

BEING OBSESSED WITH 'ORIGINAL FORM' IN KOREA: ITS ORIGIN, PROBLEMS AND FUTURE

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The philosophical platform of modern conservation has been established on the basis of evolved concept and ideas of authenticity. The 19th century conservation focused on the visible aspects of authenticity, such as form and material but the concept in the 20th century has evolved into the one to embrace both tangible and intangible aspects such as function, workmanship and setting. In addition an attitude toward understanding and defining the concept has been changed from static into flexible so that, for example, the authentic form could be both the earliest stage of creation and the present one with patina and historical addition.

However Korean conservators still exercise their practice based on the 19th century concept of authenticity obsessing with 'original form'. The timeline of authentic form for them is fixed to the moment when the object was created, so authentic form has been understood as the 'earliest form'. The evolved concept of authenticity written in the conservation canon such as the Nara Document (1994) has never been a feasible idea to an actual practice.

Taking the case of Seokuram (an 8th century Buddhist cave), the presentation examines Korea's attitude toward authenticity with analytical perspective in three areas: its historical and social context; the way in which it has affected to the decision-making; and the problems of obsessing with authentic form. The presentation intends not to judge the local practice from international perspective but rather to find a compatible solution between international principles and local practice in defining and exercising authenticity.

ORIGINAL FORM: ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT IN KOREA

The Korean concept of original form (*wonhyeong* in Korean) first appeared during the Japanese colonial period, became solid after the Korean War in the process of re-formulating national identity but, once the definition was fixed, has not been discussed despite changes in western conservation theory adopted in Korean guidelines, thus producing a philosophical disjunction in Korean practice. In actual practice, during the early years of the twentieth century, the concept of *wonhyeong* was used and interpreted in various ways but quickly began to establish its meaning as the earliest form.

The earliest writing mentioning *wonhyeong* is found in the 1921 article by Deokyu Kwon entitled 'Travelogue in Gyeongju' in a monthly magazine called *Gaebyeok*. This criticised the Japanese conservation programme of 1915 in Seokuram Grotto, which caused

irreversible damage during the process of dismantling and reassembling. The top of the dome was plastered in Portland cement and the order of the sculptures was changed. In his critique, Kwon implicitly defines *wonhyeong* as the earliest phase of construction (Kwon 1921: 72).

Slightly different from the meaning above, an article in the daily newspaper *Dong-a-ilbo* in 1922 used the word *wonhyeong* meaning 'the form as it is', when reporting official announcement of the Japanese Colonial Government on the issue of Sajikdan (*Dong-a-ilbo* 21 October 1922: 3). Sajikdan in Seoul, the capital city of Korea and old dynasty was a shrine to accommodate the state altar for land and crops where an annual ritual for the gods of land and grain was held by the king for a successful harvest. The colonial authority planned to convert the compound of Sajikdan into a sports stadium demolishing the shrine in the centre. However, they faced strong public opposition (*Dong-a-ilbo*, 29 November 1921: 3) so they announced the preservation of the shrine as it was but used the surrounding area for sports and leisure

facilities instead (*Dong-a-ilbo* 21 October 1922: 3). *wonhyeong* in the article is clearly used to mean to preserve as it was. However, Sajikdan, which was a core part of the whole complex with gardens and service buildings, was protected from losing its *wonhyeong* but it lost its context in the setting of the surrounding landscape and its original use.

A 1939 article in the same newspaper used *wonhyeong* in a confusing way. It reported “Completion of reconstruction of Daedongmun (Daedong gate in Pyongyang, the present capital city of North Korea): no change from *wonhyeong*, but partial change” (*Dong-a-ilbo*, 5 August 1939: 4). During the total dismantling and re-assembling of the gate, the Japanese authorities removed a wooden floor from both the left and right sides of the first floor as well as all wooden floors on the second floor. The newspaper used the word in an ambiguous way reporting that ‘there was no change in its *wonhyeong* but much change in several parts of the building’. It seems, then, that they used *wonhyeong* to describe a case where a building kept a similar appearance to its original one after a repair or restoration, yet it was not necessarily important to preserve or restore elements precisely in every detail.

