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Kim Bok-jin: Founder of National Sculpture in Korea During the Japanese Colonial Period

Abstract. This study examines the life and work of Kim Bok-jin (pseudonym: Jeong-gwan), the first Korean sculptor to graduate from the Department of Sculpture at Tokyo University of the Arts in 1925, during the Japanese colonial period. He was also the first to introduce Western realist techniques into Korean sculpture. The paper explores national motifs in Kim's work within the context of a historically challenging era and analyzes several of his lesser-known pieces through the lens of Korean studies. The primary focus is on his sculptures Standing Woman, Statue of Maitreya Buddha, Baek Hwa, Youth (Boy), and Old Man. From 1925 until his death in 1940, Kim Bok-jin consistently exhibited at the Joseon Art Exhibition. Beyond his artistic practice, he founded and directed the Art Research Institute, where he mentored emerging artists. He was also active as a journalist, critic, and political figure, serving as a member of the Joseon Communist Party. This study aims to reevaluate the legacy of Kim Bok-jin, a pivotal figure in Korean sculpture, who was posthumously awarded the Order of Merit for National Foundation in 1993.

Keywords: Sculptor, Japanese colonial period, youth, Song Ki-jung, Maitreya doctrine, artistic spirit of the nation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the national motifs in Kim Bok-jin's works within the context of a complex historical period and analyzes several of his lesser-known pieces through the lens of Korean studies. Kim Bok-jin (September 23, 1901 — August 18, 1940) was a sculptor active during the Japanese colonial period and a prominent figure in the progressive literary movement. He holds a significant place in the history of Korean sculpture: from 1925 until his death in 1940, he regularly exhibited his works at the Joseon Art Exhibition. In addition to his artistic practice, he directed the Art Research Institute, where he mentored and supported emerging artists. Kim was also involved in journalism, art criticism, and political activism as a member of the Joseon Communist Party. As a leading member of the Korean Federation of Proletarian Artists (KAFE),

he was arrested in 1928 and subsequently imprisoned. During his incarceration, Kim became deeply engaged with Korean Buddhist thought, particularly the Maitreya faith (미륵신앙). This belief system, which promised the coming of a future Buddha, served as a symbol of hope for the oppressed classes in feudal society. For many peasants enduring severe living conditions, the Maitreya faith represented revolutionary ideals and the hope for a transformed, ideal society.

Following his release from prison, Kim Bok-jin resumed his artistic work, producing a variety of sculptures, including abstract pieces, portraits, and Buddhist statues. Among his most notable Buddhist works are the principal Buddha statue at Geumsan-sa Temple in Gimje and the unfinished Maitreya Buddha statue at Beopju-sa Temple on Mount Songni. Kim Bok-jin is recognized as a national sculptor. Notably, after the death of Korean independence activist Dosan Ahn Chang-ho, Kim was arrested by the Japanese police for creating a death mask of Dosan's face, in collaboration with an apprentice.

The final work completed by Kim Bok-jin before his untimely death in 1940, the sculpture "Youth (Boy)", was based on a photograph of Son Ki-jung, the Korean marathon runner who won the gold medal at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. As Korea was under Japanese colonial rule at the time, Son competed for the Japanese national team under the name Son Kitei (孫基禎). The close resemblance between the physical features of the sculpture and those in the photograph is unmistakable. As a sculptor with strong nationalist convictions during the colonial period, Kim Bok-jin found inspiration in Son Ki-jung, and "Youth (Boy)" came to embody the spirit and resilience of the Korean people. The aim of this study is to reconsider the artistic legacy of Kim Bok-jin, recognized as the founder of modern Korean sculpture, who was posthumously awarded the Order of Merit for National Foundation in 1993.

2. BIOGRAPHY OF KIM BOK-JIN

Jeong-gwan Kim Bok-jin was born on September 23, 1901, in Palbong-ri, Nam-i-myeon, Cheongwon-gun, Chungcheongbuk-do, as the eldest son of Hong-gyu of the Andong Kim clan. He had two older sisters and a younger brother, Kim Ki-jin, who was born in 1903. As a child, Kim Bok-jin studied classical Chinese and learned a thousand characters from his teacher. In early 1914, he was married by his father's arrangement; at the time, his father was serving as the governor of Yeongdong County. After ten years, Kim Bok-jin broke away from the formal constraints of this arranged marriage. In 1917, he entered Gyeongseong Paje High School and submitted his first essay to the Maeil Sinbo newspaper, which served as the official publication of the Japanese Governor-General from 1910 to 1945. The essay was accepted and published. During his time at school, Kim Bok-jin emerged as a prominent figure among the literary youth of Gyeongseong High School. Alongside activists such as Park Yeon-hee, Lee So-gu, and Kim Ki-jin, he co-founded the Bando-gurak-bu Club, a cultural and intellectual circle.

