ART AS FREEDOM AND POWER

Kim Tongin and the political legacy of pure literature in modern Korea

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Introduction

This chapter explores Kim Tongin’s (re-)invention of Western aestheticism in colonial modern Korea through his literary and literary-critical works from the late 1910s to the 1930s. I trace the relations between Kim’s notion of the autonomy of art and the prevailing ideological discourses of the day in the colony, liberalism, and social Darwinism. In particular, I argue that Kim’s one-person movement for establishing the autonomy of art in colonial Korea was closely tied to East Asian versions of the liberal concept of freedom (chayu) and the social Darwinist notion of power. I also suggest that this figure of artist, discursively free from Confucian ethics and contemporary colonial/imperial politics and now endowed with secular transcendental power, laid the groundwork for modern subjectivity in the colony and in postcolonial South Korea. Artists or aesthetic subjects were simultaneously a prototype for modern subjectivity and exceptions to it.

Were Kim Tongin’s efforts to encourage the genesis of a new kind of art in colonial modern Korea just a passing idea? Although the autonomy of art occupied a marginal position, it did become deeply entrenched as it changed its guise and adapted itself to evolving historical and material contexts. In the latter part of this chapter, I discuss how the autonomy of art came to be the “other” perspective against which the dominant camps of nationalists (both left wing and right wing) and (internationalist) Marxists defined their positions on art in later colonial Korea and postcolonial South Korea. The idea of the autonomy of art occupied the position of the marginalized and therefore essential other in the constitution of the larger field of art and art theory in modern Korea. As I will show, the concept of autonomous art played historically contingent and varying roles and took on different meanings in the turbulent subsequent decades on the Korean Peninsula. This relationality between the autonomy of art and politicized concepts/practices of art has revealed the inherent heteronomy of art vis-à-vis the extra-aesthetic forces that constitute it, while, conversely, the imagined and performed autonomy of art has produced real political effects. Once ensconced in the consciousness of artists and intellectuals, I argue, the autonomy of art has always posed the possibility of differently politicizing representations in modern Korea, where the lines of political divisions were often too reductively drawn amid complex circumstances.
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Here I am relying on Jacques Rancière’s idea of the inherent interpenetration of art and politics, refuting the widely accepted notion both in the West and in modern Korea that politics and aesthetics are discrete entities, which thus requires us to “know whether or not they ought to be set in relation.”1 Kim Tongin’s idea of pure art is in fact distant from Rancière’s theorization of art as a more fundamental kind of politics, i.e., spheres of the politics of perception, sensation, and cognition—that is, aesthetics in the etymological sense as politics. Nonetheless, the very idea of pure art operating precisely as a political notion at least planted this possibility of imagining a different “juridical order.” In other words, Rancière’s dissensual politics/aesthetics enables me to assert that the autonomy of art and the non-autonomy of art were inherently intertwined, together shaping modern Korean art.

In considering Europe, Pierre Bourdieu argues, the notion of modern art, art as ex nihilo, was produced in fact ex instituto—that is, out of various and multiple historical and social forces and structures.2 Modern art in colonial Korea arose within an even-more complex network: the unequal relations of global and regional systems and institutions. The first was Japanese territorial imperialism and Western cultural hegemony; the second was uneven capitalist structures of domination, including print and commodity capitalism; the third was transcontinental/the West–East Asian discursive formations in political ideology—that is, importation and regional adaptations of liberalism, social Darwinism, Marxism, and fascist thought; and last but most relevant to the present discussion was colonial Korea’s importation from late-nineteenth-century Europe of the idea of the autonomization of art. This was the view that literature and culture as a sphere was delimited and separated from others, such as politics, the market, religion, and ethics—and more specifically, that aestheticism was a particular and extreme instance of autonomous art.