SEOKURAM: THE BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY

Seokuram, located in Toham Mountain near the south-east coast of Korea, is an artificial stone grotto which was built in the eighth century with the support of the court of the Unified Silla Dynasty (668–918) (Figure 1). The grotto is composed of three sections: a rectangular antechamber, a corridor for

linking the antechamber and main chamber and a round main chamber at the back. Forty sculpted Buddhist images in all are depicted here in relief and in the round.

The rectangular antechamber and linking corridor have different groups of guardians such as the eight congregated guardians and four heavenly guardians who belonged to other religions but took refuge with Buddha later to become a guardian to protect the temple (Figure 2). The main chamber contains a seated Buddha in the centre surrounded by ten disciples and several bodhisattvas as in Buddhist cosmology (Figure 3). All components and figures of the grotto are made of granite stone.

Japanese intervention

Seokuram had been forgotten during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), which changed the national religion from Buddhism to Confucianism. It was a place only few local people pay visit for religious purpose until a Japanese mailman discovered the grotto and reported to the postmaster (CHA 1967: 14).

As soon as the news was delivered to the public, the grotto became a target of Japanese looters and smugglers. Two statues from ten niches of the upper storey of the main chamber disappeared immediately after one Japanese bribed a Korean Buddhist monk in Seokuram (CHA 1967: 14).

The major restorations during the colonial period were executed in 1913, 1917 and 1934 by the colonial government. The first restoration practice was started in 1913. Wooden scaffolding was installed in 1913 and the dismantling work, including the removal of the interior sculptures, was completed in



Figure 1 | Seokuram from a distance.

1914. There is no single record remaining that describes the original arrangement and preservation status of the sculptures. Such problem made later scholars divide into two groups and seriously debate on the authentic arrangement. While they excavated the site

before the work of concrete reinforcement of the base and the exterior of the grotto, the workers discovered two springs coming from the stone wall at the back of the grotto. Although such springs had been carefully planned by Silla engineers in order to optimise the temperature inside the grotto to prevent the grotto from becoming damp due to the surrounding landscape and weather, the Japanese workmen were unable to understand the sophisticated system. They used zinc pipes to drain the water to the outside which brought an interruption of the mechanism controlling the condensation of the grotto (Yu Hongjun 1999: 230). In 1915 the reconstruction of dismantled components the Japanese decided to cover the top of the grotto with double-layered concrete during the reconstruction without understanding of scientific ventilation system. This was reinforced by a two-metre-thick external wall of concrete. Recently introduced in western countries, cement was seen as an ideal material to solve the structural problem of buildings and to repair many monuments.

The second conservation practice started in 1917 mainly because of the leakage problem inside the grotto. Drainage pipes had to be installed on the outside of the dome



Figure 2 | Antechamber.

to prevent rainwater from seeping in, but this failed to solve the leakage problem. The colonial government, therefore, decided to undertake more repair work from 1920 to 1923. During this time waterproof asphalt was applied over the concrete reinforcement on the ceiling. Since the zinc pipes were unable to handle all the water from the springs, a conduit was constructed to drain the water out of the grotto's right side.

In spite of the second restoration, the grotto's moisture problems continued to result in damage from green moss. In 1927, The Governor-General tried to find a way to wash the moss off using steam and a boiler was built for installation. The steam cleaning method was anything but gentle: it used scorching steam from a shower nozzle. A locomotive engineer was called from Gyeongju Station and, after the boiler was fired up, the structure was sprayed with scalding steam. The steam cleaning managed to wash off all the green moss but, with the passing of time, it grew back and the strong method of steam cleaning caused further erosion.

