

The Pilgrimage of a Painter

An Encounter with the Soul of Minjung

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THE BERLIN WALL WAS torn down on November 9, 1989, by the people of Berlin. The images are vivid: crowds of citizens on top of the wall that divided Germany into east and west; West Berliners handing roses to their compatriots from the east; an old man playing the cello; people crying in each others' arms. The postwar era of a divided Germany was coming to an end.

The fiftieth anniversary of "Kristallnacht" had been observed exactly one year earlier, on November 9, 1988. On that day in 1938, Nazi sympathizers stormed into 7,500 shops and establishments owned by German Jews. They smashed windows and burned synagogues. On the fiftieth anniversary, Germans commemorated the event in various parts of the country with acts of repentance and remembrance. At the time of the anniversary, I was visiting West Berlin for an exhibition of my art.

As part of the Berlin commemoration, musical compositions by Jewish composers were featured on prime time television; a special exhibition of art works by a painter who had once been an inmate of the concentration camps was displayed; and lectures and exhibitions of artifacts from that era were sponsored by various newspapers, including conservative ones.

In December 1936 Japan and Germany signed the Anti-Comintern Pact and plunged headlong into war as fascist states. Despite this common history, the two countries

vary widely in how they faced their war responsibility. Since I was becoming more deeply involved in the unfolding of events in Korea at the time of my Berlin exhibition, I began to use the theme of war responsibility in my paintings.

The works on display at the Berlin exhibition—oil paintings and a series of prints—dealt with the theme of the forced recruitment of Koreans during the war as slave labor and as "comfort women," women forced into prostitution for the Japanese Imperial Army. Also on display was a movie depicting the forced roundup of laborers, *Be Free, Garden Balsam!—My Chikuhō and Korea*, and a slide feature on the comfort women. Prior to the Berlin exhibition, these same works had been exhibited in October 1988 at the campus gallery of the University of London, sponsored by the Catholic Institute of International Relations.

In September 1988, as I was about to leave Japan for the London exhibition, the atmosphere of Japan changed completely with the announcement that Emperor Shōwa was critically ill. As if some extraordinary natural catastrophe had struck the country, the nation went into a state of panic. Mass media reported on the emperor's condition daily; people formed long lines in front of the Imperial Palace to sign sympathy books; and all scheduled celebrations and festive events were canceled or postponed.

Was the emperor indeed a "living god," as nationalistic ideology would have it? During World War II, anyone who opposed the imperial system of State Shinto was called "pagan"; those critical of it were termed "unpatriotic" or "heretical" and were alienated from the social group and the workplace, which jeopardized their livelihood. In a similar kind of atmosphere, would my travel abroad "to make an issue of Japan's war responsibility" be construed as an unpatriotic action? In Japan itself, there was little hope of holding an exhibition dealing with the problems of Koreans in Japan or the theme of Japan's war responsibility. In Europe, however, I found much more cooperation in terms of exhibition space and financial support.

My encounter with Berlin had begun in 1982 when I had had an opportunity to show a series of paintings on the Kwangju uprising. The organizing committee for that exhibition was comprised of German, Japanese and Korean women living in Berlin. The Germans of Berlin, living in a divided city, shared the same pain as the Koreans, who were also from a divided country. The Germans and the Japanese also shared the common sorrow of having allowed fascism to reign in their respective countries. But Japanese and Korean women residents in Berlin shared little in common because the Koreans had come to Germany as international migrant workers, but the Japanese were there as students. Many of the Koreans still harbored negative feelings toward Japan for its colonization of Korea.

Despite the chasm that existed between the two groups, we kept the channels of communication open by discussing the Kwangju incident, opposing sex tourism and other issues. In the process, a sense of solidarity developed among us as Asians and as women. Finally, the committee launched my exhibition. Coincidentally, the exhibition itself became a forum for

debate of war responsibility issues and of the reaction to the emperor's critical condition.

