Realism in Asia

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Realism\(^1\), which is characterised by the attempt to represent nature as it appears, has dominated Western art for a long time. Since the Renaissance, European painting had sought the idea of *Ut pictura poesis* (“as is painting, so is poetry”). It is based on the premise that human thoughts and emotions can be expressed through the visual depiction of facial expressions and movements of figures within a realistic space, as if paintings were wordless poems. For this reason, life drawing was one of the important disciplines in art academy curricula. Modernistic art which emerged in the second half of the 19\(^{th}\) century rejected the faithful depiction of nature and emphasised the autonomy of art, attaching importance to the inherent formal attributes of line, colour and form. Modernism developed into Cubism, Expressionism and reached its peak with the Constructivism and International Style in the 1920s and 30s. Yet during the same period, some European countries saw the return of the realistic tendency, for example, in the Nazi art of Germany and Socialist Realism during Stalin’s administration in the Soviet Union. As a result, realism became associated with political authoritarianism for some period of time in the West, and this led to the predominance of abstract art as a counter-ideological statement in Europe and the US in the postwar years. In Asia, however, the situation was more complicated.

There are differences in the reception of Western realism among various Asian countries during the influx of modernisation to the East in the second half of the 19\(^{th}\) century. Fascinated by the realistic depiction found in Western painting, Asian artists were eager to learn oil painting techniques, perspective and chiaroscuro. They started to adopt a rigorous attention to detail through courses such as figure and nude drawings or sketching from plaster figures at Western-style art schools. Yet as experimental modernistic art practices infiltrated the Asian art scene in the 1930s, realism started to appear outdated, and this caused many Asian painters to abandon realistic art.
Realism regained its popularity and academic figure drawing saw the light of day in Japan in the early 1940s when the threat of war hung over Asia. Japan declared war against China in 1937 in an ambitious attempt to create the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In 1941 it entered into a war with the Allied Forces including the US, and the countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia, which were occupied by Japan, were entangled in the unprecedented adversities of war. The war period saw around 220 paintings being produced in Japan, which depicted scenes of war or consecrated the battles that the Japanese army took part in. The army’s media branch dispatched painters to hard-fought fields in China and Southeast Asia and had them make sketches and paintings. When the works were finished, they were presented to the army for exhibition tours. Most of these works were commissioned by the Departments of the Army and of the Navy. Such commissions attached weight to realistic documentation of the war and the impact of propaganda rather than that of aesthetic quality. These works consisted mostly of large oil canvases and had the characteristics of Western history painting. These aspects are exemplified by Miyamoto Saburo’s *The Meeting of Generals Yamashita and Percival* (1942). The painting referred to a photograph published in *The Asahi Shimbun* (Feb 20, 1942). It was, in part, a result of the artist’s own on-the-spot survey. The work depicted objects in minute detail and in an extremely realistic manner.

In August 1945, with the defeat of Japan, the world was restructured according to a new order, and this generated a great change in the political, social and cultural fields of Asia. The Allied Forces liberated the nations of the Pacific coast region from the military government of Japan. Yet the end of the world war did not mean the end of problems. China suffered from a four-year civil war after WWII. Mainland China was communised in 1949 when the civil conflict ended in a victory for the Chinese Communist Party, and the retreat of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalist Party) to Taiwan. Korea was freed from the colonialist Japan, but North Korea and South Korea were under the reign respectively of the Soviet Union and the US. Discord between the left and right wing continued and finally the Korean War broke out in 1950. The war went on for three years, and in 1953 the armistice concluded with the battle line at 38th parallel of the north latitude. North and South Korea then became the forefront of the opposition between ‘communism’ and ‘democracy.’

Indonesia, which was one of the colonies possessed by the Netherlands, declared independence in 1945. In 1949, the Netherlands and Indonesia were in a union, but in 1956 the independence of Indonesia was fully recognised. The Philippines had been governed as a territory of Spain for a long period of time before the US established its colonial rule in the country from 1898. The Philippines was occupied by Japan in 1943, but gained independence in 1945 after the US retook sovereignty over the islands. Singapore, which had been a British colony since 1819, became a self-governing state in 1959 under a new constitution and gained independence from Malaysia in 1965. In the case of Vietnam, which was under the rule of France, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established in 1945, but Vietnam was partitioned into north and
south at the 17th parallel north in 1954 after an eight-year war with France. Later, the war between a communist-oriented National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (Viet Cong) and pro-American Ngo Dihn Diem’s administration in South Vietnam did not end until 1975 when South and North were unified to form a unitary state.