In addition to his artistic pursuits, Kim Bok-jin, who possessed notable literary talent, was deeply interested in theater and cinema. He frequently visited cultural venues

such as Danseongsa, Umigwan, and Gwangmudae — key sites in the early development of Korean film during the Joseon period. In 1919, he took part in the March 1st Movement as a member of the Baejae High School Student Organization (배재학당). During the movement, he played an active role in Gyeongseong, where he mobilized students and contributed to the reproduction and distribution of the Independence Newspaper.

After spending the first half of 1920 in a period of personal wandering, Kim Bok-jin traveled to Japan, where his younger brother Kim Ki-jin and several friends had already gone, with the initial intention of studying law. During his time there, he visited a Japanese art exhibition in Shanghai Park, Tokyo, where he encountered a colored plaster sculpture titled “Lao-tzu.” Deeply impressed by the work, Kim experienced a turning point, choosing to pursue what he called the “critique of civilization” through visual art rather than literature. This decision led him to enroll in the Department of Sculpture at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Under the guidance of Ko Chung-gwan-un (1852–1934), a renowned sculptor and professor at the institution, Kim Bok-jin excelled in his studies and ultimately became the first Korean sculptor of the Joseon era.

As a supporter of the March 1st Movement, Kim Bok-jin actively participated in anti-Japanese literary and socialist activities opposing colonial rule. These actions led to his imprisonment for five years and six months. In recognition of his contributions to Korea’s independence and cultural development, Kim Bok-jin was posthumously awarded the National Foundation Medal for Patriotic Service in 1993.

Kim Bok-jin’s younger brother, Palbong Kim Ki-jin, was a journalist and writer who served as the social affairs editor for Chosun Ilbo and Maeil Sinbo, as well as the arts and culture editor for the Jungang Ilbo. Kim Bok-jin himself also contributed to journalism, working as the editor of arts and culture at the Chosun Chungang Ilbo. Together, the two brothers played a significant role in shaping the development of Korean art in the early 20th century, advancing the nation’s artistic spirit through literature, sculpture, theater, and art criticism during the Japanese colonial period. Kim Bok-jin and his younger brother, writer Kim Ki-jin, co-founded the Dowolhoe (다월회) an intellectual society. As a leading figure in the Korean New Theater Movement, Kim Bok-jin was an active theorist and participant in debates surrounding proletarian class literature. During the Korean War, Kim Ki-jin served as a military writer in Daegu and produced works categorized as “frontline literature” until 1953. He was also involved in democratic and civil rights activities, serving as a member of the Civil Rights Protection Committee, leading opposition to authoritarian rule, and acting as editor-in-chief of the Gyeonghyang Sinmun newspaper in 1960. He passed away from natural causes in 1985. Kim Bok-jin married a second time to Heo Ha-baek (1909–?), who was a teacher and later principal of Sookmyung Girls’ High School. The couple had two daughters. [Kim Ki-jin, 1958:3–12].

2.1. Art and the Reflection of Power

Among the professors of sculpture at the School of Fine Arts at the Japan National Institute of Technology—founded in 1872—was the Italian sculptor Vincenzo Ragusa (1841–1927). He introduced Western sculptural techniques using plaster and marble

and emphasized to his students that sculpture was fundamentally the reproduction and representation of physical forms. However, by 1890, a shift in the cultural atmosphere in Japan led to increasing criticism of Western influences and a renewed interest in rediscovering traditional Japanese values. In response to this changing spirit of the times, Professor Ko Chung-gwan-un, who later became Kim Bok-jin's mentor, emphasized woodworking as a way of preserving and continuing the traditions of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts.

