defined solely by technical attributes, such as use of light, volume, and perspective, and it is in oil painting’s technical aptitude for verisimilitude that which he views as more compatible with goals of realism. While he acknowledges the merits of both mediums, the question of how to innovate Chosŏnhwa as a modern, (that is, a realist) genre lies in overcoming what he sees as the burden of aesthetic tradition that privileges subjective expression over faithful representation of the object being depicted. Not surprisingly, Kim Musam’s emphasis on verisimilitude is consistent with his refusal to broaden the category of realism, a definition of realism that hinges on the primacy of the visual. He continues, “Regardless of whether the painting is Eastern or Western, works of art are never completely immune to flaws ... The importance lies in the problem of how to accurately represent the object being depicted in the most faithful and objective sense.” In terms of Chosŏnhwa, the overarching goal becomes then, its ability to convey verisimilitude, irrespective of origins.

On the other end of the spectrum is the director of the newly established Central Museum of History and a fellow panelist Hang Uk, who warns against the merging of influences. This concern is also framed by how tradition of ink-and-brush painting is posited alongside, or rather, within the rubric of realism. He suggests, “If we stray from the tradition of Chosŏnhwa and instead strain to look for lines in reality, it could result in mutated (deformed) expressions.” Hang Uk continues, “Of course, we should look for lines in reality but before that, if we stay true to the tradition of Chosŏnhwa and continue

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65 Within the context of this discussion, “three-dimensionality” stands in for techniques of achieving verisimilitude.
our search, then the seeds of realism will surely emerge from this tradition.” 67 Sharing Hang Uk’s views, Kim Yongjun who also expresses hesitation towards appropriating Western techniques in the advancement of Chosŏnhwa. Kim Yongjun asserts, “I think three-dimensionality can be sufficiently expressed in Chosŏnhwa. There are Eastern artists abroad who employ Western techniques to express three-dimensionality, and although this is done with good intentions, I see it as a failure. In order to add shade they blot ink onto the face, and this only messes up the painting.” 68 Unlike Kim Musam who equates verisimilitude with realism, Kim Yongjun refuses to privilege oil painting as the only medium that can aptly convey realism. As it was stated earlier, his criteria for realism is much more expansive, and his definition of the “real” less an ontological given than a cultural construct. For Kim Yongjun, past works Sodang Yi Chae-gwan’s Yaksan Ch’osang (fig. 2-5) and Kam-yŏ’s portrait of Yi Che-hyŏn Ch’osang (fig. 2-6) are few among many examples of art that demonstrate realism within the long tradition of ink-and-brush painting in Korea, and accordingly, the development of the genre should remain within the parameters of what already exists in Korean tradition, not elsewhere.

Of the long list of artworks and artists invoked in this discussion, only two contemporary works that fall under the category of Chosŏnhwa are brought into the discussion. The two works, Chŏng Chongyŏ’s “Digging” (Kuljin) and Yun Chunsu’s “General Kim Il Sung at the Battlefront” (Chŏnsŏn ŭl sŏch’al hasinŭn Kim Il sung wŏnsu), are presented as most recent examples of current stage of Chosŏnhwa. In their appropriation of technique of oil painting, which is here understood in terms of both colour and three-dimensionality, these paintings are scrutinized by panelists on both sides

of the debate. It was noted that, Chŏng Chongyŏ’s painting, which depicts a scene of
digging, had caused much debate within the field for its liberal use of colour – a
technique uncommon in traditional mode of ink-and-brush painting (fig. 2-7). For the
staunch advocate of tradition like Kim Yongjun, such experimentation with colour only
demotes the “essential quality” of Chosŏnhwa and he advised against it. On the other
hand, Kim Musam defended the work for its appropriation of techniques of oil painting,
yet found the work shy of a true innovation in expanding the vocabulary of Chosŏnhwa.
Similarly, Yun Chunsu’s rendering of Kim Il Sung’s facial features was problematized
for its all too real portrayal of Kim’s image. According to the panelists, the “hyperlrealism” of Yun’s work reduced the painting to the realm of photography and a mere

copy.

In many ways the anxiety surrounding the merging of influences is not unique to
this particular moment in the postwar DPRK. Rather, such conflicting views – to borrow
the title of the panel discussion, “tradition” versus “innovation,” epitomized the discourse
of modern art ever since the introduction of oil painting in East Asia in the late-
nineteenth century. From the outset, the debate has been framed in binary terms with
Western techniques of representation of oil painting assuming the position of the so-
called “modern” on the one hand, and the preexisting modes of representation in East
Asian visual culture, as exemplified by ink-and-brush painting, as “tradition” on the other
hand. However, artistic production and consumption since the late-nineteenth century

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69 Since reproduction of the painting under consideration by Chŏng Chongyŏ is unavailable the
image provided in Fig. 2-7 is a close comparable by the same artist in terms of formal aesthetics.
70 For a general overview, see John Clark, Modern Asian Art (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i
71 See Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the art of
Twentieth Century China (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), John Clark, Modern Asian
and into the twentieth century elided these oppositions as artists and writers endeavoured to not only reconcile western practices with indigenous one but also, above all, strived to create a new visual language that would best represent its respective contemporary ethos in a new global context. The challenge of defining modernity relied on these arbitrary categories, but, to borrow Maxwell K. Hearn’s words, “the demarcation between the modern and the past has a jagged edge defined both by specific historical events and by gradual shifts in attitude and style that are more difficult to pinpoint in time.”

While Hearn’s words describe the conditions of modern art in China, they also resonate quite aptly in the case of Korea. In the context of the postwar DPRK, however, the earlier binary of “traditional” versus “modern” is transfigured into new a geopolitical configuration based on ideology as “socialist” versus “capitalist,” at least from the standpoint of the official discourse. But even within this different, yet equally vague dichotomy, the debate surrounding Chosŏnhwâ reverts to the earlier problematic of modernism, that is, how to re-define Korean realism.

