1968, or Vulnerability in Prewar Korea

Joan Kee

Let me propose two claims. The first is that 1968 marked a distinctly *prewar*, rather than postwar, era. The second is that artworks made in North and South Korea support this claim especially well. 1968 is shorthand for the welter of crises happening on an international scale during the sixties and shortly thereafter. Its magnitude is such that histories of modern and contemporary art revolve around its aftereffects. Only 1945 carries more weight as a centre of discursive gravity. In the two Koreas technically still at war, 1968 was when tensions between and within both North and South Korea threatened to bring the world closer to total destruction than it had since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Yet, both the governments of North and South Korea seemed unified in their attempts to will an artificial peace into existence. As if to mask the sheer terror of total destruction that loomed larger than ever, artists in both Koreas diligently churned out pastoralised views of industrial facilities, slice-of-life portraits, and genre paintings.

J. Kee (✉)
Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, New York, NY 10075, USA
e-mail: ifa.director@nyu.edu

M. K. Lee and D. S. Ho (eds.), *Labour and Privilege | Future Commons*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-4418-3_2

At the same time, many of the resulting artworks conveyed a shared sense of vulnerability that implied a common state of foreboding. Macho posturing via monument construction came to a particular head in the mid-1960s. Think, for example, of the Chŏllima monument on Mansu Hill in Pyongyang: a sculpture of the mythical 1000-li or 400-km winged horse. Or the statue of Kim Yushin, the legendary general who unified the peninsula and became an explicit symbol of South Korea's claims to peninsular authority in the seventh century, strategically positioned in front of Seoul City Hall so that his sword is pointing due north. Each monument represents an attempt to establish nationhood according to an idealised chronology of victory and triumph. Governed, however, by an unspoken injunction against nuance or argument, such initiatives failed to account for a body politic in a constant state of subjection. How could life be possible given the exposure to risk compounded by practical and logistical limitations? Although North Korean economic and military strength was at its height, internal power struggles made public activity, including the creation and display of art, a fraught endeavour. In South Korea, the myth of a unified nation came under relentlessly increasing scrutiny as the human cost of industrialisation brought new attention to the currency of harm. Vulnerability thus bound both sides of the 38th parallel as strongly as the rhetorics of aggression that exploded in 1968.

What this specifically looked like might be inferred from a small but critical number of artworks, whose circulation and subject matter qualified their operation as intermediaries between everyday life and the ideal worldview of the state. I look, in particular, at images that were not "fine art", at least not in the sense of transcendent physical objects valorised for being above life's fray. I draw from examples of Socialist Realist painting; *Chosŏnhwa*, the name given to ink painting in North Korea; and photography, which in South Korea turned on the depiction of unsettling encounters. Despite profound differences in format, purpose, and pitch, all these instances permeated everyday life. Socialist Realist painting invariably shaped the definition of art in North Korea around acts of obligation, yet it was as non-artistic artefact that it most succinctly fulfilled its responsibilities to communicate with the masses. In South Korea, photography was newly admitted into the national juried salon for arts and crafts but it was still most accessible through print media.

Turn now to *Pine Tree*, painted in 1966 by Ri Sŏk-ho. The former star student of Kim Eun-ho, arguably Korea's most well-known practitioner of *nihonga* (a synthetic medium based on ink painting literally translated as "Japanese painting") and a friend of South Korean art world stalwart Lee Ungno, Ri Sŏk-ho joined the Chosŏn Art League in Seoul in 1951, just before defecting to the North. A teacher at the Pyongyang University of Fine Arts, Ri was unflinching in his earnest rehearsal of a highly idealised view of "tradition", the bedrock on which Kim Il-sung established North Korea's moral superiority to both the South and, later, to China. Here, pictorial space is totalised by Ri's hand, typical of the kind of work for which he was renowned. But his devotion to the ideal resulted in his own entrapment within the airless world of state-mandated perfection. We look at the birds and trees as if through plate glass four inches thick. Even though the trunk presses up against the surface of the painting, the eagle seems curiously detached. Perched a bit too high on the tree, its wings firmly affixed to both sides, the eagle reads as prematurely suspended animation. Life exists only as taxidermy.

