

My solo exhibition, *The Story of Byeongangsoe 2015: In Search of Humanity*, is a reinterpretation of the *Byeongangsoe-ga*, a historical *pansori* repertoire based on a story about a horny husband named Byeon Gang-soe and Ong Ong-nyeo, commonly known as simply Ong-nyeo. I reinterpret this story in light of various recent events in Korea, as well as the global situation of neo-liberalism/neo-Cold War and its turbulent impact world-wide.

During the era of the Joseon dynasty, the story about the horny husband Byeon Gang-soe and his wife Ong-nyeo was transmitted by traveling performance troupes. By the late Joseon period, that is, the late 19th century, it became one of the six standard *pansori* repertoires, whose texts were edited and written down by the great *pansori* scholar and composer Shin Jae-hyo (c.1812-1884). In modern Korea, the story did not survive as a *pansori*, and without its musical life, it remained a lost story for many years. Then in the late 1980s it was made into a popular movie with Yi Dae-geun and Won Mi-gyeong leading the husband and wife role, respectively. This first movie was a huge box-office success, and three more commercial movies about the same story were made by early 1990s. However, the movies were made to highlight the sex act between the two main characters, particularly their encounter at the beginning of the story. Thus, a whole generation of people in Korea grew up with the name 'Byeon Gang-soe' engraved in their memory as the symbol of an erotic film.

However, a closer examination of the *Byeongangsoe-ga* reveals much more than a simple sexual encounter between a man and a woman. Using the grotesque and the scatological, the story reveals the joys and sorrows of the underclass in society and the devastating effects of social absurdities.

Byeon Gang-soe and Ong-nyeo are social outcasts. Ong-nyeo is a nymphomaniac; she is the bodily inscription of the strongest taboo of her time. The story opens with the scene of the expulsion of Ong-nyeo from her home village. Byeon Gang-soe, on the

other hand, is a born nomad. He cannot settle down anywhere. His body is also the signifier of a contagious disease. Other characters in the story include a fortune teller, a Buddhist monk, a flippant servant, troubadours and minstrels, a stable servant, a troupe of singing beggars, and members of a traveling theatre troupe. They, the members of the underclass in Joseon society, exist at the edge of society; they represent the abject in society who disturb communal identity; they question identity, system, and order, and they ignore boundary, position, and rules. On the other hand, the symbolic and belligerent-looking wooden totem pole that appears in the story reveals the grotesque fantasy about communal laws and ideologies. The frightful-looking totem pole represents a projection of the unconscious hostility toward a community and the rule of law, which in turn illustrates the stubbornness of the communal order that punishes relentlessly the nomads of the community.

Walter Benjamin has said “[T]he subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself.” It is also said that the continuation of history is the continuation of the history of the oppressed. Byeon Gang-soe and Ong-nyeo are the embodiment of the *homo sacer* and bare life; they are the dead who live at the edge. “Their voices” are the voices of the underclass that include the historical troubadours and other traveling performers; the *Byeongansoe-ga* is their fierce claim of their right to exist in history.

“Their voices” still exist today. They are the voices of the workers who have lost their jobs unfairly, who are protesting in crane towers 70 meters high in sub-zero weathers; the victims of the sunken ferry Sewol; and all the contract workers in the world who live from day to day, not knowing when their work would end. According to Rancière, art is the invocation of “the real.” The real refers to the people and objects, or those without any position of society to speak in Rancière’s tongue – who have been violently excluded from “the symbolic.” In other words, the real refers to the excluded, those

that are unseen. Politics and art give name to those who are nameless within the language of the symbolic and call them out into being.

In search of the Savage is an attempt to bring out to the surface the *homo sacer* of our contemporary society. Like Byeon Gang-soe and Ong-nyeo, they are tough, resilient, humorous; and like Byeon Gang-soe and Ong-nyeo, they are those who have been expelled from the symbolic and are 'the others'