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**Sentiment of Sorrow and Its Sublimation  
In Korean Arts**

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in comparison with the Indian concepts of  
'Tapas' and 'Rasa'**

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## Sentiment of Sorrow and Its Sublimation In Korean Arts

- Some important concepts in Korean arts in comparison with the Indian concepts of 'Tapas' and 'Rasa'

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### Abstract:

The present paper is motivated by the fact that the aesthetics has been discussed a great deal from the perspective of viewer's appreciation, but less from that of artist's creation. Having attempted to investigate the process of artist's creation, the paper brings forth some artistic sentiments often accounted for both appreciation and creation of Korean arts. And, it is to be examined whether these sentiments can be established as aesthetic concepts beyond their regional characteristics, by the comparison with their apparent counterparts in Indian traditional aesthetics.

The first part of the paper introduces the specific characteristics of Korean arts in order to bring out Korean concepts of '*Han*' (sentiment of sorrow), '*Sinmyung*' (ecstasy) and '*Meot*' (taste or flavour). The second part examines the relations of these three concepts in the context of creative process of arts. The third part compares the concept of *Han* as energy with the Indian concept of '*Tapas*' on the basis of their similarity that both concepts are involved in the process of transformation. In the fourth part, the relation of *Tapas* with the concept of '*Rasa*' as the object of arts is to be established in order to examine the validity of the concept of '*Tapas*' in understanding the creative process of arts. Then finally, the emotive outcome of arts creation, that is, Korean concept of '*Meot*' and Indian concept of *Rasa*, having a similar meaning, 'savour', will be compared in the expectation that it will re-examine the purpose and object of art practices.

### Key words:

*Han, Tapas, Meot, Rasa, Gi, Sinmyung, Ecstasy, Ananda*

White empty space of a sheet of paper that a painter is to work on..... The painter contemplates upon the image that arouses in her mind in front of the empty paper. It calls upon her inner eyes to see myriads of figures hidden inside its subtle space; She sees innumerable subtle forms waiting to be turned visible. It is the painter's task to come to terms with all forms latently lying in the empty space. In spite of all the subtle forms already existent in the empty space, she should attend her innermost urge to give the shape to the image conceived in her mind, which will have to hatch out of the world of concept and will be revealed in the world of physicality.

The significance of arts in the traditional Orient lies upon its revelation of Universal Law, called 'Do' ('*Tao*' in Chinese) in the world of physicality. The art practice could be appreciated if it could serve the spiritual (or inner) growth of an individual. If a painting neither reveals 'Do' nor breathes out vital energy called 'Gi' ('*Ji*' in Chinese) that permeates through Nature, even the technical perfection could not be appreciated as a respectable art. Without the pursuit of spiritual uplift through the practice involving the vital energy 'Gi', a painting is degraded as 'craft' or 'technique', which is not enough to be a work of arts. One of the characteristics of arts of the Far East -China, Korea and Japan- is that the goal of the arts coincides with the means of arts, that is the realization of 'Do'; the artist, while being absorbed in the world of 'Do' in the creative process, has to apply the principle of 'Do' to painting space. From the perspective of spirituality, the artistic approach of the Orient is comparable to the identification of means (*upaya*) and goal of wisdom (*prajna*) denoted in Mahayana Buddhism. As is noted above, an artist should manifest the Universal Principle, designated in Korean, as 'Li', on a limited physical space. Then, a question may arise, 'how is it possible that a limited human being, however potent she or he may be, manifest the Universal Principle?' Is it not a mere theory, or a regional myth? The Oriental affirmation- a painting, or any form of arts is valuable only when it manifests 'Universal Law', in the other words, 'Law that penetrates through the entire Universe'- may appear absurd in the world today where significance of the physicality in existence is overgrown to block the channels for subtler level of existence, and finally the meaning of existence is denied as a result of inherent limit of physicality.

Recently some attempts have been made to restore the value of Oriental viewpoint on arts alongside the contemporary theories that reject all systems established under modernism. These attempts find their justifiable stance relying on postmodernism, having focused on the fact that the Western modern theories are encountering the innate

contradiction and facing a crisis of collapse. Though it is true that the post-structuralist criticism on the limit of modern theories has given us the opportunity to look back into some important facts unattended in the past, we need not base our study of Oriental arts on the theory of postmodernism for the sake of justification because Oriental arts 'certainly' has a 'pursuit' and premise- the existence of Universal Principle. What is important in the present situation is not capriciously to dig out the fragmentary facts from the undiscovered world, but to re-examine and refresh our understanding of arts by making use of newly discovered data.