The ultimate Confucian ideal for ethical governance was articulated as munch’i (文治), or governance by respecting mun, the cosmological order.3 It was a holistic institution of discourses and knowledge that included what modernity would separate out as governing ideology (political, economic, and social), philosophy, religion, belles lettres, cosmology, and so on. While being traced to this broad premodern origin, the modern Korean notion of literature (munhak, 文學), emerging in the period of the first two decades of the twentieth century, was a product of the processes of reduction, particularization, and the simultaneous demotion and elevation of its premodern predecessor, mun. The notion of art, yesul (藝術), was an import from the West. In premodern Korea, the respective characters ye and sul making up the neologism yesul signified various kinds of skill. The conglomeration of the forms of artisanship, practical skills, entertainment, and ritualistic performances of the premodern era came to be elevated and together constitute what we now classify as yesul or “art.”4 Kim Tongin’s aestheticism in colonial Korea pushed this process of disintegration of the premodern holistic mode of governance a step further and laid the foundation for what later came to be known as “pure literature,” or sunsu munhak, one of the most debated and to a large extent disparaged terms in the history of modern literature in Korea. While the set phrase the sunsu-ch’amyŏnjaeng (the debate on pure literature vs. engaged literature) did not come into common use until the mid-1960s in South Korea, the literary establishment of colonial Korea was already divided between the leftists/Marxists and the rightists/anti-Marxists. The now-familiar term sunsu is an adaptation of the notion of pure art and pure gaze from nineteenth-century Europe.5 Purity here means separation, distance, and autonomy of meaning, away from politics, the market, and society, and argues for a kind of autogenesis of art. Sunsu holds that art is internally constituted: it derives and produces meaning only from art itself and other art. The most important shift for modern Europe was the “rupture” between aesthetics and ethics; the decoupling of these two was also the most significant lesson that Kim Tongin took away from Europe for colonial modern Korea.6
For Kim Tongin, this notion of the autonomy of art functioned like a placebo. The idea had the effect of liberating not only literature and art but also certain aspects of subjectivity presumed to have close connections to art—that is, emotions and interiority—from the extraliterary and extra-artistic structures and relations of power at the regional and global levels. In other words, while the notion of autonomous art did not actually hold that art was autonomously produced or autonomous from other spheres, it had real emancipatory effects. Most notably, the empowerment and independence of art and artist-like human subjects, imagined in the pages of literary works, contributed to the construction of modern subjectivity. The effect of the heteronomous autonomy of art was singular: it staked out an imagined/real space “outside” of the structures of material power at the heart of it.

I turn now to a discussion of how Kim Tongin transformed nineteenth-century European aestheticism into a colonial version, by illustrating how his ideas, from both fictional works and critical essays, contributed to the establishment of art as a modern institution in relation to modern subjectivity and the new collective: ethnonation, or minjok.

I. Inventing creativity (Ch’angjo)

Kim Tongin’s self-funded publication, Ch’angjo (Creativity), was both a creative outlet for writers and a venue for Kim’s own manifestos and manuals for inventing modern literature and by extension art in Korea, the kind of art Kim understood as being produced in the West. Kim Tongin’s essay “A World Created by Oneself (chagiga ch’angjohan segye): A Comparison of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky” asserts that art is the end result of autopoiesis, self-creation or self-production, by an artist. Kim Tongin rejected the premodern East Asian notion of literature as the rewriting of the classics or existing works in favor of the modern European notion of art as creation that originates with each artist, a homo faber, descended from deus faber. Ch’angjo, or creativity, according to Kim Tongin, was also necessarily linked to the catchword of the day: “new” (sin). Creativity meant creating something new: an artist creates meaning and truth out of nothing, ex nihilo, by themselves and out of their own emotions and intellect. This figure of artist in modern Europe was made in the ontotheological mode, both “secular and theological at the same time . . . grounded by desire . . . for final authority, even if that final authority is no longer named God.” If the all-important concept of imagination served as a self-inaugural and self-grounding principle for Romantics, then for Kim Tongin, “creativity” functioned similarly, with him claiming autopoiesis or creativity as the self-grounding truth. Furthermore, the West and its cultural authority and the attendant pressure on colonized intellectuals to reject their own traditions and to join the ranks of “civilized” peoples simultaneously functioned as another layer of the ground for Kim Tongin. In his eyes, the autonomy of art in colonial Korea could be heteronomously established only through its cultural hegemon, the West.

