**Art beyond Morality and Metaphysics:**

**Late Joseon Korean Aesthetics[[1]](#endnote-1)**

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Abstract: In the history of Chinese philosophy, Mozi calls music a “waste of resources,” considering it an aristocratic extravagance that does not benefit the everyday people. In its defense, Confucians highlight music’s moral and metaphysical qualities, arguing that music aids in moral cultivation and that music’s form mimics the structure of reality. The aim of this paper is to show that Korean philosophers provide yet another reason to think music is important. Music, and art in general, was used to express a national identity at a time Korean philosophers were beginning to develop their own aesthetic consciousness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A cultural movement called *Joseonpoong* (조선풍), “Joseon wind”, marked a shift away from Sinocentrism and towards Korea’s own unique value and practices. The new attempt to justify art’s value apart from its relationship to morality or metaphysics set Joseon thinkers apart from their Chinese predecessors. Using art for identity expression allowed the Koreans to reconceive art’s value while Sinocentric cosmological and cultural views were being challenged with the introduction of western knowledge. Art also became a tool for reversing hermeneutic injustice as new artistic practices and standards allowed the Koreans to meaningfully engage with previously neglected aspects of their lived lives.

I: Introduction

It is well known that Confucianism highlights art’s relationship to moral cultivation. Though many discussions focus on music, other art forms such as archery, poetry, and dance had both a moral and aesthetic dimension to them.[[2]](#endnote-2) It seems that three general views emerge in early Chinese philosophy regarding art’s value: first, art is valuable because it results from a sense of *fittingness*, a kind of moral sensibility; second, art is valuable because it gives us important *know-how* that promotes social order and peace; and finally, art is valuable because its form or structure mimics the metaphysical structures that govern the world. First articulated during the time of classical Confucians (fifth century BCE), these attitudes prevail for millennia down to the Neo-Confucians.

The aim of this paper is to show that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, yet another factor comes to the foreground as a reason to value art: its connection to identity. The Joseon (the Korean dynasty from 1392-1897) intelligentsia reconceived art in a way that distanced them from the traditional Chinese Confucian and Neo-Confucian understandings. Joseon remained a tributary state to the Chinese Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, and all its cultural standards came from China, but with a new movement called *Joseonpoong* (“Joseon wind”), Korean artists and philosophers developed their own aesthetic standards and expressions in the late Joseon period. Joseonpoong marked an important deviation from the Chinese Confucian attitude towards art which focuses on tradition, learnedness, social cohesion, and moral cultivation. During the Joseon dynasty, art becomes a source of national identity, the expression of the authentically Korean; they wanted to discuss Korea and the present, not China and the past. For Korean thinkers, art reflected lived life, not metaphysical principles; they painted real-life scenes, focused on collective music-making, and wrote about topics that were meaningful to the everyday person. The new attempt to justify art’s value apart from its relationship to morality or metaphysics sets Joseon thinkers apart from their Chinese predecessors. Art thereby becomes newly expressive during the Joseon dynasty, a precursor to the modern attitude that art is foremost a form of (personal) expression. This new view of art was important because it showed that one need not invoke metaphysics or morality to explain art’s value. It also showed how art can be used to address epistemic injustice. Art, as an avenue for self-expression, allowed the Koreans to invent practices and concepts that cohered with their everyday lives, addressing hermeneutic injustice accompanying Sinocentrism.

II: Art in Chinese Philosophy

Art plays a prominent role in classical Chinese philosophy. *Mei* (美), "beauty", is an important term that appears at least twelve times in the *Analects* and over eighty times in *Xunzi* (Tan 2015, 186). Passages from *The Book of Odes* are extensively weaved into the *Analects*, and Kongzi mentions art on multiple occasions as a meaningful thing to pursue, exhorting his disciples to “explore widely in your cultivation of the arts” (7.6). Being skilled in the arts—especially music—is considered part of being a “complete” person (14.12). Poetry and music were considered necessary elements of the proper development of a Confucian moral agent, so Kongzi thought that “an aesthetic education that places music at its core ought to be the foundation of a “humane” (*ren* 仁) society” (Tan 2015, 185). And he practiced what he preached; Kongzi sang and played at least two instruments (the stone chime and zither), and tradition claims that he had a hand in editing the *Book of Odes* (Huang 1963, 49).

