

# Cho Jihoon's Korean Aesthetics: the Concept of 'Meot'

Soohyun Kim

Cho Jihoon's aesthetics is based on the Confucian literati's spirit, *choesado*, and on the Buddhist idea of non-duality. He presented the theory of *meot*, meaning taste originally, as a Korean-specific aesthetic category in his *Study of Meot*, where he synthesized the previously discussed theories of other scholars into twelve elements. Discussing the formal characteristics of works that have the aesthetic quality of *meot*, he took unrefinedness as basic, and cited diversity, eurhythmy, and curvature as its subtraits. Discussing the compositional power or method of expression that provokes *meot*, he took hyper-standard as basic, and the subtraits include maturity, distortion, and playfulness. Furthermore, he discussed *meot* as an emotion or idea that Koreans live with, where the most basic one is otiosity (impracticality), and assimilation, moderation, and optimism are its subtraits. Finally, he identified *meot* as the ultimate aesthetic state with *pungryu*, a lifestyle in harmony with Nature, which is originated from the ancient Silla period. | Keywords: *Taste, Meot, Non-duality, Pungryu*

## 1. Introduction

Cho Jihoon (1920-1968) was a modernist poet, an essayist, and a critic active in the fields of artistic and political criticism. He published a wide range of articles on the history, folklore, language, and arts of Korea. Cho (1996b) was a professor of Korean literature at the Korea University, where he also served as the first director of the Institute for National Culture.

Cho's aesthetic theory was based on the Confucian literati's spirit, *cheosado*, emphasizing the human posture of constancy and the reclusive attitude, and on the Buddhist idea of non-duality to break the dichotomous discrimination. In particular, he applied these theories to the characteristics of Korean aesthetic consciousness, synthesizing the famous debate<sup>1</sup> in his days around the aesthetic concept of *meot*. Cho formalized his own theory of *meot* in a long essay entitled *Study of Meot*, published in 1964.

<sup>1</sup> The debate about *meot* started in the field of Korean language and literature at the end of the 1950s and gradually expanded to discussions of aesthetics. It was initiated by Jo Yun-Jae (1958), who refuted that *meot* could not be Korean-specific beauty. After a rebuttal by Lee Hee-Seung (1959), Jeong Byeong-Wook (1959) and others participated in this debate.

Although it is possible to find out some feature of *meot* in ancient Korean works of art, the word *meot* itself is a neologism derived from *maat* (meaning taste, or appetite) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was marked by turbulence of traditional and modern cultures. It is used as an aesthetic concept in an evaluative sense, referring to one of the typical artistic qualities of Korean arts. In this respect, it is like the Indian aesthetic concept of *rasa*, which implies both gustatory taste and aesthetic relish. Therefore, *meot* may be understood as Korean *rasa* or, for short, K-*rasa*.

*Meot* reflects an objective feature as well as a subjective feeling, which is specific to the Korean disposition found in traditional culture and lifestyle. It is both a formal quality of trans- or hyper-standard on its objective side, and an emotional quality of the arousal of aesthetic feeling on its subjective side.

In its widest possible definition, *meot* can be equated with the beautiful (*areumdaum*), whereby it refers to beauty in general, and also includes the fine (*goeum*) and even a modern taste. Before Cho, scholars tried to define the characteristics of Korean aesthetic consciousness based on a unitary principle. But Cho treated *meot* as one of the aesthetic categories that, along with the beautiful and the fine, compose the Korean aesthetic consciousness. It was important to him that *meot* ought to be a specific aesthetic category that is to be differentiated from other Korean aesthetic concepts.

## 2. Perspective in the Korean Art History

In a short essay<sup>2</sup> about Korean art tradition, Cho showed a glimpse of his view on Korean art history, which he divided into four periods. The first era from the tribal alliance to the Three Kingdoms (BC 56–AD 675) is characterized by the Art of Power. The second era from the time of King Munmu to King Heungdeok of the Unified Silla (676–935) brought forth the Art of Dreams, which was highly influenced by Buddhism. These eras of constructive creation were followed by the eras of succession and imitation. The third era span from the late Unified Silla to the Goryeo period (936–1392), and Cho Jihoon characterized it as the Art of Sorrow. In the fourth position, Cho defines the art in Joseon period (1392–1910) as the Art of *Meot*.