Recovering the 'original form'

Seokuram, after independence from Japan, was left with a two-meter-thick concrete wall, incessant moisture and moss and a steam cleaner. Even after independence from Japanese rule, the steam cleaning was undertaken in 1946, 1953 and 1957. Therefore the major



Figure 3 | Main chamber.

aim of subsequent remedial work at Seokuram in the 1960s was to solve the moisture problem on the surface of the interior. The project committee decided on a double dome with cement to enclose the grotto in similar fashion to the work undertaken by the Japanese authority and to fortify the drainage pipes for the springs under the floor to keep ground water from seeping in (CHA 1967: 30–32). Thereafter, the committee discussed restoring it to its original form (CHA 1967: 33–35). As a first step to solve the problem, the Korean government invited Dr H Plenderleith, the head of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre for advice. He suggested two things:

1. to remove the earth covering the grotto in order to see what was causing the moisture and drainage problems; and
2. to protect the entrance of the grotto with a wooden shelter or roof to prevent moisture on the surface.

Based on his recommendation, the Ministry of Education approved the plan and removed the soil. This work was in preparation for the actual restoration work which was to take place in 1964. Realizing his misunderstanding of the mechanism of the natural ventilation system of the cave through several discussions and exchanges of information with Korean scientists, Dr. Plenderleith (1970: 304) corrected his recommendation later explaining that he could not recommend placing a roof over the entrance or adding a door to the structure. However, his correction was ignored by the Korean authority and the construction plan was fixed.

The restoration practice from 1961 to 1964 was divided into three parts: survey, preparatory work and main construction. The survey and the

preparatory work had been executed from 1961 to 1963 as the first and second steps in 1963. The main restoration and construction work had been undertaken from 1963 to 1964.

The main aim of the project was to eliminate the cause of the moisture and moss. However the real aim, although it was not explicit in any official document or record, was to restore its original form. Two things on the questions on the original form were at the core of debate on the original form:

1. the existence of the wooden structure of the antechamber;
2. the authentic arrangement of the two guardians which are the last pair of figures at the entrance to the antechamber (far right in Figure 2), which formerly faced inwards towards the central Buddha statue, but during reconstruction were moved to their present locations in line with the rest.

First issue on the wooden structure above the antechamber has been an extremely sensitive subject because it decides the outer appearance of the grotto but there is no enough material

resource to provide a clue of what the conservation team searched for. The team had to prove their theories under the circumstance that there were only little remaining documentary evidence and few paintings to understand the earliest form.

The only resource for their theory were a travelogue by a Confucian scholar, Sihan Jeong (1675–1707) and a painting by a landscape painter, Seon Jeong (1676–1759) (Figure 4). Sihan Jeong’s travelogue of 1688 provided some clues on the grotto without detailed description. He described that

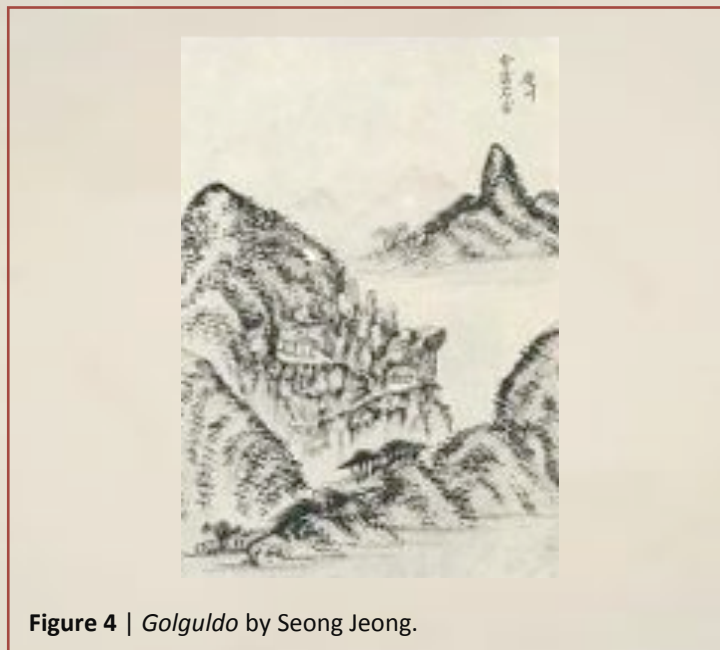


Figure 4 | *Golguldo* by Seong Jeong.

