

The Rice Papers



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A Student Journal of Asian Studies

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Preface

This is the third issue of *The Rice Papers*, an undergraduate academic journal of Asian Studies at Brigham Young University, and the first edition published since 2007. Though no new volumes were printed in this three-year interim, Dr. Van Gessel and Dr. Steven Riep continued to accept promising student scholarship for publication; this current volume is a small collection of those submissions received from 2008–10. The first paper in this new edition is a study of nativist Taiwanese writers during the period of Nationalist-imposed martial law from 1949–87 and the “evasive writing” tactics they utilized to criticize and subvert what they saw as the authoritarian rule of the Nationalist Party. After that we have a critical analysis of Abe Kobo’s *Suna No Onna*, in which the author argues for a Camusian absurdist reading of the novel, followed by a study of Kitabatake Chikafusa’s influential Shinto tract *Jinno Shotoki*. And finally, our last two essays are an investigation of growing popular dissatisfaction with the Korean yangban (gentry class) through eighteenth-century Korean art, and the role of Confucianism in the creation of a vibrant democracy in South Korea.

The staff of *The Rice Papers* extends our sincerest gratitude to Dr. Gessel and Dr. Riep of the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages for their tireless efforts as faculty advisors. Their dedication and patience in mentoring the staff and organizing funding was crucial for the continuation of the journal. We cannot adequately express our gratitude for their service. Similarly, the publication of this journal would likewise be impossible without the generous funding provided by Undergraduate Education and the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies. We also recognize the invaluable contributions of the Kennedy Center Communications staff for their editorial, graphic design, and printing assistance, and also the many faculty members across the university who volunteered to read submissions and support undergraduate research on east and southeast Asia.

It is our sincerest wish that with the support of our talented faculty and staff, and the continued interest of our outstanding student body, *The Rice Papers* will continue to act as a regular forum for undergraduate student scholarship relating to Asia. As the political, economic, and social importance of Asia continues to rise and have an impact on the international community, we hope to do our part to promote an understanding of this dynamic and fascinating area of the world for the campus community at Brigham Young University.

—*The Rice Papers* staff

Evasive Writing: Resistance to the Government and Modernization Hidden in Taiwanese Fiction

by Harrison Paul

Sometimes, it is best not to speak the truth—at least not directly. Under an authoritarian regime, the truth—whether of events or opinions—often hurts the one who reveals it more than anyone else. For this reason, writers throughout the world have long employed evasive writing tactics not only to avoid censorship of their ideas but also to escape imprisonment or execution at the government’s hand. Taiwanese writers under the period of Nationalist-imposed martial law were no different. Nativist writers, characterized by “use of the Taiwanese dialect, depiction of the plight of country folks or small-town dwellers in economic difficulty, and resistance of the imperialist presence in Taiwan” (Chang 149), resorted to evasive tactics to express their opinions. They, along with others whose views conflicted with government ideas or whose opinions were seen as challenging to the ruling party, concealed the true meaning of their words within stories that were innocent and unassuming on the surface. Although some of their works appear to be simple stories about life in Taiwan, authors like Chen Yingzhen and Huang Chunming placed hidden messages in their writing that criticized the oppressiveness of the Nationalist regime, accused them of deceiving the populace, and opposed the Nationalist Party (KMT) as the rightful government of Taiwan.

Evasive tactics include metaphors or veiled meanings in narrative. Authors use them as they employ indirect criticism that less astute readers, such as most censors, cannot decipher. According to Leo Strauss, former professor of political science at the University of Chicago and renowned

political philosopher, “The influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing, the technique which we have in mind when speaking of writing between the lines” (24). While it requires extensive preparation and careful crafting to employ evasive tactics in writing, doing so provides the advantages of personal communication for publicly distributed works while eliminating the risks of publicly stating an opinion contrary to the prevailing authority (Strauss 25). Not only can evasive writers express their opinions to a large group of people, they also avoid repercussions from authoritarian government officials. If they write with enough subtlety, then only the most careful readers—the author’s true target audience for the social critiques—will be able to understand their true meaning (Strauss 25). Because the burden of proof lies with censors—and because many authoritarian regimes employ censors for their political ties rather than their attention to literary detail—carefully crafted evasive writing presents them with the difficult task of finding a clear interpretation through which to implicate the writers (Strauss 26).

Writers often employ what Ross Chambers calls “oppositional practices” in their efforts to express their opinions without being censored (7). According to Chambers, Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, oppositional practices are techniques people use within the framework of societal rules to derive personal benefit without revolting against or directly undermining the system (7–8). Writers could tell a story that has no overt political implications—or, in fact, one that seems to view the prevailing authority favorably—while using descriptions and the portrayal of the characters or scenes to indirectly criticize the government. Writers might also use oppositional writing techniques to preserve their cultural history in the face of repression from the government. When authors employ evasive tactics to represent the opinions of an oppressed group, the ideas they express often reflect real sentiments of people who are unable to express themselves effectively. Prasenjit Duara, historian of China at the National University of Singapore, describes cultural identification as “a critical power in society that is potentially resistant to totalizing ideologies” (16), and, therefore, authors who raise concerns about the government under the guise of cultural preservation are less likely to be challenged by censors, as cultural matters may appear less politically charged.

This relates to Strauss’s idea of writing between the lines: as long as writers are able to hide their meaning behind evasive language, they can write their ideas without repercussions. When writers veil their meaning within

the framework of preserving cultural history, deflecting accusations by focusing on less politically charged issues, they work within the limits of the established standards. Using such “oppositional practices” rather than rhetoric of resistance to express their views and the views they feel others hold, these evasive writers raise questions rather than solutions, and never dare to challenge “the structures of power that are in place” (Chambers 8).

Taiwanese writers during the era of Nationalist-imposed martial law (1949–87) used these tactics to spread their ideas. One such writer, Chen Yingzhen, began publishing fiction after graduating from college in 1959 but was imprisoned for seven years in the late 1960s for “participating in a Marxist reading group” (Chang 160). After he was released, he took a more circumspect approach to writing. Chen’s evasive tactics include contrasting the 1950s with the 1980s, thus giving an indirect criticism of government and society as evidenced in his short story “Mountain Path.” Both “Mountain Path” and “Bellflowers” feature fragmented narratives that hide his meaning from less careful readers. Although his commentary can be scathing at times, in “Mountain Path,” Chen also buries his true meaning within a framework of social criticism rather than direct political criticism. Even so, his views on society and the values he espouses sometimes reveal his intent and push him to the edge of oppositional writing and dangerously close to outright revolutionary discourse.

When Chen contrasts the past with the present in his short story “Mountain Path,” he glorifies the idealistic heroes of the 1950s and turns a disapproving eye on decadence and capitalism in 1980s Taiwan. In the story, he juxtaposes the past with the present by setting the story in the present and narrating a series of flashbacks that describe events from thirty years before. He gives a scathing commentary on “the rampant materialism in Taiwan’s affluent society of the 1980s, which, as he sees it, impedes the cultivation of spiritual values and corrupts basic humanity” (Chang 174). In flashbacks to the characters’ pasts, they live out in the country; in the present, they live a comfortable life in the city. In the past, the family was forced to subsist off of the father’s meager income as a coal miner and later as a construction worker; in the present, Guomu works in the city as a successful accountant. In the past, Guomu’s ill mother lived her final days “in a damp, dark room, full of the smell of urine from the toilet bucket” (Chen 10); now, his sister-in-law is being cared for “in a private room in the hospital” (10). Huang Zhenbo and Li Guokun are seen as heroes of the past—revolutionaries fighting for high ideals; the characters in the present are depicted as products of capitalism—too concerned with increasing their material wealth to worry about the ideals of those before. The past is characterized by Cai

Qianhui's hard work and determination to repay her debt to the Li family; the present is characterized by her forgetting the ideals of the past and living a comfortable modern life with Guomu. Chen may not actually criticize the government, but he criticizes its ideology and subtly applauds those with views contrary to the KMT.

Although these comparisons may not apply directly to the nationalist government, the ideology and social commentary Chen implies show the careful reader his intent in writing. The nationalist government was the primary vehicle for rapid modernization in Taiwan as well as the introduction of mass urban capitalism. J. Megan Greene observes that "the Kuomintang (KMT) state planned and promoted science and technology (S&T) development . . . on Taiwan after 1949" and that "[the] rapid growth of Taiwan's postwar 'miracle' economy has most frequently been credited to the leading role of the state in promoting economic development" (1). Not only did the nationalists establish a capitalist system in Taiwan, but also their appeal for help from the U.S. and other Western nations entrenched them within this system—and in order to retain the favor of their Western anti-Communist allies, the nationalists took drastic measures to quell any left-wing disturbances among the populace. Therefore, while Chen criticizes this trend toward decadence and modernization in "Mountain Path," he also launches an indirect ideological attack on the government that first established and then upheld this system for decades.

In Chen's view, the Taiwanese of the past held true to their roots and their beliefs. As the nationalist government continued to modernize and regulate culture on the island according to its preferences, the people began to drift away from their values and forget their cultural heritage. Qianhui refers to them as "tamed animals" (Chen 21). She wonders how Zhenbo will deal with the decay of idealism in the wake of modernization by writing in her letter: "I am afraid that you who had 'struggled for the life that is man's right,' after your release, will have to begin another difficult journey" into a world of people "[c]ompromised and living on the products of capitalism" (21). Even though Qianhui and her communist ideals fail in the wake of capitalism, Chen glorifies the nobility of her life and her self-willed death, establishing her as a tragic idealist who could not save a dying cause. By inserting his own views that socialist ideals are admirable and capitalist methods are dishonorable, Chen undermines the nationalist government's policies by associating it with a corrupt, immoral system.

Chen also hides and fragments the true messages of his stories through the use of the detective narrative, where the mystery that the characters and readers solve reveals Chen's message. For example, in "Bellflowers," "a

young boy's story of playing hooky from school conceals a second account of the mysterious disappearance of an elementary school teacher with leftist leanings" (Riep "Gone" 7). Steven Riep, professor of Chinese literature and film at Brigham Young University, then explains the significance of using this tactic of writing: "By fragmenting the narrative along the lines of detective fiction and leaving the reader to link these fragments together with the help of a clue in the opening line of the work . . . Chen could test the political climate and reduce the possibility of [Nationalist] censorship" (7). Riep also explains Chen's use of the detective solution narrative:

The solution narrative . . . responds to the fundamental questions underlying detective fiction—who committed the crime and how and why it was committed. Conventionally the author suppresses this information, holding it in abeyance to build suspense through the reader's identification with the investigator and his or her quest for a solution to the crime (8).

In this way, Chen allows the reader to discover his message gradually and simultaneously provides ample cover to dodge accusations of anti-government rhetoric.