Confucians seemed to have valued art for reasons that can be generalized into three broad views: that art gives important social *know-how*; that art is conceptually tied to the notion of *fittingness* (a moral sensibility); and that art’s form mirrors or tracks the metaphysical form of reality. All of these views have important connections to *li* (礼), translated as ritual, rites, propriety, or ceremony. Confucianism focused on *li* as the foremost way to create social order and cultivate one’s sense of humanity. Contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Weiming understands *li* as “an authentic way of establishing human-relatedness” and as “the movement of self-transformation, the dialectical path through which man becomes more human (1972 194, 197). *Li*, then, is both social and individual, a practice that requires connection with others whose benefits can be reaped both at the societal and individual level.

Closely related to *li* is music (*yue*樂), which was often performed alongside ritualistic ceremonies. In fact, ever since the classical age of the Western Zhou dynasty (1045-771 BCE), the term “ritual” (*li* 禮) was joined with the term “music” (*yue* 樂) to create a hybrid term, *liyue*, to signify the “ultimate means to achieve order” (Zuo forthcoming, 1). *Li* and *yue* were conceptual pairs (Garrison 2012, 214); musical performances brought out what is essential in the various expressions of rituals. Like rituals, music was to be justified and valued because of its contribution to social cohesion and development of moral character (Harold 2016, 343). Just as rituals bring order at the individual and societal levels, music brings harmony to both the individual as well as society.

An important feature of music that lends itself well to ritualand moral cultivation is its performative nature. Music is rarely, if ever, enjoyed in the abstract, and when ancient Chinese philosophers discussed music, it was never focused on assessing music taken out of its  
performative context (Ibid., 349). And music is rarely incidental; much trial-and-error and theorizing go into creating harmonies out of different tones and timbre. As mentioned, for the Confucians, music was continuous with formalized dance, poetry, and ritual. The fact that music and ritual both require deliberate effort and action—i.e. making music, performing rituals, acting properly— explains why they form a conceptual pair. Both music and ritual require a sensitive practitioner.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Music and ritual’s shared performative nature allows music to provide valuable social know-how. In a broad sense, rituals aim to teach individuals where they “stand” in society and allow them to practice living out their social “positions”.[[4]](#endnote-4) Music reinforces social order as it models harmonious change finding a rhythm over time (Garrison 2012, 210). Seeing how disparate tones and rhythms fit into a harmonious whole, individuals learn first-hand how they themselves would similarly fit into the harmonious social whole—and therefore, music helps one understand (through symbolism) the social role one occupies and how one should act (Ibid., 215). Learning social know-how through engagement with music also allows one to personalize the practice of rituals. Moral principles or truths, if to be practiced, need to go through personal judgment—and art provides the opportunity to practice this (Gier 2001, 285). The moral heart-mind(*xin*心), which the philosophers sought to affect, is more connected to praxis than theory as it was thought of as the physico-psychological center predisposing a person to act a certain way (Tan 2015, 188). For these reasons, Confucians—Xunzi most explicitly—argued that music cannot be superfluous as Mozi contended.

In addition to the practical benefit of promoting moral cultivation, art was also valued for its theoretical association. In particular, art was related to *fittingness*, which is closely tied to moral rightness in Confucianism. Tan provides a fascinating discussion of how the aesthetic sense of beauty follows from a more practical sense of goodness:

Etymologically, 美 (mei: beauty) comprises two parts: the character for “ram” (yang 羊) above the character for “large” (da 大), suggesting that “when a ram is large, it is beautiful.” A fatter ram offers more meat and fulfills, first of all, the utilitarian function of food to satisfy hunger. It is only when one’s hunger has been satisfied that one begins to taste; after all, flavor is meaningless to one who is famished. A fatter ram satisfies hunger, enables one to taste, and in so doing, enables sensory pleasure– the basis of the aesthetic appreciation of the beautiful (2015, 186).

The “beauty” of the ram is contingent on the ram’s ability to meet a non-aesthetic need (hunger). Aesthetic sensibility is closely tied to a non-aesthetic sense of goodness, and in this way, we see how artistic achievement and moral rightness are related in ancient Chinese thought. Garrison’s etymological account of the word harmony (hé和) shows a similar pattern. The idea of harmony, born out of the culinary science of blending flavors, was adapted to refer to sonic harmony in music theory, and eventually became a way to signal the general connection of two things (2012, 210). Harmony, then, is generalizable to the art of bringing things together, and so perhaps it isn’t surprising that for Confucianism, harmony and beauty are moral concepts.

