

“Doing” Theory In and About East Asia: Transgression and Translation

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Abstract

Academics typically conceive of theory as a Western way of conceptual thinking or producing knowledge. In today's academic context, nevertheless, theory is influential in the non-Western world as well, as many scholars outside of the West adopt a theoretical stance in the production of knowledge. Therefore, as scholars of East Asia, we must rethink its relation to theory. Theory has been discussed in the literature in connection with East Asia, but the place of theory, both in the study of East Asia and in the region itself, still remains obscure if not unstable. Here, my term “East Asia” refers to both geographical and academic sites; that is to say, the term refers to both the region of East Asia and the academic field of East Asian studies, especially in Western academia. Native East Asian scholars of any subject, and scholars who study East Asia, whether they are situated in a Western or non-Western academic context, all face similar challenges when they attempt to engage in theory. The perception of theoretical scholars in East Asia, from both the West and the East, is at best ambivalent, if not antagonistic. In opposition to this perception, this paper will illuminate the positive aspects of theory in and about East Asia. To this end, I propose the following guiding question about the relation between theory and East: what does “doing” theory mean when it comes to East Asia? Since the term “East Asia” risks being quickly associated or conflated with the colonialist conception of the Orient or the Other – namely, a mythic territory – a more helpful question might be: what does using theory mean for both scholars of East Asia and scholars in East Asia?

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Academics typically conceive of theory as a Western way of conceptual thinking or producing knowledge. In today's academic context, nevertheless, theory is influential in the non-Western world as well, as many scholars outside of the West adopt a theoretical stance in the production of knowledge. Therefore, as scholars of East Asia, we must rethink its relation to theory. Theory has been discussed in the literature in connection with East Asia, but the place of theory, both in the study of East Asia and in the region itself, still remains obscure if not unstable. Here, my term "East Asia" refers to both geographical and academic sites; that is to say, the term refers to both the region of East Asia and the academic field of East Asian studies, especially in Western academia. Native East Asian scholars of any subject, and scholars who study East Asia, whether they are situated in a Western or non-Western academic context, all face similar challenges when they attempt to engage in theory.¹ The perception of theoretical scholars in East Asia, from both the West and the East, is at best ambivalent, if not antagonistic. In opposition to this perception, this paper will illuminate the positive aspects of theory in and about East Asia. To this end, I propose the following guiding question about the relation between theory and East: what does "doing" theory mean when it comes to East Asia? Since the term "East Asia" risks being quickly associated or conflated with the colonialist conception of the Orient or the Other – namely, a mythic territory – a more helpful question might be: what does using theory mean for both scholars of East Asia and scholars in East Asia?

The question of East Asia's doing theory, or, namely, theorizing concerns the issue of the former's methodological interactions, interferences, and interventions with Western academia (or more broadly the West), namely, the center of the epistemic system. However, if we limit our focus to methodology, we might fail to fully explain East Asia's relationship to theory in all its complexity. Since Asia's history cannot be viewed as entirely autonomous and uninfluenced by the West, I would like to take a different approach to the issue of the methodological relationship between theory and East Asia. Rather than entering in the prevailing debates about (1) whether theory is an applicable methodology in the domain of East Asia or not, or (2) whether using theory is even appropriate in this context – both of which might intensify the aforementioned antagonism towards theory or the historical and cultural dichotomy between the East and the West – I will attempt to shed light on what ways theory serves or functions in the pro-

¹ This article does not intend to compare "scholars of East Asia" and "scholars in East Asia" in their use of theory—that might only intensify the existing tension between the two groups. By adopting a post-colonial critique of the West's construction of the non-West's subjectivity, I do not differentiate between the two groups, but rather view them as one entity signifying the site of the margin.

duction of knowledge in East Asia. Considering broadly the structuralist idea of which form is intimately connected to content in producing meanings of or within text, I argue that examining the aforementioned methodological interactions in East Asia requires recognizing its existential and imaginary relationships to the other.² The notion of doing theory in and about East Asia can thus be thought of as not only the use of an academic methodology, but also a social act that translates its imaginary dynamics into the real geopolitical, geocultural, and domestic contexts. Simply put, I propose that East Asia's theorizing is a form of social practice and a process of cultural translation, informing its social relations to the global world.

In an attempt to investigate the significations associated with East Asia's doing theory as a form of social practice and process of cultural translation, I will use psychoanalysis as my conceptual framework, without limiting it to any specific psychoanalytic theory, the methodology that does not confine a meaning of a text or a language to one. I employ psychoanalysis as a figure of doing theory to examine East Asia's existential and imaginary places in the global politics of today. I follow psychoanalysis' two most widely recognized functions in doing so. First, psychoanalysis, either in the context of literary criticism or on the couch, enables or provides the subject with language to explain what cannot be spoken or is entombed in the unconscious or unrecognized desires. Second, by enabling the unsayable to be said, psychoanalysis allows the subject to construct a historical self-narrative. In what follows I will elucidate how these two effects of psychoanalysis illustrate East Asia's doing theory as a social practice and a cultural translation, 'renewing' its subjectivity and intensifying its existence (Badiou and Roudinesco 9).³

A Perception of East Asia's Doing Theory

At first, it might be useful to look at the difficult position that East Asia occupies in relation to theory. I am not to generalize that every individual East Asianist or scholar from East Asia holds the same position in regards to theory; there is no *one* way to describe the relationship between the two entities. On the contrary, each scholar has his or her own methodological or intellectual way to engage in theory. For example, while theory is a negative force to some disciplines

² In this context, my term of "the other" lies more in a generic sense of the counterparty, differentiated from the capitalized "the Other" associated with Orientalism earlier.