In the 1920s, following Kim Bok-jin's arrival, a wave of reform swept through the Sculpture Department at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Kim's works began to reflect Western realist tendencies, influenced by professors Ko Chung-gwan-un, Geon Chang-dae-mong, and Jo Chang-moon-bu — advocates of realist and academic techniques inspired by the ideas of Auguste Rodin, Antoine Bourdelle, and Aristide Maillol. In addition to his artistic practice, Kim Bok-jin was actively involved in the labor, student, and literary movements of the time, and maintained close ties with the novelist Han Sol-ya. In December 1926, he secretly joined the Third Korean Communist Party and emerged as a leading figure in the Korean Proletarian Art Union. According to the testimony of his younger brother, Kim Ki-jin, Kim Bok-jin was the principal theoretical leader of the Union, known as KAFE (Korea Artista Proleta Federacio), and was also the author of its founding platform [Kim Bok-jin, 1927]. The "Spiral Declaration Project" was a programmatic document that articulated this ideological position in the field of art.

Beginning in 1927, Kim Bok-jin ceased producing new works and instead devoted himself to teaching sculpture at the Art Institute. During this time, according to historical records, he also became increasingly active in political movements. In June 1927, he joined the Goryeo Communist Youth Association (고려공산청년회), and in February 1928, he became a member of the Korean Communist Party (조선공산당). In September 1928, Kim Bok-jin was arrested and imprisoned in Seodaemun Prison for five years and six months — until 1934 — as a result of the so-called "Gyeongseong School Cell Incident." While incarcerated, Kim studied Joseon-era classical texts, customs, and Buddhist traditions. This intellectual and spiritual engagement deeply influenced his worldview and played a foundational role in shaping a distinctly Korean approach to sculpture.

Kim Bok-jin was a remarkably inventive sculptor who, even while imprisoned, demonstrated extraordinary dedication to his art. He saved the rice allocated to prisoners, pounded it, and used it as a material for sculpting. In the prison carpentry workshop, he created Buddhist statues. During his imprisonment, he encountered and learned from numerous independence activists, including the socialist Choi Chang-ik and the writer Park Hwa-sung. After his release in 1934, Kim Bok-jin co-founded the magazine Joseon Youth (청년조선) with Kim Ki-yong and established a printing house, Aejisa, together with his brother Kim Ki-jin. However, the Japanese authorities, suspecting that both Joseon Youth and the printing house were affiliated with the Korean Communist Party, arrested him again during the Second Suppression Incident of the Joseon Proletarian Artists' Union. Following his release and return to the art world, Kim Bok-jin began to reflect deeply on concepts such as "national color," the "unique Joseon feeling," and "Joseon truth." He envisioned the pursuit of an

“aesthetics of power” as a synthesis of traditional Joseon sensibilities with the tastes and emotional expressions of modern people.

The goals of the Joseon Academy of Arts, founded in 1936 by Park Kwang-jin and Kim Eun-ho, were as follows:

1. To inherit the artistic legacy of the Joseon past.
2. To absorb the artistic trends of the modern world. [Choe Yeol, 1995: 1—171].

Here we can assume that Kim Bok-jin’s aesthetic orientation aimed to harmonize the national with the global, and the traditional with the modern. This synthesis was to be realized through what he termed an “aesthetics of power,” grounded in subjectivity and the beauty of form.

Kim Bok-jin’s artistic philosophy can thus be understood as the cultural force that transforms the most distinctly national elements into something globally resonant through the medium of art. In this context, the rediscovery and re-evaluation of his lost works allow for a renewed understanding of the dynamic artistic power that he emphasized — one that parallels the concept of *soft power* and the cultural dynamism seen in the contemporary Korean Wave (Hallyu). Moreover, the idea of a cultural powerhouse, as articulated by Baekbeom Kim Gu — a national leader who dedicated his life to the independence movement — can be reconsidered through the lens of Kim Bok-jin’s “aesthetics of power”: a vision of national and global influence achieved not through force of arms, but through the strength of art and culture.

3. THE WORKS BY KIM BOK-JIN

3.1. *Portrait Sculptures*

After 1934, Kim Bok-jin produced numerous busts and head sculptures of both women and men, including a series of portrait sculptures. The most representative work among these is the portrait statue “Old Man”, which received an award at the Joseon Art Exhibition in 1936. “Old Man” portrays a humble farmer—an aged, weary man from Joseon, marginalized and overlooked by society. The sculpture conveys a profound sense of loneliness, suffering, and sorrow, which may be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the broader oppression and deprivation experienced by an entire nation or social class. Significantly, this work was created after Kim Bok-jin had endured two prison sentences due to his involvement with the Joseon Proletarian Artists’ Union and the Communist Party. Kim Bok-jin’s realism and artistic method reflect the breadth of his worldview and his deep concern for human dignity. His work demonstrates a commitment to elevating the value of human life by vividly portraying the contradictions and hardships of lived reality.