The present paper is motivated by the fact that the aesthetics has been discussed a great deal from the perspective of viewer's appreciation, but less from that of artist's creation. Having attempted to investigate the process of artist's creation, the paper brings forth some artistic sentiments often accounted for both appreciation and creation of Korean arts. And it will be examined whether they can be established as aesthetic concepts beyond their regional characteristics, by the comparison with their apparent counterparts in Indian traditional aesthetics.

### **(I) Artistic Sentiments inbuilt in Korean Arts: *Han*, *Sinmyung*, *Meot***

#### **i) *Han* and *Sinmyung*- Sentiments of Sorrow and Ecstasy**

Principles of Korean arts have not yet been theorized in the modern academic sense because traditional arts have not been paid a respect as a separate subject of practice, but respected as a means to realizing higher level of life. However, when a question about the essence of Korean arts is raised, the answer most often comes from the context of '*Han*'. It is especially conspicuous in the field of literature. It is difficult to find an appropriate English equivalent of '*Han*'. In general, it appears as a sentiment of sorrow and as deep wound in the mind. But, it is a more complex sentiment caused from the adversities of life and the mind's reaction to it, such as the pent-up suppression. '*Han*', as the sentiment of pain and sorrow may appear negative, antonymous to the pleasure that most of successful works of arts deliver. Then, how could we count the sentiment of '*Han*' to be the essence of Korean arts? As a result, a group of scholars insists that the essence of Korean arts is not the depressive category, '*Han*', but, its opposite, '*Sinmyung*' (ecstasy). The term '*Sinmyung*' was originally

used only in Korean Shaman's (*Mudang*) ceremonial ground: when a shaman possessed by a spirit, arouses to the ecstasy as a result of her communication with the spirit, the state of climax is designated '*Sinmyung*'. In its original usage, the specification of the term '*Sinmyung*' lies in its potentiality of 'transmission', as is also indicated by the reference of collective ecstasy given in one of the earliest history book of Korea, '*Samgukyusa*'. However, the term is used nowadays in the secular meaning of 'state of pleasure, excitement and fulfillment'. In concepts, these two terms '*Han*' and '*Sinmyung*'- sentiment of sorrow and ecstasy- are inconsistent. Therefore, it seems problematic to refer to both of them in the quest for the essence of Korean arts. However, we find considerable number of examples that contains both sentiments. How can we explain this empirical fact?

## ii) *Gi* (Vital Energy) and *Li* (Universal Principle)

Aside from accounts on '*Han*' and '*Sinmyung*', '*Gi*', the vital energy can be referred to in order to investigate creative process of an artist. The focus on the vital energy that is one of major subjects of art practices in the Orient may give us an insight in regard to the problem of the relationship between '*Han*' and '*Sinmyung*', two seemingly opposite sentiments.

The place of 'vital energy' in the context of Oriental arts is well represented by the first principle of painting mentioned by *Sahyuk* in his book of criticism on ancient paintings of China. Among six principles of paintings, the first principle, that is, '*Gi-Un-Saeng-Dong*': rhythmic(*Un*) vitality(*Gi*) vividly(*Saeng*) moves(*Dong*)' has been regarded most crucial in paintings throughout ages and most arduously followed by painters in the Far Eastern Asia. However, it has often been misunderstood and confused with the second principle of painting, that is, '*Gol-Bup-Yong-Pil*': use of brush as if there is bone in it'. '*Gi*' in the first principle of paintings is not directed to the visible energy shown by the strong brush stroke. It has to be distinguished from physical energy. The '*Gi*' in paintings means the invisible life permeated through entire painting space. '*Gi*' as a subject of arts has a meta-physical implication, serving as a means to realize the Universal Law (*Li*). As is enthusiastically discussed in the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Korea during the 16<sup>th</sup> Cent. A.D., '*Gi*' and '*Li*' are inseparable, and these concepts are explicable only in relation to each other. That a painter brings out the mind-image on the painting space ideally means that her or his '*Gi*' is identified with that of the object that is to be drawn ('*Mul-A-Il-Chi*') and loses the limited self to become one with the Universal Principle;

and watching and appreciating a painting or any other form of art means that we are exposed to 'Gi' (vital energy) pervasive in the work and that we melt into the world the work takes us to.

