



Beyond Objects

Intangible Connections in Everyday Life

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Introduction

Situated at a crossroad between creative exploration, visual anthropology, and cultural studies, this research is driven by a specific interest to look at craft in connection to everyday life rather than artistic realms. In order to understand and evaluate the social dimensions surrounding craft beyond artistic objects, the project picked various locations as starting points, then progressively moved to identify links between local situations, craft practices and broader contexts bridging traditional cultures, modernization in Korea as well as global transformations. The different stories gathered here are testimonies of the social and cultural aspects that influence or affect craft practices in Cheongju and its vicinity in Chungcheongbuk-do. They raise questions about the ways in which craft cultures are lived by the local people and makers.



In this research, the domain of everyday life is not solely limited to the daily use of crafted objects, it extends further to analyze day-to-day professional situations, cultural representations and perceptions of craft and traditional cultures in the present day as well as in relationship to the past and the future.

Top: ceramics piled up at Yukgeori market.
Centre right: hammer used by a blacksmith. Lower right: charcoal burning at Kim Young-jo's studio.

Finding Cheongju

The road through which one enters, when visiting a city or a new location for the first time, is the channel that leads to many more paths. And as the number of paths intertwine and accumulate, one starts to identify connections or disruptions, smooth roads and rugged ones, endless ways or dead-ends. In this undefined geography, an experience occurs. Each experience is never finite, as it keeps changing in relationship to other experiences, continuously extending toward new roads and paths.

Craft as an experience and a context is a very similar journey.

In late July 2019, a field research itinerary started to take shape through preliminary research from Paris, thousands of kilometers from Cheongju. With the help of my young Korean assistant based in Seoul, we slowly gathered a list of craft-related contents and locations to investigate during our visit.

The review of existing research on Korean craft and material culture as well as social and historical information was a prelude. Following this initial step, improvisation once in the field was a key element to venture into unknown patterns rather than pre-formed narratives or





readily available information. It appeared essential to get samples of real life situations that would reveal various facets of craft ecologies in the present day. The idea was to trust the dynamic of chance encounters where one person would lead to the next one in an organic manner. As a result, many kind-hearted people shared their knowledge, stories and contacts along the way. At other times, there were broken links, which were also valuable to consider as they revealed some of the core challenges and emergencies in the region.

The digital era gives the false perception that the world can be found online. In reality, local craft knowledge is largely absent or only represented in certain ways. For instance, the information provided by institutional and government websites instantly appear online but informal grassroots sources are not visible on search engines. By relying too much on the Internet, there is a risk of falling into distorted constructs shaped by information hierarchy and cultural stereotypes also abound. Websites may be outdated, something which is particularly likely to happen with endangered traditional craft practices that have disappeared in recent years. However, the positive side of such limitations and gaps in digital information is that they leave spaces for field-based discoveries that reside on the periphery and within the “margins that emerge as complex maps and histories” (Clifford 1997).

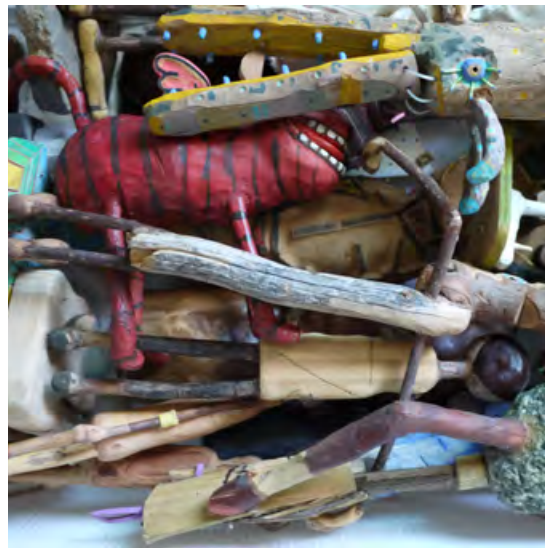


It is within this ambiguous space that this project explored and searched for new craft possibilities.

Top: driving on the highway from Goesan-gun to Cheongju city.
Above left: street in Cheongju city. Above right: calling craft makers during field research work.

Roots

the connections between people and culture



Where Does Craft Begin?

It is an open-ended question. Whether it is the material, a skill, a person, a community, a relationship, a place, a history, or a connection between all of these things, the source from which craft originates affects its trajectory and purpose, at times it is traditionally rooted in a rural context and other times it is artistic and design-led, government-promoted, tourism-based, or commercially driven.

Today, if we consider the narratives surrounding a craft practice or a craft object, they are varied and complex, not simply linear. In the case of culturally-rooted craft, they now belong to a marginal territory. While in the past, crafted objects had very strong cultural roots as they were made with materials sourced from local environments, by locals who sold them to local people at local markets or through street peddlers, increasingly craft has been displaced to a number of *elsewheres*. This was a visible reality when arriving at Yukgeori Traditional Market in Cheongju. What was missing there exposed a truth: a generational and cultural shift. Within the limited range of crafted products present there, it was impossible to verify their provenance or story.

Top: ceramic studio in Cheongju.

Above left: crafted works by Han Myeong-chul. Above right: glazing objects in Goryeong village.

A shop owner pointed out that until a few years ago, an old man was selling handmade farming tools and objects at a shop across the alley from hers. He was the last one.

