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Introduction: Thinking the Present of East Asian Aesthetics

Joosik Min

From the viewpoint of the history of civilizations, the twentieth century was an era when the Western impact showed an excessively strong tendency. Also in the academic area there were frequent discussions based on the West's dualistic thinking involving human and nature, rationality and sensitivity, and spirit and body, and in the frame of reasonable and analytic thinking. Now, in the twenty-first century, in which reconciliation and harmony between Eastern and Western cultures are required, it is necessary to elevate the spirit of East Asia by clarifying the principle of East Asian art. It is now time to value the East Asian wisdom that puts great importance on vitality, harmony, and totality while regarding wholeness as a relationship of coexistence, harmony, and supplementation.

It was in the modern Western world that aesthetics was named as a field of study and its system started to be established. However, since very long before, in the Chinese character cultural sphere of East Asia, unique aesthetic consciousness has been developed and aesthetic reflection has also been actively promoted. Why should attention be paid to the study on East Asian aesthetics now? Basically, China, Korea, and Japan are countries with a long history and an abundance of aesthetic ideas. Nevertheless, there have not been many studies on East Asian aesthetics. This is because even when studying the humanities, people in these countries were required to consciously seek precise methods. Thus, they needed to fully grasp the academic traditions of the West and were so interested in Western ideas that they neglected to academically investigate the aesthetic ideas of East Asia, to which they belonged. However, the fact that there are just a few studies on East Asian aesthetics does not mean that East Asian aesthetic ideas are themselves weak.

Now, in the new century, a more integrated and higher-level aesthetics based on the panhuman perspective is required. In that sense, studies on East Asian aesthetics will have to be more actively conducted. Various challenges of our times need to be solved on the basis of values where the diversity and universality of our culture can coexist, and the Eastern and Western civilizations, nature and humans, and tradition and modernity can have a symbiotic relationship. It is necessary to rescue a humanity lost by mechanical technology, purify the human spirit through the restoration of sensibility, and concentrate on environmental protections by recognizing the blessings of nature. The wisdom to help address these issues has to be found in the East Asian tradition.

What is a priority for East Asian aestheticians is a thorough analysis and interpretation of classical writings about aesthetics based on detailed annotation. It is necessary to systematically organize the classical works that reflect aesthetic reasoning in various aspects of East Asian ideas, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. What is also important, in addition, is to fully examine how the major concepts of aesthetics, such as *qiyun shengdong* (spirit of resonance), and *xing* (excitement)

have been established and changed and to clarify the contemporary meanings they hold. Also, a comparative study needs to be carried out to identify how these concepts have developed in China, Korea, and Japan. In this regard, joint research among scholars from East Asian countries is requested. In other words, overall and comprehensive reviews should be accompanied, for example, with regard to how Confucian ideas promoted by Confucius and Mencius developed to influence Zhu Xi and, further, how they were developing in Korea's Joseon Dynasty period and emerging in Japan's Edo period.

Korean aesthetics and Japanese aesthetics have so far been studied separately in each country, but in the future it is necessary to deeply examine the influence and relationship of the two in connection with Chinese aesthetics and their own development. For instance, *Wenxin Diaolong (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons)*, *Shipin (Poetry Grading)*, *Li-tai ming-hua chi (Record of Famous Painters of All the Dynasties)*, and *Shupu (Treatise on Calligraphy)* and scriptures such as "The Analects of Confucius" and "The Book of Odes," are not only classics of China but are considered classics for the Koreans and the Japanese, just as the *Poetics of Aristotle* is now viewed as a classic for Westerners and beyond, in addition to the Greeks. Of course, there are such valuable classics even in Korea and Japan. Therefore, we need to clarify the meanings of these classical East Asian aesthetic ideas in contemporary society and try to find out the hidden issues.

For example, the Lay Judge Theory, which is represented in the *Twenty-Four Properties of Poetry*, created by Sikong Tu, reveals the character of East Asian aesthetics. Thus, it is also necessary to examine, from an overall perspective, how this Lay Judge Theory has been discussed according to region and era even within the same Chinese character cultural sphere. Although it is of course important to compare East Asian aesthetics and Western aesthetics from a macroscopic viewpoint, a comparative study on aesthetic ideas among East Asian countries should never be neglected. Dignity is an interesting concept that supports the explanation of the relationship between the personality of an artist and his or her works of art, and embraces both norms and self-expression in the arts. These discussions suggest that the principle of evaluating and judging a person becomes a basis in understanding the arts, including literature.

Based on such research results, the composition of a history of East Asian aesthetics should also be considered. Usually, the history of aesthetics refers to history of Western aesthetics. As a result of Chinese scholars' steady efforts, in recent times a number of books titled *History of Chinese Aesthetics* were also published. Now, it is time to compose a history of East Asian aesthetics in the more comprehensive sense of moving one step forward to encompass Korea, China, and Japan. In fact, it is not too much to say that the last hundred years were marked by consistent antagonism and confrontation instead of mutual exchange among the three countries under the colonial system of imperialism and the ideological conflict of the Cold War. In order to compose a history of East Asian aesthetics, mutual exchange will have to be more active among East Asian aestheticians. They should set the writing of a history of East

Asian aesthetics as a joint research project and go through deep discussions to establish its composition.

