Eco–Art History in East and Southeast Asia

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Edited by

De-nin D. Lee

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INTRODUCTION

DE-NIN D. LEE

This anthology of essays in the growing field of eco–art history takes seriously the perils of the Anthropocene. It does so by refusing to insulate art history from concerns about climate change, ecology, pollution, and so forth. A collection of essays, of course, cannot solve the intractable problems and vicious cycles generated by political economies that rely on a combination of cheap fossil fuels and consumption. But, individually and together, the authors reveal deep and abiding connections between art and environment. By understanding these connections, we take a necessary step toward realizing our complicity in perpetuating the problems and our capacity to work toward solutions. When we ignore the surrounding ecology and climatic conditions, our art historical interpretations are skewed, our understanding incomplete.

If the environment is one area of new and urgent concern in art history, then the regions of Asia call for heightened attention, too.[1] Not only is Asia home to great concentrations of people most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, but, in Amitav Ghosh's words, Asia is "…conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming."[2] Thus, eco–art historical approaches in the sub-field of Asian art present information and analyses that matter well beyond disciplinary and geographical borders.

Within the broad area described by eco–art history and the regions of East and Southeast Asia, the authors of this anthology explore subjects as wide-ranging as the empirical paintings of aquatic creatures in

[1] Following a panel at the annual conference of the Association of Asian Studies, the *Journal of Asian Studies* published in the November 2014 issue several essays examining how the Anthropocene affects Asian studies. See *Journal of Asian Studies* 73.4 (November 2014).

[2] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 88. For several scholarly responses to Ghosh's work, see "JAS Round Table on Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable," Journal of Asian Studies* 75.4 (November 2016): 929-55.

the Korean Joseon court and the posthumous project of contemporary Filipino artist Roberto Villanueva to heal the earth, the long tradition of Chinese landscape and the tree-buddhas near Wat Mahāthāt in Thailand. Collectively, they make the case that art in and related to regions of East and Southeast Asia is fertile ground for eco–art history.

The first pair of essays takes us to the Korean peninsula at the turn of the nineteenth century when severe environmental conditions faced the Joseon kings and when new approaches to understanding the natural world rivaled long-standing conventions of knowledge. Sooa Im McCormick focuses on images depicting the paired activities of growing rice and making silk, known as pictures of "tilling and weaving" in the late eighteenth century. Such pictures have heretofore been analyzed within the context of genre painting, or in Korean, *Sokhwa*. Representing the mundane activities of labor and leisure, *Sokhwa* developed hand-in-hand with a growing interest in local phenomena and a tendency toward realism. Immediacy—whether in terms of spatial proximity or instantaneous recognition of everyday experience—characterizes both the subject and style of *Sokhwa*. Subsequently, these qualities have fueled interpretations of pictures of "tilling and weaving" as documents of Joseon prosperity. Moreover, in implicit competition with an art history championing the West as having arrived first at Modernism's finish line, *Sokhwa* is proof that another contestant may have reached that destination earlier.

However appealing, this interpretation overlooks crucial conditions caused by the Little Ice Age. Contrary to the idealized images of industry and industriousness in *Sokhwa*, the reigns of Kings Yeongjo (r. 1724−1776) and Jeongjo (r. 1777−1800) were marked by severe cold, crop failures, famine, disease and unrest. McCormick draws the indirect but nevertheless operative connections between environmental conditions and artistic subject matter. Her essay reveals a history of images of "tilling and weaving" in Joseon Korea, focusing on the transmission from the Qing court of a woodblock copy of *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving of Peiwen Studio*. At that time, the Joseon court also requested and received famine relief from the Qing emperor. McCormick restores to the examination of agriculturally themed *Sokhwa* a complex and dynamic interaction of environmental conditions, socio-economic effects, and political actions. In this context, she reveals the various roles of artwork as a medium for diplomacy, instruction, propaganda, and efficacy.

