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Emilio Uranga and the Communal Role of Melancholy in Postcolonial Korean Culture

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ABSTRACT: Melancholy has long been considered a negative state of being. However, negative interpretations fail to appreciate its positive potential. Melancholy and its effect can potentially benefit, not just an individual but a community. Changing attitudes towards the idea of melancholy in American culture may happen if the strategy of defining it is adapted. This paper focuses on how Emilio Uranga defines melancholy and how his philosophy can benefit a better understanding of melancholy in a communal dimension. The role of communal melancholy in Korean culture after colonialization exemplifies the way in which melancholy presupposes and manifests freedom and is a condition of authenticity.

KEYWORDS: communal melancholy, Emilio Uranga, Mexican philosophy, El Grupo de Hiperión, ontology, culture, postcolonial Korea, Gwangju, Kim Hak-muk

Introduction

Melancholy is often characterized as a negative mental state to avoid. The word 'melancholy' is generally associated with subjective depression, indicative of loss. Why has the English language definition of melancholy remained elusive? Culturally waxing and waning, sometimes as a mark of genius by Aristotle and at other times a psychological complex by Freud, melancholy lacks complete definition.

In an article published in May of 2019, philosopher Mariana Alessandri claims cheerfulness is a culturally adopted attitude in American culture and "practicing the American virtue of cheerfulness…borders on psychosis" (Alessandri 2019). Her claim that Americans idealize a life filled with constant smiles and cheerfulness is in effect, constructing a cultural norm, attempting to avoid melancholy. She writes, "[c]heerfulness isn't just an American phenomenon, but it is uniquely built into the nation's identity as invincible, and it's not clear that we are ready to part with it yet." Social norms of constant cheerfulness in the United States advocate for a dissociation with the full spectrum of emotions. Many have become acclimated to fast-paced, goal oriented, satisfaction. The cheerfulness habit, proposed by Alessandri attempting to avoid melancholy does not only deny authentic emotion, but its avoidance denies contact with the innermost quality that makes a human, human.

Changing attitudes towards the idea of melancholy in American culture may happen if, we instead find a working definition of it. Melancholy needs clarification because the definition of it has historically remained vague. Melancholy is not indicative of loss, and its effect can have the potential benefit not just to an individual but to a community.

Emilio Uranga

Order of which specific characteristics are necessary for the development of being is of primary concern in the study of ontology. Building from the concept of metaphysical *being,* the existential view centralizes the *quality* of being. The existential qualities of *being* are ordered as existence before essence, meaning that a human being first exists, and then is generally free to choose whom they become. Where ontology considers what conditions must be present for *being* to develop in the first place, existentialism is concerned with how that *being* is authentic.

It is necessary to appropriate the work of Emilio Uranga to show how his Mexican philosophy provides recognition of melancholy as a shared cultural trait. English-speaking cultures have not written much on Mexican existentialism, "much less reference…, the Sartrean-inspired works of Emilio Uranga" (Sànchez 2016, 2). It is unfortunate, in the English canonical philosophic tradition, Mexican philosophers are underrepresented, and certainly not from a lack of talent, as we will see in Uranga. Many English translations from French existentialists (Beauvoir and Sartre, for example) and plenty of German phenomenologists find coursework circulation in philosophy departments

across the United States. The few translations of Uranga's work available in English supply a more humanistic perspective in the history of philosophy for English readers. Uranga's Mexican existentialism enhances the European philosophical tradition by including melancholy, community and the necessity of it for human flourishing.