³ Alain Badiou made a similar claim about Lacan's conception of psychoanalysis (Badiou and Roudinesco 9).

in Asian studies, for some scholars or certain fields theory is not necessarily a hindrance to avoid. Recognizing this diversity around theory and East Asia, I focus on the institutional problems and challenges inherent in the academic field of Asian studies as a whole.

From this vantage point, I will henceforth elucidate the postcolonial aspects of the East's relationship to theory. Let me first remind us of the meaning of the Greek term *theoria*, from which our modern term *theory* stems. *Theoria* means "to look at," "to gaze at," "to contemplate," or "to speculate."⁴ East Asia's position in contemporary Western academia can be traced further back to early modern times when Europe constructed the concept of the "Orient." According to Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, while the West was portrayed as possessing the language to produce knowledge and thereby create discourse, the East served as the "native" source or material for the West's production of knowledge. The East was considered "unenlightened," the "primitive" subject that lacked a linguistic ability. Thus, the East was viewed as a void of subjectivity. The Orient, always already classified as the Other, was thus conceived as a transgressing entity, a dangerous body that held deviant desire that threatened the order of the European colonial world. In this notion of Orientalism, desire is considered "undesirable" and hence must be inhibited, and it was the Other's desires, more often than not, that tended to be oppressed. Such a colonial discourse about the Orient seems to have been revived in contemporary Western academia, producing a new epistemic system or neo-colonial subjectivity of the Other. As known, area studies is a product of the Cold War in the U.S., and especially the study of East Asia is one of the fields in which this neo-colonial epistemic power is most pronounced. Area studies' ideology that theory is the Western epistemic language and therefore cannot properly represent a native people or culture seems to illustrate this neo-colonial point of view. The hidden side of this ideology is that in U.S. academia, area studies scholars, especially East Asian scholars of this field, are associated with the image of the "native" or the "primitive" as portrayed in Orientalism, unable to "speak" the Western epistemic language. Returning to the meaning of the Greek term *theoria*, East Asia's inability to speak can thus be interpreted as its inability to "look at" or "contemplate" if we see that 1) human knowledge is acquired through examination, contemplation, and reflection, and 2) language is the medium of knowledge production and the measure of human intelligence. Simply put, East Asia is unable to "theorize."

Area specialists take a scholarly approach that seems to be informed by this

⁴ See <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=theoria&la=greek#Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=qewri/a-contents>

theoretical void, which might be the result of these scholars' unconscious internalization of this neo-colonialist conception of the Other's linguistic inability. In his essay "Positions and Positionality: After Two Decades" (contributed to the journal *Positions's* special issue called *Twenty Years Later: A Special Issue*), Naoki Sakai illuminated institutional and disciplinary problems with area studies by discussing the notions of position and positionality. Calling attention to the epistemological connection between the term *theory* and dramaturgy, (which can be described "looking at a theater stage"), Sakai explains how area studies scholars position themselves within the U.S. academic order and culture. In conventional theater spectatorship, one positions oneself away from, and in front of the stage in order to see or contemplate the play. While being physically distant, the spectator remains proximate to the stage to contemplate. As Sakai implies, however, area studies scholars' position in relation to their subject matter does not exactly coincide with this idea of position. Area studies scholars take a detached, what Sakai calls "separation," from the stage; he describes this particular position as "positionality" (71). Because positionality remains outside the configuration of *stage*, the position that allows direct gazing at people or objects becomes dominated by the positionality of withdrawal: the gazer's withdrawing from reflection or contemplation of the gazed. In such a case, the act of *theoria* or *theory* seems to be reduced to a passive gaze of positionality. This passive gaze prevents rigorous theorizing *about* or theoretical engagement *with* subjects. Sakai argues that positionality represents area studies scholars' institutional or disciplinary approach within U.S. academia. It is a theory (or *theoria*) that allows the gazer—or, more specifically, the area studies scholars—little room for critical thinking. Instead, such "theory" amounts to the collection of information about native people, language, culture, etc.—a scholarly approach that increases the gap between the East and the West. As a result, scholars take the East and the West to be positioned independently, rather than relationally and mutually constitutively, with the West assuming a position of power. As Sakai writes:

[h]ence separation would indicate no more than the erasure of coevalness, the very potentiality of being in power relations. Area specialists must evade coevalness precisely because they do not want to address the very people they describe, analyze, and evaluate. They speak *about* the people of an area, but they do not speak *to* or *with* them. Moreover, they are afraid of being spoken to *by* the people of the area, or more precisely, they are fearful of a *parrêsia*, or act of truth telling, that would upset the very positionality they want to assume. Separation is necessary to introduce two temporalities, in which the West and the Rest are supposed to exist in an unconnected fashion. Separation, therefore, is neither geographic nor civilizational; it is a political strategy that institutes the positionalities of the West and the Rest. Until the 1980s, cultural anthropologists worked with the framework of separate temporalities. Area studies

scholars did not show as much reflectivity regarding their disciplinary formation, but instead continued to appear comfortable with the discourse of the West and the Rest (76-77).

