Research Center for Korean Studies, Kyushu University
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Trans-Asian Modernism:

Movements in East Asian Avant-Garde

November7,Sat.

9:oo-17:00

Opening [9:00-9:10]

Session 1 [9:10-10:10]
Korean Avant-Garde Art in the 20th Century

Session2 [10:30-12:30]
Korean Literary Modernism and Avant-Garde

Session 3 [13:30-15:30]
Avant-Garde Art and Literature in East Asia

Discussion [15:45-17:00]

Venue: Jonathan KS Choi Cultural Center of Japan

Presenters and Discussants
Kyunghee Pyun
[State University of New York]
Sooran Choi
[University of Vermont]
Jinhee Kim
[Ewha Womans University]
Hyonhui Choe
[Hankuk University of Foreign Studies]
Yerhee Kim
[Kangwon National University]
Toshiko Ellis
[Nagoya University of Foreign Studies]
Toshiharu Omuka
[University of Tsukuba]
Liang Luo
[George Mason University]
Michelle Yeh[UC Davis]
Yuko Ishii[Kyushu University]
Tsuyoshi Namigata
[Kyushu University]

Trans-Asian Modernism: Movements in East Asian Avant-Garde

November 7, Sat.

Opening [9:00-9:10] Tsuyoshi Namigata

Session 1 [9:10-10:10] Korean Avant-Garde Art in the 20th Century

1. Kyunghee Pyun, “Trans-Asia or Trans-Eurasia: Oil Painting as an Avant-Garde Genre in Interwar East Asia”
2. Sooran Choi, “The Post War Korean Avant-Garde in the Context of East Asia”

Session 2 [10:30-12:30] Korean Literary Modernism and Avant-Garde

3. Jinhee Kim, “The Aesthetic Struggle of the Korean Avant-Garde in the Late 1930s”
4. Hyonhui Choe, “Colonial Avant-Garde, Its Aesthetics and Politics: Avant-Garde Experiments and Theories in 1930s Korea”
5. Yerhee Kim, “The Avant-Gardism of Korean Poetic Discourse in the 1980s and the "Poetic": Focusing on Hwang Ji-u's Poetry and Poetic Theory”

Discussant: Ellis Toshiko

Session 3 [13:30-15:30] Avant-Garde Art and Literature in East Asia

6. Toshiharu Omuka, “New is Old: Japanese Artists and World War I”
7. Liang Luo, “The Avant-Garde and Its Unexpected Connections: Chinese Practices in an East Asian Context, 1880s to 1950s”
8. Michelle Yeh, “Modernist Movements in Twentieth-Century Taiwan”

Discussant: Yuko Ishii

Discussion [15:45-17:00]

Session 1 : Korean Avant-Garde Art in the 20th Century

Trans-Asia or Trans-Eurasia: Oil Painting as an Avant-Garde Genre in Interwar East Asia

Kyunghee Pyun(State University of New York)

Among theories of Avant-Garde, Peter Burger and Jean-François Lyotard rise to be the most influential figures in the narratives of visual art. Burger divided the historical avant-garde (Dada, Surrealism, Russian Constructivism) and modernism in his famous book, *The Theory of Avant-Garde* in 1974. His ideas summarize that avant-garde artists do not reject individual artistic techniques and procedures of earlier art, but rather they reject that art in its entirety. He emphasized that advocates of avant-garde pushed for radical break with tradition by attacking the establishment of art as it has developed in bourgeois society. For Lyotard, the avant-garde persists within postmodernism as a tool of resistance, constantly challenging and disrupting cultural recognition and community conformity. In *Inhuman* published 1988, he emphasized that twentieth-century philosophical theories have displaced the distinctions between nature, the human, and technology.

In this paper, I contemplate the emergence of oil painting as a problematic medium connecting the ideas of avant-garde with materiality of bourgeois consumerism. I will question whether the medium itself is a crucial component, to Asian audiences, in the production and the consumption of European avant-garde art in the interwar period. The “foreign supplies” could bring obstacles for resistance to the establishment and could limit the aesthetic intention. Using trans-Asian artists who traveled to neighboring countries or to European countries, I argue that Lyotard’s advocacy for plural narratives of avant-grade art is valid: rather than seeking a unified political consensus, these artists discussed in my paper enable scholars to consider local, heterogeneous choices and to search for silenced voices.

