

Book Notes

Traditional Korean Ceramics: A Look by a Scientist by Carolyn Kyongshin Koh Choo (Ko Kyöngsin 高慶信). Seoul: Designnnoom, 2016. 292pp.

As can be surmised from its title, this book is a comprehensive survey of traditional Korean ceramics written by a scientist. Its author, Carolyn Kyongshin Koh Choo, is a scientist who has taken an unusual career path. Trained as a physical chemist at MIT, she turned her research focus to traditional Korean ceramics in the early 1990s, establishing the Department of Science of Cultural Properties at Chung-Ang University as the institutional base for her extraordinary project to “understand the beauty of [Korean] ceramic wares from a scientific point of view” (9).

The guiding motive of this book is not especially different from that of the prominent 20th-century connoisseurs of Korean ceramic arts. Like Yanagi Muneyoshi, Ko Yusöp, and other modern art historians, Koh Choo also searches for the uniqueness of the Korean ceramic tradition by identifying its subtle differences from the grossly similar but technically more sophisticated Chinese tradition. To this common search for Korean uniqueness, she adds her own “scientific point of view.” She presents the microscopic and chemical analysis of ceramic shards excavated from major kiln sites as a new way to investigate the unique technical and aesthetic characteristics of Korean ceramics.

Reflecting the author’s self-positioning as a scientific connoisseur of Korean ceramic art, this book takes a different approach from that of ordinary art history works. Rather than following the conventional historical succession of the main ceramic types, from Koryö celadon to Chosön white porcelain, she

arranges its four parts (each consisting of three chapters) according to major decorative methods employed by Korean potters (15). After giving an overall introduction to Korean ceramics in Part 1, the remaining three parts are devoted to discussions of major techniques that characterize Korean ceramic art: underglazing and inlaying (*sanggam* 象嵌) (Part 2), various decorative methods applied to Chosŏn *punch'ŏng* wares (Part 3), and finally, uses of pigments (iron-rich clay, copper red, and cobalt blue) in brush painting on ceramic surfaces (Part 4). This arrangement of topics according to decorative techniques enables the author to freely commute between the two realms of art and science in her discussion of specific methods. She thus connects the prominent aesthetic features, imparted to the ceramic wares by certain techniques, with the scientific analysis of the ceramic bodies, glazes, and pigments that were employed in the technical processes.

In order for readers to follow this oscillation between artistic and scientific discussions, it is essential to rely on the introductory Part 1, which offers a well-arranged and highly enlightening overview of the book's contents. Chapter 1 presents the aesthetic characteristics of Korean ceramic arts, compared with those of China. Unlike the Chinese ceramic tradition, which developed a technically sophisticated overglazing method as a response to ever increasing international demands, the Korean tradition remained in isolation from global market trends, continuously relying on the underglazing method. This was the technical base upon which Korean potters imparted to their wares the "subdued and restrained beauty" (25) which, according to many modern connoisseurs, came to represent the "quintessence of the Oriental spirit" (18). Chapter 2 portrays the historical process of how Chinese ceramic techniques were imported and assimilated, while identifying the major sociopolitical and philosophical environments that shaped the fundamental characteristics of Korean ceramics. The high concentration of ceramic production into a few government-controlled centers (Kangjin and Puan in Koryŏ, and Kwangju in Chosŏn) explains the lack of diversity in the Korean ceramic tradition. Philosophical trends of the ruling class, especially Chosŏn Confucianism with its emphasis on frugality and simplicity, discouraged technical sophistication and colorful decoration, thus giving birth to what might be called the minimalist aesthetics of Chosŏn *punch'ŏng* ware and white porcelain. In Chapter 3, the author introduces an entirely new, scientific way to view the methods of traditional ceramic arts. For the careful reader, discovering how certain aesthetic features of ceramics can be explained by the chemical composition of the raw material and the transformation it undergoes during the firing process is an enlightening experience. The author also explains how to interpret the microscopic images of

ceramic shards, which provide many important clues that reveal the raw materials and the firing processes that Korean potters employed in their works.

