

The Era and Values of Korean Culture and Arts

-----Bowls and Jars
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Bowl: Pronounced “Maksarbal” in Korean

Pot: Ceramic ware in general, mainly jars of pickled vegetables, soybean paste pot, pots, etc.

If I were a terrorist of culture, I would change the world to be identical. Then everyone could discuss one's culture and arts easily. Though we are not poets, we can describe our personal inspiration combined with our culture. What is the reality? The increase in the world economy was blocked by inflation and other factors. In order to gain more self interest countries have taken measures, which bring the world into infinite competition. This kind of competition has caused instability in society, and less enjoyment in sharing cultures. The reality is the poor are getting poorer.

Each person has been more and more focused on what is the aim of his life.

All cultures and arts should serve people with equal rights. The economy should not be the only consideration, and economic powers should not have privileges. English can not be applied in all countries. Each country and each nation has its own traditional values and thousands of years of history, culture and arts. Each nation keeps its own culture and arts, and the inheritance is of great significance. It is the same with religions. Human beings should have their own values of life, and should make a great effort to keep them.

Personally I think cultural wars are carried out in the world. For example, America did studies on the production techniques of Korean traditional ceramic pots (mainly pots for keeping pickles and soy), gathered many statistics about related pots, and collected and produced visual data for American universities in the 60s and 70s. Through America, some Japanese folk-custom researchers usurped the traditions to Japan by putting a Japanese stamp on Korean tradition. Everyone knows that pickles are important Korean fermented food. The pot used to preserve pickles is traditional Korean pottery wear.

We cannot survive without food, and it is necessary for us to get enough food for our bodies. Each nation has built up its own dietary habits. Our problem is that our children love KFC and McDonald's, and have become more over-weight every day. Children are the future of Korea. They indulge in computer games, which worries us.

Dr. Steve, who worries about the ending of the Earth, has proposed a new life style---build up colonies on the moon and on Mars. Based on the current existing circumstances in Korea it seems like it might become true in the near future. There are internet bars, singing halls, and 24-hours shops everywhere along our streets, which cannot be explained by economic theory. Anything which could bring in a profit will emerge everywhere in one day. What does this mean? Can we get rid of it? Where can we breathe? Burnt garbage travels back into our bodies again. Beautiful landscapes, which appeared in poems, are blocked from us now. Is it possible for us to see them again? Will tombs similar to the Terra Cotta Warriors exist many years later? And will the Great Wall disappear?

Now is the time of the World Cup, and the whole country is covered by red flags. Will our country be a football power? Why are the youngsters so crazy for Korea? They are like hungry jackals and wolves blindly shouting for Korea. Will red devils, red flags and red supplication bring us

temporary comfort? Our culture and art are covered by a shadow. The voices of jackals and wolves are disgusting. Sports commentators and journalists on TV and newspapers are echoing comments. They write about how the great Korea will do, and it is nothing but a nightmare. When our spirit of culture and art can be recovered, and a harmonious team can be formed, the nature of artisan can be called back, and the best culture and art will be created. If it were not the World Cup but a cultural festival instead, people would love the art just as they loved the World Cup. Korean culture and art would be developed and perhaps , even lead the world. The reality is that too many literatures who shout about the great Korean football also discuss politics in bars and restaurants. Mr. Kim Ku said :”One tree is not a forest, and a field with only one flower is not a field. Many trees make a beautiful forest, and all flowers blooming together make a spring. In our country all religions should be freely developed. Everyone should have the freedom to give full play to one’s thought. This is called real freedom, and in such a country people attain maximum development and create an excellent culture.”

Great cultures are based on valuable traditional culture, and emphasize its meanings. What is the meaning of art you may see everywhere in the world? Only the unique culture and art belonging to a special nation has an important position. Later last autumn I was invited to attend a workshop demonstration by Professor Peter in Huston. During my stay I visited local art galleries. From those paintings produced in the 13th and 14th centuries one can tell the ambition and greed of western culture and art. Shell Oil bought many art works using oil money. Could we say they love art? The answer is not simple, not only because of their desire for culture.