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



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

The portrait sculpture “Hong Myung-hee”, created in 1936 by Kim Bok-jin, depicts Hong Myung-hee, a respected nationalist and writer best known for authoring the monumental modern historical novel *Im Kok-jeong*. In March 1938, Ahn Chang-ho, a prominent nationalist and independence activist, was gravely ill in prison and was transferred to the university hospital, where he was expected to die by the tenth of the month. Kim Bok-jin, along with his student Lee Guk-jong, managed to bypass Japanese security checkpoints and, with the assistance of hospital staff, entered Ahn Chang-ho’s hospital room. There, they created a death mask of Ahn Chang-ho — a portrait sculpture honoring a man who had made a profound contribution to Korea’s struggle for independence.

3.2. Maitreya Ideas and Buddha Statues

From 1928 to 1934, during his imprisonment, Kim Bok-jin had access to a wide range of Buddhist texts and materials related to Joseon customs, which enabled him to explore the concept of national identity in depth. While in prison, he encountered Buddhist philosophy and was particularly drawn to the Maitreya faith and the broader Buddhist worldview. In the context of a feudal society, the Maitreya faith functioned as a kind of gospel of hope for the oppressed classes. According to Jeong Seok-jeong [1983: 48], the Maitreya belief at the end of the Joseon Dynasty can be characterized as “revolutionism, and the ardent hope that the existing world will be transformed and a new ideal society will emerge.”

The image of Maitreya served as a symbol of revolution and the envisioned beauty of a new society for many dispossessed and oppressed peasants. Lee Jong-ik noted that belief in Maitreya represented “the hope of the common farmers that Maitreya would appear and free them from their restrictions and bring about the necessary utopia.” Both

the Donghak and Chongsangye movements, which were influential among the governed classes in the 19th century, claimed to have established a post-paradise world based on Maitreya ideology. Likewise, scholars of the Chogyae Society of Korean Buddhism during the Joseon period asserted that “Maitreya Hasen’s faith” formed a system that fulfilled the desires and aspirations for change among the subjugated classes.

Kim Bok-jin, deeply interested in revolutionary developments throughout Joseon history, found meaning in the Maitreya faith. He hoped that the Buddha statues he sculpted could offer comfort and hope to those suffering under colonial oppression. According to Choe Yeol (1995: 105–108), the highest state of Buddhism is both immanent and transcendental and must be given physical form for expression—in other words, Buddhist art is the fruit of compassion. Kim Bok-jin embraced this perspective, believing that Buddhist ideals were inseparable from compassion and revolution, and that art grounded in these ideals could meaningfully contribute to real life.

In this sense, his concept of the “aesthetics of power” is rooted in national tradition and may be seen as a harmonizing worldview—one in which an ideal society emerges through a synthesis of socialist ideology and Maitreya’s vision. Notable among Kim Bok-jin’s Buddhist works are the “Main Statue of Maitreya Hall” (1936) at Geumsansa Temple in Gimje and the “Solimwon Buddha Statue” (1935) at Solimwon on Gyeryongsan Mountain. The bronze “Maitreya Buddha” at Beopjusa Temple in Boeun, Chungcheongbuk-do, is also believed to be his work.



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

In 1937, Kim Bok-jin began work on the statue of “Maitreya Buddha” at Beopjusa Temple, using cement and stone as the primary materials. However, in 1940, Kim Bok-jin passed away before the work could be completed. The statue was eventually

finished by his students and other young sculptors twenty-three years later, in 1963. According to Choe Yeol [1995: 125], Kim Bok-jin, shortly after returning from his studies in Japan in 1925, published a sketch of the statue of the “Buddha in Seokguram Grotto” in the *Sidae Ilbo* newspaper. In doing so, Choe argues, Kim Bok-jin was expressing a broader historical perspective on Korean art. Choe described the Seokguram Buddha as “an essay on Korean art that reflects the history of Joseon.” As capitalist civilization advanced following the Japanese invasion, Korean art came into conflict with foreign influences, entering a phase of “confrontation and struggle,” in which “locality” became its principal weapon. By publishing the sketch of Seokguram, Kim Bok-jin initiated what Choe termed an “explosion of spiritual content”—a turning point that marked the emergence of a modern artistic nationalism. Kim asserted that “the vitality and formal beauty of an object should be subjective and have a unique style (individuality).” At the time, this stance represented a powerful artistic awakening of national consciousness. It expressed concern over the erosion of territorial and cultural identity by foreign ideologies and advocated for the revival and reinvigoration of national artistic traditions.

