

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Tchah Sup Kim
- Interviewer: Juyoung Yoo
- May 17, 2016 / Tchah Sup Kim's studio in Soho, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Juyoung Yoo (AKAA Research Fellow 2015-2016)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Juyoung Yoo (JY): Can you briefly describe your artworks?

Tchah Sup Kim (TSK): In the past, Central Asia Scythians, other tribes were well-known because they were well-told, but Chinese and Korean were scared of Scythians. For the 1000 years, Chosun (조선), Koreans had Kyoung ju (경주) blood that they knew, and they were punished if they spoke the words, so all were hidden beneath. However, it was all revealed through the exhibition. It became globalized, but it has a long way to go. In English, it is Scythian and pronounced as Si-tian, but it is pronounced as Ski-tai-uh in Russian. In 800 BC, Herodotus was very curious because he was told that the Scythians had red faces, as to how we call North Koreans Bbal-gang-e (빨갱이 Red people often referred to communist), eat people, like how southern people are afraid of the northern people. All the stories were told about them. Funny thing is Greeks were the same too. Herodotus walked from Peking (unsure) to Israel, Syria, Turkey, and to the Northern coast and wrote a history book. He wrote about it in detail. You can still see it in bookstores these days. Scythians are well-described, and he said that they were whiter than themselves. They are not red-faced people, but we share blood with them, the nomadic blood. When Alexander was coming to the East, Afghanistan and Pakistan were called the Northern Kandahar region and Greek cultures met. Alexander is the same blood too. So, he came to Kandahar and not further east, and that was around 200-300 BC. Starting from Iran to Kazakhstan, there was no boundary at the time. We are nomadic, have no boundaries because we live a nomadic life. If we have boundaries, we might kill the cows from starvation or have them freeze to death. It wasn't like making the boundary and laws, but it was to share the territory. Grass grows continuously. They lived like that for thousands of years, and their politics were much better than these days. However, when Alexander came, each country had Saka, around 200 BC. It is called Suk-ga (Buddha) in Korea now. People who ruled Northern India, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and all the regions ran into Alexander. But, as a result, Alexander was hurt. He retreated, but he was severely injured. Pakistan, Southern Iran, and about 2 years later, he died when he was about 34 years old. He died because of the injury. Thus, Saka won and conquered. However, the son and father always go to the warfare together for the next king, but the 10-year-old boy had nobody to fight with. And, he saw too many people's deaths. So, the son Siddhartha ran away from home and thought of Buddhism. Thus, Buddhism is a worship of the sun. Worshiping fire. So, since the winter is long and has short days, the God of fire was important. Also, in Korea, even within the family, some of the members have darker skin than others. My brother has darker skin, and that's because our blood is mixed with Indian. So, the world has changed. So, this question of not knowing who I am and my concerns goes on throughout my life. Korean, Koguryo and Shilla, Japan, all the wars and fights. I think America is similar. I think the anthropologists have it wrong. We, Northern Barbarians, were called barbarians because we were dangerous. People who go first are called settlers, and the ones that follow are called the barbarians. After industrialization, it changed. So, to make it global, we should do something together, maybe like soccer.

JY: Do you feel responsible as an artist?

TSK: No, I am just busy doing my work. That led me here.

JY: So, the things you told me, your inspirations, cultural tracings, did you think about them more after you came to the United States?