Nathaniel Kingdon presents further insights into the intersection of environment and art in the early nineteenth century, a moment when empirical observation figured increasingly in creating knowledge among scholars and painters at the Joseon court. Kingdon takes as his case studies

textual and visual representations of aquatic creatures. In 1814, scholar Jeong Yakjeon (1758-1816) completed a registry of fish he observed while exiled to the remote island of Heuksando. Jeong's earlier draft included illustrations, but persuaded by his brother's criticism that pictures were "shallow," he abandoned images in favor of text alone. As a result, Jeong's registry, *Jasan Eobo*, met the scholarly expectation that text formed the basis of knowledge. But, Jeong departs significantly from Confucian precedents by focusing on animals he himself observed, naming and organizing animals on the basis of morphology, omitting lexicology, minimizing literary references, and proceeding directly to physical description.

Still, Jeong's *Jasan Eobo* perpetuated myths and generated gaps in understanding that illustrations by their very nature would have countered. To make the point, Kingdon compares Jeong's written registry with contemporaneous paintings by court artist Jang Hanjong (1768-1815), especially his eight-panel screen, *Painting of Aquatic Life*. Jang breaks with precedent, too. Eschewing generalizations and literary formulas, he draws on empirical observation. Jang's fish are precisely depicted, identifiable species organized according to several, different eco-systems: marine, freshwater, and inter-tidal. Moreover, his medium—painting—demands plausibility and therefore makes no allowances for mythical creatures that text, even Jeong's groundbreaking fish registry, can accommodate. Kingdon recovers a significant moment in the development of natural history in Korea, a moment when the longstanding belief that human morality lies at the center of all intellectual inquiry no longer obtained. Instead, scholars and artists invented new methods and created new forms for understanding the natural world.

Shifting from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on the Korean peninsula, the next three essays examine contemporary art and necessarily recognize its inherently global dimension. Midori Yamamura's examination of the work of Roberto Villanueva (1947-1995) takes her from the Philippines to Japan; De-nin Lee analyzes paintings by Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943) who immigrated to and now lives and works in New York City; and Lucy Davis re-traces the migrations of wood and woodcut artists including herself in the Malaysian archipelago. Although separated by great distances and working in different mediums, each of the artists in question grapples with the present problems of the Anthropocene. The three essays are also informed by the authors' particular experience or interest—curatorial, pedagogical, and artistic practice, respectively—and thus, they suggest a diversity of approaches to writing eco–art history.

Midori Yamamura examines the intersection of indigenous aesthetics and environmental themes in the monumental, but ephemeral art of Filipino artist Roberto Villanueva. Inviting audience participation in ritual, Roberto's therapeutic strategies culminated in his posthumous project designed to heal the planet, *Sacred Sanctuary: Acupuncture the Earth*. The history behind this project includes Roberto's personal experience of battling leukemia caused possibly by exposure to radioactive waste, but it also draws on a history of colonialism, which exploited the natural abundance in the Philippines and degraded its environment. Roberto's earlier work took issue with the poisoning of rivers, illegal logging operations, and the negative impacts of swidden agriculture. He saw hope in indigenous practices of forest preservation, and he shifted his energies to local arts communities. His late work not only reveals the problems and their history, but it also adopts an ethics of low impact on the earth combined with audience collaboration toward positive socio-political change, enacting what Yamamura calls "sustainability aesthetics." Roberto did not live to see the staging of *Sacred Sanctuary: Acupuncture the Earth*, but the artwork was realized posthumously at the symbolic location that he specified, Hiroshima. Yamamura rekindles the memory of his bold project, challenging us to forge art systems that likewise resist "capitalist circuits" and their ruinous, planet-wide effects.

Seeing the frequency with which contemporary Chinese artists reference canonical Chinese landscapes as a rhetorical strategy for revealing anthropogenic change, De-nin Lee develops a case study of Zhang Hongtu's work. When juxtaposed with their artistic references, some paintings from Zhang's *Shanshui Today* series produce an implicit before-and-after narrative of a pristine past destroyed by industrial pollution and habitat destruction. Interpretations of his landscapes map easily onto a prelapsarian myth, and can invoke Orientalizing ideas of a closer-to-nature Other that becomes corrupted by adopting aspects of the modern industrial west. Yet, massive anthropogenic changes in Chinese regions occurred well before the Industrial Age, and Zhang's oeuvre offers an opportunity to dislodge myths that landscapes of the past and present, along with art historical practices of canon formation and comparative analysis, have promoted. Instead of dichotomies of before-and-after or self-and-Other, Zhang's paintings attest to continuities. Using Zhang's artwork, Lee reveals the outlines of a genealogy of domesticated landscapes stretching back to the middle of the first millennium. She also finds—in Zhang's impulse to identify with the Other, both human and animal—a strategy for countering anthropocentricism. Such artwork can

inspire and fuel eco–art history as part of a broad agenda to confront climate change.