Philosophical discourse in Mexico City influenced by European works thrived in the late 1940s, el Grupo de Hiperión formed, developing a specific type of philosophy, seeking to define the Mexican philosophical tradition. In 1948, the El Instituto Francés de América Latina, hosted an existentialist conference in Mexico City. Emilio Uranga was the first presenter. Sartre's existentialism gives, Uranga lectures, "theory of social relations, a pedagogy, a theory of history, an ethics, and an idea of man…" (Sànchez 2016, 15-20). Mexican existentialism is concerned with human existence *in* an environment. Uranga tells his audience how Mexican existentialism differs from European existentialism. It is possible for "existentialism to give a foundation to a systematic description of human existence, but not of human existence in the abstract, but of a situated human existence, in a situation, of human existence framed in a determinate geographical *habitat*, in a social and cultural frame…" (Sànchez 2016, 21). The *sort* of philosophy Uranga presents is humanistic. His interpretation of specific Mexican *being*, when generally applied to *all* humankind brings about a particular philosophical worldview more inclusive than the European tradition alone. An *interpersonalismo* or inter-subjective approach is a distinguishing characteristic of Urangan philosophy (Sànchez 2016, 81). This feature is what creates the potentiality for recognizing communal melancholy through his explanation of melancholy. Its role in a communal sense should be explored to understand better how collective action begins.

In 1951, as a response to an essay from Samuel Ramos, Professor Emilio Uranga argued against a psychoanalytic assumption on Mexican character. His description of how we depend on our community combines features of existentialism and classical Aristotle. "Anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient…is either a beast or a god" (Aristotle, 1253^{a} 28-30). Human beings are vulnerably delicate, both emotionally and physically. "[T]he fundamental project of protecting a fragile being requires constructing the surrounding world as a practical system of resilient, elastic, and "soft" networks [*canals amortiguadores, elàsticos,*"*algodonosos*"]" (Uranga 2017, 167). Networks described by Uranga interpreted as social movements add to the research on collective action.

Melancholy, "expresses the human condition most acutely" (Uranga 2017, 171). Uranga finds melancholy as a primary condition of *being* and irreducible. Uranga defines melancholy as an ontological property that is primary, meaning that freedom, dignity, and authenticity are all presupposed by melancholy. A human builds upon the foundation of melancholy and all authentic action springs from this originating source of *being.* As a trait all humans share, metaphysical melancholy gives us all a similar constitution of *being.*

It is beneficial to possess Uranga's account of melancholy while also considering his version of humanism. Melancholy presents us with a quality of being human that can lead to more qualities for the self and for others to cherish. Humanism is a philosophy concerned with the social realm by requiring an inward evaluation of self. In "The Mexican and Humanism" Uranga, again, puts priority in "the quality of being human" above the political. Acknowledging the inherent struggles in life, Uranga notes the importance of authenticity and humanism in political or social action in the following:

> Being a Mexican, then does not mean, if one penetrates right into the marrow of his being, a particular nationality, but the quality of being human. In a certain way his libertarian efforts, like the Reform and the Revolution, are copies of a struggle for the human to which the Mexican finds himself committed, a struggle he takes up with such *originality*, that from this root other qualities sprout as general offshoots and not as tumours to be eradicated (Uranga 1965, 505).

Nationalism conflicts with humanism, Uranga claims. Attaching to nationalism denies the potential for full humanism (505). The non-political aspect of Uranga's humanism shows how it is possible to courageously care for collective action by aiming at an idea of salvation through communal melancholy.

Examples of Communal Melancholy in Korea

> There is a Korean word, sinparam, that expresses the pathos, the inner joy, of a person moved to action not by coercion but by his own volition. Parma is the sound of the wind; if a person is wafted along on this wind, songs burst from his lips and his legs dance with joy. A sinparam is a strange wind that billows in the hearts of people who have freed themselves from oppression, regained their freedom, and live in a society of mutual trust (Cumings 1997, 185).

Anne Anlin Cheng in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* honors Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a Korean American filmmaker, artist, and author. Tragically, in 1982, Cha was raped and murdered in New York at age thirty-one, only shortly after Tanam Press published her book. Cha was born in South Korea; her family desperately tried to seek safety during the Korean War (1950-1953). At age ten, her family immigrated into the United States. After high school, Cha graduated from Berkeley with a film degree and then in studied film in Paris at the Centre d'Esudes Americaine du Cinema. Her work gained prominence, not only as a filmmaker but in other art mediums. Her family eventually presented the Art Museum at UC Berkeley with many of her artworks.

