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Considering Do-Ho Suh's Installation Art within the Context of Asian Democracy

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Abstract: After adopting democracy as a part of western modernization, Asian countries have shown a contradictory position between human rights and Asian values, which is a unique system of traditional values kept by an Asian cultural area. In contrast to the respect of the individualistic ideal in the western democracy, Asian countries, despite the democratic principles, have emphasized national sovereignty and community's precedence over individuals for the social and economic stability. Thus, Asian democracy has been identified as a dictatorial system of Asian development, which is the mixture of the Confucian tradition of patriarchal system and community spirit with capitalism. Experiencing the same paradigm, South Korea has formed "new totalitarianism" by the collusion of "Jaerber" (a group of monopolistic enterprises) and political parties, which was revealed in an economic crisis in 1997. Critically representing a space between the individual and the community, Do-ho Suh's works shows fragile human rights in Asian (or Korean) democracy. For instance, "Some/One," displayed at the 49th Venice Biennale, shows a nine-foot tall, long, flowing robe made by approximately 100,000 military dog tags. While regular dog tags identify the wearer through name, birth date, and blood type, Suh's manufactured ones show random assortment of letters and numbers as they represent a required individual anonymity in front of the authority of community. In addition, the viewer can enter inside of the robe and see their distorted reflections in mirrors which lined the robe's interior. The artist awakes the viewer to the violated human rights by totalitarianism or authoritarianism, which has been done in the name of national development. This paper will look at contradictory aspects between Asian (Korean) society, emphasizing new Confucianism and human rights with Do-ho Suh's works. Furthermore, Slavoj Žižek's theory, which extends Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts such as the imaginary, the symbolic, the real, fantasy, and jouissance to a political discourse, will be applied to understand the relationship between reality and a democratic ideology in Korea. In conclusion, this paper will attempt to demystify Asian values, which have been abused in the name of national development.

Keywords: Do-ho Suh's Works, Asian Style of Democracy/ Asian Values, Slavoj Žižek's Concept of Mapping Ideology

Introduction

THIS PAPER IDENTIFIES an ideological discourse related to a social structure through Korean artist Do-Ho Suh's works which deal with collectivity and individuality in a social space.¹ This paper deals primarily with his works *Some/One*, *Who am We?*, *High School Uni-Form*, *Floor*, and *Welcome*. Formally, his works approximate Minimalism because of the structural simplicity. Critic Miwon Kwon, however, argues that Suh's works are simultaneously Minimalist and not Minimalist. While Suh's works show aspects of Minimalism in terms of decentralizing subjects and producing the contingency of meaning, they also move away from Minimalism by connecting intimately with viewers and creating an interpretative closeness.² To use Kwon's term, this "doubleness" in Suh's works amplifies the viewer's interest and challenges them to reflect on social structures.

Since the aforementioned works of Suh invoke social themes such as collectivity versus individuality and anonymity versus identity, this paper attempts to deal with these themes within the context of the Korean period of modernization from the 1960s to the 1980s. In addition, it is likely that Suh's experience of living in both Korea and the U.S. gave him an opportunity to compare societal values in two different social systems. In this context, his works, executed in the U.S., retrace his memory and reflect a Korean social system. For instance, Suh depicts the public whose individuality is sacrificed for the collective by using generic figures. Examples of this can be found in *Some/One* and *High School Uni-Form*, where the figures have bodies without faces like empty shells, or in the ambiguous gestures of the figures of *Welcome* and *Floor*, whether they hail or resist a political authority.

In order to understand Suh's works, this paper employs a discourse of ideology drawing on the work of Slavoj Žižek. Extending Jacques Lacan's theory

¹ Born in South Korea in 1962, Do-Ho Suh earned a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in oriental painting from Seoul National University and moved to the U.S. to continue his artistic studies. He earned a Bachelor's degree in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994 and a Master's degree in sculpture from Yale University in 1997.