II. Art as “free”: the sovereignty of mad genius artist in “Kwangyŏm Sonat’a” (Mad Flames Sonata), “Kwanghwasa” (Mad Painter), and “Paettaragi” (A Ferryman’s Song)

I. Aesthetic freedom as power, will, and voluntarism

The Western notions of art and aesthetics that entered colonial Korea through Japan drew on neo-Kantian philosophy and Romantic literary and critical works that espoused this philosophy. Kant understood human subjects as “absolutely free” and the work of art as having been produced “via free human initiative,” and therefore, for Kant, “the aesthetic product becomes
a utopian symbol of the realization of freedom” both in its production and appreciation. In Derrida’s critique of the West’s philosophical foundations, he understands this “freedom,” interchangeable with “sovereignty,” in this way: “this freedom as a force, as mastery or sovereignty, as the sovereign power over oneself”; “this definition of freedom as a faculty ‘in charge of itself and of its decisions,’ as the sovereign power to do as one pleases, in short, the power to attain ‘perfect independence.’” For Kim Tongin, this Romantic notion of freedom as free will and power was further intensified by the social Darwinist self-justifying concept of power, power for power’s sake, as we will see later. Given that both the unfreedoms and disempowerments that constrained the colony and the power of the West propagated this social Darwinist idea of power, it is no surprise that this notion of sovereignty, the Romantic notion of power, was valuable to colonial intellectuals: they pursued power discursively in the cultural and aesthetic sphere, as it was not attainable in the political sphere.

Kim Tongin’s short story “Kwangyŏm Sonat’a” (Passion Sonata or more literally Mad Flames Sonata), from 1929, is the clearest instantiation of his theory of art—that is, art as an expression of this kind of free will and power. The story features a genius composer, Paek Sŏngsu, who commits a series of violent and perverse crimes, including, arson, the rape of a dead woman, and murder for aesthetic purposes—that is, to be inspired to produce his masterpieces. In this story, Paek’s “genius” is associated with words such as yaso (wild nature), yain (wild man), and kwang’o (violent nature). The title of the story, “mad flames,” refers to the violent force of emotion expressed in the music that Paek composes. Once he commits these crimes, he seems to reach this higher sphere of freedom, which is described as “free and uninhibited” (chayu pangbun). His music is described in this way: “grotesque emotions that have been imprisoned”; “wild power”; “threatening power and wild nature”; and “violent sonata . . . and its breathless power.” The story ultimately defines art as power (“him,” in Korean), power stemming from untamed nature and its violence, as shared with or inherent in the emotions of geniuses. And this power, expressed through art, is in turn “freedom” (chayu) for Kim Tongin: “Powerful art or [the] power of art reaches the realm of freedom.”