This situation reflects the reality of the decrease in craft production and local knowledge assets across South Korea, a social change that has affected all industrialized societies in various ways. Between the 1950s and 1980s a study published by the Smithsonian Institute exposed the material culture of three Korean villages and analyzed them according to the type of artefacts that existed then, how they had changed through drastic modernization and how the changes occurred in each decade. The study reflected on the survival strategies for Korean culture and the manifestations of its creativity and innovation in connection to foreign influences (Knez 1997). At that time, traditional craft objects including household items, furniture and farming tools were still widely used alongside modern products. The 1960s saw the acceleration of industrial development and the proliferation of plastic goods that were perceived as “essential for rising living standards in the country” (Clark 2000). The social and political ideals of that era led a majority of people to adopt mass-produced objects however certain traditional pieces, such as the food storage earthenware, kept their presence in Korean households at least up until the late 1990s (Morillot 1998). The diversity and quality of craft products at street markets are described to have considerably decreased across the country since the 1980s (Kim 2015). However, this does not mean that craft practices and traditions have ceased to exist, they have continuously been part of a process of transformation and re-adapted to modern life.



Above: industrial Onggi earthenware sold at Yukgeori market. Onggi pots are used to ferment food and are a key component of traditional Korean lifestyle.



Right: iron pots of unidentified kind, sold at a local market in Boeun-gun. This type of object is mostly used in rural areas and traditional kitchens that feature a fire stove.

As South Korea's democratization movements and rapid economic development took place in the 1980-90s, the decades that followed have been particularly significant for traditional knowledge and practices. The transformation of social life, the migration from rural to urban centres, the modernization of production methods and value chains has been relentless. Not only did the materiality of the actual objects change, but the relationship between people, objects, and surrounding environment were altered to a great extent. The youngest generations may only interact with craft as symbols of *pastness* rather than elements that are experienced in everyday life. These important changes coincide with the homogenization of cultures and ways of life, they are also at the core of the fragmentation of craft as a socio-cultural system.

As such, new beginnings had to be identified by craft practitioners to overcome this social, cultural and economic crisis. Craft as a surviving practice has had to search for new ways of being and even live through new *identities*.

"It is often believed that it is more pertinent, in our urban industrialized societies based on rational thinking, to produce via machines than make things ourselves. Any product coming from this kind of production chain does not leave any room for emotion or chance. Such things only give the feeling of the ideas that generated them. Reduced to materials and categorized, they reject heterogeneity, differences and alterity."
(Lee 1997).



Without a Trace

We dialed the number of a textile business several times. No one picked up the phone but there was an address listed on a website. So we took a bus and made our way there. The online map indicated a residential area, but when we arrived all we could see was a construction site.

The previous buildings had been torn down to leave space for a new housing development. Without a trace, all residents and shopkeepers had vanished, leaving us with our imagination, a vague picture of what might have been.

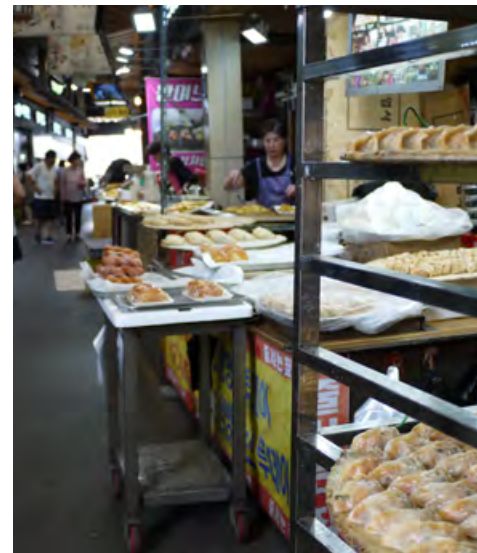
A silent image juxtaposed with the view of a construction site.
An untold story.

To Craft or Not?

“(What does) the process of making concrete things reveal to us about ourselves? Fine cloth or food cooked well enables us to imagine larger categories of good. Friendly to the senses, the cultural materialist wants to map out where pleasure is to be found and how it is organized (...) We can achieve a more humane material life, if only we better understand the making of things.” (Sennett 2008)

Many of the older ladies and men selling food products at Yukgeori market can be considered artisans. Using their long-term experience and skills to produce rice cakes, seed oils, herbal remedies, ginseng products, and various take away foods, their activities are straightforward expression of everyday life cultures. If craft is about making things based on local know-how, then local food production is very much an expression of craftsmanship.

Foods and their consumption, just like craft, are mirrors that we can hold up to analyze how people shape their connections to locality and culture. In that respect, Yukgeori market speaks on behalf of several generations of women and men, and especially the elder ones. They are of the generation that experienced life before mass production became the norm in Korean society.



Scenes from the Yukgeori traditional market in Cheongju city.

A sesame oil producer proudly tells about her family business that has been running for sixty years. She sells to individual customers and also the many restaurants in town. “I use Korean sesame seeds to make the oil during our special holidays like *Chuseok* but the rest of the year I use seeds from China.” She says that her son will not carry on with the business. He has other prospects for his future. Therefore, she will be the last before closing the business. She is not an exception in this case as the majority small business owners in Korea do not encourage their children to continue in their footsteps. There are similar examples in the case of craftsmen.

We met the blacksmith Choi Yong-jin in Jeungpyeong, who is concerned that his profession is too hard for the younger generations to carry on. He currently does not train new apprentices and works on his own. It has been reported in recent years that many craft masters share the same sentiment. The *chaesang* bamboo basket maker Park Hyo-suk who has been practicing since age five, refuses to teach her skills to her children citing time-consuming labor and financial hardships. “Why encourage our children to choose a career path that is not financially sustainable?” (Koreana 2015) In the past, small-scale businesses and street peddlers formed an essential part of Korean everyday culture but increasingly in the last twenty years, the economic transformations and social expectations of modern society have challenged small business owners and the continuation of their operations (Leppanen 2007).



Above: a sesame oil producer describes her workspace which has been operating since the last sixty years.

Right: a bottle of sesame oil purchased at that store.





