

Resistance is not always the whole picture: Hong Sung Dam's Dawn woodcuts and the Gwangju uprising

Clare Hurley
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East Wind, an exhibit co-organized by the Gwangju Art Museum (South Korea) and the Queens Museum of Art (New York), October 5-November 30, 2003

East Wind, a recent two-part exhibit at the Queens Museum of Art (QMA), received little publicity in the mainstream New York press, even though it presented a large number of significant works by the South Korean artist Hong Sung Dam.

Entitled "Resistance and Meditation," the part of the exhibit dedicated to Hong's work included *Dawn* (1981-88), the series of 49 woodblock prints for which he is most famous, as well as numerous paintings, several murals, and other large-scale multimedia pieces, a video piece, and three conceptual installations. The show surveyed the artist's work over a 20-year period, and was effectively a retrospective.

The limited advertising budgets of smaller museums and the fact that Hong Sung Dam is Korean do not entirely explain the oversight. The lackluster interest is more probably due to Hong's work representing a trend in art called "Minjung" (Korean for "people's")—art of a political nature that came to prominence in South Korea in the 1980s but is out of mode in the current art scene.

Additionally, his work depicts a population whose struggle for democracy and human rights has been suppressed for decades with the direct backing and assistance of the US, whose thousands of occupying troops help maintain the status quo.

Hong's work deserves attention. The events it records in artistic form are, first, the Gwangju uprising in May 1980, and second, Hong's imprisonment in 1987 on charges of collaborating with North Korea by designing a mural critical of conditions in the South. The murals on display at the QMA (which could not include the controversial one still on display in North Korea), as well as the paintings and other pieces, reflect these experiences.

The *Dawn* woodcuts are small (30 x 40 cm on average) black-and-white images that depict scenes from the Gwangju uprising in May 1980. In *March to the Provincial Office*, a woman with an armful of stones urges a crowd forward toward a burning vehicle in a city square. *The Union World I* shows young men in a pickup truck flashing peace signs and raising rifles, while a man on the street holds up his daughter to wave to them, another holds up a broom, and a woman hands them ammunition. In the more compact composition *Mother*, a woman holds her child and a rifle in such a way that all three figures merge into one as she looks toward a bright white horizon.

A second group of images depicts the suppression of the uprising. A soldier bashes a man's head with a gun butt, a crying child lies atop the blankly staring corpse of its mother. In *Dog Food*, a prisoner on his knees with his hands tied behind his back eats with his face in a bowl on the floor.

Although produced over several years following the uprising in Gwangju, the woodcuts feel as though they were made in the white heat of the moment; in fact, the artist includes himself at work in some of the images. The story they tell is compelling. People take their future into their own hands and rebel against an oppressive authority. They find power and joy in their collectivity, but instead of prevailing, they are murdered by troops, suppressed and imprisoned.

The narrative is archetypal, but also historically specific. The QMA's commentary explains only that the Gwangju uprising was part of the South Korean people's struggle for democracy, but this does little to clarify these events for an American public likely to be uninformed about South Korea's history. A muffling vacuum is thereby created around artwork that cannot be appreciated without a fuller understanding of the background of the Gwangju uprising.

In a pattern repeated throughout the post-colonial countries in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Western allies extended their influence by suppressing the nascent Korean working class and peasant masses. In the Korean War, an uprising against this foreign domination was crushed in the South by direct US occupation.

In the subsequent 30-year period, the United States developed the government of South Korea as a proxy state within the framework of the Cold War, with democratic rights openly subordinated to the interests of capitalist development. An atmosphere of hysterical anti-communism was used to suppress all opposition.

Without popular legitimacy, the government depended on the military and the direct support of the United States, which maintained 50,000 of its own troops on the peninsula to ensure "security" against the North. A hothouse version of capitalism was developed, with the predominantly agricultural nation achieving a level of industrialization in a matter of decades that in Western economies had taken centuries. It was called the "East Asian Miracle," until it collapsed in the late 1990s.

Intellectuals and workers in South Korea seeking an alternative to the repressive capitalist regime have confronted serious historical and ideological obstacles—above all, in the form of the reactionary Chinese and North Korean Stalinist regimes, which claimed to be "communist" but represented socialism's national-bureaucratic opposite. Cut off from genuine Marxism, it is not surprising that considerable confusion has persisted in left-wing and anti-establishment circles in South Korea.

The uprising in Gwangju in May 1980 maturing social contradictions and grievances, as well as an intensification of regional political conflicts. Gwangju is the provincial capital of Cholla, which had been discriminated against throughout the 1960s and the 1970s by leader Park Chung Hee. It remained a poorer agricultural area in the rapidly industrialized country, and became the center of growing political opposition led by Kim Dae Jung.

Park was assassinated in 1979, raising hopes for a measure of political liberalization. However, another military strongman, Chun Doo Hwan, seized power and countered the outbreak of popular opposition to his coup by proclaiming martial law. Resistance was anticipated in Cholla, which was therefore cut off from the outside world as the military moved in.

Reports by Korean eyewitnesses and the few foreign journalists who managed to infiltrate the security cordon are collected in books such as *Gwangju Diary* and *Gwangju Uprising*, illustrated with Hong's woodcuts. They attest to the crimes against humanity committed by the South Korean military, which killed as many as 2,000 unarmed civilians between May 18 and May 27, 1980.