This particular disciplinary positionality explains why area studies scholars' attempt to theorize a native country's internal dynamics or subject formation is not seen as serving the field's purposes of data collection and does not conform to the Cold War ideology of a friend-enemy dichotomy. Such a date-, field work-, and archive-based discipline amounts to reinforce the neo-colonial subjectivization of the Other and identitarian politics that seem still strongly present in U.S. academic culture. This academic ideology is applied more strongly to native, female, theoretically inclined scholars of East Asia. While white, male academics (including some in area studies) can "do" theory as they see fit, minority or indigenous scholars cannot because theorizing their own subjectivity is against the model minority that they are expected to embody. Moreover, because theory is always already represented as a mostly European and male language, the indigenous female subject who theorizes is immediately criticized as Eurocentric or as a privileged, postmodern, and free-floating subject, showing little concern for the suffering or experiences of (Third World) native women.

My intellectual interest in this topical subject of theory or doing theory is part of the growing awareness of the importance of this issue of discipline of area studies addressed above. At the same time, the way my work (or, more accurately, the topic of my work) is received by colleagues, for example, shows that this attention does not always contribute to improving the situation of area studies. Colleagues have often asked me, their tone suggesting the impossibility of a satisfying answer: "How does Freud fit in with your work about Korean trauma?"; "How is Lacan's theory of desire relevant to the desire of the Korean people?"; "Where do you situate your work about Korean emotions within Western philosophy?" I believe that these questions stem from a peculiar combination of doubt, resistance, and rejection of my use of psychoanalytic criticism or theory at large. I suggest that identifying the assumptions that motivate these questions may help to explain what it means to do theory in East Asia. What are the psychological dynamics behind or beneath the relationship between theory and East Asia?

Doing Theory as Transgressive Desire

In fact, the academic normalization of a neo-colonial way of thinking created a mood of prohibition (pertaining to the psyche of the other) and further implemented social prohibition (designating the social practice of the other),

and that this psychic and social imperative has come to regulate a subjectivity of Asia, as well as the affective mode of its existence. There are two forms of prohibition in this case, as suggested above: one from *outside*, and the other from *inside*. These prohibitions point not only to concerns with the methodological and pedagogical constraints of area studies, but also its epistemic limitations. If we follow such notions that knowledge, especially in the humanities, is not merely the findings of the undiscovered but also the assembly of one's (that is, a person's or a culture's) ideas, politics, imaginations, or desires, and thereby that knowledge production represents a process of cultural phenomena of a society, these epistemic prohibitions are not limited to the matter of an academic or a disciplinary method. They indicate epistemic violence, the violence that limits the subject's ways of seeing and thinking. Furthermore, since gazing or contemplating entails feeling, this violence can also be said limiting the subject's way of feeling, a marker of psychic violence that might not be immediately detectable. These epistemic prohibitions are oftentimes reaffirmed by native scholars in the field of East Asia studies themselves, through the implementation of the ideology of nativism or essentialism: the belief that a native subject or culture cannot be explained with Western knowledge or the Western epistemic system but must only remain a body of raw materials and information for its authenticity.⁵ As noted in the previous section, this nativist construction of subjectivity might be the result of these native scholars' own projection of the neo-colonial Western perception of the "native" subject onto themselves, thereby producing what Sakai calls a regime of "separation" or the positionality of withdrawal. Thus, my intellectual interrogation of "what it means to do theory in East Asia" or "why *we* do theory in and about East Asia" already implicates its own cognizance of both the external (*outside*) and internal (*inside*) taboos on its act of doing *theory*.

Because of this internalized prohibition, the question of "why does East Asia do theory" amounts to a psychological question: "why are we [East Asianists or East Asia scholars] doing something we should not." This self-censoring question shows that East Asia is aware of the institutional prohibition of theory and that its own desire to do theory is thus transgressive – the desire to theorize is a desire to *do* something that *we should not do*. We must examine what political ramifications might be implicated in East Asia's *ostensibly* transgressive act of doing theory in the milieu of this collective cultural prohibitive psyche. To do so, we will investigate the psychological consequences of *doing something we should not*, of

⁵ I acknowledge that this tendency, as mistaken as it is, might be motivated by the attempt to respect one's own culture or another culture or understand it on its own terms rather than imperialize it by imposing the other's ways of thought.

breaking the institutional taboos discussed above. To this end, I will appeal to Freud's psychoanalytic constructions of taboo and prohibition. In my discussion, Freud's theories of taboo and prohibition, as we will see, are not limited to a psychosexual dimension as they are classically understood. Rather, my interest in taboo and prohibition lies in the clash of institutional repression and individual unconscious or desire, and its aftereffect of ambivalence in the structure of kinship that Freud underscored within the overtone of sexuality. It is this anthropological structure of a kinship and its subsequent psychic affect under the cultural practice of (sexual) repression that I link to the psychic phenomenon of East Asia's transgressive desire for doing theory within the structure of academic practices.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud traces the origins of the unconscious and repression, constructing the history of taboo by examining the structure of the kinship of so-called "primitive" societies. Freud discovers not only the social function of taboo but also psychological effects of it. One of the most central taboos was incest. These Clan societies practiced exogamy, the prohibition of marriage between a man and a woman from the same totemic system. When a man and woman from a different system of totem married each other, the communities would collectively decide under which totemic order the couple would fall. Once the agreement was made, one spouse was prohibited from having sexual intercourse with any individual from the other spouse's community, even those to whom he or she was not blood related.⁶ That taboo was hereditary, passed down from a married couple to their descendants. This taboo's social function was to maintain the totemic tradition and balance of power relations in a primitive society. Such forms of taboo predate religion and written forms of law.