In her careful examination of the development of Chosŏnhwâ, South Korean art historian Pak Kyeri, too, frames the debate in terms of a binary: “traditionalist” versus “reformist,” with Kim Yongjun representing the traditionalist and Ri Yŏsŏng figuring as the voice for the reformist. According to Pak, the development of Chosŏnhwâ can be

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Art (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1998); Aida Yuen-Wong, Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006); Josh Yid ed., Writing Modern Chinese Art: Historiographic Explorations (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2009).


traced back to the theoretical debate between these two figures and attributes the
subsequent division of the genre into distinct types, landscape painting (水木畫) and
colour painting (彩色畫), as necessarily emerging from the aforementioned contestation.

Despite Pak’s nuanced reading of the historical discourse surrounding the development of
Chosŏnhwa, her analysis is invariably filtered through the lens of the present; that is to say, the division of the genre and the debate that preceded it is narrated from the foresight of Kim Yongjun having been marked as a reactionary for his espousal of traditional aesthetic in the years following the shift in political discourse. Pak writes, “the tradition of landscape painting was framed as remnants of feudalism and gradually eliminated altogether, thereby paving the way for the rise of portrait centered colour paintings (in traditional ink) that employed western mode of painting (shading and perspective) to become the stock character of Chosŏnhwa in the Kim Il Sung era.”

Although Pak is right to point out the unfortunate conclusion to this particular saga in the art history of the DPKR, I remain wary of identifying Kim Yongjun and his theoretical inclination in the same language as the art historical narrative of posterity. Instead, I would argue that to read Kim Yongjun’s position of advocating Korean’s aesthetic heritage as simply “traditionalist” in contrast to Ri Yŏsŏng’s more Westward leaning theory as “reformist,” not only reproduces the official rhetoric of the state, but more importantly, it undercuts the modernist impulse that undergirded Kim Yongjun’s art theory that which harkens back to the colonial period. As John Clark explains, “The use

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75 Pak Kyeri, “Kim Il Sŏng chuŭi misul ron yŏn’gu,” 300-301.
of the word ‘tradition’ to characterize art works often involves the ideological self-definition of works by, or on behalf of, a social group who are instrumentally bound to legitimize their own stereotyping of the past. Such groups systematically exclude the actual historical variation in the past by their present reconstruction of it.”  

Similarly, the overarching label of “traditionalist” fails to fully capture Kim’s longstanding preoccupation with the question of the nation in visual, aesthetic terms; but perhaps more crucially, it denies the accumulated knowledge (and appreciation) of Western modernism Kim shared with those who postulated a different path to the innovation of Chosŏnhwa.  

In fact, I would posit that even Kim Yongjun’s search for a realist vocabulary within Korea’s own artistic heritage was driven by a desire no less modernist than his contemporaries who embraced Western mode of realism, a point I will expand on in the next section.

Returning to the panel discussion then, underlying the opposition is less about East versus West, than about different ways of understanding and problematizing the contested field of realism in search of a uniquely Korean art. Be it Kim Musam, who willfully ignored the multiple conceptions of realism in favour of an uncompromising adherence to a single paradigm, mimesis, or those more inclined to interpret realism as a discursive enterprise like Kim Yongjun and Ri Yŏsŏng, the overarching goal for all the panelists was clear: to find the language of a new Korean realism. To put it differently, the question becomes, not only how to define, but also where to find the language to best articulate this new Korean realist aesthetics. Whereas some panelists such as Ri Yŏsŏng

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78 I am referring to Kim Yongjun’s earlier theories on art, especially with respect to his activities as member of Korean Artists’ Proletarian Federation (KAPF). Kim emphasized the importance of learning Western art to advance Korean modern art.
and Kim Musam sought to import realist techniques from the West, for someone like Kim Yongjun and Hang Uk, the locus of realist tradition was interpreted as not necessarily foreign but located within indigenous practices. This attempt to expand the notion of realism, not merely to include the medium of ink-and-brush painting within the broader rubric of realism but reframe Korea’s own aesthetic tradition as having been already realist, is most pronounced in the reconsideration of *saũi* (寫意), an aesthetic concept that can be traced back centuries in East Asian art discourse. Despite the seeming recourse to the dangerous terrain of “tradition,” Kim Yongjun and Hang Uk’s invocation, or rather, their selective appropriation of the tradition via *saũi* is a means to define a uniquely Korean realism that still leaves open the possibility of its functioning as part of a uniquely Korean modernity, and it is to this we turn to next.

**PART II: More than What Meets the Eye – The meaning of saũi in DPRK**

‘Influence’ is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experience and the influential beholder will wish to take into account.  

Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*

Hang Uk and Kim Yongjun’s position is one that endeavors to find an indigenous mode of realism within Korea’s own tradition, and their defense of tradition of ink-and-brush painting is telling. To emphasize this point, they turn to *saũi* (寫意), a pictorial genre and mode of execution that can be traced back to the thirteenth century or earlier,

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depending on how we frame the narrative. 

It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a detailed genealogy of saūi and its conceptual evolution in the historical discourse of East Asian art. Suffice it to say, literally meaning “sketching of an idea,” in its traditional usage, saūi implies an underlying assumption that such painting serves only as a means – by way of highly abbreviated, sketchy forms – to evoke conceptual overtones and spiritual resonance beyond tangible property. In contrast to the technical craftsmanship of professional artisans, with its painterly interest in verismilitude, saūi mode (or more commonly referred to as literati painting), and its emphasis on expression of untrammeled feelings, was practiced by scholar-amateur artists and over time appropriated as part of a scholarly pursuit. In terms of formal qualities, privileging of interiority over external form led to bold brushstrokes and splashy throwaways becoming the stock character of literati paintings in the saūi mode (fig. 2-8). But it is also worth noting that at times, the emphasis on scholarly taste justified lesser efforts to masquerade as respectable works in the name of evoking the “spirit” (fig. 2-9).

How is saūi, an aesthetic practice long associated with the literati pastime compatible with modernist discourse of realism, let alone the ideological underpinnings of a socialist DPRK? With its prevalence and popularity among the literati class,

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81 For a detailed history of evolution of the term, see Mikko Hirayama, Restoration of Realism, 9-68.
paintings in the suī style did, in fact, enact as a potent signifier for the culture of upper echelon of a politically and socially stratified ancien régime of the pre-modern era.

