CULTURALLY-CONSTRUCTED BARRIERS

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

I have traveled to and lived in many different countries outside my native country of Korea. These opportunities have allowed me to meet diverse people and learn about their unique cultures. While living in the United States, I have experienced culture shock in such everyday activities as observing students eating food during class, wearing pajamas at school, and other similar displays of informal behavior. I was taught to follow Confucian ideas (유교사상); the basic principles being to respect one’s elders and to be considerate of other people. Compared to Korean culture, Western culture seems very open-minded and individualistic. Adjusting to the West has challenged me to negotiate conflicting impulses to reveal or conceal my emotions. I have experienced both confidence and insecurity speaking English and I have felt a sense of belonging and isolation, resulting from my appearance as an Asian.

Having these experiences, I have come to realize that invisible barriers exist between me and other people from different cultures. Before coming to the United States, I ascribed commonplace stereotypes to Americans. I believed that they all possessed guns, were tall and big, and ate hamburgers everyday, etc. These stereotypes and cultural barriers may have been created not only by cultural differences, but also through my own preconceptions. The Korean culture that I grew up in has impeded my full comprehension and assimilation into Western culture.

I want to integrate the traditions of my Korean culture with aspects of western culture in order to illustrate how both cultures are a part of me. Through the use of many different display techniques, I have created partially permeable barriers, such as a fence, a door and blinds from ordinary Korean objects like Kimchi jars, rice bowls, side-dish plates, and spoons. I have also invented a pattern as a hidden icon. I want to understand and make elements of Western life my own in the process. My thesis exhibition demonstrates this desire by creating partially open barriers to signal my cultural adjustment to life in the West.
CULTURALLY-CONSTRUCTED BARRIERS

For my exhibition, I use typical objects of Korean cuisine to symbolize barriers which are created by me and my own culture toward Western culture. However, these barriers are permeable and dissolve little by little, an act, which represents my acceptance of new cultures. I have used the entire gallery space to install my work. I have chosen installation for this exhibition format because it is not only large, powerful and physically confronts the viewer, but because it is much more effective for my concept. Korean culture is more collectivistic than individualistic. To explain some of the cultural differences, I present individual ceramic pieces that interact with and rely upon each other. When the pieces are combined, they are larger and more stable. They recall proverbs; such as many a mickle makes a muckle and united we stand, divided we fall. Both of these expressions represent Koreans’ beliefs based on collectivistic thought.

Barriers 벽 – Fence with Kimchi(김치) Jars

In my installation, cultural barriers are implied through the creation of a large fence that divides the gallery space. Every house in Korea has a fence. Our fences are made higher and stronger than American fences. The purpose of fences in Korea is to divide land and protect private life. They are mostly made of brick or cement, and have a completely solid surface. In contrast to Korean fences, American fences are less substantial and serve to indicate private space rather than to protect it.
Within my installation, the fence symbolizes how I still protect myself and how I still hesitate to open up completely within this culture. Instead of bricks, my fence is constructed of traditional Korean Kimchi jars. When most people think of Korean food, they think of Kimchi (김치)\(^1\) as a staple side-dish which accompanies rice at every meal. Kimchi has such a long and distinctive history for Korean people. Kimchi was traditionally preserved in big ceramic jars and people buried jars full of Kimchi under the ground to keep it fresh during the winter time. Moreover, the Kimchi jar is one of Korean’s most important historical ceramic artifacts. It is made with special clay, called Ong-gi (옹기) and fired once with ash glaze. This clay body is able to allow air to flow in and out of the jar. Its permeability is an important functional feature that makes the Kimchi jar special. Furthermore, Korean ancestors would keep soy sauce, soybean paste and chili pepper paste in the same style jars because of its specialty.

I reduced the volume of the Kimchi jar and carved patterns on its surfaces in order to escape from functional aspect and express intercultural dialogue. When I stacked these pots and combined four pieces together, they create the outline of Eastern style house on the front surface and the outline of Western style house on reverse surface with its partially open spaces. These open spaces imply that I have opened up to the new culture in certain ways and adapted myself to the new circumstances. I hope the open space will continue to become bigger while I deal with this new Western culture.