Ri's *Pine Tree* illustrates how ideology, intention, and form were never as aligned as concepts like propaganda might have us believe. The alignment became even more tenuous in 1966, just before North Korea's year of emergency, when surviving members of Kim Il-sung's immediate cohort affiliated with early Mao and the Soviets were duly eliminated. Even the most impeccable nationalist credentials afforded no protection—anti-Japanese guerrillas were summarily purged for opposing single-state ideology. Artists, not surprisingly, were disproportionately affected, with purges thinning the ranks of the North Korean art world so much as to establish them as a new class of vulnerables. Recall, for instance, the apocryphal story of Kim Yong-jun, depicted in one 1953 oil painting by his friend, the Soviet Korean artist Pen Varlen. The venerable artist and critic responsible for linking ink painting to the state's rhetoric of self-reliance (*juche*) was allegedly executed in 1967 for casually throwing out a newspaper containing a photograph of the Great Leader, Kim Il-sung. Against such incidents, the depiction of an eagle with a pine tree, a traditional pairing symbolising longevity, reeks with irony.

But if *Pine Tree* seems particularly laboured in its execution—workman-like, even—it is because technical competence has proven a reliable alibi for those whose fulfilment of their duties subjected them to extraordinary risk on a daily basis. Surgically precise in his brushwork without being virtuosic, Ri set out to prove himself a diligent labourer and, therefore, a model citizen. But even works celebrated as ideological exemplars sometimes let slip critical incongruences of form, reflecting a deep if unarticulated sense of uncertainty, often at the level of pictorial structure. We intuit this already from the awkwardness of Ri's cast of characters, in which lies the chance for speculation rather than subordination.

If the production of images became the grounds for North Korean artists negotiating their own survival, for South Korean photographers, it was a means for reflecting how citizenship was less a designation of legal status than a practice crucially defined by finding an alternative language to consider the minoritarian body. The years between 1956, when South Korean President Rhee Syngman decisively severed pretences to democratic rule, and 1972, when Rhee's successor, Park Chung-hee, followed suit with the Yusin Constitution, constantly saw the ideals of personal autonomy and political self-actualisation subject to perpetual threat.

Such questions bore particularly hard on photographers for whom a resounding question concerned the responsibilities that come with being sufficiently privileged to take up the camera. The word used was "realism", a maddeningly broad term imported from Japan and, in the context of Korean photography, defined as the will to make photographs more visibly contiguous with the social and physical world outside an image's four edges. Realism put pressure on the instrumentalisation of photography by a state singularly obsessed with economic development, no matter the physical or psychological cost.

Modernist aesthetics merged perhaps too seamlessly with a state eager to begin reconstruction, both through actual physical development and in imagined form. Never has a gas refinery looked so appealing than in Yoo Chung-chae's photograph *Energy Source,* selected for the country's most prestigious national art exhibition, the Kukjŏn, in 1967. North Korea might have been the foil—particularly the striking works published in the magazine *Lighthouse* that bear more than a passing resemblance to East German state photography. Under Park Chung-hee, the mid- to late 1960s were banner years for industrialisation and urbanisation, particularly in the capital city of Seoul, which Park quickly designated as the ultimate testing ground for his grand plans to remake South Korea into a strong, developed nation-state.

Yoo Chung-chae, *Energy Source*, special citation, 1967 Kukjŏn

With Park Chung-hee's blessing, Kim Hyun-ok, the mayor of Seoul from 1966 to 1970, started an astonishing range of projects, such as the creation of streets like Sejong-ro, the thoroughfare over which naval hero Admiral Yi Sun-shin stood guard, whilst the city's verticalisation was endorsed as high culture. *Night Scene* by Yi Sun-heung, a photograph selected for the 1969 Kukjŏn, depicts a nocturnal view of the extensive network of elevated railways and high-rise building projects that epitomised Park Chung-hee's urban dreams. Photography probably did more to articulate the ambitions of the state than any official proclamation or mandate could.