It is true that the three countries, Korea, China, and Japan, have so far shown considerable differences in political systems and economic structures. Nonetheless, these countries have one thing in common: the tradition and history of the Chinese character cultural sphere. Based on this affinity related to cultural tradition, the three countries need to cultivate a comprehensive East Asian aesthetic culture. Just as cultures were actively exchanged around East Asian regions in the era when "Japanese envoy to China in the Tang dynasty" and "Korean missions to Japan," which refer to diplomatic envoys dispatched to foreign countries, played an active role, East Asian culture will have to bloom again. The formation of character through arts, which refers to the spirit of enhancing one's personality by undertaking in-depth studies, discussing tastes, and loving art, is at the core of East Asian aesthetic culture. This is set apart from the logic of politics and economy. It is a way for human formation based on refinement and personality.

East Asian aesthetic ideas have appeared in various forms depending on era and region but they share some common and consistent characteristics at the root. For East Asian people, Tao is the origin of the self and the world. Tao means the principles and laws encompassing the mysteries of Mother Nature from heaven and earth or the cosmic order that rules this world. All forms, including human beings, are created by the action of Tao. Therefore, each of the East Asian peoples regards Tao as the basis of individual existence, bringing unique value to it. The absoluteness of Tao is divided up among them, and, at the same time, Tao maintains absoluteness in such a way. It is embodied in a separate object, and each object symbolizes Tao. Although arts are different in terms of art forms, including poetry, writing, painting, and music in East Asian regions, they commonly express Tao as the mysteries of heaven and earth and the Tao of humanity that lays Tao as the mysteries of heaven and earth at its root. Just as Laozi said, "Human beings follow the earth; the earth follows the heaven; the heaven follows Tao; Tao follows nature," all human activities ultimately belong to Mother Nature. In that sense, East Asian people have the wisdom of always adapting themselves to nature and living together with it.

The East Asian traditional arts of painting and calligraphy use a brush. In particular, with the development of ink paintings, brush and ink became the basis of the formative arts. Here, various changes were made in the form of dots and strokes and the manner of handling a brush, including thin or thick dots and strokes and light or heavy or slow or quick motions. Thus, abundant, dynamic, energetic, internally tension-causing, and flexible drawing lines appear. The subtle changes in the ups and downs of the drawing lines bring lively movements to the ink painting. In addition, it contains a variety of spiritual flavors, such as majestic brushstroke, beautiful brushstroke, upright brushstroke and elegant brushstroke. Such various, free, formative beauty of brush and ink made it the ultimate ideal to match the profound and mysterious formative force in which the mysteries of heaven

and earth activate themselves. Like this, the tradition of East Asian art is filled with delicate sensibilities and refined emotions.

The lively motions of endlessly-changing dots and lines shaped by a brush more intensely express the inner moods through the infinite change of hues coming from lights and shades of ink color. The ink color in painting and calligraphy is black, as a single color, but it is a single color that contains all changes and infinite diversity. Therefore, it is possible to freely express the world of beauty that can never be represented by using multiple colors. The black color of ink excludes extra things, such as ornamental or noisy beauty, and instead represents only essential, fundamental, and original things. In this sense, it has simplicity. It is also uncomplicated, in the sense of unifying towards the inside rather than dispersing towards the outside. In addition, the color directs the human mind to infinite depth and original calmness rather than loudly stimulating it. The original calmness is not a simple calmness but calmness in the midst of commotion that holds all motions inside. There, a kind of darkness can be felt, but it is also not simple darkness but darkness that composedly calms the human mind, stabilizes it quietly, and unifies it internally and deeply. Such artistic viewpoint is in stark contrast to the experimentalism or exhibitionism shown in contemporary Western arts.

The essence of East Asian art thoughts lies in regarding creation of the arts, including formative art, as a matter of mind and expressing them as a mind. Of course, all arts are designed to express the impression of human life and have two sides of form and mind. However, European art puts form above mind while East Asian art places more importance on mind. Thus, the latter is characterized by art of mind and spirit. The art of mind and spirit means one that expresses an artist's mind that views the mind of heaven and earth as his or her own mind, or the one that expresses an artist's spirit that views the spirit of the universe as his or her own spirit, instead of expressing individual arbitrary views. In short, East Asian art is an art created by an artist who expresses his or her root of life as a form and embodies the self-awareness of Tao.

In East Asia, skill and Tao, or courtesy and virtue, have long been distinguished from one another. The idea of putting Tao above skill and virtue above courtesy has so far continued. Virtue refers to Tao experienced and realized by artists. Those who achieved the self-awareness of Tao were considered to be true artists. Moreover, the idea of seeing artworks as a reflection of the personality of the creator is deeply rooted. Therefore, the unity of artistic value and personal value was stressed. In this regard, the creators of music and paintings and calligraphy gradually became intellectuals from the bureaucratic class and were required to harmonize courtesy and virtue or skill and Tao. For example, since making paintings requires a high level of spirituality, such as vitality or superb spirit, the creator must have an excellent personality that is different from a mere professional artist.