Freud discovered more than the social function of this taboo: he discovered the individual psychic trait inherent to these taboos. Freud describes a psychosexual relation, marked by two conflicting feelings, that he observed in the Zulu society between a mother-in-law and son-in-law, people who must avoid seeing each other (or avoid "touching" each other's body, to be more precise. On the one hand, a mother-in-law has an affectionate feeling toward a son-in-law, an emotion that can also be described as sexual attraction to him, because of her identification with her own daughter. On the other hand, she also develops a hostile feeling toward him as she unconsciously transfers her unhappiness and unfulfilled needs in her own marriage onto her daughter. Hence, "very often the unkind, sadistic components of her love are directed on to her son-in-law in order that the forbidden, affectionate ones may be the more severely suppressed" (15).

⁶ This makes the other spouse allowed to have sexual intercourse with members of his or her own kinship society.

In this contradictory emotional pattern, Freud discovered the unconscious and repression of the human mind, and a consequent "ambivalent feeling" in human relationships. In essence, whether between blood or tribal relations, the rules of avoidance cause a temptation towards incest and the breaking of the taboo. Instead of being satisfied, the desire remains in phantasy "through the agency of unconscious connecting links," producing an ambivalent attitude toward the desired one (16).

While recognizing the difference between a primitive society's taboo and an individual's obsessional taboo, Freud links the rules of avoidance or the fantasy of a temptation to transgress the taboo in the former case to the phenomenon of "touching phobia" in the latter. He argues that the *desire* to touch in a primitive society's taboo practice is exhibited in early childhood. In this developmental stage, the child wants to touch a particular kind of object, and this temptation is prohibited by the parents whom the child loves, which overrides the child's instinct to touch. Rather than succeeding in "*abolishing*" the instinct, according to Freud, the child comes to "*repress* the instinct (the desire to touch) and banish it into the unconscious" (29, original emphases). At this point, a "psychical fixation" emerges in the child, a fixation constituted by the subject's ambivalent attitude, caught between a wish to touch and a rejection of this enjoyment (29). This mental phenomenon also entails feelings of expiation, shame or guilt. The ambivalence is the result of the conflict between the instinct—signifying the desire to touch—and repression—signifying unconscious—under the circumstance of prohibition, which resembles the psychic quality of taboo in a primitive society.

It is this psychological constellation of ambivalence in taboo prohibitions that I link to my exploration of the psychological implications of East Asia's doing theory, a prohibited act.

Following Freud's theory of prohibition explained above, I argue that there is an institutional consciousness that prohibits theory in East Asia. Nonetheless, East Asia has a desire to "touch" theory. In other words, East Asia has an intellectual awareness of the institutional prohibitions (the institutional super-egos) towards theory and, at the same time, its own transgressive desire for it. As a result, East Asia tends to repress its desire to theorize, which can be linked to Sakai's term of "separation." Put differently, it can be said that the enunciation of "doing something we are not supposed to do" signifies the subject's (East Asia's) ambivalent feeling toward the institutional taboos, the psychical constitution created by the *mêlée* between its unconscious repression of theory and its desire to transgress its prohibition. This ambivalence explains why some of the scholars of and from East Asia engage in theory in an ambiguous way while others repress their desire to do it. I describe this ambivalent way of East Asia's doing theory as

“passing” or “queering,” which might be associated with my use of the term “transgressive.” If we understand that these two manners of performing identity indicate in-betweenness or indirectness, East Asia’s transgressive act of doing theory as passing or queering can be recognized as an encrypted form of political act. In other words, East Asia employs the affective mode of ambivalence in re-representing its identity under the institutional prohibitions. It is important to note that my sense of transgressive or transgressive desire, therefore, does not signify a deviant act in the classical idea of transgression but rather a “passive” act that desires to liberate the subject from repression.

Returning to my conception of psychoanalysis as a figure of doing theory, the institutional battle of psychoanalysis in the tradition of Western academia might be viewed as analogous to East Asia’s transgressive desire for doing theory and liberation from the epistemic repression described above. The Western intellectuals’ antagonistic view of psychoanalysis seems to mirror the unsettling perception of East Asia’s doing theory within Western academia. Psychoanalysis has been considered either pseudoscience or pseudophilosophy, and this view is still common in academia. The marginalized place of psychoanalysis can be compared to the way in which East Asia has always been considered peripheral in world history. Some schools of thought in psychoanalysis were considered controversial or anomalous because of their radical departure from the mainstream or traditional streams of psychology or psychoanalysis. For example, we are well reminded of Lacan’s controversial place in the international psychoanalytic community and his excommunication from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1962 for his unorthodox views on the calling and practice of psychoanalysis.