Moreover, in light of the encroachment of a Western mode of realism into the East Asian art practices, specifically late nineteenth century Academic Realism, the schematic and almost abstract formal expression of the suī style of painting was posited as not only an antithesis to realism (and its purported goals of re-representing the “real”), but also incongruous with the enterprise of modernism at large.

According to the art historian Eugene Wang, in the early twentieth century, literati painting and its invocation of suī (Ch: xiéyi) became the flash point in the debate between “reformists,” those who advocated verisimilitude of Academic Realism, and “traditionalists” in East Asia. In the context of China, Wang writes:

Radical reformers held that the codification of brushwork at the expense of modeling led to a diminution of creativity and the consequent degeneration of Chinese painting in late imperial times. Enlightened ‘traditionalists,’ on the other hand, saw sketch conceptualism as a point of contact between time-honored Chinese literati painting and Western modernism, and hence argued against its rejection or the radical ‘modernization’ of Chinese painting. For many young Chinese artists, sketch conceptualism [K: suī, C: xiéyi] was the aspect of Chinese tradition that they were most able to capitalize on and explore in their attempts to appropriate or internalize European modernist models. It was also where

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83 Eugene Wang, “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency,” in Chinese Art: Modern Expressions, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 107. In the context of early twentieth century China, Wang writes: “Kang Youwei, a noted political reformer held that Chinese literati painting, with its preference for sketchy conceptualism [suī] over professional craftsmanship, was responsible for the decline of Chinese pictorial art which Kang thought paled in comparison with Western art. His solution was to return to the realistic style of the art of the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Cai Yuanpei reached the same conclusion from another route. Compared with Western art, Cai argued, Chinese art emphasized conception and copying rather than the depiction of actual external appearance. He considered Western painting more advanced by virtue of its affinity with science. To modernize Chinese art required, according to Cai, the infusion of a ‘scientific’ spirit by way of verisimilitude.”
demarcations between ‘traditionalism’ and ‘modernism’ were most likely to founder and unravel.\textsuperscript{84}

As it was in China, radical reformers in early twentieth Korea also saw literati painting, with its preference for saũi over professional craftsmanship, as incompatible with the modernist ethos.\textsuperscript{85} Underlying their hostility towards saũi, was the conviction that historical progress was propelled by advances in science and technology. Western realism, with its linear perspective and illusionist devices, was seen as technologically more advanced, whereas the traditional ideals of quietude, eremitism, and self-cultivation evoked by saũi in literati paintings appeared to be increasingly out of sync with the emotional and political needs of Korean intellectuals during the tumultuous years under colonialism. Indeed, as Kim Musam’s adamant stance demonstrates, such a radical view continued to hold sway decades later, now reframed under a different geopolitical context of the Cold War.

Although painting in the saũi mode was limited to the genre of literati painting with few exceptions,\textsuperscript{86} within the debate waged between the radical reformers and the so-called traditionalists, saũi came to represent the practice of ink-and-brush painting in its entirety. To be sure, traditional literati painting was only one typology among many different modes of representation in East Asian visual culture, as Academic Realism was all but one stylistic genre in medium of oil paint. To put it differently, saũi, both as a concept and style, became a synecdoche for tradition of East Asia vis-à-vis the modernity

\textsuperscript{84} Eugene Wang, “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency,” 104.
\textsuperscript{85} In terms of literature, Yi Kwang-su on literature demonstrates this radical view on break with tradition. See Hwang Chongyŏn, “Nobul, ch’ongyŏn, cheguk – han’guk kundae sosorŭi t’onggukkagan sjak,” Sanghŏ hakpo 14 (2005), 263-297.
of the West. It is not surprising then that the discussion on *Chosŏn* would engage is the meaning of *saŭi*, at the very least for the medium of ink-and-brush painting alone was a signifier for what it was not, that is, the West.

But for someone like Kim Yongjun and Hang Uk, the division was less clear-cut than the polarizing views of Kim Musam and his radical reformist predecessors would assert. On the contrary, Kim Yongjun and Hang Uk’s position was one that saw in *saŭi* an opportunity for a new mode of a distinctly Korean realism – that is, simultaneously modern and national in origin. By invoking *saŭi* through emphasis on lines of *Chosŏn* as its essential character, what has hitherto been posited in opposition to the tenets of realism, was now reframed in this debate as something inherent to realism.

Hang Uk explains: “It seems like there are those who claim that because *Chosŏn* is in the mode of *saŭi* (*saŭijŏk*) it cannot approach realism, but I don’t agree with this stance. I see *saŭi* as a genuine attitude in the pursuit of reality.” Echoing Hang Uk, Kim Yongjun adds, “I believe the highest stage of realism to be the *saŭi*.” Rather than merely the form (*sahŏng*: 型) dictating realism as a category, for people like Hang Uk and Kim Yongjun, *saŭi* is invoked as something that exists beyond what meets the eye, and therefore more real than the mimesis of form. Hang Uk’s defense of *saŭi* against such a narrow definition of realism is worth quoting at length. He explains:

> The structure or shape, in other words, outline of an object, too, is an expression at the tip of the brush after a going through the process of planning in one’s mind, by this, it means that it is not the form of the object that one copies directly, but rather it is the essence of the object or the genuine effort to grasp the oneness of

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89 According to Eugene Wang, traditional terms such as *xieshi* and *xieyi* were used interchangeably to explain Western concepts of “realism” and “conceptualism” in early twentieth century China. See Wang, “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency,” 111.
one object with another. Realism is not merely an exact replication of form. This is why I don’t agree with the position that without appropriating techniques of oil painting Chosŏnhwang cannot establish realism. The question becomes then the need to strengthen the basic principles of Chosŏnhwang (emphasis added). 90

In redefining not only the formal aesthetics of realism, but also its essential meaning in this way, the advocates of the traditional mode of ink-and-brush painting sought to insert Korean tradition into the existing canon of realist tradition, which had been up until now defined as a foreign entity.

