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Decentering Korean Identity with Diasporic Art: A Conversation with Y. David Chung

Y. David Chung, University of Michigan

In conversation with Hijoo Son, Phillips Academy, and Jooyeon Rhee, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Y. David Chung is an artist and filmmaker known for his film and video works, installations, performances, drawings, prints, and public artworks. This interview combines two conversations on the concept of Korean identity and diasporic art: one that took place in 2008, after Chung finished filming his documentary *Koryo Saram: The Unreliable People*, co-directed with Matt Dibble, and the other in 2018. Hijoo Son and Jooyeon Rhee jointly designed the questions, interviewed Professor Chung, and redacted the transcript into its present form.

Decentering Korean Identity

Jooyeon: David, could you tell us why working on diaspora is so integral to your work?

David: The idea of diaspora has been really important to me for many years, even before recent academic research on diaspora, now called diaspora studies, became significant. I have traveled a lot since I was a kid [in the 1960s and 1970s], and I have seen a substantial Korean population living outside Korea. I was intrigued to see how Koreans in various places across the world shaped their existence outside Korea. Who are these people? How can they frame a structure for their identification with Korea? And, at the same time, how do they then shape their identities outside the country? In some cases, such as the Koreans in the former Soviet Union, who are called *Koryösaram*, people who are two or three generations away still latch onto the idea that they are Korean, even though they are not really Korean. I see similar cases among groups of Korean people in the United States and many places around the world. These cases have been intriguing to me; thus, diaspora became an important subject matter in my works.

Jooyeon: It's interesting to hear you say that second- and third- or, in the case of *Koryösaram*, fourth-generation Koreans who believe they are Korean "are not really Korean." This statement is related to the second question we wanted to ask you. Does your idea about diaspora and Korean identity change or expand as you create works about them? You have featured Koreans in Russia and Kazakhstan, and recently North Koreans. Do fourth-generation Kazakh Koreans, for example, cling to some kind of idea that they are ethnically Korean?



Figure 1. Still image from *Koryo Saram: The Unreliable People*, 2007.

David: I think my ideas do change. Looking toward the Koreans in the Soviet sphere and in North Korea really changes the pivot of where the Korean diaspora come from. It decenters the previously dominant notion of Korean diasporic identity by shifting the geographical location of the origin, because it used to be so focused on South Korea. And it does expand the central idea of where the mother country is. It really does change a lot of ways you look at the diasporic community when you “decenter” the point of origin, because you look at it from their perspective, through the prism of their history and legacy. It’s quite different from those who migrated to the United States or South America for economic reasons.

Hijoo: So you’re talking about the political and historical reasoning or motivation for movement or forced movement in these cases?

David: Right. The circumstances of their movement shape their ideas about Korean identity.

Hijoo: On the one hand, different types of movement decenter the concept of Korean diaspora, particularly the ways in which cultural producers think about it or deal with it, or write and make artwork about diasporic issues. But from the standpoint of the North Korean refugees, for example, I don’t know if we can use diaspora when referring to them. Would you say that these people decenter the concept of diaspora? To a great extent, their lives are still being determined by the South Korean state. Even before they arrived in South Korea, they were in China, Thailand, and all the other countries they

had to go through. Do you think the existence of North Korean migrants and refugees “decenters” the concept of diaspora, since a majority of them live in South Korea?

David: Yes, I think so. For those who grew up in Pyöngyang or elsewhere in North Korea but now live in the West or in post-Soviet countries, their childhood memories and ideas about how they grew up are completely different from those of people from the South. Their political views, for example, are quite different from those from South Korea. So I do think it makes a big difference.¹

North Korean Refugees as Diaspora



Figure 2. Still image from *Defector Project*, a video in progress.

Jooyeon: I presume that your idea about “decentering” is informed by your recent work with North Koreans. Could you just talk a little bit about what you’ve been doing recently, especially since you have spent some time in Seoul and in Pyöngyang?

David: Well, this is a project that’s been going on and off for several years. About eight years ago, I did the first installation called *Pyöngyang*, and it was a drawing and a sculptural work. Shortly after the installation, I wanted to expand that piece by working on a video or film project, but I put it aside for about five years before working on it again. I’ve been interviewing and working with some North Korean refugees and defectors in Seoul and talking to them about their experiences. Their stories really vary from people who have been in Seoul for ten years to people who just came to South Korea two years ago. I’m most interested in the human component of their lives and their stories about residing in South Korea. I do interview them just a little about how

¹ Son and Rhee (2018).

they escaped and the hardships they went through before arriving in South Korea. My main interest, however, is to hear about how they are looking at their lives now. Some of them want to go back to North Korea, and that type of thing is a very interesting example.