The disruption in knowledge transmission that has been taking place and which only will widen over the next decade characterize the rift between generations and the alteration of cultural life. This tendency is now experienced worldwide as local knowledge diminishes through generational shifts and globalized systems have created various forms of post-modern cultures. While many worry about cultural preservation, the questions need to also focus on the ability of the next generation to shape locality through multiple global influences. This is not just a matter of skills but also of cultural appreciation and integrity.

In everyday living, the continuity of local know-how and its sustainability ultimately depends on the perception of the makers but also on the possibilities of innovating within existing structures. Such possibilities are tied to the relationship between people of different generations as well as the possibilities to connect traditional practices to a diverse and broader framework that extends beyond craft itself.



Visit to Choi Yong-jin's workspace. He is one of the blacksmiths listed on the government register as national cultural property.

Displacements & Constructs

With the transformations and challenges of the last two decades, many craft practices have adapted to contemporary demands and norms. The generational shift that is now underway shows that the younger generation of artisans are closer to the fields of art and design rather than traditional practices. Designers themselves are interacting with craft with great interest and sometimes become artisans themselves. Among the individuals encountered during the research trip, ceramicists were particularly leaning toward the arts and contemporary design, in some cases forming a 'designer+artisan' duo, as they found more opportunities to sell their works through creative showcase and gained exposure across borders.

More surprising displacements happen in connection to Korean film and television productions. Metal tools produced by blacksmiths, which are still sold primarily as commodities for farmers, have found new applications in Korean dramas to be used as props: daggers, knives and other weapons are the most common orders. According to Choi Yong-jin, the global 'Korean wave' phenomenon also opened up new doors to do e-commerce. He sells his products online to Western customers avid of traditional Korean artefacts. This type of relationship between traditional craft and popular culture may be contested and viewed critically, it is nevertheless part of today's reality since culture is often lived and constructed through media and information technology.



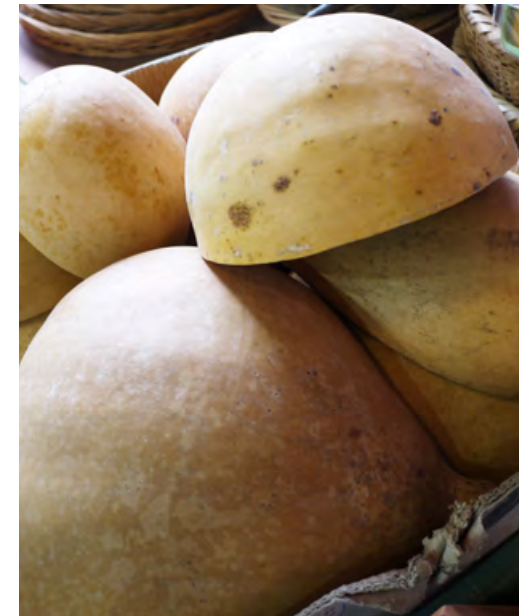
Top: farming tools produced by blacksmith Yu Dong-lyeol.

Above left: metal type castings. Above right: industrial production of trays commonly sold at the market.

For the blacksmith Yu Dong-lyeol, the growing trend of *hanok* living (traditional Korean house) among the urban elites has created a new market for handmade home interior designs: door handles, knobs and other house adornments require the craftsmanship skills of blacksmiths who used ancestral techniques from the Joseon dynasty. Since the late 90s, the urban elites who turned their backs on the *tanji* (Korean large-scale apartment complexes) started to move into individual houses in less more rural settings that are in proximity to large cities (Gélezeau 2003) raising the popularity of the *hanok* and taking it to new dimensions.

Because of its limited availability, the craft that was used as a natural component of Korean everyday life, is increasingly symbolic in modern Korean society. It is lived as an imagined world, shaped as new narratives and rewritten as a globalized genre. This is a space where craft and its associated traditions have turned into a simulacrum through which people try to get a grasp of a culture that is continuously in flux and mutating. A context where “tradition, annihilated, is reconstructed as an imagined past imperfect” (Lie 2015).

“It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood (...) The imagination today is a staging ground for action, and not only for escape (...) There is growing evidence that the consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general, agency.”
(Appadurai 1997)



Top: rural-style objects with unidentified provenance sold at Yukgeori market.
Above left: detail of a *hanok* house window. Above right: *bak*, traditional gourds.



The collective imagination alongside many other factors variably influence the “down-to-earth” ties that endure between people, and cultural traditions are still embedded in holiday celebrations, weddings and other family rites attended across several generations.

“People rent more than they purchase nowadays because the hanbok dresses are only used on specific occasions”. Sitting next to her sewing machine, a younger-generation *hanbok* maker was working in a quiet alley at the Yukgeori market. She produces the affordable range of ready-to-wear *hanbok* but also some that are based on specific orders. Practicality and price range are what influence the customers most. A traditional costume made with high quality materials and entirely by hand is too expensive for the average consumer. New styles and colors are also necessary to attract them: fabrics are often synthetic (shinier, easier to clean), textures and more glitter are added compared to the sobriety of past garments. In its revised form, the hanbok has become a post-modern commodity, merging consumer trend and at times the media-influenced representations of *Koreanness*. Simultaneously it remains a way for people to affirm a traditional identity, customized according to present trends and still honoring the customs embedded in Korean family life.

The range of *hanbok* dresses from the high-end crafted product faithful to the traditional form to the more ubiquitous hanbok made at humble markets shows the diversity of experience and narratives surrounding a single tradition and the social realities that stem from those differences. The differences in quality naturally mirrors the social hierarchies that define consumer culture, where a social class can be distinguished

Hanbok maker interviewed at her shop and her work on display at Yukgeori market.

by the type of product it consumes (Bourdieu 1979). Nevertheless, the cultural value of the dress and its meaning may be the same for all Koreans regardless of the quality of the product or their social background. This is a question that has yet to be investigated further: the links between material quality and cultural depth; the relevance of craft quality in relationship to living traditions and social identity.

