

## **Benjamin, Wajiro and Taewon: Parallel (hi)stories of uncanny modernity across the ominous continent<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

Benjamin, a radical historical philosopher, was also a reflective journalist-writer. He was reading carefully, observing sensitively the everyday lives of the exulted, crisis-stricken German Weimar Republic. Equipped with a keen and sharp dialectic sense about the historical progression, he was not prospecting the future entirely with hope and optimism. He was rather foreseeing the possibility, eventuality of dark catastrophic (re)turn. He sensed that any revolutionary attempt to slow down, to stop that 'progress' would for a while. That was why he was engaging himself busy with recollecting the past, recording the current, which might be swept/taken away from us, our memories.

This essay begins with such uncanny sensibility, 'political unconsciousness' of Walter Benjamin from Europe. It then will try to connect this figure in haste with Kon Wajiro across the Eurasia continent in Japan. If Benjamin became a thoughtful *flaneur* walking down the urban spaces and collecting the image-fragments of the endangered city space in hurry, Wajiro in Tokyo was busy doing what he has had termed the modernology(考現學) after the disastrous 1923 Tokyo earthquake. Is this parallel surprising? Of, if we consider the earlier interconnection in/between the Japanese Ukiyo-e(符世畫) tradition and the European Impressionism, not that much?

<Walter Benjamin, Kon Wajiro and Taewon Kim>

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<sup>1</sup> This is surely not a finished article but only an unready version of extended abstract on the subject. No quotation is permitted.

<sup>2</sup> Any, further communication/correspondence of inquiry, suggestion and comment is possible and would be sincerely appreciated and full-heartedly welcomed via the following email address. jeongyuchan@gmail.com



Source: SF Funchiap



Source: Wikipedia



Source:

blog.daum.net

Some briefly mention them and put the two together as similar species.<sup>3</sup> But there is yet found no significant studies, discussing their theoretical commonality and/or methodological un-similarity, putting their transformative traces within historical context. Here we add more obscure Taewon Park and his friend Haekyoung Kim from Korea of the similar time. In Seoul, by the time of late 1920s and early 30s, Taewon, a dandy novelist, together with his poet friend Haekyoung, would be practicing similar walking around the city, writing of the urbanscape, under/about peculiar and precarious condition of the Japanese colonial modernization. Can we find Benjamin as well as Wajiro in them, how?

This paper tries to review these interesting parallels, or, more correctly, unrecognized interconnectivities of the walkers/thinkers/writers across the geographic space, historical time. What do they share? How can we see the commonalities as well as differences among them? Why is it important to review Benjamin in Europe in comparison with the others from the Far East, and *vice versa*. This essay compares their thoughts/writings on, and methodologies of, observing the uncanny modernities (in plural) realizing similarly, developing differently, across spatial places of Berlin/Paris, Tokyo and Seoul. The capitalist bourgeoisie modernity with different faces was indeed expanding globally, settling everywhere, establishing “connexions everywhere.”<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Benjamin walks/thinks over the one-way street of Berlin endangered by Nazism

“All that is solid melts into air,” and man is “compelled to face with sober senses, his real

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<sup>3</sup> Harootunian, H. D. (2000) *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Yoon Sun, L. (2013). *Modern Minority: Asian American Literature and Everyday Life*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Marx, K. & Angeles, F. (1967). *The Communist Manifesto*. London & New York: Penguin, p.223.

conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”<sup>5</sup> It was the truth as to Benjamin in Berlin, German, of 1920s. Familiarized with Marxism via the friendship with Asja Lacis and Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin was making critical observations, eagerly attempting to create a materialist phenomenology, of everyday life. He was also busy publishing his ideas through the media such as the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, assisted by Siegfried Kracauer. If not exactly like vertov’s “communist decoding of what actually exists,” his thought-writing was still the careful, sharp-eyed exploration of the phenomena of the con-fused decade.<sup>6</sup>

In order “not to mask the current”, compelled by the historical change, he adopts a political stance of not just interpretation but of interpenetration.<sup>7</sup> To him, reflection is intermingling with the everyday things in neighborhoods. Like, Charles Baudelaire, he would “never pass by a wooden fetish” “without reflecting” perhaps upon the days.<sup>8</sup> He was literally radical, genuinely philosophical, that is, thoughtful as to history. With the small gathering collected from the actuality, he developed/imagined a virtual constellation of history yet in the form of innocent fable, crystalizing allegory. Set between the north-east-south-west of Finland-Moscow-Napes-Paris, Benjamin reconstitute Berlin during mid and late 1920s.

<Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) >



*One-Way Street* outstands as that very textuality of conjunctural analysis, situational configuration. He named it also as Asja Lacis Street. But the title comes to signify much more than the departing communist lover from Riga, Latvia, then a Baltic part of the Soviet

<sup>5</sup> Marx & Angeles, p.223.

<sup>6</sup> Michelson, A. (Ed.) (1984) *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley, London & New York: University of California Press, p.50.

<sup>7</sup> Brodersen, M. (1996). *Walter Benjamin: A Biography*. London & New York: Verso.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, W. (1979). *One-Way Street*. New York & London: Verso, p.51.

Union. Not yet fully equipped with a ‘materialist outlook’, the literary ‘fragment’ realized on *One-Way Street* is sharp and deep enough to interpret/interpenetrate the temporal-spatial reality. The author-observer, Benjamin, is keenly aware of “the violence, incomprehensible to outsiders and wholly imperceptible to those imprisoned by it” inside German. “The freedom of conversation is being lost.”<sup>9</sup>

<One-Way Street>



Source: rotes-antiquariat

We should not forget that this significant work “can only come into being in a strict alternation between action” of traveling/walking and practice of writing.<sup>10</sup> *One-way Street* is the outcome of movement, product of *footwork*. It is a procreation of actually going out there and seeing things in one’s own eyes. That experience he obtains through the learnt ‘art of strolling’, by himself becoming a flaneur. Wherever in Moscow, Paris and/or Berlin goes he out for solitary walk and for lone mediation. What he thus constructs is a factual portrayal of the city, which strangely reflects the historical moment. Benjamin takes the residence on or is voluntarily lost in the streets, (re)collecting materials of space, (re)constructing collectives of time.

<Quote from *A Berlin Chronicle*, 1932>

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, p.45.

Not to find one's way in a city  
may well be uninteresting and  
banal. It requires ignorance -  
nothing more. But to lose  
oneself in a city - as one loses  
oneself in a forest - that calls for  
a quite different schooling.  
Then, signboard and street  
names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks,  
or bars must speak to the  
wanderer like a cracking twig  
under his feet in the forest.

Walter Benjamin

[www.storemypic.com](http://www.storemypic.com)

Source: StoreMyPic

He sensed the catastrophe, 'the end of an era'. Unescapable crisis was invading the European civilization. As a matter of fact, Hitler was already making a monstrous appearance, mass-ornamented as a charismatic leader.

<Hitler campaigns strong in Nuremberg, 1929>



Source: National Archives

He will soon become a furious Fuhrer of new Germany, leading enormous populace toward the one way passage of totalitarianism, war, barbarism and mass deaths. Benjamin knew that he was, his time was, lost. Can criticism "be the continuation of politics by other mean?"<sup>11</sup> Contained by uncanny, mysterious yet familiar, air of toxic Nazism, he only can disguise himself as a harmless rag picker. He merely can envision becoming an angel of history confronting sadly the mighty storm called the modern progress.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Witte, B. (1991). *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, p.125.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt, H. (Ed.). 'Thesis on the philosophy of history' *Walter Benjamin Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.

### 3. Wajiro draws the 'Mordernology' of earthquake-struck Tokyo emperor modernism

Gon Wajiro in Japan also sensed the catastrophe, more correctly experienced 'the end of an era'. Unescapable crisis was invading the civilization. He was in hurry, too. Before it was too late, he must relentlessly wander around: go and listen to, interface with many things embedded within the city. If Paris taught Benjamin "this art of straying",<sup>13</sup> it was the capital city of Tokyo that taught Wajiro what he termed the modernology(考現學). The same or common circumstance surrounding them, however, was the fast-track system of capitalist development, modernization that was engulfing every(wo)men including them.

<Postcard, New Tokyo Underground Railway, 1930>



We know that Benjamin was reflexively foreseeing the disastrous totalitarian Nazi statism, critically examining the avaricious bourgeois fetishist capitalism. On the other hand, Wajiro, an anthropologist studying architecture, was not concerned about that future. He saw the disaster *before*. Together with many others survived, he had already experienced the catastrophe, if was not like a political-societal one in German but rather a natural one. It was yet the same dramatic, violent collapse of the present system. More specifically, the disastrous Tokyo earthquake of 1923 completely broke down the everyday life of modernizing Japan.

<Scene of Tokyo after the 2013 Earthquake>

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<sup>13</sup> Jennings, M. W., Eiland, H. & Smith G. (1999). 'A Berlin Chronicle', *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*. Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. P.598.



Source: Unicef

Before the catastrophic earthquake stroke the city, he was not in the capital city. He was rather busy roaming and travelling around the rural areas of the Emperor Japan, engaging himself with the works of doing archaeology(考古學). He would even be venturing onto the colonized Korea, doing an anthropological study/service of its village architectures for the ruling Japanese colonial government. The revolting, horrible earthquake occurred at his own home city literally stops this. He has to return to the emergent, emergency space/place of Tokyo. Experiencing a drastic happening, Wajiro now notices the essential instability, discontinuity and even vulnerability of modernity, modern culture.