² Lisa G. Corrin and Miwon Kwon, *Do-Ho Suh* (London: Serpentine Gallery, Seattle: Seattle Asian Art Museum, 2002), 12.



of psychoanalysis to a political discourse, Zizek explains a fundamental mechanism of ideology. According to him, the fundamental purpose of ideology is to construct a social reality with an unconscious illusion that is grounded in reality itself, not simply to represent a reality illusively on a side of knowledge. He calls this unconscious illusion the “ideological fantasy.”³ Since the individuals’ illusions operate within reality, even though the individuals know that they are following an illusion, they still act on the illusion as if they didn’t know that it is not grounded in reality.⁴

The application of Zizek’s notion of ideology will help explain how East Asian social systems form their ideological fantasy. In addition, Zizek’s understanding of the social subject will shed light on the figures in the crowds of Suh’s works. These figures are correlative with the object of a social fantasy.

Discourse of Asian Values

Asian values uniquely emphasize the originality of Asian culture, which has been part of the East Asian Confucius society since the early 1970s. The principles of Confucianism in Asian culture have been adjusted to democracy, human rights, economics, trade, and security, as crossing over ideology and reality. The debate on Asian values began as Asian politicians supported collectivity through an Asian model of democracy as opposed to the Western focus on individualism, democracy, and human rights. This shift to an Asian model of democracy was particularly prevalent after the end of the Cold War. The starting point of Asian values is the prioritization of the collective over the individual.

According to Xiaorong Li, the core of Asian values is that “the community takes precedence over

individuals.”⁵ Asian values demand the respect of authority, the consideration of social order and fundamental principles of government, a heightened emphasis on consensus and harmony instead of competition and confrontation, a high interest in education, and the spirit of diligence and frugality.⁶ A strong advocate of Asian values, Singapore’s former Prime Minister Kuan-Yew Lee asserted that individualism in the West and the U.S., which gives priority to individual liberties and rights over the public good, led to an increase in violence, crime, fragmented families, drug abuse, slackened social discipline and the corruption of morality. As a result, Lee argues, the West is confronting economic stagnation and social degeneration.⁷ According to Prime Minister Lee and Malaysia’s Prime Minister, Dr. Mohamad Mahatir, Asian values are superior to Western individualism in terms of establishing a well ordered society, stable politics, and a dynamic economy.⁸

Suh’s work *Some/One* (2001), shown in Figure 1, represents an aspect of Asian values that justifies the prioritization of collectivity over individuality. *Some/One* shows the nine-foot tall, long, flowing armor of a general. The armor is made up of approximately 100,000 military dog tags. In contrast to regular dog tags that identify the wearer through name, birth date, and blood type, Suh’s obviously fabricated tags are engraved with randomly assorted letters and numbers. They remind us of the demanded sacrifice of anonymous individuals for the sake of the public good. Viewers can walk inside of the armor and see their own distorted images reflected in the mirrors that are hung on the inner walls of the armor. The viewer’s distorted image in the mirrors in *Some/One* suggests two sides to Asian values.

³ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 33.

⁴ *ibid.*, 33.

⁵ Xiaorong Li, “Asian values’ and the Universality of Human Rights,” *Dealing with Human Rights: Asian and Western Views on the Value of Human Rights*, ed. Msrtha Meijer (Amsterdam: Greber Pub.; Oxford : WorldView Pub.; Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press,

in association with the Netherlands Humanist Committee on Human Rights (HOM), 2001), 39.

⁶ Je-Kug Chun, “The Re-Examination of Asian Values,” *East Asia Review* 2 (1999): 44.

⁷ Fareed Zakaria, “Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kwan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs* 73: 2 (March/ April 1994): 111-12.

⁸ Peter R. Moody, Jr. “Asian Values,” *Journal of International Affairs* 50:1 (Summer 1996): 167.



