



Zainichi Korean Artist Fung Sok Ro in the Diasporic Intersections and Flows

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ABSTRACT

As a Korean artist and activist, Fung Sok Ro, the first generation in his family to be born in Japan, had to negotiate between his family who were directly involved with the Chongryun organization that supported North Korea and an identity that questioned his position. During his 30-year career, Ro has become known for his thoughtful and splendidly dignified sculptures that confront his Korean diasporic history.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora; transnationalism; hybridity; Cold War; Zainichi; Chongryun

Fung Sok Ro¹ is a Korean born in Japan. I initially met and included him in the 2002 Gwangju Biennale exhibition, *THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora*. During his 30-year art career, Ro has become known for his thoughtful and splendidly dignified sculptures that address his Korean diasporic history. His participation in the gallery tour/talk, and the symposium that was held in conjunction with the exhibition, became his first ever trip outside Japan to Korea, involving a complicated, special arrangement with the Republic of Korea for a “stateless” person to obtain a pass to travel there. This significant visit led Ro thereafter to obtain a South Korean passport. Ro, like other Zainichi Koreans, has faced several decisions that became major material and psychic transformations in his life and for his identity.

Fung Sok Ro can be said to have inherited Chongryun identity from his forbears that has been a complexly ambivalent force in his life.² Ro nevertheless remained connected with the social milieu for his sense of creativity, politics, employment, and his identity. Ro mines Korean history and living cultural developments to create sculptures that evoke poetic empowerments with the past and the diasporic present.

Aside from being born the same year – 1955 – as the founding of Chongryun, Ro and his family had an intertwined history with Chongryun. His grandparents immigrated to Japan from a southeastern province of what is now South Korea in 1939 when Ro’s father was 10 years old. His grandfather was engaged with establishing Chongryun schools. His father worked as Chongryun’s organizer while earning a living as the management of a Japanese newspaper dealer. Ro attended Chongryun schools, but by the end of junior high school, he rebelled against submitting unconditionally to what he considered to be a dictatorship and finally attended a Japanese high school. Ro eventually taught art at

elementary schools and at Korea University (located in Tokyo), all run by the Chongryun organization cumulatively for 32 years until 2015.

Ro grew up during a volatile period defined as postcolonial, post-World War II, and by the Korean War, an era dominated by the Cold War. Much of his dynamic life has been engaged in struggles against invisibilization and the essentialization of his subjecthood as he sought to settle into a hybridized whole. Through it all, Ro continues to explore and define his subjectivity through his vibrant art practice.

I will discuss three works that span each of the three decades for the distinct appearances that are symbolic of the encountered transformations. A sculpture from 1993, *The Gate* is a commanding ceramic tower using the portal as a metaphor for depicting five defining stages of Korean history. Ro astutely used color along with the hands-on treatment of clay as he subtly changed the terracotta hue at the top with tinges of blue at various sections, until it settled into a sobering light gray. At the very top, the narrative starts with a female figure wearing *hanbok*³ who represents Korea when it was a unified peninsula before Korea became divided. In the next section, a female figure with a child bound to her back standing in front of a shut gate represents the Japanese colonial period. A shut door in the third section depicts a male figure sitting with his head on his knees in the corner, alluding to the emasculation experienced by males in Korean patriarchal culture during the colonization with an *onggi*, a large ceramic pot, on its side to suggest the upsetting of the order during the Korean War. The largest, heaviest section, with the gate area sealed, symbolizes the divided country, completely disconnected. At the very bottom, a figure stands inside the widely opened doors. Always representing the indelible weight of the past, Ro suggests that the present represents hope, metaphorically and literally an openness for the future.

In 2003, after making his first trip to South Korea the year before, Ro created works that absorbed and reflected a major shift in his experiences. No longer focusing on Korean history, he directed his attention to living in Japan and how the contemporary environment affects subjectivities and labor. At the end of the twentieth century, many buildings in Japan were reconstructed or renovated and transformed into contemporary buildings. In his critical view, the buildings look like a “box of lights,” new and beautiful but with residents whose livelihoods had become difficult to detect or understand.

The first of the two ceramic works, *Infinite Desire Under a Pale Light* (2003), is an 8-foot-tall box. One can see through a narrow opening, a tall concrete structure that teeters toward the top with countless window-like openings that reveal packed crowds of figures. *Everyday (Being Pressed by Work) Under the Pale Light* was created a year later and represents the quotidian life of workers, trying to keep up with the production. A large opening of the square box shows a traditional stylized factory, with tall chimneys and figures standing in line as they slowly climb up the slope to reach the remote entrance of the factory. Illuminated by a pale light inside the plastic boxes, both works show a color scheme radically different from the earlier works from the 1990s. Although clay remains the medium like the earlier works, various tones of primary colors are used here instead of the natural or dark hues of the earlier works. The semitranslucent plastic boxes lend a sense of artificiality and lightness that is unprecedented.

Completed in 2016, *Torrent* is the last work to be discussed (Figure 1). Remarkably distinctive, the structure is completely constructed out of pine lumber and is interactive. One can sit in it and be a part of a sculpture that beautifully blends the



Figure 1. Fung Sok Ro, *Torrent* (2016), pine; width: 130 cm, depth: 115 cm, height: 165 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

familiarity and the functional ease of a welcoming chair that doubles with that of an open hand that Ro intends to refer to the receptive hand of Buddha. Ro's early trip to Nara at age 18 immersed him in early Korean and Japanese art history, and it also convinced him to become a sculptor. This early impression was recalled in his reference to Korean dynastic era depictions of regal landscape. Scenes of mountains and rivers were drawn with hot iron and rubbed with colors on the side of fingers that double as the chair's backrest. The backside of the landscape is engraved with letters that are the five precepts of yin-yang. Also, as if to suggest the underlying force of nature, Ro has subtly carved a curve that starts in the middle of the seat extending out to where there lies a myriad flow of data in several languages. Among the numbers and other concepts related to yin-yang are found these words in English, engraved into the seat: sympathy, religion, philosophy, law, imagination, passion, and curiosity. In his attempt to "comprehensively grasp the human world," Ro views humans as elements in a multitude of small flows that eventually merge to become a torrent that we live in.

Encompassing the complexity and enormity of the world, Ro's recent works signal a transformative shift that critiques the postmodern experience of contemporary living in Japan. Instead of a notional homeland, he accepts Japan as his home and renders his art practice to be as independent and meaningful a voice as possible. As a diasporic subject,

his ambivalent existential feelings no longer dominate his realm as he continues to symbolically recognize his empowerment through his work.

Notes

1. I have been enormously gratified to meet Ro initially in Japan in 2001 for our research for the 2002 Gwangju Biennale. Later, for this paper, I relied on our e mail exchanges for more detailed information. I am indebted to Ro for his many hours responding in English using Google Translate to answer my numerous questions. I am also thankful to Ro for providing professionally shot images in his portfolio that include the sculptures that are discussed in this paper.
2. Chongryun is one of two Korean Zainichi political organizations, founded in 1955 that is affiliated with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (also known as North Korea). The other is Mindan that is politically affiliated with the Republic of Korea (also known as South Korea).
3. Korean traditional outfit for females that includes a long sleeve top tied with a long sash and a long flowing skirt.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Artist, activist, and curator, *Yong Soon Min* is Professor Emerita at the University of California, Irvine.