He also uses this kind of fragmentation in "Mountain Path" to conceal his meaning from nationalist censors. Guomu's process of discovering his sister-in-law's true past is split into a series of flashbacks and references to the past that obscure the truth and make the reader wonder what actually occurred. Much like a detective mystery, "[a]s the investigation progresses, the investigator and the reader find clues that, when pieced together, provide an increasingly clearer understanding of the past" (Riep "Gone" 9). Because the events of the story are fragmented, Chen buries his criticism of the White Terror underneath a general—and generally accepted—call for a return to the morality and dignified personal independence of traditional culture. He glorifies those who, like Qianhui, lament the decadence of capitalist society, and strive to work diligently in the service of others. Jeffrey C. Kinkley describes this trend that Chen's post-imprisonment works, including "Mountain Path," feature:

[Chen's] later stories recoil from the absoluteness of an irksome new human equivalence enforced by dependence on the exterior force. The quest is to go back to the family, to tradition, and to national pride, though any tradition of nationalism will do. . . [Chen's characters] are pampered and rewarded into a state of cultural and moral anesthesia—made dependent upon a false *god* (or devil) of rational, multinational, acultural, emotionless, valueless, infinitely relativist, modernity (258).

By this method, Chen criticizes the nationalist government's support of rampant modernization while ostensibly only addressing matters of social morality and the shift from idealism to consumerism.

While Chen's writing often focuses on political issues that lurk beneath the surface of his narratives, Huang Chunming focuses primarily on social and cultural issues. His evasive tactics consist mainly of metaphors and stories of ordinary people that express his views on social problems without indicating specific culprits or solutions. Rural Taiwanese are at the center of Huang's writings, especially in "The Drowning of an Old Cat" and in "The Taste of Apples," and he uses the lives and perspectives of the common people to comment on the changes the nationalists made that affected the native populace.

Huang's social commentary is particularly evident in his short story "The Drowning of an Old Cat." This story describes how an old man named Ah Sheng reacts to city-dwellers deciding to build a swimming pool on the site of the well in Clear Spring, his rural town. Ah Sheng opposes the pool's construction, because he feels this will defile the pure well that has served his ancestors and given life to their rural community. Though he tries every method he can imagine to stop the city-dwellers, Ah Sheng fails and eventually drowns in the very pool he protested against building.

This story illustrates Huang's concern that native traditions and the innocent, rural way of life were threatened as modernization began to sweep Taiwan. It also provides an indirect criticism of the nationalist government, as the KMT was the primary force behind Taiwanese modernization, as noted earlier. Additionally, Ah Sheng is mocked throughout the story as his behavior conflicts with the accepted norm for the city-dwelling urbanites. He is laughed at for speaking out of turn at an official village meeting (Huang *Drowning* 24–25), is treated as an ignorant "elderly gentleman" when interrogated by the police (31–32), and is "the butt of a number of jokes" when he tries to seek help from the county chief's office (35). Huang chronicles these changes and the shifting attitudes that accompany modernization; in the words of Howard Goldblatt, research professor of Chinese at the University of Notre Dame, "Ah Sheng's death carries no more weight in the village than the drowning of an old cat; progress has won and the reader must decide for himself how he feels about that" (Faurot 118–19). Huang lets his readers draw their own conclusions regarding the appropriateness of Ah Sheng's actions, as well as the costs and benefits of modernization in Taiwan. Given Ah Sheng's portrayal as an honest, well-meaning character and his subsequent tragic fate, it is apparent that, in Huang's opinion, Tai-

wan is modernizing far too quickly for its own good. The changing cultural trends and adoption of Western ways of thinking leave many unable to cope with the new society that has developed around them. Even so, according to Goldblatt, Huang is “a social pathologist, one who deals with the diagnostic rather than the prescriptive or the remedial—in literary terms, of course, a critical realist” (Faurot 119). He mentions issues pertinent to this time period in Taiwan and leaves the reader to decide “the merits of the characters’ actions and of society’s demands from the raw data of dialogue and objective narrative” (119). The objectivity of his narrative also lends to his ability to hide any criticism he may have within others’ interpretations of his writing. This is exactly what Strauss referred to when he described the “peculiar technique” (24) writers develop when they are faced with threats of censorship: the ability to express an opinion by subtle implication, relying on the reader to reach the same conclusion.

Huang provides an objective narrative in “The Drowning of an Old Cat” as he sets up a conflict of moral values between the older rural Taiwanese and the rising generation. One of Ah Sheng and his group’s primary concerns about the construction of a swimming pool is the moral impact it will have on the community, mentioning girls and boys wearing “indecent clothing” and worrying about “what’ll be going through their minds” (Huang *Drowning* 21). When rallying the other older gentlemen to his cause, Ah Sheng vehemently states, “Here in Clear Spring we’ve always been simple, decent folk, but this could bring ruin to our sons and daughters and corrupt the entire village!” (21). In the end, however, Ah Sheng’s plans are easily thwarted and the swimming pool is built, with young people “staring, as though mesmerized, at the bras and short red pants of the swimsuits, their desires aroused” (36), which is exactly what Ah Sheng had feared. While his concerns may seem old-fashioned or reactionary to the modern reader, Huang uses Ah Sheng’s character to show how modernization in Taiwan has quickly and radically changed the lives of those in the countryside: Ah Sheng’s failure to prevent modernization from spreading to his town reflects the failure of Taiwanese culture and traditional values to continue in the face of increasing nationalist-driven modernization. Ah Sheng’s anxiety over the morality of his community, despite his admission that he does not have long left to live (32) and will not live to see the pool greatly impact village life, contrasts sharply with the city-dwellers’ uncaring attitude: “You ought to take it easy and enjoy your twilight years. Why concern yourself with matters that don’t concern you?” (31). Huang seems to laud Ah Sheng for his dedication to social morality despite his awkwardness in modern society, lamenting how the rising urban generation ridicules his unselfish attempts

to preserve traditional morality. By showing Ah Sheng's determination to preserve his cultural heritage, Huang thus subtly criticizes modernization and its proponents in Taiwan, while still veiling his commentary underneath a narrative about rural Taiwanese standing up for their moral standards.

In addition to critiquing modernization's impact on the rural Taiwanese, "The Drowning of an Old Cat" also offers subtle commentary on the nationalist government. When Ah Sheng and the villagers try to stop the construction company from building the swimming pool, the police apprehend them and eventually arrest them. Ah Sheng inwardly complains about the unfairness of the law, and the story notes that "he could not understand why others received the protection of the law for coming and interfering with his and others' actions, while the righteousness of his behavior was considered illegal" (28). Here Huang metaphorically expresses dissatisfaction with the government: the nationalists make it legal for modernizing enterprises to infringe on the rural life of the native Taiwanese, while the people's efforts to resist these changes are met with government-imposed penalties. Furthermore, Huang uses Ah Sheng's appeal to County Chief Chen to illustrate the government's unwillingness to address issues important to the native Taiwanese. When Ah Sheng meets with the county chief to discuss the matter of the swimming pool in Clear Spring, the chief pays him little attention. He never takes Ah Sheng's ideas seriously, despite promises during his election campaign that "if he was elected, Ah Sheng could come to him any time with problems" (33). Huang's commentary applies to politicians in general but specifically to those leaders during the early nationalist government who made promises they either forgot or were unwilling to keep. Like Ah Sheng, the people of Taiwan were neglected and forgotten by their leaders, and their traditions began to fade away in the wake of modernization.

Huang Chunming also employs symbols and metaphors in his works that critique the government and the modernization process it brought upon the Taiwanese people. In "The Taste of Apples," Huang's use of symbols embeds a hidden meaning in an otherwise benign story. The story centers on the impoverished Chiang family. After the father is hit by an American car, the foreign affairs police take the American driver, a U.S. military officer with connections to the Taiwanese government, to apologize to the family. Throughout most of the story, the mother and oldest sister constantly worry what will become of them if the father is dead; in the end, they discover he will live, though he will not be able to work. The American officer then gives them a large sum of money to cover their future expenses.

On the surface, "The Taste of Apples" might seem to be praising the compassion of the American driver or showing the benefits of moderniza-

tion. A deeper look will show that Huang is clearly criticizing modernization and its effects on the Taiwanese population. The foreign affairs policeman, for example, can be seen as a representation of the nationalist government. When he speaks to the family, he primarily speaks Mandarin Chinese—he hazards one phrase in “halting Taiwanese” (Huang *Drowning* 161–62)—even though the family speaks Taiwanese, and the parents rely on their daughter to translate for them. This symbolizes the nationalist government’s detachment from the people as well as their policies to establish a national cultural identity that suppressed native Taiwanese culture. In addition, when the policeman is leading the American to the family’s home amidst “a district where tiny illegal shacks [were] made of wooden crates and sheet metal” (159), he lies to him about the situation of these people. When the American notices the squalor in which these impoverished people live, the policeman hastily explains they are merely temporary residents and will soon move to some “apartments alongside the river” (160). He then remarks that he “felt pleased with himself over his alert reaction, but at the same time was uneasy about lying” (160). The nationalist government was also similar to the policeman in this regard: its leaders sought to make Taiwan look more modern and more prosperous than it was so that foreigners—especially their powerful allies, the Americans—would support their government and view them as a valid industrial society. After all, “American intervention was . . . instrumental in the economic reforms of the early 1960s, which set [Taiwan] on a path of export-oriented industrialization” (Chu 117). Taiwan’s government relied on American support to implement its ambitious programs, and Huang expresses his opinion that the government cared more about modernization than about its own people.

Furthermore, the impact the American has in the Chiang family’s lives symbolizes the effects modernization has wrought on the native Taiwanese population. When the Chiang family moves from southern Taiwan in search of work to “try [their] luck in a big city” (179), the father is run over and crippled by a large American sedan, a symbol of modernization. However, in the end, does the accident not leave the family better off financially than they were at the beginning? This is indeed the case: one effect of Chiang’s encounter with the American car is that his family is provided for by someone else’s money. The officer offers to send Chiang’s mute daughter to America for special education. Hidden beneath the surface of this story is Huang’s commentary undermining modernization: it provides monetary security but disables them, severing cultural and family ties and forcing them to become economically and culturally dependent on foreign powers.

In Howard Goldblatt's analysis, Huang offers an objective commentary to the effects of modernization on the Taiwanese:

It is probably not so much that the author consciously tries to avoid forcing his judgments or conclusions upon the reader, . . . rather, I believe, he is himself ambivalent and finds his natural sympathies with the symbols of an earlier, less complicated time blunted somewhat by the knowledge that progress and modernization can and do bring tangible benefits to many people. He may be saying only that we mustn't forget the true costs of these benefits, willing though we may be to pay them (Faurot 119).

Huang suggests we reconsider the price paid for modernization; just as Chiang loses his legs in the accident that ensures his family's financial security, so are cultural traditions and personal dignity lost in the flurry of modernization.