2. From political sovereignty to aesthetic sovereignty

In two stories, “Paettaragi” (A Ferryman’s Song, 1921) and “Kwangyŏm Sonat’a” (Mad Flames Sonata, 1929), Kim Tongin references two premodern potentates, one from the East and another from the West: Emperor Qin of ancient China and Emperor Nero of ancient Rome. In their implicit connections to the artists-protagonists in the respective stories, they appear as the prefigurations of the modern artist, as their perfect personification of free will is demonstrated by the absolute power over their subjects. Kim implies that modern artists have transformed this absolute political power into absolute aesthetic power and that sovereignty is now limited to the sphere of art, culture, and imagination. “Paettaragi” opens with an unnamed first-person narrator musing about Emperor Qin on a beautiful spring day near the Taedong River in Pyongyang: “Whenever I think about utopia [yut’op’ia in the original], I cannot help but think about Emperor Qin who possessed a great character and who enjoyed the very greatness of humanity to the utmost . . . [He] built the famed Abang Palace (Efang Gong in Chinese) with all the extravagance of art, and enjoyed himself.” The “greatness” (k’in sam, wiin in Korean) that Kim Tongin attributes here to Emperor Qin is derived from the Nietzschean idea of the Übermensch, influential in contemporary East Asia at the time. And then, the narrator, referred to simply as sinsa (Western-style gentleman), quickly moves on to a folk song, paettaragi, that he hears being performed by a singer who is the protagonist of the framed story—that is, the main story. The
narrator’s attention is caught by the singer’s artistry: “It was Yŏng’yu paettaragi. His was far superior to any other possible renditions by entertainers (kwangdae) or kisaeng. The man who sang the folk song was that superb.” This opening scene performs key tasks for Kim’s efforts to invent modern art for Korea. First, it transforms Emperor Qin’s absolute political power, “kill or let live,” into power now associated with art—in this case, music. Second, it elevates folk song and folk song singing to “art,” gesturing toward the birth of modern art in the colony. While paettaragi was a local work song, sung by fishermen, ferry operators, or sailors, Kim here implicitly compares it to songs that would have been performed for entertainment, such as those sung by kwangdae or kisaeng. Whatever the purposes of vocal music might have been in the past, those who performed them were always the common folk of premodern Korea. Now, by willing these songs into the previously nonexistent category of modern musical art, Kim Tongin’s story convinces us that Korea has always had transcendent art in the commonest quarters of its land: Korea has always possessed art, and this alone should propel Korea into a state of “universality.”

Kim Tongin’s stories fashion the modern “Korean” artist who is a “universal” artist: fetishized, sacralized, and yet necessarily confined to the autonomous and yet segregated sphere of aesthetics. This aesthetically sovereign subject, an exceptional subject with transcendent and quasi-divine superhuman abilities as a creator, simultaneously serves as a prototype for the (colonial-)modern subject. That is, this notion of the artist has served as the ultimate instance of the voluntaristic, autonomous, and interior self. Aesthetic sovereignty, however, formed only part of the foundation of modern subjectivity in Korea. While the idea of the sovereignty of subjectivity might have claimed the position of goal or ideal, modern Korea has always seen its contention with the more deeply rooted and persistently residual philosophico-ideological foundation of normativism of the Confucianized premodern Korea. Kim Tongin’s legacy worked to provide a pushback against the powerful undercurrent of this tradition.

III. Art as “pure”: purity as separation, delimitation, and independence

Europe made the transition from premodern “art,” which had been integrated into Christian theocratic statecraft in the form of sacred texts and ritual performances, to modern art as a sphere independent or autonomous from others such as politics, economy, religion, or ethics. Late-nineteenth-century European aestheticism was the ultimate and extreme instantiation of this logic of the autonomy of art in the broader process of functional differentiation—that is, separation, delimitation, and autonomization of various spheres of governance such as political institutions, economic systems, and cultural and social structures (art, religion, education etc.) in modern liberal-capitalist nation-states. In this context, the “purity” of art resulted from art’s disassociation from the values, interests, and functions of other spheres: art posited and pursued “purely symbolic value.”

While there were other perspectives on the role of art vis-à-vis society, politics, and the nation available to colonial writers who were exposed to Western education through their study in Japan, more so than any other contemporary writer, Kim Tongin was powerfully drawn to the aestheticist notion of art. When Western aestheticism was able to disavow the social forces that had constructed it, it was much more difficult, if not impossible, for Korean aestheticism—an oxymoronic term, in fact, as I will show in the last section of the chapter—to do the same, for a variety of obvious reasons. First, literature in particular and art in general were subject to censorship by the colonial government: the authoritarian politics did not permit even the minimal semblance of autonomy for art. Second, the majority of Korean artists and critics, whether
Marxist and left-leaning or right-wing nationalist, tended to fall on the side of believing in the social and national role of art in modernizing reforms and/or progressive politics. The residual traditional holism that saw “art” only as integral and subordinated to “ethics,” politics, and governance informed the belief system of this majority, both on the left and on the right. In a way, this underlying holism was Kim Tongin’s true nemesis. Last but not least, although Kim Tongin seems to have been oblivious to this, it is rather obvious to us in hindsight that pure art, the idea of which was imposed on the colony as a “universal” principle by the pressures of “advanced civilizations,” was not really tenable in a colony like Korea. Modern Europe could imagine a pure gaze for its art; Kim Tongin’s attempt to do so resulted in a colonial “re-invention” of the pure gaze that was closer to W.E.B. Du Bois’s double consciousness, the duality of the self-conscious gaze that was burdened to produce the pure gaze. Kim Tongin’s efforts on behalf of art’s sake strove against these powerful constraints that all but destroyed the illusion of the “autonomy” of art. The autonomy of art was nonetheless an essential Western import—marginally central or centrally marginal—that had its local usefulness through successive eras of modern Korea.