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“Since the local autonomy system (jibang jachige) was revived in the 1990’s, each local government has manipulated strategies to develop the cultural distinctiveness of local communities (...) Local governments hold festivals to stress local color, to encourage tourism and to promote the recording of local history by reinventing folklore and publishing home-town magazines.” (Kim 2003)

During the rapid modernization process of South Korea and mass migration to the cities, a parallel movement to promote folk culture in reaction of modernization was initiated by students and scholars in the 1960s (Lim 2003). Since then, various actions toward the promotion of rural life and folk traditions have been carried out by local governments.

A number of initiatives to revive rural life through tourism experiences are located in areas within a short distance from Cheongju city: Beollat Hanji village, Hyeondo Obaksa Village or the Nangseong Godmee village offer agricultural and cultural activities to visitors. In the case of the *hanji* village, 20 farmhouses remain and simple activities for paper making are proposed. *Hanji* is used by master craftsmen notably those



Top: souvenir shop in Songnisan National Park displaying a range of craft-related products of unidentifiable sources.

Right: traditionally-bound book made with hanji paper and hemp cover.





who produce woodblock printing, metal type printing or pyrography (*nakhwa*) and the material can also be used to create objects and fiber (*jiseung*). Artists all over the world use this traditional paper. But currently in the Chungbuk area, there appears to be a wide gap between the *hanji* cultural tourism experience and professional creative practices. Villages are not tied to the broader range of creative expertise and backgrounds that could nurture and stimulate them in new ways. Activities could be diversified through creative residencies or business opportunities while increasing the number of collaborations between local villagers and outsiders.

Currently, many craft activities are limited to pre-defined categories based on amateur activities instead of living through reciprocal professional relationships. This model does not leave enough room for the unexpected to happen - a key ingredient for creative contents. The missing links, if restored, have the ability to generate new content from existing contexts. They would benefit local businesses and the tourism industry which could more strongly integrate craft knowledge and quality creative contents.



Top: rural area on the outskirts of Cheongju city.
Above left: dried jujube fruit from a local farm. Above right: crafted items sold in a village.

Traditions & Modern Life

Soban are small portable tables that are mainly used for eating as well as reading and writing (*chaeksangban*) and used to be an ubiquitous part of the everyday household. Traditionally in Korea, a dining table could not be shared and the *irinilban* 'one table per person' was the standard. Ordinary households had multiple tables to serve their guests and each one of them was configured to fit the dishes on the table perfectly. Their scale was also measured precisely to make it easier for the host to serve the person and also to make the guest comfortable when eating (Choi 2018).

Today, authentic crafted soban tables are extremely costly and antiques also have hefty price tags. While a majority of the urban population has shifted to modernized dining tables and chairs since the 1960s, the *soban* is used in certain contexts and could still be found at Yukgeori market, in a new form. In one of the designs, it featured foldable aluminum legs for easy storage. Of course the new versions are light years away from the revered handcrafted objects, however they are undeniable extension of a cultural custom that is distinctive of Korean culture itself. The transition of an object in its form and functionality captures the often awkward relationship between tradition and modernity where functionality often overrides the original craft's aesthetic value.



Modern-style soban tables sold at a shop in Yukgeori market.

Exchange

the connections from people to people

Women

“We help each other all the time. If one of us is not around, someone else will come from nearby and take care of the customer. That’s how we work.”

The anonymous food vendors at Yukgeori market informally rely on each other and their faithful customers to run their business. The ladies were cheerful and eager to talk. They all lived around the market in small houses. Something about them reminded me of textile weavers in rural villages of southeast Asia. Sitting side by side, chatting endlessly and working together informally. I read in a journal that the ladies working at rural markets in Korea picked up their goods in nearby mountains and fields - they were sometimes even referred to as ‘vagabonds’ as they instinctively moved from one area to another, and always found a way to get by even during the hardest of times. Watching them sitting and working at markets these days is like reading the last page of an ending chapter. Their presence is often viewed with nostalgia by Korean people.

In the past, Korean women played a significant role within the family household. They could do everything with their hand skills and ancestral knowledge, from embroidery works to food preparation, their dedication and patience were the essential elements of their craftsmanship. As a way of life, the work was never about themselves, but something to provide and support others.

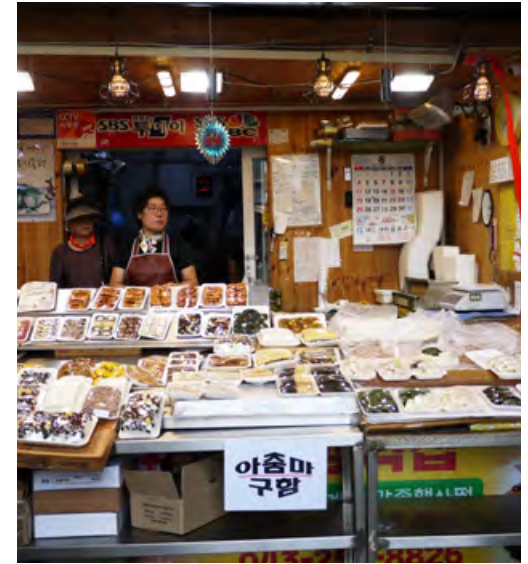


Women vendors and shop owners working at Yukgeori market.

“Creating an embroidery work involves thousands of stitches and requires the patience and self-denial of an ascetic. That was, in fact, the spirit of embroidery; long hours of self-sacrifice labor for the sake of the comfort and happiness of the household members and to make the home environment pleasant and attractive.”