Cho said that the Art of Power focused on heroic majesty rather than details; and the Art of Dreams was a balanced expression between a vibrant mind (content) and an ideal body (form). The Art of Sorrow, Cho said, is connected to the idea of the Pure Land and Zen in the condition of people's discouragement and indifference as they were struggling with the hardships of a feudal society. The latter art can unfold in two directions. One is to shift from emptiness and sorrow to hedonistic romance. At that time, "the standard is scattered, and the regulation is laid down, and the technique is uneven and starts to flow in an asymmetrical way". The other is to seek a romantic utopia by purifying complex emotions in sorrow, such as is materialized in Goryeo porcelain. Then, "the sorrow of emptiness achieves the beauty of chastity, and the spirit of non-symmetry and imbalance represents the climax of the nature-like artificiality" (Cho, 1996d, p. 295).

<sup>2</sup> The essay is titled as *Prototypes of Korean Art* (Cho, 1996d, pp. 291–297) published in 1948.

The Art of *Meot* is characteristic of the arts of the Joseon Dynasty, which adopted Confucianism as its ruling ideology. In its early days, “the ideas of naivety and integrity against luxury and fragility” was the spirit of that time. Accordingly, the Art of *Meot* was at first based on the beauty of naivety and eurhythm. However, as such intentions dwindled, the ideology of reclusion based on *cheosado* was born.

Cho Jihoon’s perspective on art history responded to the task of reconstructing Korea’s national art just after the liberation from Japanese occupation. The scholar anticipated that “only in the unity of power and dreams can the weakness of the Art of Sorrow and of *Meot* be overcome” (Cho, 1996d, p. 297). He apparently felt a certain problem within the art and culture of his days, when sorrow and *meot* were mainstream emotions throughout the period of Japanese occupation, and until after the Korean War. That is to say, the passive aspect of the Art of Sorrow is “to spend time in decadence or praying, engulfed in self-derision, despair, and resentment”; and the negative aspect of the Art of *Meot* flows “from reclusion, rebellion, and expectation, consistently with lamentation and confidence”. I can interpret Cho’s vision of Korean art for the future as follows: The decadent traits in the Art of Sorrow are to be overcome through its union with the Art of Power. And it is suggested that the Art of *meot* ought to be united with the Art of Dreams to acquire classical harmony or moderation.

Cho’s view on Korean art history has the practical content to describe the aesthetic consciousness of each era. Therefore, words such as power, dreams, sorrow, and *meot*, that represent each era, function as aesthetic concepts as are respectively the heroic, the harmonious, the sorrowful, and the *meot*. As the word *meot* is difficult to translate into English, almost all scholars have argued that it is a unique characteristic of Korean aesthetic consciousness, and by consequence untranslatable. “The Art of *Meot* would proudly have the power of confidence in the midst of sorrow, being characterized by brightness and sophistication amidst simplicity and rough-savor” (Cho, 1996d, p. 296). It is difficult to find any foreign term that corresponds to an aesthetic predicate expressing such complex and ambivalent properties.

### 3. The Study of *Meot*

It is remarkable that Cho had published an essay<sup>3</sup> on *meot* almost 20 years before he completed his study in 1964. Therein, he presented this concept as an almost metaphysical, primordial idea. This indicates that his vision was to encompass the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism from early on, and that he finally found a source of his theory of *meot* in the ancient Korean *pungryu*<sup>4</sup> ritual of the Silla period.

<sup>3</sup> The essay is titled as *Treatise on Meot* (Cho, 1996c, pp. 56–59), written in 1941.