A practicing artist, Lucy Davis investigates intersecting lives of individuals and human populations on the one hand, and of trees, wood, and forests on the other hand. Art and artistic practices mediate between the two, taking the forms of woodcut prints, spiritual and shamanic activities, scouring back streets for discarded wood furniture, enlisting the services of a private company to interpret DNA wood samples, photographic portraits of tree wounds, woodprint collages, an animated film, and a mixed media installation. Davis' searches for an artistic expression that responds to non-human narratives of wood, resists simple-minded advocacy, and pays homage to the mid-twentieth century Malayan Modern Woodblock Movement, which provoked her initial interest. Her essay treats images and natural histories of frangipani, *bakau*, *huang yang*, *terentang*, banyan, and teak trees, or *kulijawa* as it is known in Muna, the native language of that island in southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. In her artwork and this essay, Davis knits together micro-histories and macro-ecologies, demonstrating how "human and non-human agents have colonized and continue to make their presence felt across the archipelago."

The final two essays by Sonya Lee and Gregory Levine, respectively, consider sites of cultural heritage and the complex ecological challenges they pose to their constituencies. Examining sites in China and Thailand, respectively, their essays bridge past and present, and they challenge us to reexamine the underlying values that govern our attitudes and our inclinations to preserve the past.

Lee examines the Nankan Mountain Scenic Area in Northern Sichuan province, where Buddhist cliff-side carvings dating to the seventh century and the Museum of the Sichuan and Shaanxi Revolutionary Base featuring artifacts from the 1930s make strange bedfellows. For the Chinese government and its culture industry, however, the material remains of the region's remote religious history and its near political past offer a singularly attractive opportunity to balance the contradictions of a consumer-based economy within a Communist regime. In analyzing the use and uneven distribution of resources natural and otherwise of the Nankan Mountain Scenic Area, Lee adopts a method of art historical ecology. By doing so, she not only illuminates a complex political economy of cultural heritage, but also extends it to include concern for the site's natural environment and sustainability.

Within the political economy that generated the Nankan Mountain Scenic Area, art historians played a key part by undertaking research and producing scholarship, which demonstrated historical value

and justified petitions to the state for recognition. Against the backdrop of the world heritage system and the international prestige granted by UNESCO, Lee reveals how the creation of "cultural heritage"—a process that in China requires the work of scholars, the promotion of local party members, the sponsorship of high-level political committees, the approval of international bodies, and the coordinated construction of infrastructure and other physical changes to the site, not to mention daily operation of the resulting attraction—facilitates "development and politics, consumer demands and party priorities." When granted the moniker "cultural heritage," a site undergoes marked transformation. In contrast to centuries past when religious practice motivated viewers to sponsor additions to and renewals of the Buddhist cliff carvings, for example, Lee observes that professional standards and commercial interests now drive unprecedented physical changes. Whereas visitors are now forbidden to sponsor changes to the cliff, site managers undertake massive adjustments to landscaping in the name of visitor amenities. Still, Lee reasons, visitors may regain a measure of agency, as they now constitute *in toto* the determinant of the site's (economic) viability.

Viability is Levine's concern in his essay probing the meaning of tree-buddhas near Wat Mahāthāt in Ayutthaya. For Levine, these "conjoined arboreal and human-made entities" offer a case study for confronting realities that art history's anthropocentric orientation has dangerously obscured. Art history's conventional narratives of human exceptionalism disavow the field's basis and complicity in a destructive carbon economy, and such narratives are blind to the biosphere. Borrowing a term from writer Amitav Ghosh, Levine sees in art history a "great derangement" that facilitates art-history-as-usual despite alarming signs of climate change and biospheric collapse.[3] To begin writing an art history free of derangement, Levine resists isolating the human-made component of the "Buddha head in a tree" and analyzing conventionally its date, iconography, style, and so forth. Instead, he attends to the head *and* the tree.