(Bojagi: the Art of Harmony 2011)

As the role and place of women in Korean society continues to change rapidly, craftsmanship will be lived through different relationships, mainly outside the household. The presence of objects will no longer carry the same meaning, forever altering the cultural landscape of Korean everyday living.



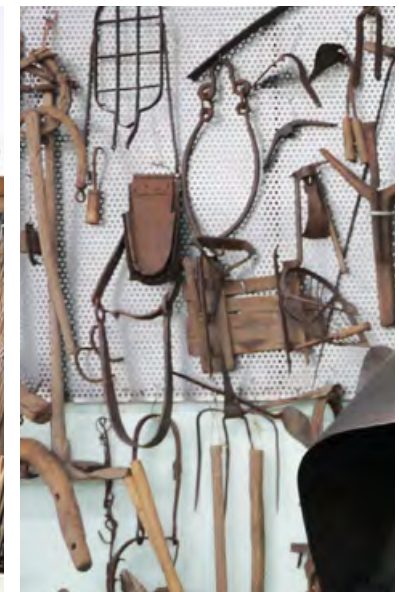
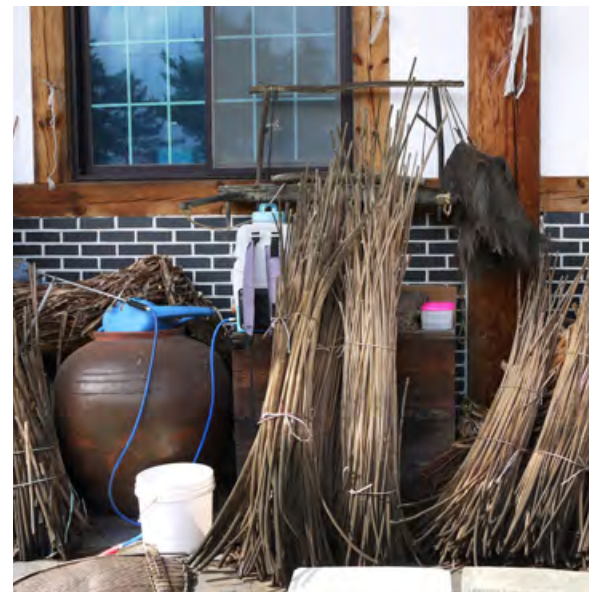
Community of women who work together at a local market in Boeun-gun.

Learning

“We have so many unfulfilled plans behind us, so many promises that have still not been held, that we have the means of rebuilding the future through reviving our heritage in its multiple forms.” (Ricoeur 2008)

The transmission of craft knowledge from one person to another can take place at different levels; between an expert and the general public, between a master and an apprentice, between two family members, between a craftsman and a designer, etc. The shaping of craft knowledge can be deeply affected by the context within which it is transmitted, from very traditional to post-modern, formal or informal.

In Cheongju and nearby cities, a number of craft educational activities are situated in relationship to historical and traditional contexts. Craft culture experiences are mainly designed with the intention to connect the general public with ancestral practices. At the Jikji Museum and the Learning Centre for Metal Type Printing, metal type master Im In Ho makes demonstrations and teaches regularly on weekends to school children and high school students. Free courses sponsored by the government attract the general public, however not many design or craft professionals attend them because they are not being promoted as such.



Top and above left: the Hanji museum in Wongpung-ri offers classes for the general public. Above right: tools hanging on a wall at the blacksmith experience centre in Boeun-gun.

Cheongju is known to be the birthplace of the *Jikji* (by its full name *Buljo Jikji Simche Yo Jeol*) an anthology of Zen Buddhist Teachings which happens to be the first book ever printed with moveable metal type. While the demand for this kind of printing is limited, some traditional books have to be constantly reprinted and the niche popularity of metal type printing has a potential to expand through small scale publishing. However the links between core traditions and contemporary design in this context is not visible. It remains an area to consider in the digital age where a number of young designers are developing an interest toward analog media.

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The Boeun Centre for Cultural Heritage was established through the collaboration of five local master craftsmen to provide learning opportunities for the general public and also longer-term training programmes for young apprentices who have a family background in one of the following disciplines: woodcarving for Buddhist temples, *nakwha* pyrography (a burning technique used on hanji paper or wood), metalsmithing, alcohol brewing, and woodblock printing. Each discipline is taught by a master craftsman and the average age of the apprentices is 30 to 40 years. The centre also works with UNESCO experts in the field of intangible cultural heritage, to share and disseminate information on Korean intangible cultural practices.



Left: Nakwha demonstration by Kim Young-jo. Right: Buddha statue carved by Ha Myeong-suk

During our visit, we had a chance to meet Kim Young-jo, a pyrographer who has been practicing his craft since the last 47 years following a family lineage spanning four centuries, together with Ha Myeong-suk a woodcarving master.

The centre is highly focused on the preservation of skills which have practically no reach in the contemporary arts field. In this context, the survival of traditional skills is supported by a certain type of market demand. In the case of Buddhist sculptures, the demand of Buddha statues is very high and extends internationally. Eighty per cent of the production focuses on temple orders and the remaining twenty per cent on individuals. Despite the marginal nature of this type of craft, it is likely to survive.

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When he was young, Yu Dong-lyeol observed his uncle working as a blacksmith. He initially did not follow in his footsteps but after several years working in a company, he decided that blacksmithing was the right job for him. He trained under the master craftsman Sul Yong-seon who is now 85 years old and still active. After training, Yu set up his own practice in Boeun, then in early 2019 he was solicited to manage the blacksmith experience centre, a studio integrated as part of a museum structure that promotes agriculture, farming and folk culture. He makes and sells products, provides demonstrations of his craft there, mainly for children and families, while teaching middle school apprentices who aspire to this ancient craft. He is also involved with activities at the nearby Boeun Centre for Cultural Heritage's 'Open Studio'.