THE HEAVY CROSS OF WAR RESPONSIBILITY

My Berlin exhibition was entitled "War as Seen Through Women's Eyes." Heated discussions raged in the exhibition hall. A German woman recalled: "Foreign movies and television programs featuring stories of World War II have portrayed Germans as cruel, inhuman people. Without exception, the Nazis were pictured as the 'bad guys.' Because of that, we could not walk with our heads up. How about Japan?"

The whole world has read *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, other literature about the persecution of the Jews and accounts of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. The question of war responsibility is a cross borne by the German people. An elderly painter at the exhibition remarked: "You are examining the issue of war responsibility from a woman's standpoint. But I, as a man and as a German, stand on the side of the perpetrators, a member of the German people who persecuted the Jews. I cannot endure this historical fact. You are a woman and you have a position from which to speak; I can only envy you."

"Japanese women were also participants in war crimes," I responded. Women sent their children, their lovers and their husbands to the battlefields. We were educated to believe that laying down one's life for the sake of the emperor is an unquestionably right thing to do. I have drawn pictures more from the standpoint of Korean women than from that of Japanese women."

A woman student majoring in Japanese literature at the Free University of Berlin said: "The former Japanese Embassy, where the Anti-Comintern Treaty was signed, is now the Japan-Germany Center, which sponsors programs and education in traditional Japanese culture and information on Japanese technology. However, it provides no

literature or education on the war. Why does Japan try to hide the history that is well known to everyone?"

A woman reporter for a broadcasting station added: "I belong to the generation that has no actual exposure to what the Nazis did to the Jews and cannot really relate to it. I took the time to visit Auschwitz and learned there of the unbelievable things that had taken place—Jews were herded into gas chambers and systematically massacred by Germans of my grandparents' generation. I was utterly ashamed of being a German."

A man who is a school teacher recounted: "My father participated in the war but would never talk about it; people truly were preoccupied with the postwar reconstruction. It was only with the rapid economic growth and the campus struggles of 1968 that we began to question our war responsibility. We were in a state of shock over the news coverage of the Eichmann trial and the release of Nazi records by those at the Vienna center who were searching for Nazi war criminals. We asked our parents about their activities at that time. I must understand history if I am to clarify my relationship, as a German citizen, to the past. It would be wrong to say that I am not accountable for the war because I was not born yet. Can we conveniently accept only what is comfortable from the past and ignore what is not? We Germans have such a painful history. No one can cover up the history of our persecution of the Jews. To bear this history is to find my own identity."

The Reverend Fischer noted the relationship between the church and art. "Even Christians do not come to church nowadays because the churches do not have the energy or the moral authority to address the issues of the day. So what should be done? The church exists for two reasons: to comfort people's souls and to build the ideal community that Jesus envisioned. Christian churches also need alternatives. They have to be keenly attuned to the voices and cries

of our time. The church must return to its point of departure: priests must be the ones who protest; those who become pastors must be persons who will not allow themselves to be controlled by powerful people or institutions. I hope and pray that every believer will become a pastor so that the church will be able to provide an alternative to the world by becoming a place of lively communication and a place of solidarity, where the encounter of art and religion unites the human experiences that move us."

Germany has achieved a national consensus on the issues of facing the nation's past sins and discussing its war responsibility. On May 8, 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe, President Weizacker delivered an address in which he said, "Those who close their eyes to the past are blind to the present." By comparison, acknowledgement of the wartime past has always been the concern of a minority in Japan. With its eyes closed to the past, Japan has launched an economic invasion of the parts of Asia where it had formerly sent its military forces and thus has grown to be an economic superpower. It continues to be taboo to mention such topics as the persecution of Koreans, the nation's responsibility for war crimes in Asia, and the emperor system. The mayor of Nagasaki came under attack by right-wingers as well as by the general public for stating that Emperor Shōwa bore some responsibility for World War II. This point has become a loyalty test for the Japanese. When will the people of Japan ever break this taboo and achieve a national consensus to address the issue of Japan's war responsibility?