Of course, it is important to remember that there wasn’t a strict division between the aesthetic and the moral in the ancient world.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, it is noteworthy that in Confucian thought, aesthetic beauty tracks something right, good, or ideal in the non-aesthetic realm. In fact, concepts of beauty and harmony have a metaphysical basis in ancient Chinese thought. It has been noted that the pentatonic scale—the scale in which ancient Chinese music was composed—“corresponds to the cosmological theory that all life is the result of interaction of the Five Elements (wood, metal, fire, water, earth)” (Huang 1963, 52). Corresponding to the Five Elements, there were five notes (C,D,E,G,A) from which music was composed, and five tastes (sour, bitter, sweet, acrid, and salty) from which *hé*, or harmonious flavor, resulted.[[6]](#endnote-6) The pentatonic scale also corresponded to the seasons, the four notes apart from the tonic note possessing seasonal associations. The Chou dynasty (1115-722 BCE) went as far as to make monthly associations with scales as it used a different musical mode each month in court ceremonies (Goldron 1968, 65-67, 70). Music was also correlated with *yin* and *yang* (Wiant 1965, 135), and Xunzi correlates music with *qi* (氣), a primal psycho-physical force that permeates all things in the world.[[7]](#endnote-7) Xunzi writes that music is “sufficient to bring order to the myriad changes within [people]” as “sounds and music enter into people deeply and transform people quickly” (2014, 218-219). For the Confucians and Neo-Confucians, music’s efficacy is closely related to its metaphysical origins.

The emphasis on art’s connection to morality and metaphysics continues into Neo-Confucianism. During the Song dynasty (960-1279), a number of musical reforms were carried out because the court feared the instruments’ pitches had veered away from the original pitches used during the Western Zhou dynasty, a time from which ceremonial music originates. The first reform was initiated by Emperor Taizu (太祖r. 960-976) because he worried the ceremonial music was too highly pitched (Zuo forthcoming, 13). Incorrect pitches put the court music at risk of falling out of harmony, which would in turn put the court’s (i.e. the dynasty’s) legitimacy at risk—so a number of reforms were initiated during the Song dynasty (Ibid., 1).

The Neo-Confucians weren’t seeking to restore their sounds out of sheer respect for tradition. Instead, they sought an independently existing pitch standard, a source of all cosmic order at the center of the universe; the desire to replicate the past came from the conviction that their predecessors correctly understood the metaphysics of the standard pitch and “translated” it into musical tones (Ibid., 27). What remained constant throughout the reforms was the conviction that good music reflects cosmic coherence because the nature of music is closely tied to the nature of the universe (Ibid., 2).

As evident, Confucians and Neo-Confucians were deeply concerned with the effect music had through metaphysical means, and the connection between music and metaphysics became quite elaborate in Neo-Confucianism. However, during the Joseon dynasty, Korean philosophers moved away from the moral and metaphysical understandings of music. In the next section, I will provide the cultural context for the ideological shift.

III: Introducing Joseonpoong

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Korean philosophers’ attitude towards art began to shift. A cultural movement called *Joseonpoong* (조선풍 朝鮮風)— meaning “Joseon wind”, coined by Park Ji-Won (박지원1737-1805)[[8]](#endnote-8)— sought to break out of Sinocentric frames of thought and recognize Joseon’s own cultural value. Politically, Joseon was a tributary state to the Ming and Qing dynasties, which meant that Joseon more or less enjoyed political autonomy as long as she participated in diplomatic exchanges and offered “tribute” (i.e., gifts) as a token of submission. As a subordinate state, Joseon also looked to China for culture, so philosophies such as Confucianism and Buddhism became prominent in Korea, and in the arts, too, Chinese methods and standards were adopted. However, during the late Joseon period, Korean artists began to develop their own aesthetic consciousness and pursued new subject matters and methods that captured what is unique about Korean landscape, language, and customs.

This new cultural movement had a more down-to-earth tone than Chinese Confucian and Neo-Confucian attitudes toward art. Joseonpoong pursued “truth” in the everyday, using the artist’s subjectivity and consciousness as the starting point instead of pursuing moral cultivation or metaphysical truth (Han 2017, 321). Accurately portraying Joseonesque emotions and mindsets became a way to express truth through literature, and this conviction led late Joseon artists to use “minor” materials such as Korean proverbs, folk songs, and customs as literary subject matters and poeticize dialects, slang, and place names (Ibid.). Joseon scholars attempted to overcome the traditional attitude of Sinocentrism by affirming the existence of a Korean nationhood. Accordingly, they developed and strengthened their awareness of an identity that is distinct from the Chinese; they wanted to accurately understand the Joseon existence itself. They founded “Joseonology,” a study of the language, history, geography, and industry of Joseon, and examined folk practices (often based on seasonal changes) with great affection. For the first time, literary works in hangul (한글, the Korean alphabet) appeared, and several unique styles in painting and calligraphy were developed.