<sup>4</sup> The literal meaning of *pungryu* is wind-flow. However, it has diverse meanings such as a kind of music, nature-like lifestyle, and the ancient ritual institution (*pungryu-do*). It is also a Korean-specific aesthetic concept, which comprises subtraits such as naturalness, humour, and *meot*. Min Jooshik (1986; 2005) discussed *pungryu* in relation with the theory of *meot*.

His *Study of Meot*<sup>5</sup> first begins by linguistically distinguishing it from general aesthetic concepts. The distinction between the beautiful (*areumdaum*), the fine (*goeum*), and the *meot* is as follows: While *areumdaum* is a word that represents general, world-wide beauty; the other two represent Korea's specific sense of beauty. Cho claims that *meot* is the most unique form of Korean beauty. The impossibility of translating it builds the basis of the argument that *meot* represents Korea's unique consciousness of beauty.

Cho's theoretical system provides a framework for discerning aspects of *meot* as an aesthetic concept. He discussed the aesthetic contents of *meot* by dividing it into three: (a) formal beauty, (b) expressive beauty, and (c) spiritual beauty. (a) and (b) are developed by dividing the theory of *meot* into an inner moment and a creative moment of an artwork, which are related to aesthetic consciousness. (c) deals with the characteristics of the traditional spiritual ideology or philosophy of life, that support the Korean aesthetic consciousness of *meot*.

Each of these three moments is explained by dividing it into one basic trait and three subtraits. Cho Jihoon's description of those twelve traits are as follows:

- a.1. **Unrefinedness**: module of a form not completely geometric
- a.2. **Diversity**: expression of disposition to escape from monotonous, flat, dull style by varying it
- a.3. **Eurythmy**: state of dynamism in which motions to stop occur incessantly
- a.4. **Curvature**: linear form of cursive shape in mobility
  
- b.1. **Hyper-standard**: entering into a standard and coming out again to give birth to a new one
- b.2. **Maturity**: mastership, craftsmanship
- b.3. **Distortion**: deformation
- b.4. **Playfulness**: creative principle from the feeling of leisure and gaiety
  
- c.1. **Otiosity**: impracticality, disinterestedness, non-usefulness, superfluosity
- c.2. **Assimilation**: harmonious order and enjoyment without any serious conflict between ultimate reality and mundane world
- c.3. **Moderation**: feeling guided by intellectual temperance, not riotous or indulgent
- c.4. **Optimism**: cheerfulness without risk or urgency

<sup>5</sup> The *Study of Meot*, first published in 1964, is compiled in Cho Jihoon's *Complete Works* (Cho, 1996e, pp. 357–443). It is also included in his essay collection *Stone Aesthetics* (Cho, 1996a, pp. 63–170). In this paper, citations of this text are from the former.

#### 4. Formal Beauty

What kind of form is *meot*? What are the formal characteristics of a work that accompanies the aesthetic quality of *meot*? Cho took unrefinedness, diversity, eurythmy, and curvature as its formal traits. This theory is a compilation of works of previous theoreticians since 1940's, who focused on *meot* as a formal characteristic of the Korean art.

##### a.1 Unrefinedness

Some kind of Korean artworks has the form characterized by having a module that is not completely measured in geometric scale. Such an opinion was previously proposed by Koh Yu-Seop, the first modern scholar of aesthetics and art history. In *Essay on Some Characteristics of Korean Culture of Art*<sup>6</sup> Koh said that unrefinedness in architecture comes from Korean people's rich imagination ("abundance of fancy and constructive power") (Koh, 2005, p. 18). Cho extended this opinion to art in general. According to Cho Jihoon, among traditional Korean music of the pentatonic scale, a wonderful rhythm can be found in "the use of chromatic semitones that break regularity and normality of achromatic progression" (Cho, 1996e, p. 419). Such can be found in a song of *yukjabaegi* or *gayageum sanjo*, which is a piece of music played on *gayageum*, a twelve-stringed zither-like instrument. The formal freedom of breaking out of traditional versification is an example of unrefinedness as a formal beauty of *meot*.