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\(^1\) Kimchi (김치) is a Korean dish that is fermented through lactic acid production at low temperatures to ensure proper ripening and preservation. A spicy pickled or fermented mixture containing cabbage, onions, and sometimes fish, variously seasoned, as with garlic, horseradish, red peppers, and ginger.
Installation of Barriers 벽, 2008
Porcelain slip casting, Metal pipes, Wood, Rice, Cone 04 glaze, 345” (W) x73” (H) x4” (D)

Barriers 벽, front detail
Welcome - Doors with Rice-Bowls

As a part of the barrier, I have included a Korean style gate with a door that leads the viewer into the next gallery space. A door is a type of impermanent barrier. The door and the gateway I have created are based on traditional Korean models. The viewers see the gate as an Asian artifact but what is more, it has a meaning of welcoming them to my world upon entering. I used rice bowls to create the door. Koreans believe this container is significant since Korean’s staple food product is rice. Korean people traditionally eat rice three times a day. The cylinder like shape of Korea rice bowls is unique compared with other Asian countries such as Japan or China. Rice-bowls are made of many different materials such as clay, brass, stainless steel, and bronze. Among these materials, ceramic bowls are the most commonly used today. In addition to the shape and materials, there is a Korean etiquette for eating rice. People are taught to not hold their rice bowl in their hands while eating. Traditionally, it is said that when holding a rice-bowl, it takes your luck away from you, besides doing so is rude to your elders.

I reduced the size of rice bowls. For this reason, I wanted to follow the real dimension of a door and I wanted to use as many rice bowls as I could. There are, therefore, tiny small open spaces between the bowls. The rice-bowl door is left slightly ajar in order to signify that it is ready to be opened completely, when I am ready. I decorated the interior of the gateway using tiles with a bicultural pattern that I created.
Source images of Rice-bowl and traditional front door in Korea

Installation of Welcome 환영, 2008
Porcelain slip casting, Wood, Wire, Cone 6 glaze, 78” (W) x108” (H) x28” (D)
Welcome 환영, Detail

Welcome 환영, Detail
Union 조합 – Line with Spoons

After passing through the door the viewer encounters a line of hanging spoons that lead to the next room. The spoons are installed hung on the wall at eyelevel. The line they create continues into the next room. This arrangement is meant to not only lead people physically to the next piece but is meant to express the unification of two different cultures, Korea and America. I carve a Korean traditional pattern into the handle of the spoon and filled up with resin and rice.

According to Confucian ideas, the spoon is a critical utensil and one of the iconic objects of Korean cuisine, because it shows respect for elders and follows a traditional statement about luck. For instance, I was taught that I should not pick up a spoon and eating before the oldest person at the table does. In addition, I was taught that I should use a spoon for rice and soup. According to Korean superstition using chopsticks for rice brings bad luck.

Installation of Union 조합, 2008
Porcelain slip casting, Resin, Rice, 400” (W) x56” (H) x1” (D)
Hope 희망 – Blinds with Side-Dish Plates

The empty space between the first and second gallery is an important and conscious part of my installation. It indicates the passage of time. The second room is dark, but there is a light that emanates from behind two huge blinds hanging from the ceiling. The blinds are constructed from small plates that have been combined with each other to create partially opened barriers. Most Korean meals are served with various small side-dishes, rice, and soup. Korean people communally share the side-dishes. Historically, there are different names for each type of meal depending on the number of side dishes that accompany the main dish.
The blind implies that I should open the blind if I want to see outside of myself. I have used two different shapes of plates with red and blue colors in order to represent Korea and America. The national colors emblematic of both America and Korea are red, blue and white. These colors are common to both countries’ national flags. Similar to Kimchi jar I have finished the front and back of these plates with different patterns and surface treatment. One set of plates include a single grain of ceramic rice upon each. These plates combined to create two shapes, a star and a Yin Yang symbol. These symbols are embossed on the back of the plates. These blinds are naturally hung from the ceiling to the floor. I also decorated the floor with rice to create the origin.

Surface treatments that invite close inspection are employed throughout my installation. This deeper investigation mimics the process of getting to know an individual a process that is known to assist people in breaking down the cultural stereotypes they hold. Depending on whether or not the viewer is looking at the front or back of the pieces, he/she is able to see different surface treatments and different patterns on my ceramic pieces. Walking towards the pieces from the gallery entrance, East Asian imagery is evident, yet in leaving the space, the visual references are more Western. This display represents how both cultures are important to me.

Installation of Hope 희망, 2008
Porcelain slip casting, Rice, Jump rings, Cone6 glaze, 48” (W) x108” (H) x0.3” (D)
Hope 희망, detail
For the surface treatment of the tiles and the Kimchi jars that are a part of the barrier gate I designed my own pattern through the combination of several different cultural images including the Apple computer logo, a Coca-cola bottle, and the Korean pattern known as Danchung(단청). This invented pattern expresses intercultural dialogue.