Precisely, because its ties with the state were less direct, even more influential was the multidisciplinary cultural journal *Konggan*, or *Space*. Founded by the architect Kim Swoo-geun in 1966, *Space* was initially funded by Park's right-hand man Kim Jong-pil, with whom Kim the architect connected immediately. Thanks in large part to such personal ties, the journal's contents, unlike those of many other publicly distributed magazines, were largely uncensored. *Space* was unique amongst South Korean publications in that it was both a space through which readers could enter the mindset of the state, as well as a space where photographers and writers enjoyed considerable leeway in framing their approaches to culture.

It is this conjunction of spectacle-making and its banal repetition that a 37-year-old photographer named Yook Myung-shim tried to address by pointing his camera in the opposite direction, towards the ground. The former high school English teacher left the sleepy central Korean city of Taejeon for Seoul in 1966. Like most photographers in early postwar Korea, Yook had been an erstwhile painter, a medium that for Korean artists signalled a commitment to questions of pictorial space, and especially questions arising from treatments of edges and surfaces. In one image taken in 1969, assorted feet and truncated legs fringe the top of the pictorial space, reminding us that the ground is under foot. It is a site on which things rest: sheets of asphalt, curbs of concrete, and, it is implied, buildings. Taken just after an anti-military government

demonstration, the photograph begs the presence of architecture, and it is architecture and urban planning to which Yook and his colleagues are in part responding. This lateral and vertical expansion all but obviated the ground and, by association, all who walked upon it. To focus on the ground thus meant recuperating the weight of those it was tasked to bear: not the ranking elite, but the unrecognised everyperson whose continued anonymity was essential to establishing national unity as the dominant scale of reference for thinking of the world.

Yook Myung-shim, *Jongno-gu, Seoul*, 1969

Let me draw your attention to the lower right-hand corner of Yook's image, where a dog lies with its eyes closed. Its four legs are splayed somewhat, as if the dog was asleep. Nearby is a dark splotch that reads as either shadow or excretion not far behind it. The stillness of the body mimics, or is in fact, death. The other thing to note is how exposed the dog's body is, or rather that it exemplifies the state of being completely unprotected. If photographs like this helped create an unwritten class of vulnerables in contrast to the formation of a civil society based on strength, fortitude, and invincibility, the dog is its exemplar. The vulnerable is defined by its lack of resilience—not because of any personal deficiencies but because of the structural forces marshalled against it, him, her. And in such a world, tragedy is merely a temporary incident that will soon become no more than a dark splotch, whose outlines will fade in the harsh light of day. According to Yook, the dog was only emaciated and dehydrated. But according to his camera, it never had a chance.

Yook's image illustrates how agency was exercised through the act of revelation; of showing that which was ordinarily doomed to be unseen. In his view, the world turns on the distinction between the visible and invisible. In mid-to-late 1960s Korea, the distinction was particularly acute as Park Chung-hee's new government vigorously attempted to promote itself to both its citizens and the world at large by endorsing certain kinds of images that in turn constituted a surface that the state hoped might reflect to viewers a more positive image of itself.

Kim Chong-yun, *Land of Resentment*, 1966

Paradoxically enough, the thrust of Yook's photograph is amplified by a North Korean painting. *Land of Resentment* was painted by Kim Chong-yun in 1966. A rare depiction of weary bodies, it ranks amongst the only scenes of vulnerability in the North Korean canon. At 142 by 100 centimetres, it is considerably less grand than most of its Socialist Realist counterparts. Stylistically, the work verges on nostalgia; its brittle moulding reminiscent of oil painting in 1930s pre-liberation Korea. But Kim, one of the "old guard" who began studying art at the Pyongyang University of Fine Arts in 1947, knew how to stage a scene. A bearded old man in traditional summer clothes sits dejected, his eyes downcast on parched earth. Just behind him is a youth, perhaps his son, looking into the distance. Both are set against a rural backdrop that reads less pastoral than bilious, the air choked with a pale-yellow haze that appears to subsume the land almost completely.