Huang also describes the taste of apples at the end of his story. While the family originally believed the apples—expensive goods imported from the U.S.—would taste sweet, they realize they are actually “a little sour and pulpy, and when they chewed they were frothy and not quite real” (184). The apples symbolize the forbidden fruit of modernization and reliance on American influence: even though people enjoy the benefits of industrial societies, Huang suggests people are often disappointed in what they find. The nationalist government's efforts to improve their lives are also like the apples, “frothy and not quite real” (184)—in other words, superficial and insubstantial—and this analogy is used to further express Huang's latent disapproval for the changes that swept Taiwan during nationalist rule.

By reading what is written between the lines, we can see Taiwanese writers under the nationalist regime placed hidden messages in their works to safely or secretly display their dissatisfaction with current events and the shift in cultural trends that they blamed on nationalists. Chen Yingzhen and Huang Chunming incorporated moral ideas of self-sacrifice, concern for public decency, and the dignity of honest work into their stories to lend credibility to their arguments. Due to increasing modernization, age-old values and traditions were being destroyed, and past idealism was failing in the face of growing consumerism and materialism. By focusing on the social and moral implications of modernization, they protected themselves from nationalist censors and police. By implicating the government's policies as the culprit for modernization, they also tacitly—and discreetly—criticized the nationalists for the problems associated with it.

Huang, Chen, and others like them took it upon themselves to express the common people's resistance to modernization and the oppression of native Taiwanese culture. Although they recognized the people's lives im-

proved materially as a result of modernization, they refused to let monetary benefits trump the alarming cultural degradation that accompanied them. Through the use of veiled language and fragmented narratives, these writers did more than simply express their opinions; they incited readers to ponder the consequences of modernization and take a more objective position in evaluating trends toward modernization and their multidimensional impact on society. Their evasive tactics not only allowed their works to be published and widely dispersed, but their tactics also increased the overall impact of their words.

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Suna no Onna: An Absurd Reading

by Charisa Player

Woman in the Dunes (*Suna no Onna*), written by Kobo Abe, readily lends itself to analysis as an existential novel, which is described as a work that “subverts and ridicules traditional genres of realistic fiction, asserting its non-mimetic autonomy over against the conventional expectations and interpretative customs of the reader” (Goebel). However, because of the way in which the novel presents its world, and the way that the narrative ends, *Suna no Onna* finds itself in a somewhat separate category from other existentialist texts. In his article “Kobo Abe: Japan’s Kafka,” Goebel explains Abe’s writing in *Suna no Onna* is a “psychological fiction, maintaining, however, the Kafkian narrative structure of the conflict between the conventional world of the protagonist and the ever-shifting, paradoxically uncertain counter-reality.” He continues explaining Kafka’s approach:

In Kafka’s texts, such erroneous approach to life results in the protagonists’ inevitable failure to come to terms with the challenges posed by the enigmatic institutions of domination and authority. They remain inescapably trapped in the endless mazes of these power systems. This predicament deprives them of their last residues of existential autonomy and eventually results in their humiliating death.

Instead of merely reproducing a Kafka-esque existential novel, Abe, who was an open admirer of Kafka, adds a unique twist on the Kafkian existential novel in *Suna no Onna*: rather than present the narrative world as having those “enigmatic institutions of domination and authority” in a con-

temporary society, he instead traps his protagonist within a desert that has a very opaque social structure and few characters. Additionally, rather than ending the novel with the protagonist Jumpei's inevitable and humiliating death (which only occurs outside the main narrative when Jumpei is officially declared missing), Abe instead keeps Jumpei very much alive at the end and has Jumpei choose to inexplicably keep his place in the village and continue with his attempts at becoming independent. Because of the ways in which Abe subverts the Kafkaian existentialist prototype in *Suna no Onna*, he might be seen not as Japan's Kafka or a Japanese writer who merely adopts an existentialist style but as someone who takes that Kafka-esque existentialist style and makes it uniquely his own. It is this difference between the expected Kafkaian existential structure and Abe's novel that begins to suggest the validity of an absurdist interpretation rather than a strictly existentialist one for *Suna no Onna*.

Although it's possible Abe did not draw consciously from Camus when writing *Suna no Onna*, this novel seems to lend itself more to Camus' style of absurdism rather than the more vanilla existentialist genre. In order to highlight the difference between typical existentialist texts and the similarities to Camus' definition of absurdism, this essay will compare the themes, setting, and the main character of *Suna no Onna* against Camus' paradigm of absurdism in "The Myth of Sisyphus" in an attempt to show how Abe has taken the existentialist ideal he saw in Kafka and has expanded it in a uniquely Japanese way.

Camus' Absurdism

Absurdism is generally seen as a kind of extension of existentialism. Both absurdism and existentialism include the same confrontations between the expected and reality and both deal with characters in crisis over these perceived philosophical differences. Camus describes the absurd primarily in terms of it being an irreconcilable confrontation between two equally valid points. He explains, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (28). For Camus, this confrontation between what is expected and what is perceived is at the heart of what constitutes the absurd. He explains, "The magnitude of the absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of my comparison. . . . the absurdity springs from a comparison" (30). For example, Camus considers an absurd action as one that is an "exercise in detachment and passion which crowns the splendor and futility of a man's life" (107). Camus further clarifies the difference between an existentialist work and an absurdist work when he explains that an existential

novel will end with the main character having a “continued cherishing of a blind hope” (54), while an absurd novel will end without offering some kind of solution or hope to the reader. Camus argues that the author of an absurd novel must write an absurd ending for absurd characters, where the absurd novel is “that exercise in detachment and passion which crowns the splendor and futility of a man’s life” (107).

In this way, *Suna no Onna* is an absurd novel rather than an existentialist one, primarily because of that “splendor and futility” of Jumpei’s life in the dunes. While Abe frequently invokes questions, both philosophical and practical, about the absurd position in which Jumpei finds himself, Abe does not offer any concrete explanation for Jumpei’s work continuously shoveling sand. Rather, Abe merely makes references to other ideas and figures as fleeting lenses through which to view the situation, much like looking at the same scene through different color filters provides variety to the scene without actually changing the scene’s composition. An example of this occurs when Jumpei is writing what seems to be some kind of a dialectic in a journal. In this conversation between Jumpei’s “selves,” he observes his lack of concrete motive for doing anything, and responds:

When farmers increase their workable land they have that much more to do. In the final analysis, there’s no end to their labor, and they only wind up with more to do. However, the farmer at least has a return on his potatoes and rice. Compared with a farmer’s work, shoveling away the sand is like trying to pile up rocks in the River of Hades, where the devils cart them off as fast as you throw them in. Well, what happens with the river of Hades in the end? Not a thing. It’s an infernal punishment precisely because nothing happens. (188)

This reference to infernal punishment seems to acutely invoke the myth of Sisyphus, who was punished for his disregard of the gods by being forced to continually roll a large stone up a hill and watch it roll down before starting the whole process over. Similarly, Jumpei seems to be forced to continuously shovel sand and watch the sand fill in the space during the day before starting again each night. The lack of produced product, and the inability to make any noticeable improvement in the project, is what makes the endeavor an absurd one. We as readers expect to have a purpose for our labors, and the break between our expectations and the reality of what Jumpei is doing is what makes this absurd.

While Jumpei does not necessarily begin the novel as an absurd man, by the end of the novel, he becomes so when he chooses to stay in the village when given the opportunity to leave. By staying, Jumpei elects to both

continue existing in his absurd world and also elects to continue his rebellion against it. It is this continued rebellion and the conscious decision to stay that makes Jumpei an example of an absurd man.

Camus' Absurd World and the World of *Suna no Onna*

Camus describes the absurd man as one who “recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason, and admits the irrational” (37). The absurd man, then, is a thinking man. He is one who recognizes the world as absurd and confronts this knowledge through reason. Camus describes reason as “the wine of the absurd, and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness” (52). The absurd man is one who has “forgotten how to hope. This hell of the present is his kingdom at last. All problems recover their sharp edge” (Camus 53). In *Suna no Onna*, Jumpei finds himself trapped in a small pit in the ever-flowing and ever-changing sands. Buried within the sand is a small two-room hut that is constantly in danger of being swallowed whole by the landscape. Jumpei’s companion is a woman, a native of the local village.

For Jumpei, life in the dunes is very much a hell of the present, with each grain of sand composing a problem with sharp edges. Abe describes the decisions and occurrences within the pit as having potentially life-threatening consequences. For example, as Jumpei begins to confront the realities of living in the desert, he is first faced with the problem sand creates when combined with perspiration and clothing: “You’ll get a sand rash right away if you leave your clothes on when you perspire . . . the skin festers, like after a burn, and then scales off” (57). According to the woman [who is unnamed in the book and will therefore be called Onna in this essay], in addition to the danger of wearing clothes in the sandy pit, there is a danger from sand encroaching on the living space, from storms, and from the walls of the pit in which they live collapsing. Each of these dangers arises from the ever-present, sharp-edged sand.

Interestingly, in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus refers to the absurd world as a desert. He explains that discussing the existence of one’s self or of others is “evoking after many others those waterless deserts where thought reaches its confines. After many others, yes indeed, but how eager they were to get out of them!” (9). It is probably not coincidental that the narrative of *Suna no Onna* takes place in a literal desert—one that further enforces the literal boundaries of the kind of metaphorical thoughts within Camus’ desert. And similar to other men who have found themselves in the desert of an absurd world, Jumpei, as the nascent absurd hero, also attempts to get out of the desert.

While Camus feels escape is not a valid response to an absurd universe, he implies it is through the struggle with this desert that man can come to understand his place within this absurd universe. He explains the absurd man “must adapt [his] behavior to [life’s certainties] and pursue them in all their consequences,” further arguing, “I already know that thought has entered those deserts. There it found its bread. There it realized that it had previously been feeding on phantoms” (22).

Despite his passion for the absurd in literature, Camus is undecided whether a truly absurd work of literature can be done. He seems to find some sort of reconciliation, escape, or hope in the ending of every literary work that attempts absurdism. Particularly, Camus seems to have been under the apprehension that a novel that does not provide some sort of hope at the end is unlikely to be published or possibly even written. However, despite drawing from English, European, and Russian examples, Camus here seems still to be constrained by a rather Western literary convention that requires literature to provide some kind of philosophically satisfying ending. Because of its strong historical background and plethora of extra- and intra-cultural influences, Japanese literature has been largely free from this constraint. This freedom from the expected Western ending is also inherent in *Suna no Onna*, which suggests its potential as an absurd novel in the Camus sense.

Jumpei’s Transformation into an Absurd Man

Just as Camus describes the absurd world as a desert, Jumpei’s entry into the desert is also his entry into the absurd world. Upon entry, Jumpei must similarly decide what to do once he recognizes his world is absurd. Camus argues there are two options once one finds oneself in the absurd universe: to escape or to stay. He describes the desert of the absurd world as dangerous: “To say that the climate is deadly scarcely amounts to playing on words. Living under that stifling sky forces us to get away or to stay. The important thing is to find out how people get away in the first case and why people stay in the second case” (29). Camus’ interest in the absurd world is not that it exists but rather what one should do once one is there and why other men have made their choices to stay or leave once there.