As examined so far, each country in Asia was confronted by a different political situation after WWII, but one common denominator was that all of them were affected by the tension from the Cold War between democracy represented by the US and communism by the USSR. This conflict in terms of political ideology had a tremendous impact on the art scene. In other words, the most universal style in communist countries such as China, North Korea and North Vietnam was Socialist Realism that started in the USSR in the 1930s. Socialist Realism became what is called the official style of the Stalin Administration in the USSR in the 1930s. It was basically a realistic mode based on European academism, but it regarded art as a tool for revolution and had labourers and farmers as its main motifs. Realist painting was practiced also in the countries that adopted democracy as their ideology, but assumed a tone different from Socialist Realism. It was not until the second half of the 1950s, about a decade after World War II, that artists in most Asian countries, apart from certain communist states, abandoned realism and followed the trends of abstract art such as Abstract Expressionism and Informel which dominated the art scenes of Europe and the US at that time. This essay observes how realism unfolded itself during the post-WWII period.

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The art world in Japan was unable to avoid mental and economic exhaustion in the midst of its defeat in WWII and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 1948, however, it slowly resurged. Around those days, the painting circles in Japan were divided into two factions: The domestic group gave emphasis to social and political situations; the international group was enthusiastic about importing recent artistic tendencies of the international art scene which they could not afford to set their eyes on until then. There was a diversity of opinions on realism among those domestic painters who attempted to express their experiences of the social and political difficulties of Japan. To them, realism was related to the realities of life, far from the realistic mode exemplified by war painting or Socialist Realism prevalent in the Soviet Union. The artistic concern of these painters resulted in the creation of various kinds of realistic works: realistically rendered works, and those that used symbolic or expressive distortions and brushwork. In terms of techniques, they engaged diverse art forms including oil painting, ink painting and photography.

Among the major painters of realism in the postwar years was Ichiro Fukuzawa. He had adopted surrealism as his main approach since
the 1930s. In *Group of Figures Defeated in Battle* (1948), corpses are piled one on top of the other in a vast spread of land with the horizon at a remote distance. Unlike Fukuzawa’s work in which the body parts are vividly depicted, Noboru Kitazawa’s images are distinguished by their photographic quality. In *Quo Vadis* (1948), a man with a packsack on his back seems to be straying aimlessly. This man looks at the lines of people walking under a red flag at the distant horizon, giving clues to the psychological duress and confusion of the Japanese then. On the other hand, Iri Maruki and his wife Toshiko Maruki focused on Japan as the ‘victim’ of atomic bombing rather than ‘aggressor’ in the war. *Fire* (1950), a black ink painting was such an example: Here, the killed and the injured are both depicted, shocking viewers during its tour throughout Japan.

Apart from these artistic activities of individual artists, there were also group activities in the field of realism art in postwar Japan. Among them, the ‘Reportage Painting’ movement is noteworthy. This movement was led by left-wing artists who emerged after the termination of the US occupation in 1952. ‘Reportage Painting’ refers to the art by the radical artists of such art groups as Century, Japan Art and Culture Association, Japan Art Exhibition and Young Artist Association Exhibition. They renewed the realistic style affected by Surrealism while rejecting modernism. Their work is characterised by a bitter criticism of the contradictory social realities of postwar Japan. The ardour of this art movement abated in the face of the increasing interest in international artistic tendencies such as *Informel*, since 1956.