Jooyeon: Who are the ones who want to go back to North Korea? Is their desire to return due to the extremely displaced conditions under which they live[d] in South Korea?

David: Some have gone back, though I don't think any of the people I interviewed have returned. There are a number of reasons that they want to return. Maybe they miss their family back in North Korea, some feel like they don't fit in South Korea, many South Koreans can be very judgmental, and so on.

Hijoo: Looking at the scale of identities that you are depicting and encountering, would you say that they represent or are part of the "Korean diaspora," in the sense that the diasporic identity par excellence is one in which that history of displacement, suffering, trauma, pain, violence, and coerced or forced movement is imbricated in that term? In this sense, would you argue that North Korean asylum seekers and refugees are part of that Korean diaspora?

David: Yes, I think they are. For example, some of them are living beyond South Korea in different countries such as England, the United States, and Canada, so they would definitely be part of the Korean diaspora. You have to use this term "diasporic community" very carefully, because there is an official government definition. South Korea established a government institution that deals with Korean diaspora a few years ago, I believe, that interprets things in a certain way. So how do North Koreans residing in South Korea represent part of a diasporic community? That would be a hard question to tease out. I guess it would depend on how you define "diasporic community." The question is: Which one is their mother country? North or South Korea?

Hijoo: Right! Exactly! That's the conundrum!

David: Those refugees living abroad are definitely included in the "diasporic community."

Hijoo: But the conundrum of how to categorize those living in South Korea is yet to be determined, perhaps?

David: Yes, I don't know exactly how you would categorize them.

Jooyeon: Did you exhibit any of your recent video, *Defector Project*, on North Koreans, while you were in Seoul over the summer?

David: I haven't shown it in Seoul yet. The last time I showed a piece of it was at the University of California at Berkeley, when I was invited to give a talk there. But right now the project is in progress.

Jooyeon: Has your interaction with North Koreans in South Korea informed you in ways that further—or even differ from—what you have learned from ethnic Koreans in the Commonwealth of Independent States such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan? Obviously, North Koreans are Korean—they consider themselves Korean—but how is that negotiated, especially as they interact with South Koreans and shift their understanding of self?

David: As I said earlier, the ways they live really vary. There are some people who have migrated to South Korea and found work. These people are doing okay, though they still feel, of course, the prejudice because of their accent and where they are from. As you know, South Korea is a very hierarchical society. If you are a young man and you didn't serve in the military, then you are in one group of people who are to be discriminated against. If you are North Korean, then you are in a completely different group of people altogether. I think the experiences of the young women and men are different as well. So it's really hard to generalize their stories. But individual stories matter a lot. Some of their stories are quite horrific, such as young women being sold as wives to Chinese men, having kids, and then having to escape to Thailand. Almost all of the people I interviewed went to Thailand and then came up through Thailand to South Korea.²

Hijoo: And the majority of them have been women?

David: There are a lot of women, but there were young men as well.

Hijoo: David, you are very well known in the community of South Korean artists and academics, but not necessarily with North Korean refugees. When you approach them, do you tell them who you are, and then they are open to talking to you, or is it just kind of how I often go about doing things: "Hey! I'm this person, I'm doing this ethnographic study, may I interview you?" How do you approach them?

David: Usually they are not familiar with my work. If they're other artists and academics, then they will be. So in that case, yes, then they certainly do. Specifically with the *Defector Project*, it doesn't really come up. They'll just think I'm someone making a film.

² The growing body of North Korean studies is expanding by the day, but some of the best work on North Korea and North Korean refugee/migrant issue is by Andrei Lankov. Though outdated, his article (Lankov 2004) remains important in the field.

Reception of Diasporic Art



Figure 3. Still photo from a 1988 performance of *Seoul House*, co-written by Pooh Johnston and Charles Tobermann, with Jim Turner playing Mr. Kim and Tom Wall playing the Salesman.

Jooyeon: This past summer, we were talking about your teaching work on film in Seoul, and we wanted to know if your work has been received in South Korea differently than in, let's say, Boston, Chicago, or Washington, where you have shown your documentary video *Koryo Saram*. Also, what kind of changes have you seen in Seoul concerning the subject matter of your film, the idea of Korean diaspora?

