



Kim Bok-jin - the founder of national sculpture in Korea during the Japanese colonial period

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the biography and work of Kim Bok-jin (pseudonym: Chongwan), the first Korean to graduate from the sculpture department of Tokyo University of the Arts in Japan during the Japanese colonial period (in 1925) and the first sculptor to introduce Western realist techniques to Korea. The study will also examine the national motifs in the works of Kim Bok-jin against the backdrop of a difficult historical period, and analyze a number of his little-known works through the prism of Korean studies. The main content of the study is the sculptures of Kim Bok-jin "standing woman", "statue of Maitreya Buddha" "Baek Hwa", "Youth (Boy)", "Old man". He is a significant figure in Korean sculpture: from 1925 until his death in 1940, Kim Bok-jin regularly exhibited his works at the Joseon Art Exhibition, and in addition to his artistic activities, he also ran the Art Research Institute, nurturing young artists. He also engaged in journalism, criticism, and political activity as a member of the Joseon Communist Party. The purpose of this study is to rethink the work of Kim Bok-jin, the founder of Korean sculpture, who was posthumously awarded the Order of Merit of the National Foundation in 1993.

KEYWORDS: Artistic spirit of the nation, Japanese colonial period, Maitreya doctrine, Sculptor, Song Ki-jung, Youth.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the national motifs in Kim Bok-jin's works against the backdrop of a complex historical period, and analyze a number of his little-known works through the lens of Korean studies. Kim Bok-jin (September 23, 1901 – August 18, 1940) was a Japanese colonial sculptor and a leader of the progressive literary movement. He is a significant figure in Korean sculpture: from 1925 until his death in 1940, Kim Bok-jin regularly exhibited his works at the Joseon Art Exhibition, and in addition to his artistic activities, he also ran the Art Research Institute, nurturing young artists. He also engaged in journalism, criticism, and political activity as a member of the Joseon Communist Party. Kim Bok-jin, a leading figure in the Korean Federation of Proletarian Artists (KAPE), was arrested in 1928 and subsequently imprisoned. During his time there, Kim Bok-jin became deeply immersed in the ideas of Korean Buddhism and developed a keen interest in the Maitreya faith (미륵신앙), which served as a beacon of hope for the oppressed classes in feudal society. For most peasants suffering from harsh living conditions, the Maitreya faith represented revolutionary ideas and the hope that the existing world would change and a new, ideal society would be created.

After his release from prison, Kim Bok-jin continued to create various types of sculptures, including abstract, portrait, and Buddhist statues. The most famous examples of his Buddhist sculptures are the main Buddha statue at Geumsan-sa Temple (금산사) in Gim-jö (김제) and the unfinished Maitreya Buddha statue at Beopju-sa Temple (법주사) on Songli-san Mountain (속리산). Kim Bok-jin is a national sculptor. When the Korean independence activist Ahn Chang-ho (Dosan) died, Kim Bok-jin was arrested by the Japanese police for making a death mask of Dosan's face (with an apprentice).

The last work created by Kim Bok-jin before his untimely death in 1940, the sculpture "Youth (Boy)", was modeled after a photograph of Son Ki-jung, a Korean marathon runner who won the 1936 Berlin Olympics (as Korea was a Japanese colony at the time, he competed for the Japanese national team under the name Son Kitei (孫基禎)). The striking similarity between the physical characteristics of the sculpture and the photograph is obvious. Kim Bok-jin, as a sculptor with strong nationalistic beliefs during the Japanese colonial period, drew inspiration from the athlete Son Ki-jung, and the iconic sculpture "Youth (Boy)" symbolizes the spirit of the Korean people.



The purpose of this study is to rethink the work of Kim Bok-jin, the founder of Korean sculpture, who was posthumously awarded the Order of Merit by the National Foundation in 1993.