When we finally arrive, Myeonghae from the hermitage greeted us. We sat down for a while, then went up to the stone grotto. There are Buddhist carvings at the entrance – four on one side and five on the other. They are so skillfully carved that they seem to have been created by heaven itself. The stone gate consists of a stone piece shaped like a rainbow. Inside, there is a large stone Buddha. This majestic figure almost seems to be alive. The base is straight and exquisite. The ceiling stones and other stonework are rounded and stand straight so that there isn't the slightest leaning. The lines of Buddha statues seem to be alive.

(Yu Hongjun 1999: 197).

The other remaining material to be cited to argue on the original form of the grotto is a landscape painting by Seon Jeong. However there is no clear evidence that a grotto with wooden roof in Seon Jeong's painting is Seokuram. Scholars who insisted that the grotto originally had a wooden roof argue that the grotto in his painting is Seokuram. However, the title of the painting is called 'Golguldo' meant 'drawing of Golgul (literally meaning Bone-grotto)' which can be any other grotto. In addition the earliest photographic evidence taken during the Japanese colonial period does not show any wooden roof.

However the restoration authority, including Suyeong Hwang, strongly advocated the existence of a wooden structure providing archaeological findings such as roof tiles and metal nails (CHA 1967: 103). The decision was made in favour of his arguments. Although there was no evidence that the roof tiles were used in the wooden structure of the antechamber and therefore they cannot be taken as evidence that there was a wooden structure, the

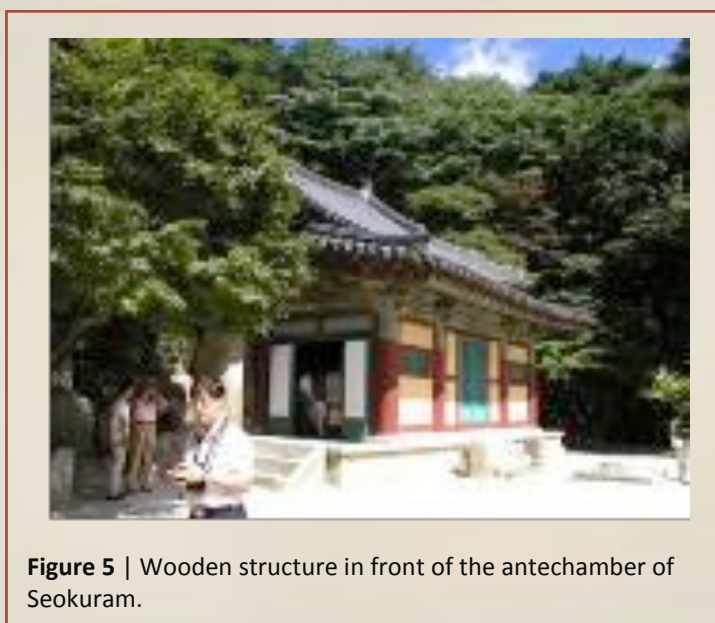
wooden structure was added (Figure 5) during the 1960s restoration for two reasons:

1. roof tiles which were found during the excavation before the restoration provided evidence of a previous wooden structure;
2. protection of the sculptures from the strong ocean wind which had caused deterioration.