In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus spends a great deal of time discussing what constitutes an escape from the absurd and whether such an escape is a legitimate way to confront such a world. His conclusion is that escape, which in “Sisyphus” ostensibly refers to suicide, is not a legitimate answer, and the absurd man should strive to remain in the absurd world—continuing the struggle. But while Camus immediately rules out suicide

as a kind of escape, he also considers that finding some sort of hope in the absurd world is also a kind of escape.

To Camus, an escape from the desert in an absurd novel comes about when the novel ends by overshadowing the character's absurd struggle through some kind of hope, either in the future or in a higher power. Such hope constitutes a reconciliation with the world. He explains that when "man integrates the absurd . . . that communion causes to disappear [the absurd's] essential character, which is opposition, laceration, and divorce" (35). Because the basic elements of the absurd (of continual opposition) are lost, the result is an existential escape from the desert. And rather than allow his character to have such an existential escape, Abe creates a true absurd hero when Jumpei elects to continue his opposition in the desert rather than return to his old, ignorant life.

Escape from the desert is still very much a major theme in *Suna no Onna*. When Jumpei finds himself trapped in the desert, he is told that escape is emphatically not a valid option. Onna tells him that the only people who were ever close to escaping were a family whose members probably died in the attempt. (Amusingly, Jumpei's response to this was "Absurd!", 119). However, despite having been told that escape was not an option, Jumpei continues to try to find ways to get out of the pit and away from the village.

Jumpei at this point is not yet what Camus would consider an absurd man: he still has hope in escape and hope in returning to his old life. However, while it may seem Jumpei is headed for just such an existential escape, Abe has already alerted his reader at the beginning of the book that Jumpei does not return to his old life. The first paragraph in *Suna no Onna* both sets up his Jumpei's permanent disappearance and sets up this disappearance as an "escape":

One day in August a man disappeared. He had simply set out for the seashore on a holiday, scarcely half a day away by train, and nothing more was ever heard of him. Investigation by the police and inquiries in the newspapers had both proved fruitless. Of course, missing persons are not really uncommon. . . . Many disappearances, for example, may be described as simple escapes. (3)

Despite Jumpei's disappearance being referenced as an escape, Jumpei's "escape" is ultimately away from one irrational world into the desert, rather than from the absurd world into the rational one. And it is Jumpei's decision to remain in the desert at the end of the novel that is one of the things finally marking Jumpei as an absurd man.

The absurd man is one who maintains his struggle with the absurd, has no hope for a change in his situation, and passionately embraces the futility of his life. When given the chance, Jumpei does not choose to escape, which according to Camus would mark him as an existential man rather than an absurd man. However, Jumpei instead “refuses consolations, ethics, reliable principles. As for that thorn he feels in his heart, he is careful not to quiet his pain. On the contrary, he awakens it and in the desperate joy of a man crucified and happy to be so, he builds up piece by piece—lucidity, refusal, make believe” (Camus 26). Camus goes on to explain:

Before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification (with regard to whom or what is not the question). He weighs his chances, he counts on “someday,” his retirement or the labor of his sons. He still thinks that something in his life can be directed. In truth, he acts as if he were free, even if all the facts make a point of contradicting that liberty. But after the absurd, everything is upset. That idea that “I am,” my way of acting as if everything has a meaning (even if, on occasion, I said that nothing has)—all that is given the lie in vertiginous fashion by the absurdity of a possible death. Thinking of the future, establishing aims for oneself, having preferences—all this presupposes a belief in freedom, even if one occasionally ascertains that one doesn’t feel it. But at that moment I am well aware that that higher liberty, that freedom to be . . . does not exist. (57)

Jumpei’s character is contradictory in this way. While he no longer counts on “someday,” and by the end of the book no longer thinks of life as something with direction, he also sees the lie his previous life was. He sees the absurdity of his death, which would change nothing in terms of how the people would treat his disappearance back home. Jumpei no longer has any aims for the future—he is not looking forward to Onna returning, nor the prospect of having a child, and he is definitely not looking forward to the prospect of leaving. As he goes down the ladder after choosing not to leave, he repairs the ladder and reassures himself of his illusory freedom. Abe writes:

There was no particular need to hurry about escaping. On the two-way ticket he held in his hand now, the destination and time of departure were blanks for him to fill in as he wished. . . . He realized he was bursting with a desire to talk to someone about the water trap. . . . He might as well put off his escape until sometime after that. (239)

By arguing he has a “round-trip ticket” and is merely deciding not to use it, Jumpei consciously and absurdly decides to stay. By doing so, he maintains his position as an outsider who possibly may try to escape, and at the

same time he happily embraces the “opposition, laceration, and divorce” (35) from the rational world, as he continues to work on ways in which he can rebel against the desert. In fact, his main thought is not of escape but in bragging about his water trap, which stands as one of the many ways in which Jumpei continues to rebel against his place in the desert.

Camus is insistent that an author who writes any kind of theme in the struggle, or any kind of hope as an escape from the desert, writes an existential work rather than an absurd one. While it could be argued Jumpei is given hope and is, therefore, properly existential, the “hope” Jumpei has at the end of the novel is not the kind of hope Camus warns would allow for an escape or a reconciliation with the world. Rather, his hope is in the continuation of his rebellion and the preservation of the contention between how Jumpei views his life and the absurd reality in which he exists.

In the process of rebelling against the desert and the village, Jumpei constructs a bird trap he ironically names “Hope.” The bird trap fails spectacularly as a means of trapping food, but it incidentally shows Jumpei a way to mine water from the sand. While having an independent supply of water helps Jumpei feel a certain amount of freedom, he also realizes it is a far cry from any actual independence. Instead of being excited about the water he can find and all the things he hopes to do with it, Jumpei seems more interested in understanding the process by which the water got into the bucket. He seems to primarily see this source of water as a way of rebelling against the structure of the village, rather than a path to freedom. He exclaims, “If he were successful in this experiment [to store water pumped from the sand] he would no longer have to give in to the villagers if they cut off his water. But more important, he had found that the sand was an immense pump” (234). So despite Jumpei’s excitement about this discovery, this view of hope is not one of hope for escape from the desert, nor an acceptance of his place within the desert.

Abe here seems to not only differ from the existential paradigm but also stray somewhat from the absurdist paradigm; Jumpei seems to be following a more enlightened model of hope. For Abe, Jumpei’s hope does not necessarily constitute Camus’ existentialist hope, which would allow him to escape from his circumstances. Rather, hope neither allows him to escape the desert or to reconcile with it: the device does not allow for Jumpei to escape the village or escape his responsibilities of shoveling sand since hope cannot replace his food supply and prohibits Jumpei from having an immediate plan for escape. Camus argues:

[Life] will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this

fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness. Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which he lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. (53)

Jumpei's hope is something he seems to contentedly accept as a way to continually rebel against the desert. He is happily continuing the conflict; in remaining in the sand pit, Jumpei does not give up his thorn of an absurd life in the village but rather takes a great effort to maintain it. He does not negate the terms of opposition nor does he abandon his conscious revolt. Rather, he finds contentment in giving up his *desires* for escape or freedom. It is this fine line between the absence of desires and resignation to his fate that highlights the difference between Abe's brand of absurdism and Camus' paradigm, and this difference hints that Abe has taken not only the existentialist paradigm but also the absurdist paradigm and adapted them (together) for a Japanese audience.

Conclusion

Suna no Onna shows Jumpei becoming an absurd hero of sorts, and then successfully ends as a close approximation of a Camusean absurd novel. However, while Jumpei continues to valiantly struggle with his absurd life, the novel itself does not explicitly offer any kind of reconciliation for his encounter with the absurd. Instead, Abe writes Jumpei as a man who seems to have given up his desires for escape and freedom and has, thereby, found a happiness of sorts.

Camus describes the successful absurd hero as one whose "revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (54). Jumpei is by no means resigned to his crushing fate. He neither accepts it, nor despairs. He neither desires to change it, nor desires to leave. Abe describes this struggle as patience, where "patience itself was not necessarily defeat. Rather, defeat really began when patience was thought to be defeat" (221). And it's Abe's sort of patience that is one of several elements that adds a very Japanese flavor to what might otherwise be considered merely an absurdist novel.

Considering all the ways in which *Suna no Onna* strays from the Kafkian existential paradigm and follows (somewhat problematically) along the Camusean absurdist paradigm, Abe can be seen as a writer who did not merely take the theme of existentialism and package it for a Japanese audience. Rather, Abe seems to have developed his own brand of existentialism that borders on absurdism. And even though Jumpei, like Sisyphus, is left to continually perform tasks that are meaningless, rather than leave us to

conclude (as Camus would have us do) that “all is well” (123) with this absurd hero and “one must imagine Sisyphus happy,” Abe shows Jumpei as someone who has cast off his desires and found what might be considered a very sandy Nirvana.

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The Contradictions of Kitabatake Chikafusa's Jinno Shotoki: How the Jinno Shotoki Shows that Japan is Not *Shinkoku*

by Adam Wheeler

It is widely held by Japanese and non-Japanese historians alike that Japan has enjoyed an uninterrupted reign by a single royal family for at least the last 1,500 years, if not longer. This unprecedented system of government has given rise to much investigation as to how such a feat could have been accomplished and has also given rise to the belief that Japan is *Shinkoku*, or “divine land.” Theories on the longevity of the Japanese imperial family have been based on the relationship between them and surrounding families of influence, as well as the tenuous relationship that existed between the Imperial family and the *shogunate* (hereditary commander of the Japanese army who exercised absolute rule under the nominal leadership of the emperor) of the warring states period. Most, if not all, examinations take for granted that Japanese genealogies and documents bestow an equivalent sum of power, prestige, and respect that less enduring dynasties and monarchs in other countries possessed. This assumption gives unwarranted acknowledgment and credit to the Japanese imperial line that, while unique in its organization and its perpetuation, does not translate to the same significance of other countries’ ruling families if they had lasted as long.

For six hundred years, *Kitabatake Chikafusa's Jinno Shotoki (A Chronicle of God's and Sovereigns)* was the main text to support the claim that Japan enjoyed an unbroken continuity of rule from the time of Amaterasu, making it *Shinkoku*.¹ He maintained that 1) Japan is superior to other countries, 2) it is superior because it is *Shinkoku*, and 3) it is

Shinkoku because it enjoyed an unbroken continuity of rule from the time of its bequeathal by the sun goddess, Amaterasu.”² Because *Jinno Shotoki* stood for centuries as the preeminent text on the history of Imperial succession, and as a catechism of sorts for loyalty to the imperial family and the central role that it continues to play in the analysis of the Japanese Imperial line, the use of this text in demonstrating the fractured imperial family line is especially effective.

Kitabatake’s first statement is dependent upon the second statement, which in turn is predicated upon the truthfulness of the third. It is upon the third and final statement that Japan has “enjoyed an unbroken continuity of rule” that this paper is dedicated. In his own attempt to prove the divine nature of Japan and with his own logic, Kitabatake Chikafusa brought to light inconsistencies and argued his own case of an unbroken imperial line.