2. BIOGRAPHY OF KIM BOK JIN

Jeong-gwan (정관) Kim Bok-jin was born on September 23, 1901, in Pal-bong-ri (팔봉리), Nam-i-myeon, Cheongwon-gun, Chungcheongbuk-do, as the eldest son of Hong-gyu of the Andong Kim clan. He had two older sisters, and a younger brother, Kim Ki-jin, was born in 1903. As a child, Kim Bok-jin learned a thousand characters from his Chinese teacher. In early 1914, he married by order of his father, who was then the governor of Yeong-dong County (after 10 years of marriage, Kim Bok-jin broke the formal boundaries of marriage). In 1917, Kim Bok-jin entered Gyeongseong Paje High School and sent his first essay to the Meil Sinbo newspaper (published from 1910 to 1945 as the official press organ of the Governor-General). The essay was published. During his studies, Kim Bok-jin became a leading figure among the literary youth of Gyeongsung High School, and together with activists such as Park Yeon-hee, Lee So-gu, and Kim Ki-jin, he founded the Bando-gurak-bu Club.

In addition, Kim Bok-jin, who was gifted with literary talent, was interested in theater and cinema, and often visited places such as Danseongsa, Umigwan, and Gwangmudae, which were the birthplace of Korean films in Joseon. In 1919, Kim Bok-jin participated in the March 1st Movement as a member of the Baejae High School Student Organization (배재학당) and was in charge of some parts of Gyeongseong (경성), mobilizing students and rewriting the Independence Newspaper.

After spending the first half of 1920 wandering, he went to Japan (where his younger brother Kim Ki-jin and friends had gone) to study law. There, one day, while visiting a Japanese art exhibition in Tokyo's Shanghai Park, Kim Bok-jin saw a plaster sculpture in color called "Lao-tzu" and, impressed by it, decided to follow the path of "criticism of civilization" through art rather than literature. Thus, Kim Bok-jin entered the sculpture department of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. As an outstanding student of the sculptor and professor of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Kohong Gwan-woong (1852-1934), Kim Bok-jin became the first Korean sculptor of the Joseon era.

As an ally of the March 1st Movement, Kim Bok-jin took part in anti-Japanese literary and socialist actions against Japanese colonial rule, which resulted in his imprisonment for five years and six months. In 1993, Kim Bok-jin was awarded the National Foundation Medal for Patriotic Service.

Kim Bok-jin's younger brother, Palbong Kim Gi-jin, was a journalist and writer who served as social affairs editor for the Chosun Ilbo, Maeil Sinbo, and arts and culture editor for the Jungang Ilbo. Kim Bok-jin also served as the editor of arts and culture at the Chosun Chung-an Ilbo. The two brothers thus played a vital role in the development of Korean art in the early 20th century, promoting the nation's artistic spirit in literature, sculpture, theater, and art criticism during the Japanese colonial period. Kim Bok-jin, together with his younger brother, writer Kim Ki-jin, organized the Dowolhoe (토월회), and as a luminary of the Korean New Theater Movement, he was an active theorist and participant in debates on proletarian class literature. Kim Bok-jin's younger brother, Kim Ki-jin, enlisted in the military as a writer in Daegu during the Korean War and wrote works that qualified as "frontline literature" until 1953. He was also a member of the Civil Rights Protection Committee, led the fight against the dictatorship, and was active in various activities, including as the editor-in-chief of the Gyeonghyang Sinmun newspaper in 1960, and died of old age in 1985. Kim Bok-jin married a second time to Heo Ha-baek 허하백 (1909 - ?), who was a teacher and principal at Sukmyung Girls' High School, and they had two daughters.

2.1 Art and the Reflection of Power

Among the professors of sculpture at the School of Fine Arts at the Japan National Institute of Technology, founded in 1872, was the Italian sculptor Vincenzo Ragusa (1841–1927). He taught the art of sculpture using plaster and marble techniques and instilled in many of his students the idea that sculpture is the reproduction and representation of forms. In 1890, the spirit of the times in Japan was critical of following Western traditions and seeking to rediscover traditions, and Professor Ko Chung Gwan-eun, Kim Bok-jin's teacher, focused on woodworking under the pretext of continuing the traditions of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts.