The uprising's leaders, mostly students, were politically unprepared at best. Although cynical as to the Carter administration's commitment to anything other than its own interests in the region, they still hoped that the US would intervene in their behalf. However, the US was not about to intervene simply to maintain an appearance. More occupied by the Iranian hostage crisis (1979) and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1980), the United States government stood aside to let Chun's regime maintain "stability," even if it exposed the lie that its presence on the Korean peninsula had to do with democracy.

The *Dawn* series is part of the movement of Minjung art that developed in the aftermath of the Gwangju uprising. Hong Sung Dam and other first-generation Minjung artists, like Japanese artist Tomiyama Taeko, produced prints whose simple black-and-white graphics were intended for reproduction in pamphlets and books worldwide to publicize this crime against humanity.

There are some photographs of the events that could have been used if it were simply a matter of documentation. However, more than just inspiring outrage at the violence, Hong's woodcuts capture something of the fervor and the joy of the uprising, as well as the misery of its defeat, and the humiliation and suffering in its wake.

The images also represent the artist's participation in the events, whether or not he actively fought. Contemporary artists rarely take this position, and it displays considerable personal courage. Hong's identification with the ordinary masses of society is palpable.

Although the Minjung artists used Korean folklore motifs to create a native look, they were equally influenced by non-Korean art traditions. These included German Expressionism, and the woodcuts of Käthe Kollwitz, in particular. It is interesting to notice certain stylistic differences between Hong's work and that of Taeko, the latter seeming more modern in her use of flattened and abstracted forms. Both artists clearly pay their respects to Picasso's *Guernica* in their depiction of

human anguish, but seem a bit artistically derivative as a result.

Hong's woodcuts as individual images are further limited by their literalness, and derive more impact from the artist's sincerity and their being a narrative group, than from their great originality.

Ironically, it was the integration of Minjung art within the tradition of Western art, rather than its political nature, that eventually led to its loss of influence after its apogee in 1987. The political movement in which it was based became increasingly nationalistic and isolationist. Later Minjung art tends to be folksy and decorative.

Since the 1990s, Hong has created a variety of pieces about his imprisonment by the government in 1987 for political subversion. These paintings and conceptual pieces attempt to process, as much as communicate, the effects of imprisonment and physical torture on the artist's consciousness. This is not the experience of most people, and certainly of few artists, which gives this body of work an inherent interest. In general, the work is understated and unsentimental, focusing on the individual psyche's coping mechanisms as well as the bond between prisoners.

The murals are the final important body of Hong's work displayed at the QMA. These included several large-scale (290 x 900 cm) paintings, such as *Faded Tears in Moonlight* (1994), *New "Paradise in Dream"* (2002) and *Ritual Paper Flower* (2003), as well as wall-sized works made up of multiple small canvases or prints.

In the painted murals, Hong arranges human and animal figures in surreal, symbolic compositions strongly indebted to the Mexican muralist style of such painters as Diego Rivera. *Faded Tears in the Moonlight* is the most historically narrative of the three, telling the story of the Tonghak Peasant Rebellion in 1894.

The nationalist orientation of Hong himself is evident. The positive imagery of the murals relies heavily on Korean agrarian folk motifs, while violence and destruction are largely depicted as alien (non-Korean either in style or actual identity) and technological. One does not find any of Rivera's tribute to industrial labor here.

The limitations of Hong's outlook can clearly be seen in the mural *New "Paradise in Dream."* Although the fully elaborated symbolic content is no doubt more complex, overall the image communicates that both life-enhancing and life-destroying currents flow into human existence—not a terribly original or profound observation. The role played by struggles such as the Gwangju and Tonghak Rebellions in this life cycle remains unaddressed.

In the mural *Ritual Paper Flower* (2003), Hong returns to the historic specificity that characterized *Dawn*. The image includes the World Trade Center towers being destroyed as an orgy of human figures gratifies and tortures one another. Many of the figures look like the "Japanimation" warriors from the video and card games obsessively played by youngsters and adults all over the world today.

The images are not only of brutality, but also of a sexual depravity not to be seen in Hong's other work. One is reminded of eighteenth century Spanish painter Francisco Goya's late *Black Pictures*. The horrifying image is a sharp condemnation not just of the virtual reality of video games, but of the culture of capitalist imperialism that it epitomizes.

One is inclined to interpret the image as simply retrograde given Hong's tendency to valorize Korean native culture, shown here being destroyed by another foreign invader. Interestingly, the only "positive" image in the whole composition is a self-portrait of Hong, strung up by the feet with his head submerged in water (a motif from his prison experience). In one hand he holds a knife, and in the other a lit candle. His feet are tied to branching white blossoms, beneath which a few women with flower torches dance.

This would seem to indicate a continued hope for personal sacrifice and resistance, at least by the artist. It is hope of a sort, in the context of a bitter condemnation of contemporary society, but it is a long way from the

days of Gwangju, when resistance was that of the masses, not just of the individual.

In spite of a political outlook that has become confused and embittered, Hong Sung Dam's work is of enduring interest. His *Dawn* woodcuts and the Minjung movement remain an instructive example of artists' ability to contribute to social and political movements. Artwork of this sort can bring a clear-sighted, and not only impassioned perspective to bear on momentous events, even if this potential is not fully realized in Hong's work. Certain of the aesthetic choices fall short, but one senses a restless artistic spirit experimenting with various media to communicate an experience of resistance that is all the more relevant at the present time.

(A complementary exhibit, "Nostalgia Today" presented the work of three contemporary South Korean artists, Kim Dae-won, Ha Chul-kyung, and Kim Young-sam, but it is beyond the scope of this review.)



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