To be sure, there were those who were uneasy appropriating both the concept and practice of not just any precedent but especially one that was thoroughly embedded within the culture of the elite in this new era of socialism. Speaking to this discomfort, the panelist Chŏng Hyŏnuk contends: “When speaking of preservation of heritage we need to consider the following. Traditional lines consist of many ideological aspects. In other words, the problem lies in whether we should take in the lines drawn by our ancestors uncritically or not. The paramount issue, here, is that lines should emerge from strong risûnok’ŭ, that is which hails from reality.” 91 Arguing alongside Chŏng Hyŏnuk the art critic Han Sangjin also denounces saŭi as an aesthetic category incompatible with demands his contemporary moment, and articulates it as a failure: “I cannot agree with this apparent notion that “saŭi is at once realism.” He continues, “Not only saŭi but material form (sahyŏng) should also follow. In the past, in conforming their views to the doctrines of saŭi, artists ultimately sacrificed form.” 92

But to those who find affinity for realism within saŭi (or vice versa), the ideological association with the pre-Revolutionary era is merely a circumstance of history,

not inherent to the practice itself. For Kim Yongjun and Hang Uk, saũi is not necessarily antithetical to the goals of neither socialism nor realism. On the contrary, in emphasizing the interiority and the relational aspect of the practice, they (re)interpret saũi as a means to reveal a deeper truth, that which is articulated as the ultimate goal of realism. Again, invoking saũi through the metaphor of lines, Kim Yongjun explains, “What line is, is the basis with which one understands the essence of the thing depicted and the expression of its content.”

Echoing Kim, the panelist and fellow painter in medium of ink-and-brush painting, Ri P’alch’an also contends, “The lines manifest in our Chosŏnhwa are lines that schematize objects or lines that are simplified. This is why the scope of this line is infinitely broad and big.” And indeed, for these panelists the scope of realism is broad and fluid enough to incorporate saũi as a necessary ingredient in completing the enterprise of defining a uniquely Korean realist aesthetics.

Perhaps more importantly, I would argue that underlying this debate is saũi’s capacity for not only the real, but also the modern. To evoke a pre-modern notion to make a claim for the modern may seem like a paradox. But if we probe deeper at the ways in which Kim Yongjun and others re-conceptualize saũi against the backdrop of global trends of modern art, the case for a modernist aesthetics shaped by their own modernist desire comes to the fore.

Saũi – towards a new paradigm of the real

If we follow the general understanding of modernism as a radical shift in paradigm around the beginning of the twentieth century against the authority of tradition, we find that Western modernists and their East Asian counterparts were confronted by

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different traditions, and overcoming tradition also meant different tasks. European modernism broke away from the mimetic illusionism by constructing a utopian purism of subjectivity and sensation. Reformers of East Asian art, however, faced a different burden of tradition. The primacy of spiritual vision and anti-illusionism that European modernism was working hard to create was precisely the burden of saūi in the literati tradition that modern-minded East Asian radicals were trying to unload. In fact, if Academic Realism was envisioned as the needed corrective to what was perceived as the moribund tradition of East Asian painting, it was this very tradition that was constructed as anathema to European modernism that which sought to renounce verisimilitude for a more subjective orientation, a determination that echoes the aesthetic precepts of saūi. But, as the art historian John Clark points outs, “One’s traditionalism is another’s modernism.” This curious historical paradox was precisely how the discourse of modern art emerged under the context of colonialism in Korea and the aforementioned debate should be approached not as a break, but a continuation of a historical problematic at work.  

For Kim Yongjun and others who advocated saūi as a viable mode of realist aesthetics, the tradition of saūi was framed not as an antithesis to the modern but instead, as a means to articulate the modern in a familiar, native tongue. By reframing the definition of realism as an enterprise that sought to probe at a deeper truth that lay beyond

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96 John Clark notes that “techniques or styles such as salon realism, which were conservative or reactionary in their originating cultures, could be radical in effect if not always in the artists’ intentions in their culture of transfer.” See John Clark, “Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art,” in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. by John Clark (Sidney: Wild Peony, 1993), 6.
97 See sections on modern art under colonialism in Ch’oe Yŏl, *Han’guk kunhyŏndae misul sahak* (Kyŏnggi-do P’aju-si: Ch’ŏngnyŏnsa, 2010).
what meets the eye, not only were they seeking to, (for a lack of better word), indigenize realism, they were also calling into question a singular, and outmoded conception of realism that put a premium on the primacy of vision. The modernization envisioned by radical reformers at the turn of the century did in fact conceive realism as a practice in the authentic re-presentation of the real that privileged certain ways of “seeing,” which was purportedly more scientific than their predecessors. But underlying this new mode of seeing is nevertheless a belief in the seamless contiguity between imaginary vision and corporeal sight, artistic form and lived experience, the observer and the observed. Even if one were to subscribe to the logic of a temporal lag in transference of modernism, by this time in the postwar DPRK when the panel discussion was taking place, the discourse of modernism had already run its course; and surely for people like Kim Yongjun who have grappled with the problematic of modernism for decades, the historical residue of preceding realisms was thoroughly understood. Therefore, from the outset Kim calls into question this earlier iteration of realism, when he asks, “In a way, wasn’t mere copying, that is, [paintings that emulated] photography believed to be realist?” Even Kim Musam, the staunch proponent of realism in the mode of Academic Realism criticized the painting by Yun Chunsu as “hyper-realist” and claimed that the all too real

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99 See Pak Kyeri, “Kim Yongjun úi p’uro misul ron kwa chŏnŭi misul ron,” 211-247. For an example of Kim Yongjun’s writing, see “Chŏnt’ŏnŭi chaeŭmmi” Kŭnwhŏn Kim Yongjun chŏnjip 5: Minjok misul ron (Seoul: Yŏrhwadang ch’ulp’an, 2001), originally published in the daily Tonga ilbo (January 14-16, 1940).

portrayal of facial features reduced the painting to the realm of photography, a mere copy.  