In the 1920s, after the arrival of Kim Bok-jin, the wind of reform swept through the sculpture department of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Kim Bok-jin's works reflect Western realistic tendencies, thanks to the influence of professors Ko Jeong-



kwang-woong 고촌광운, Geon Chang Daemong 건창대몽 and Jo Chang-moon Bu 조창문부, proponents of realist and academic techniques, following the ideas of Rodin (Auguste Rodin), Antoine Bourdelle (Antoine Bourdelle) and Aristide Maillol. Kim Bok-jin was a sculptor and a leading figure in the labor, student, and literary movements, and was close to the novelist Han Sol-ya. He secretly participated in the 3rd Korean Communist Party, formed in December 1926, as the leader of the Korean Proletarian Art Union. According to the testimony of his younger brother, Kim Ki-jin, Kim Bok-jin theoretically led the radical direction of the Korean Proletarian Art Union (KAFE Korea Artista Proleta Federatio), and the union's platform was also founded by Kim Bok-jin. The "Spiral Declaration Project" was a programmatic document that applied this position to the field of art.

From 1927, Kim Bok-jin stopped creating works and taught students at the Art Institute in the field of "Sculpture". At the same time (according to historical records), in June 1927, Kim Bok-jin joined the Goryeo Communist Youth Association (고려공산청년회) and, in February 1928, the Korean Communist Party (조선공산당). In September 1928, Kim Bok-jin was imprisoned in So-dae-mun Prison for five years and six months (until 1934) due to the "Gyeongseong School Cell Incident". While in prison, Kim Bok-jin studied the Joseon classics, customs and Buddhist traditions, which influenced the history of the Korean people and laid the foundation for the creation of Korean sculpture.

Kim Bok-jin was a genius sculptor who saved the rice given to prisoners for food, pounded it, and used it as material to make sculptures. He created Buddhist statues in the prison carpentry workshop. While in prison, he met and learned from many independence activists, including socialist Choi Chang-ik and writer Park Hwa-sung. After being released from prison in 1934, Kim Bok-jin founded the magazine Joseon Youth 청년조선 with Kim Ki-yong and opened a printing house called Aejisa 애지사 with Kim Ki-jin. However, the Japanese police, who believed that Joseon Youth 청년조선 and the printing house were affiliated with the Korean Communist Party, imprisoned him again in the Second Suppression Incident of the Joseon Proletarian Artists' Union. After his release and return to the art world, Kim Bok-jin reflects on "national color," "unique Joseon feeling," and "Joseon truth," and views the pursuit of "the aesthetics of power" as a combination of "unique Joseon feeling" and "the tastes and emotions of modern people." Here we can assume that Kim Bok-jin's aesthetic policy was to harmonize the national and the global, the traditional and the modern, and that this harmony could be achieved through the "aesthetics of power" based on subjectivity and the beauty of form.

3. THE WORKS BY KIM BOK JIN

3.1. Portrait sculptures

Kim Bok-jin created many female and male busts and head sculptures, as well as portrait sculptures (after 1934). The most representative work among them is the portrait statue "Old Man", which won an award at the Joseon Art Exhibition in 1936.

The portrait statue "Old Man" represents a simple farmer, a tired old man from Joseon who is ignored by everyone. Loneliness, pain, and sadness permeate the entire figure, which can be seen as a reflection of the oppression and deprivation of an entire nation or class. It is noteworthy that this work was created after Kim Bok-jin served two prison terms for his activities in the Joseon Proletarian Artists' Union and the Communist Party. Kim Bok-jin's realism and creative method can be seen as a result of his own broad worldview, a desire to elevate the value of human life using methods that vividly reflect the various contradictions experienced in reality.

Kim Bok-jin created many portrait sculptures, and he believed that a sculptor "gives life to copper" in terms of molding, that is, the human face is extremely important. There are about twenty-one portrait works by Kim Bok-jin, they were collected in the late Japanese colonial period, but none of them survived, only photographic plates remain. Kim Bok-jin believed that portrait sculptures are social, and the depiction of historical or modern figures should reproduce the social "achievements and influence" of a person.

The portrait sculptures "Hon Myung-hee 벽초 홍명희" created in 1936 by Kim Bok-jin depict Hong Myung-hee, a revered nationalist and writer who wrote the greatest modern historical novel "Im Kok-jeong". In March 1938, Ahn Chang-ho, a nationalist who was suffering in prison, was taken to the university hospital ahead of schedule and was expected to die on the tenth. Kim Bok-jin and his student Lee Guk-jong overcame the Japanese checkpoint and, with the help of the hospital staff, entered the hospital

room and removed the death mask of Ahn Chang-ho. It was a portrait sculpture in honor of a man who made a great contribution to the freedom struggle.