Despite, and because of, its marginalized place, however, psychoanalysis has challenged the established authority of philosophy and psychology; it has revolutionized the sovereignty of the past. As controversial as he is, Lacan stands among the most notable revolutionary psychoanalytic figures. Trained as a psychiatrist, he was the first psychoanalyst to incorporate philosophy (e.g., Hegel, Heidegger, and Structuralism), linguistics, and semiotics into psychoanalysis. Lacan formulated “the radical concept of the subject,” discovering that the unconscious is structured like a language, a discovery that “replace[d] the philosophy of the consciousness” (Badiou and Roudinesco 8). Through this discovery, “psychoanalysts rediscovered philosophy and intellectuals rediscovered psychoanalysis,” and, as a result, psychoanalysis could be conceived beyond the schism between psychology and the medicinal or clinical arena at that time (10). In a similar vein, Elisabeth Roudinesco emphasized Lacan’s play of “transgression,” his interest in the subject of psychosis rather than that of neurosis, in mystic women

and their search for *jouissance* – all subjects that reside outside the realm of *raison d'être* (26). In her words, Lacan “plunged into the tormented universe of psychosis, of feminine madness, of paranoia as a system of logical and even formal thought” (12). His notions of the Other and its desire are what renew the subject and intensify subjectivity. I associate psychoanalysis’ radicalism and Lacan’s transgression with East Asia’s transgressive act, expressed as a desire for theory and for doing theory. Just as psychoanalysis continued to evolve and reformulate its theory in the face of resistance, the neo-colonial epistemic system did not stop East Asia’s desire for doing theory. Ironically, the more Western academia represses theory in the domain of East Asia, the stronger East Asia’s desire for doing theory becomes. East Asia’s transgressive desire for theory amounts to a social intervention in the neocolonial order and the Western knowledge system – indeed, with all forms of colonialism and imperialism. Moreover, it is the manifestation of a desire to translate unfamiliar cultural practices and knowledge into the domain of its own consciousness.

Theorized in this way, East Asia’s desire for theory is no accident. It coincides with the emergence of a new discourse of desire facing East Asia and, as a consequence, a newfound subjectivity in “the different forms of territorialization, the new forms or disciplinary mechanisms of economic conditions, the crisis of institution, and the transformation from quantity of life to quality of life” (Lambert 130). For philosophers and theorists, the emphasis on the universal human right to desire is a necessary shift in reimagining society as the construction of relays of the social networks and systems. So, here we must recognize another plane of the notion of desire in the context of our theorization of East Asia’s ambivalence and transgression. As Deleuze and Guattari remarked, “[t]here is no such thing as the social production of reality on the one hand, and a desiring-machine that is mere fantasy on the other” (28); desire signifies the social relations within the institutions in which societal mechanisms are produced that lead the subject to attain satisfaction. In this sense, the desire to transgress the colonial epistemic taboo that maintains “we should not do theory” might well be conceptualized as a form of (re)territorialization, and the desire to cross (or transgress) that epistemic taboo is a desire to reorganize Asian subjectivity, the signification of the desire to establish the new social relations.

Viewed in this light, to desire *this desire* is to engage ceaselessly in social practices, and thus to desire theory is to practice theory. In other words, whether it is repressing its desire for theory or acting on it in the transgressive or ambivalent form of passing or queering, East Asia’s intellectual engagement in this issue itself signifies its social relations to the global academic institutions and the West, indicating that it is already “practicing” (or “doing”) theory in an important

sense. Here, our sense of doing theory is not a kind of practice that simply applies or formulates a theory. Rather, it is a kind of theoretical practice that “is itself a local and regional practice operating as a series of relays from one practice to another, while practices are relays from one theoretical point to the next” (Patton 86). That is to say, the relation between theory and practice in East Asia is not conceived as a totalizing body isolated from any given social assemblage of language or historical event. It is “local” or “fragmentary” bodies, as was emphasized by Foucault and Deleuze, that produces the social relation of theory and practice, not a particular totality of the subject or object. My sense of fragmentation includes not only the realm of the actual or the eventual but also that of the virtual. This is to suggest that social relations embody not only the networks of the political and the economic, but also the links of the affective and the psychic, to which I shall turn in what follows. In this sense, what East Asia is *doing* in “doing theory” is finding the point of contact between two cultural subjects, at both the collective and individual levels, each in its own fragmentation. For East Asia, doing theory is a way of tracing the abysses of its unconscious, of its desires and fantasies, entailing their translation into its existential relationship to the global world, as well as its own consciousness. My use of the term “existential” here does not refer to the philosophy of existentialism, which focused on lived experiences and consciousness, from which Lacan and Lacanian psychoanalysts departed. In my conception, the existential is the whole human experience informed by both the concrete and non-concrete, an experience that inhabits the psychic space where oppositions coexist—the actual and the virtual, the real and the imaginary, the imaginary and the symbolic, and the affective and the psychic.