TSK: Since my childhood, I mean, I was born on May 5, 1940, in Yamaguchi, Japan. I think I moved twice when I was young. I remember one thing, I think I was about 4 years old, and there was an official residence near the neighboring hillside. While living in residence, I saw 100 Korean laborers working and sleeping in the school-like buildings, and when I was about 4 years old looking at the sky, I saw a dragonfly-like thing in the sky. I think it was like a reconnaissance plane and it was making smoke, and Japanese soldiers ran to catch it, and in the airfield, there was my father who was director of the airfield construction. My father was an engineer, and in today's view, he was pro-Japanese, he was making the Japanese military stronger. When the airplanes were falling, I could hear the sirens and saw people getting hurt. After a few days, I remember seeing things that were totally different; trees and houses weren't there. It was clear as a mirror, but I saw something rising from the bottom. I think it was the sunrise in the East Sea. I don't know if it was Pohang or Busan pier, but my father brought 2-30 relatives from Nagoya, Tokyo to Korea. I slept through the night on the ship, and in the morning I was in Korea. August 15th, Independence Day, I was only 5 years old. I didn't know anything, but I remember on a very hot sunny day, I think it was August 15th, on a clean road; a woman dressed in white was dancing and coming to my side of the road. She looked like a crazy person, but she was saying "Peace in the country, peace in the country." Every man is dead. That scene was like a movie. On that hot sunny day, nobody was there but her. I think maybe her husband was dead or she was waiting for her husband. I don't know. Also, I didn't speak Korean. I could speak a few Korean words when I was 8 years old. I think it was 1948, I was born in the 1940s, so when I was 8 years old, I only knew my Japanese name, so I didn't answer when people called me by my Korean name. My grandfather named me Tchah-Sup, but I wasn't used to it. Others laughed at me. When I saw the schoolyard, I saw soldiers with a patch on their chest that had a white skull on a black background. At the time, my family owned a lumber mill and machinery and was very wealthy. So, soldiers brought enemies to our home. On the market days, soldiers came to our home and bought lumber and sometimes cut lumber in our mill. I followed them once, in the barley field next to the city traction, soldiers let people smoke cigarettes and eat food and drink. Then, the soldiers made a cross and hung the enemies, blindfolded them, and killed them. I saw that scene for several years. I didn't know why they did that. I was only 8 or 9 years old and thought that was what people do. The funny thing is, I became the captain of my military unit called, Backgol Boodae (White Skull troops) when I served as the 1st ROTC member in 1963. Strange. I am not scared of looking at skulls. When

about 4 to 5 people were executed, that sound echoed in the village. When the soldiers left, one woman came to the execution place and threw a stone at one of the dead enemies, and his skull was revealed from his forehead. The lady shouted, "Now, I found you!" I think her husband was killed or something, and she was blaming him for it. I thought that was life. Good and evil are relative terms and conditional. I wish it were all good, but that is just impossible.

JY: I think artworks reflect artists' lives, what do you think?

TSK: Most of my art is like that. This is my drawing from 1993, and this was exhibited in SOMA in the Olympics Museum, Seoul. The fact is that this should be upside down. This is a Korean map that the Netherlands made. This is the pier of Sinuiju (신의주) where ships can be parked, but I made it upside down. Where I am standing is Manju (만주) or here, but we just use the world map without any critical thoughts. People ask all kinds of things, people who come here to learn art-making, and artists and business are the same, it's not something that others can teach you. People make sense of it themselves. Bill Gates was not taught by some professor. Also, professors are not the highest intellectuals. From Korea, I painted geometry and everything. Because of my identity issues, I participated in an exhibition in 1968 called the 68 Show. I showed my self-portrait. I rearranged and painted my distorted self because of all the Japanese, American, and French influence. Then, the Seoul Newspaper said it is sensational, but the good thing was artist Ik Lee who studied in France saw my works and commented on them. You can find this in my recent book as well. I was a young artist back then, and I always had the resistance of my past. My grandfather and my father did so many faulty things. I was young, and I was self-taught in western paintings. When I was in high school, they didn't teach it to me in school. In Gyeongju where I grew up, they didn't have any private lessons or anything. The cultural relics found in Gyeongju-si were my teachers. Also, I have Gyeongju blood in my veins, and it is always comparable with other cultures. Small broken tiles or relics were easily found during farming. I naturally went to museums since my adolescence. I drew inside the Seokguram in Bulguksa (one of Korea's UNESCO heritage sites). I didn't have money to pay the tuition, but I applied for college anyway. I attended because I got accepted to the Seoul National University, but Seoul did not have any cultural relics like in Gyeongju, so I naturally did a comparative study. That is why I mentioned Herodotus. We have to debate. There is no future if there is no debate. Through debates and discussions, we understand the differences among us. Then, we may accept the differences. Then, ultimately I get to think about my own thoughts in a relaxed manner, but the story of Freemason that I never heard about in Korea or the United States. That work is etching work of stones. I did something similar in my graduation exhibition in Seoul National University, and one of the professors from the Architect department came to me and said that he wanted to buy my work. I told him it is about 500 dollars, and he said that the monthly income for a professor is about 700 dollars. He also asked me if I was a Freemason. So, I told him that I don't know what a Freemason is, and other people also asked me the same thing.