Philosophically, a general movement away from rationalism towards empiricism accompanied Joseonpoong’s more down-to-earth aesthetic aims. Being exposed to different schools of philosophy (both eastern and western) led Joseon philosophers to realize that Neo-Confucianism “was not a complete set of ideas in itself, but merely one of the philosophical frameworks, among others, containing the partial truths and moral imperatives of the world” (Ahn 2018, 111). Accordingly, Joseon thinkers embraced critical inquiry, emphasizing proof and verification at the heart of their engagement with the Confucian classical tradition at a time when the norm was to (dogmatically) adhere to Neo-Confucian interpretations of Confucian classics, especially those of Zhu Xi (Ibid., 108). Joseon philosophers largely came to see abstract metaphysical debates as futile and vain, and prominent thinkers such as Park Che-Ga (박제가 1750-1815) and Park Ji-Won stressed the importance of practical knowledge, arguing that scholars needed to pursue economics, agriculture, and sciences along with philosophy (Ibid., 110). Believing the value of scholarship lies in its use, they maintained that academic teachings that leave ambiguous its application is not true scholarship.

I believe that the Joseon tendency to distance themselves from abstract metaphysical debates and the desire to establish Korea’s own national identity culminated in the change in attitude towards art as well. Ideological differences led Korean philosophers away from the moral and metaphysical conception of art. Art’s subjects became quotidian, and its aims became more pragmatic in the sense that art had more to do with expression and enjoyment rather than moral cultivation or metaphysical truth-seeking. In his essay “Kiyeron”, Jeong Yak-Yong (정약용1762-1836), a leading late Joseon philosopher, “distinguishes men and animals not by ethics, but by the possession of “arts and techniques,” raising these to be, along with ethics, an expression of man’s pre-eminent wisdom” (Kalton 1975, 44). Art became an avenue through which an excellence apart from moral cultivation or theoretical rightness can be achieved. We see these patterns emerge in Korean music, literature, and painting.

IV: Art in Joseon Dynasty

There was a blossoming of cultural activities among the artistic elites of Joseon in the eighteenth century, and it seems to have led the elites to shed their stereotypes regarding music, which in turn changed their attitude towards music (Song 2017, 320). An important factor contributing to the change in attitude towards music was the rejection of the idea that music is for a specific purpose or function; a growing awareness of “musical autonomy” cognized music as an art form that is purely for appreciation (Ibid.). Accordingly, musical practices transformed from a practice aimed at individual and group moral development to a shared social practice for the sake of enjoyment. Scholars and musicians moved away from the belief that music is for the proper development of moral dispositions (바른 성정 性情) and embraced the belief that music is for sharing and enjoying (Ibid., 321). Once we investigate the musical activities of the Joseon cultural elites, we see that they considered music a hobby with “the charm (멋) of breathing together and sharing” (Ibid.). Hong Dae-Yong (홍대용 1731-1783), a philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer, thought that instead of trying to understand music’s benefits in a schematic sense, we should embrace the more general idea that music adds richness to life (“음악은 삶을 윤택하게 해 준다”) (Ibid., 333). This broadening of music’s benefits suggests that appreciating music did not have to rely on its moral benefits, which shows a marked departure from the earlier Confucians’ tendency to relate music to the metaphysical and moral. The fact that new, foreign instruments such as the Chinese dulcimer (양금 洋琴) were integrated into the Korean musical scene provides an especially poignant comparison with the musical reforms during the Song dynasty.

One might think that the growingly social and enjoyment-based nature of music in the late Joseon period is irrelevant to, or at least doesn’t mark a departure from, classical Confucian and Neo-Confucian attitude towards music because the former deals with popular/folk music, not court music that has to do with ceremonial rites. However, Joseon thinkers’ changing conception of art deals not only with popular/folk music, but also with court music and music *per se*; it rejected the metaphysics that gave music its legitimacy and efficacy in classical Confucianism. Also, though court music is most explicitly discussed in relation to metaphysics in Confucianism, Confucian and Neo-Confucian thoughts on music applied to both court music and popular music. Kongzi talks about arts in general needing to be an integral part of education, writing that part of being a complete person is being accomplished in the arts and acculturated by ritual and music. It is important that he specifies ritual and music separately from the arts— he explicitly considers both ritual music and (popular) arts to be necessary for education, so to say that the Confucian attitude towards music only applies to court music would be to draw an artificial line where Kongzi did not see one. Lastly, it might seem that music accompanying court ritual is not the type of music that should be seen as a means for identity expression. However, there were movements to nationalize the music in Korean court rituals as well (more will be said about this soon).