Psychoanalysis as an Ethnographic Assemblage

In this above sense of the assembly of fragmentations or the coexistence of the opponent entities in terms of subject-formation, does psychoanalysis come as an effective methodology with regards to my notion of doing theory? If East Asia’s doing theory is designated as the political and social acts of translating another’s culture or imagination into its own or vice versa, we must accordingly explain how psychoanalysis serves the process of cultural translation. Let me first explain how the critic’s position in practicing literary criticism is similar to that of the analyst in practicing psychoanalysis. In tracing the hidden elements in the subject, the critic has his or her own desire in relation to the other, which is akin to the analyst’s desire vis-à-vis the analysand. In search of the subject’s unconscious desires and

fantasies in the text or in the analytic context, critic and analyst are both tasked with translating the interpretative meanings of these desires and fantasies into a broader cultural space. In this practice of translation, one oftentimes unconsciously transfers or transmits one's own desires and fantasies into the subject (or the analysand), wishing the latter to speak or act accordingly. Some subjects or analysands fulfill this desire by way of speech-act—either real or imaginary—and some may deny or rebel against it. The process of tracing or translating this dynamic thereby creates a psychic space between one and the other or what Gabriele Schwab calls "imaginary ethnography." In imaginary ethnography, psychoanalysis functions as a "discourse and practice of cultural resistance that unsettles the status quo of habitual cultural codes"; its own function is "writing culture" (2). I call this practice "the psychic process of cultural translation," involving the psychoanalytic mechanisms of transference and counter-transference when the subject encounters another subject in difference, (e.g., gender, sex, culture, religion, etc.) or another culture.⁷

Foucault's concept of psychoanalysis might further illuminate my sense of psychoanalysis as an ethnographic collection of a cultural translation. In the latter part of *The Order of Things*, he explains the relation between psychoanalysis and ethnography:

Psychoanalysis stands as close as possible, in fact to that critical function which, as we have seen exists within all the human sciences. In setting itself the task of making the discourse of the unconscious speak through consciousness, psychoanalysis is advancing in the direction of that fundamental region in which the relations of representation and finitude come into play. Where all the human sciences advance toward the unconscious only with their back to it, waiting for it to unveil itself as fast as consciousness is analyzed, as it were backwards, psychoanalysis, on the other hand, points directly towards it, with a deliberate purpose—not towards that which must be rendered gradually more explicit by the progressive illumination of the implicit, but towards what is there and yet is hidden, towards what exists with the mute solidity of a thing, of a text closed in upon itself, or of a blank space in a visible text, and uses that quality to defend itself. (374)

What Foucault implies in this passage is that psychoanalysis is not a human invention of science to discover what already exists on the surface of the consciousness central to a particular people or culture; rather, it is a laborious method to unveil not only what is visible but also latent in the body and texts. This function of psychoanalysis is central to mapping the ethnography of a people. Not simply the scientific or ahistorical archive of individual memories and pathos,

⁷ See Meera Lee's "Psychoanalysis and 'Imaginary Ethnography' in East Asian Studies," especially pages 69-72 for more explanation of the concepts of cultural translation and counter-transference.

psychoanalysis, as Foucault implies, is an ethnographic assemblage, that allows us to rethink how particularity can be understood together with or within universality and vice versa, and therefore to reformulate the relation of history and context, of theory and practice.

We should remember that Freud is known as the father of psychoanalysis and that modern trauma studies is a branch of psychoanalysis. Most of Freud's work is based on the case studies of his patients suffering from the symptoms of trauma, hysteria and deliria, and many of them were Jewish European individuals. As a practitioner, he was concerned with theorizing the core of what is commonly shown in individual and collective consciousness and unconsciousness. His concern was studying not only the particular emotions and psychologies of the individual, but also configuring the collective group identity (i.e., Jewishness) in European history – that is, universal particularity. For instance, his theories of (the return of) repression, civilization, and totem and taboo can be read as implicit critiques of Christianity, with the social function of re-constituting the minoritized Jewish cultural identity. This is, however, far from stating that psychoanalysis is an ahistorical archive of European Jewish people's memories and pathos alone. What I wish to emphasize here is that Freud's psychoanalytic theorization of his case studies already suggested psychoanalysis as a mechanism of a cultural translation. We can see how Freud extracted a universal paradigm of the human mind and human relationships by examining particular types of people, or, drawing on the experiences of a particular people – how he invented a universally applicable frame to be used to examine a particular subject or culture.

With these views of psychoanalysis in mind, I now return to those questions that were posed to me, about my work, from colleagues. For example, "How is Lacan's theory of desire relevant to the desire of the Korean people?" Let me show how psychoanalysis serves to interpret a particular Korean culture and translate its meaning into a larger historical context. I will examine the early modernist writer Kim Dong-ni's short fiction and examine character of the female shaman through Lacan's theory of subversion.

Kim wrote two stories about shamans: a short story, "Munyōdo" (The Shaman Painting, 1936), and a novella, *Ulhwa* (Ulhwa the Shaman, 1978). "Munyōdo" was published during the Japanese colonial occupation. Kim later rewrote this short story as the novella *Ulhwa*. I will focus on "Munyōdo" in this paper. Using shamanism as a motif of pain and suffering, he places the tragic lives of the two female shamans at the center of the narrative. At face value, this short story remains the definitive works on the religious and cultural significance of shamanism in Korean literature. But the symbolic capital that these works produce with regard to Korean subjectivity, particularly Korean female subjectivity, is