«Figure 1» Ahn Chang-ho and Kim Bok-jin, with Lee Guk-jeon (1937, right) Sculpture of an old man (1936, left)

3.2. Maitreya Ideas and Buddha Statues

From 1928 to 1934, Kim Bok-jin had access to many Buddhist books and materials related to Joseon customs in Hyeon-mu-so Prison, which allowed him to deeply explore the topic of national identity. Kim Bok-jin, who encountered Buddhist ideas in prison, was drawn to the Maitreya faith and the Buddhist worldview. In a feudal society, the Maitreya faith was a kind of gospel of hope for the oppressed classes, and according to Jeong Seok-jeong, the Maitreya faith in the twilight of the Joseon Dynasty could be characterized as "revolutionism, and the ardent hope that the existing world will be transformed and a new ideal society will emerge."

The image of Maitreya was a symbol of revolution and the beauty of the new society for the majority of the dispossessed and downtrodden peasants. Lee Jong-ik noted that the belief in Maitreya was "the hope of the common farmers that Maitreya would appear and free them from their restrictions and bring about the necessary utopia." Both Donghak and Chongsangye, who were influential among the governed classes in the 19th century, claimed to have created a post-paradise world using Maitreya ideology, and scholars of the Chogyo Society of Korean Buddhism in Joseon claimed that "Maitreya Hasen's faith" was a system that satisfied the desires and will of the governed classes for change. Kim Bok-jin was also interested in the revolutionary steps in Joseon history, discovering the Maitreya faith and hoping that the Buddha statue he carved would provide solace and hope to those suffering in his colonial homeland. According to Choi Yeol (1995:105-108), the highest state of Buddhism is immanent and transcendental and must have a form for its expression. In other words, Buddhist art is the fruit of compassion. Kim Bok-jin believed that the ideas of Buddhism are the ideas of compassion and revolution, and he combined this with the theory of art that can contribute to real life. In addition, the "aesthetics of power", according to Kim Bok-jin's thoughts, is rooted in national traditions, and can be seen as a world-embracing harmony in which the ideal society is built on socialist ideology and the ideas of Maitreya *미륵산양*. Among Kim Bok-jin's Buddhist statues, the "Main Statue of Maitreya Hall *미륵전 본존물*" (1936) in Geumsansa Temple in Gimje and the "So-lim-won Buddha Statue *소림원 불상*" (1935) in Shaolinwon on Gyeryongsan Mountain are noteworthy. The bronze "Maitreya Buddha" in Beopjusa Temple *법주사* in Boeun 보은, Chungcheongbuk-do is also believed to be the work of Kim Bok-jin.



«Figure 2»" So-lim-won Buddha Statue (1935) on the left, Main Statue of the Maitreya Hall (1936) on the right.

In 1937, Kim Bok-jin began working on the statue of "Maitreya Buddha 미륵대불" in Beopjusa Temple. He used cement and stones as the main materials. In 1940, Kim Bok-jin passed away, and the statue of "Maitreya Buddha 미륵대불" was completed by his students and other young sculptors twenty-three years after the teacher's death, in 1963. According to Choi Yeol (1995:125), Kim Bok-jin, who returned from school in Japan in 1925, published a sketch of the statue of "Buddha in Seokguram Grotto" in the newspaper "Shidae Ilbo". Thus, Choi Yeol revealed his view on the history of Korean art by writing about the Buddha statue in Seokguram Grotto that it is: "An essay on Korean art that reflects the history of Joseon." As capitalist civilization developed after the Japanese invasion, Korean art encountered its main enemy, foreign art, and entered into a "confrontation and struggle" with it, making "locality (hyang-to-seon 향토성)" its main weapon. Kim Bok-jin, by publishing a sketch of Seokguram, achieved an "explosion of spiritual content" and then argued that "the vitality and formal beauty of an object should be subjective and have a unique style (individuality)." At the time, this was seen as an artistic awakening of national consciousness, expressing regret that territorial and national self-identity were being influenced by foreign ideas and calling for the revival of national traditions.