Figure 1: Some/One, 2001 Stainless Steel Military Dog Tags, Nickel Plated Copper Sheets, Steel Structure, Glass Fiber Reinforced Resin, Rubber Sheets, Dimensions Variable

On the issue of the justification of Asian values, Xiaoaring Li and Jeo-Kug Chun argue that Asian values are a governmental rhetoric and an official statement supported by Asian political leaders. They argue that the advocates of Asian values confuse a community with a state and a state with a regime. Frequently, citing the traditional Confucian value of social harmony, Asian political leaders suppress civilian criticisms of the government and limit individual liberty and rights for the sake of the public good. This enables political leaders to maintain long-term political control.⁹

In contrast to the two scholars' negative views, others offer a defense that links Asian values with the substance of Asian model of democracy. Lee Kuan Yew¹⁰, Goh Chok Tong¹¹, Kishore Mahbubani,¹² and Bilahari Kausikan¹³ have claimed that since Western democracy accompanies disorder and indulgency, it does not fit Asian culture which respects authority and order. Thus, Asia should not accept Western democracy unconditionally and should develop its own political system in keeping with Asian culture, values, history, tradition, and customs. Advocates stress that the Asian model of democracy privileges public order and respect for authority over individual liberty. It also emphasizes "good" government over democratic government.¹⁴ According to Yung-Myung Kim, good government means an effective government that serves as guardian of the public, ensuring public order, wel-

fare, and economic prosperity. In order to achieve this governmental goal, political leaders are allowed to exercise their broad powers with moral rectitude. Kim regards this policy as a highly elite and Confucian conception of politics.¹⁵

By challenging these defenses of Asian values, a counter argument becomes apparent. The Asian model of democracy is an order-oriented democracy without liberty¹⁶. In other words, it is nothing but another expression of an Asian model of developmental dictatorship which mixes the Patriarchal or Communitarian system of a Confucian tradition with the market principles of Capitalism. As Li asserts in his critique of Asian values, the enforcement of the collective and the order-oriented principle function as ideological tools for rationalizing authoritarianism in East Asia. This renders Asian democracy nothing more than an excuse that political leaders use to maintain the existing authoritarian order.

Korea has typically followed the Asian model of democracy in the name of political stability and economic growth. Suh's works, *Who Am We?* (2000), shown in Figure 2, and *High School Uniform* (1996), shown in Figure 3, illustrate Korean democracy without liberty. In *Who Am We?*, Suh displays a wallpaper that collages nearly 40,000 portraits taken from his high school yearbook. Each face is reduced to a small dot, which, from a distance, creates a pattern of dots. As the viewer comes close to the wallpaper, however, they see that each dot is

⁹ Je-Kug Chun, "The Re-Examination of Asian Values," 47.

¹⁰ Fareed Zakaria, "Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kwan Yew," *Foreign Affairs* 73: 2 (March/ April 1994): 109-26.

¹¹ Chok Tong Goh, "Social Values, Singapore Style," *Current History* (December 1994): 417- 22.

¹² Kishore Mahbubani, "The Dangers of Decadence: What the Rest Can Teach the West," *Foreign Affairs* 72: 4 (September/ October 1993): 10-14.

¹³ Bilahari Kausikan, "Governance That Works," *Journal of Democracy* 8:2 (April 1997): 25-34.

¹⁴ Young-Myung Kim, "Asian Style Democracy," *Asian Survey* 37: 12 (December 1997): 1120.

¹⁵ Kim, "Asian Style Democracy," 1121.

¹⁶ Chun, "The Re-Examination of Asian Values," 49.

the face of an individual teenage boy or girl. The dots represent the anonymous individuals living for

the sake of the public in Korea.

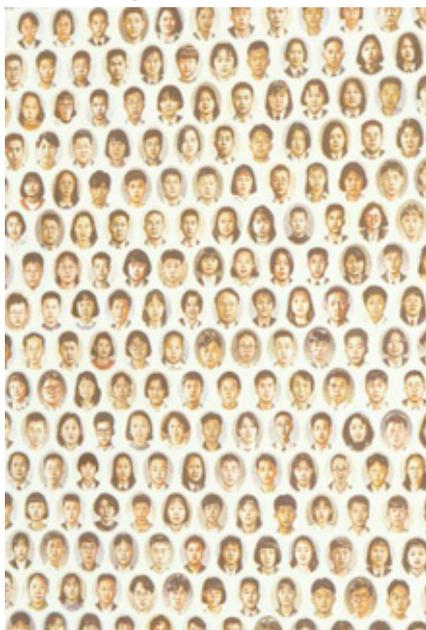


Figure 2: Who Am We?, 2000 Four-Color Offset Print on Paper, Variable Dimensions, 24 x 36 Inches