David: That's a good question. I think my work is looked at very differently over in South Korea than it is in United States. Earlier on, when I showed my work in South Korea, I was labeled as a *minjung* [people's] artist, maybe because my work deals mainly with socially marginalized people. I heard about this terminology, because *minjung* artists immediately associated my work with theirs due to the style of my work. Even as early as *Seoul House* [1987], the South Korean art world linked me with that style. I was immediately put in that camp back then.³

³ The economic boom in Korean industry in the 1980s created an unequal distribution of wealth. Such inequalities and unjust social hierarchies realized through the exploitation of the poor led, partly, to the birth of *minjung misul* (people's art). *Minjung misul* expressly manifested distaste for modernism and opposed the idea of "art for art's sake." Aesthetics was less important and

Hijoo: Are you talking about this labeling as occurring recently or a while ago?

David: A while ago, in the 1990s. The films I showed back then were the works I had done on Los Angeles riots and the relations between the African-American and Korean-American communities. I think people in South Korea are always curious about what my political stance is. Even if they don't come out and say so, they are always searching for that. And then also, Jooyeon's question about the reception of artwork and artists from overseas in South Korea is very critical, whether you are Korean or Korean American, or whoever you are. Cody Choi, for example, had a very interesting take on all this stuff.⁴

Hijoo: He changed his citizenship to South Korean? And he's based in Seoul now?

David: Yes. He's based in Seoul, but because he's spent so much time in Los Angeles—I think he has spent about twenty years there—he has found that he's considered Korean American and not Korean in South Korea.

Jooyeon: So, you're saying that the viewer's subject position—such as being South Korean—matters in the reception of your work, because that has implications?

David: Yes. People always seem to be interested in putting you in a certain camp in South Korea. The understanding between Korean-American and Korean art and artists is very interesting. For example, look at the *Void in Korean Art* exhibition curated by the Samsung Museum.⁵ It's very interesting to hear Korean peoples' comments about Korean-American artists such as Kimsooja, Byron Kim, and Do-ho Suh.⁶ There are also Korean artists in the show, and it's actually one of the best-curated pieces in South Korea that I've seen. It had to do mostly with the quality of the art and with empty spaces in artwork. The overall feedback was that these artists are taking parts of past Korean art and interpreting it.

Hijoo: What does that mean?

David: I don't know, but, for example, Byron Kim's celadon paintings are interpreted as directly referring to Korean celadon.

wholly secondary to content. Thus, *minjung* artists' work addressed the conditions of peasants, urban factory workers, the exploited, and the dispossessed, particularly critiquing wealthy capitalists through art. The major leaders of the movement included Kim Bongjun (b. 1954), Yun O (1946–1986), Im Oksang (b. 1950), and Sin Hakch'öl (b. 1954). Critics of *minjung misul* charged that the group's overtly political tones served merely as propaganda for left-wing idealism.

⁴ The artist Cody Choi (b. 1961) considers himself "Kmerican." See Thaddeus-Johns (2017).

⁵ See Schwabsky (2008).

⁶ See Kimsooja (2003).

Hijoo: So the Korean markers became *the* markers because they are legible to South Korean viewers?

David: Right. They're using these objects to reference Korea and Korean art history.

Hijoo: What was the Do-ho Suh piece?

David: It was a soft, fabric piece, a really beautiful gate produced out of fabric. It's a huge piece, a twelve-foot hanging Korean gate hand-sewn together. And Kimsooja had a video about the wandering migrant in which one sees the back of her head and there's water going by.

Hijoo: A *Needle Woman* series.

David: Yes. It was interesting to see how Korean-American artwork is so different when it's shown in South Korea compared with any other country. Precisely because the viewers are South Korean, they have a natural bias to connect the work to their country. And of course they're going to pick the celadon pieces instead of Byron Kim's *Synecdoche* [an ongoing work composed of four hundred portraits of sitters' skin tones].

Jooyeon: David, so you are saying that South Korean viewers tend to receive diasporic artists' works politically. But, your current topic of concern—the project you are in middle of doing—is about North Korean immigrant refugees and asylum seekers. However you want to shape that category, it is in itself a very political project. So I don't think you're going to get away from that type of questioning.

David: Not at all. I understand that.