Another characteristic of East Asian aesthetics is the unity of poetry, calligraphy, and painting. The art forms, which express the impression of human life, have individual originalities but

are inseparably linked to one another at the root. Literary painting is an art of not drawing the form of an object but drawing the creator's will by borrowing the form of an object. Poetry, calligraphy, and painting are the same in that they are art forms that deeply express the will, and they are mutually combined and unified in an artwork. Poetry, calligraphy, and painting are a means to express the originality and wholeness of impressive human life in a multifaceted and diversified style.

In East Asia, learning has long been regarded as a way for humans to lead a great life in society. Since practice is a priority, learning is deeply connected to the fields of ethics and education. The tradition of aesthetics for human formation, which has influenced East Asian aesthetics since the era of Confucius and Mencius, was established in the form of aesthetic education in China in modern times. There are also theories of aesthetic education or art education in the West but, in East Asia, aesthetics itself so certainly represents the character of aesthetic education that it is expected to be facilitated.

The activities of the International Conference of Aesthetics have so far been limited to studies on Western aesthetic ideas, especially by Western people. However, in the turn of the century, new types of self-reflection and self-awareness on East Asian aesthetics are emerging. While the ICA was held fourteen times in the twentieth century, beginning in Berlin, Germany in 1913, none of East Asian countries became a host country. In 2001, the fifteenth conference was eventually held in Japan under the theme of "Aesthetics of the 21st Century," and a special department of East Asian aesthetics was also arranged. The hosting of the ICA in East Asia is judged to be a great opportunity to attract Westerners' attention to East Asian aesthetics. Since then, as the ICA was held in Beijing, China in 2010 and Seoul, Korea in 2016, the role of East Asian aesthetics became more prominent. This can lead to a new turning point in the study on aesthetics. Meanwhile, in 1998, an academic conference on transcultural aesthetics was held in Sydney, Australia, and in October 2000, a meeting on the same topic was held in Bologna, Italy, as an extension of the conference. In addition to the growing interest of Western people in the East Asian aesthetics, self-reflection has also strongly appeared within East Asian countries.

It is fortunate that the 1st International Conference of Eastern Aesthetics was held, though belatedly, in Hohhot, China in July 2000. There, about 70 scholars from China, Korea, and Japan gathered to hold a great debate. Indeed, its start is academically significant. As East Asian aestheticians proposed, conducted, and operated the conference themselves, new topics and methods for discussions, which have never been dealt with by Western aestheticians, were presented. Although academic exchanges have been poor due to various circumstances in East Asian regions, various methods for mutual exchange were discussed at the conference, including hosting a symposium under a common theme by regularly holding this meeting. Since then, the conference has been held by one of the three countries, China, Korea, and Japan, in order, every two years and thus has been established as a platform for active discussions.

Today, most students, especially in Korea and Japan, initiate their aesthetic studies largely indebted to Western aesthetic ideas. Young researchers are so familiar with the modern system of Western aesthetics, such as research subjects, topics, and methods, that they do not have a unique critical mind based on their cultural traditions. By deeply recognizing the fact that the terms of beauty, art, and aesthetics that are currently used are the translated words made in the process of accepting Western studies, a new framework for learning, capable of fully encompassing the diversified areas of East Asian aesthetic culture, should be established. Now, it is necessary to undertake aesthetic study with the contents built up on their own cultural traditions.

In recent years, from the perspective of Westerners, the problems derived from their own cultural traditions and their solutions have been actively sought. In the postmodern era, in which the cultural and ideological movements to overcome the Western modernity are becoming visible, the aspects of art and aesthetics started to change dramatically. In this context, greater attention is being paid to East Asian culture and art. This is not interpreted, as in the past, at the same level as simple intellectual curiosity or exotic hobbies. East Asian culture and art are accepted as wisdom of life, to make a new breakthrough of the human civilization that has reached the limit in a certain sense.

In the twenty-first century, in addition, East Asian aestheticians also began to pay attention to their own cultural and artistic traditions and to focus on the discovery and creation of East Asian values for a new era. Indeed, East Asian aesthetic ideas direct us to rethink about the destruction and loss of humanity caused by the values in the era of machinery and technology; the destruction of nature derived from too much emphasis on production and development; and what is the true human value. This will lead to important studies that support beauty and art, and at the same time will play a major role in preparing the future direction and value of ecological life.

I am very pleased that this time, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, the internationally renowned journal, has published a special issue about East Asian aesthetics. For the publication of this special issue, I have asked the nine scholars from China, Korean, and Japan to contribute articles. Then, the topics that they freely presented were classified into three parts: nature and environment; life and human cultivation; and art and creation. I would like to deeply thank Professor Arnold Berleant, the chief editor of CA for suggesting and leading this special issue to be published, and Professor Ken-ichi Sasaki of University of Tokyo for encouraging me during the period of preparation and giving me a lot of advices.

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