In the subsequent three parts, the themes of Part 1 reappear in greater detail, including their application to specific decoration methods. The translucent *pisaek* 翡色 glaze of the Koryŏ celadon, which “adds depth to the glaze and softens the images,” can be explained by “crystalline structures, either remaining from the original mix or formed newly in the process of cooling” (Part 2, 83-84). The beauty of Kyeryongsan 鷄籠山 *punch'ŏng* wares of the mid-Chosŏn period owes substantially to its clay materials of the highest level of iron oxide, which make the body “dark grey, tinted variously with brown and black” (Part 3, 188).

In spite of the author's strong emphasis on scientific understanding of the beauty of Korean ceramics, she never attempts to reduce the artistic senses of beauty to the microchemical compositions of ceramic bodies and glazes. Instead of being a scientist of the Cartesian spirit, she aims to be a translator, connecting the hitherto disconnected languages of science and art. Not only does the author's exposition successfully maintain a balance between its scientific and artistic aspects, but more importantly, through the author's mediation, one language imparts its own virtue to the other. Thus the subtle aesthetic features of Korean ceramics, which are “very difficult to describe adequately in words” (71), come under the purview of the powerful analytical language of chemistry. The reverse is also true. The author's exposition of the microstructure of ceramic shards is never wholly dominated by the cold language of science. On the contrary, it very often evokes a sense of wondrous beauty, as though describing a whole new kind of landscape or “another world of abstract art” (191).

This extraordinary synthesis of Korean ceramic arts is not without drawbacks, however. The scientific portions may be difficult to read through, particularly for those readers with insufficient scientific literacy. Perhaps most puzzling to readers with a humanities background would be the author's characterization of Korean ceramic art as “quintessentially Oriental.” Is she “Orientalizing” the Korean tradition in the same manner as was criticized by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*? In a sense, yes, because she identifies the technical and aesthetic essences of the tradition that have remained more or less intact throughout Korean ceramic history. Moreover, those essences are portrayed as something feminine in character, like those of a quiet and unassuming woman.

Yet there is a crucial point that may exempt the author's position from the charge of Orientalism. Her equation of Korean ceramics with the Oriental never leads to nativist mystification of the tradition or, conversely, to the outright cultural negation of it. The author's voice is ambivalent, appreciating both the merits and shortcomings of the so-called Oriental features of Korean ceramic

tradition. The “quiet, serene beauty” of Korean ceramics can be viewed as an ironical “benefit” of the global isolation and technical simplicity of the Korean tradition (278). Moreover, this irony was not just a relic of the past, but is still very much alive in contemporary Korean ceramic art, in which the author has been an active participant (Epilogue, 278-283). In this sense, the author’s “Orient” is not for distancing and alienating the past. It rather connects the past with the present, in the same way that in this book she connects the artisanal practice of the traditional Korean potters with the contemporary scientific practices in which she specializes.

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The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea by Bandi (pen-name). English translation by Deborah Smith. New York: Grove Press, 2017. 247 pp.

The Accusation is an extraordinary book. It is a collection of seven short stories written in beautiful prose and conveying the author’s earth-shattering despair over the suffocating social system of modern-day North Korea.

Aside from its literary qualities, however, *The Accusation*’s publication is an extraordinary feat. Originally published in 2014 in Korea (as *Kobal*), it is the first book manuscript ever written secretly in North Korea, smuggled out, and published abroad. Its writer, Bandi—a pseudonym meaning “firefly” in Korean—has long been a prominent writer in North Korea whose works were particularly widely published in the 1970s (p. 243). He remains a member of the Chosŏn Writer’s League’s Central Committee, and is thus part of North Korea’s intellectual elite.