Cheng is careful not to label *Dictée* an autobiographic account because the text features fragments of history that may or may not be Cha's own. "Clearly the text is preoccupied with history, specifically Korean national history and the contemporary legacy of that history to the West" (Cheng 2000, 142). Cha includes cursive handwriting, notes of correspondence, news articles, and a particular photograph evocative of invasion that will be especially important as we consider communal melancholy in postcolonial Korea.

The photograph is one that is not her own; Cha does not cite or reference it. Cheng finds that Cha's inclusion of the photo, without documentation, demonstrates a postmodernist critique of the long history of colonialization of Korea. The particular picture Cha employs in her book, creates a desire in the reader to know *more* about it. "We want to know that photo's referent. Cha's private notes tell us that the photo documents the 1919 Korean Independence Movement demonstration, where over two hundred students demonstrated for democracy and protested against the Japanese-installed Korean government" (143). Cha as a postmodernist artist purposefully confuses the context of the photograph, creating stress in the interpretation of its origin. Demonstrating a sense of stolen Korean opportunity without using statements in complete sentences. Cha writes the following:

> The image. To appeal to the masses to congeal the information…The response is pre-coded to perform predictably however passively possible. First examine neutralized to achieve the no-response, to submit to the uni-directional correspondence (Cha 1982, 32-3).

The image from 1919, Cha uses is the same image General Chun distributed to crush Korean democratic spirits after the massacre on May 18, 1980, in Gwangju, South Korea. Chun intended to break the spirits of the people in Korea through controlling the media. This image was widely circulated in South Korea, while at the same time, nearly no news reports of the massacre were available, creating an authoritarian government almost overnight. "The black and white photo of that student demonstration and subsequent massacre is homeless because *that* "original" event was homelessness itself, a story lost in the intervening publicity surrounding it" (Cheng 2000, 145).

By the beginning of May 1980, Chun Doo-Hwan declared himself the leader of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency and did not vacate his position as the leader of the Defense Security Command. This political move into authoritarianism received the okay from the United States. General John Wickham, according to the author of *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History,* gave favor to General Chun's coup d'etat (Cumings 1997, 376). Democratic protestors came together in cities across Korea. In the capital city, upwards of fifty thousand students and other citizens demonstrated against authoritarian rule. The reaction from General Chun was harsh, martial law was enacted, the universities closed, the legislature erased, all political assembly deemed illegal, and thousands of political leaders were arrested in the middle of the night May 17, 1980. The final phase of his coup d'etat included General Chun appointing himself the chair of a special

national security group. With this power, Chun reacted to the protest at Gwangju by ordering the army to murder Korean citizens.

The massacre in Gwangju (sometimes spelled Kwangju) was not limited to arbitrarily killing citizens protesting martial law. The level of violence against approximately 500 Korean citizens on May 18, 1980, shook many into action in support of the cause to repeal the authoritarian rule. "Elite paratroopers, widely thought to have been on drugs, landed in the city and began the indiscriminate murder of students, women, children— anyone who got in their way." Bayonets met the flesh of women, paratroopers ignited fuel against the faces of students (377).

The United States complicity supported the Chun led massacre at Gwangju. Ronald and Nancy Regan welcomed Chun and his wife at the White House less than eight months after the brutality of Gwangju (385). The same month, General Chun designated himself as the Korean leader of government (379). Chun forced nearly 40,000 teachers, students, organizers, journalists, and public servants into rural mountain locations. Physical and mental torture sometimes did not stop short of death and, many succumbed to the violence and died. The captors desired to hear the victims scream, according to an unnamed survivor:

> Right before supper we were beaten out of our minds and at suppertime we were given three spoonfuls of barley rice. Even though we offered thanksgiving for this, we were beaten again. For one laugh—80 lashings. In the morning there is a marching song period which is called a screaming time but we were so hungry we couldn't shout [so] then they beat us with clubs until we screamed. One friend of mine, Mr. Chai, could not scream because of a throat infection and therefore, he was beaten to death (379).