Historical Background

Chikafusa’s Kitabatake family was a branch of the Murakami Genji. After the decline of the Fujiwara, the Murakami Genji reached a high point of influence during the time of Michichika. Born in 1293, Chikafusa succeeded to the family headship in 1306, when he was only thirteen. Until Chikafusa’s time, heads of the Kitabatake family had enjoyed only moderate provisional positions. However, when Godaigo became emperor in 1324, it became obvious that Chikafusa was favored and quickly rose to a major counselor (*dainagon*). So far as it is known, Chikafusa played no part in the overthrow of the Kamakura bakufu, the ruling feudal regime headed by the Shogun. It was not until the Kemmu Restoration of 1333 that Chikafusa emerged as a major character through his influence in the southern court and his writings.³

In 1339, when Kitabatake started writing, it was only eight years after the first protracted imperial schism had occurred with the Kemmu Restoration. The Kemmu Restoration began with Emperor Godaigo (r. 1318–39) who wished to restore imperial power that had slowly diminished since the rise of the Fujiwara regents, cloistered emperors, and the Kamakura bakufu. Since his father had already abolished the office of cloistered emperor, Godaigo started making plans to overthrow the Kamakura bakufu in 1331. The shogunate heard of his intentions, and in 1332, he was exiled by the shogun to the Oki Islands. Before Godaigo was caught, the shogunate had designated Kogon (of another family branch) as emperor without the act of an abdication by Godaigo. A year later, Godaigo escaped the islands and started gathering loyalists to his cause. The shogunate sent an army led by Ashikaga Takauji, a high-ranking member of the Minamoto clan, as rein-

forcements who then joined forces with Godaigo. Discontent had spread to many, including another Minamoto chieftain, Nitta Yoshisada, who struck down the shogun at Kamakura.

Godaigo returned to the throne in 1333, ignoring any claim Kogon had on the throne. He proceeded to consolidate power back within the court and sought to administer most of the national affairs himself. The restoration government was unable to deal promptly or satisfactorily with the multitude of problems and demands presented by contentious warriors. For their efforts in overthrowing the previous shogun, Ashikaga and Yoshisada both desired the shogunate appointment. Nitta Yoshisada championed the restoration government but was beaten by Ashikaga Takauji in Kyoto. Unwilling to acknowledge Ashikaga as the new military power, much less appoint him as shogun, Godaigo fled to Yoshino in the south and set up court there, still proclaiming himself the rightful emperor. Back in Kyoto, Ashikaga had a member of another imperial branch chosen as emperor, one who would appoint him shogun. The imperial family had suffered numerous smaller and temporary schisms, but these events created, for the first time in Japanese history, a situation in which there were two emperors with their own courts in their own capitals.⁴

This was the political environment that provided the impetus for *Jinno Shotoki*. Since Kitabatake Chikafusa wrote *Jinno Shotoki* in 1343, it has exerted an enormous influence on historical conceptualizations about Japan and its imperial institution.⁵ *Jinno Shotoki* has long been seen as a historical record of imperial succession, while the obvious, highly slanted, political aspects were either ignored or unnoticed; this is interesting given the part Kitabatake played in the Kemmu Restoration.⁶ Yet Chikafusa was less concerned with the legitimacy of the imperial succession, which he implicitly accepted wholeheartedly, than with the succession itself or the transmission of ruler ship from one sovereign to another over the generations.⁷

Rule, Reign, or Neither

The extent to which the imperial family “ruled” or “reigned” when there were no power struggles is of primary importance. From the beginning of the primacy of the Yamato clan over other clans of the now-called Yamato Period, their authority has been largely tenuous, with only brief periods of firm control. Godaigo did not fall prey to that “age old fiction of imperial rule” that his predecessors had.⁸ He realized with the founding of the Kamakura Shogunate, and with the fact that the instant Gosaga was enthroned over his anti-shogunate brother, that the emperor had lost all initiative in the matters of imperial succession.⁹

The continuation of the imperial dynasty depended on the birth of sufficient sons in the family. To prevent the extinction of their family line, the emperors had access to many noble and fertile women. The Yoro code put into effect in 757, but hardly followed, stipulated the emperors have a total of nine consorts of varying ranks.¹⁰ This almost guaranteed a continuation of a single imperial line. When these safeguards failed, there were other, almost inexhaustible, imperial lines of descent that could be drawn upon to fill the throne.

Kitabatake acknowledges this happened but glosses over it as if it were expected. "Since Sanetomo had no successor, the line of Yoritomo came permanently to an end, and administration of the eastern provinces was assumed by Yoritomo's widow."¹¹ These appointments not made by strict primogeniture were attributed to an emperor-to-be's residual virtue (highly subjective), and were seen as a display of Amaterasu's will that they take the throne. Chikafusa sought to further justify these lateral transmissions of succession by stating that "within the progress of legitimate succession there was a special direct line, from which there might be deviations but to which there would always be returns."¹² Using this reasoning, European monarchies lasted much longer than now recognized because of the almost incestuous relationship between monarchs of different countries that related many to each other.

Chikafusa emphasized the divine ancestry of an unbroken imperial line.¹³ This unbroken line was seen as having reigned supreme, without being deposed or challenged, for at least fifteen centuries, despite the fact that the country was often torn by feuding camps who acknowledged different sovereign emperors.¹⁴ Chikafusa supported Godaigo and his southern court but disagreed with the restoration in principle. Chikafusa obtained his notions about imperial rule and succession from the Shinto idea of immutable ordering; no matter what aberrations from the norm occurred, the imperial succession would invariably return to its direct course, or line, ensuring its eternal continuance.¹⁵

Chikafusa admitted the difficulty in distinguishing between an ordinary succession to the throne and one that constituted direct descent lay in the fact that direct descent could only be absolutely confirmed in retrospect. This authorized Chikafusa to rewrite history. If an imperial line ended because of a lack of an heir, or was deposed by another family member, the new imperial successor could easily be recast as the true wielder of divine authority. Such was the case with Buretsu in the sixth century.

When Buretsu died, his line came to an end. Sorely distressed, the ministers at court looked about the provinces in search of someone

closely related to the line. After conferring together, the ministers selected him to be emperor. Keitai modestly declined three times. Upon assuming the imperial position, Keitai proved to be a sovereign of truly superior wisdom. Of Ojin's many sons, it was Nintoku who had become a sage ruler. But his line came to an end, [with Buretsu] and now the descendents of Hyabusawake emerged as protectors of the imperial succession. It is difficult to comprehend the reason for this. Perhaps the resurgence of Hyabusa's descendents was decided by Amaterasu herself, in which event its purpose cannot be comprehended by mortal minds.¹⁶

By simply stating the extinct line was not a direct line, and the new successors actually restored divine imperial sovereignty, Chikafusa created an escape clause in his reasoning.

The pretense of imperial rule was not seen by Chikafusa as an affront to its continuity. Rather, he saw that by not allowing sovereigns to act as they wished, the succession was protected. Chikafusa wanted the emperor himself to be treated much like the regalia, a symbol of the ideal, ethical rule.¹⁷ This idea of reigning without ruling in order to maintain stability, which is evident in Kitabatake's writings, seems to have gone unnoticed by many when dealing with the issue of the Imperial family's lengthy rule.

Regents and Imperial Cloisters

The position of the Imperial family was of course unique, since access to the throne was the principle goal in all interfamily competitions. In another sense, the Imperial family was much like all the other families, insofar as it too was obliged at times to contend openly for power.¹⁸ Disputes over succession represented a complex phenomenon in medieval Japan, and generalizations are difficult. Imperial succession disputes had erupted between Temmu and Kobun in 672 (in favor of Temmu) and between Saga and Heizei in 810 (in favor of Saga).¹⁹

Godaigo correctly assessed that the real loss of Imperial control happened in the centuries preceding his succession to the throne with the rise of regents, cloistered emperors, and the military.²⁰ The rise of regents and cloistered emperors came from the Fujiwara's desire to maintain control over the emperor. If the emperor proved too young to rule, a regent (usually Fujiwara born) would look after the affairs of the state until he came of age. After the founding of the Kamakura Shogunate, the most successful Fujiwara contenders for public positions were those who were willing to serve the shogunate at court. The agents of the court then were no longer showing loyalty to their emperor but to the *bakafu*.

After an emperor had served a set time, he would be replaced. This ensured that the emperors didn't become completely independent and could be controlled by their in-laws. These two systems lead to numerous emperors surviving their reign and still attempting to wield some influence over the current emperor. What these two systems meant for the emperor was for his power to almost always be divided, fractional, and incomplete.

Perhaps the most obvious instance of the discontinuity of Imperial rule is the need for a "restoration," such as that of the Kemmu Restoration. Godaigo was aware the power to rule had long since passed from the hands of the emperor to the hands of those who surrounded him. Godaigo's consciousness of his role as a restorer can be seen in his choice of the year-name Kemmu in imitation of the Chien-wu (Sino-centric mentality) period; this correlated with the restoration of the Han dynasty.

Chikafusa mentions early on that Japan is Shinkoku, or superior, to other countries, such as India and China, that had multiple Imperial families and dynasties, because it had not had such a disruptive history. Yet, the sovereign he supported during the schism overtly recognized Japan was like China, because the Imperial family had lost their power to rule and the reverence needed to reign.

Conclusion

Kitabatake wrote his *Jinno Shotoki* in a time of political and religious upheaval and was understandably affected by both. Not wanting to concede that Japan had just undergone a break, or schism, in the Imperial line, Chikafusa maintained the southern court was the rightful sovereign while simultaneously refraining from calling the northern court (Kyoto) illegitimate. Since they were both of the Imperial family, both had the ability to rule, but the tie went to the southern court that possessed the Imperial regalia.

In his attempt to present Japan as Shinkoku, Chikafusa overtly turned a historical writing into an exercise in the justification of religion or ideology. When inconsistencies between historic events occurred or with principles he believed should have been followed, Chikafusa either ignored them or chalked them up to the "unalterable mandate of Amaterasu."²¹ These digressions bring his work further away from the empirical fields of politics and history and closer to faith-based ideology. *Jinno Shotoki* was not a political tract influenced through Shinto but a Shinto tract that sought to influence politics.

Jinno Shotoki's influence spanned six hundred years until Japan's defeat in 1945, when the reigning emperor Hirohito renounced his personal divinity and, by extension, the divinity of the entire Imperial line. It is un-

derstandable why *Jinno Shotoki* was heeded for so long by the Japanese people much the same as any other nationally uplifting stories have been heeded by other countries regardless of their reasoning. While the defeat disproved the first part of Kitabatake's credo, it did not disprove the third: that Japan had enjoyed an unbroken continuity of rule. It seems that for centuries, contradictions and inconsistencies in Chikafusa's *Jinno Shotoki* were either unnoticed or ignored. These discrepancies are most evident in the feeble position of power the emperors possessed due to meddling regents, Imperial cloisters, military struggles with shoguns, and internal dissensions that permeated the Imperial family and surrounding clans.