The painting might have been used as a stock image of suffering, made to illustrate the moral superiority of the Democratic People's Republic, as opposed to its neighbour below. But the old man is puzzling. He is not so theatrical as to register merely as another participant in a pictorial mass games orchestrated for the Great Leader. Somehow, he manages to breathe in air so dusty as to make coughing about as appropriate a response to the painting as looking. His attitude conveys hopelessness, but the eyes never once leave the ground, nor do they betray any specific emotion let alone bitter indignation. The ambiguity is a rare point of respite in an otherwise continuous circuit of production where the only permitted emotional responses were either unbridled rage (usually directed against Americans) or unfettered joy (towards the North Korean leadership).

Why, then, did Kim name this *Land of Resentment*? Was it a reference to its inhabitants? If so, to whom was the resentment directed and how? What was the direction of emotion? That so many questions are raised without explanations suggests how Kim tried to render the painting rhetorically elastic, easily deployed to serve any number of state agendas. But the disjunction between the title and what actually takes place in the painting also leaves room for speculation about how and where agency might be possible.

Rather than seek refuge in the shopworn concepts on which both North and South Korea staked their claims to authority—terms like nation, people, Korea, progress, and history—image-makers in both

Koreas produced viewing experiences most legible through the apprehension of fallibility rather than coherence. Via pictorial incidents of incongruence, slippage, and misalignment, it was thus possible to imagine a different Korea, one neither beholden to identitarian myths of unity nor ideological opposition. In 1964, Joo Myung-duck began taking pictures of mixed-race orphans, all children of Korean women and United States servicemen stationed in Korea, after following his sister, then a volunteer at the Holt Orphanage. Founded by an American couple whose efforts to adopt Korean War orphans led to the passing of the "Holt Bill", a 1955 law which essentially permitted the adoption of non-US children by US citizens, the orphanage was affiliated with an adoption agency that has since placed 60,000 Korean children in US homes.

Over the course of a year, Joo eventually took more than 5,000 images, some of which he published in local photography magazines. At a friend's behest, he chose 95 to be displayed at the Central Information Center in downtown Seoul in 1966 at what effectively became the first major solo photography exhibition to take place in postwar Korea. For Joo, who came to photography not as a journalist but by joining one of the many amateur and student clubs that emerged in Seoul in the early 1960s, stated that photographs, "should propose questions of a social nature to the regular viewer".[1] In his case, that meant taking apart the idea of a unified nation—the fiction on which Park Chung-hee built his state—by showing those populations that compromised the foundational myth of racial purity.

Joo Myung-duck, from the "Holt Orphange" series, 1964

As I have written elsewhere, the series was, in South Korea, the most explicit demonstration of photography's capacity to transform subjects into social entities and political subjects.[2] Yet even if the Holt Orphange photographs succeeded in creating an obligation in its viewers to think about caring for strangers outside the almighty networks of kin, the paternalistic responses of viewers illustrated just how unprepared Korean audiences were to grapple with the complexity of vulnerability. Pity seemed the only response allowed. "Look at their sadness", said commentators, even though the images are studiously devoid of any traces of sorrow porn characteristic of so-called "beggar photography" (*kojiki shashin*) popular in postwar Japan as well as Korea. Well-meaning articles described overseas adoption as the "best" solution for children who were seen less as human beings as they were "social problems".[3] Only in a few instances was there an attempt to broach what Joo practically spelled out in each of his photographs. If the orphans were indeed "social problems", how much did that have to do with their potential to compromise the carefully crafted myth of a unified Korean race? As a sector of the population, the orphans were defined by their need for protection, but not necessarily their rights, a theme that continues today (multiracial children born out of wedlock have far fewer rights in Korea than their monoethnic counterparts).

To be vulnerable is to be in need of care, a point that Joo makes by the number of pictures featuring children cuddling dolls or soft toys. Yet solace is absent. As Joo observed near the very beginning of *The Mixed Names* of a US military jeep headed towards one of the so-called "camptowns" of makeshift bars, black market peddlers, and other establishments catering to the American military presence, it is a mistake to consider the war as over. Only this time, the key battleground is identity and specifically what must be *excluded* from Koreanness in order for the myth to retain its credibility as a nation-building premise.