Kim Bok-jin warned against superficial local theories of Joseon, saying, "The unique feeling of Joseon is not something that can be learned in a day or two, nor is it something that can be easily imitated. It cannot be achieved without blending into and developing within the Joseon environment.". For Kim Bok-jin, local culture (Hyang-to-seon 향토성) was not a reproduction or reconstruction of the past, but rather a search for a new world and an art based on it. For Kim Bok-jin, folk customs and traditions without social characteristics are not art, and true local national identity is properly revealed when the philosophical characteristics of society blossom from the aesthetics of people's lives and emotions and are created by changing and developing over time (Choi Yeol, 1999:140).

"Main Buddha of Maitreya Hall 미륵전 본존불" of Geumsansa Temple is a Buddhist statue recreated from "Shaolinwon Buddha Statue 소림원 불상". It is the greatest sculpture of the 20th century, where the sculptor combined the smooth lines of the human body and the iconography of traditional Buddhist statues. "Baek Hwa", a full-length portrait of a woman in hanbok published in 1938, is a wooden sculpture of actress Han Eun-jin (한은진) from the stage production "Baek Hwa", based on the novel by writer Baek Hwa-sung 백화성, in 1931. The sculpture reflects the continuity of Joseon art by combining the character of the main character Baek Hwa with Kim Bok-jin's aesthetics and approach to regionalism (Hyang-to-seon 향토성). The heroine's menacing face and her long-folded hanbok skirt make it clear that she is not an oppressed woman bound by feudal shackles. The life-size statue of "Baek Hwa" can be seen as a wooden sculpture that reflects Kim Bok Jin's worldview, his pursuit of progressive aesthetics, "locality"

(Hyang-to-seong 향토성) and national traditions.

3.3 Sculpture "Youth (Boy)" and the meaning of the word "youth".

At the beginning of his creative path, Kim Bok Jin tried to reflect his artistic ideology by depicting the female body, he created statues of standing and sitting women. He also created sculptures of old people, using elderly people as models, but they did not turn out as intended. But, finally, he managed to convey the power of art, the aesthetics of positivity and movement in a plaster sculpture of "Youth (Boy)".

The sculpture "Youth (Boy)" is reminiscent of Rodin's "Bronze Age" and the Greek "Kouros of Anavysos", which were created with anatomical accuracy. The statue of a young man carries the ideas of dynamism and humanity, as Choi Tae Man notes, Kim Bok-jin "laid the foundation for the creation of Korean realistic sculpture, which overcame the time constraints associated with the need to acquire modern sculpture techniques through Japan." The sculpture "Young Man (Boy)", with its bold and masculine appearance, can be understood as a reflection of Kim Bok-jin's revolutionary concept, as if he overcomes the reality of colonial Korea of those years through "expressing art with force". "Young Man" is the pinnacle of sculpture art of that era, created in the spirit and technique of realism, it conveys the ideas of "locality and nationality" in sculpture and the "aesthetics of force" of will. At the time of the production of "Youth (Boy)" in 1940, the social and cultural situation in Joseon was difficult because Joseon was under harsh colonial rule at the time: Japan forced schools to worship Shinto shrines and banned the use of the Korean language. In 1938, the Governor-General banned education in the Korean language, and in 1940, names were forcibly changed to Japanese. These were difficult times for the Korean people. In this historical context, Song Ki-jung won the world marathon title at the Berlin Olympics in August 1936. At the same time, the incident of removing the Japanese flag from the Chosun Chungang Ilbo newspaper occurred. These historical events became a source of pride and hope for the oppressed Korean people of Joseon.

Upon hearing the news of Song Ki-jong's victory on the radio, people cheered in front of the Donga Ilbo in Gwanghwamun, reminiscent of the March 1st Movement. The three major national newspapers, Donga Ilbo, Chosun Chungang Ilbo, and Chosun Ilbo, which had removed the Japanese flag, were suspended indefinitely. Japan, feeling that Song Ki-jong's victory was an event that could spur national awakening and unity among the Korean people and become an issue that could not be ignored, banned all celebratory events. In connection with these events, in August 1938, Kim Bok-jin, who was then the head of the art department of the Chosun Ilbo, left the newspaper.



«Figure 3» Chosun Chungang Ilbo newspaper with the Japanese flag removed

A monthly magazine, "Youth (Boy)", was published, aimed at young people, encouraging them to learn about civilization and build civilization, as well as to make efforts to spread new knowledge, enlightenment, and to cultivate a strong youth spirit. It published Choi Nam-sung's poem, "From the Sun to the Youth 해에서 소년에게", which is considered the beginning of "physical" poetry.