### iii) Distinctive Characteristics of Korean arts in terms of the Expression of 'Vital Energy' and Concept of 'Meot' (Flavour or Taste)

Charm of Korean arts is distinguished from the 'grandeur' of Chinese arts and from the 'colourful strike' of Japanese arts. Its charm can be found in the 'composure'. In appearance, Korean arts are relatively less refined and less articulated. For example, asymmetrical shape of porcelain is appreciated as representing a specific principle of Korean arts, and native Korean music, whether vocal or instruments, pursues for neither embellished nor polished sounds, respecting raspy sound as akin to environmental nature. Exaggerated movement and technical perfection could not be much regarded as accommodating free flow of vital energy (*Gi*).

Another effort of Korean arts to realize 'Gi' as Universal Principle ('*Li*') and to channel a free flow of 'Gi' within works may be seen in their concern for the emptiness. Empty space (negative space) is a considerable element of visual composition. The empty space is laid with so much importance that the figures feature on a painting space to create a significant empty space called '*yobaek*', literally meaning 'unfilled white'. Just as Korean paintings use negative space positively, native Korean music uses silence, sonic rest in between notes. Pause of bodily gesture between movements is an important element in Korean traditional dance. The visual emptiness, sonic silence and gestural pause are not taken as negative, but these are 'relished' as they make for infinite creative imagination.

The artistic proposition of 'the static in the midst of movement (*Jeong-Joong-Dong*) and the movement in the midst of the static (*Dong-Joong-Jeong*)' in Korean arts is also associated with the technique of establishing 'Gi' by means of creative emptiness. When this artistic proposition comes into being in real life, Koreans say 'there is *Meot*', meaning 'there is taste or flavour. When a work of arts or a person reveals the harmonious combination of multiple dimensions, it is verbally expressed, '*Meot* is soaked out and comes off'; '*Meot*' is not to be made, but to spontaneously arise.

'*Meot*' is a Korean word employed for something aesthetic, with broad usage in daily life. The word has an emotive implication today, as equivalent to taste, flavour,

savour, interest, gusto, relish, delight, pleasure, grace and aroma. However, the fact that it derived from the word '*Mat*' which especially means 'palatal taste' clearly proves that sensual experience is essential in its concept. *Meot* in the context of arts has an intimate term with the revelation of '*Gi*'. The vital energy is experienced in the harmonious state of 'the static in the midst of the movement' and 'the movement in the midst of the static'; however, its resistance to break the harmony simultaneously exists in the state. Therefore, the condensed energy in its full tension and at the same time in its composure is relished in *Gi*, and '*Meot*' comes off in the state.

## **2) *Han* as Energy, *Sinmyung*(Ecstasy) and *Meot* (Savour)**

Then, how is the concept of *Han* related to another concept '*Moet*' that represents a Korean aesthetic conception? If the former is possibly associated with the latter, the former may be considered as an aesthetic concept.

### **i) Sentiment of Sorrow as a Source of Energy**

The concept of '*Han*' accounts for many representative examples of Korean arts, such as poetry of evoking the sympathy of natural objects that lead solitary life or *Salpuri*, a solo dance for cleansing the soul of painful life. Though *Han* in general sense denotes a complex sentiment, it is taken as creative motivation and generative force when it comes to the field of arts. And these works are, first of all, characterized by the high degree of emotive tension and dynamic rhythm. '*Han*' in the context of arts can be said to play an active role in the creative process of arts and it has to be understood as an aesthetic concept differentiated from the romantic sentiment of sorrow and tears. Though the emotion of sorrow caused from pains and sufferings of life becomes a certain motivation for practices of arts and provides appealing themes of arts, the emotion itself is not necessarily associated with the creative process because it can rather obstruct the way to universality if it is a subjective obsession. Here, the point has to be made that the emotion of sorrow and suffering, when it is overcome, is metamorphosed into a generative force, which serves as an igniter of artistic creation.

## ii) '*Han*' as Energy and '*Sinmyung*' (Ecstasy)

'*Han*' as an emotion of sorrow and suffering has dual tendencies of fastening and releasing as much as its emotional development presupposes the interactive relationship between the external conditions and subjective reaction to them. From the state when the pent-up emotion is released arises the ecstasy, '*Sinmyung*'. The condensed power contained in the emotion of '*Han*' to be released is proportionate to the lump of pain and suffering. The will power to ward the negative emotion away carries a great deal of driving force, and potentially explains how the painful emotion can be sublimated in arts.