In *High School Uni-Form*, Suh critiques Korean society's insistence on respect for order and authority. He connected 60 rigid-looking high school uniform jackets at the shoulders. Suh arranged the jackets, which were similar his own high school uniform, in

a row and hung them on a metal frame with wheels. When assembled in this way, the jackets look like a march of a disciplined organization. The idiosyncrasy buried in the crowd of Suh's works questions the condition of Korean democracy without liberty.



Figure 3: High School Uni-Form, 1996 Fabric, Plastic, Stainless Steel, Casters, 59 x 85 x 144 Inches

After being liberated from the Japanese colonization of 1910-45, the Korean government experienced various political upheavals including the dictatorship of President SungMan Lee in 1948-61, the militarily dictatorship of the 1960s and the Revitalizing Reforms of the 1970s under General JungHee Park, the Fifth and Sixth Republics of the 1980s by Generals DooHwan Chun and TaeWoo Roh, and the first civilian government in 1993 by President YoungSam Kim. During this period of political confusion, Koreans were asked to be patient in the name of political stability and economic development. In appearance, Korea's economic success and rapid

modernization spoke for an Asian model of development and showed the potential of Confucianism in a modern society.

The conflicting views on Asian values outlined above highlight a complicated relationship between the Asian model of democracy and Confucianism. The doctrines of traditional Confucianism, including the emphasis on social order and the respect of public authority, consensus, and harmony, have been used to justify the theoretical foundation of Asian values and the desire for rapid economic growth in East Asia. At the same time, the appropriation of Confucianism has enabled the authoritarianism of Asian

political leaders. For instance, Mark L. Clifford argues that Confucianism has been misunderstood in Korea. He contends that even though Confucius mentioned that power and authority are determined by a natural hierarchy—from fathers to sons, from husbands to wives, from elder to younger—it didn't mean abusing subordinates, sacrificing dignity in the name of development, or beating wives. Furthermore, harmony and consensus in Korean Confucianism are misused as coercion. Clifford points out that the hierarchical legacy of Confucianism was overlapped with a system of military authoritarianism in Korea. As a result, the classical Confucian ideal is rarely found in Korea.¹⁷

Suk-Chun Yu in his article “The Possibility of Limitation of Confucian Capitalism” states that the potential of Confucian Capitalism in Korea is limited because of the collusion between the Korean government and “Jaebols,” a group of monopolistic enterprises.¹⁸ In the same vein, Donald Kirk contends that the alliance between the Korean government and Jaebols ensured victory for the ruling party and brought out a new style of totalitarianism. Finally, it caused a national bankruptcy in 1997. At that time, Korean government was aided by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) to overcome the economic crisis.¹⁹ The alliance between the Korean government and the Jaebols creates a negative version of Confucianism which is characterized as a mixture of the system of Mandarin with favoritism.

As the two opposite applications of Confucian doctrine show, Confucianism became a proper cultural ground for developing the political stability and economic growth in Korea, but at the same time, it was used as political propaganda for a style of totalitarianism and brought about negative economic results.

Understanding Confucianism in an Ideological Mechanism

According to Žižek, a “rigid designator” combines ideological elements into a stable whole by fixing a signifier of ideology from ideological discourses. Žižek regards a “rigid designator” as a substance which stays “the same in all possible worlds even though the property of the given object is changed.”²⁰

To use Žižek's term of “the quilting process,” the operation of a rigid designator causes a surplus which identifies an object beyond its variable properties and “in an object more than the object.”²¹ Žižek's notion of fixing an ideology illuminates how Confucianism becomes an ideological surplus in the field of Asian discourses.