The decision brought fierce opposition including a physicist, Dr Cheonu Nam, who independently studied the scientific technique of the structure of Seokuram. He argued that the wooden structure was not part of the original plan and had blocked the natural flow of the wind causing further damage to the sculptures (Nam 1968: 238). The opposition party

including Nam used scientific theory rather than material evidence to prove the earliest form. In order to support his theory that the wooden structure in the antechamber was not part of the earliest form, Nam argued that the grotto had a natural circulation system of moisture and wind, so it did not need to have a wooden structure in the antechamber. However, he had no

physical evidence to prove his theory. Second issue on the original form was the arrangement of the foremost two figures on the left and right side of the entrance wall, which had four guardians each side. Two guardians in the entrance are part of a group of eight guardians. According to the photographs after the Japanese conservation the first two guardians from the entrance were facing inward so that they were not standing with the other six guardians in the same row (Figure 6). Although the conservation team did not have any evidence or resource to confirm which arrangement is authentic they changed two figures in line with the other figures so that all four



guardians on each side can face each other (Figure 7). Nam and an art historian, Wonryong Kim, who participated in the 1960s restoration as an appointed supervisor, opposed the alteration on the basis that there was no physical evidence it (Nam 1968: 43; CHA 1967: 109).

Continuous obsession with the 'original form'

Debate about the original form (which is the earliest form in this case) has been continuous for the last half century and it seems unlikely to come to a satisfactory conclusion in the absence of any hard evidence to prove the theories of either side. In such circumstances, the focus should perhaps be shifted from the original form to the best way to preserve the present-day form. Analysis of the decision making of the 1960s restoration authority suggests a somewhat emotional approach to national identity. Suyeong Hwang and Yeonghun Shin, both of whom had acted as on-site supervisors during the 1960s restoration, demonstrated an emotional response to solving the problems caused by the Japanese restoration. To them, recovering the original form was a national task to respect the ancestors' sublime spirit. In a publication of 1964 Suyeong Hwang, who was a Buddhist art historian as well as a full-time advisor during the restoration as a commissioner of The Committee of National Treasure, Ancient Sites, Places of Scenic Beauty, and National Species Preservation, was explicit in his view that the repair of the grotto was an essential mission of great pride which had been spiritually handed down from previous generations. He stated that

Even though Seokuram had been neglected and decayed from time to time, our ancestors had

perpetuated a light of Buddhist spirit with an occasional donation and they had repaired it for the protection of sacred sculptures. Thus, if anyone says it [the fact it had been preserved] was a miracle, he is an ignorant person who does not understand the spirit of the preservation that has descended from our ancestors...The survey and repair [for the last several years] should be understood as an opportunity to re-discover and re-assess our heritage by us [Korean people].

(Hwang 1964: 127)

Agreeing with the ideas of the opposing group against the 1960s restoration, Hongjun Yu, the country's best-known art historian and the former chief administrator of the Cultural Heritage Administration, claimed that the restorers of the 1960s were ignorant of scientific technique in the

grotto and characterised the opposing groups in an extreme way stating:

Looking at the debate over this issue, I discovered something very interesting and important. Scientists like Dr. Yi Taenyeong and Nam Cheonu had faith in the Silla people's scientific outlook. It must be noted that unlike the mechanistic science of the twentieth century,



Figure 6 | Guardians before the alteration.

Silla's sophisticated science utilized natural principles. For this reason, scientists tend to agree that the only way to solve the problems of Seokuram is to restore it to its original form. However, art historians, archaeologists and administrators, i.e., those who don't fully understand science, felt that some technique or device of modern science could surely save the grotto.