There used to be many hundred-year-old trees along streets in our cities. Thanks to cultural awareness these trees were once cherished, but now what is left is only the memory; endless development has destroyed everything. In the past one could feel the culture of pottery, culture of heated brick beds, and culture of village construction. Walls of buildings in villages were constructed of loess with pottery tiles, but this tradition vanished some years ago. Where can we find our pottery pots? Tableware in Taizong Hotel is all plastic now. Why do Korean hotels not use porcelain ware? The answers I got are identical: They are easy to break, too heavy, etc. We may want to ponder what the real position of ceramics is in our daily lives. Every hotel in Japan and in China uses only ceramic table wears.

Eating fast food causes our children to be overweight. Parents are too busy making money to share their time with family members. Modern means of transportation bring us both convenience and traffic accidents. It is not necessary to take a long period of time to destroy a culture. Recalling the ceramic cups used for drinking liquor in the past, I would say they were excellent ceramic works. By boiling water in traditional iron pots we get distilled water from the evaporative cooling process with which we can make liquor. Fermented food-culture is always accompanied by ceramic wear culture.

Paste Doenjang, soy, chili sauce and pickles are all kept in ceramic pots. Ceramic pots are also used for keeping shrimp paste, water, liquor, etc.

From 2005 to 2010, six festivals of “Maksarbal” were held in Zibo, China. “Maksarbal” is a festival where ceramic artists from different countries create works, exchange ideas, and do demonstrations together. The “Maksarbal” of August, 2006 was very special. The weather was terribly hot, and we had to both create works and fire the kiln. We felt hot both outside and inside our bodies, a wonderful feeling. To organize such an activity the host prepares for several months. I will never forget what we did at the “Maksarbal” in Zibo. It is very important to the cultural exchange between Korea and China.

Zibo has about 8000 years of history of ceramics. I believe there must have been some kind of exchange in the early years. More than 70 ceramic artists from different countries participated in the first “Maksarbal” in Zibo. All the activities, including building a wood kiln, creating

art works, firing, unloading the kiln, etc., made a deep impression on us. The wood kiln is 15 meters long, with three kiln chambers, twice as wide as normal kilns. One of the features of the kiln is its breadth. Pieces can be easily rearranged inside the kiln. "Maksarbal" in China will become a supporter for ceramic art exchanges between China and other countries. More than ten "Maksarbal", including the Korean ones, are festivals for ceramic artists. With the artists being able to obtain inspiration, maintain their individual styles, and attach their feelings to their works, it stands to reason that excellent works would be created. We have our ceramic language, which helps us communicate.

"Maksarbal" brings international ceramists together. We create art works, dance, sing, etc. Through "Maksarbal" we know each other better. Foreign ceramists benefit from learning the Korean traditional technology of making pots and bowls.

At the "Maksarbal" of 2006, Greek ceramist Maro said: "Greece itself is a perfect sculpture. Sculpture is our language of creation." There are big pots in Greece which are similar to the Korean ones. Although Greeks differ in technologies, they have similar applications for, keeping olive oil, wine, and fermented alcoholic drinks. The bowl we use to drink rice wine is called "Maksarbal" in Korean. Holding a "Maksarbal" in your hand, you might want to sing poems. The reason I mention "Maksarbal" is that it is no longer a small bowl, but a bowl that maintains our life. Using it daily, and continually using it are our life-style. Westerners use a coffee cup for drinking coffee, and we Koreans use "Maksarbal" for drinking rice crust water. Rice bowls and soup bowls made by craftsmen in Korean time are very common, and the most precious as well. The Korean etiquette passed on from ancient times is being modest, prudent and respectful of others. We may say this etiquette is Korean-bowl culture. A beginner can make just normal bowls. The real bowl is chaste, and, of concealed brilliance, and one can feel its center of gravity which is the heart or the kernel of the bowl. Try to think about it, if a bowl is from the hands of a craftsman who has devoted his life to making bowls for more than 30 years, no one dares to say "it is just a bowl". How many bowls made by a craftsman can survive for hundreds of years? What we see at old kiln sites are just broken pieces, and a few good ones are kept in museums. Most of the excavated pieces from tombs and from under the water were destroyed in wars.