##### a.2. Diversity

Diversity is an expression of the will to escape from monotony and to make subtle changes. In this sense, the opinion that diversity is a formal attribute of *meot* can be found also in Koh's saying that "*meot* is an expression of diversity through action" (Koh, 2005, p. 18). On the other hand, Lee Hee-Seung (1959) talked about characteristics of the 'more than necessary' and the 'spree' as elements of *meot*, that also indicate diversity of a form. He said, for example, that the length of a Korean costume called *hanbok* is very uncomfortable, but the reason one endures such inconvenience is because of one's own style, which is *meot-daelo*. This opinion suggests an important point about *meot* as a formal beauty, namely that *meot* is contained in an excessive form that is impractical. Like the clothes in *hanbok*, for us to feel stylish, patience is required to endure the inconvenience. It hence can be said that the formal characteristic of *meot* is an over-decoration, which is tolerated in the case of *meot*. What Cho said about diversity also refers to this kind of excessive decoration.

##### a.3. Eurythmy

One feels a certain pleasure when those extra forms have rejoicing rhythms. Such beauty is "the beauty of dynamics", that is, "the beauty seen in varying processes of presentation" (Cho, 1996e, p. 424). According to Cho, *meot* appears in the process of shifting from one movement to the next. Therefore, the essence of the formal beauty of *meot* is 'dynamic stability'. The beauty of

<sup>6</sup> Koh Yu-Seop's article was originally published in *Chosun Ilbo* in 26-27 July 1941.

a form lies in the movement rather than in the static state, to be more precise, in the fine movement rather than the turbulence. Therefore, a brief pause while moving quickly creates a higher level of *meot*.

#### a.4. Curvature

Curvature is curved linearity. Lee Hee-Seung (1959) said that Koreans with a taste of *meot* just feel bland about a straight and flat thing, they do not enjoy it. The curved shape represented by the roof of a traditional Korean house, *hanok*, contains such a savour, which can be said to be spicy and not bland. But Cho Jihoon mentioned that there is no taste in an excessively curved form. In other words, the curvature of *meot* is achieved through harmony with straight lines. Furthermore, Cho noted that the characteristics of line are freedom and change, and that linear form represents a state of mobile tendency (Cho, 1996e, pp. 427f.).

In summary, the rough-savoury taste accompanied by asymmetrical form, the lavish taste of various forms with excessive decorations, the spree taste contained in rhythmic form, and the spicy taste permeated in the curved form are included in the category of the *meot* as a formal attribute of Korean beauty.

### 5. Expressive Beauty

*Meot* as expressive beauty refers to the creative aspect that instils it in artworks, and as such stands in relation to the artist's power of composition or artistic skills.

#### b.1. Hyper-standard

Cho had defined *meot* as a hyper-beauty distinguished from the normal beauty of the fine (*goeum*). Therefore, when discussing hyper-standard, Cho takes it as the basic trait of *meot*. Hyper-standard means “entering into a standard and coming out again to give birth to a new one” (Cho, 1996e, p. 429). And its subtraits are maturity, distortion, and playfulness.

#### b.2. Maturity

For Cho Jihoon, maturity means not just getting used to a standard, but also having completed enough training to overcome it. Therefore, maturity is “skillfulness and standard of Nature acquired through artful exercise at last” (Cho, 1996e, p. 429). In this sense, *meot* is not something that is made and practised, so much as something that is spontaneous and evoked from within. In this way, when *meot* overcomes artificial intention and becomes a natural flow, its maturity appears as the beauty of ‘graceful naivety’.

#### b.3. Distortion

Distortion is deformation in style. Examples are: Putting a cap on sideways; placing the keyhole of a door plate in the centre of the circle, but somewhat obliquely drilled on one side of the upper radius; decorating a closet or shop repair in a very simple way, and suddenly engraving a subtle distorted pattern on the ankle. Such distortions are “to create a unique or higher-order taste that is not felt in normal forms” (Cho, 1996e, p. 431). According to Cho,

distortion takes on the spiritual tints of transformation, ingenuity, humour, and abstraction.