Beyond evoking an indigenous tradition, the appeal of saūi in its emphasis on interiority and immediacy, also reveals a deep-seated mistrust of vision. In this sense, it is not merely a coincidence the medium of photography enters the discussion on realism. In fact, photography has not only shifted the visual paradigm – that is, ways of seeing the world also ourselves in it, the purported truth to the medium shaped the realist discourse since its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and in the Korean peninsula in the decades that followed. Although an in depth analysis of the relationship between the advent of photography and the development of realist discourse in both visual and literary arts would be helpful, it is beyond the scope of this present study. However, it may be worth turning to Nancy Armstrong for some clarity. In her discussion of Victorian fiction, Armstrong offers four propositions meant to “re-conceptualize literary realism in relation to the new medium of photography”:

1. **Proposition 1**: By the mid-1850s, fiction was already promising to put readers in touch with the world itself by supplying them with certain kinds of visual information.
2. **Proposition 2**: In doing so, fiction equated seeing with knowing and made visual information the basis for the intelligibility of a verbal narrative.
3. **Proposition 3**: In order to be realistic, literary realism referenced a world of objects that either had been or could be photographed.
4. **Proposition 4**: Photography in turn offered up proportions of this world to be seen by the same group of people whom novelists imagined as their readership.

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2. For more on early practices of photography in Korea, see Ch’oe Injin, *Han’guk sajinsa, 1631-1945*, (Seoul: Nunbit, 2000).
As Armstrong points out, the order of these four propositions underscores “the process by which fiction and photography authorized each other.” 104 Although Armstrong’s investigation is centered on the development of Victorian literature, similar logic was at work in the visual arts. But what constituted visible materialization of the DPRK at this time of postwar socialist reconstruction? How to make “Korean essence” (minjōksŏng) legible through Chosŏnhwa? It is precisely this mutually binding relationship between photography and representation in realism that Kim Yongjun sought to destabilize through the invocation of saũi.

By problematizing the discourse of realism that relied on the primacy of vision as the only means to translate the real, Kim Yongjun’s posited a different mode of realism that emphasized interiority over external form through a framework that was already at his disposal, saũi. The turn to saũi as a more appropriate mode of expression for a new Korean realism is, I would argue, not necessarily a reversion back to tradition but a tactical response to modernism. On the one hand, saũi allowed them to articulate a modernist desire for subjectivity without antagonizing the ideological underpinnings of socialism, and on the other hand, it provided them with an indigenous framework to give form to the “Korean essence” against the backdrop of the visual hegemony of a preceding realist tradition, one which was critical at this moment of socialist reconstruction.

The precepts that underlie saũi, such as its emphasis on unmediated expression of interiority and subjective orientation, find parallel motives in European modernism of the early twentieth century. 105 Indeed, East Asian artists had already experimented with

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104 Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography, 248.
105 As Eugene Wang points out, “apologies for traditional Chinese literati painting often justified its relevance to modern times on the ground of its spiritual affinity –its intensely subjective orientation and determined renunciation of verisimilitude – with European post-Impressionism,
translation of saũĩ into their practices of modern art. If realists sought to ascertain the real through a visual order that was photographic in nature, the modernist that followed looked for the truth in what lay behind the image. According to Nancy Armstrong, the modernists’ conception of the real was a reaction against the kind of visual primacy realism sought to encode. For the modernists, she writes, “What was most real was not something we could understand simply by looking at it.” Armstrong explains:

To put it simply, the modernist concept of authenticity was a post-photographic way of imagining one’s relations to the real […] I describe modernism accordingly, as a set of techniques that related identity on the other side of the image and sought to reveal what was there before realism misrepresented that more primary reality of self and object.

Armstrong’s explanation of the modernist enterprise could easily stand in for Kim Yongjun and his fellow panelists, whose call for saũĩ was equally motivated by a desire to move beyond representations of external form in their search for authenticity. In the context of the postwar DPRK, however, this authenticity was the expression of a national character, “Korean essence,” which they hoped could be made legible in the lines of Chosõnhwa.

This underlying desire for authenticity was fuelled by yet another kind of anxiety of vision, or more precisely, anxiety of vision in a new world order. Like the modernists who sought to “distinguish authentic artistic expression from those art forms which made

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Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism” Eugene Wang, “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency,” 103.

See Eugene Wang’s analysis of paintings by the artist Chang Xu in “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency,” 114-26.

Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography, 244.

Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography, 246.
themselves accessible to ordinary consumers,” the task for North Korean artists was to distinguish their art from other modes of art executed in the same medium of traditional ink-and-brush painting, not only within East Asia, but also within North Korea’s Other, the capitalist South. As the panelist Ri Sŏkho points out, “In Chinese or Japanese or Korean art, they all use the same strokes (sŏnjo: 線影) in the drawings. I’ve been drawing for this long but I still cannot differentiate how strokes in our [North Korean] art differ from others.” Sharing this anxiety is the panelist Pae Unsŏng, who concedes, “I think Chosŏnhwa should be an art that can carry its own uniqueness in any place. I regret the fact that this is what currently lacks in [Chosŏnhwa].” But what exactly is this uniqueness that currently lacks in Chosŏnhwa? How to parse the visual ambiguity between strokes of Korea, Japan, or China? For someone like Kim Yongjun, it was in the aesthetic practice of saŭi he saw a way to overcome this anxiety of vision. According to Kim, one can understand and find Korean essence through saŭi: “What line is the basis with one understands the essence of the thing depicted and expression in its content.” Echoing Kim, art critic and panelist Kim Ch’angsŏk also contends that the pursuit of interiority in saŭi is also a practice in discovering the genuine character of the Korean nation that photography belies:

The problem lies in the fact that even in landscape or flower paintings, it should express the essence of [Korean] people’s national character. To represent [Korean] people’s national character in a picture is to find the national character of our art. Material, medium, technique, are all part and parcel of efforts to construct [our] national character. The national character – this is a foremost a problem of ideological content. To emphasize once again, without expressing national character there is no national character in art. If we are to consider the