Hijoo: Of course, it's interesting, though, because isn't it important to tell the stories that you are trying to tell?

David: I was very interested in how culture and self-awareness come from traditional storytelling and how those stories form who you are. I was interested in Korean stories and American stories, in what *is* subject matter. I was thinking about what defines subject matter for immigrants to South Korea. How is it defined for people who are moving from place to place? How does subject matter become defined? If I'm referring to a biblical scene, then I'm obviously referring to Western ideas, and so this was a sort of investigation into what all that was about. I was interested in folk stories, especially Korean folk stories, so it was a blending of all those things. I created a specifically commissioned work, *Mega Morning Calm*, for the *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* [1994] exhibition, curated by Margo Machida and

Vishakha Desai, the gallery directors at that time. They wanted a mural for the entranceway to the Asia Society [in New York City]. The title comes from the Korean creation story of Tan'gun, and that's why it's called *Mega Morning Calm*.



Figure 4. Detail of *Mega Morning Calm*, 1993. Mixed media on paper.

Hijoo: Oh, because it's a *mega*-narrative.

David: Yes. It's like the ultimate narrative, or the first narrative.

Hijoo: I've seen the piece. Wasn't there an implicit critique of that narrative? Or, were you interested in bringing the mythical origins onto canvas as subject matter?

David: Yes, I was interested in subject matter. What is subject matter? And I wanted to choose this creation story. Every people has a creation story, and no one knows about the Tan'gun story, which is a fascinating one. As you know, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il claim direct lineage to Tan'gun, and there was some linkage to Everwhite Mountain (*Paekdusan*) and some war imagery in the installation. Just the story itself...I really loved the story about the bear and the tiger. It was a subject matter that I actually wanted to work with.

Hijoo: But it's a myth.

David: Well, some people believe that it's real. And there's a Tan'gun cult.⁷

Hijoo: Well, yes, of course. People call Tan'gun *harabŏji* [grandfather]. What do you think about the idea about pure blood ties, that the Korean people are one large family that goes back to this progenitor, Tan'gun?

David: Well, I think that it's interesting. The kind of thing I was looking at in the film *Koryo Saram* is that there are so many Koreans living abroad—some seven million? I think it's precisely what I wanted to drive at in the film: the idea that identity and culture are temporal. They are made up in the mind. It's a question of how much you want to attach yourself to it. I think that some people don't want anything to do with it and others find it an important thing to latch onto. My work is looking at just the experience of a person from one culture who is mixing with another culture.

Hijoo: But this idea of attachment...you're definitely attaching to your body of work this Korean history. Just look at the titles of your earlier works from the 1990s—street scene, bar scene, apartment, and so on—and then look from those to the titles of your works from *Turtle Boat Head* [1992] to *Mega Morning Calm*.

David: The *Turtle Boat Head* piece is obviously about the Hideyoshi invasions and the turtle warships. Again, I wanted to interject subject matter into the body of work. Once again, I went to the grocery store with that.⁸ I felt like I hadn't finished with that theme.

⁷ See Grayson (2016).

⁸ This Korean-American immigrant story highlighting the tension in Korean/African-American relations in urban America throughout the 1980s and 1990s informs much of Chung's earlier multimedia art work, including his rap operetta *Seoul House* (1987), which he wrote, co-directed and co-produced. *Seoul House* received critical acclaim. Hosted by colleges, community centers, and other institutions, this operetta was re-produced throughout the country and even made its way to Almaty, Kazakhstan. Thus, *Seoul House* provided an entrée for Chung into the Korean communities of the Central Asian republics, the topic and focus of his 2006 documentary *Koryo Saram: The Unreliable People*.

This time I actually built a grocery store with paper and wood, and the project was largely based on my father's experience growing up during the Japanese occupation, surviving two wars, and being pushed down to the South.

Hijoo: He's originally from North Korea? Pyöngyang?

David: My mom is from Kaesong, and my father is from a small town outside Pyöngyang. They both lost everything during World War II and came to South Korea after the occupation, not during the war itself. It was sometime between 1945 and 1950, so *Turtle Boat Head* was largely about that experience. My father was in the Korean navy for twenty years, and he'd always talk about these turtle boats. So it's largely a piece about that story.

Hijoo: So, was the piece *Turtle Boat Head* commemorative?

David: I think that this interjection of culture largely comes from autobiography or at least is informed by that, more than it presents itself as a grand historical narrative.