(Yu 1999: 230)

However, the main problem was that the conservators did not realise that the most important thing was to consider not what was the earliest form but how they could preserve the grotto in its current state in the absence of hard evidence about the first

phase. They should have had to face the fact that the grotto had been lost in its original form by the Japanese restoration, which was irreversible. The grotto had been altered too much by its dismantling under the Japanese colonial authority and there were not enough documents to help restore it because of the failure to undertake a thorough survey before work began. The authenticity of material, form and technique had been lost by the time Korean scholars looked for the earliest form in the 1960s. After the inspection of the grotto in 1963, Wongryong Kim, who was an art historian and a supervisor of the restoration with Suyeong Hwang, pointed out the impossibility of restoring the earliest form and strongly opposed the plan for the alteration of the arrangement of figures in the entrance (CHA 1967: 109). He argued in the committee meeting in 1963 that

There is no clear evidence [about what the original form was], so we should preserve it as it is rather than deciding this kind of an important matter without thorough consideration...If we intend to rearrange two figures in two even rows during the present restoration as Suyeong Hwang's suggests, there should be undeniable evidence or records to support the assumption. Due to the lack of evidence in the present situation, we cannot decide on work which none of us can be responsible for with certainty, thus, we had better preserve it as it is.

(CHA 1967: 109)

At the 1991 Conference of National Specialists on the Scientific Preservation of Seokuram, he recollected the 1960s restoration with regret and made the interesting suggestion that

Whenever I think about the world treasure known as Seokuram, I feel troubled. I still have doubts as to whether the restoration should have been done, and

I also feel that I should do something about these problems. The assumption that there was definitely a wooden antechamber is a modern idea. In terms of Silla times, I think this is problematic. As scholars, I feel that we should have strong convictions...In conclusion, I would like to suggest that all the people currently associated with the Seokuram project be removed. Since there are many excellent young scholars in Korea, let some new people form a committee and take a fresh look at the grotto...We can start afresh, assess possibilities and take things in a new direction.

(Quoted in Yu 1999: 256)

His recollection implies the error of the previous restoration, which aimed at finding the original form but damaged the existing one. His suggestion can be interpreted in two ways: either take a different

perspective to find the earliest form or abandon the enthusiasm which was shown by the previous generation and preserve without further alteration. In the light of his standpoint in the 1963 committee meeting, it seems that his 1991 recollection implies the latter. For the first generation who took over the responsibility



Figure 7 | Present arrangement of figures.

of looking after the monument from the Japanese authority, identifying the original form and restoring it in Seokuram's case became more important than for any other altered heritage because it was the most iconic heritage asset whose original form had been distorted by the Japanese, foreign invaders. Therefore, this altered heritage had to be returned to its original form. Kim's recollection pointed out that Korean restoration needed to realize that it is difficult, if not impossible, to restore the earliest form and to find a new direction for conservation without delusional enthusiasm. If the contemporaries who executed the restoration adopted the more fluid concept of authenticity, the decision could be made

in different ways, focusing on conservation to prevent further damage rather than restoring it to a form that was based on improvable assumptions. It also could protect the religious value allowing it to serve its original function rather than restricting people entering the grotto by putting a glass window in front of the corridor and only allowing authorised monks to enter for daily ritual. The failure to establish the fluid concept of authenticity and emotional attachment to the earliest form led to the grotto losing its religious function and changed religious and aesthetic experience of the visitors.

The restoration of Bulguksa, a sister temple of Seokuram that was executed after the work in Seokuram, confirms that the attitude toward restoring the earliest form as an original form has a close connection to the recovery of national identity. The first part of the *Bokwon report of Bulguksa* (CHA 1976) specified the aim and meaning of the displaying that the rationale of the restoration extended to the spirit of 'national security and protection'. It states that

The Unified Silla period is the golden age of culture in our history...The representative cultural heritage sites of the period are Seokuram and Bulguksa. Therefore, they are the essence of our cultural heritage as well as religious places with a Buddhist spirit protecting the nation. Unfortunately, however, Bulguksa experienced destruction by the Japanese Invasion (1592–1595) and thereafter only certain buildings such as Daeungjeon (Hall of Great Hero), Geuknakjeon (Hall of Western Paradise), Jahamun (Purple Mist Gate), and Jongru (Bell Pavilion) remained so that it could not recover its splendid and decorative appearance from the old period. President Jeonghee Park, who was sympathetic about the temple, ordered the restoration in order to preserve our heritage and to resuscitate patriotism encouraging people to love our nation and to foster a spirit of protection of it...Three major meanings of the restoration are:

1. the preservation of our cultural heritage;
2. the perpetuation of the spirit to protect our nation;
3. the foundation of the basic ground to spread our traditional and intelligent culture.