NOTES

1. Chikafusa, Kitabatake. *A Chronicle of Gods and Sovereigns: Jinno Shotoki of Kitabatake Chikafusa*. Translated by H. Paul Varley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 49.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. *Ibid.*, 1–3.
4. De Bary, Theodore and others. ed., *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Volume one: From Earliest times to 1600* (New York: Columbia University, 2001), 257.
5. Mass, Jeffrey P. "Review of A Chronicle of Gods and Sovereigns: Jinno Shotoki of Kitabatake Chikafusa,"
6. Varley, H. Paul. *Imperial Restoration in Medieval Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 101.
7. *Jinno Shotoki*, 14.
8. Reischauer, Edwin O. *Japan: Past and Present* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1953), 84.
9. *Ibid.*, 52.
10. Shillony, Ben-Ami. *Enigma of the Emperors: Sacred Subsistence in Japanese History* (Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental, 2005), 57.
11. *Jinno Shotoki*, 222.
12. *Jinno Shotoki*, 16.
13. Reischauer, 106.
14. Shillony, 1.
15. *Jinno Shotoki*, 255.
16. *Ibid.*, 119.
17. *Jinno Shotoki*, 39.
18. Varley, 39.
19. *Ibid.*, 51.
20. *Ibid.*, 68.
21. *Jinno Shotoki*, 9.

Genre Paintings

by Elisa Allan

Artistic responses to the changing socio-political stability in Korea during the eighteenth-century indicate the growing disillusionment and dissatisfaction with *yangban* (gentry class) consolidated control, the thinning control of Confucianism over class, and the blossoming of contending ideas.

Genre paintings (*Pungsokhwa*) demonstrate the waning ideological control of Neo-Confucianism by making common people and everyday events the main subjects, minimizing background, raising the importance of secondary figures in the paintings, and subtly criticizing yangban exploitation and decadence.

Historical Background

Korean society experienced broad changes during seventeenth-century Confucian ideology. While Korea had been a Confucian dynasty since the advent of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), after the devastation of the Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98) invasions from Japan and war with the Manchurians who would overthrow the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and establish the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), Koreans began to consider themselves to be the last surviving stronghold of the ennobling ideology of Confucianism. Neo-Confucian norms of the seventeenth century successfully replaced post-war uncertainty with dependable social, political, and economic prosperity. However, this national and social ideology could not maintain impeccable

control in the eighteenth century as the country began to experience greater prosperity and undisturbed peace.

Interest in Original Korea

In the eighteenth century, unorthodox scholars began to question whether following a traditional “Chinese” model was really beneficial for Korea. Koreans “reconsidered their country’s traditional relationship with China and began to develop more independent views of their own” (Pratt 3). Many Koreans began to feel more practical learning was necessary to maintain the country’s growth. Furthermore, turning to China in a display of submission began to be viewed as a betrayal of Korea’s nationality and pride.

One of the most prominent and influential schools of thought was from *Sirhak*, or Practical Learning School. Sirhak advocates did not try to dissolve the current Confucian hierarchy but rather tried to make reforms within its framework. Sirhak sought to cultivate “original Koreanness” and began to explore more traditional Korean customs (Yang 269). While the court musicians continued performing Confucian ritual dance, other scholars “began to sing *kagok* (long lyric songs) and to play *sanjo* (musical suites), they showed their appreciation of their own country’s literary traditions and its lively shamanistic and folk music” (Pratt 23). Scholars still used *Hanja* (Chinese characters), but now also wrote in *Hangul* (Korean alphabet). Influence from the Sirhak movement yielded a flowering of native artistic expressions. Sirhak philosophy delved into the artistic realm in both *jingyeong* (true view) landscapes and *pungsohwa* paintings.

Dissatisfaction with Ruling Yangban

In addition to an appreciation for the original Korean essence, Sirhak found the increasing hypocrisy and corruption of the yangban lifestyle deplorable. In the seventeenth century, community institutions placed greater administrative control over political and legal systems in the hands of the yangban gentry class. Yangban literati organized *hyang-yak* (village code of conduct) in rural villages and followed with other organizations and systems for the “purpose of maintaining order in their respective communities and enlightening their residents” (Lee E-Wha 177) but resulting in greater political power in the hands of the already economically powerful. Lines between yangban and the common classes were more firmly established and no longer crossed.

By the eighteenth century, abuse of the system led many to question the morality of those in power. Rights were more especially reserved for the privileged upper class as “clear distinction[s]” delineated between yang-

ban and commoners, legitimate and illegitimate children, and masters and slaves (178). Many felt their entrenched power had led the yangban class as a whole to become unproductive, incapable, and unresponsive to the needs of the lower classes. Scholars such as Pak Chi-won (1737–1805) and Jeong Yagyong (1762–1836) publicly bemoaned the grievous economic disparity (Lee E-Wha 184–85). While not advocating the complete removal of the system, they argued for reforms that would lessen class distinctions and enable each person to be treated well within his class.

Moving Away from Traditional

Genre paintings reflect the growing interest in ideologies outside Confucian orthodoxy. The focus on everyday life as the objective of the painting, the negation of background and importance of secondary figures, and the subtle critique of yangban extravagance all indicate an eighteenth-century ideological shift from traditional Confucianism.

Capture Everyday Life

Korean genre paintings were a bold departure from traditional Confucian paintings in their focus on everyday life and ordinary people. Traditional Confucian landscape paintings diminished human figures in order to emphasize the smallness of man in the larger scheme of nature and the world. Man was depicted as an observer and minor player. The artist and philosopher Guo Xi (c. 1020–90) asserted that man “should be kept out of sight altogether, his presence indicated only by the tip of a fishing rod visible along a river bank or the roof of a pagoda peeping through the trees high on a mountain side” (qtd in Pratt 42). The painting of realistic humanity or glimpses into daily life was not appreciated because it did not hint at a metaphysical experience.

Yun Duseo (1668–1715), was the first among Joseon artists to focus his attention entirely upon the “healthy everyday activities . . . of the lower classes” (Y. Park 190) in portrayals of ordinary Korean people pursuing ordinary daily tasks. Though he came from a powerful landowner’s family, Yun was encouraged to be aware of the life and troubles of the lower classes (Y. Park 192). He was a magnanimous leader and was touched by the hardships he saw around him in the hard working peasants. Unlike many others from his social class, Yun was willing to spend time in the midst of the common people to properly portray their lifestyle.

Yun’s *Quarryman* (see Appendix Plate 1) demonstrates his ability to capture the action as the robust worker splits off a chunks of rock with a heavy hammer. His back curves, creating a line of energy from the tip of the

hammer to his raised left foot. The pending blow upon the chisel is felt even before it strikes, and the chisel-holding partner shares in the viewer's anticipation, squinting and turning his head away lest he get any flying chips in his face. To capture such movement in a personal rather than cliché way required time spent in observation. Though there was a precedent for the painting of peasants in China, Korea's appreciation for the common people went beyond the images of farmers shown in distant, detached hierarchical displays. The Confucian depiction of the "noble" peasant (considered the backbone of society in the hierarchical class system) focused on meaning through imaginary symbols and icons. Genre painting conveys a glimpse of life and shifts from being a "painting of meaning" to being a "painting of impression" (Lim 217–18). Rather than seeking to portray transcendental values of humanity, genre paintings simply seek to portray man as he already is with both flaws and vibrance. The new genre style focused upon the peasants themselves, capturing their vitality rather than didactically espousing their virtuous lifestyle. Yun's groundbreaking interest in depicting the lives of ordinary common people led to the full development of the Korean genre style.

Genre paintings such as Kim Deuksin's (1754–1822) *Cat Snatching a Chick* (see Appendix Plate 2) capture the spontaneity and humor of life. The man, previously content at his weaving, is startled by the intrusion of a cat stealing one of the new chicks. The overturned weaving mat, the chaotically scattering chicks, the angrily protesting mother hen and the man's outstretched pipe hoping to stop the impishly escaping intruder all testify of the sudden disruption of a previously serene scene. Strong diagonal lines in the tree, window, and outstretched pipe each contribute to the piece's energy. One art historian, Kim Wonyong (1922–93), lauded the "spontaneity and unconcern for technical perfection" and characterized the genre style as a one of "optimistic naturalism with preference for simplicity and naïveté" (qtd in Pratt 4). Traditionally, it was "unthinkable for a picture commissioned out of Confucian duty and respect to show any sign of emotion" (Pratt 19), and a parallel characteristic was the typical absence of humor. In contrast, genre paintings revel in portraying all the emotion, action, and humor of everyday life. The viewer is amused as the man's urgency to stop the escaping cat causes him to topple from his precarious perch. His wife arrives in time to try to assist but can do nothing more than witness the scene. Since her husband is already out of her reach. *Cat Snatching a Chick* creates a narrative snapshot of everyday life that contains humor and energy, something deviant from the Confucian norm.

Absence of Background and Secondary Figures

The division of space indicates another bold divergence from traditional painting. Yun Yong (1708–40), grandson of Yun Duseo, exemplifies the use of empty space in *Woman Harvesting* (see Appendix Plate 3). The absence of background reduces distractions and makes the figure the unequivocal focus of the painting. Traditionally, the experience of a painting rather than the literal view encouraged a hierarchical perspective instead of a linear one. In contrast, there is no search for visual depth through a receding background in *Woman Harvesting*, only an interest in capturing the essence of the healthy peasant woman. Though we do not see her face, her down-to-earth, unpretentious character is clearly indicated by the way she has tucked in her skirt because of its inconvenience in hampering her work. She reveals her rolled up undergarments and muscular calves. Though she looks strong and healthy, she maintains her femininity by the delicate manner in which she is holding her harvesting tool and her innocent unawareness of being observed at her work. The painting is entirely focused upon her; and the few plants around her feet do not compete for our viewing attention in order to support “the centrality of the main character” (Y. Park 193). Genre painting diminished the need for elaborate background and indicates a subtle change in aesthetics from traditional painting.

Kim Hong-do (1745–1806), otherwise known by his pen name Danwon, also contributed to changes in division of space by developing the nonfocal character as an essential part of a genre painting. The elevation of secondary figures divides the viewing plane into distinctive regions of interest. Lim Tae Seung describes these regions as “dichotomous regions” of the motif that differ from the cubic “multi-regions” of space appearing in earlier paintings (Lim 208). Rather than the depth created by depicting close, medium, and distant ranges divided by spaces of “fog” in between, Kim Hong-do eliminates background and creates composition entirely composed of foreground players. Kim Hong-do’s *Ssireum (Wrestling)* (see Appendix Plate 4) demonstrates this division. Even the background viewers of the energetic wrestling match do not recede with noticeably lighter ink. The vendor to the left of the wrestlers attracts attention, because he is opposite the empty negative space on the right side and functions as a fulcrum to support the top and bottom curves of spectators. He, unlike the rest of the individuals in the painting and the viewers themselves, is turned away from the engaging scene to direct his gaze elsewhere. This “seemingly irrelevant figure” (260) not only provides balance and bridges the spectators to create a unified composition but represents the introduction of a second focal point to complement the main part.