In the case of Korea, oil painting techniques and realist art were introduced largely by Korean artists who studied in Japan after the commencement of Japan’s colonial rule in Korea in 1910. Since then, realism, impressionism and post-impressionism were attempted one after another, and in the 1930s some artists started to employ modernist abstraction in their work. In 1937, nearly every cultural activity in Korea was paralysed with the outbreak of the Pacific War, and imperial Japan forced Korean artists to glorify the war in their war paintings. Those war paintings made in Korea remain only in the form of photographs. They praised the militarism of Japan either by their free will or by pressure. Among such works are *Memorial Painting of the Draft System in Korea* (1943) by Dankwang Art Group, *Donation of Gold Jewelry* (1937) by Un-ho Kim and *We Guard Asia* (1940) by Hyeong-ku Shim. As a result of producing these paintings, these artists became associated with being pro-Japanese.

In 1945 Korea gained independence with the defeat of Japan, but it was divided into North and South at the 38th parallel north. North Korea was occupied by the USSR and South Korea by the US. In the midst of the conflict between the left and right wing, South Korea established its separate government in 1948. But on June 25, 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, which then fell into disorder again. During this
period when one’s survival was more critical than one’s creative outputs, it seems that the government’s establishment of the Official War Painter’s Troop and the Official War Photographers’ Troop should be regarded not as an effort to document the realities of war but as a protectionist policy for those in the artistic career. These artists were given identification cards, and in some cases, living quarters. Most painters went to the battlefield to make sketches from time to time. Notably, there was no stipulated rule that the painters should abide by. The War Painter’s Troop consisted of artists who had been active in the art scene since the years of Japanese imperialism, and in general their works were of strong realism, but only a few of them depicted the scenes of fierce battles (Night Battle by Su-Oek Lee, 1952). Painter Joon Lee gives an insightful explanation of the problems with regard to the Korean War and the war painting circle: “Those war painters made several war paintings during the war, but most of those were in fact nothing but sketches and they were hardly qualified [sic] as war paintings. On one hand, it was due to the shortage of art materials, and on the other hand, they lacked the conscious attitude to fill their works with the anti-Communist spirit so as to raise the morale of the people while busying themselves about how to survive the war safely.... It might also be that they did not want to depict in their paintings the tragedy of a dog-eat-dog fighting.”

The painters in South Korea were well aware of the fact that Socialist Realism was predominant in the art scene of North Korea and in the war paintings produced in Japan during the Pacific War. It is noteworthy, thus, that these South Korean painters attempted to keep their distance from realism in their personal work. Su-Oek Lee made works of extreme realism in fulfillment of his duty as a war painter, but he worked in a Cubist mode in his personal works such as On the Way to a Refuge (1954). In general, during the postwar days of political and ideological chaos, the experiences of war were revealed through the implicit expressions of an individual’s will to live or the collapse of faith in humanity rather than a direct and realistic depiction of battles and life as a refugee. From around 1957, a generation of artists who graduated from the colleges of fine arts after the Liberation found their hope in the violent brushwork and intuitive idioms of Abstract Expressionism and Informel, which prevailed in the art scenes of Europe and the US. The use of realistic modes was still found in the works shown at the National Art Exhibition in the 1960s, but realism was no longer capable of holding off the stampede of abstract art.

In China, the situation was somewhat different. The seizure of power by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party heralded a new beginning in every field of society including the art scene. In fact, a new start in the realm of art was already being incubated in Mao’s famous talks on Art and Literature delivered at the Yanan Conference in 1942. During such talks, he emphasised art’s function as an instrument for revolution by benefiting the people rather than for pursuing artistic integrity. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai founded
the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Yanan in 1938 to pursue this cause. In 1949 when a new government was established, most faculty members of Lu Xun Academy became those of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

It has been known that Chinese artists went to the battlefields and made a large number of sketches when the Korean War broke out in 1950. China entered the war as an ally of North Korea in the winter of that year. At that time, a strong realist tendency was evident in Chinese painting because of the great influence of the Soviet Union with which China had a close relationship. A large number of Chinese artists went to the Soviet Union to study in the 1950s, and Konstantin M. Maksimov from the Soviet Union came to Beijing to teach at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Among Socialist Realist painters, oil-on-canvas painting was deemed an appropriate medium since it supported vivid depiction of figures and dramatic expression, while traditional-style (non-oil) painting was regarded as one of the vestiges of feudalism. In 1956, large-scale oil paintings started to be produced in great numbers by painters belonging to the generation of artists who were educated in 1949 or after. In these paintings, the main figures located at the vertex of the triangular composition or at the centre serve to attract the viewer's eye through the use of colours and light. Also, a low perspective was used so that the main figures appear domineering and majestic. Oil painting started to lose its popularity as the relationship between China and Russia became estranged. In an about turn, realistic oil painting was now deemed the art of capitalism and the West, and efforts were made to reestablish the traditional Chinese style of painting. This led to the emphasis on the use of outlines and flat colour schemes.