Concept of '*Han*' and '*Sinmyung*' could have thematic development within Korean Shamanism (*Mugyo*). The initiation process of a shaman especially well illustrates how life's suffering is accumulated to form a pent-up emotion of *Han*, and how the power charged in the emotion of '*Han*' itself functions as a transformational force to release the fastening force of life's pain. Their thematic development within Shamanism is also supported by the fact that the *Salpuri*, unambiguous representative of the concept of '*Han*' and '*Sinmyung*' in Korean arts originated from Shaman's ritual dance. Korean Shamanism is often referred to as the underlying foundation of Korean culture along with Buddhism and Confucianism. Korean Shamanism, and Shamanism in general stress the significance of suffering and accommodation of pain in order to achieve the harmonization of opposites. Here, the pain finds its significant place as creative force. Nourishment of emotion of '*Han*' may be understood in the creative context of shamanic ceremony, which is comparable to primordial experience that brings in self-healing.

Only when '*Han*' is overcome and released, it is discussed together with the concept of ecstasy in the context of arts. Concept of *Han* having its place in arts as creative energy for transformation has to be distinguished from the emotional sorrow.

## iii) Concept of '*Han*' and '*Meot*'

The innate dual tendency of *Han*, that is, 'fastening' and 'releasing' can be comparable to the dynamic expression of '*Gi*' in Korean arts. Releasing the lump of *Han* generates the creative force that turns a restraint subjective into liberated objective. *Gi* channeled in the dynamic expression of energy is relished and experienced. As was mentioned above, *Meot* in the context of arts has an intimate term with the revelation of '*Gi*'. Specific importance of empty space in relation to



drawn figures in Korean paintings can be interpreted from the viewpoint of the dynamic 'principle of fastening and releasing'. In Korean native music, the interplay between fastening and releasing sounds is particularly important to create a real taste of music. This principle is also applicable to understanding the dynamics of Korean traditional dance. Therefore, we can relate the concept of *Han* with the aesthetic sense of '*Meot*' from the perspective of dynamic principle of fastening and releasing.

### 3) Han and Tapas

*Han* may be established as a concept that is involved in the process of transformation. The concept of '*Han*' may have a broader scope of application, not just confined to Korean arts, since the life's suffering is a universal phenomenon, and all the sentient being leading life of physical body itself may be defined as the condition of suffering if we borrow Buddhist analysis on suffering. It is attempted here to examine whether the concept of '*Han*' can be theoretically explained as valid concept involved in artistic process, with broader applicability, by comparing it with the concept of *Tapas* in Indian theory of Yoga.

#### i) Similarity and Difference of *Han* and *Tapas*

The comparison of *Han* as transformational energy with the concept of *tapas* is based on the following similarities; the meanings in their general usage have the connotation of 'pain'; both concepts are related to the heat that innately has a purifying energy. *Han* involves the process of self-healing by undergoing pain, and *Tapas* has been employed as a purificatory means in Yoga.

'*Tapas*' in general means 'penance' and ardour, implying the experience of physical suffering and mental strife in the context of asceticism. It does not carry the emotive sentiment of sorrow. *Han*, on the contrary, does not necessarily imply the experience of physical suffering, but more to do with resultant emotion caused from various sufferings. Though the general usage of two words reveals the difference of their concepts, both of them function as source of creative energy in different disciplines, respectively of Yoga and Shamanism.

## ii) Meaning of *Tapas* in the Context of Creative Process

Concept of *Tapas* is rarely referred to in the field of Indian aesthetics, but its significance is irrefutable in the Brahmanical rituals, yoga and ascetic traditions of India. Mircea Eliade, in his book 'Yoga: Immortality and Freedom', explained yoga technique as an internalization of Brahmanical rituals. In addition, he made a comparative study between Yoga and Shamanism and presented their most significant similarity to be the mastery of 'inner fire', while pointing out the crucial difference in between them.<sup>1</sup> Having accounted the association of '*Han*' with Shamanism and paid attention to its essential role in Korean arts, its Indian counterpart '*Tapas*' is possibly considered as an important concept involved in creative process of arts.

The Sanskrit term '*Tapas*' sprang from the root '*tap*', meaning 'heat', or 'the shine of the mid-day sun'. Etymologically, the term denotes the 'cosmic energy' residing in heat, fervor and ardour, which supports its fundamental implication of 'procreative power' obtained by means of severe self-mortification.

In *Rgveda*, *Tapas* is referred to as one of the necessary means to produce the divine immortal nectar, Soma. (IX. 113) In a later hymn (X.190) of *Rgveda*, *Tapas* is described to have existed prior to both divine and human being and linked with primordial desire, mind, order and truth, in the procreative process. Thus, we see in *Rgveda* that the concept of '*Tapas*' is fundamentally related with the creative process.