#### b.4. Playfulness

Playfulness is a principle of expression that stems from the feeling of leisure and gaiety. It is based on the surplus coming from maturity, and the humour coming from deformation. Mature technique in string-instrumental music expresses *meot* through playing vibrato (*nong* in Korean). Similarly in dance, the subtle movements of the shoulders and fingertips are seen as the expression of a gentle playfulness. And in the traditional Korean sword dance, *meot* comes from the performer's distorted costume and playful movement. Cho came to understand that it is playfulness that expresses the excitement of *meot*.

However, Cho believes that playfulness is the most dangerous element corrupting *meot*. If *meot* loses the standard of harmony and moderation, he said, "it falls into a variety show of skills and gets beyond a joke" (Cho, 1996e, p. 434). In other words, playfulness can cause a moment which turns *meot* to nonsense. This is what Ko Yu-Seop (1941) had pointed out before, and Cho also saw it as a weak point of *meot* that had to be overcome.

### 6. *Meot* as Spiritual Beauty

Cho said that the most basic in *meot* as spiritual beauty is otiosity (impracticality). At the lower level of it, assimilation, moderation, and optimism are its subtraits. These go beyond the limits of aesthetic categories. In other words, these are elements of the traditional ideology or life philosophy. This theory also embraces the pioneering ideas of Shin Seok-cho (1941) and Lee Hee-Seung (1959). Shin regarded the nature-friendly life philosophy of literati in the Joseon Dynasty as a key idea that operates on the basis of the aesthetic consciousness of *meot*. And this opinion has been shared by Cho.

#### c.1. Otiosity

Cho did not give any definition of 'impractical' or 'practical' in relation to spiritual beauty. He just referred in this context to the common theory of traditional aesthetics such as that of disinterestedness and play drive. The question I would like to pose here is: Why did Cho Jihoon view the essence of *meot* as impractical? I suppose it has something to do with a theory brought forth by Lee Hee-Seung (1959), who defined the latter as the excessive, the 'more than necessary'. In this regard, there exists an English translation of *meot* suggested by Yangha Lee, who once called the Korean lifestyle to be otiose.<sup>7</sup>

#### c.2. Assimilation

Assimilation refers to the union with dust, *héguāngtóngchén* in the Taoist classic *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-Tzu, which means to soften the inner light and

<sup>7</sup> Zoh Johann (1999) noted that Yangha Lee, a scholar of English literature, translated the term *meot* as 'otiosity' in English.



become like the dust of the world. In the sense of hiding one's talents and assimilating with worldly people, it is also called *xuántóng*, unfathomable non-discrimination. Accordingly, Cho defines *meot* as “a world of harmony, order, and joy free of strife, conflict, and reclusion” (Cho, 1996e, p. 437). Assimilation contains both nobleness and popularity at once. In *meot*, both the spicy posture of constancy of *cheosado* and the unsettled nonsense of over-abundance are avoided at all.

### c.3. Moderation

Even if there is luxury in the otiosity of *meot*, it must be balanced by moderation. True *meot* should be supported by high culture and noble thought, followed by cultivation and temperance. This theory is based on the way of harmonious fitting, once suggested by Shin Seok-cho (1941). In a word, it can be said to be moderation rather than indulgence in emotional expression. As *meot* has balance and stability, harmonious fitting can be regarded as contradicting itself with its features of unrefinedness and distortion. Harmonious fitting, however, is not at odds with the harmonization of diversity and the modulation of unrefinedness. In other words, the harmonious fitting of *meot* is eurhythmy through distortion, that is, of modulation. Thus, Cho explains, “if modulation is done as it is, even in a text that seems to be frenzied or sloppy, the *meot* is established” (Cho, 1996e, p. 438).