As a younger generation blacksmith, Yu is optimistic about the future and passionate about his craft. There is something contagious about his optimism. He believes that there are many prospects for young people to work in this field because of the shortage of practitioners and new demands from urban areas. In the last three years, approximately half of the blacksmiths in the area have ceased their business operations. While the demand might have simultaneously decreased, alternative markets have opened up in connection to high-end crafted design and architecture. Yu strongly believes that there is room left for creative innovation in his professional field.



The blacksmith experience centre produces objects for sale and is also a learning centre.

(in)Visibility

“In Chungbuk, there are many artisans but they are scattered across distances and not easy to find.”

According to the majority of the people interviewed, craft makers in Chungbuk spreads across wide distances and are usually outside of urban areas. Sparsely located, they are difficult to find and searching for them is akin to a treasure hunt. Twenty years ago, there were still many villagers who could produce handmade goods of all sorts and finding them by chance was something natural. Today, this type of encounter is close to impossible. Invisible is what craft has become in everyday life contexts.

Jeong Cheol-ho and Noh Jeong-suk of Tomo Studio, a small ceramic studio in Cheongju, are members of a professional network that was set-up in cooperation with other makers living within the Chungbuk area. They felt that mutual support was necessary to overcome some of their common challenges including exposure and market opportunities. They organize events or retail opportunities which are vital for the sustainability of their business operations, expanding their presence in tourism areas including the Cheongju international airport. They believe that while there are many artisans in the region, the majority of them are difficult to reach and work in separate groups. The access to craft knowledge has thus become challenging even from within the local community itself.



Searching and finding Tomo Studio, a contemporary ceramic studio in Cheongju.

While established craft practitioners and artists have relied on their names and reputation to run their businesses, it is increasingly challenging for the young makers to gain recognition as a maker or artist and earn from their creative activities in Korea.

Nationwide, the Korea Craft & Design Foundation (KCDF) has set up various initiatives to revitalize craft through events and business development schemes including a programme targeting craft villages that are famed for their master-level artisans and high-end quality products. Design collaborations, apprenticeship, and market distribution are part of the programme. The production outputs are targeted toward urban consumers living in the Seoul metropolitan area.

Secondly, a Craft Week (craftweek.co.kr) takes place in numerous locations each year in May and invites makers to initiate activities in their local area to stimulate interest in craft and related practices. This event also confirms the density of core activities in and nearby Seoul, and the need to find channels that can facilitate further connections between the centre and the periphery.



From urban to rural contexts, the craft ecology in the Cheongju area spreads over distances.

Supply & Demand

“Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life (...) An extinction is a local event as well as a global one. Extinction is a breakdown of coordination that has unintended and reverberating effects.”

(Tsing et al. 2017)

Chungbuk is a region rich with natural resources and the wood from its forests is either used for firing ceramics or as the raw material for woodcarving arts such as Buddhist temple sculptures. The presence of mountain water and soil also make it an ideal setting for ceramic production. Still, in the majority of craft practices today, makers do not use local natural materials. This contradicts the original principles of craft as a way of life based on local resources and short supply chains. While artisanal food production (e.g. farm to table models or farmers markets) is experiencing global momentum, could similar relationships expand through craft practices in Korea?

There are correlations to be made between the depletion of local cultural knowledge and environmental degradation as they depend on reciprocal relationships that affect larger systems and living arrangements. Even the smallest changes have long-term consequences on human relationships and the cultural contexts that depend on them. Industrialization is now undeniably at the root of the current environmental crisis and this represents an opportunity for craft as a model of sustainable production.



Top: ceramic kiln in Joryeong village.
Above left: industrial version of *ki*, rice winnow. Above right: Jujube tree wood used for woodcarving.

Material supplies for craft practices in Cheongju are currently mostly centralized in specific cities within Korea. Icheon and Yeosu provide clay for most ceramic producers, while Daegu is a centre for textile production. Secondary cities often behave as material hubs for other cities, and Seoul as a dominating urban centre aggregates materials and finished products from all over the country.

While the craft material supply appears to have remained relatively confined within Korean borders, the distribution of everyday products is much more globalized. A shop keeper at Yukgeori market confessed: “handmade products are too expensive and not many people make them these days. I wouldn’t know where to locate them, so I sell factory-made products from China. That’s what my customers buy.” From one of the shelves, he picked a ceramic mug made in a factory in Cheongju but emphasized that the price was more expensive.

The broken relationship between craft makers and sellers has completely transformed the local marketplace that is overflowing with factory items. Interestingly, some of the objects’ functionality and form have remained: pots, bowls, mats, wooden utensils, and even the *jukbuin*, also known as the “bamboo wife” pillow, were common sights at Yukgeori market and other small town markets.

In modern life, the emotional distance between people and the objects they use in everyday life has been altered by industrial efficiency, affordability, and the disposal nature of things. As a consequence, the aesthetic dimension of everyday life has dwindled.



Range of industrial products that retain a semblance of traditional form or function in Korean daily life.

Across Borders

“For many ceramic makers these days, we have to reach out further and support each other in order to sustain our practices. Because the local demand is low, we have to go to Seoul or tourist destinations like Jeju island to distribute our work. I have also set up an international network, with other Asian practitioners to stimulate exchanges and create new opportunities for all of us. Through our international community, we have a built a kiln, combining our expertise and knowledge. It is not a typical Korean kiln because it uses influences from many other countries.”