"Buddha head in a tree" confounds even before analysis begins: should the art historian begin with describing the head or the tree? Levine wrestles with ontological distinctions to point out deeply seated priorities that have shaped art historical inquiry before applying the methods of art history to unpack the histories and significance of the sculpted head and the ficus tree. Head and tree align serendipitously in becoming a "coherent" object of religious worship. However tidy this conclusion, Levine recognizes its inherent anthropocentricism in seeing the tree only in

[3] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*.

relationship to the human world. To "pay attention to trees as trees," he looks to botany and ecology to defamiliarize the tree-buddha, to reveal the artifice of human sign systems for understanding the tree, and to attempt an arboreo-centric narrative. Levine restores agency to this and other specimens of the *ficus religiosa*, sometimes called "strangler figs," for their capacity to "colonize" human-built structures. While art history has tended to lament (and to prevent or circumvent) the loss of art, he calls for a recognition that there never was anything but loss. Or, more accurately, symbiotic "becoming-and-making-with." Recognizing this reality regarding material, artistic entities, Levine urges us to reimagine art history by attending to "the biovisuality of the nonhuman as it alters human-made objects and 'creeps' into our visual experience…."

Indeed, reimagining art history lies at the heart of this anthology. In the age of climate change, as the impacts of the Anthropocene increasingly disrupt earth's systems, we are facing new, daunting problems. The reckoning may be different for everyone, but we all bear a measure of responsibility. The authors here see ways that art history—a field of human inquiry predicated on careful observation—can help reveal (rather than obscure) with greater accuracy the scope and complexity of the problems, and thereby guide the thinking behind solutions. This anthology of essays in eco–art history is presented to you, dear reader and fellow traveler, in the sincerest hope that the ideas therein provoke and inspire, and that you will share the knowledge, advance the field, and contribute to the effort.

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CHAPTER ONE

RE-READING IMAGERY OF TILLING AND WEAVING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LITTLE ICE AGE

SOOA IM MCCORMICK

Introduction

Detailing multiple steps of cultivating rice and producing silk, the Southern Song Chinese official Lou Shou's (1090–1162) two handscrolls of poems and paintings are generally regarded to be the first examples of works inaugurating the tradition of *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* 耕織圖. (Fig. 1-1).[1] Thereafter, *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* occupied a special position in pre-modern East Asian politics, warning rulers of moral laxity and urging them to tend the livelihood of their ordinary subjects.[2]

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[1] Research for this essay was begun in 2015 and presented at the 2016 College Art Association annual conference and the 2016 Korean Art History workshop at Harvard University. The author gratefully acknowledges the input of colleagues at these two forums as well as the feedback from two, anonymous reviewers who read the manuscript in 2017. The work by the Chinese Yuan-period painter Cheng Qi (active in the late 13th century), which is now in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, is the genre's well-known example. In addition to paintings, many woodblock versions were also reproduced and widely circulated throughout the Yuan and Ming periods. For the early development of the tradition of tilling and weaving imagery in China, see Roslyn Lee Hammers, *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving: Art, Labor, and Technology in Song and Yuan China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

[2] Since knowledge about agriculture and sericulture was already widespread prior to its publication, Lou Shou's *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* should not be recognized as a simple book for guiding farming and weaving techniques. In China, the meanings and roles of *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* evolved throughout successive dynasties. For more, see Francesca Bray, "Agricultural Illustrations:

Even in Joseon Korea (1392−1910), where kingly patronage of art was generally viewed as an act of idle fancy,[3] this theme received much royal patronage for its powerful didactic nature.[4]