In September 1934, Kim Bok-jin founded the magazine "Young Joseon 청년 조선" together with the novelist Kim Ki-yong. The important meaning and symbolism of the word "youth" for Kim Bok-jin, as a writer, journalist, sculptor and socialist, can be understood from the title of his sculpture "Youth" and the title of this new magazine. If we look at the fact that magazines for young people were published overseas (for example, "Youth of Korea 소년한국" in the United States in 1919, "Shanghai Youth 상해소년" in Shanghai, China in 1924, and "Catholic Youth 가톨릭 소년" in Manchuria), we can conclude that the publication of magazines for young people was related to the independence movement.

Kim Bok-jin, who worked at the Chosun Chungan Ilbo at the time, may have seen photographs of Song Ki-jong. The physical characteristics and figure of the statue of Kim Bok-jin, "Youth," are very similar to the image in the photograph of sixteen-year-old Song Ki-jong standing on the podium after winning the 1935 Shinkyō Games in Japan and to the image of him heading to the locker room after winning the 1936 Berlin Olympics.



«Figure 4» «Youth(Boy)» by Song Ki-jung, after winning the 1935 Shinkyō Games in Japan (right), after winning the 1936 Berlin Olympics (left), in the center of the "Youth" statue by Kim Bok-jin.

Also, if we compare the image of Song Ki-jung who is crying with his head down while listening to the Japanese national flag and the Japanese national anthem on the podium with the statue of "Youth (Boy)", in the photo, Song Ki-jung is standing with his head down and his legs together, while the statue of "Young Man" has his head up and his leg extended. There is only a slight change in the movement, but the physical proportions, the muscles of the arms and legs, the angle at which both hands are lowered, the clenched fists, and the short sweatpants are all very similar to the original.

Kim Bok-jin, a progressive intellectual of that time, may have tried to portray Song Ki-jong as a patriot with great physical and mental strength who could symbolize the hopes and dreams of Joseon, and thus created a sculpture of artistic ideology. Kim Bok-jin's "Youth (Boy)" is a portrait sculpture that follows the principles of form-building elements, vertical composition and frontality, revealing the appearance of a person according to his social achievements and capabilities through the form. In order to depict the character of Song Ki-jong's "Youth (Boy)," the author uses the technique of modeling by gradually attaching clay, and finishes the work with plaster. The rough texture of clay may give a sense of "unfinished," but it also allows one to feel the living vitality.



The plaster sculpture “Youth (Boy)” is the last masterpiece of Kim Bok-jin, its hero is reserved and tense. The enterprising and sharp figure of the young man exudes vitality and reflects the idea of a hopeful future for the nation. In this way, Kim Bok-jin tried to express his artistic ideology during the difficult times of humiliation of the Joseon people. Like the statues of Maitreya Buddha, “Youth (Boy)” reveals the spiritual world of Kim Bok-jin, anticipating the emergence of a national hero who will ensure the independence of Joseon.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have studied the main stages of the biography and work of Kim Bok Jin, the founder of Korean sculpture. He lived and worked during the difficult colonial period for his people. He was a fighter who was imprisoned for his views, but managed to continue creating works of art that carried deep social and national meaning. Unfortunately, the master's works have not survived: about thirty works left after his death burned during the fires of the Korean War Apart from Buddhist sculptures, not a single one of his artistic works has survived. Traces of his descendants have not been found either. The sculptor's lost works can only be seen in photographs in the catalogues of the Joseon Art Exhibition, where they were selected. In this regard, the reconstruction and restoration, as well as the re-evaluation of the significance of Kim Bok-jin's sculptures as a founder of Korean sculpture who strived to embody "locality" and national spirit in his works, are of great importance for modern Korean studies, especially in light of the Hallyu wave, since this will introduce the pioneer of Korean sculpture to the world.

Of particular importance for the advancement of Korean studies are Kim Bok-jin's surviving Maitreya Buddha statues and his work “Youth (Boy)” based on photographs by marathon runner Song Ki-jung, which symbolize important historical moments during the colonial period. They can be valuable resources for students and scholars studying Korean studies, introducing them to Korean history, art, and philosophy.

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