What did pure art mean in colonial Korea? Although the term sunsu munhake, or “pure literature,” did not become a predominant concept in literary criticism until the 1960s, the notion of the autonomy of art began to take root in the 1920s, though as a minoritized position against which the majority defined themselves. Kim Tongin was the most ardent advocate of art for art’s sake, vis-à-vis those who endorsed the opposing credo “art for life’s sake” (insaeng ǔl wihan yesul) being loosely formed against Kim’s aestheticist stance. If art for life’s sake was a rather vague idea, a more significant lasting opposition came from precisely the target of Kim Tongin’s attack and his lifelong archrival, Yi Kwangsu. Kim railed against Yi Kwangsu’s tendency toward moralism, which was associated with the prevailing reformist ideology of Enlightenment dedicated to modern nation building.

Apart from Yi Kwangsu and Kim Tongin, the other important canonical writers from this crucial period between the late 1910s and the early 1920s when modern Korean literature was being molded—before the rise of Marxism-influenced literature—are Hyŏn Chin’gŏn, Na Tohyang, Chŏn Yŏngtaek, and Yŏm Sangsŏp. With the exception of Yŏm Sangsŏp, these “fathers” of modern Korean literature did not really engage with theories of how to modernize or create literature in general, nor did they participate in the debate. Without subscribing to Kim Tongin’s aestheticism, Yŏm did argue for the separation of culture and literature as a sphere and an institution. While it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to assess the extent of the impact that Kim’s aestheticism had on these writers, it is at least important to be mindful of Kim’s advocacy for art’s independence, as it did leave a lasting legacy in more pronounced ways in postcolonial South Korea.

As Marxism came to dominate the intellectual scene, the “autonomy of art”—reinterpreted as art as non/a/suprapolitical—became unsustainable. However, when in the 1930s the consumerist phase of colonial capitalism emerged on the peninsula, the idea of the autonomy of art made its way back into literary work, in subtle and surreptitious ways, just as the literary establishment was compelled to “depoliticize” itself due to ever-worsening state censorship and the persistent rounds of arrests and incarceration of Marxist writers. I argue that this forced depoliticization brought about a kind of freedom and separation of literature from the burden of overpoliticization by the supremacy of Marxism. The autonomy of art also betrayed itself in the distance of some of the modernist works from the cultural marketplace, marked by their critical and parodic representations of the flourishing commodity culture and consumerism.
Considering the European case, Bourdieu argues that the modern construction of pure art was accomplished through the invention of the figure of the modern artist:

that social personage without precedent, the modern artist, full-time professional, dedicated to his work, indifferent to the exigencies of politics as to the injunctions of morality and recognizing no jurisdiction other than the specific norm of art. Through this they invented pure aesthetics, a point of view with universal applicability, with no other jurisdiction than that which it finds in itself.25