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

The “Main Buddha of Maitreya Hall” at Geumsansa Temple is a Buddhist statue recreated from the earlier “Solimwon Buddha Statue.” It is regarded as one of the greatest sculptures of the 20th century, exemplifying Kim Bok-jin’s ability to harmonize the flowing lines of the human form with the iconographic features of traditional Buddhist statuary. Another notable work, “Baek Hwa,” is a life-size wooden sculpture created in 1938. It is a full-length portrait of actress Han Eun-jin, who starred in the stage production *Baek Hwa*, based on the 1931 novel by Baek Hwa-sung. This sculpture reflects the continuity of Joseon artistic traditions by blending the persona of the character Baek Hwa with Kim Bok-jin’s aesthetic vision and his commitment to regionalism. The heroine’s commanding expression and the long, folded hanbok skirt clearly suggest that she is not a submissive figure bound by feudal constraints. The statue of “Baek Hwa” can thus be seen as a powerful embodiment of Kim Bok-jin’s worldview—one that fuses progressive aesthetics, an emphasis on “locality,” and a deep engagement with national tradition.

3.3. Sculpture “Youth (Boy)” and the Meaning of the Word “Youth”.

At the beginning of his artistic career, Kim Bok-jin sought to express his artistic ideology through representations of the female form, creating statues of both standing and seated women. He also sculpted elderly figures using older individuals as models,

though he later regarded these works as unsuccessful in achieving his intended effect. It was through the plaster sculpture “Youth (Boy)” that he ultimately succeeded in conveying the power of art, along with an aesthetic of vitality and movement.

The sculpture “Youth (Boy)” recalls the anatomical precision of Rodin’s “Bronze Age” and the Greek “Kouros of Anavysos”. Like these works, Kim’s sculpture presents a young male figure imbued with dynamism and humanistic ideals. As Choe Tae-man notes, Kim Bok-jin “laid the foundation for the creation of Korean realistic sculpture, which overcame the time constraints associated with the need to acquire modern sculpture techniques through Japan.” “Youth (Boy)”, with its bold and masculine form, may be interpreted as a manifestation of Kim Bok-jin’s revolutionary vision—a symbolic act of transcending the harsh realities of colonial Korea through the forceful expression of art. This sculpture stands as a pinnacle of early 20th-century Korean sculpture, rendered in a realist spirit and technique, and expressing the ideas of “locality” and “nationality” through what Kim Bok-jin envisioned as the “aesthetics of power and will.”

At the time of the creation of “Youth (Boy)” in 1940, the social and cultural situation in Joseon was extremely difficult, as the Korean peninsula remained under harsh Japanese colonial rule. During this period, the colonial authorities enforced policies that aimed to erase Korean identity: schools were required to conduct Shinto shrine worship, and the use of the Korean language was systematically suppressed. In 1938, the Governor-General officially banned education in Korean, and by 1940, Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names as part of the Soshi-kaimei policy. These were deeply repressive and painful years for the Korean people. In this historical context, the triumph of Son Ki-jung — who won the gold medal in the marathon at the 1936 Berlin Olympics — became a profound source of national pride. Although he competed under the Japanese name Son Kitei, his victory was celebrated as a symbol of Korean resilience. That same year, the Chosun Chungang Ilbo newspaper famously removed the Japanese flag from a photograph of Son Ki-jung during the Olympic medal ceremony — an act of quiet but powerful resistance. These events served as symbols of hope and inspiration for the oppressed people of Joseon.

Upon hearing the news of Son Ki-jung’s Olympic victory on the radio, crowds gathered and cheered in front of the Dong-a Ilbo building in Gwanghwamun — a scene reminiscent of the March 1st Independence Movement. In response to this public outpouring of national pride, the three major Korean newspapers — Dong-a Ilbo, Chosun Chungang Ilbo, and Chosun Ilbo — which had deliberately removed the Japanese flag from photographs of the victory, were suspended indefinitely by the Japanese authorities. Alarmed by the potential for Son Ki-jung’s victory to inspire national consciousness and unity among Koreans, the Japanese colonial government banned all public celebrations of the event. The regime recognized that such moments of symbolic resistance could galvanize anti-colonial sentiment and thus sought to suppress them entirely. Amid these developments, in August 1938, Kim Bok-jin — who was then serving as head of the art department at Chosun Ilbo — resigned from his position, likely in protest or as a consequence of the escalating censorship and political pressure imposed on the press.