In addition to music, Joseonpoong also brought changes in literature and painting. Stories were written in hangul, the Korean alphabet, for the first time; *The Tale of Hong Gil-Dong* (홍길동전 洪吉童傳), a tantalizing story of an illegitimate son of a nobleman who steals from the rich and corrupt aristocrats (not unlike Robin Hood), was written in 1612 by Huh Gyun (허균 1569-1618). Pansori (판소리), traditional Korean music, also inspired fiction, and works based on orally transmitted lyrics—mostly dealing with ordinary people and their lives—appeared in the late seventeenth century. Park Ji-Won wrote eleven novels—nine of which survived—and most were sharp social commentaries critiquing the shallow and hypocritical ruling class. *Yangbanjun* (양반전) satirizes the pride, entitlement, and uselessness (무능성) of *yangbans* (양반), the Joseon aristocrats; *Kwangmunjajun* (광문자전) juxtaposes a morally upright beggar named Kwang-Mun with a greedy and self-interested yangban; and *Hojil* (호질), meaning “Admonished by the Tiger,” tells of a revered village scholar whose hypocritical conduct by night is admonished by a tiger who originally meant to eat him but found him unappealing. These works reveal Park’s literary and philosophical commitment to acknowledge social realities while also encouraging aesthetic innovation. He argued that the true spirit of literature lies in creative writing supported by a spirit of change and that a writer must honestly depict life without affected elegance. As a testament, he wrote in the vernacular language, an inconceivable feat for the orthodox Neo-Confucian of the age (Choe-Wall 2010, xvi). He rejected conventional expressions and customary writing practices, instead orienting himself with his own prose style and exemplifying the spirit of Joseonpoong.

A uniquely Korean style and subject matter also arose in painting. Though Korean painting had historically been influenced by Chinese painting, artists began to develop unique characteristics in the sixteenth century by responding to artistic impulses inspired by features of Korea.[[9]](#endnote-9) Style-wise, a new technique characterized by loose and carefree expression of lines, light colors, and diffuseness emerged, and it gave Korean painting the “quality of being unostentatious” (Ch’oe 1979, 11). Painters sought greater expressiveness with exaggeration, complication, coarse brush strokes, and even distortion of forms (Ahn 1975, 32). By the late Joseon dynasty, the new method had established itself as an “unmistakable national style” (Ch’oe 1979, 11). Subject-matter wise, artists turned towards their own peninsula. For instance, in the eighteenth century, Chong Son (정선1676-1759) painted Korean landscapes at a time when it was more conventional to copy Chinese landscapes or draw imaginary landscapes (Ibid., 15). *Jingyeongsansoo* (진경산수 眞景山水), meaning “real landscape” or “sincere landscape”, emerged in late Joseon and prioritized Korean landscapes. The novelty of the movement was that it didn’t quite seek to copy a scene in nature even when working off of a particular scene. Instead, artists composed their landscapes from the vast nature displayed before their eyes, “cutting up” their vision and pasting it on the canvas however they saw fit. The artists expressed the beauty of a particular region with subjective and nationalistic awareness, thinking that doing so conveys a kind of reality or sincerity that more traditional methods don’t.

Just as landscape paintings developed their own style, Korean folk paintings also developed a unique style showing new variations (Chong 2000, 163). During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Kim Hong-Do (김홍도 1745-1806) and Sin Yun-Bok (신윤복1758-1814) depicted the everyday lives of the common people, a “bold attempt at a time when it was customary for painters to deal only with high-brow and idealistic themes” (Ch’oe 1979, 15) . The growing desire to depict Joseon led artists to focus on Korea’s own nature and people.