This notion of the artist as a professional was actually promoted by Kim’s arch opponent, Yi Kwangsú, along with his introduction of the functional differentiation and overall autonomization of spheres and professional fields that included culture and art.26 Kim Tongin further deepened this idea of the functional differentiation and autonomization for art by merging it with the Romantic conception of art as transcendental: this separation becomes exceptionalization, and autonomization becomes the sacralization of art and artists. In sum, the modern artist in colonial Korea was a subject of autonomy in two ways, being a subject possessed of free will and a subject who is a professional in the independent sphere of art and accordingly being free from the pressures and values of other spheres. Even when Kim Tongin’s idea of the absolute autonomy of art seemed irrelevant, given the inexorably politicized context of the colony, I argue that it worked to create a protomodern subjectivity: like the modern artist and modern art, the modern subject was imagined to be intrinsically autonomous: “free” and “pure,” even if conditions at a given time temporarily prevented them from living this self. In the last section, I further explore the paradoxicality of this protomodern subjectivity in the colonial context, specifically the interlacing of (anticolonial) ethnic particularity and the colonized pursuit of universality in Kim’s fictions.

IV. The non/autonomy of art for the ethnonation in the age of empires

1. “Provincializing Europe” and cosmopolitanizing colonial Korea

In the modern Western context, the disavowal of other values from spheres outside of art, in turn, helped to constitute art as an institution, which enabled its purely symbolic value, the accumulation of which amounted to the prestige or social value it created for itself.27 In colonial Korea, the invention of the pure symbolic value of art/literature was a slightly more complicated process, as that value was necessarily “impurely” connected to the overriding value of nation building as well as that of collective resistance to the Japanese Empire. In this last section, I will briefly discuss how Kim Tongin’s campaign for autonomous art served to produce “Korea” simultaneously as a “universal” power and a particular ethnonational-cultural-geographical location.

Kim Tongin’s “Paettaragi” (A Ferryman’s Song) is a clear illustration of the ambivalent desires to transcend locality (that of a colonized ethnus) and yet to affirm that (colonized) ethnonational culture. Given that Flaubert’s own pretense to the autonomy of his “universal” and “pure” art could be premised only on his (imperial) disregard for the non-universality of the non-European world and their cultures, Kim Tongin’s articulation of this inbrication of these two tendencies as being at once universal and particular reversely deconstructs European cultural imperialism and reveals Europe’s own provincialism, as Chakrabarty puts it.28
In “Paettaragi,” Kim Tongin describes the setting of the story, Pyongyang; its natural landscape; and its cultural heritage in terms of both its local particularity and its universality. The narrator repeatedly invokes that local particularity with references to “Korean traditional music” (Chosŏn aak), “Korean pine” (Chosŏn sŏl), “Pyongyang Castle” (Pyongyang sŏng), “Taedong River” (Taedong-gang), and “The Peony Ridge” (Moran-bong) while universalizing throughout the short story, by comparing Pyongyang to a biblical topos: “(Pyongyang) reminded you of the fertile land of Canaan.” The biblical “utopia” of Canaan leads the narrator to free associate an Eastern version—that is, that of Emperor Qin: “Whenever thinking of utopia, we can’t help but think of Emperor Qin.” Although China has been “demoted,” here Kim Tongin attempts to revive its universality in order to counter Western civilization’s monopoly on it. This partial and temporary resurrection of the Sinitic/Eastern universality does seem to lend a little help to Kim Tongin’s efforts to cosmopolitanize Korea and to create a modern Korea through the Western imperium.