Bandi became deeply disillusioned with the suffering during the implosion of the economy in the late 1980s, and the subsequent famine of the 1990s. He wrote the stories in *The Accusation* in order to share with the outside world “a true likeness of North Korean society as he himself saw it” (p. 244). The manuscript was long hidden in a cupboard in his home in North Hamgyŏng province, until it was smuggled to South Korea with the help of a relative who had defected there.

It may not be appropriate to dwell so long on the background of an author

in a book review, but in Bandi's case, the background is a highly significant part of the overall story. It has long been debated whether North Korea has a similar type of culture of literary and artistic dissent as the one that flourished underground through secret *Samizdat* publications in countries of the former Soviet Union. With *The Accusation*, the world no longer has to wonder whether a culture of dissent exists in North Korea. No one knows precisely how extensive it is, but no matter its size, Bandi's masterful and damning work has put it on the literary map.

The book's title describes its contents well. The work's seven stories are all accusations of injustice and oppression against the North Korean state and the social system it upholds. The first story, "Record of a Defection," focuses on a technical engineer in one of the country's most remote provinces, who suspects that his wife is having an affair. As the story unfolds, switching perspectives to his wife, it turns out that she has been secretly taking contraceptive pills to avoid bringing a child into a world she sees as cruel and grim. When her nephew is barred from becoming class president, she learns that her husband comes from a family background considered to be highly suspicious by the government. This convinces her that no matter how hard you work, and no matter how great your merits, family background forms a glass ceiling that stymies opportunity. This story, like several in the collection, is a harsh damnation of North Korea's *sŏngbun* system, whereby all citizens are classified according to their political loyalty, deduced through the political merits of their families.

Sŏngbun also figures prominently in "City of Specters." In this story, a mother from a highly prominent family background, living in Pyongyang's most upscale central district, struggles to keep her child from crying at the sight of the portraits of Kim Il-Sung and Karl Marx in Kim Il-sung Square where their apartment is located. As she draws the blinds to shield her child's eyes from the portraits, the local street secretary (perhaps a mistranslation of *imminbanjang*, head of the local neighborhood unit, or *imminban*) complains that this creates a lack of uniformity in the way the apartment building's façade appears from the outside, perhaps a metaphor meant to illustrate the stifling climate of forced conformity in North Korean society. The secretary soon becomes suspicious of the family, and learning that their baby cries at the sight of the Great Leader himself, the authorities suspect that it is the parent's lack of political belief that has been transmitted to the child. After all, this conclusion is only natural in a system where political loyalty is considered a trait passed down through the generations.

As a particularly powerful illustration of the author's own intellectual suffocation in North Korea's intellectual climate, the story's protagonist, Gyeong-

hee (Kyŏnghŭi), is struck with terror at how quickly the authorities can convene a political mass-rally, gathering hundreds of thousands of the city's inhabitants in the central square. The story also illustrates the heightened danger faced by those at the top of the socio-political ladder, as they are scrutinized even harder than those in the non-privileged classes. For their baby's crying, the whole family is banished from Pyongyang and sent to live in a rugged, rural province.

These are only two of the seven stories that give voice to Bandi's own deep sense of frustration with the conformity, hypocrisy, terror, and fear in North Korean society, which he describes through the narratives of his protagonists. The book is obviously not a factual textbook on the North Korean system, but this is its biggest strength. Neither ordinary memoirs, nor academic works, can convey emotions and perspectives as effectively as literary prose.

The stories in this volume humanize North Korean society in a way much writing on the country fails to do. They are not only worth reading for their originality as the only literary fiction thus far smuggled out of North Korea and published for a wider audience, but also for their sheer literary quality. The language is at times poetic, but without becoming esoteric or losing its pointedness. The translation by Deborah Smith is masterful, although some vocabulary choices are problematic and obfuscate the original meaning for readers less familiar with the North Korean system. For example, the term "boy scouts" (e.g., p. 35) is used instead of "Kim Il-sung Youth League." But this is only a minor issue with a book that should be required reading for anyone with an interest in North Korean society.

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