109 Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography, 246.
issue of the essence of saūi in connection to this, if paintings are to distinguish itself from photography and to become a genuine work of art [saūi] is necessary. Great works of art from the past may seem simple but there exist within these works undercurrent of philosophical mediations. This inner stream is not merely a stream that flows but within it we can find our national character that embody the great mountains and rivers of [Korea]. This is why saūi and realism is inextricably bound together (emphasis added). 113

This anxiety of vision is paradoxically underscored by the emphatic call for visualizing the Korean essence, its national character, and I would argue that the call to return to saūi is invariably linked to the question of the nation. 114 To be sure, the aesthetic category of saūi is a shared tradition among other East Asian nations, and for many artists and critics, including the ones partaking in this panel discussion this overlap was a poignant source of anxiety impeding the project of achieving a distinctly (North) Korean aesthetics. But for Kim Yongjun and Kim Ch’angsŏk, the personal touch and emotional immediacy, the qualities that characterize saūi, are precisely what is needed in this time of a new nation state in the making.

Saūi – the modernist paradigm?

Kim Yongjun and his fellow panelists’ invocation of tradition as an a priori category may be misleading in making us believe that they are simplyrediscovering the past; but isn’t tradition one but many products of modernity? Rather, it is my contention that the call for saūi is not a reversion to the pre-modern, but instead their appropriation of tradition is a tactical means of asserting a narrative of continuity of the past, present,

114 In addition to invoking traditional practices and concepts of saūi, preservation of material culture under the rubric of “national heritage” was critical enterprise for both Koreas after the division. For more on the South Korean context, see Christine Hahn, Surfaces of Sand and Stone: Unearthing the Origins of Modern Korean Painting in the Archaeological Remains of the Past (PhD diss.: University of Chicago, 2009).
and future. To borrow Armstrong’s words, the return to tradition is “an aesthetic strategy rather than its cultural objective.” Therefore I would argue that Kim Yongjun’s position is not a “traditionalist” for he eschews certain modes of realism with Western origins. On the contrary, his viewpoint is thoroughly “modernist” in that his understanding of what Korean art should look like in his contemporary moment is informed by an accumulation of artistic traditions and discourses from both East and West, pre-modern and modern. As Devin Fore argues in his study of realism in the interwar years in Europe, the return to the human figure in visual art and literature in the 1920s was not a reversion to traditional realist representation and its humanist postulates, but realism was invoked as a strategy of mimicry that was necessitated by historical circumstance. Fore writes:

> Although it is true that interwar art mimicked and repeated the methods of figuration used in earlier eras, there is nothing perforce reactionary about strategies of mimicry and repetition in and of themselves. As the philosopher Ernst Bloch argued in his contribution to the interwar debates about the ‘cultural heritage’ (*Kulturerbe*), the recycling of aesthetic forms is hardly the same thing as their ideological reinstatement.  

In a similar vein, Kim and his colleagues did not uncritically reinstate its pre-modern predecessors by returning to the aesthetic vocabulary of *saũi* nor were they advocating the same ideological underpinnings of *saũi* as it was practiced in the past. Instead, by reinterpreting *saũi* through the lens of contemporary manifestation of realism, they posited new and unfamiliar syntaxes of encounter that was to abet the transition into a new socialist era. Indeed, not unlike many iterations of realism, the aesthetic category of

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saũũ is also a historical accumulation to a certain extent,\(^\text{117}\) and with every invocation it accrued different meanings, including this particular moment in the postwar DPRK. For people like Kim Yongjun, saũũ became a way to not only undercut the hegemony of Western origins of realist tradition, but also redefine his own tradition in accordance to the demands of a new historical juncture.

**Conclusion**

Returning to the panel discussion, the issue remained one of national character and how to best represent “Korean essence” (minjŏksŏng), that was simultaneously nationalist and (socialist) realist. As we have seen, their assessment of current production of Chosŏnhwa was still an incomplete project. The two contemporary works by Chŏng Chongyŏ and Yun Chunsu evinced innovation, yet for the diverse panel it fell short of the ultimate goal of creating a visual vocabulary that was appropriate for the new era of a socialist DPRK. It was either too emulative of oil painting, or not legibly Korean enough for the (socialist) realist direction of their contemporary moment. As Hang Uk lamented earlier, “Among the works being exhibited today, it is hard to identify what constitutes Chosŏnhwa. Chosŏnhwa have yet to demonstrate its fundamentally unique character.” In other words, the unique character of Chosŏnhwa was still in the process of becoming.

Furthermore, the dual challenge of creating a distinctly Korean and also realist aesthetics was exacerbated by the fact that this particular mode of painting was shared by other nations that had evolved from the same artistic tradition. As Ri Sŏkho points out, “In Chinese or Japanese or Korean art, they all use the same strokes in the drawings. I’ve been drawing for this long but I still cannot differentiate how strokes in our [Korean] art

\(^{117}\) See Mikiko Hirayama, *Restoration of Realism*, 72-134.
differ from others.” This is a sincere concern that reveals the anxiety that pervaded not only in the artistic discourse, but also North Korean society at large during this period of transition into socialism.

On the other hand, the fundamental questions of what and how to depict “Korean essence” finds parallels during the early twentieth century, most pronounced during the colonial period (1910-1945). It should not come as a surprise then that many of the discussants participating in the panel were indeed invested in addressing similar questions of visual representation of national character during the colonial period. And while their frame of references may differ, the emphasis on tradition as well as innovation is reverberated from the echo chamber of its colonial past.