In *Brahmanas*, *Tapas* is recognized simultaneously the means to and the experience of transformation. David M. Knipe designates *Tapas* in *Brahmanas* as 'the primal energy ready to be drawn upon by the knowledgeable, the adept and the aggressively self-disciplined'. (Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade, '*Tapas*' by David M. Knipe, PP. 335-336) That two stones used for grinding to produce Soma were called '*diksa*' (initiation) and '*tapas*' also indicates that '*Tapas*' was recognized as a transformational agent. In *Upanisads*, the ascetic *tapas* is modified and its connection was explored in the heat of grief and ecstasy along with other fields like sexuality, hatching, ripening, digestion, strife, rage and mystical vision.

The above Vedic reference and *Brahmanical-Upanisadic* development of concept of *Tapas* stress its important similarity to the concept of *Han*; both of them as a transformational creative energy, the energy resulted from the control of the heat.

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, P.327 ; 'The difference between the yogic method of meditation and the technique that results in shamanic ecstasy is too great to permit us to consolidate them under any form

#### 4) *Tapas and Rasa*

The purpose of Yoga employing 'Tapas' is to reach 'Ananda' (Ultimate Joy). The close relation between *Tapas* and *Rasa* can be established even without mentioning the significance of *Tapas* in the context of creative process of arts, because the relish of *rasa* is paralleled with the spiritual joy of *Ananda*, as is elucidated in the Abhinavagupta's analysis of aesthetic experience. The realization of *Rasa* through works of arts takes the viewer up to the state of *Ananda*; the relish of *Rasa* in many cases, if not always, coincides with rise of a certain feeling of fulfillment. And, the aesthetic viewpoint of Kashmir Shaivism recognizes 'Rasa' identified with *Shakti* as well as *Ananda*. *Rasa* as the object of arts identified with the Ultimate Principle of Energy accommodate the hypothesis that concept of *Tapas* can be viewed from the perspective of aesthetics, since it is unambiguously related with the control of energy.

According to *Abhinava-Bharati*, *Rasa* is produced as a result of harmonious combination of four *bhavas*; *Vibhava*, *Anubhava*, *Vyabhicharybhava*, *Sthayibhava*. Though experience of *Rasa* may be universally valid as the object of arts, regardless of artistic genre, the process of production may differ from medium to medium. Here, we can further investigate about validity of the concept of *Tapas* in analyzing the process of how *Rasa* arises in arts.

#### 5) *Meot and Rasa*

Only when *Han* is restored to 'Meot', it is significant in arts; only when *Tapas* takes the practitioner to *Ananda* or *Rasa*, it finds a meaning in spirituality and arts. Then, we may say *Meot* and *Rasa* are the goal of arts in two different traditions of Korea and India. Here, it should be examined whether the two artistic objects, 'Meot' and 'Rasa' are identical, being consistent with the fact that their general meanings are same, 'taste'. If the contents of these two concepts correspond to each other, the concept of *Meot* can attain a certain theoretical foundation against philosophical backdrops of *Rasa* theory.

When Koreans employ the word 'Meot'- that is subjective and judgmental- to a person, not only the pleasant appearance is taken into consideration, but more of inner qualities and behaviour are all together considered. In this sense, the term *Meot* corresponds to the Sanskrit term 'Lavanya', which was accounted for the concept of 'Dhvani' (*lavanyamiva anganaasu* meaning 'like charms in a beautiful woman') in Ananadavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*. *Rasa* is also considered as a form of *dhvani*. It

indicates that there is a certain affinity between *Meot* and *Rasa*.

However, *Meot* is not a concept that leads the viewer to the state of full absorption; it is inhabited rather in works of arts than in the imaginative world the viewer enters in art appreciation. It is more of a secondary effect by the rhythmic handling of components of artistic medium. Korean arts ultimately pursues for the state where the artist and viewer both are liberated to be one with the work of arts, which cannot be explained through the concept of *Meot*. Here we find the concept of *Meot* unjustifiable to be the object of arts, while *Rasa* having similar meaning to that of *Meot* stands firm as the object of arts, having supported by its similarity to *Gi* as the Universal Principle of Energy.

The concept of *Meot*, though not proved to be an object of arts, emphasizes the importance of sensual experience of arts. And it can be understood a tasteful secondary feature resulted from the dynamics of *Gi* and a pleasant sentiment derived from a tension between harmony and disharmony.

Having posed '*Gi*' as a justifiable object of Korean arts, further investigate can be attempted about the relation of the concepts of *Gi*, *Rasa*, *Ananda* and *Shakti*.

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