In all three stories, “Paettaragi,” “Kwangyŏm Sonat’a,” and “Kwanghwasa,” the first-person narrators appear as part of the framing stories. Described as sinsa, a Western-style gentleman, sometimes carrying a “walking stick” (sŭt’ik in the Korean original), we can safely assume that they are Kim Tongin’s authorial doubles. It is this inconspicuous and yet pervasive presence of the Korean Western-style male figure that Kim Tongin uses to place his stories and their characters in what we might call a cosmopolitanized and thus universalized “Korea.” Put another way, Kim Tongin draws our attention to the fact that while these stories are set in Korea and written in Korean and by a Korean, namely himself, they are “universal” stories, which he insists can take place anywhere: Europe, Asia, or Korea. On the other hand, in “Paettaragi” Kim emphatically and self-consciously focuses on the “local color” of the folk song, paettaragi, as well as the particular customs and geographical peculiarities of Pyongyang and “Chosŏn.” By characterizing the beauty of the song and the superiority of the ferry operator’s performance in “Paettaragi” as transcending particularity, Kim Tongin strives to produce the autonomy of art in his art, though he cannot produce his art independent of locality. In this sense, the universalizing and the localizing by Kim in these stories take place simultaneously and relationally. In the beginning of “Kwangyŏm Sonat’a,” Kim Tongin’s narrator says, “You can think of this story as having taken place somewhere in Europe or it could have happened in Chosŏn as its stage forty years from now.” In this passage, Kim posits universality for Korea and yet at the same time suspends it just a bit for four decades. Being aware of the lack of coevality between Korea and the West and the nonuniversality of Korea, Kim projects a possible coevality into the future.

2. Aesthetics for the ethnonation or aesthetic ethnonation

No matter how much Kim Tongin aspired to escape the ignominy of particularity, escaping the global hierarchy premised on the im/material order of power was, of course, impossible. And in turn, even if Kim Tongin did not intend this, the modernizing of Korean art (i.e., producing autonomous art) necessarily ended up becoming a nationalist project. Another early work by Kim Tongin, “Yakhanja ŭi sŭlp’ŭm” (The Sorrow of the Weak, 1919), the story of one “Elizabeth Kang,” ends with the narrator’s exhortation to the reader to awaken from the state of being a “p’yobon” (dead specimen) to the fact that “those who realize that they are weak are strong.” As with the other stories that I have discussed in this chapter, Kim Tongin in “Yakhanja ŭi sŭlp’ŭm” tries to combine his aestheticism with the dominant political idea of the day, social Darwinism and its colonial derivation, self-strengthening, as in “Kwangyŏm Sonat’a,” which I discussed earlier. This social Darwinist mandate to be strong is then connected to the Western Enlightenment and liberal notions such as “freedom, love, and truth” in “Yakhanja ŭi sŭlp’ŭm.”
Even for Kim Tongin’s aestheticist claim for the autonomy of art, art is ultimately connected to social Darwinist notions of power—that is, the dominance of the strong over the weak and the consequent survival of the fittest—which was a challenge faced by the collective—that is, the Korean ethnos.

The paradox of creating proper modern art for Kim Tongin was inexorable: “proper” art for Korea was non/supra-Korean art, which created (im)purely symbolic value for Korea: Korea gaining entry into the club of the modern “advanced” nations. In the global system of empires and colonies, the (Western) notion of the autonomy of art provided an “exit,” an “external” institution “inside” the system. It was the product of Western hegemony, and yet it also allowed those in the periphery to escape at least partially—imaginarily and imaginatively—from that domination. The notion of the autonomy of art produced this ambiguous and ambivalent space where the powers of the material realm could be challenged and, even if only momentarily, interrupted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how Kim Tongin attempted to reinvent modern European aestheticism in the context of colonial Korea. First, I have illustrated how artistic will and talent, based on the Romantic concept of the secular transcendental self, functioned as a premise for free, voluntaristic, and power-seeking (colonial-)modern subjectivity through the linkage forged between aestheticist ideas, on the one hand, and liberalism and social Darwinism, on the other, in early colonial Korea. Second, I have argued that the autonomization of art was part of the larger process of the transition from the premodern holistic system of governance to a modern one where politics, economy, society, and culture were being differentiated and delimited as domains of governance. Furthermore, I have explored how the autonomization of art became a position against which the more dominant modes of conceiving of art—that is, the politicization of art—came to define themselves—that is, both leftist and rightist nationalists—in the subsequent decades of colonial rule and then independence. In the rest of the conclusion, I offer some broader speculations as to the possible implications of the particular colonial and postcolonial versions of aestheticism and pure literature that I have discussed, centering on a couple of issues.