So, I looked into what a Freemason was and found out that it was a very controversial (in a bad way) group, the KKK was also part of the Freemason group, and people were asking me if I was part of the Freemasonry? I felt perplexed. However, in 1988, I had some health issues and went to the emergency room several times, and it was a truly hard time for my wife. So, we went to Korea for a number of reasons and to get surgery, we had to sell this loft to buy some place to live in Korea. Seoul National University offered me a job as a professor, but I didn't go. I knew how challenging it is to be a professor. I wanted to be an artist, not settle down and buy a 3-story building or something. I just wanted to pursue my art. Myong Hi (Tchah Sup Kim's wife) could've been the wife of a professor, riding an expensive car, and painting whatever she wanted. But, we leased this loft for about 2000 dollars a month and lived in Korea. We only come to this loft in New York once or twice a year, and we travel the rest of the time. The good thing is, Myong Hi found her material, blackboards, which is not an easy thing. She found a shining light from waste. From a viewer's perspective, teaching is very important to help a human enter the civilized society. We have one over there, but I bought a very old antique blackboard from Korea. I bought a broken one for \$3.5 and sold it for \$25,000. The blackboard teaching must continue. Now there is an electronic version of blackboards but in 2008, I was in Jeju Island for a conference, and the doctor called me urgently. He told me that I might have stomach cancer, and I should have surgery right away. So, I flew to Seoul immediately to Paik Hospital to get the surgery done. I had to fly back to New York in a week, but I wanted to go to a place called Taos Mountain in New Mexico, 3000 meters in elevation, to get some fresh air. I often go there. I drew one of the mountains I saw from there, 12000 feet high. I drew the sunrise I saw through the window in the hotel. I painted it with pastel and did another one in oil when I came back to New York.

JY: You travel very often, and Myong Hi mentioned that you're her mentor and a companion. What do you think?

TSK: She likes it, and I like it too. But, we don't interfere with each other. If you interfere, you may argue, and that makes your lips dry. If my stomach cancer recurs within 5 years, I might die. So, I can't eat milk or food that has sugar in it. Fresh milk is good, but all the milk we buy in grocery stores is processed. It was challenging. Milk and sugar. In order to stay healthy, we should get fresh food with healthy nutrients, but people put poison to preserve food for a longer time. It is killing the good bacteria.

JY: Are you healthy now?

TSK: I am healthy but without eating that kind of food. But, I always make a mistake once in a month when I eat out. For example, I went to a restaurant called The Kunjip after an exhibition. They serve delicious food, but there is only one item from the menu that I can eat. They even add sugar to the egg appetizer, so I can only eat the hot Codfish stew from hundreds of choices they offer. So, since I had to live for 5 years

without having the recurrence, I went to the bookstore, Barnes and Noble to learn about Freemasonry. I hesitated about whether I could ask about Freemasonry or not, but I asked the manager. The manager brought about seven books related to the Freemasons, and I chose 5. When I read them, they were the best thing I've ever read. I think it was like Jesus; people might have thought of him as a Satan when he shared his beliefs and taught people. Even now, Freemasonry isn't restricted to the United States, and nobody knows when it started. However, the oldest thing is (in estimate) the Pyramids and the Obelisk. Maybe the people who built Solomon were the next. They are stone builders, the most ideal and perfect in humanity. They study astronomy and have to be perfect in geometry and the Bible.. You have to take a test and get accepted, and if you become the pastor, you get the qualification to be a Freemason, and it is called the fellow craftsman. As far as I've read so far, Freemasonry is perfect. Also, they don't have a right path, but opportunities come to them. I don't know what it is, but they have a certain rule or a secret. To become a priest or a donor, you have to follow the steps: master apprenticeship, fellow master, master, and when you become the master, there is a secret that should never be revealed. They get killed if they reveal it. So, I made this 7.2cm.

JY: Is it life-size in the artwork?