Joo is amongst the very few photographers in Korea to not only disclose minoritarian presences but to attempt to give that presence its own space within the burgeoning image ecologies of postwar Korea. His is a project of reallocating agency across a wider and more disparate constituency than implied by concepts like nationality, race, or citizenship. In 1968, Joo began another series of photographs for the monthly general interest magazine published by the *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper company. By this time, he was an editor, organising his own series, including *Strangers in Korea* (*ibang*) (1968). The first featured ethnic Chinese residents in Incheon, the port city not far from Seoul, which since 1883 had been a major gateway of trade between the declining Qing Empire and its equally ailing former tributary, the kingdom of Chosŏn

Under the unequal treaties made between Chosŏn and the Qing, Chinese settlers in Incheon answered only to Qing law. Their few remaining descendants circa 1968 lived under a South Korea government that paired nation-building with racial purity, a policy that Park Chung-hee implemented with ruthless efficiency by denying Chinese residents full citizenship rights and even the means to a livelihood by imposing heavy taxes on the flour, which was a staple for their noodle restaurants (they were not allowed to sell rice). Many of the original residents fled to Busan after the Korean War, whilst others relocated to Taiwan or the United States. The photographs published in the magazine were described as a portrait of "pathos"—the Chinatown, which was built by Chinese at the end of World War I, was now a "ghost town".

The ambiguity of the distance at which Joo takes his pictures speaks volumes about the uncertainty of a Chinese community against the nationalism of South Korea. The people seem both too far to suppose any real intimacy between Joo and them, and also too near to suggest non-intrusion. Joo watches from a distance, which he maintains in order to remind his Korean viewers that they too are held at arm's length from his subjects, even if the land the Chinese inhabit belongs to them, or rather, to the entity now known as "South Korea". The images produce the kind of suspension that lets them float within the subjunctive rather than do their business, which, in the context of Korean social documentary photography, meant data conveyance or acting as pity bait. Such images of alienation ran counter to the rhetoric of kinship on which Park Chung-hee's state was founded (the state as benevolent father or the idea of fraternal nation). Yet, there is an openness about Joo's work that does

the opposite. Here is where the labour of ethics begins, by making uncertainty primary and by doubting the neutrality of the unidentified viewer. The suspended animation coursing throughout *Strangers in Korea* seems like an admission of failure on Joo's part. Neither he nor the camera can pierce the veil shrouding their would-be subjects. Lacking secure legal protection afforded by citizenship, Chinese residents were amongst the most economically and politically vulnerable groups in sixties Korea. But like *The Mixed Names*, *Strangers in Korea* rejected the association of vulnerability with submissiveness. In both works, vulnerability is not an object of displaced emotion but becomes a space, or even a sanctuary from the brutal logic of domination and submission operating in both North and South Korean society (albeit in very different ways and for vastly different ends).

Affording vulnerability its spatial dimension is the tension generated between proximity and distance, which another photographer, Jun Mincho understood most viscerally. Like Joo, Jun deployed his camera to explore the capacity of architecture to frame positions of power and the physical conditions through which identities take form. In October 1969, Jun stepped away from high-rise buildings to depict those living and working under their shadows, as demonstrated in one depiction of a sleeping porter in Gwanggyo-dong, one of downtown Seoul's commercial thoroughfares. Taken whilst Jun was almost lying on the ground with a wide-angle, 24-millimetre lens, the photograph defines vulnerability by suggesting how the only rest available to those involved in physically rebuilding Seoul was death or something close to it. Here, it is the porter sleeping against a backdrop whose most noticeable feature is a sleek black glass office building that contrasts sharply from the mass of largely squat buildings below. It is the Samil Building, the glass-curtain wall skyscraper designed by Le Corbusier protégé Kim Choong-up, that for almost a decade would be the tallest building in South Korea.