The underreported brutality imposed on the Korean people under authoritarian rule worsened the collective anguish. Hiding the massacre, making the Korean people believe their efforts are moot, caused a reaction among the people to reveal what happened in Gwangju. This truth created a collective feeling of melancholy.

Sometimes a word *han* is used to describe the sorrow of the Korean people. This word, according to Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, originated through colonialism but has evolved to create a new meaning. In her article "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of "The Beauty of Sorrow" she shares the history of the word with the reader. Critics, writers, artists, and scholars "frequently characterize *han* as "the Korean ethos" and the soul of Korean art, literature and film." Kim argues "its contemporary biologistic-oriented meaning emerged first during the Japanese colonial period as a colonial stereotype." She believes that reviewing the remnants of *han* demonstrates an understanding of how it was first imposed on Koreans and distributed as a colonial construct. Kim notes an evolution of the term, first inflicted on Koreans as a cultural interpellation by the colonizers and now viewed as a term of affinity, traveling "into a completely new context through the Korean diaspora. On Kim's account, *han* is defined "as an affect that encapsulates the grief of historical memory—the memory of past collective trauma…attached to a nation" (Kim 2017, 253). The feeling Kim describes is similar to communal melancholy.

We will now apply Uranga's philosophy to collective action in postcolonial Korea. Unfortunately, there is not much information in English describing the testimonies of the collective action taken by those affected by the Gwangju massacre. There is one video available with English subtitles describing how the collective action began in Korea in the 1980s as a result of Chun's authoritarian rule. Democratic protestors tried to fight against the martial law, tried to spread the news of what happened in Gwangju, and tried to honor those killed protesting on behalf of their Korean culture.

Kim Hak-muk planned a student protest on the second anniversary of the Gwangju uprising with three other activists. None of the students broke the law; they only *planned* the event. All four served a year in prison. Three of the four suffered mental anguish and died. The only one to survive was a philosophy student, An Jae-hun. Hak-muk's brother, Kim Jun-muk thinks no one remembers Hak-muk (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation 2016).

Forbidding political expression and assembly under Chun authoritarian rule created a loophole. Professor Oh Seung-yong from Chonnam National University in Gwangju says, "the law

on campus stabilization prohibited all assembly and political expressions on campuses. People couldn't express their dissent without extreme methods like self-immolation. In order to say what was forbidden, extreme self-sacrifice was a pre-requisite" (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation). A person at extreme perils may recognize their own melancholic metaphysical quality. The realization, coupled with humanism, can reach into a collective sense of communal melancholy.

In impossible situations, effecting a community, a human being can choose to act on behalf of others, exerting dignity and liberty, even if for only a moment. The Korean people were under a brutal regime and family, friends, neighbors, and posterity shared collective suffering. Nationalism played no part in the humanitarian concern exhibited through the examples that would eventually lead to democracy in 1987. It was not love of a country that motivated the Koreans to uprise, it was the love of their culture and community. If reminded of Emilio Uranga's words, it is possible to decipher the impetus for self-sacrifice.

> This peculiar "courage" or "perceptivity" that causes him to open himself up to what is "unhappy" and "forsaken" in the human lot is the orginating principle that lays him open to what is human to the more submerged area in which there has been prepared or brought into being a capacity for communication of feeling, by comparison, sympathy, or affinity with other people, and with all that tries to represent itself as human (Uranga 1965, 507).

Conclusion

The examples used from Korea: Cha's photo and book, the 1919 Korean Independence Movement, the Gwangju student uprising, Mr. Chai's death, *han,* the extreme reaction to the massacre, and Kim Hak-muk's plan of political expression, all of these acts can serve as practical understanding of authentic freedom in actions, presupposed by melancholy. Some opposition may claim that use of Mexican philosophy, applied to Korean culture after colonialization conflates cultures and disciplines. Such positions are highly biased and fail to recognize the value of interdisciplinary approaches to understand the world better. Emilio Uranga's philosophy applied contextually shows the role of communal melancholy as a motivation for social action.

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