The Post War Korean Avant-Garde in the Context of East Asia

Sooran Choi(University of Vermont)

This talk reads the Korean avant-garde of the Cold War decades and after within the wider field of East Asian avant-garde art. Under the military-led developmental governments that ruled South Korea from 1961 — regimes that fused authoritarian control with state-driven industrialization — an art that openly named its opposition was impossible; what its artists made instead was an art of disguise — the happenings of the late 1960s, and the avant-garde art (전위예술, jeonwi yesul) of the generation that followed — which folded political refusal into forms the security state could not read as dissent. Rather than treating this work as a national episode sealed off from its neighbors, the talk situates it among the currents that moved across the region: the shared conditions of Cold War division, censorship, and compressed modernization that shaped experiment in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China alike, and the crossings — of artists, forms, and publications — that connected Korea to them. It asks what the Korean case contributes to a regional history of the avant-garde: how experiment traveled and connected, how it negotiated distinctive institutions from official exhibitions to, more recently, digital platforms, and what the region's own long traditions of transgression and eccentricity lent it. The talk draws on my work as editor of Volumes 3 and 4 of A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in East Asia, previewing questions the volumes take up — but its center of gravity is the Korean avant-garde itself.

Session 2 : Korean Literary Modernism and Avant-Garde

The Aesthetic Struggle of the Korean Avant-Garde in the Late 1930s

Jinhee Kim(Ewha Womans University)

This study aims to discuss the radical aesthetics and political implications manifested in the avant-garde poetics of late-1930s colonial Korea. In doing so, it examines the avant-garde networks that crossed regional, media, and class boundaries—as well as the intermedial influences built upon them—as the driving forces behind these characteristics.

The avant-garde poetics of the early-to-mid 1930s, which had developed primarily around surrealists like Kim Ki-rim and Yi Sang, underwent a significant transformation moving past the mid-30s. First, a more aesthetically experimental, radical, and diverse nature emerged in both theoretical discourse and creative works. Second, the movement shared aesthetic and political ideologies through active engagement with the art and theater scenes of contemporary Korea, Japan, and Manchuria. Third, they continuously published coterie magazines—the very media that drove and sustained their activities. Fourth, the agents of avant-garde art expanded from intellectuals to the working class, while reality and praxis were heavily emphasized in their pursued artistic ideology. Fifth, it demonstrated a border-crossing of existing boundaries and an expansion therefrom. For instance, the avant-garde shifted from the ‘center’ of Seoul and Japan to Manchuria, including the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, marking an expansion from the center to the periphery.

Focusing on the literary historical changes presented above, this study aims to elucidate the literary historical achievements of the avant-garde in the late 1930s. Furthermore, it seeks to evaluate the Korean avant-garde as a political vanguard that carried out an aesthetic struggle in a colonial situation where realistic representation was impossible.

Colonial Avant-Garde, Its Aesthetics and Politics
: Avant-Garde Experiments and Theories in 1930s Korea

Hyonhui Choe(Hankuk University of Foreign Studies)

In 1930s Korea under Japanese colonial rule, Yi Sang (1910-37), a prominent modernist writer, engaged in a series of radical literary experiments, most notably through his 1934 serial poem Ogamdo (Crow's Eye View). To overcome the peripheral status inherent to colonial Korean literature, Yi adopted an absolute devotion to form. Unable to realize modernity at the level of thematic content under imperial domination, he pushed avant-garde aesthetics to its limit by substituting formal experimentation for content. This strategy demonstrates how avant-garde aesthetics served as a crucial shortcut for the periphery—the East vis-à-vis the West, and the colony vis-à-vis the empire—to transcend its geopolitical limitations and reach modernity.

Within this context, the unexpected political dimension of avant-garde formalism in the modern world comes to the fore. This ambiguity is vividly illustrated in the literary criticism of Ch'oe Chaesŏ, who interpreted Yi's formal experiments not as a escape from reality, but as an aesthetic radicalization of a realist engagement with modern conditions. Ultimately, the inherent political ambivalence of avant-garde aesthetics enabled Ch'oe's ideological transformation—from a champion of avant-garde art to a practitioner of the fascist "aestheticization of politics." This paper explores the complex intersection of aesthetic radicalism and political ideology within the colonial avant-garde of 1930s Korea.

The Avant-Gardism of Korean Poetic Discourse in the 1980s and the "Poetic"
: Focusing on Hwang Ji-u's Poetry and Poetic Theory

Yerhee Kim(Kangwon National University)

This paper aims to examine the avant-gardism of 1980s Korean poetry through the poems and poetic theories of Hwang Ji-u. In the era of the 1980s, which began upon the tragedy of the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement, Korean poetic discourse pursued the avant-gardism of literature and the dismantling of the literary institution through movements such as mook (magazine-book) publications. Among these avant-garde attitudes in 1980s Korean literature, Hwang Ji-u stands out as the most prominent poet. However, as seen through Peter Bürger's consideration of the historical avant-garde, the avant-garde imagination attempting to dismantle and reconstruct the boundary between life and art results in the fading of its powerful destructive force as art is sublated into life. Nevertheless, Hwang Ji-u's poetic proposition—stating that "anyone/anything can become a poem," while simultaneously asserting that "the poetic does exist"—seems to transcend the point Bürger diagnosed as the failure of avant-garde art. In other words, Hwang Ji-u preserves poetry precisely by dismantling it. By paying attention to the relationship between poetry and politics, as well as poetry and life (reality), this paper examines Hwang Ji-u's poetic thought, which captures a landscape of avant-garde poetics in 1980s Korean poetry, and seeks to read the avant-gardism and singularity embedded in his poetics.