Jun Min-cho, *Modernization*, 1969

The emphasis on verticality recalls that which was celebrated in the pages of *Space* some two years earlier, as well as on the magazine's February 1971 cover. But here it is put into context. The Samil Building towers only because it has no other rivals. Its all-glass façade vibrates antagonistically from the single-storey concrete shops that lie at the skyscraper's foot: a framing device, it would seem, for the sleeping porter. Jun aligns the head of the porter with the edge at which two sides of the Samil Building abut, hence drawing the eye upwards towards the building's unfinished floors. At this point, Jun draws attention to the question of labour: to both the work needed to complete these floors and to those who might be charged with the task, such as the porter lying below. Jun illustrates how the state plays off size against scale so as to make inevitable the suppression of individual presence. It is not simply largeness for its own sake that matters. Rather, it is that the buildings, the city of Seoul, and indeed the nation are being explicitly scaled in ways that make inevitable the suppression of individual presence, real bodies, and their susceptibility to harm.

First published in 1970 in *The Dong-a Ilbo* after Jun entered a photography contest sponsored by the newspaper, the image would have registered through touch as well as sight. Published on rough newsprint-like stock, the image would have felt like rough sand compressed together. Such an experience aligns us more convincingly with the asphalt of the street or the splintered wood of the porter's cart than it does with the forbidding smoothness of the glass skyscraper standing in the distance. At the same time, however, the palpable image only reinforces how powerless we are to intervene in what unfolds beneath our fingertips. Though himself unaware of the lens, the porter is positioned in a way that makes us conscious of a division between our world and that framed within Jun's viewfinder. Jun puts pressure to bear on this division, not in order to uphold the tired fiction of photography as a mirror of truth, but in order to emphasise the world as contingent on divisions. This is a work meant to instil anxiety in a viewer who was far more accustomed to seeing photographs that presented the world as the state wished it to be.

Jun originally thought of calling this work *Shade*, but eventually asked his friend, the mystery writer Kim Sung-jong, to title it. Kim called it *Modernization*, a title that raised the question of whether development in fact depended on exploiting human vulnerability in the name of an abstract nationhood, when most of its citizens had yet to develop any real resilience to either the damage caused by the Korean War or by growing

social inequity. Death and debilitation were as central to the narrative of development as views of rebirth and vitality. By calling his work *Modernization*, Jun insinuated that the real work of the modern was undertaken through juxtapositions and the production of oppositions (for example, vertical versus horizontal, rich versus poor, literal versus unseen labour). The modern, Jun implied, was produced through an interminable loop of abjection and glorification. *Modernization* suggests how state-defined views of development arbitrate between those who will thrive and those who must perish, supposedly for majority benefit. The squat buildings in the shadow of the Samil Building are doomed. Construction, or what the state and a few private enterprises would unilaterally regard as progress, requires building on, or over, pre-existing life. It requires burying the living.

One wonders how much of Jun's sensitivity had to do with being a perpetual outsider. Born in Japan and raised in the gritty port cities of Busan and later Incheon, Jun came from humbler origins than Yook Myung-shim, Joo Myung-duck, and certainly Limb Eung-sik, who grew up in a home equipped with its own facilities for processing film. Jun aspired to be a painter, but was rejected for being colour-blind, a disability that proved to be an advantage in taking black-and-white pictures. Concerned with a future he saw as inevitably mediated by images rather than text, he enrolled in the Sŏraebŏl College of Art, which in 1964 became the first tertiary institution in South Korea to offer a four-year university degree in photography. Jun regarded his images as commemorating, in his words, "the labourer who worked until his back broke but could never escape poverty".[4] That he could publish such potentially inflammatory images was because he did so not as a photojournalist, but as a private citizen merely submitting an entry to one of the many photography contests that proliferated in the 1960s.

Jung Yung-man, *Evening Sunset at Kangsŏn*, 1973

Consider Jun's image in relation to one of the anchors, if not the lodestone, of the North Korean socialist canon. *Evening Sunset at Kangsŏn* was painted in 1973 by Chŏng Yŏng-man, who was just a few years older than Jun and had predictably impeccable class credentials. The son of a worker and a 1962 graduate of the Pyongyang University of Fine Arts, Chŏng was the head of the Chosŏn Art League Central Committee. Somewhat unusually, *Evening Sunset at Kangsŏn* was created at the direct behest of Kim Il-sung's son, Kim Jong-il, who allegedly encountered a beautiful sunset whilst visiting the Kangsŏn steel works on the Taedong River. Not far from the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, Kangsŏn had long figured in national mythology. In a 1961 painting by Kil Chin-sŏp, Chang Hyŏk-t'ae, Song Ch'an-hyŏng, and Ch'oe Ch'ang-sik titled *After the War at Kangsŏn*, we see Kim Il-song lecturing to his loyal masses with the charred husk of the old steel works receding in the background. The unreal-ness is telling—there are two different chronologies or temporalities present. Depicted here as a spectral background, the devastation of the past recedes quickly to make way for the boundless energy of an eternal present.