Figure 3. Chosun Chungang Ilbo newspaper with the Japanese flag removed

A monthly magazine titled “Youth (Boy)” was published with the aim of educating and inspiring young people. It encouraged youth to engage with modern civilization, contribute to its development, and take part in the dissemination of new knowledge and enlightenment. The magazine promoted the cultivation of a vigorous and enlightened youth spirit. Among its notable contributions was the publication of Choi Nam-sun’s poem “From the Sun to the Youth” (해에서 소년에게), which is regarded as the starting point of so-called “physical” poetry in modern Korean literature.

In September 1934, Kim Bok-jin, together with novelist Kim Ki-yong, founded the magazine *Young Joseon* (청년조선). The significance and symbolism of the word “youth” for Kim Bok-jin—as a writer, journalist, sculptor, and socialist — can be understood through both the title of this publication and the title of his sculpture “Youth (Boy).” For Kim, “youth” represented not only vitality and forward-looking idealism but also the potential for cultural and national renewal. The publication of *Young Joseon* can be viewed within a broader historical context in which youth magazines often had ties to the Korean independence movement. For example, “Youth of Korea” (소년한국), published in the United States in 1919; “Shanghai Youth” (상해소년), published in China in 1924;



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

and “Catholic Youth” (가톨릭 소년), published in Manchuria, were all aimed at informing, inspiring, and mobilizing young Koreans in diaspora communities. Such publications were part of a larger effort to cultivate national consciousness among the younger generation in the struggle for independence [Yun Beom-mo, 2006:331–337].

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

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

Kim Bok-jin, a progressive intellectual of his time, may have sought to portray Son Ki-jung as a patriot possessing great physical and mental strength—someone who could symbolize the hopes and dreams of Joseon — and thus created a sculpture rooted in artistic ideology. Kim Bok-jin’s “Youth (Boy)” is a portrait sculpture that follows the principles of form-building elements, vertical composition, and frontality, revealing the figure’s character through his social achievements and capabilities, expressed through form. To depict the character of Son Ki-jung in “Youth (Boy),” Kim used the modeling technique of gradually attaching clay, completing the final work in plaster. The rough texture of the clay may give a sense of being “unfinished,” but it also conveys a sense of living vitality.

The plaster sculpture “Youth (Boy)” is the final masterpiece of Kim Bok-jin. Its subject appears reserved yet tense; the sharp, dynamic figure of the young man radiates vitality and embodies the vision of a hopeful future for the nation. Through this work, Kim Bok-jin sought to express his artistic ideology during a period of profound humiliation and hardship for the people of Joseon. Much like his statues of Maitreya Buddha, “Youth (Boy)” reflects Kim Bok-jin’s spiritual world and anticipates the emergence of a national hero—one who would ultimately lead Joseon to independence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, the author has examined the main stages of the biography and work of Kim Bok-jin, the founder of Korean sculpture. He lived and worked during a difficult colonial period for his people. Despite being imprisoned for his views, he continued to create works of art imbued with deep social and national significance. Unfortunately, most of the master’s works have not survived: approximately thirty pieces left after his death were destroyed in the fires of the Korean War. Apart from Buddhist sculptures, not a single one of his artistic works remains. Traces of his descendants have also not been found. The sculptor’s lost works can now only be seen in photographs preserved in the catalogues of the Joseon Art Exhibition, where they were once showcased. In this regard, the reconstruction, restoration, and re-evaluation of Kim Bok-jin’s sculptures — as the founder of Korean sculpture who sought to embody “locality” and the national spirit in his art — are of great importance for modern Korean studies. This is especially relevant in light of the global Hallyu wave, as it will introduce the pioneer of Korean sculpture to the world.

Of particular importance to the advancement of Korean studies are Kim Bok-jin’s surviving Maitreya Buddha statues and his sculpture “Youth (Boy),” modeled after photographs of marathon runner Song Ki-jung. These works symbolize key historical moments during the colonial period and serve as valuable resources for students and scholars exploring Korean history, art, and philosophy.

The Korean Wave, currently popular worldwide, showcases cultural dynamism through Korean content and style. This cultural dynamism is not merely a modern phenomenon; as emphasized in Kim Bok-jin’s work, which highlights the power of nationality and art, it has deep historical roots embedded in Korean culture. The author hopes that Kim Bok-jin’s work, which speaks to the artistic power of the most national becoming the most global, will be restored and introduced to a wider audience.

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