### c.4. Optimism

Optimism is based on harmony and moderation, sincerity and prudence, and refers to a leisurely life in nature, and a state of spontaneity, a lofty spirit. On the level of optimism, one can calmly enjoy the essence of *meot* in oneself without looking for it in a bustling state of mind. It is also in the sense of *meot* that *cheosado*'s ideology of reclusion causes a passive rebellious attitude in modern Joseon literature.

Cho explained that the ultimate *meot* is “the state of extreme delight that free indulgence suits standard” and “the state of non-obstacle that spontaneous act suits standard” (Cho, 1996e, p. 439). And he identified the ultimate *meot* with the state of *pungryu*, a life that enjoys the beauty of harmony with Nature (Cho, 1996e, p. 443).

## 7. Beauty of Non-Duality

*Meot* is one of the historically established aesthetic concepts of Korean beauty. Unlike the beautiful or the fine, the *meot* is much younger in that it has been coined and used since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century only. Therefore, it is closely related to the common Korean aesthetics of the period of modernization. Cho described the aesthetic concept of *meot* as both transformative and tasteful. Accordingly, the aesthetic feeling of the *meot* as tasteful (*meot-sreoum*) occurs when a form deviates slightly from the standard, and thus has a break-through, so that extravagance arises. It is not enough to find the tasteful in things that are out of the way or are arbitrary. The stylish result of *meot* produces not only an unconventional taste, but also a harmonious aesthetic relish. Seen in this way, the formal characteristics that give rise to *meot* include both the formal



and the transformed, the harmonious and the discordant. Furthermore, it is not a logical contradiction but a case of aesthetic category conditioned historically, that both taste and elegance are included in *meot*.

In retrospect, Cho's aesthetics is a product of intellectual pursuits undertaken during a period when Koreans called for the reconstruction of national culture after independence from Japan's annexation. It is also true that his theory shows some limitations today. In particular, the aesthetics of dynamic force exerts greater appeal than the traditional aesthetics that had been based on reclusion and serenity. This is probably because, as Cho hoped, the aesthetics of sorrow and *meot* had reached a point where they were united with the aesthetics of power and dreams. The elements that make this change possible are included in his *meot* theory itself. This is because *meot*, as an aesthetic concept, is characteristic of non-duality, that moves beyond the modern thinking in dualisms.

The complexity of the concept of *meot* logically encompasses or transcends the positive and the negative. In Buddhist aesthetics of Zen, a concept related to such a logic is the beauty of non-duality. "There is no difference between imperfection and perfection, to grasp perfection in imperfection and to see the absolute in relative things" (Cho, 1996e, p. 326). What we find here is a logic that transcends an ordinary level of discernment, which would hold that perfection is to be beauty and imperfection to be ugliness. In delineation thereto, Cho mentioned that the world of Zen is not the land of balance, symmetry, harmony, and logic, but of in-congruent harmony, illogical logic, and purposefulness without purpose.

By consequence, the here outlined theory of *meot* is about the beauty of non-duality on the basis of the highly developed Buddhist thoughts of Avatamsaka and Tathāgatagarbha.<sup>8</sup> According to Cho, "[the aesthetic property of] *meot* is neither secular nor profane. To call it classical, it has a vulgar aspect; and to call it ordinary, it has a secular exultation. Indeed, there is a subtle tightrope that crosses the subclass and does not fall on either side, and on that thin line there is a great way of *meot*" (Cho, 1996e, p. 439). In his aesthetics of *meot*, such a state of enveloping logic is latent. It is the product of mental relaxation and free play. And it also goes hand in hand with *pungryu* since it is like wind-flow trembling and flowing with a sense of beauty.

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<sup>8</sup> The Buddhist thought of Avatamsaka (*Hwaeum* in Korean) is a philosophy of totalistic organism. And the Tathāgatagarbha (*Yeoraejang* in Korean) doctrine is a kind of soteriology or gnoseology of Buddha's round totality and human immanent perfection.

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Soohyun Kim  
Gyeongsang National University  
Jinju, South Korea  
[kshh@chol.com](mailto:kshh@chol.com)

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