I hope to have shown that there was an important deviation away from Chinese Confucian and Neo-Confucian attitude towards art during the late Joseon dynasty. Whereas art, and especially music, was cognized as an important tool for moral cultivation by the Confucian and Neo-Confucian philosophers, art was cognized as an avenue through which identity can be expressed. The classical Chinese views on art minimized the role of individual creativity (Gier 2001, 281), but in the Joseon dynasty, artists (often scholar-artists) used the arts to showcase their national, local, and individual settings. And whereas art was believed to show forth the basic elements ordering the universe according to Chinese views, Korean scholars denied such metaphysical bases of art—and this led to the latter seeking changes in styles and subject matters in art while the former had sought to preserve tradition as best they could.

V. Advantages of Seeing Art as Expressive Medium

The Koreans’ new view of art, which focuses on expression and enjoyment, competes with the traditional Confucian arguments for the value of art since it shows that one need not rely on art’s moral or metaphysical qualities to explain its value. Again, in Confucianism, music was considered efficacious and important because the scale and the “original pitch” had deep connections to ancient Chinese cosmology; the five notes of the pentatonic scale corresponded to the Five Elements, and the “original pitch” was seen as a fundamental force that mobilizes and orders all change. However, ancient cosmology was beginning to be questioned in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as increasing exposure to western science, especially heliocentric astronomy, led Joseon philosophers to rethink the role of traditionally important cosmological concepts. For example, in 1653, Korean astronomers developed *Siheonyeok* (시헌력 時憲曆), a hybrid of the lunar and solar calendars, and when they began to see that seasonal changes resulted from the Earth’s movement around the sun, the roles of yin-yang and Five Elements were questioned.[[10]](#endnote-10) Dasan thus wrote that the Five Elements were “just like anything else” and that it was “not reasonable to think of them as producing a myriad of other things” (Kim 1986, 12).

If the yin-yang and Five Elements were superfluous concepts, and music’s importance came from its close relationship to those concepts, then a new basis for music’s value had to be devised (if one were inclined to protect music’s value). Given that fundamental understandings of physics and metaphysics were in flux in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Koreans’ shift away from music’s metaphysical ties towards music’s expressive abilities might not have been a coincidence. Rooting music’s value in the possibility of self- and national-expression allowed the Joseon artists and philosophers to continue to appreciate music (and art in general) despite their changing relationships to scientific frameworks.

Considering art an avenue for self-expression also allowed the Koreans to challenge outdated socio-cultural views. Matteo Ricci’s map of the world—*Gonyeomangukjeondo* (곤여만국전도 坤輿萬國全圖)—opened up for the Koreans a whole new world populated with far away kingdoms, and their ways of looking at the world and situating themselves within it changed dramatically. No longer was Asia—and in particular, China—at the center of the world, and no longer was Korea a mere sidekick to the central world power; with other continents involved, China and Korea were merely two kingdoms among many. This new perspective became a basis for rejecting Sinocentrism, which also led to new standards of beauty. The Koreans began to view Joseon’s art from a more independent perspective, recognizing the value of their own national culture, and this new perspective helped the Koreans reevaluate their practice of looking to Chinese culture as the standard of beauty. This new cultural consciousness was a groundbreaking change for artists who were previously embedded in the Sinocentric worldview.

The Koreans’ new view of art encouraged innovation in ways that morality or metaphysics-based ways of valuing art did not and could not. Recall that the Confucians and Neo-Confucians had much vested interest in maintaining past music; for instance, the Song court in the tenth century sought to recover pitches from a dynasty dating back nearly two millennia, and Kongzi and Xunzi believed that only the ancient music from the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE) or music based on the *Odes* (1000-700 BCE) had a positive effect on one’s character.[[11]](#endnote-11) If music’s value and moral efficacy are closely tied to objective features of reality, then it makes sense that music should not change lest it no longer accord with the original standard that made it good and efficacious in the first place.

However, moving away from these traditional views of music encouraged the Korean musicians to incorporate new instruments, invent new notation systems, and even compose new ritual music influenced by indigenous tunes. Park Ji-Won played a pivotal role in integrating the Chinese dulcimer into traditional Korean music, researching the instrument and inventing a new playing method so that it would fit Korean tunes (Song 2017, 330). His pursuit of the new sound was underpinned by an experimental attitude towards music, which is in stark contrast with the Song philosophers who underwent no less than six musical reforms in order to restore the ancient, original pitch standard. King Sejong the Great (세종대왕 1397-1450) invented *jeongganbo* (정간보 井間譜), a new musical notion system that was well-suited for Korean music which was unique in East Asia for using asymmetric meters; jeongganbo helped incorporate traditional Korean music to the format of court music (Park 2018, 120). Lastly, in painting, new styles and subject matter were embraced, and in literature, the Korean alphabet and vernacular expressions were used. Thus, we see that valuing art as a medium of expression encourages innovation in ways the traditional Confucian ways of valuing art didn’t and couldn’t.