remarkable. Kim once stated that the motif of "Munyōdo" was a "national circumstance" (316). This national circumstance refers to the Japanese colonial occupation that aimed to eradicate Korea's national identity by oppressing Korean culture and language. For him the most violent form of colonial oppression was the eradication of his native language and alphabet. As a writer in perhaps the darkest period of Korean history, he saw unspeakable sadness in the loss of his mother tongue, and the wound caused him to feel what he described as *ul-bun* (anger and resentment) and *won-han* (grudge) (316). To the sad young writer, shamanism came to mind as the most antiquated, authentic religious and cultural "Koreaness" and as a symbolic device to heal those feelings. At the same time, reflecting upon the global anxiety and confusion of the twentieth century, Kim also searched the literary world for something to heal the wounded human mind. It is noteworthy that shamanism was prohibited in colonial Korea at that time. He chose the shaman—a very subversive subject—as a new image of female subject, a new human figure, and a new kind of god that can heal our fear, hatred, and violence. Kim's literary envisioning of the shaman can be interpreted as his (re)translation of the so-called transgressive subject into the subject of liberation. This literary translation might be described his desire to transgress the colonial rule, his implicit revolt against the Japanese colonial occupation in his motherland.

Kim's vivid descriptions of the two female protagonists, especially having them become shamans and practice shamanism in both "Munyōdo" and *Ulhwa*, however, may not be interpreted by some readers in the way I described above. In both stories, there is no doubt that these women's actions are brutal and even immoral, actions that can easily be associated with transgressive acts in the traditional sense. In "Munyōdo," for example, we encounter a young deaf girl, Nangi, who is a talented painter. Her mother, the shaman Mohwa, believes that her daughter is the incarnation of the Flower Spirit, the daughter of the Sea Kingdom Dragon Spirit. While Mohwa goes out to perform a shaman ritual for the townswomen, Nangi stays home alone, spending most of her time painting. One day, Nangi's older (half-)brother, Ugi, returns home as a converted Christian, representing modernity, and denounces shamanism as a signification of the deviant. Mohwa is infuriated by her son's conversion and believes that a demon has possessed him. She begins an exorcism. Ugi, on the other hand, thinks that his mother's shaman practice is evil and thinks that she has been taken over by a demonic spirit. He also blames Nangi's deafness on her shamanism.

The conflict between mother and son escalates when Ugi catches his mother burning his bible. In the ensuing struggle, Mohwa stabs her son, mistaking him for a demon. Ugi eventually dies despite Mohwa's remorseful care. The village builds a church at Ugi's request, made before his death, and turns

against Mohwa's shaman practice. Mohwa clings to the belief that "the Jesus demon" had taken her son's life and performs a daily shamanic chant in an attempt to exorcise it. Completely stopping any requested rites for the townspeople, she hangs all of Nangi's paintings of Spirits and gods on the kitchen walls. This causes the townspeople to think she has gone mad. About a month later, Mohwa decides to practice one more public ritual—her last one—due to a family's requests to console the tormented spirit of their daughter who threw herself into a river, and also with the hope of curing Nangi's deafness. Dancing in deep sorrow and summoning the Spirits on the bank of the river, Mohwa slowly wades into the water until she is submerged, chanting her last shaman song to implore Nangi to come to find her in the spring. Ten days later, Nangi's father returns to Mohwa's house and leaves to wander around with her. After that, Nangi paints the shaman, presumably her mother, and her father tells the story about her daughter's leaving that painting behind in their drifting journeys that followed.

The story suggests that Mohwa's killing of her son and her "death wish," not to mention her shamanistic practice itself, were the outcomes of her unconscious. According to Lacan's theorization of the subject of subversion, the subject who speaks in her unconscious is not the "I" who is enunciating but the "I" that is signified in her speech, as the desire lies in the Other. As he writes, "[t]here may be no signifier of the enunciating subject in the statement—not to mention that there are signifiers that differ from *I*, and not only those that are inadequately called cases of the first person singular" (Lacan 677). Lacan demystifies our notion that the subject belongs to "me," the "I" who speaks, thereby radicalizing the concept of the subject. The subject is not in "me" but hidden in the Other that the "I" speaks about. Therefore, for Lacan, the true subject can be found in its unconscious, only in the subversion of the subject.

Following this logic, the real speaker in Mohwa is not Mohwa herself but the Other who is signified in her desire. More straightforwardly, in a shamanistic sense, the signified "I" in her linguistic structure designates a demon. This demon represents the Symbolic born out of her desires and fantasies, or hysteria and delirium—the Imaginary. This transgressive body—a demon in her eyes—is a god, the subject she loves, which we can identify as the subversion of Mohwa. Yet this love does not come as the Real unless the subject experiences what Lacan calls *jouissance*, distinguished from pleasure or joy. Lacan says *jouissance* transforms itself into desire, but only at the expense of love. Paradoxically, however, without *jouissance*, love is impossible, and there can be no true subject.

In the case of women, *jouissance* seems to be more complex in Lacan's formulation of the subversion of the subject. For him, woman is not merely the place of *jouissance* for man but has her own *jouissance* "proper to her and of

which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it—that much she does know" (145). It is this *jouissance* that makes woman the Other. Lacan's concern with women's becoming Other is not a concern with being "all" or "whole." Rather it is quite the opposite: women are "not all," according to him. What I draw from Lacan's theorization of woman as the Other in this sense is her being the "proper" Other. The Other is very important in Lacan's conception of the subject because the subject's desire and unconscious inhabit the Other and therefore complete the subject as the true subject. What makes woman the proper Other is the experience of her *jouissance* not merely as a phallic device but as an enigmatic journey to arrive at loving *her* god like Mohwa. Thus ". . . the supreme Being . . . is situated in the place, the opaque place of *jouissance* of the Other—that Other which, if she exists, the woman might be," as Lacan describes it (153). Through the signified "I," the imaginary Other, Mohwa speaks properly of her desire and makes her otherness the proper otherness, experiencing *jouissance* and becoming the subject of subversion, her own god.