TSK: Yes, it is the actual size. It's the same. Also, this thought is similar to the Freemason's spirit. It is as if I went to Europe in the late 80s and drove on a well-paved road, but the car stopped. I couldn't find what was causing the problem. I couldn't go forward before I knew about the Freemasons. My etching works are in ten major museums. My painting is included in the Metropolitan Museum's collection. However, at one point, reading wasn't as interesting, and after thinking about it, I found out that the cause was this loss of direction. So, I thought of this Masanbae (cup he created), the 8-shape is analemna) in English. And, this infinity symbol derived from something I read in a book, Einstein and a physicist from London were having a conversation at Princeton University. The English physicist asked Einstein if the universe had a number. But he doesn't say. So, that was always a question mark for me. So, I thought about it, and photographers took pictures of the Apollo Theater in Greece from the east side. The photo was taken once every two weeks. From spring, left to right the connected dots created a shape that was similar to number 8. So, I have the world map on top of the Masanbae (cup), and I arranged them myself. I fit them according to my birthday. Green in summer, and winter and fall are dry. We should not follow what Americans are doing, if we follow, we'll always be in second place. We can never succeed or proceed. I think we should not fight among ourselves, and the United States is the most powerful country in the west, but America should see Shilla (신라)¹. In 1975, I came on behalf of the Rockefeller fellowship, even though I couldn't speak any English. People told me that there is Rome in the West, and Gyeongju in the East. With the tradition of the Scythians, I am proud to be the Shilla descendent. Myong Hi has her own world, and I

¹ An ancient Korean kingdom (57 BC – 936 AD)

am happy to make abstract art. Abstract art from its word, is not going to the right path, it is detouring. Museums show the most renowned abstract artists' works, but the rest are sitting in storage. Figurative is again a good thing. Back to the classics. So, when I saw the map again, all my distracting thoughts went away. Usually, the most respected subject is on top. Whatever that is, it is situated in the Northern part. So, the first map was created by a Netherlander in hopes of searching for treasures in East (Asia). We still use the same map that he created to get the treasure easily from the East. Marco Polo saw the map and came to China and saw the guns and gunpowder, the Southerner's thoughts. We from the North that settled in the Southeast are like upside down. I think it is wrong. Children learn this way. So, I think Korea should be upside down. I drew it upside down. I gave this painting to my former student Hyegyum Kim from Ehwa School, who worked at Christie's in 2012. But Christie's thought Mr. Kim changed the thought of fundamentalism and got angry. Nobody really noticed the upside down map, but one person in 1993 saw my work and said that they should record this. America was angry.

JY: So, all your maps are upside down?

TSK: Yes, if you look at this, I am holding it with my left hand. This is a horseshoe, American military helmet, and this is a Manchuria field, and Sandong peninsula, and an upside down map. This was done in 1993. Korean people don't buy this art because they might be misunderstood by others. I do not paint to sell, instead art for me is like a digestive medicine. Medicine for my mental health.

I got a phone call from Philip Gould, a professor at Columbia University's Art History department, that he was in the SoHo area. So, I invited him and prepared a Korean meal, but he asked me to come in a hurry because the map was upside down. Korean people criticized me for having abnormal thoughts and ideas. I forgive them, it's because they are not smart enough. So, when he asked, I said, I feel comfortable. So, the professor said, "Oh, my God." So, then I became uncomfortable again. But at around 11 p.m., he called me. He told me that it was a Jewish holiday the next day, so he invited me to have dinner with him at his place near Columbia University. So, I went there and ate dinner. It was a two-bedroom apartment, but it was filled with books. He brought a book and showed me, and it had a compass. On top of it, there is a 2cm boy lighting up, and below it in Chinese letters. Usually, compasses face South on top. Korean geometric geography thinks everything is South, and South is always on top and front. Then, he said that I am a genius. Then, Larry and Eleanor asked me similar things. So, I told them that the Americans have it all wrong, the sense of direction. He's a writer at the New York Times. If I were in the Southern part, then the map would make sense. And, they told me an artist like myself should do it. I think it was in 2003 when I showed my works at the Korean Cultural Center, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art has this self-portrait. It is myself in total agony being offered a cup to drink. It is important to note that this is a reflection from a mirror. A mirror can't see the future. It

should show the past. Mirrors don't lie. So, that is why we should study history. We should read regardless of a handful of lies. Then, we should study archeology, anthropology, and linguistics. The world is a much better place. We can study through the internet. When the **pre-turner** was exhibited at MoMA, a Korean lawyer who studied at Columbia University said that she was touched by my works because there were not many Korean artists showing their works at major museums. We should look at maps. When we go to Florida, I should view the map upside down, but it is difficult to read English upside down. Then, I will be a second late for reading the map upside down. The direction of culture is the right way, though.