POPULAR PARTICIPATION

The generations that lived through World War II must have experienced a hell on earth: the genocide of the Jews characterized by Auschwitz; the operations of

Japanese troops in China under the order of "Burn! Plunder! Kill!"; the massacre at Nanjing; the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Such incidents must have burned into people's memories the images usually associated with the end of the world. My vicarious experience of the war started as it ended. What was the war all about? Why did Japanese soldiers go into battle, summoned only by call-up papers? Why did artists draw war paintings for propaganda purposes? Why were antiwar movements not started? Filled with such questions, I began my quest and pilgrimage as a painter.

Until then my philosophy of painting was totally unrelated to the sphere of politics and war. "Art for art's sake" was the only legitimate value accorded a work of art, excluding anything useful in human life or endeavors. That doctrine had crumbled by the end of World War II because, at the request of the military, the master painters of the day had produced art that aimed to arouse and inspire nationalism and patriotism and to glorify war. The artists I met after the war took a totally different approach. France gave birth to the Popular Front of Antifascism. Artists and academics from many countries, disregarding national borders, participated in the Popular Front in Spain during its civil war. Many European artists fought against the Nazis in resistance movements.

I began to learn about the Chinese revolution and the involvements of Edgar Snow and Agnes Smedley who went to Yen-an to report on the revolution at the same time that anti-Japanese literature was beginning to circulate in China during the Sino-Japanese War. I had lived as a girl in the 1930s in Luda and Harbin, while Manchuria was becoming a Japanese puppet-state and the outbreak of war was drawing near. Vividly imprinted in my memory are scenes of Harbin where I spent some time as a student and would-be painter. As the Sino-Japanese

War spread, I daily witnessed the crowds of refugees and beggars crouched along the sides of the roads, the shabbily dressed peasants being kicked by heavy-booted Japanese police and the dead bodies that were left frozen by the roadside. On the eve of the 1949 communist revolution in China, I was strongly reminded of these sights. The colonial experience had engraved these memories on my mind.

In those days, China, Korea and the countries of Southeast Asia never appeared as subjects of Japanese art. To Japanese artists, Asia was a backward region and barren of culture. Tokyo was directly connected to Paris as far as modern art was concerned. Asia was ignored.

The success of the revolution in China awakened my identity as an Asian. Though I had accepted Western modernism as universal and had long admired its art, my sense of values gradually started to change. The age of *Ecole de Paris*, which had once attracted me so much, was already over. Instead, my thoughts were occupied with the France of Sartre and the Resistance, participants in reality. The determination not to be swallowed up by power became my starting point as I joined the ranks of painters and artists. By chance I came to know about mining and coal mines. I chose them as the theme of my painting. I thought they would provide an opportunity for conversion and participation in the reality around me. Postwar mining, the cutting edge of the labor movement's struggle, gave birth to cultural circles of workers that seemed to evolve into a new, strategic foothold—a Japanese Yen-an. I tried to discover the image of a new people in coal miners.

In Yen-an, Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) asked, "What is art? Is it a flower to give added beauty to the life of the affluent? Or is it charcoal in the snow to those starving in the freezing cold?" Applying these words to my own situation, I wanted to be a piece

of charcoal in the snow. During visits to numerous coal and other kinds of mines during the 1950s, I came to sympathize with those who “lived in the depths of the earth.” I even thought that I was producing “charcoal in the snow,” but contrary to my expectations, none of the miners appreciated it. Opening exhibitions of my pictures about the mines at one gallery after another in Ginza and at a museum in Ueno, Tokyo, I found myself in a maze. Mining was too heavy a theme for me to handle, but I spent nearly ten years of trial-and-error in pursuing my own artistic expression. As opposition mounted against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in the 1960s, the Miike coal miners lost their battle.

ENCOUNTERING THE THIRD WORLD

As coal was replaced by oil in the early 1960s, jobless miners found themselves immigrating to South America. Did they find a “land flowing with milk and honey”? I decided to view their new lives for myself. I raised funds for my trip by selling my paintings and contracting with newspapers for articles. Finally, I secured enough money to support a stay of over a year.