Steel works became a more prominent subject in North Korean art and photography during the early 1970s. The economic edge North Korea had enjoyed for so long was fast eroding, not only because of

internal difficulties but because of South Korea expanding its exports to include heavy industry as well as the more traditional textiles, plastics, and other light industry goods. North Korea doubled down on metallurgical and machine building to recharge a growth rate that had stagnated after the withdrawal of Soviet aid in 1966. But the more the state struggled to maintain its economic precedence, the more it became imperative to conceal that struggle from view. Park himself had toiled in the steel works, but the image he presents is an unreconstructed sentimentality writ large—Oh, those glorious days in the coke oven!—to which every viewer had a front-row seat. The reddish orange reappears in Chŏng's landscape, but is considerably muted and less suffocating. The sunset is perfect, so much so that it is intelligible only at the register of allegory.

But Chŏng's is not the landscapes of progress so popular in China, whose political relationship with North Korea had sunk to new lows by 1967. Where Fu Baoshi managed to incorporate symbols of industrial and technological development into the landscape, Chŏng sets up an odd disjunction in his view of what might be called the pastoral industrial. A better comparison, perhaps, is *Platinum Mountains* painted by Yun T'ae-ryŏng in 1968. Named for the white magnesium culled from the mountain slopes, the mountain in the image is presented as eminently subject to human will. Yun wields his brush as if it were a chisel, the mountain sculpted into giant geometric formations. Yet, as if to cover the denuding that would later cause environmental havoc, clumps of foliage are tactically placed in the left corner and immediate foreground.

In Chŏng's work, the factory is pushed up against the banks of the river in a manner that, whilst not exactly confrontational, is far from the integration characterising the works of Fu and his other contemporaries. Under a sun that stubbornly refuses to set, the river acts like a border, or a moat, perhaps. Reflection seems burned into the surface of the water. What is unusual about the landscape, which took Chŏng a year to complete, was how it leaves the viewer to make sense of the world. Overall, stillness contrasts with the direction of the smoke. Against this, the golden sun reads as distant and unattainable. The distancing represents the triumph of culture and the human-made over nature—crucial attributes in light of natural disasters resulting in famine and devastation. One can "capture" nature within the four edges. There is something perversely optimistic about the normalisation of industrialisation and how it appeals so unabashedly to the fiction of a stable world to inhabit. It may have been overcompensation to see the world in this way. But to depict

a factory so that its presence hardly interrupted what might be called the persistence of the land amounted to a profession of faith: painting, at least, would not let itself be vulnerable in the way its creators and audiences were. What we see is not exactly resilience, the nominal opposite of vulnerability. But land in Chŏng's work registers as a condition defined by its ability to outlive even the most devastating events.

But where is the body in all of this? The landscape is strikingly absent of its populace: the smiling faces that improbably toil within spitting distance of furnaces and the like. But there are nevertheless three bodies present: the all-seeing eye of the state ventriloquised through the hand of Chŏng, the virtual hand of Kim Jong-il, and that of Chŏng himself. By this time, the hand was central to the Kim Il-sung cult of personality. In particular, the outstretched arm and open hand underscored how closely the state was imbricated in its ability to perform. The hand gestures to an indefinite multitude or an unarticulated future.

The significance of the hand extended to Kim Jong-il, who allegedly had a direct role in the creation of *Evening Sunset at Kangsŏn*. The story, of course, is pure anecdote, perhaps circulated as yet further evidence of the scope of his political authority rather than an example of any desire to speak through the experiential authority of art. Then there is Chŏng himself. The landscape may show how far the eye can see, but those limits belong to Chŏng as well as the state. Chŏng was no subversive; his privileged position was enough of a disincentive from any outright expression of dissent or even mild discontent. But the patchwork execution marked a certain deference to the demands of large-format painting. Chŏng submits to the painting acting upon the body rather than vice versa.