Hijoo: It's autobiographical, but it's also historical. These are some main, conventional narratives of Korean history.

David: Well, I find this whole politicization is a global thing. People don't talk as much anymore about the artistic merits of a piece. They talk much more about politicization.

Jooyeon: On the topic of the politicization of artwork, do you believe your interaction with artists in South Korea has given you any insight into or posed challenges to your diasporic identity or your work? Were there moments of misunderstanding, miscommunication, understanding, or conflict that you encountered that you might want to share with us?

David: I don't know if my interactions with artists in South Korea pose any challenges to my diasporic identity. If anything, they confirm my understanding that our approaches are very different, because a lot of artists in South Korea would not have the same concerns. Well...there are a lot of artists, writers, filmmakers, and people who are working with the topic of Korean diaspora. When this trend first started, it was really misunderstood, like the art exhibition called *The Decade Show*.⁹

Hijoo: Yes, in 1990.

⁹ Roberta Smith (1990) reviewed *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980's*. For more information about the exhibition, see also http://www.boweryartisttribute.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/195.

David: 1990. That's when the curators grouped marginalized people, without really distinguishing between what made them marginalized, as if there were no distinction among ethnic, cultural, or political reasons for marginalized groups in the United States. I think the understanding of the diaspora has become much more mature now. It's become really different. People understand it much better in both the United States and Korea, actually. In South Korea, there's much more awareness about diasporic people there now. And there isn't the earlier attitude that was, sort of, either you're Korean or you're not. Now they understand, "Oh, okay, you're a foreign Korean." They accept that.

Hijoo: That's really interesting that you say that about *The Decade Show*. Then there was the Whitney Biennale in 1993. Do you remember how Byron Kim's work on skin colors was really highlighted? And then, of course, there was Yong Soon Min's 2002 *There: Sites of the Korean Diaspora* show at the Gwangju Biennale. And, subsequently, do you know the *Zainichi* writer Kyung-sik Suh, who has written books about the Korean diaspora?

David: No. I may have read some of his work.

Hijoo: So, you're not aware of the Korean Japanese....

David: Oh yes, completely, parts of my family are still in Japan.

Hijoo: Your film was really eye-opening for so many of us, the communities that were able to see it. Maybe one day you could show it in North Korea. You're right, there has been a trajectory in which conversations and especially cultural producers have been really key to helping to open the discourse, if I can say that: opening the conversation to think outside conventional narratives that reduce everyone into one pot as in *The Decade Show*, which you mentioned.

David: *The Decade Show* made no distinction between those who voluntarily migrated and others, who were forcibly brought over. But of course there is now great awareness of those things. I remember being back then on a panel of Korean immigrants, rape victims, and American Indians. [*Laughter.*] The title of the panel was "Marginalized Victims." Of course, that would never happen today. In South Korea now, and the United States and other countries, there's a lot more awareness about hybrid cultures, ethnic identity, ethnic nationalism, all these different ways in which people identify themselves, and also the artwork as well.



Figure 5. Detail of *Turtle Boat Head*, 1992. Charcoal on paper.

Capitalizing on Korean Identity in Popular Media

David: In South Korea there's just a lot more understanding of diasporic issues, and the topic is really present in the popular media. On the topic of North Korean refugees, there are television shows about North Koreans who now live outside North Korea, so it's not this hidden thing anymore.

Hijoo: The North Korean beauties!¹⁰ Did you watch the show? What did you think?

David: I'm always amazed at how all of these things are really present in the popular media.

Hijoo: It's not a hidden thing. It's actually commercialized, popularized, and in that sense narrativized. But when I see the famous show with the North Korean beauties, and the producer is a famous woman producer, I would say there's a certain narrative that's constantly pushed on the audience: these women tell their stories of going to hell and back, but ultimately they've faced the challenges, survived, and overcome hardship!

David: That's a whole strange world. Really bizarre.

¹⁰ This is a reference to the Channel A television show *Ije mannarŏ gamnida* (Now on my way to meet you), produced by Jin Min Yi. See Epstein and Green (2013) and Cho (2018).

Hijoo: It seems that South Koreans always put North Koreans in a positive light. Whether through a savior narrative or a victor narrative, it definitely seems as if there's a positive twist, which I know is *not* always the case.

David: So, a lot of changes have certainly happened, and there's a lot more awareness of the diasporic community.

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About the Artist

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