

Text as Image: Rewriting “Jingbirok” and “Seoyukyunmun”

Hi, this is Eunji Seong. I’m a Master’s candidate in Visual and Critical Studies department at SAIC.
What I want to talk about is:
My written thesis, and my artworks that go with the thesis.

(CAMERA FOCUS ON ME)

1. Introduction of my written thesis. (~5 min)

(CAMERA FOCUS ON ART (NOT ME))

2. Relationship between my written thesis and my artworks, introduction of my artworks (~5min)

<part 1>

I’m currently writing about, broadly speaking, “contemporary Chinese art” and, more specifically, “two Chinese language-based artists who are also calligraphers in contemporary Chinese art.”

Some people say, it is a curious thing that I write about Chinese art as a Korean. I see this kind of comment stem from an understanding of my Koreanness that may have nothing to do with anything Chinese. In other words, I could look as if I might not be Korean enough to be talking about Korean stuff. That makes sense, in the context that I am doing non-American stuff in America.

However, I do not see my interest in contemporary Chinese art that way. Ironically, I write about Chinese art because I am “very” Korean, as long as tradition and history are concerned. So, what does that mean?

There are two things to know: first, Chinese tradition, culture, and history have a lot to do with Korean counterparts. Second, again, I’m writing about two Chinese language-based artists. And it is important to understand that language-based art in China is pretty much about dealing with its tradition, culture, and history. Chinese language, particularly the written language, signifies its long-standing culture.

I grew up reading Confucian texts and writing calligraphy on rice paper with inkbrush and ink. Through all my teenage years, my goal was to achieve “Three Perfections,” namely, poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Confucian texts, doing this kind of calligraphy, and the idea of Three Perfections are all originally from China, but apparently, they have become part of Korean culture and tradition. Memorizing Chinese characters came naturally, because I was exposed to many Chinese characters for so long. Plus I really liked how they look, and still, I feel like they hide ancient secrets and wisdoms in their complicated system.

I know what I just said sounds like an archaic person. But I am not alone in this. The two artists I am writing about are just like me. They are artists as well as scholars. They paint, write, and practice calligraphy. Although they are living in the contemporary world and making contemporary art, they are deeply interested in old cultures. What’s more, by combining elements of contemporary art with their knowledge about tradition and culture, mainly Chinese characters and calligraphy, they are making one of the most fascinating contemporary Chinese art: Pseudo-characters.

Pseudo-characters are designed to deconstruct Chinese characters. They are illegible. They remain as images.

But didn’t I just say that the two artists take an interest in their culture and tradition? And wasn’t their language kind of at the core of their culture?

If you take a look at their pseudo-characters, you will know these artists took great pains to invent fake characters. These fake characters are beautifully done. Then you will figure out that these artists developed a complex “love-hate relationship” with, say, books, words, and texts. Understanding the “love-hate relationship” is pivotal in understanding pseudo-Chinese characters and eventually a lot of contemporary Chinese art.

And, that is what I am mainly writing about.

Before diving into my artworks, I would like to briefly talk about the two Chinese artists I am writing about: Xu Bing and Gu Wenda. They grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a decade-long struggle in China that left up to 20 million dead. It was launched by Mao Zedong, essentially to shore up his power in China. This period was filled with propaganda and violence, and Xu Bing and Gu Wenda took part in the Cultural Revolution by producing propaganda posters. Not surprisingly, these propaganda posters held little truth. Fundamentally, Xu Bing and Gu Wenda’s pseudo-characters are a response to the Revolution and a takeaway for them from their own experience; they attack and reinvent words and books for their manipulative power in politics and their banality in commercial culture.

<part 2>

My paintings, or calligraphies, exist as a companion of my written work. They are in conversation with pseudo-Chinese characters in many ways; they are interested in old cultures and tradition; some of them are fake letters, which lead them to remain as images; and, they are concerned with physical appearance of letters.

Choices of font style are also intentionally traditional, as well as the way the texts are written. I wrote them vertically because Korean letters used to be written vertically. And they are actually supposed to be written vertically. I tried to stick to tradition, because that way they can be in line with pseudo-Chinese characters I am researching, but also I do appreciate traditional way of writing.

Of course, there are differences, too. And I think here is the part where I stand as a Korean who is unable to empathize with somehow painful Chinese experience.

My letters are based on Korean letters. Although the upper one is filled with a lot of pseudo-Korean letters, they are by no means deconstruction or destruction of Korean letters. Deconstruction of Chinese characters was possible because of their historical, political, and cultural background. Korean letters, which I think are also one of Korea’s cultural prides and symbols, have never gone through what Chinese language had gone through. I just want my letters to be regarded as an exploration of letters.

The lower work is a calligraphy work of a Korean text. These letters are legible to Korean readers, and I didn’t want to further experiment with them. My choice of leaving them original is because I decided that they look beautiful as they are.

I don’t think I’m interested in legibility of my work that much. What I am more interested in is celebrating the visual side of language.

I used ink, white oil paint, fake petals and Ferrero Rocher’s gold foil. Petals and gold foils were used to add festive atmosphere. They were decorative options, which I welcomed for my works, because I want visually pleasing experience with them. Also I like the fact that the petals and gold paper are

fake petals and fake gold. I like to question what is authentic or fake. How do we define these words? Can we simply say my pseudo-Korean letters and other Chinese artists' pseudo-Chinese characters fake? Do they open a new possibility for us to understand anything about language, like, language's nature?

Another difference from pseudo-Chinese characters is that I had Korean texts for each work. An excerpt from "Jingbirok" was used for the upper work. Jingbirok, or the "Book of Corrections," originally published in the 17th century, is one of major works in the history of Korean literature.

I used a part of "Seoyu Kyunmun," or "Observations of the Western World" for the lower work. Seoyu Kyunmun was written by a 19th century Korean student who studied abroad to America and I chose a part that describes his trip to Chicago. Reasons I chose these texts are manifold: they are considered as classics now, and awareness of language and language transmission are important discourses around them. Also, I haven't talked about it much but, like pseudo-Chinese characters, Jingbirok is a critique of a past event.

Like my position as a student in the City of Chicago, the author of Seoyu Kyunmun, one of the first Koreans who studied in the US, wandered through streets of 19th century Chicago as a student and wrote about it. THANK YOU.