The addition of the nonessential secondary figure for the sake of capturing the “insignificantly significant” individual highlights a release from traditional ideology. Lim suggests the prevalence of the significant secondary character in Kim Hong-do’s paintings was more than just a characteristic of his unique style. He asserts the advent of the secondary figure “implies a release from cultural chauvinism and cultural hegemony, signifying that Confucian ideology’s monistic way of thinking had collapsed and that a pluralistic way of thinking had come into consideration” (Lim 215). Unlike traditional literati paintings, in which the hierarchy is obvious, the main figure in genre paintings loses some power to the secondary figure as they compete for the viewers attention and create a unified whole rather than a hierarchy.

Dichotomous regions enable genre paintings to capture the emotions of individuals in the group. Kim Hongdo’s *Dancing Boy* (see Appendix Plate 5) uses the multiplicity of key characters to highlight expressions of accompanying musicians. The crescent moon shape of the musical ensemble creates a path for our eyes to travel indiscriminately over each player until we focus upon the dynamism and flamboyant movements of the dancing boy himself. As the main part, he captures energy with his waving arm, flying cloth, and raised foot. The deeper color supports his main role in the composition and the varying line width infuses him with visual energy to match the enthusiasm of his dance. While the rear musicians fade into the background slightly with a lighter line, the absence of other background makes them crucial elements in the painting and each one is addressed with importance. The thin, smooth line quality defining their robes contrasts with the dancer. Each player is unique with clothing, traditional instruments, and expressions of enjoyment that capture personality. The *janggo* (hour-glass drum) player’s eyes are mysterious as he bows his body over his instrument and “shakes his shoulders to the rhythm, apparently intoxicated by his own music” (Y. Park 261), and the flute player’s expression is one of complete enjoyment as he turns his body to the dancer and the viewer. Kim manipulated the figures; normally, they would have seated themselves in a line to accompany the dancer in order to include them as essential elements in the painting. These emotion-filled secondary figures, though supporting the main part, are no less important in their role as they are elevated in genre paintings.

Subtle Critique of Yangban Lifestyle

Some scholars, emboldened by the philosophies of Sirhak and the injustices they observed around them or in their own lives, subtly or openly criticized the stratified social class system through the arts. Condemnation

of corruption appears in contemporary literature. A popular novel about a peasant named Hong Kildong demonstrates a brisk satire against the immoral ruling class and the “inherent” goodness of the lower classes. Another story portrays Heungbu, the humble, but good-hearted brother, prevailing against his greedy, decadent brother, Nolbu, who is overcome by selfishness. Shim Sajeong’s (1707–69) *Shinseon with Toad* (see Appendix Plate 6) cynically portrays the powerful manipulating the weak. The painting alludes to a popular tenth-century motif of a Chinese Daoist immortal famous for carrying a three-legged toad and teasing it to perform for him when he needed money. Traditionally, paintings of this subject portray the Daoist in a friendly, humorous fashion as a performer. Shim’s version contrasts in its negative tone. The darkly clad *shinseon* is painted in messy and hurried strokes of an old brush, his visage grinning menacingly down as he looms largely over his small, helpless toad. The expression is distinctly one of ruler and ruled as *shinseon* has power to provoke while the toad, in an anthropomorphic expression, throws its hands up in the air as if to surrender and dances along at the demand of his master. His painting reflects an air of derision, mocking the social system the way the *shinseon* sneers at his toad. Literature and artwork alike denounced the ruling class.

Kim Hongdo’s *Rice Threshing* (see Appendix Plate 7) demonstrates the inequality of the distribution of labor and subtly disapproves of the slothful haughtiness of the yangban. While the workers are busy threshing the rice, energetically tackling the labor-intensive task at hand, their supervisor lounges off to the top right. Sprawled lazily on a mat smoking a *jangjuk* (long bamboo pipe), a symbol of status reserved only for yangban (Lee E-Hwa 209), his visible disconnection from the industrious workers echoes the gulf separating the two classes. Pak Chiwon (1737–1805) did not hesitate to point out the hypocrisy and corruption of yangban life by challenging the underlying assumption that physical labor and commerce were unsuited to “gentlemen” who ought to spend all their time seeking for truth rather than working with their hands. Though the supervisor does not appear malicious, he earns no respect for the manner in which he exploits the energies of the working class to support his posh day observing. The juxtaposition of two polar opposites in *Threshing Rice*, the lazily displayed wealth and ease of lifestyle alongside the diligently engaged workers in scant attire, alerts the viewer to the incongruence of the social system.

Shin Yunbok (1758–early nineteenth-century), known by the penname Hyewon, insinuates disillusionment with the lifestyle of the wealthy. His genre paintings focus upon the yangban class (a distinct characteristic since most other genre painters focused on the peasant) and veiled his criticisms

in light-hearted paintings capturing their utopian, easy-living style. He didn't balk at "poking fun . . . at the pompous Chinese-style behaviour of the gentry. Sometimes he showed them flirting with *gisaeng* girls, an exposure which they did not entirely appreciate and which may have accounted for his expulsion from the *Dohwa-so* (Office of Portraits and Paintings—the official painters of the Joseon court)" (Pratt 25). Shin does not openly criticize yangban decadent lifestyle, but hints at the increasing absence of morality expected from Confucian rulers.

Though Shin's *Going Boating* (see Appendix Plate 8) has an air of ease and quiet contentment, it also highlights the flirtation and frivolity in which the yangban spent their time. No figure directly engages the viewer with a gaze, creating the feeling of stumbling upon a blissful scene of utopian life. The classic, wide-brimmed hats of the men echo the full, contented feeling accompanying the prosperity they all enjoy. One yangban gazes "amorously" (Y. Park 305) while playing contentedly with the waves, the older man behind him is captivated by the melody of the *saenghwang* that the woman delicately plays at the prow of the boat, and the third peers around the cloud-like, billowing braids of the last woman to offer her an elegant pipe. These men, representatives of the yangban class, were supposed to be the "apostles of morality" (Janata 46) and yet led lives of merriment. Shin would often cast the upper class with an almost pornographic edge by openly displaying physical contact, flirting, and sexual advances. By portraying, for example, a *gisaeng* "being closely embraced by one of the men present—in open defiance of the strict moral standards of the upper classes" (46), Shin acknowledges the attractiveness of the elitist lifestyle while calling into question the morality of those who enjoyed it.

Shin's *Spring Picnic* (see Appendix Plate 9) implies a denouncement of yangban decadence. This painting shows the prevalence of the wearing of expensive braided hairpieces known as *gache* or *dari*, which could cost as much as the price of five rice paddies (Lee E-Wha 197). He portrays the females in this painting enjoying their easy outing, propping up their elaborate *gache* wigs with their hands or accepting long smoking pipes from their accompanying yangban males. They ride on ponies, an example of their wealth that "by today's standard . . . would mean going out in a limousine with a private chauffeur" (Y. Park 302). Their carefree enjoyment is contrasted starkly to the discontent upon the face of the trailing servant in the top left of the painting. He is painted squarely with broad shoulders and methodically placed steps in contrast to the smooth curvilinear lines of the elite. He walks a respectful pace behind, perhaps symbolizing the distance between classes, and holds the yangban hat in his hands rather than

enjoying the opportunity to don that symbol of wealth and power. He is the “antithesis to the carefree mood displayed by the partygoers” (303). By distinguishing the bliss of the yangban and ladies from the discomfort of their servants, Shin highlights the fact that the lower classes were excluded from the enjoyment of a luxurious lifestyle. *Spring Picnic* juxtaposes intemperance alongside humility in a subtle critique of the prevailing social system.

Conclusion

Genre paintings demonstrate a shift in Korea’s view of itself by making common people and everyday events the main subjects, minimizing background, raising the importance of secondary figures in the paintings, and subtly criticizing yangban (gentry class) exploitation and decadence. Because these aesthetic divergences from the seventeenth-century institutionalized norms for artistic expression reflect the waning monistic ideological control of Confucianism and growing disillusionment with the consolidated power of the yangban, genre paintings are indicators of the changing socio-political atmosphere in eighteenth-century Korea.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Quarryman. Yun Duseo, 18th C., India ink on ramie, 22.9x17.7cm, private collection



Plate 2. Cat Snatching a Chick. Kim Deuksin, India ink and light colors on paper, 22.5x27.2cm, Gansong Museum of Art.



Plate 3. Woman Harvesting. Yun Yong, 18th C., India ink and light colors on paper, 27.6x21.2cm, Gansong Museum of Art.



Plate 4. Ssireum (Wrestling). Kim Hongdo, 18th C., India ink and light colors on paper, 27x22.7cm, National Museum of Korea.



Plate 5. Dancing Boy. Kim Hongdo, 18th C., India ink and light colors on paper, 27x22.7cm, National Museum of Korea.



Plate 6. Shinseon with a Toad. Shim Sajeong, 18th C., India ink and light colors on silk, 22.9x15.7cm, Gansong Museum of Art.



Plate 7. Rice Threshing. Kim Hongdo, 18th C., India ink and light colors on paper, 28x24 cm, National Museum of Korea.



Plate 8. Going Boating. Shin Yunbok, colors on paper, 28.2x35.6cm, Gansong Museum of Art.



Plate 9. Spring Picnic. Shin Yunbok, colors on paper, 28.2x35.6cm, Gansong Museum of Art.

Confucianism, Authoritarianism, and Democratization in South Korea

by Andrew Selman

Many argue that principles of liberal democracy are generally not compatible with the values and beliefs of a society based on Confucian principles.¹ Confucianism promotes loyalty and obedience to and respect for those in authority. If Confucian values form the foundation of a society, then the citizens will show deference to the leaders of that country and will be more likely to submit to authoritarian or even totalitarian governments. The continuation of authoritarian governments in China, Singapore, and Vietnam, all countries with considerable Confucian influence in society, seem to support this theory. Between 1948 and 1987, South Korea also saw a rather oppressive government. However, the inability of South Korean presidents to suppress democratic movements and demonstrations and the continued consolidation of democracy, despite the inability of presidents to actively promote it, shows the case of South Korea does not support the idea that democracy and Confucian values are incompatible.

South Korean presidents, supposedly implementing Confucian ideals and values, went to great lengths to suppress calls for democracy and to consolidate their power.² Syngman Rhee, who became the Republic of Korea's first president in 1948, began his administration by purging society of every group he did not like including student groups, newspapers, and factions within the military itself. He abridged freedom of speech, heavily censored the press, and banned many organizations from meeting. Through his "youth organizations," which were essentially groups of thugs, Rhee

rooted out communists or other political enemies, assassinated his opponents, and blamed their deaths on the communists in a further attempt to gain power.³ Rhee also threatened and arrested members of the National Assembly. When declaring martial law, he ensured the amending of the constitution to remove term limits for the president, allowing him to remain in office as long as he wished. In that way, Rhee established a pattern of power-grabbing and political suppression for the Korean presidency by preventing other political figures from gaining any experience or political maturity and weakening government institutions.