In practice, how many of us use ceramics? If Taizong Hotel would use ceramic tablewares, how much trouble and how much heavier could it be? How unhappy could a waiter be if the wares are broken? It is common to use ceramic tablewares in Japan and China. It is a symbol of their admirable history. The most important factor is to feel their kernel and hearts. Happy and carefree are word from the Chinese language, and similar expressions can be found in Korean. Being happy and carefree is a kind of life attitude, a realm. Using ceramic wares is this kind of life attitude since they contain our beautiful life. In the realm of being happy and carefree one may forget unhappiness. Let us get into the world of ceramic pots.

There are two kinds of ceramic pots, pottery pots and porcelain pots. Pottery pots do not need glazing, and porcelain pots need glazing. Ash glaze is a mixture of glaze and plant ash. Put normal plant ash into water, and add the selected glaze. The deposit is what we call ash glaze. One needs to wash the plant ash several times because the ash is strongly alkaline which makes it difficult to dissolve with glaze. There are many proportions of glaze and ash. Too much glaze will generate a brown or black color. Different kiln atmospheres will also form different colors. Oxidizing flame will form a brown or black surface. Reduction flame will bring various surface effects on pots by controlling the oxygen content in the kiln. By adding copper oxide to the glaze, one gets a blue gloss in oxidizing flame, and a red gloss in reduction flame. Using white porcelain glaze one gets a non-transparent white surface in reduction flame, and a white surface with a yellow gloss in oxidizing flame.

Hand-painted lines, and finger-painted lines are decoration techniques. After glazing, you draw

paintings on the surface of the ware using your fingers. You should do it quickly, never “taking two bites of a cherry”, and without modification. Sometimes the paintings appear child-like which gives different feelings reflecting the purity they contained.

Firing needs about one week, and any fault during the firing might cause failure of the whole process. In the past when craftsmen made pots, they would share the work and the profit. At the beginning of firing, the temperature in the kiln should be built up slowly. Before firing you put bisques into the kiln which is called kiln placing. The kiln firing pots usually has just one kiln chamber. Dragon kilns with many chambers are also used for firing pots. Koreans also call dragon kilns cannon kilns. A dragon kiln is built on an incline with air holes in the middle part. There is a feeding hole at the top of the kiln for adding small wood pieces. Walking along the dragon kiln from the top to the bottom, you will find that the placing of wares is well arranged with the big ones at the top and small ones at the bottom. Due to the inclination angle, bisques at the bottom need a support base. Firing consists of three stages. Begin using smoke for preheating, and when smuts start to die drop down, add fuel to reach a higher temperature, which is called middle fire. Then, to melt the glaze, raise the temperature to what is called white fire. All holes in the kiln should be covered after the firing because sudden cooling will generate cracks in the wares, or even break the wares into pieces.

There are many different kinds of pots; small pots called “round general” for keeping oil, water pots for transporting water on Jeju Island, pots for storing rice, pots for washing rice, pots for storing water, pots for keeping liquor, pots for cooking drugs, baked clay basins for washing rice, pottery mortars for taking away rice chaff, pots for preparing sticky rice cakes, pottery steamers, etc.

I would like to introduce small bowls pronounced “Maksarbal” in Korean.

Sarbal is a bowl used for keeping rice, soup, and tea. “Maksarbal”---the, combination of “Mak” and “Sarbal”, might be the oldest pottery bowl in Korea, which is nowadays used for drinking rice wine in Korea. The pronunciation of Mak means “the final” in Korean. The blind end of a coal-mine tunnel is pronounced Mak in Korean. For more than 30 years I have made numerous “Maksarbals”, including those botched ones I made when I was a beginner.

One might wonder what is the extraordinary meaning of those bowls, pots, basins, and jars. Though it is nothing to be impressed by, they are not Coke bottles dropping from the heavens. They belong to our nation. They are our soul.

“Maksarbal” is our symbol, our brand, and belongs to all ceramists of the world. Our proposal is to pursue the cultural equality, to fly over the art world. One should share the culture and arts of other nations, but not control them. Cultures and arts belong to all of us.