On the main road of Wongpung-ri, Goesan-gun, a sign to the left hand side points to Joryeong Folk Craft and Art Village. It is a short distance on a steep road, and rather than a village, it is a collection of a few house structures. This is where Kang Kyung-hun set up his studio-shop. In the past, many woodcarvers worked in this village but since their passing Kang is the only practicing craftsman. He used to teach ceramics in Seoul and relocated to Goesan with his wife where they can enjoy more affordable space as well as the mountain environment, ideal for ceramic production. They are the modern generation of artisans, with a keen interest in experiments and global connections.

Every year, Kang runs an international exhibition of ceramicists in his town to promote cultural exchanges and develop exhibitions overseas, particularly in southeast Asia and China.



Visit to Kang Kyung-hun's ceramic studio and shop in Joryeong village, Goesan-gun.



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Mr Han lives in a small village in Goesan-gun, the hometown where his family has been living for the past five generations. He used to be a banker, moved around South Korea and travelled all over the world. During his trips, he picked up various natural materials including seeds, branches and other random pieces. He then relentlessly worked on crafting objects depicting animals and other creatures. He is particularly fond of the *horangi*, the mythical tiger from Korean folk culture. “That’s because, even if I make a mistake, the *horangi* always ends up looking good”. Han’s self-taught technique uses woodcarving and consists of unconventional assemblage that cannot be classified. He insists that he does not make craft to earn money and refuses to sell his work. He stores his hundreds, if not thousands of small sculptures in plastic tubs, while keeping a few on display around his house. Each object has a background story some of which are inspired by Korean folk literature, others by a journey in a foreign country. He is a prolific maker, caring of details, intuitive, honest, spontaneous, curious, touching. “Curiosity is the most important thing in life!” He cannot stop smiling and laughing as he talks about his work. His passionate attitude and talent is what makes him a true craftsman.

As we stood in his garden before we said goodbye, he shared one last thought: “You know, you are the first foreign person to visit me here. You are very brave to come all the way to this small village and do this research!”

Restoration

people, craft and Cheongju

“In order to put Korean culture back into human dynamics, it is necessary to pay close attention to how Koreans create, produce, adopt, reformulate, reproduce, and discard cultural elements. In other words, Korean culture should not be treated as a separate entity but as something existing in people.”

(Yi 2003)

“It is not merely a matter of transforming minds in order to the requirements of our contemporary world. It is also necessary to change attitudes, customs and lifestyles. Preparing citizens for the future is as much about giving them the means to think as about giving them the freedom and will to do so. If devoid of the strength of will and the certainty of decision, knowledge is either suffering or sheer bliss.”

(Bindé 1997)

Post-Industrial Futures

A market seller pointed to a dusty plastic crate on the floor.

“These are the only handmade products I sell in my store.”

The ceramic pieces had visibly been sitting there for months if not years without much attention. Their quality was poor, yet interesting because of their naiveté. Seeing them in between the piles of white plastic bowls felt like an archeological find.

The anonymous objects, mysterious, without any indication of who had made them silently expressed something. I picked up the best looking one and bought it for 3000 Won.



Top: pile of industrial products at the store where the last handmade items were found in Boeun.
Below: a humble handmade clay object purchased at the store.



I Have a Request

“The artistic craft people do not have a connection with the local community. The two groups do not communicate with each other enough. I would like to see more tangible actions to mend this broken relationship. So I have a request. Could you please highlight this point in your research?”



Meeting Kim Man-su at his ceramic studio.

The potential for Cheongju to behave as a city laboratory for creative craft experiments resides in its proximity to rural areas where local assets and creativity endure, together with the surviving small-scale urban structures (e.g. markets, street shops) that are likely to transition (if not disappear) in the next decade - both aspects are fragile and will need to be regenerated by the next generations through a durable and culturally meaningful plan.

Restoration begins as a process of identifying various links while analyzing situations where social and cultural challenges are manifested. In that respect, the present research is only a small beginning reflecting a wider reality: the disconnect between craft and localities, the pervasiveness of industrial processes, the displacement of beauty outside of everyday life, the global narratives that affect local livelihoods. Cultural and artistic projects need to consider those realities in connection to different groups, placing the people at the heart of their endeavour.

The sustainability of a creative culture depends on its connection with the local people first. In the context of Cheongju and its vicinity, there is evidence of craft and local cultural assets yet the divide between craft and local people is now deep. As the creation of objects has an impact of a broader set of values that shape everyday life, craft is directly tied to the notion of quality of life and the possibilities to distribute higher living standards for all. Craft cannot be separated from this social reality.

Rather than a mere form of artistic expression, it represents a solution to restore broken links.



[Within Ordinary Life]

The application of craft knowledge outside of its own realm and beyond art and design to reach other fields such as food culture, environmental sustainability, village communities, local livelihoods including markets would grow its relevance in the present world.

Currently the life of Korean craft resides primarily within objects and their *imagined worlds*: traditional culture preservation, art and design, as well as historic representations and symbols of the past. In that sense, craft lives within certain boundaries, outside of the real life contexts and as such, it follows patterns of predictability. While ordinary situations are challenging because they are in flux, it is through them that craft can have an impact across generations and generate a more culturally diverse ecology: bridging the urban and the rural, re-thinking models of production in relationship to ethical modes of consumption, connecting master artisans with humble shopkeepers, balancing local life and tourism.

While the value of craft as cultural heritage is considerable, the dynamic life of this heritage must find creative ways to participate in present contexts instead of staying confined within museums, institutions or artistic events. Rather than a mere symbolic expression of the past or a contemporary form of art, craft must be viewed as a solution and a means to create change locally and globally.

“Context is a space that generates meanings by generating real and possible relationships but context cannot be fully anticipated (...)

We need to think through how planning, sustainability, and design can best work together, both as correctives to market failure and as sources of social policy that do not rely entirely on efficiencies measured by price and consumer demand.