In the autumn of 1961 I made my way to Brazil, spending two months on a Dutch ship that sailed to South America by way of Southeast Asia, Mauritius, Mozambique and South Africa. My section of the ship had been chartered by the United Nations for immigrants from Okinawa and for exiles from Taiwan and mainland China. All were heading to Latin America to build a new life. Though I had originally intended to follow the former coal miners from Japan, I began to discover the young continent and its people. Their existence under colonialism was completely different from that of the Japanese immigrants, who could afford to bring sewing machines and television sets with them to their new country.

Brazilian vignettes: wandering people swarming into cities as domestic refugees from the drought-stricken lands of northeastern Brazil, Black people in urban slums, migrant miners from the Chilean deserts and the plight of the Bolivian *indios*, half of whose children do not survive infancy. The kind of European culture I saw in Latin America was rooted in the massacre of the continent’s native peoples and the hard labor of African slaves; it was founded on their blood, labor and tears. In my year-long journeying, I began to recognize the tremendous gap between rich and poor, the great disparity between the affluent North and the starving South. Those who can afford to eat decent meals, send their children to school and have running water and electricity are, in my opinion, the elite of the world.

On the return trip to Japan, I traveled through Mexico and Cuba. I was overwhelmed by the Mexican murals. The painters who fought in the Mexican revolution—Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco and others—rejected the art of the ruling class that imitated the Western colonizers. Instead, they established the murals’ movement as the people’s art. They overturned the colonial view of art in favor of a new art movement. With this concept, I set out alone in 1967 on a sketching trip to Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and India. A new theme began to take shape as I observed the situation of Palestinian refugees living in tents in the Syrian desert, the poor farmers in Iran and Iraq, the people in the remote villages of Afghanistan and the untouchables in India. One blazing hot day, as I walked along a tree-lined country road in Bihar beside creaking ox carts, I began to question the meaning and purpose of modern civilization. I started to read *Study of India*, which I had taken with me. Its depiction of Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance movement and the philosophy of a “god of the beggars” opened a totally different Asia to me.

...A belief which disdains give-and-take as a despicable ideal. The only God that exists, the only God that I believe in is the poor people of all nations (Romain Rolland, *Study of India*).

"Disdaining give-and-take" is a dignified philosophy that is entirely different from modern rationalism. My faith in Western modernism as a set of universal concepts was vigorously shaken in India. Seeking more, I traveled throughout Latin America and Asia. I was grieved at the poverty I found but came to regard the experience as a piece of "exotica," a sightseeing tour of the regions' deprivation. Simply viewing the destitution of masses of people and arriving at a social recognition of it does not create a painting.

The painters and sculptors who created Gothic cathedrals and Hindu temples had molds and forms into which to pour the fruit of their souls. On the eve of revolution there was a shared ground from which to dream of future liberation. Without a sacred space like that, how can art be born? With such thoughts, I arrived back in Japan shortly after the campus struggle of 1968 began. Immersing myself in the campus movements, I did not feel like painting at all.

LED BY PAIN

Why and for whom do I paint? I asked myself these questions, focusing on social change rather than on my art. Late in the fall of 1970, with my questions still unresolved, I took my first trip to Korea. My continuing involvement in the turbulent world of Korea began during that trip. One summer day in 1971, a visiting student told me that his friends, Korean residents of Japan studying in Seoul, had been arrested that May on a charge of espionage. These friends were two brothers, Suh Sung and Suh Jun Shik. The elder brother, Suh Sung, had been severely burned while in prison, and the student wanted me to check on his condition.

I consented to his request, chiefly because I had just begun reading the poetry of Kim Chi Ha.

In September 1971 I went to Seoul and consulted Tae Yun Gi, Suh Sung's lawyer. Under his guidance, I visited the South Korean Ministry of Justice and the prosecutors' office and began the complicated procedures for securing a visitor's permit. It was granted just as I was ready to board a plane to return to Japan. At Seodaemun Prison, a relic of Japanese colonialism, I saw a wife with an infant and an elderly mother in tears. Those images speak of a country's tragedy that has remained unchanged from ages past.