The factory seems oddly toy-like, even fragile. Its dominance has the air of fiction. Smokestacks puff dutifully, but these spindles seem hardly able to sustain the demands for productivity. Below is the reflection of the factory complex, an inky, amorphous darkness seeping into the river like a bad oil spill. It is the dark side of the state's romance with industry, the side kept assiduously hidden elsewhere but that rises from beneath the surface, which here is not so much tranquil as it is compliant, by order, of course, of Kim Jong-il. Chŏng's painting is not a blind flight into satire; in the sensitive years after the great purges of 1967, feigning such a separation was likely to have fatal consequences. But intention and execution are paired more loosely than is expected, particularly in a work like this. *Evening Sunset at Kangsŏn* may depict an ideal world, but its curious

misalignments ground its presence in a time whose treachery bound Chŏng closer to his presumptive public than did any government-imposed frame of reference.

Evening Sunset at Kangsŏn reframes the initial pessimism of Jun Mincho, whose view of the Samil Building all but thrusts human exhaustion into the foreground. It is not only that Jun refuses a vision of the world where advanced technology can efface all traces of the human, but also that he trains his camera—itself a technological device most Koreans did not then own or use—to do likewise. Yet Jun does more than reflect the world in its present state. Especially when read alongside Chŏng's painting, *Modernization* attempts to situate photography as a platform for shaping the world so that the defenseless need not always remain as such.

Both works scaffold 1968 in the two Koreas as a distinctly prewar moment. The formless darkness seeping into the Taedong is a specter of human-made catastrophe; environmental crisis is perhaps the most obvious example. For Jun, that catastrophe is an ongoing subjugation of the industrial working masses. By focusing on the image of the exhausted porter whose limp anatomy has more than a passing resemblance to a dead Christ sprawled on the knees of the Virgin Mary, Jun defines photographic focus as a moral obligation to give form to otherwise nameless lives. What might be described as the "time" of 1968 reads as prewar, because even without the ever-present terror of nuclear holocaust, *Evening Sunset at Kangsŏn* and *Modernization* underscored how familiar death was to both the practice and envisioning of everyday life. The two Koreas remain at war. But that the real reckoning is yet to come is what image-makers in the time of 1968 sensed and what we living half a century later must face all too soon.

Notes

1. Note on transliteration: Korean words and names of existing places or living persons have been transliterated according to custom or preference (e.g., *Dong-a Ilbo*, Joo Myung-duck, Busan, etc.). All other terms have been transliterated per scholarly convention using the McCune-Reischauer system that was invented by Ch'oe Hyŏnbae, Chŏng Insŏp, and Kim Sŏn'gi, three of the most important Korean phoneticians of the early twentieth century. The only transcription system for an East Asian language to be invented

by Asian—and not Euroamerican—scholars until the introduction of pinyin for Chinese in the 1950s, the invention of McCune-Reischauer in the 1930s can be seen as an anti-colonial project directed against Japanese imperial efforts to suppress the use of Korean in occupied Korea.

This is a revised and expanded version of a 2018 Summer Institute lecture.

Joo Myung-duck, "Chwadam: Chu Myŏng-dŏk ŭi sajinŭl iyagihanda" [Roundtable: talking about Joo Myung-duck's photography], *Chu Myŏng-dŏk ch'ogi sajindŭl* [The early works of Joo Myung-duck] (Koyang: Sigak, 2000), u.p.

2. See Joan Kee, *The Geometries of Afro Asia: Art beyond Solidarity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).
3. Unsigned article, "Tto hana ŭi sahoe munje honhyŏla sŏngnyŏn" [Another social problem: the mixed race child comes of age], *Dong-a Ilbo*, 28 April 1966.
4. Jun Min-cho, *Kŭ tt'ae kŭ sajin han jang* [That moment, that one picture] (Seoul: Noonbit, 2000), 20.