<Cover of the Book *Modernloogy*>



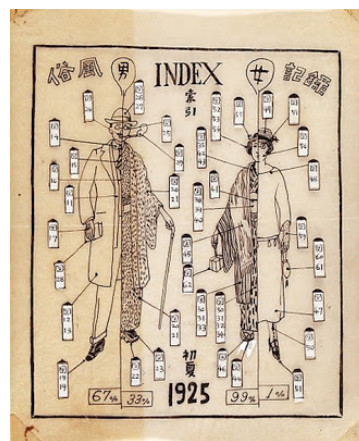
Source: Flickr

He has to keep go out and see the fast-changing urbanscape with his own eyes. He has to note, collect the (dis)appearance of urban 'mass ornament'. The movement, transformation, dialectics of appearance and disappearance of modern patterns, urban

codes should be carefully appreciated and reflected. Even the inconspicuous fashions, styles, various ways of decorating and living must be carefully decoded in details, when they appear and before they disappear again. Anthropology is too slow a method(logy) for that mission. It is basically *backward*. He needs to develop a new skill, totally a different technic of snapshotting the fast-tempo exchange, movement of modern urbanity. For that, he intentionally becomes *superficial*.

This 'way of looking' at the transformative contemporariness of modernity, superficiality of things, he names *modernology*. Putting down his old taste for slow traditional rural cultures, Wajiro now cultivates a new perspective to confront/observe the fast (dis)appearance of urban lives. He draws everything, from the fashion style of ladies & gentlemen walking on downtown streets to the list of tools equipped inside public bath. Details of the Japanese modern culture during the 1920-30s are surprisingly displayed according to the numbered indexes. Today's readers will feel and taste, touch the metropolitan cultural dynamism at the Far East nation-state of Japan, which has by that time invaded, colonized the neighboring countries.

<A secular Modernlogy by Wajiro>



Source: Instant-Tane

#### 4. Taewon writes about the colonial urban scape of Seoul modernity

Historical, not natural, disaster was engulfing the Korean peninsula. Korea, then named differently as *Chosun*(朝鮮), was one of those Asian country colonized by Japan illegally. Koreans had to live under the Japanese government general from the year of 1910. They



must survive the harsh rules set by the foreign occupying regime, or die unwantedly. They might run (in)voluntarily away, migrate to mainland China and/or Manchuria. Many dared to sacrifice their lives for independence. Nationalist antagonism, patriotic zeal was indeed very high. Some young Korean intellectuals were turning to the 'Marx boys/girls', when more resistant others joining socialist activism, communist partisan groups formed in and out of the country.

Colony is in fact an intolerable system of violence, a military-political, psycho-mental and physical state of disaster to the occupied people. It is a serious, traumatic condition of threat on their life, a hard and unbearable time of crisis to their culture. So many intellectuals, including the literary ones, were led to pay their attention to the naked catastrophe with keen eyes. Some were consequently forming and joining a radical/progressive artist alliance of *KAPF, Korea Artist Proletariat Federation* in the year of 1926. But not all thoughtful, critical minds of poets, novelists as well as painters were neither buying the militant historical-materialist politics nor adopting the crude anti-imperialist writing style of propagations.

<Postcard, *The Street of Keijo*, Seoul about 1920s>



Especially, young Taewon Park and his friend, Haekyoung Kim, known more popularly by the pen name of *Isang*, were belonging to that deviating modernist minority. Nurtured inside the cultural environment of urbanizing Seoul, they were too sensitive to neglect the undeniable, exciting modernizing side of the Japanese colonialism. The later to them was an ambivalent foreign dominance, with both catastrophic/containing and modernizing/liberating aspects.

<Cartoons pictures about the modern boys & girls walking the colonial Seoul street>



Source: *Beoul-kun-Gon*, 1927

They were quite articulated if poor dandies, bohemians of the colonial period. These stylish ‘modern boys’ were actually enjoying the materials of G. Simmel, and even were ardent fans of Rene Clair and his experimental movies. They were *appreciating* the modernity itself.

Did Taewon and Haekyoung read or know about Benjamin? We do not know for sure, but the chance seems very much limited. These young avant-garde modernists were, however, well aware of new intellectual trend, artistic mode not just of Japan but of Europe. For instance, they knew about the Surrealist idea, and were eagerly and quickly importing the very method of modernology onto their own novel and essay writings. Like their precedents from abroad, Taewon and Haekyoung also go out frequently. They were often found walking, hanging around the modernizing colonial city(scape) of Seoul. They appeared as new type of modern(ist) *flaneur*, trying to read and attempting to understand the given condition of time and space.