JY: When was the most challenging time for you?

TSK: I should say it in relation to history. Seonbi (선비 A term for a scholar in Korea) is Sinbei in Chinese, and in Scythian, they are the gold worshipers, but they should live in a place with green meadows. So, Hangojo (한고조) wanted to steal that land and went to the west. But, the only person that resisted and didn't go was Kim Alji's (김알지) father. I think that was 10 BC or something. Hangojo brought many troops to conquer Hyoong Nojo (흥노조), and Kim Alji's father wrote it in history. But, they surrendered and asked for forgiveness by giving them some silk and his daughter. Then, that would leave me with Hangojo's daughter as a grandmother, so the blood is in me. Then, Hanmoojae (한무재) a few decades later when Kim Alji was a young boy killed his father and the time changed, you needed a horse to fight in wars, and Kim Alji was very good in riding a horse, so he married his daughter to Kim Alji. Not all of these are written in Korean history. So, this is why I respect Kim descendants, and there is hope in Korea.

JY: Then, when did you feel most awarded?

TSK: When I made the right map. For an Asian barbarian nomad taking action, it is more powerful than a nuclear bomb even.

JY: What made you come to the United States?

TSK: After graduating from college and being discharged from the military, I think it was around 1965. I read in a textbook that Korea was first to make metal type. I immigrated in the 80s, and when I saw other history textbooks, I participated in the Paris Biennial and sent my works since I couldn't go, but I learned something through studying world history textbooks. I came to the conclusion that Durer painted the Bible to educate the illiterate, and that was a departure point for etching. Durer's father had a printing shop. So, people could learn the Bible faster and better. Then, America became a big country that won many wars, but Korea argues they are the first people to create metal type. What did they do with such incredible skills? So, I didn't like to go to Europe because the sun was descending. I decided to come to the United States to learn to etch as a way of my artwork. I was not supposed to teach my high school students private

lessons, but I taught them to earn money for tuition to come to the U.S. My teacher Yoon Myung Ro asked me to come to Seoul National University, so I went there a year early, and then a person called me from Choseon hotel one day. He was about 50 years old and that was Yoon Myung Ro, and they asked me if I still wanted to go to the U.S. They saw my portfolio through slides and gave me the Fulbright scholarship. I told him that I wanted to learn etching in a developed country where they have good control over steel. I accompanied him to the airport and there were many sculptors including the commander Yi Sun-sin. He asked me who my favorite sculptor was, and I told him that I like Manrin Choi's terracotta works. He gave me a yellow paper, which turned out to be an application. So, later, he invited Manrin and I and gave us 2000 dollars. It was a week after school started. Getting the visa was another challenge.

I came to the United States with a clear vision. So, I advise younger students to come to the United States with a clear goal in mind. The United States is not a country where you can easily become renowned. After a year or so, Myong Hi came to New York. I applied for a competition that the Artists Society held. Myong Hi helped me carry my etching piece, and I won the emerging artist prize. It was technically perfect. Stone field with lots of sunlight. And then I showed my works at the Brooklyn Museum, and in Korea. Visiting galleries is almost like a death parade. Galleries pursue all different things. I believe we should study classics first. You should have a relaxed mind. There are several European artists that became very famous. My point is, you should not hurry. You should study the basics first. Artists are not made. Politicians can be made, but art is different. There is no future if there is no art. There is no right way. My conclusion is that you should learn, but it doesn't have to be from teachers. It is challenging, but self-education is the best. Art should be done with our eyes and hands. Machines can never replace it. They may be perfect scientific tools. But, art has a life if done with our hands and eyes.