Similarly, the artistic style was closely connected to the political situation in Southeast Asia. Overall, the ideology of the Cold War in the 1950s split Asia in two dominant artistic styles: The Communist-inclined countries concentrated on realistic approaches while those of the Democratic camp pursued abstraction. In Vietnam, which was one of the French colonies, Victor Tardieu from France offered a typical academic education as the principal of the Indochina Art School from 1925 until it was closed down in 1945. Since the division of Vietnam into north and south after the war against France, artists who went south from Hanoi worked actively in the art scene of South Vietnam. Artists in North Vietnam were left with no choice but to adapt themselves to the production of works in an artistic mode totally different from that which prevailed during the colonial rule of France, that is, to the making of Socialist Realist works similar to those in China and the Soviet Union.

In Indonesia, which gained independence in 1945, left-wing LERKA (Institute of People's Culture) acknowledged realism as the only legitimate art style. An opposition to this was offered by a group of writers, artists and intellectuals who signed what they called Gelanggang's Letter of Conviction. They advocated the individual's freedom
of expression; criticised politically oriented art practices, and supported abstract art, which was predominant in the international art world. This antagonism among the Indonesian art circles continued until the 1960s, and finally ended in 1965 when LERKA was prohibited from their activities. Later, a great number of works by the members of LERKA were destroyed.

In the case of Malaya (the name was changed to Malaysia when Singapore was separated from the Malayan Peninsular in 1965), the conflict with the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) continued from 1948 to 1960. During this period, disputes erupted regarding anti-colonialism, racial issues and the cultural practices of the West. In particular, the art scene of Singapore was led by Chinese leftist painters as Chinese people comprised the majority of the Singapore population. They established the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (in 1938) and taught both Chinese art and Western art. The artists from Nanyang (this geographical name means the “southern sea,” referring to the regions located to the south of China) Academy identified themselves with Chinese artists. After the communisation of China, China’s Socialist Realism spread through young Singapore artists of Chinese ethnic origin. One of these groups was the left-wing Equator Society, which was formed in 1956. This group of artists emphasised the use of realist artistic style, focused on social problems and advocated the ‘heroisation’ of labourers. In opposition to this, artists who were involved in the Singapore Art Society concentrated on the depiction of peaceful scenes and everyday life and the theme of the cultural identity of Malaysia. This contrast gradually abated in the 1960s when Socialist Realism started to forfeit its influence as the Malaysian government employed Malaynisation and policies for a multiracial society.

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The theme of war has been dealt with in the history of art for the longest time. In the artworks of war, the image may be historical, documentative, patriotic or demagogic. It may either oppose or applaud war, its manner metaphoric or direct. In many Asian countries, however, the art that depicts the experiences or influences of war is often marked by the lack of autonomy on the part of the artist. Japanese war paintings or the Socialist Realist works made in communist nations consisted mostly of the works commissioned by the governments, and they are often demagogic depictions of extraordinary and heroic figures similar to history paintings. For these reasons, the realist paintings of the 1950s were considered left-wing and were not even given a chance to be an object of proper evaluation. There existed even a widely accepted idea that ‘realism vs. abstraction’ equalled ‘communism vs. democracy.’ This rigid antagonism and the tension and discords during the Cold War started to enter a new phase in the second half of the 1950s when Asian countries were relieved of postwar chaos. The art scenes of most of the countries that advocated the cause of democracy were dominated by the international tendencies of abstract art such as Abstract Expressionism and Informel, whereas realism started to be seen as conservative. Yet realistic tendencies still continued to prevail in communist countries. It is in the Asian art scene of the 1940s and 1950s that realism was linked with politics more closely than ever.