If we recognize that ordinary human beings have significant capacities to plan and design their own futures, we will have stronger connections between our ideas and the values and motives of those whom we actually claim to serve and to represent.”

(Appadurai 2013)

[Craft Data & Research]

The creative transformation of a place depends on informed research and in-depth analysis from multiple perspectives. In the case of traditional craft cultures, this in-depth research is also key for its sustainable development and future credibility. Craft practices need to be researched in relationship to the various contexts in which it can deliver impact: sustainable production methods that address industrial market failures, social innovation models for small-scale industries, rural environments and natural resources, professional networks, and urban-rural cooperation. Collecting more data as well as recording stories and case studies are needed to connect various dots and formulate a real plan of action together with local communities.

In the case of highly localized resources and knowledge, access should be managed as closely as possible with the local communities. When this condition is met, it becomes possible to share the benefits.

(Weber 2005)

Generally, social studies on craft but also on Korean cultures remain scarce and are especially limited overseas. There is a shortage of independently-led research on local experiences and informal knowledge assets, particularly in terms of contents that focus on everyday cultures and small-scale enterprises. This is pointed out by a number of anthropologists, sociologists and also people working in the creative fields. The unlocking of new craft potential depends on the future possibilities of applying and marketing craft knowledge through innovative and realistic approaches. Craft's relevance will stay limited if it is marginalized as a practice without a pragmatic role or social function in the present. Increased research efforts are therefore essential to make sense of craft in relationship to social change. Those efforts should be coordinated among local communities together with institutions, academia, researchers, small entrepreneurs and creative practitioners.

[Open City]

An open city is one which belongs to the people and lives through human interactions and differences. The principle of an 'open city' is based on unresolved narratives and encounters (Sennett 2019). It is a context in which craft has a potential to evolve organically from the bottom-up and be re-introduced as a key element in shaping everyday life.

Away from homogeneity and regular patterns, the open city is a platform where culture actively participates in people's lives and where people shape the culture of their own place. In the manner of past generations who knew how to organize themselves informally, the activation of open networks and exchanges between different local actors can only diversify contents, resources and approaches. With its flexible structure, the open city enables the reciprocal relationships that are necessary for the dynamic transmission of knowledge in correlation with creative approaches that responds to present social needs.

In the case of Cheongju, the city platform can operate in relationship to remote rural areas. Dispersion and distance embody the opportunity to discover the cultural layers of areas situated "in between". Such areas are now increasingly challenged by economic and demographic transitions especially in heavily industrialized countries. In the last decades, cultural and artistic initiatives have been implemented to revitalize some of those areas with a focus on social issues (e.g. Echigo-

Tsumari Art Field). Using creative means and locality as assets, this type of initiative re-arranged the broken relationships between urban and rural areas. Creative cultures, including craft, became incentives for people to venture into unknown territory in a world that has often become too predictable and homogenous. In that context, the ambiguity became a strength and chance encounters were the fuel for creativity to grow and human relationships to improve.

The path toward a dynamic cultural life also depends on localized production and consumption where producers, sellers and customers develop close bonds. To achieve that, the city has to become an enabling platform where people can re-connect with each other while creating the right balance between supply and demand. The lower circulation of consumer goods and a higher social and cultural focus will be necessary for craft to support an ecology that is steeped in local resources and is environmentally sustainable.

By striking a balance between spontaneous actions and durable planning, Cheongju can be a regional hub through which craft and local cultures transition toward a balanced life - combining grassroots networks and digital communication, initiated by collaborative efforts and based on the principles of the open city.

The Right to Beauty

“In the past, even twenty years ago, almost everyone in this village used to know how to weave a basket, but now not a single person knows how to do that. The place of craft has completely changed in our society.”

(Kim Young-jo)

Locations

Blacksmith Experience Centre, Boeun-gun
Boeun Centre for Agriculture
Boeun Centre for Cultural Heritage 'Open Studio'
Boeun City
Boeun Market
Goesan-gun
Cheongju City
Cheongju Craft Biennale Site (former Tobacco Factory)
Joryeong Folk Craft and Art Village, Goesan-gun
Jeungpyeong
Jeungpyeong Market
Jikji Museum, Cheongju
Korea Craft Museum, Cheongju
Local market, Cheongju
Songnisan National Park
Shinpueong Hanji (Hanji Museum), Goesan-gun
Tomo Studio, Cheongju
Wongpung-ri, Goesan-gun
Yukgeori Market, Cheongju

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CR Collective, Seoul
Jangwang Market, Seoul
Korea Craft & Design Foundation, Seoul
Namdaemun Market, Seoul
National Folk Museum of Korea, Seoul

People

Anonymous hanbok maker
Anonymous rice cake maker and seller
Anonymous rice cracker maker and seller
Anonymous hardware shop owner
Anonymous household item shop keeper
Anonymous soban table seller
Anonymous vegetable sellers
Anonymous restaurant owner
Anonymous hanji paper shop keeper
Anonymous hanji museum staff
Anonymous craft museum staff
Choi Yong-jin (최용진), Blacksmith
Ha Myeong-suk (하명석), Woodcarver
Han Myung-cheol (한명철), Maker
Jeong Cheol-ho (정철호), Ceramicist
Jin Jeonghyun (진정현), KCDF
Kang Kyung-hun (강경훈), Ceramicist
Kim Man-su (김만수), Ceramicist
Kim Young-jo (김영조), Pyrographer
Noh Jeong-suk (노정숙), Ceramic Product Designer
Oh Ga young (오가영), KCDF
Oh Sewon (오세원), CR Collective
Yu Dong-lyeol (유동렬), Blacksmith

Objects

(selected encounters)



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