Issues of content, style, form, and the reconciliation of all of the above as a new national style, at stake is the creation of a new visual literacy for the masses – that is, the invention of a new sensus commnis that would allow the populace to easily recognize, understand, and consume these signifiers as distinctly Korean.118 The aim for Chosŏnwha was then, in the words of Pae Unsŏng, “[to] be an art that can carry its own uniqueness in any place” – a legibility for all. However, this goal of a unified aesthetic doctrine of Chosŏnwha would not be achieved for another decade.119

The question of how to visually articulate Korean character that is defined as both realist and nationalist is invariably linked to the process of achieving the goal of socialism in North Korea. As historian Evgeny Dobrenko suggests in his study of the political economy of socialist realism in the Soviet Union, socialist realism as an

aesthetic category was not only an ideological product of socialism, but indeed abetted in
the process of realizing socialism as a political process. But as we have seen, if the
goal of socialism was writ large, the due process of finding the aesthetic vocabulary for
imaging/imagining a socialist Korea was hardly uniform. At the least, this debate
functions as a window into the uneasy process of a socialist reconstruction, but this
glimpse into the unevenness with which socialist realism was translated at the level of
cultural production also challenges us to rethink the ways in which ideology operated,
even in the DPRK.

120 In Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New
the question of whether we are dealing with an aesthetic or a political phenomenon, whether we
are inside or outside “artistic reality,” sounds something like this: Socialist Realism has no
distinct sphere apart from ideology and politics – it is entirely politics (propaganda, ideology). In
accordance with this logic, however, politics (propaganda, ideology) too has no particular sphere
separate from Socialist Realism, which means that the broadest arena of Soviet political-
ideological creativity is not even a separate enterprise, but is rather the inner sphere of Socialist
Realist production and consumption (emphasis added).”
CHAPTER THREE
TRADITION AS INNOVATION

North and South... East and West: they are two and yet not two. I believe that if we can ever accept this, we can hope for no greater beatitude. The discipline of aesthetics finds its chief reason for existence in putting for this fundamental truth. 121

Soetsu Yanagi, The Unknown Craftsman

“The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” With these words, written in 1852, Karl Marx characterized the problem faced by innovation in all realms of thought, and action in the mid-nineteenth century Europe. 122 During the time of his writing, in arts, as in politics, pitched battles were waged between the proponents for the new and the upholders of established values, between those who sought to create with a contemporary sensibility a new imagery appropriate to the modern age, and those who clung desperately to the desiccated attitudes and outworn vocabulary of the past. A century later, Marx’s prescient words would echo louder than ever in the newly established socialist nation of the People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) against a different backdrop of an even more polarizing context of the Cold War.

Yet at the same time, the boundary lines between innovation and tradition were far from being absolute during then in the mid-nineteenth century Europe, as it was a

century later in the divided Korean peninsula. If Kim Musam, the connoisseur of Korean art, forcefully rejected the subjective mode of saũi of the pre-revolutionary past in lieu of a more objective approach to representation, he nevertheless asserted that a thorough knowledge of the art of the past was necessary for creating the art of the present; in the case of Kim Yongjun, a return to an earlier, indigenous tradition was actually felt to be an essential condition for contemporary artistic renewal. For some critics like Ri Yŏsŏng, the search for an appropriate style, necessarily involved looking towards the West for inspiration, whereas for others, like Hang Uk, traditional art could serve as the basis for the most daring pictorial innovations.

For the arbiters of culture in the new arena of North Korean socialism, however, the categories of tradition and innovation was even more entangled than their European forbearers for they had to parse through the competing traditions of both East and West in their quest to find a shared vocabulary of a new Korean aesthetics. This struggle comes through most poignantly in the debates that inform the emergent genre of Chosŏnhw'a. On the one hand they were confronted with an indigenous tradition in the practice of saũi, which carried with it the burden of a feudalist legacy that was ideologically opposed to the new era of socialism. On the other hand, it was the equally weighty legacy of multiple discourses of realisms, a tradition that originally hailed from the West. But tradition is only an invention of modernity, a categorical imperative that finds meaning through the vantage point of the present that which is itself ever so elusive. In the context of the post-colonial and post-division DPRK, the traditions of multiple origins were both invoked and contested in their search for a new art that could aptly capture the new zeitgeist – “socialist in content, nationalist in form.”
To be sure, socialist realism was the guiding aesthetic principle since the beginning and at least in theory, all artistic production was mandated to adhere to the tenets of socialist realism. At the same time, artists and writers in the DPRK were faced with an added task of delineating a distinctly Korean aesthetic vocabulary to articulate the goals of socialism. But translation of this decree into practice was less coherent than one may be led to believe.

What the debate surrounding the development of Chosǒnhwa underscores is thus less the authority of the state or any particular tradition(s), but rather a revelation of the anxiety that not only pervaded the enterprise of socialism that was still in the process of becoming, but also symptomatic of modernity at large. As John Clark explains:

The use of the word ‘tradition’ to characterize art works often involves the ideological self-definition of works by, or on behalf of, a social group who are instrumentally bound to legitimize their own stereotyping of the past. Such groups systematically exclude the actual historical variation in the past by their present reconstruction of it.  

Tradition was a hard fought category in the postwar years on both sides of the 38th parallel. Both the DPRK and ROK had to legitimize their respective states and as visual culture became a critical site to achieve their goal, tradition was invoked once again. In fact, much of what Koreans and the outside world know today about Korean art also stems from this period, when the terms, boundaries and borders for both ancient and modern Korean art were being defined. In the early postwar period, artists, curators, and critics were all searching for visions of a Korean past untainted by the travails of the twentieth century. This longing manifested itself in the search for origins, traditions, and archetypes of an enduring and unbroken Korean history.

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123 John Clark, Modern Asian Art, 71.
As Andreas Huyssen writes, “It is not the sense of secure traditions that marks the beginnings of the museum, but rather their loss combined with a multi-layered desire for (re)construction.” Andreas Huyssen is referring specifically to uses of the past in the museum setting, but his words are particularly apt for describing the contingent, selective, and constructed role the Korean past played for all those in charge of defining a new language of Korean art during the postcolonial post-division era.

The desire for a seamless continuity with the past was the shared goal between both Koreas. Necessitated by a historical crisis and rupture, the appeal of an unwavering tradition went beyond the possibility of providing those in charge with a convincing language to narrate the past; it also allowed them to speak for the present, and by extension, the future. But if the debate on the development of Chosŏnhwa was any indication, the due process of delineating an apt tradition, let alone a new definition of Korean art, was fraught with discordant voices. What comes through in their negotiation of the categories of tradition and innovation is a glimpse into the historical complexity underlying modernist aspirations in Korean art.