Park Chung Hee seized control of the South Korean government through a military coup in May 1961. He established the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction, a military tribunal that replaced the civilian government. Park held nearly complete control over this body, through which he purged society, the government, and the military of people he felt were undesirable for society.⁴ He established the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, which performed domestic surveillance in addition to its international objectives, and used it to spy on and rid himself of political enemies. Park had a law passed for “purification” purposes that banned around four thousand of his opponents from political activity for six years,⁵ assuring his victory in the subsequent presidential elections of 1963 and 1967. After a closer election in 1971, Park declared a national emergency, declared martial law, suspended the constitution, and dissolved the National Assembly.⁶ He then intimidated the public into passing a new constitution, one that relegated the National Assembly to the status of a mere rubber stamp for his policies and granted the president the power to appoint and dismiss officials at will.⁷ He used his unlimited emergency powers to prohibit the criticizing of the constitution, the demand of reform, and organized political activity. He also put heavy restrictions on the press, made work stoppages illegal, and prohibited others to criticize him.⁸

Chun Doo Hwan also seized power in a coup, taking over the military in December 1979 and then declaring martial law in May 1980. Like his predecessors, Chun carried out purges of society to rid it of all forms of opposition, which he claimed were social evils. Under martial law, Chun “dissolved the National Assembly, closed down all colleges and universities, banned labor strikes, and prohibited all political discussion and activity.”⁹ He had people sent to purification camps and did not allow newspapers to have reporters in multiple cities, which forced newspapers to rely on the highly centralized and controlled state news agency.¹⁰ Offensive books, especially those on Marxism, were blacklisted; those found reading banned literature were arrested and accused of spying. The most famous

incident of Chun's repression is the violent putdown of the Kwangju uprising. Immediately following Chun's coup, protests began in Kwangju. Chun sent Special Forces units into the city, and the soldiers began beating and stabbing civilians indiscriminately. This enraged the citizens, and the protest grew into an insurrection. Order was only restored after Chun sent the regular army, but two hundred civilians had already been killed.

The acts of despotism committed by Rhee, Park, and Chun are far too numerous to fully describe here. They attempted to justify their actions through claiming strict control was necessary to defend against the communist threat, to allow for economic growth, and the strengthening of the country. While the extent of the validity of these justifications is debatable, one could reasonably predict that faithfully adhering to Confucianism would require the Korean people to submit to this treatment. Despite efforts to stamp out democracy and rule absolutely, several incidents show that South Korea's presidents, while oppressive, were unable to stifle the democratic drive of the Korean people. Given the chance, democracy may have succeeded in Korea earlier than it did. This suggests that, in the case of South Korea, the Confucian value of deference to authority does not allow for blind acceptance of totalitarian regimes, and, therefore, democracy is somewhat compatible with Confucianism.

The circumstances surrounding the end of Syngman Rhee's administration provide the first instance of attempted democracy. Following an obviously tainted election in April 1960, thousands of students marched toward the presidential mansion, protesting Rhee's government and calling for more democracy. When it became clear the students could overwhelm the soldiers stationed to guard the residence, Rhee ordered the soldiers to begin shooting the demonstrators. Despite 125 students dead and more than 1,000 wounded, the students did not disperse. The soldiers eventually stopped firing and returned to their homes.¹¹ The pressure of these protests forced Rhee to resign and flee the country. Such a massive demonstration suggests South Koreans expected democracy, civil liberties, and just leaders. Centuries of kings, decades of colonial occupiers, and years of a despotic president did not resign the Korean people to accepting their lack of freedoms. Although the government that replaced Rhee was far from perfect, it was not given a chance to fully succeed.¹² Had Park not artificially ended this government, it is possible it could have continued indefinitely.

The 1980 protests in Kwangju similarly show a citizenry demanding democratic processes and proper civil liberties. Chun Doo Hwan's violent suppression of the protests shows the resiliency of those seeking democracy, as well as the increasing difficulty of maintaining an authoritarian regime.

Additional protests against Chun in 1987 showed the world that Korea was ready for full democracy. The 1987 protests were unique, because they included a large number of middle-class citizens, as opposed to the heavily student-dominated protests of the past. A politically active middle class—ironically created by Park Chung Hee’s economic reforms—shows Korean society as a whole had matured politically, showing its readiness for the responsibilities of self-government. The 1987 protests culminated because Chun conceded to hold himself to his seven-year term limit and allowed for the direct election of the next president.

In addition to protests, election results show many Koreans desired the democracy denied to them by their presidents. The presidential election of 1971, in which opposition leader Kim Dae-jung nearly defeated Park Chung Hee, suggests a significant number of people opposed Park’s authoritarian policies. If Park truly had complete control over Korean society, whether it was through his ability to intimidate or the people’s deference to him as their leader, he almost certainly would have used that power to ensure a solid victory. Such a close election demonstrates how people took advantage of their voting privileges and used whatever means to voice their disapproval of the government. In the 1987 election, Chun Doo Hwan supported Roh Tae-woo, one of his generals and a classmate from the military academy. In what was generally considered a fair election, Roh received about 37 percent of the vote, winning only because the opposition split between the two candidates—Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam.¹³ Had the candidates reached a compromise, Koreans would have successfully voted out the government party by electing a civilian president five years before they did.

While it is understandable to rebel against such harsh authoritarianism, even under more democratic presidents, South Koreans have generally not shown deference to the president and have been somewhat contemptuous at times. This rebellion provides further evidence for the claim that Confucian values rooted in Korean culture do not inhibit the development of elements of a healthy democracy. Since 1992, South Korea’s civilian presidents have shared the difficult task of turning the country into a liberal democracy, though they themselves have often failed to live up to democratic principles of transparency and honesty. South Koreans have not tolerated the bad examples made by their presidents, and their open criticisms have shown they demand more integrity and respect for the rule of law from their leaders.

Kim Young-sam won the 1992 presidential election, going into office with a commitment to clean up government and remove any vestiges of authoritarian rule. Ultimately, his attempts ended up being little more than

a purge of his own in order to put his supporters into government positions (Clifford 333).¹⁴ Bribery scandals and his own tinge of authoritarianism hampered Kim's presidency, and many of his reform attempts proved unsustainable.¹⁵ Kim Dae-jung's presidency was also tainted with corruption and demonstrated a weak management style.¹⁶ He is best known for his "sunshine policy," a reconciliatory approach to North Korean relations. While he eventually won a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, even this was cheapened by the fact that Kim essentially paid for the 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il of North Korea by funneling the North Korean government money. Kim Dae-jung had been heavily persecuted by Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan for years, and Kim's presidency had the potential to finally represent South Korea's consolidation of democracy. However, corruption surrounding his presidency epitomized by his bribery of North Korea, showed the South Korean presidency was still not living up to the democratic ideal and weakened the people's trust in the government. Kim Dae-jung's presidency, like Kim Young-sam's, is seen by many as a failure.¹⁷ Progress in consolidating South Korea's democracy during both their administrations occurred mostly in spite of their leadership. Any progress made in this area without presidential leadership shows the desire of the Korean people for democracy and their belief in democratic principles, while continuing to live in a Confucian society.

Roh Moo-hyun, another progressive candidate, followed Kim Dae-jung into office and into criticism. Roh became the first South Korean president to be impeached; he was accused, among other things, of being "incompetent" and "unqualified."¹⁸ The Supreme Court ruled the impeachment unconstitutional, but as a result, Roh remained largely unsuccessful in producing meaningful policy changes.¹⁹ While ordinary citizens often and openly criticized the president, the National Assembly's impeaching the president shows that even within the government itself, the institution of the president was not all-powerful; there was clearly no sense of reverence for the office of president for its own sake. Furthermore, Roh's impeachment establishes the ultimate refusal of South Koreans to be deferent to their president without his meriting it, providing perhaps the strongest example of Confucian ideals failing to inhibit democratic practices.

South Korea's current president, Lee Myung-bak, has also faced very open and harsh criticism for a variety of reasons. The June 2008 protests against imported American beef, in which tens of thousands of South Koreans participated in several candlelight vigils, show the extent of open disapproval that many South Korean citizens have for Lee's policies. While such a protest would likely have met extreme repression under Syngman

Rhee or Park Chung Hee, in a complete reversal of the top-down presidential leadership concept that should thrive in a Confucian society, Lee apologized for his actions and for failing to listen to the will of the people.²⁰

While South Korea's consistently outstanding economic growth beginning in the 1960s and lasting well into the 1990s is often referred to as a miracle, the current state of South Korea's democracy, considering its past, is no less miraculous. Emerging from under the harsh colonial umbrella of Japan, South Korea is now one of the most democratic countries in all of Asia. However, the Confucian influence that forms the underlying foundation of society persists. Clearly, elements of both Confucianism and liberal democracy can successfully coexist in an Asian country. Whether or not it is something unique about South Korea making this possible is unclear. However, South Korea's experience shows that reconciliation of these value systems is not altogether impossible and should provide a hope for the possibility of a more democratic future for other countries in the region.

NOTES

1. Park Chong-min and Doh Sull Shin. "Park Chong-min, and Doh Sull Shin. "Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?" *Asian Survey* 46, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 341.
2. *Ibid.*, 361.
3. Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc, 2005), 345, 357.
4. Eckert, Carter J. et al., *Korea Old and New: A History* (Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers for the Korea Institute, Harvard University, 1990), 360.
5. *Ibid.*, 362.
6. *Ibid.*, 365.
7. Cumings. 363.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Eckert, 374.
10. Breen, Michael. *The Koreans: Who They Are, What They Want, and Where Their Future Lies* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2004), 216.
11. Peterson, Mark and Phillip Margulies. *A Brief History of Korea* (New York: Info Base Publishing, 2010), 214.
12. Eckert, 358.
13. *Ibid.*, 384.
14. Clifford, Mark. *Troubled Tiger: Businessmen, Bureaucrats, and Generals in South Korea* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 333.
15. Sung Deuk Hahm and Kwang Woon Kim. "Institutional Reforms and Democratization in Korea: The Case of the Kim Young Sam Administration, 1993–98." *Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration* 12, no. 4 (October 1999): 492.
16. Sung Deuk Hahm and Dong Seong Lee. "Leadership Qualities and Political Contexts: Evaluation of the Roh Moo-hyun Administration in South Korea, 2003–08." *Korea Observer* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 186.

17. Hahm and Lee. 209.
18. Chaibong Hahm. "South Korea's Miraculous Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (July 2008): 137–38.
19. Hahm and Lee, 184.
20. Kim, Stella and Blaine Harden. "S. Korea's Lee Offers New Beef Apology," *The Washington Post*, 20 June 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/19/AR2008061901299.html> (accessed 19 March 2010).

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