I waited an hour or so before Suh Sung was brought into the room, accompanied by a prison guard. His face had the keloid scars of severe burns; little was left of his ears; and his hands were charred black. I wondered if his scars and injuries were the mark of Korea's division, the price one young man paid for the unification of his mother country. What darkness! What deep night! Tears streamed incessantly down my cheeks. My impressions of Suh and the prison drew forth an image from one of Kim Chi Ha's poems.

On the ocher road, clear stains
Of blood, along the marks of blood
Go I, Father.
You have passed away
Where only the sun burns jet-black.
(*Ocher Road*, 1970)

The ocher (yellow soil) signifies Chollanamdo, the poet's birthplace as well as the whole of Korea: a land suffering from division, foreign invasion and war. The land had been smeared with the blood of those killed; among the marks of blood, young Koreans perhaps had tried to walk down the ocher road, which was filled with the anger and distressful *han* (pain) of the oppressed. I, a representative of the oppressors who had trampled on them, wished to

follow their way. Those trampled upon experienced han while their assailants were burdened with shame. I also had harbored han throughout the days after World War II because the roots of my identity had been nurtured in Manchuria during the Sino-Japanese War.

As I pondered the Korean situation, I was reminded of Lu Xun, a Chinese writer on the eve of his country's revolution, and the young people around him. One of his disciples, an activist, was arrested with five other writers in 1931 and executed by firing squad. In his grief, Lu Xun wrote a eulogy, *Writing in the Depth of Night*, to appeal to the conscience of the world. China's deep night seemed similar to the situation of Korea in the 1970s. I drew a picture, a black-and-white lithograph, entitled *A Prisoner of Conscience*, to appeal for the release of Suh Sung. With this creation, I thought I had finally come to understand what it means to paint.

The 1970s marked the beginning of Korea's democratization struggles, during which a young worker named Chun Tae Il set himself afire and burned to death. The subsequent intensification of pressure on the people by the country's military dictatorship resulted in the imprisonment of the Suh brothers as well as in the arrest of Kim Chi Ha and many others. In opposition to these oppressive measures, the pro-democracy camp started a campaign to collect one million signatures. The situation grew more and more tense.

In 1974 fifty-four people, including Kim Chi Ha, were arrested by the authorities, who were bent on crushing the student uprising. This incident came to be known as the Democratic Student Youth Association Case. Among those arrested and tried was a Seoul University student by the name of Kim Byung Gon, who was sentenced to death. The student responded, "It is an honor." Kim Chi Ha was deeply shocked at this.

In the face of a demand for the death penalty, what is this "It is an honor"? The death penalty means death. Are these the words of a saint...? Are we saints? Yes, we won in the end. We overcame our fear of death. That emotion was not of this earth. Rather it was a religious experience. Not only that, it was the apex of artistic impression. A word crossed my mind then: "political imagination." The word engraved on my mind is what expresses the unity of art and politics in the true sense of the term. In just one stride, I leapt over the disturbing gap relative to my involvement in the *minjung* movement, which had agonized me for many years—the gap between political action and artistic creation (Kim Chi Ha, *Penance* 1974, abridged excerpts).

"Political imagination." It may sound presumptuous, but that process was also a part of my pilgrimage. What was the origin of the radiant light of Kim Chi Ha, Kim Byung Gon and others? Having been seared by fire, had these people become diamonds? In an authoritarian regime, was there any other choice for art than to be cathartic? The most serious offense of authoritarian societies is the reversal of positions between judge and judged. That is how Jesus came to be crucified.

According to the Reverend Mun Dong Whan, the cross of the Korean church is a "slanting one." It is a cross that each and every Korean must carry, bleeding, to Golgotha. Prison messages from Korea continued to send the glittering rays of the Spirit to us Japanese who lived in a peaceful, prosperous country. How paradoxical that prison cells served as places of creation and shapers of philosophy. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Is 9:1).