Since its first introduction to Korea in 1498 via Ming-dynasty copies, pictures of tilling and weaving gained great momentum by the eighteenth century, not only as an independent genre, but also as an essential iconographic element of *Sokhwa* 俗畵 (literally, "Pictures of Ordinary Customs"), customarily translated as "genre painting."[5] (Figs. 1-2 and 1-3) Scholars generally have noted the intellectual and socio-economic zeitgeist of the time as important factors contributing to the popularity of this subject and its stylistic distinction. Some maintain that an intellectual trend called *Silhak* 實學, a school of thought that strives to solve practical matters through an empirical approach, inspired ruling elites to commission imagery that realistically renders daily scenes of ordinary people.[6] Regarding its

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Blueprint or Icon?" in *Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China: The Warp and the Weft* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007); Julia K. Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration and Confucian Ideology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Roslyn Lee (Roslyn Lee Hammers), "The Fabrication of Good Government: Images of Silk Production in Southern Song (1127–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) China," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* 171 (1998): 194–203; Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Brian McKnight, *Village and Bureaucracy in Southern Sung China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

[3] For Neo-Confucian statecraft in the Joseon dynasty, see James B. Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyongwon and the Late Joseon Dynasty* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996); Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 1995); and William Theodore De Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[4] Jeong Byeong-mo [Chung Byungmo] "Joseon sidae hubangi ui gyeongjikdo," [Late Joseon-period picture of tilling and weaving] *Misul sahak yeongu* no. 12 (1991): 32.

[5] According to Jeong Byeong-mo [Chung Byungmo], *Landscape of Four Seasons* (1744), a pair of handscrolls by two members of the royal family and court painters, Kim Du-ryang (1696−1763) and Kim Deok-ha (1722−1772), is among the earliest artworks that combine the iconographic elements of *Picture of Tilling and Weaving* with everyday scenes. Jeong Byeong-mo [Chung Byungmo], "Joseon sidae hubangi ui gyeongjikdo," [Pictures of Tilling and Weaving in the Late Joseon Period] *Misul sahak yeongu* no. 12 (1991): 40.

[6] See Yi Jung-hui [Lee Junghee], "Joseonhugi pungsokhwa ui balsaeng gwa geundaeseong," [Development of Late Joseon-period Genre Painting and its

thematic distinction, others propose that *Sokhwa* is an artistic premonition of modern society because it deals with daily labor of working class people, not the leisurely activities of aristocrats.[7]

Fig. 1-1. Attributed to Cheng Qi (active from mid to late 1200s), Detail of *Tilling Rice*, mid-to late 1200s. Handscroll; ink and color on paper. Freer and Sackler Galleries. Image Courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.: Purchase — Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1954.21.

Modernity] *Hanguk geundae misulsahak* 13 (2004): 41−71; Yi Won-bok, "Joseon sidae pungsokhwa gue heureum gwa uiui," [Development of Joseon-Period Genre Painting and Its Significance] in *Joseon sidae pungsokhwa* [Joseon-Period Genre Painting] (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 2002); Jeong Byeong-mo [Chung Byungmo], *Hanguk ui pungsokhwa* [Korean Genre Painting] (Seoul: Hangil art, 2000); and An Hwi-jun [Ahn Hwi-joon], "Hanguk pungsokhwa ui baldal," [Development of Korean Genre Painting] in *Hakguk hoehwa-ui jeontong* [Tradition of Korean Painting] (Seoul: Munye chulpansa, 1988), 331.

[7] Yi Tae-ho, *Joseon hugi hoehwa ui sasil jeongsin* [Spirit of Realism in Late Joseon-Period Painting] (Seoul: Hakgojae, 1999); Kang Gwan-sik,"Jingyeong sidae hugi hwawonhwa ui sigakjeok sasilseong," *Gansong Munhwa* 49 (1995): 58–60; and Yu Bong-hak, "Joseon hugi pungsokhwa byeoncheon ui sasangjeok geomto," [Examination on Ideological Foundations of Late Joseon-Period Genre Painting and Development] *Gansong munhwa* 36 (1989): 87−110.

Fig. 1-2. Sim Sa-jeong (1707−1769), *Rice Reaping*, 1700s. Album leaf; Ink and light color on silk. National Museum of Korea. Image courtesy of National Museum of Korea, Bongwan 2514