In regard to Confucianism in Asian values, Klaus-Georg Reigel regards Asian leaders' application of Confucianism—Singapore's former Prime Minister Kuan-Yew Lee's notion of the Asian values and former Korean President Dae-Jung Kim's idea of Asian democracy—as justifying their political doctrine through a phenomenon of “invented tradition.” This, according to Reigel, is an attempt to construct a current consistency through a proper, if fabricated, historical legacy. Through “reflective acquisition” of a past cultural legacy, the believer of the invented tradition stands for a social construction which is characterized as an “undisputed reality.” At this time, borrowing from Emilé Durkheim, Korea's cultural legacy is treated like an unchangeable fact in a modern society that is always changing.²²

Žižek stresses detecting the fundamental property of an ideology behind the “rigid designator” which halts ideological discourses by attaching them to a stable and fixed point. Even though an ideology is totalized through the operation of the rigid designator, its elements are structured and performed within ideological fields. In other words, the elements are “pure difference.”²³ According to Žižek, one possible way to define an ideology is to approach it not by its positive properties but by its positional/relational identity, such as its oppositional or its differential relations.²⁴ In the case of describing Asian values or Asian democracy, Confucianism in its ideological mechanism is not stably identified, but is an effect produced by connections of signifiers derived from related Asian discourses. As applied by East Asian political leaders, Confucianism represents the most distinct character of East Asia when compared to the West; for example, Confucianism's focus on the community versus the West's focus on the individual. In this process, the substance of Confucianism is embodied by its opposition or its differential relation to the West.

¹⁷ Mark L. Clifford, *Troubled Tiger: Businessmen, Bureaucrats, and Generals in South Korea* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 15-16.

¹⁸ Suk-Chun Yu, “The Possibility and Limitation of the Confucian Capitalism,” *Chuntonggoahynda* (June 1997): 74-93.

¹⁹ Donald Kirk, *Korean Crisis: Unraveling of the Miracle in the IMF Era* (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press): 42.

²⁰ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 95.

²¹ *ibid.*, 95.

²² Reigel, Klaus-Georg. “Invented Traditional Asian Values,” *Chuntonggoahynda* (Winter 2000): 182-83.

²³ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 99.

²⁴ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 98.

In regards to identifying the subject with a social ideology, Žižek explains that the most radical component of Lacanian theory is the realization that the big “Other,” the symbolic order itself, is structured around fundamental impossibility. In addition, it becomes clear that the subject is split in itself.²⁵ Thus, the Other, such as a nation, society, or organization, knows the lack of itself and tries to conceal it through a (social) fantasy.²⁶ Fantasy conceals the lack in the Other and, at the same time, provides an equivalent object for the subject’s desire. Fantasy, however, does not simply offer the subject satisfaction; rather, it constructs a kind of reality and teaches the subject how to desire.²⁷ As an intermediate, a social fantasy constructs a frame for equalizing our desire and, at the same time, conceals the lack in the Other.

The desire realized in a social fantasy, however, is the Other’s desire instead of the subject’s own. According to Žižek, the original question of desire is not directly, “What do I want?” but, “What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?”²⁸ In a social context, the subject’s answer to the question, “What does a society want from me?” is based on the question of desire. The subject’s answer, disciplined by a social fantasy, is the Other’s desire itself. The object makes the subject

fantasize itself as “worthy of the Other’s desire.”²⁹ The subject’s entire being constructs the fantasy-object by filling out the Other’s desire; therefore, the Other’s question establishes the subject’s position, and the subject of the signifier and the fantasy object are identical.³⁰

In order to operate the social fantasy and to seize the individual effectively, Žižek stresses a trans-ideological surplus which stimulates the individual emotionally, such as through notions or sentiments of solidarity, justice, belonging to a community, and bonding.³¹ As Žižek states it: “not all is ideology.” Individuals keep their ideological identification through “something more than politic,” “an ecstatic aestheticized experience” with the phantasmatic background of ideology.³²

In *Floor* (1997-2000), shown in Figure 4, and *Welcome* (2000), shown in Figure 5, Suh illuminates the identification of the subject as the Other’s desire in his depiction of the crowds. *Floor* consists of 40 glass plates. The size of each plate is a little more than three square feet. 180,000 plastic figures of two inch tall men and women are placed on the gallery floor to prop up the glass plates. Audiences can step on the plates and see the figures’ diminutive palms forced upward beneath the plates.