My Lacanian reading of "Munyōdo" can be criticized on many accounts. From the moralist's point of view, one might argue that Mohwa's *jouissance* is extreme or immoral: both the murder of her own son in an attempt to save his life, and her suicide to save her own. From the postcolonialist's perspective, the madness, deviance, and primitivism embodied in Mohwa and spoken through the imaginary demon were precisely what constituted Korean subjectivity under the Japanese colonial rule when Kim was writing this story. Traditional feminist critics might say that a Lacanian reading only reinforces this concept of the Other as the unstable subject, mad with inconsistent dark desire and crazy hair, dancing in the moonlight. Is not this kind of colonial subjectivity precisely that which psychoanalytic critics hope to deconstruct rather than reaffirm by virtue of theorizing? Keeping this question in mind, how are we to make sense of Mohwa's inexplicable behaviors and unconscious without the theories of the unconscious, desire, or subversion? How do we explain Mohwa's ecstasy when she is peacefully walking into the river, committing suicide? The scene is described in Nangi's painting at the end of the story:

Low hills slumbering on night's distant horizon. Broad river winding black across the plain. Sky spangled with stars about to rain down on riverbank under a large canopy a crowd of village women held in thrall by a shaman's magic dance for a lost soul, sadness and hope in their faces and a weariness that tells of coming dawn. In their midst the shaman caught up in the ecstatic throes of her dance, spinning weightless in her swirling mantle, pure spirit freed of flesh and bone (Kim, 36).

This end of Kim's story, rendering Nangi's aesthetic vision of the shaman, her deceased mother Mohwa, stands as the most prominent moment of the latter's

jouissance, her becoming the Lacanian subject of the proper Other. In this instance, Mohwa becomes a liberating, sublimated subject through transgressive acts. In our Lacanian psychoanalytic reading, Kim's metaphoric use of the shaman designates the subversion of the subject, the subject in emancipation. In this spirit of doing theory, paradoxically, our Lacanian translation of Mohwa allows us to break from and renew the colonial conception of Korean subjectivity, serving to construct Kim's writing culture as, beyond the literary portrayal of a tragic shaman, an ethnographic assemblage of the psyche of the "othered" Korea during the Japanese colonial occupation. In a similar way, it also allows us to resist the historically repressed concept of woman as the subject of madness and hysteria. In essence, psychoanalysis helps us to retranslate the Orientalist notion of the Other, (e.g., the Orient, Asia, and (mad) Women), and therefore reclaim its subjectivity.

In conclusion, we can reaffirm that psychoanalysis serves critics (or analysts) to translate a culture and allows us to inhabit an imaginary space of the Other, not as a pseudo-science of a particular group or history, but rather as an anthropo-ethnographic knowledge system of the human mind and history. Doing psychoanalysis is therefore more than merely applying a methodology to the East Asian context; it is a social practice aiming to explore a reservoir of its unconscious desires and fantasm, the crossroads of the real and the imaginary, and the imaginary and the symbolic, in its contact with the other culture. In this sense, psychoanalysis is conceived as a form of *theoria* or *theory*, and, accordingly, doing *this* theory in and about East Asia is directly "gazing" or "examining" its social relations, including the issues of social, cultural, institutional and epistemological taboos and prohibitions. It is to translate both its existential conditions and limits, and imaginary dynamics—or, simply put, all kinds of transgression—at the crossroads of the other (or the West), as well as itself. In effect, doing theory allows the renewal of East Asian subjectivity.

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在東亞內「做」相關東亞的理論： 踰越和翻譯

摘要

學者們一般將理論視為西方於思想建構或知識生產的方法。然而，現今學院中，許多西方國家之外的學者於生產知識時，也採用某一理論立場，因而使理論在非西方世界中深具影響力。因此，身為東亞的學者，我們必須反思東亞和理論之間的關係。理論的討論可見於相關東亞的文學作品之中，但理論的位置，不論就東亞研究或是地區本身而言，依然模糊、搖擺。在此，「東亞」一詞同時意指地理上和學術上的位置；意即，東亞地區和東亞研究，特別是指西方學院中的一種學術領域。從事任何學科的東亞當地學者，以及研究東亞的學者，無論身處西方學界之內或外，試圖從事理論研究時皆會面臨類似的挑戰。所謂東亞理論學者的這個觀念，不論來自東方或西方，若非互相對峙，也相互矛盾。相對於此觀點，本文將闡明東亞之內和東亞相關理論的正面方面。為達此目的，就理論和東亞關係切入，我提出幾個問題做為引導：「做」東亞相關的理論所謂為何？既然「東亞」一詞容易和殖民主義概念中的東方或他者聯想或同化—意指神話的範疇—因此較有助益的問題應該是：對於研究東亞的學者或東亞的當地學者而言，使用理論的意義究竟為何？

關鍵字：理論、東亞、翻譯、踰越、精神分析