“How to develop Chosŏnhwa to speak the language of the present?” was an overarching question lending itself to lengthy discussions. Traditions of both indigenous and foreign origins were invoked, but to emphasize once again, this turn backwards was only a tactical maneuvering to move forward. In other words, for the diverse panel, tradition was innovation. Explaining the modernists’ reaction to the preceding realism of Victorian literature, Nancy Armstrong writes, “Modernism’s quarrel with Victorian aesthetics sought to undo the collaboration between words and images that I have

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identified with realism (emphasis mine).”¹²⁵ If modernism was about undoing this relationship between words and the image, in the DPRK the task was threefold: 1) undoing the longstanding “collaboration between words and image” of traditions of both saũi and Western realism, 2) undoing its reiteration during the colonial period, 3) a reestablishment of the relationship between words and the image in terms of a new ideology of socialism. Be it Kim Musam who vehemently rejected the aesthetic tradition of saũi in lieu of another tradition in academic realism or Kim Yongjun who saw a means for innovation in the tradition of saũi, despite their differences, each struggled with multiple discourses of tradition in the shared quest to define a new Korean art in a new global context. To quote John Clark, “One’s traditionalism is another’s modernism.”

Therefore, I reject the polarizing labels of “traditionalist” and “reformists” to describe the theoretical inclination of each participant. These binary oppositions are as arbitrary as categories of tradition and innovation for such labels only deny the complex and often overlapping motives and desires that underlie their respective viewpoints.

Returning to the question of how to define a new Korean realism, tradition(s) provided the cultural arbiters with the stock language to articulate the national and the modern, but as we have seen consensus remained elusive. If anything, this longing for tradition only underscored the anxiety that was exacerbated from the inability to visualize this new aesthetics. The panelist Ri Sǒkho expresses this concern earnestly when he remarks, “In Chinese or Japanese or Korean art, they all use the same strokes (sǒnjo) in the drawings. I’ve been drawing for this long but I still cannot differentiate how strokes in our [North Korean] art differ from others.” This anxiety of vision, that is, inability to

¹²⁵ Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography, 247.
see, is not only symptomatic to the emergence of *Chosŏnhwa* in the context of the DPRK, but also endemic to the aesthetic category of socialist realism at large.

In his examination of the project of socialist realism in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), art historian Sigrid Hofer articulates a similar phenomenon of how tradition was invoked to as a means to counter the uncertainty of achieving a consensus of socialist realist aesthetics. He writes:

> Socialist realism did not in fact characterize East German art from the beginning; nor was there any clear understanding about exactly what the term meant. Significantly, the GDR attempted to deal with the problem by staging antiformalism campaigns rather than by carrying through a constructive campaign in support of realism; as it was clearly impossible to formulate definitive rules for a representative art, hostile positions were invented instead.”

As it was in the DPRK, Hofer points out, artistic heritage was mobilized as a powerful tool to remedy the difficult process of translating the universal notion of socialist realism into a particular national context. With respect to GDR’s own socialist re-interpretation of tradition in the works of Albrecht Dürer, Hofer continues:

> Socialist realism not only proved impossible to establish as a representative concept of art but also was persistently evaded for years, and this had the effect of bringing it back into limelight for the Dürer year. At the same time, however, this also resulted in a modified definition that made it possible thenceforward to accommodate all the art products that failed to conform to socialist realism’s strict formal precepts.”

Although Hofer is here writing in the context of canonization of Dürer in the early 1970s GDR, similar logic was at work in the DPRK during the period of socialist reconstruction. As previously mentioned this disconnect between tenets of socialist

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realism and its translation into actual practice was significant. Insofar as we understand this gap as not an anomaly in the so-called totalitarian cultures of the DPRK or in the former GDR, but indeed as an organic manifestation of ideology, we can approach culture in the DPRK or any other socialist context more meaningfully.

Rather than approaching the topic of Chosŏnhwa as a discursive artistic discourse, my project was a close examination of one particular site, or rather an event, in the making of artistic discourse at large. By focusing on the panel discussion published in the pages of Chosŏn misul, it was my intention to identify and parse the different views and opinions that informed the development of a new genre. Such a case study dedicated to one single event may seem inadequate to extrapolate deeper meaning for the wider discourse, but I believe this sort of close reading is precisely what lacks in current scholarship devoted to the study of North Korean art. What we can glean from this rare transcript of an entire panel discussion is far richer than any secondary sources describing the discourse of Chosŏnhwa or any other modes of art in the DPRK. By illuminating the depth and breadth of the debate in its entirety, my goal was to relay the rich discourse that was transpiring at this particular moment in the DPRK history, and in doing so, challenge the dominant understanding of the socialist culture in the DPRK as simply derivative, ahistorical, and totalitarian. Instead, what we find is thoroughly modernist desires and challenges manifesting in dialogue with the wider discourses of modernism, which are necessarily historical and global in context.

To be sure, there are more questions than answers provided in my limited study, and accordingly, a deeper engagement with the topic is necessary. For example, the

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relationship between the artistic discourses of the colonial period and its continuity into the post-colonial, post-division era is a fascinating topic to be explored. Also, comparative examinations of the development Chosŏnhwa in the DPRK not only vis-à-vis Han’gukhwa in the South but also Guohua in the People’s Republic of China would be key to further development of this topic. This case study, as it stands, brings to the fore more questions than any definitive answers. This is indication of the breadth and the depth with which we can approach the topic of Chosŏnhwa in particular, and North Korean art in general. The historical material available to researchers in the field may be limited in scope, but nevertheless, we can overcome this impasse by engaging with the sources in a new light. As it was for the panelists striving to image and imagine a new path for the visuals art in the postwar DPRK, the future of North Korean art scholarship is an open field that invites more critical engagement.


--------. “Kim Jong Il chuŭi misul ron kwa Pukhan misul ŭi pyŏnhwa – Chosŏnhwa molgolpŏp ŭl chungsim ŭro” (Treatise of Fine Art of Kim Jong Il-ism and Change


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