

3rd International Conference “Manga in Society: Beyond Economism”

Sept. 14-15, 2011 Bucheon, Korea

Summary

Korea’s manhwa is, disputably, the nearest relative to Japan’s manga, in regard to both proliferation and aesthetics. This alone would have been reason enough for the International Manga Research Center (imrc) to hold a conference in the neighboring country. Hopes were further raised by the fact that more than 80 Korean universities educate artists under the name of “manhwa.” Bucheon University, a two-year junior college with a remarkable department for digital cartoon and moving images, is one of these institutions, and it generously hosted the first part of our conference. Located in Bucheon, one of Seoul’s former bedtowns, the college relates itself to the extraordinarily successful efforts of the so-called “manhwa city:” Bucheon has been shaping its identity by leaning heavily on manhwa, including an international comics festival (BICOF, since 1998) and a manhwa museum (since 2001).

Against this backdrop, and in an attempt to avoid the favorization of one specific university or group, such as the Kyoto Seika University alumni association, the imrc opted for the Korea Manhwa Contents Agency

(KOMACON) as the co-organizer of its 3rd international conference. Kim Byung-Heon, president of KOMACON, and especially Park Seok-Hwan, head of KOMACON’s content business team, supported our endeavor, although the idea of a scholarly event was obviously new to them. In Korea, “manhwa” (designating mainly digital cartoons, animation and games these days) has been receiving astonishing government funds for the last decade. These subsidies, however, are meant to promote two things, preferably in tandem: contents industry and national identity. Thus, Korean manhwa research, up to and including a few doctoral students, focuses more on contemporary and future developments than historical background, more on commercial or institutional purposes and respectively “utilizable” results than critical questioning and multi-perspectivity. This was, at least, the impression which most of the Korean conference papers gave.

Out of the conference’s 15 speakers, KOMACON chose seven, while the imrc invited eight, among them Ms. Leem Hye Jeong (Korea), Ms. Gan Sheuo Hui (Malaysia), Ms. Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto (Belgium, imrc), and Mr. Patrick Galbraith (USA), researchers who combine an expertise in Japanese discourse with globally informed critical perspectives. Sociologist Chen Chung Wei (Taiwan) was not able to attend the conference in person, but kindly submitted his paper. The keynote speeches were given by myself and Mr. Han Chang-Wan, board member of KOMACON and professor at Sejong University Seoul, where he chairs the Institute for Manwha and Animation Industry. As distinct from other speakers, some of whom are his doctoral students, such as Ms. Lee Seung Jin and manhwa historian Mr. Park In-ha, Prof. Han offered a definition of manhwa as a means of critical humour and a manifestation of cultural alternatives, from which he deduced that manhwa has to go hand in hand with the newest technologies in order to unfold its

social potential. Korean webtoons, brand toons, game-prologue comics and educational manhwa were raised as recent examples along with the “animated paintings” of media artist Lee Lee-nam (b. 1969), which recommend themselves as both gallery exhibits and iPhone apps.²

Initially, the imrc had suggested “Manga and Society: Beyond Economism” as the conference’s title out of concern for self-critical reflection on manga studies after March 11 (that is, the earthquake, the tsunami and the accident of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima). Since the early 2000s, Japanese manga research has been focusing on three main topics: firstly, globalization, secondly, fan cultures (especially otaku and fujoshi [rotten girls]), and thirdly, the cultural and industrial implications of “media mix” crossovers. But the aftermath of March 11 triggered questions about manga’s role in society, that is, its ability to raise awareness about issues which concern society at large, going beyond affective communities on the one hand and neo-liberalist economism on the other. In conjunction with this, political thinking, previously confined to newspaper cartoons (apart from Kobayashi Yoshinori’s essay manga), has regained attention, and established habits of reading/consuming manga have become subject to scrutinization. This includes critical efforts to balance advantages and shortcomings, for example, in regard to fujoshi discourse, or manga museums. Itō Yū asked “success to whom?” in his discussion of the Kyoto International Manga Museum.

Precisely this effort to consider multiple perspectives seemed to be absent from most Korean papers, which provoked questions such as: What kind of aesthetic innovations do actually result from business promotion, for example in Bucheon and at KOMACON? In what way does the employment of digital technology—in webtoons, Lee Lee-Nam’s “animated paintings,” or the manhwa museum’s permanent exhibition—contribute to recognizing and approving differences and to changing one’s view, in other words, what is the critical surplus of interactive devices beyond just exhibiting technical virtuosity and economic power? Has the excessive use of the internet led to a public plurality of opinions and more political diversity? (In Japan, it has proved vital for political cartoons after March 11, when TV stations and newspapers supported the government’s restricted information policy, as Ron Stewart pointed out.) What kind of “education” could be facilitated by educational manhwa, in addition to webtoons the only booming branch of Korean comics today? (In Park In-ha’s talk, those manhwa’s “education” was revealed to be a mere label in many cases, and merely juxtaposed against “entertainment” as its real content.) How do dedicated manhwa fans respond to governmental policy? (In Japan, the majority would suspect “state usurpation,” as Yamanaka Chie commented. In her comparison of manga/manhwa museums, she pictured two extreme cases: the Korean pursuit of having manhwa sanctioned by the nation state vs. the Japanese readers’ scepticism, resulting in an extended private space at the expense of the public sphere.)

Admittedly, the conference gave the overall impression of KOMACON speakers and imrc speakers talking at cross purposes: on the one hand, a devotion to digital technology and its economic potential, combined with a demand for more subsidies, equating “society” with the “state” and the “nation”, and, consequently, an uninhibited top-down perspective (cartoonist Lee Kyung Rae was the only one who voiced doubts about manhwa’s ability to fulfill government expectations); on the

other hand, a favorization of a bottom-up perspective, taking its departure from manga readers (not limited to Japan), strong historical concerns, including reference to print-based comics, and a dedication to critical scholarship. (Yoshimura Kazuma, for example, called for an “imagination” in manga studies which would have allowed for including the risks of nuclear power in the reception of Barefoot Gen—and for imagining new forms of publication independent from the established industrial ones.)

From a pragmatic short-termed point of view, Bucheon may probably benefit more from exchange with Angoulême than Kyoto, since the Japanese local and national governments cannot stand the comparison in regard to subsidies. Researchers with a broad field of view, however, may relate the differences, which emerged at the conference, to fundamental characteristics of Korean and Japanese comics cultures, among them the relevance of magazine serializations (which have worked only in Japan so far and begin to see their decline even there), the amount of theoretical research specifically focused on manga/manhwa (which, in Korea, has possibly to be looked for outside of the manhwa field), the possibility that the same Korean speakers might give different talks at a non-Korean venue, and the fact that “manhwa” professors in Korea are mainly cartoonists and western-style painters by education, whereas in Japan, such university positions are being held by professional mangaka who have gained their laurels within the manga industry. Insofar as the Bucheon conference has brought people together, who are in one way or another involved in manga/manhwa research, it has laid the foundation for further and more profound exchange, at any rate. Many thanks to everyone in Bucheon and Kyoto who helped making this possible!

Jaqueline Berndt

(On the part of the imrc, the Bucheon conference was organized by an executive committee, whose members were Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto, Inomata Noriko, Leem Hye Jeong and myself.)