BECOMING A MEDIUM

Through art exhibitions at museums and galleries in Japan, I tried to convey the thoughts and feelings that had accumulated since my first trip to Korea in 1970, but few people listened to my message. I knew I had to change the medium of my expression in order to plead for the Suh brothers and for Kim Chi Ha. I decided to create a slide show of paintings built around the poems of Kim Chi Ha. The show, "Prayer of Bound Hands," was completed in April 1976 with the assistance of many friends, professionals in their own fields. I exhibited the slides at one rally and meeting after another. People gathered in response to leaflets that advertised the show; many were quite enthusiastic. A place had been created where artists, messengers and viewers could gather to discuss common concerns. Soon English and Spanish versions of the slide show were produced and shown overseas through the efforts of supporters and grass roots workers. I produced two more slide shows, "Food is Heaven" and "Rumors," which presented my lithographs of other poems by Kim Chi Ha. After a few years of drawing pictures on the themes of Kim's poems and traveling in all directions to show them, I realized that Korean artists should be performing that task; I should be painting Japanese situations.

The deep scars of the Japanese invasion of Korea and of the experiences of World War II were still evident in the Korean people's stories. Postwar Japan had ignored its responsibility for the wounds of Korea and was merely intent on high economic growth. Yet some forty years after the war's end, the total picture of the war was starting to emerge. The wounds of war remained unhealed: the division of North and South Korea, the search for relatives by Japanese war orphans who had been abandoned in China, the existence of some 700 thousand Korean residents in Japan—descendants of

Koreans brought forcibly to Japan before and during the war. In every region of Asia where Japanese companies have been established, I have heard the cries of war victims, cries that have been silenced by Japan's economic pursuits. By not acknowledging its war responsibility, Japan has added another, its responsibility for the postwar economic situation in Asia.

To allow the cry of people abandoned by modernization to be heard, I decided to introduce a maternal motif into my painting in the form of a medium—not a secularized and commercialized psychic, but a woman of the earth who is impregnated with "original life." A similar motif appears in myths everywhere. To me, such a woman medium relates the living and the dead, this world and the next. With this motif I felt I could expand a former artistic theme—the mines of Chikuho—and resurrect the bones and ashes of the Korean miners who had been forcibly brought to Japan and later buried in the mines. This was the series of pictures that was subsequently made into the movie, *Be Free, Garden Balsam!—My Chikuho and Korea*.

While showing the movie, I continued my journey as an "itinerant entertainer." At a showing in Kyoto, Ueda Masaaki, a scholar of ancient history, gave a lecture on mediums. He said that there are two ways to put a soul at rest: one is for the assailants to try to console the souls of the war dead; the other is to let the voices of the victims echo their deep sorrow. The latter, he said, is a genuine requiem.

After that lecture I determined to become a medium of the second variety and began to work on a series of paintings pertaining to the Korean comfort women. The series, featuring the themes of comfort women going mad and being left behind on a Pacific island and the war dead being sunk in the deep waters off the coast of Java, was adapted for performance by an experimental theatrical group. The public performance,

done at a well-known temple in Tokyo in May 1987, was filmed and produced as a documentary. In addition, I put together a slide show on the theme of the comfort women, "Memories of the Sea," for my European exhibition in 1989.

FROM THE ABYSS OF RUIN

Having survived the oil crisis, Japan has become one of the world's leading economic powers. Tokyo is flooded with consumer goods of all kinds; famous name-brand products crowd store shelves; and everything from Alaskan salmon to tropical fruit is available daily. The traditional folk cultures of Third World peoples have been turned into commodities for the tourist trade—commodities with an ethnic flavor. Beautiful coastal areas are seen as ideal sites for resort developments. Japanese

companies are advancing in the very countries that the Japanese military once invaded; the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere envisioned by the wartime imperial regime has emerged at last, with Japan at its center. People who dare to raise the issue of Japan's war responsibility are branded as part of a heretical minority. There is one important difference, however: people from every part of Asia, Africa and Latin America are crying for alternatives.

Art is being commercialized at a dreadful pace in the modern world. I hope not to follow along in that stream but to search for a different path. Just as wandering minstrels once roamed the countryside, I hope to become a "wandering painter," roaming from place to place to show my paintings in order to relate to the soul of the people.

[Translated by Kusunoki Toshiaki]