VI: Implications for Aesthetics Today

The Koreans’ renewed focus on the self with respect to art shows art’s potential role in addressing epistemic injustice. That art can be used politically is nothing new. For instance, the dramatic arts take an enormously nationalistic tone in Ireland when the Abbey Theater is founded by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory in the early twentieth century, the relationship among art, nationalism, and political action becoming so closely intertwined that three decades later, Yeats wonders: “Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot/ Did words of mine put too great strain/ On that woman's reeling brain?”[[12]](#endnote-12) But there’s *epistemic* injustice as well as political injustice, and that art can also address epistemic injustice is a relatively new idea. In this section, I’d like to suggest that Joseonpoong helped the Koreans reverse hermeneutic injustice because it gave them new standards and practices that were previously lacking.

Epistemic injustice has been a subject of lively discussion for the past decade or so. Briefly, epistemic injustice, a concept made prominent by Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, concerns how societal structures epistemically disadvantage those in marginalized social positions by either questioning their credibility (*testimonial injustice*) or denying them the conceptual resources they would need to understand and express their experiences (*hermeneutic injustice*). For example, when a woman’s claim is not taken seriously because of the stereotype that women are not rational (because they’re emotional), the woman suffers from testimonial injustice because prejudice disadvantages her as a potential knower; and when women lack certain concepts—such as sexual harassment and post-natal depression—to understand their lived experiences, they suffer from hermeneutic injustice because societal power relations had led to an unfair distribution of cognitive resources, resulting in a relative lack of concepts or frameworks through which women could make sense of (and improve) their experiences.[[13]](#endnote-13) It is the latter injustice—the hermeneutic variation—that I believe the Koreans addressed through art.

Hermeneutic injustice occurs “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker 2007, 1). When a group is socially deprived in a systematic manner as a result of discriminations (and reinforced by discriminations), the group experiences something that goes beyond mere disadvantage. Joseon Koreans, as citizens of a tributary state, were not only politically subordinated to the Chinese, but also culturally and linguistically subordinated; we saw earlier how Korean painters didn’t think to paint Korean landscapes because it was customary to paint Chinese landscapes, and we also saw how Korean literature was written in Chinese characters, making it difficult to render faithfully Korean ways of speaking (e.g., idioms, place names). An important mode of self-engagement and understanding were deprived of the Koreans because the validated forms of expression were ones that were imposed from without; cultural standards came from China, and they were not responsive to the Korean experience.

An important moment in Korean music history took place when King Sejong wondered why it is that we play ancient Chinese music for deceased Korean ancestors when they had enjoyed native Korean music while they were alive (Park 2015, 132). Music from the Chinese court was played during rites commemorating the deceased kings, and the fact that Korean music could not be elevated to the level of court rites led to a discrepancy in the ways Koreans were living. In their lived lives, Korean music was important, but in official practice, it was at best irrelevant—and this created a gap between the perceived meaningfulness of Korean tunes and the intimation that only Confucianism-sanctioned Chinese music mattered.

As mentioned, spoken Korean was also left behind in the official linguistic/cultural framework because the use of Chinese characters made it difficult to capture Korean ways of speaking. “In certain social contexts,” Fricker writes, “hermeneutical injustice can mean that someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not” (2007, 168). In the context of the Joseon dynasty, Koreans suffered from hermeneutical injustice because it was difficult to socially constitute themselves as Koreans when their language and artistic practices were deemed illegitimate or irrelevant. Aesthetic ideals were foreignly imposed, which meant that Koreans lacked normative and evaluative standards that reflected their identity; a good artist was “good” by Chinese and Confucian standards. When cultural forms are imposed in this way, people don’t actually get to engage with their experiences; again, note how Korean painters didn’t engage with their own surroundings because the expectation was that they paint landscapes of the politically and culturally dominant country.

Though they might not have conceived of their movement this way, looking back, we can see how the Koreans reversed hermeneutic injustice through Joseonpoong. A parallel can be drawn between street artists and Joseon artists. In “Finding Your Voice in the Streets”, Sondra Bacharach argues that street art can be a tool for addressing epistemic injustice because it gives voice to those who lack it (2018, 33). Those who were denied a voice due to testimonial injustice are offered a chance to be heard without prejudice since street art is anonymous. Hermeneutic injustice is also alleviated when issues that would have been ignored otherwise are raised, and the public is exposed to ideas it might have lacked (Ibid., 35). There is much parallel between the way street art addresses epistemic injustice and the way Korean art addresses epistemic injustice.