Source images of Apple computer logo, Coca-cola bottle, and Muricho of Danchung
First, I used an Apple computer logo for my pattern. Apple Computer Inc. is an American multinational corporation with a focus on designing and manufacturing consumer electronics and closely related software products. Also Apple’s logo is popular and recognizable for its brand.

Second, I chose to use a Coca-cola bottle and logo. Coca-cola is one of the largest manufacturers, distributors and marketers of nonalcoholic beverage concentrates and syrups in the world. The biggest contribution to making Coke identifiable is the name and shape of the bottle. Coca-Cola’s headquarters are in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States of America. Coke has a high degree of identification with the United States itself, being considered by some an "American Brand" or to a larger extent as an item representing America. The identification with the spread of American culture has led to the pun "Coca-Colanization". The bottle is visual metonym for the Coca-Cola Company.

Lastly, after studying English in Canada, I went back to Korea and visited the Kyung-bok goong(경복궁)², Korean Palace. When I visited Kyung-bok goong, I saw the Dancheung pattern and was fascinated by it. Since then, I have researched and studied Danchung patterns. Danchung is a beautiful and grand decorative pattern painted on the technically advanced wooden architecture of ancient Korea. Designs of Danchung use an

² Kyung-bok goong is a palace located in northern Seoul, South Korea. It was the main and largest palace of the Joseon Dynasty and one of the Five Grand Palaces built by the Joseon Dynasty.
order and system of painting to emphasize the durability of the architecture, to cover the roughness of the wood, and to make people understand Hwaum(환), the theory of Buddhism. Danchung has several different patterns including Muricho(머리초), Hyui(휘), Gummun(금문), Hwamun(화문), Joyiecho(주의초), Buricho(부리초), and Geuki(곳기). These patterns have individual meanings and symbols. Among these patterns, I chose Muricho because it exists only in Korean’s Danchung. Muricho is a floral Korean pattern named for the type of flower that appeared as its central motif. Muricho is meant to signify good luck.
CONCLUSION

I have evolved culturally constructed barriers over my 3rd year in graduate school at Louisiana State University. As a person who has come to America from Korea, I have had many valuable experiences that have shaped my worldview. The barriers I have created for this exhibition are tangible representations of the invisible barriers I have felt not seen. I intend for this work to reveal to the viewer how my culturally constructed barriers are slowly dissolving with time and experiences living in the United States. I have come to realize that I need to be more open-minded in order to get involved with the culture that I am now a part of.

I have learned many lessons in how to deal with both technical and theoretical issues within my work through the support and advice of faculty and friends. Creating a large installation has been a huge challenge for me. My experiences here have helped me to mature as an artist and to understand American culture. I am now accustomed to certain American behavior such as waving a hand to greet elders instead of bowing, paying tips, and holding a door for others, etc. At this point I feel more comfortable being in America than being in Korea. I see myself developing my work through this cultural experience and will not be afraid of facing new cultural experiences as a person coming from totally different country.
INTERNET REFERENCES


Coca-cola http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coca-Cola

Danchung 단청 http://library.thinkquest.org/28749/main-en.html

Kimchi 김치 http://www.lifeinkorea.com/culture/kimchi/kimchi.cfm


VITA

Hae-Jung Lee was born in November 1976, in Seoul, Republic of Korea. She received her Bachelor of Fine Art majoring in ceramics at Kyung Hee University in Republic of Korea in 1999. Upon completing her B.F.A, she studied English in Vancouver, Canada, and participated in Western Canadian culture for one year. This experience provided her with a developing and understanding of her interest in the freshness of western culture. After studying English in Canada, she applied to a graduate school at Kyung Hee University in Republic of Korea. She received her Master of Fine Art concentrating on ceramics with her thesis; study of expression of ceramic decoration based on Gummun(금문) of Danchung(단청), in 2002.

Having been an Artist-in-residence at Guldagergård-International Ceramic Research Center in Denmark and at The Banff Centre in Canada in 2003 and 2004 provided her with valuable experiences which enabled her to further develop her interests in ceramics while interacting with artists from all over the world. These experiences stimulated her to study in Louisiana State University for her second master’s degree.

She has been awarded several remarkable prizes such as best of show, award of distinction, silver prize as well as others in both Korea and the United States of America. She recently got married to a wonderful person, Daniel Engle.