(CHA 1976: 17)

It is difficult to understand why and how this should be related to the architectural aspect of the temple and its restoration. The attitude might have originated from the circumstances of the time. In the 1970s national security continued to cause anxiety after the Korean War, the anti-communists were highly motivated and the government encouraged the patriotism of the people by restoring an important but damaged Buddhist temple. The recovery of national identity was not merely an individual passion but the desire of the public. Instead, it might be more precise to suggest that the government used the restoration of the two sites as a political tool to satisfy the desire of the public for the recovery of national identity and to gain their political support.

ORIGINAL FORM: THE PRESENT CONCEPT AND A WAY FORWARD

Recognised as one of the finest national heritage sites, the grotto has garnered much attention from the Korean government and many scholars for the last 100 years. As displayed in the conservation of Seokuram, the constant passion for recovering *wonhyeong*, literally original form but meaning the earliest form, has dominated not only in conservation projects but also in the studies of architectural history in Korea. In the 2000s, the debate on the original form still has been at the centre of attention of both the public and scholars. For example Jaesin Yun (2000: 128-129) studied the photographic evidence and revisited scientific theories of the past and argued that the roof tiles were for protection from water coming into the main chamber, implying that there was no wooden structure in front of the grotto. However, it seems difficult to persuade the public and scholars who had been tamed by 1960s onward obsession for the earliest form, believing that the restored form of the grotto is the one.

The reason why original form in Korea has preferred the earliest form can be explained because of the

constant demand to build a nation after the Japanese colonial period as examined above. Being deeply influenced by the western attitude toward material evidence as proof of the dignity of long tradition and history, the Koreans longed to find and restore the earliest form of their historic buildings and monuments in order to prove their identity and proud history. It has been a national task for several decades (Lee, S 2007: 125-126).

However, this attitude has been questioned recently by scholars and conservators who recognise the limitations of restoring the earliest form and understand international principles and guidelines, like Ganggeun Lee, a young and leading architectural historian. He has argued that decisions for restoration have to be made after careful discussion, leaving open the possibility of new evidence, so that a building or monument may be restored to an original form not based on speculation but on accurate analysis, thus opposing speculative restoration to an earlier phase (Lee, G 2002: 232).

Such changed attitude toward the original form has not become favourable yet in Korea. In 2002, the Cultural Heritage Administration announced a plan to build a copy of the grotto the same size in the grotto precinct for the prevention of further damage and for visitors to touch it and understand at closer range (*Dong-a-ilbo*, 2 February 2002: 11). The underlying intention of such plan is that the material evidence should be preserved for itself without valuing the public experience of witnessing the original entity of the monument. Material aspect and authenticity in form was more respected than associative, emotional, and aesthetic aspects of visitor's experience. The plan brought strong opposition from the Korean Architectural History Institute and Korean Archaeological Institute as well as from the public demanding a withdrawal of the plan (*Dong-a-ilbo*, 9 April 2002: 15; Lee, S 2002). They argued that building a copy of Seokuram with synthetic material 100 meters away from the original grotto would destroy the authenticity and religious and aesthetic value of Seokuram (*Dong-a-ilbo*, 9 April 2002: 15; Lee, S 2002:

86). The Cultural Heritage Administration announced the withdrawal of the plan in the same year.

Considering that it is difficult to reconstruct the earliest form of monument as shown in the case of Seokuram, conservators should moderate an over-enthusiastic attitude toward the earliest form. Instead they need to endeavour to define a present-day concept of original form on the basis of acknowledging its fluidity and subjectivity. And such change of attitude will enable conservators to be compatible with prevailing international principles of minimum intervention and respecting the trace of time in conservation.

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