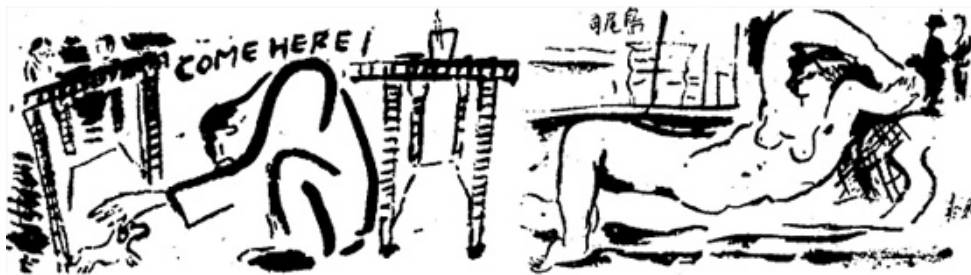
<Cover page of *A Day of the Novelist Mr. Kubo* by Daewon>



Source: muncon.net

They were really the new kids of writer-thinker who wanted to see face-to-face the (dis)appearing modernity. They would not flight from it, or fight against it. They would only write *passively* about it, express/expose widely its kaleidoscopic complexity. Like Simmel, Wajiro as well as Benjamin, they are busy noting the impressive fragments, configuring the expressive grains, of the upcoming bourgeois capitalist modernity. They yet had to do that under the peculiar time/space of growing Japanese ‘fascization’.<sup>14</sup> Their work was doomed to fail under the uncontrollable political condition. They were destined to be a captivated subjectivity, colonized identity. This was their external *and* internal crisis, catastrophe.

<Illustrations done by Haekyoung for Taewon’s Novel, *A Day for the Novelist Mr. Kubo*>



Source: Webzine Arco

## 5. Summary

Haekyoung, born in the very year of 1910 when Korea was officially colonized by Japan, would write lots of scandalous, hard-to-understanding surrealist poems, aside to many short novels. Sick and ill with tuberculosis and other diseases, he still wanted to go and see the capital of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity. Instead of Paris, he only went to Tokyo. Disillusioned by the fact that the actual modernity of colonial Japan was merely a fake and crudity itself, he died there abruptly after the police arrest and torture in 1937. His best friend, another early 20<sup>th</sup> century boy of Taewon, born in 1909, would rather stay in Seoul. He had finished a first-person narrative novel titled *A Day of the Novelists Mr. Kubo* in the earlier year of 1934.

It appears the fictive story of a walker named Mr Kubo. But, in actuality, it was a

<sup>14</sup> Maruyama, Masao (1964). *Gendai Seiji No Shito To Kodo*, Tokyo: Mirai-Sha.

narrative of Taewon himself. Coming back to Korea after study in Japan, he became extremely poor and despairingly unemployed. Every day, like many others, he had to borrow some little money from his mother, and went out to walk aimlessly around Seoul. From the crowded central station to an elevated department store, he had no fixed destination, secure basis. He moved *freely* among the streets, architectures and crowds of the colonized capital. Thus the author might look like a *flaneur*. But he was not an inheriting romantic bohemian or a heroic middle-class dandy at all. He was literally, existentially a poor straying rag-picker.

He could not be delighted by the illuminating, fascinating mass ornaments of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neither would he be impressively expressing, revealing happily the bright urbanism of colonial modernization. Partially perhaps, but his writings were reflecting the dark, miserable psycho-mentality of Japanese colonialism. His writing-thought should be read as tragic sketch, rare reflection of inter-subjective reality of those frustrated, self-destructive decadents defeated by history. They reveal the catastrophic condition of ruins, inside 'bare life' of oppressed Koreans in general. In that way, their modernology is not a mere copy or a technical importation of Wajiro's method, which is outwardly oriented toward the superficial things.

<Marching of Japanese army and Nazi in later 1930s>



Source: WorldPress.com



Source: New Statesman

We now know about Benjamin's historical philosophy. He knew the violent direction of history. So he had to hurry and write, before finally trying to flight out with failure. Like that 'angel of history' from an invaded state of Western Europe, Taewon of a colonial nation from East Asia must have had a similar uncanny sense that something bigger, horrible, disastrous was still to come. It was indeed an ominous time of barbarian re-appearance;

monsters would keep marching forward! Before it was too late, they had to go out, walk and observe/record/collect not the manifest but inconspicuous lives endangered. Such memory-images, thought-stories would later be re-read, re-wrote against the savage one-way passage of history.