Again, it is probably not the case that Joseon artists saw themselves as battling epistemic injustice; after all, epistemic injustice is insidious precisely because victims are often unaware of its existence. However, the Koreans felt expressive constraints, and what we cansee *now* is that their struggle against aesthetic and cultural constraints was in part their struggle against epistemic injustice. Cognitive resources to understand the Korean life were lacking in the Sinocentric framework, and like street artists, Korean artists used art to establish standards and practices important to them since they could not have done so through the “official” means by making philosophical arguments within the (Neo-)Confucian system or using Sinocentric language and methodologies. After all, if art was to be valued because of culture-independent notions of metaphysics or morality, it is difficult to see how Korean philosophers would have argued for the relevance of the Korean alphabet, indigenous tunes, or landscapes. But if art could be valued for its expressive power, then not only are particular identities important for art, but aesthetic standards and concepts (such as beauty or even truth) can also be expanded to accommodate more people’s experiences.

“It’s hard to change the structural institutional inequities,” Bacharach writes, “by working within the system, or even by criticizing the system” (Ibid., 40). Using art, however, allowed Korean artists to bypass the linguistic and conceptual restrictions in expressing what is important to them, much like how street artists use visual expression to articulate ideas for which the public lacks words (Ibid., 36). It is telling that King Sejong, who was ahead of his time (relative to Joseonpoong), reforms court music to include Korean indigenous tunes *and* creates *hangul*, the Korean alphabet.[[14]](#endnote-14) And hangul, which better captured spoken Korean, featured only twenty-eight characters, a vast improvement from Chinese characters which demanded familiarity with thousands of characters for basic literacy. Ultimately, art was used by the Koreans as a way to champion subject matters and methodologies that were closer to the everyday lived life, which provided the framework to understand and validate the uniquely Korean experience.

VII: Conclusion

Within the East Asian Confucian and Neo-Confucian context, Joseonpoong represents the first instance in which art becomes associated with the expression of identity, especially national identity. This is a new uncoupling of aesthetics with metaphysics and morality, a move that sets the late Joseon thinkers apart from their Confucian and Neo-Confucian predecessors. Joseon scholars considered art worth pursuing and thinking about, and so in the grand scheme of things, late Joseon scholars provide one more answer to the ancient Mohist criticism that art is a waste of resources: art is valuable because it allows one to cognize and express one’s unique identity. Focusing on art’s expressive abilities also helped the Koreans address hermeneutic injustices stemming from Sinocentrism. Though these justifications for art deviate from the reasons Confucians and Neo-Confucians originally answered the Mohists with, they constitute a valuable defense of art in their own right.

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1. Thank you to the participants at the fifth annual NAKPA (North American Korean Philosophy Association) meeting for helpful feedback. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Gier 2001 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See *Analects* 17.11 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Confucianism considered there to be five main relationships—ruler and subject; father and son; elder and younger sibling; husband and wife; and friend and friend—and one’s identity and resulting responsibility are determined respective to the five main relationships. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Xunzi’s “Discourse on Music” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. There are also five colors, five directions, five animals, five grains, five creatures, five viscera, five smells, and five numbers (see Huang 52-53) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Sima Qian wrote that pitch standards outline the distribution of *qi* in the universe and explained every object’s existence and movement (*Shi ji* 25.1243). We know that this was believed literally as Neo-Confucian court scholars sought to take advantage of the relationship between *qi* and pitch standards when they devised a method to observe *qi* through observing movement of ashes among pitch pipes (Zuo forthcoming, 29). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Han 2017, 321 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Ch’oe 1979, “Korean Painting” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See “The Formation and Development of Korean Silhak, Astronomy, and Geography” *Google Arts and Culture*. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See *Analects* 3.25, 7.14, 15.11; *Xunzi* 20.7-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. From “Man and the Echo” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See McKinnon 2016 and Fricker’s chapters one and seven. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. New court ritual music including *Potaepyong* (보태평) and *Chongdaeop* (정대업) incorporated Korean tunes, creating a new class of rite music called *Chongmyojeryea* (종묘 제례) (Yi 1980, 28). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)