Figure 4: *Floor*, 1997-2000 PVC Figures, Glass Plates, Phenolic Sheets, Polyurethane Resin, Variable Dimensions, 39.37 x 39.37 x 3.15 Inches

Welcome is a doormat made up of hundreds of miniature rubber figures. In contrast to *Floor*, with its distinctively male and female figures, the figures in *Welcome* do not have specific features. Black fig-

ures form the word “Welcome” in a surrounding field of orange figures. As Suh explains, the figures are pared down or rounded out in the same way that a doormat is worn out when people step on it.

²⁵ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 122.

Since the Other has a fundamental lack, the Other stays open. If not, the subject would be isolated from the Other’s closed structure.

²⁶ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 127.

In “Society doesn’t exist,” Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue that “The social is always an inconsistent field structured around a constitutive impossibility, traversed by a central antagonism.”

²⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 118.

²⁸ Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (N.Y.: Verso, 1989), 9.

²⁹ Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 8.

³⁰ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 196.

³¹ Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 21.

³² Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 22.



Figure 5: Welcome (Amber), 2000 Polyurethane Rubber, 50 x 84 Inches



Figure 6: Welcome (Detail)

The raised arms of the figures under the viewer's feet appear to resist authority or adversaries, yet, on the faces of the figures, no appearance of rage or struggle can be found. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that the figures holding up the plates represent the oppressed masses. It is more likely that these figures signify those individuals in East Asia who imagine themselves as agents of the Asian model of democracy, securing their nation's economic growth and modernization. The citation of Confucian ethics justifies East Asian leaders' political doctrine and stirs East Asians to feel a proper pride in their traditional culture.

In the frame of an ideological fantasy, the figures in Suh's works are understood through Žižek's formula of fetishistic disavowal: "I know that Mother has not got a phallus, but still I believe she has got one."³³ Pointing out the unconscious level of the individual's behavior, Žižek shows how the sublime object is made through this formula. In an ideological effectivity, individuals in East Asia know that Confucian ethics were applied and manipulated for political ends, but they still believe Confucianism justifies Asian values and Asian democracy as if the

connection between them is irreducible orthodoxy. Through East Asians' misrecognition, Confucianism becomes the sublime object. According to Žižek, the subject's misrecognition is a necessary condition for an ideology to construct a reality in society.

Conclusion

Suh's works reveal the relationship between a social structure formed by an ideology and its constituent. In order to interpret the themes of Suh's works—collectivity and individuality, anonymity and identity—this paper explored the individual within an ideological field by tracing the ideological fantasy which Suh's works suggest.

By prioritizing order, Asian democracy was characterized as a democracy without liberty. This calls into question Asian democracy's respect for human rights, the cornerstone of Western democracy. The advocates of Asian values have defended this systemic lack by referring to Confucianism. Reinvented by the effect of ideological discourses, Confucianism became a surplus which signifies an object more than itself. Žižek explains that, as a key characteristic of

³³ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 18.

surplus, if we push a surplus dramatically to one side, the other side, perversion, becomes obvious. East Asian leaders' passionate support of Confucianism rationalized their authority, but their extremism revealed other faces of Confucianism, such as new totalitarianism or soft authoritarianism. As with the Mobius strip, the two faces of Confucianism, maintaining traditional social orders and demolishing human rights, are inherently linked to each other.

For the sake of economic growth and political stability, people in East Asia sacrificed their individuality for the public good, fantasized themselves as the posterity of the Confucian legacy, and followed the national platform. The crowd figures in Do-Ho Suh's works remind us of Zizek's notion of the subject who goes through a social fantasy misunderstanding themselves as worthy of the Other's desire under an ideological mechanism.

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