Session 3 : Avant-Garde Art and Literature in East Asia

New is Old: Japanese Artists and World War I

Toshiharu Omuka(University of Tsukuba)

Japanese art during World War I was profoundly affected by the disruption of cultural exchanges with the West. Western-style painters (yoga), in particular, suffered a major blow, as they had been expanding the scope and depth of these exchanges. Consequently, artists who had previously been interested in the radical expressive forms of France and Germany were forced to seek new directions. One such direction was the reassessment of tradition and the rediscovery of the past. Another was a movement among yoga painters to explore new geographical horizons in East Asia that had previously been overlooked as subjects for landscapes. Finally, a small number of artists attempted to raise their antennae even higher toward new forms of expression, just as they had done before.

While the return to tradition formed prominent trends such as the so-called Shin-hanga (New Prints) and Shin-nanga (New Literati Painting), the up-and-coming critic of the time, Kinoshita Mokutaro, sharply pointed out the nature of this "newness" in a 1916 article for the prominent magazine Chuo-Koron. He noted that he could find nothing "new" in "New Orientalism", characterizing it instead as a "fukko" (revival) or a "kakusei" (awakening). On the other hand, with the end of the war in Europe, after a long interval, expectations for working in Paris were boiling over among Western-style painters. A wave of artists flocked to the City of Art to find “Return to Order”, while German and Russian radical trends strongly stimulated the rise of the avant-garde in the 1920s Japan.

The Avant-Garde and Its Unexpected Connections
: Chinese Practices in an East Asian Context, 1880s to 1950s

Liang Luo(George Mason University)

Taking inspiration from the overall framework drafted by Professor Namigata and me a year ago, I am experimenting with a range of themes relevant to the first two volumes of The Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in East Asia, which I am co-editing with Professors Pyun and Namigata respectively. Considering the periods from the 1880s to the 1950s as an organic whole, I am reminded of both of my monographs, The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China, and The Global White Snake, as deeply rooted in this important and transformative period in the cultural history of the avant-garde in East Asia.

Through a range of case studies from late 19th century and early twentieth century avant-gardist commercial entertainment based on classical themes and folk legends, early twentieth century modernist fiction centering aestheticism and revolutionary tendencies, to the transformation of the avant-garde throughout the 1950s at the post-WWII moment, I invite considerations of the intricate and often unexpected connections between the classical and the avant-garde, the folk and the avant-garde, the avant-garde and the popular, the aesthetics and the political, and conservatism and avant-gardism.

I highlight the local specificities, intermedial perspectives, and boundary-crossing qualities of the avant-garde and treat it as the denomination for a conglomerate of heterogeneous transnational networks of movements, groups, individual artists, aesthetic activities, among many others. Here the East Asian context is treated flexibly, focusing on transnational flows, colonial histories and post-colonial articulations, diasporic identities, and cultural entanglements across this region. I am further inspired by the dissenting energies brought by the rise of “Global Asias” as ways of crossing Asian Studies, Ethnic Studies, (Cultural) Heritage Studies, Transpacific Studies, and Diasporic Studies, among other locally oriented fields such as Asian American Studies, Afro-Asian Studies, and Eurasian Studies.

Modernist Movements in Twentieth-Century Taiwan

Michelle Yeh(University of California, Davis)

This paper offers an overview of the modernist movements in poetry in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in the first half of the twentieth century. It begins with a reflection on how to define modernism in the East Asian context. Instead of subscribing to the Western paradigm, the paper seeks to explores Chinese modernisms that arose under unique historical, sociopolitical, and literary-cultural conditions.

In the broadest sense, New Poetry (xinshi), or poetry written in the modern vernacular in non-traditional forms, which arose in 1917, may be considered the earliest articulation of modernism in the Chinese context. As such, it went through several iterations in the 1920s and culminated in the publication of Les Contemporains (Xiandai) in Shanghai in 1932-35. On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, recent developments in mainland China and Japan inspired Taiwanese poets to write modern-style poetry, in both Chinese and Japanese. A short-lived but innovative movement was launched in the 1930s by a small group of poets in South Taiwan, who founded Le Moulin Poetry Society to advocate Surrealism. In postwar Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1950s, émigré and local poets developed a modernism that exerted a lasting influence on later generations.

In each case, the poetic modernisms outlined above represent a confluence of transcultural and translingual forces. The paper offers an analysis of the historicity as well as literary expressions of the modernist movements as a significant part of international modernism.