First, we must remind ourselves that literature in early colonial Korea educated emotion and disciplined behavior. That is, it contributed to producing a new subjectivity, because it taught Koreans how and what to feel, think, and perceive by using the tools of the new language, discourses, and perspectives. In short, it created new realities. In this sense, all modern literature in colonial Korea was working in the way Rancière argues that aesthetics works: ideologically and politically at the sensory and epistemological levels. As I have argued in this chapter, Kim Tongin’s own literary works did not exactly contribute to the deconstruction of the existing order of perception, because of its own narrow definition of aesthetic, although his aestheticism, even if unwittingly but necessarily, deconstructed the universalism of European aestheticism—that is, its intrinsic imperial politicality. It was the proletarian camp who was able to invent and produce new language and new realities: the previously unseen, unheard, and unfelt of the Korean masses—that is, the formerly feudal peasantry and the now-colonized proletariat. Nonetheless, I assert that Kim Tongin’s conviction in art for art’s sake did begin to exert influence in the early twentieth century and that, however marginalized, the aestheticist idea did become part of the institution of art in modern Korea. Second, given the notion of “pure” in pure art as a fundamentally dynamic and contingent term, I argue that the present is another point in history when we might again strategically deploy pure art against the
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all-powerful forces of the market that have de-differentiated all spheres of governance: politics, the economy, and culture. In contemporary South Korea, where politicized literature has been gradually losing currency since the nation’s transition to liberal democracy, the contemporary other against which literature must define itself has increasingly become popular culture and the ever-intensifying commodification and commoditization of culture in general. It is the supremacy of commodification of culture that makes me wonder whether this is another time when we could claim, stake out, and imagine, this time more self-reflexively—though only fully and strategically—a space of “purity,” an “outside” to the forces of marketization and economization of culture.

Notes


2 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 257.

3 In the premodern East Asian context, the character mun (文) signified “the order of the cosmos,” implying the twin notions of internal possibility and external manifestation. In this sense, mun was foundationally linked to Confucian statecraft. Kwŏn Pu-durare, *Han'guk k'ŭndae sosŏl ǔi kwŏn*, 80–81.

4 Ibid., 54, 57.

5 Bourdieu explains the emergence of pure gaze in this way: “Pure gaze came into being with the emergence of an autonomous artistic field, capable of formulating and imposing its own values and its own principles of legitimacy, while rejecting external sanctions and demands.” Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 21.

6 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 209.


8 This aestheticization of sovereignty took place alongside the gradual process of secularization in modern Europe. A series of scientific discoveries led to the diminishing authority of the Christian worldview and to the separation of religion from politics, ethics, philosophy, and art. Divine authority has been substituted by other ideas, such as reason, natural law, and imagination. See Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignties*, 1–19.


10 For the Romantic poets, imagination became an “ontotheological” human substitute for divine creativity: “Imagination becomes a key touchstone for modern sovereignty in that it provides a quasi-religious alternative for the transcendence of the divine, which had hitherto been the basic condition of freedom, universalism and political legitimacy.” Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignties*, 7.


12 See Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, 43. For Derrida, this became the dominant notion of sovereignty in the Western tradition, one associated with free will and freedom. Along with Bataille, Derrida offers a more deconstructive notion of sovereignty, on that is based on “a conception of the sovereign that is entirely conditional and thus subject to endless variation.” See Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignties*, 73–74.


14 Ibid., 449, 453.

15 Ibid., 462.


17 Ibid., 367 (emphasis added).


20 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 199.


22 In the modern European context, pure art, or art as art, was made possible by “dissociating art as commodity from art as pure signification, produced according to a purely symbolic intent for purely
symbolic appropriation, for disinterested delectation, irreducible to simple material possession.”
Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 114.


25 Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 199.

26 See my article on Yi Kwangsu’s ideas about functional differentiation and professional fields: Lee, “Sovereign Aesthetics.”


30 Ibid.


32 Kim Tongin, “Kwangyŏm sonat’a,” 447.

33 Kim Tongin, “Yakhanja ū sulp’ŭn,” 351.

34 Ibid.

**Works cited**


