

**“A Mystical Source That Has
Not Been Read”: Jan Tschichold
and New Typography in Post-War
South Korea, 1977–2023**
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This chapter examines the impact of Jan Tschichold and New Typography in post-war South Korean design.¹ Designers and design historians in Korea generally agree that Sang-soo Ahn (b. 1952), the internationally renowned typographic designer who is often considered “the father of contemporary Korean type design”,² was responsible for the introduction of Tschichold to the country. In 1980 Ahn first translated into Korean Tschichold’s *Asymmetric Typography* (1967), the English-language edition of *Typographische Gestaltung* (1935), and published it as a series of articles in *Ggumim* (Decoration), one of the earliest design magazines in post-war Korea.³ This was the first time that Tschichold’s name and typographical theory reached Korean designers through a Korean-language publication.

About three decades later, by the early 2010s, Tschichold had become a *myth* or an *icon* in Korean design, as the *grand master* of typography and a *precursor* to the Swiss International Style.⁴ But a renewed interest in Tschichold also emerged among some Korean designers and scholars. In 2013, the editor at Workroom Press in Seoul, Hwalsung Park, translated into Korean Christopher Burke’s *Active Literature. Jan Tschichold and New Typography*, a book that revealed more nuanced stories behind the myth of Tschichold.⁵ In 2014, Jinsu Ahn, a typographer based in Basel, translated the German edition of *Typographische Gestaltung* directly into Korean, providing a more accurate knowledge

of the original.⁶ The same year, the Korean Society of Typography (KST), one of the most influential groups of typographers and graphic designers in Korea, published a special issue of its journal, *LetterSeed*, dedicated to Tschichold (hereafter referred to as *LetterSeed* 10).⁷ *Active Literature* and *LetterSeed* 10 shared the purpose of demystifying Tschichold and providing a deeper understanding of his typographic design and theory. Considering that in 2007 the editor and typographer Robin Kinross, in his foreword to *Active Literature*, called for a move “towards a critical

1 The significance of Tschichold in North Korea may be an interesting topic to explore, but due to my limited knowledge and access to North Korean material, I focus on South Korea. In this chapter “Korea” refers to South Korea.
2 Fu 2019. For a biographical account of Ahn, see Kang 2017.
3 The series was published from July 1980 to May 1981 under the title, “Yan Chiholteu ui bidaechingjeok taipogeurapi” (Jan Tschichold’s *Asymmetric Typography*). Jun 2017b: 84–85.
4 Burke and Park 2015: 198.
5 Burke 2013.
6 Tschichold 2014.
7 Since 2013, the Korean Society of Typography has published *LetterSeed* bilingually in Korean and English. The society also re-publishes its journal in book form. In this chapter I reference the English texts in the book version of the special issue, Korean Society of Typography 2015.

understanding of Tschichold's work", the tendency found in the Korean design field in 2013 and 2014 may have been a response to design scholarship in Europe.⁸

In this chapter, I examine these key publications and related figures that have played significant roles in shaping the understanding of Tschichold in Korea. I aim to shed light on how Korean designers were introduced to Tschichold, how they accepted or responded to his practice and theory of typography and how their meanings may have changed, especially before and after the early 2010s. By tracing the significance of Tschichold in Korea, a lesser-known area in English-speaking design scholarship, I also aim to provide a foundation for comparative approaches to Modernist typography and contribute to a more nuanced and global understanding of graphic design history.

Sang-soo Ahn and the "Yellow Book"

About a decade after *Typographische Gestaltung* was published in *Ggumim*, in 1991, Ahn revised the translation and published a Korean edition in book form.⁹ (fig. 139) It was the first book to be published by Ahn Graphics, the design studio and publisher that Ahn had founded in 1985.¹⁰ In the translator's postscript he wrote:

I was captivated by the world of typography after reading this book, a classic on typography. Finding a dusty and small copy of *Asymmetric Typography* in the corner of an imported bookstore in Mugyo-dong in 1977 was an encounter of serendipity. [...] This book was written according to the time in 1935. But apart from some technical factors, most of it is still applicable today. His [Tschichold's] timeless insight is astonishing.¹¹

Although by 1977 the original edition of *Typographische Gestaltung* was more than forty years old, Ahn was fascinated by Tschichold's perspective on typography and found it relevant for typographic design in *Hangeul*, or Korean script. In an interview with the designer Byung-jo Kim in 2014, Ahn even recalled that "everything seemed to be correct to my eyes".¹² Ahn also noted that through the book he was able to "see the flow from Europe through Japan to Korea" of principles and terminologies of typesetting commonly adopted in Korea.¹³ Because modern printing technologies were introduced to Korea mostly during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), printing and typography in post-war Korea was still heavily influenced by Japanese standards.

Having discovered what he thought were the origins of modern typography, Ahn attempted a more theoretical approach to design and presented editorial designs that were new to Korean publishing. In an article he wrote in 1981 in *Dijian* (Design), the best-selling design magazine in Korea, Ahn argued that designing a book was more a matter of "communication" than "ornament" and the goal was to "make the readers understand and get interested in" the publication.¹⁴ Here Ahn was repeating Tschichold's view that New Typography

should prioritise clarity and function over ornament, to make the publication easier to understand and serve the readers.¹⁵

Ahn also applied Tschichold's typographic principles to some of his works in the early 1980s. The edito-

8 Kinross 2007: 7.

9 Tschichold 1991.

10 AG n.d.

11 Tschichold 1993: 180.

12 Ahn and Kim 2015: 216.

13 *Ibid.*: 213.

14 Ahn 1981: 12.

15 Tschichold 1993: 30.

rial design of the cultural magazine *Madang* (Yard), for which Ahn served as art director, was a result of such an influence.¹⁶ (figs. 140–141) Most significantly, Ahn set most of the texts in the magazine flush left – justified is the standard in Korean-language typography – and used coloured photographs abundantly. Graphic designer and historian Kay Jun aptly suggests that the use of high-quality and carefully edited photography, combined with fresh typesetting techniques, gave *Madang* a clean and distinctive look that set it apart from popular magazines published in Korea at the time.¹⁷ She argues convincingly that Ahn's designs for *Madang* were a practical pursuit of functional and mechanised hangeul typography, which laid a foundation for his later, more experimental works from the late 1980s.¹⁸

Tschichold's name and typographical theory slowly gained attention among Korean designers alongside Ahn's career as a prolific designer and educator. From 1982 to 2012, Ahn taught visual design at Hongik University, one of the most prominent institutions for design education in Korea.¹⁹ At the school, he instructed students to read the Korean edition of *Typographische Gestaltung* and, regarding the book's influence, commented that "Tschichold must have influenced on their typography works either directly or indirectly".²⁰ From the 1990s, *Typographische Gestaltung* was repeatedly recommended by design magazines like *Dijain*.²¹ The book gradually became a standard text on typography for Korean designers and design students more generally.²² Among some designers, it even earned a nickname, the "yellow book", because of the colour of the cover.²³ A strong association between Ahn and Tschichold also persisted in Korea, as Ahn continued a successful career and earned international recognition as a pioneer of Korean typography.²⁴

Active Literature and LetterSeed 10

In the foreword to *LetterSeed 10*, designer Jee-hyun Kim wrote: "A Korean version of a book [about Tschichold] was recently published. This would be the right time to honour him", indicating that the special issue of the journal was partly influenced by the publication of *Active Literature* in Korean.²⁵ Byung-jo Kim, who edited the special issue, wrote more

provocatively: "Jan Tschichold made me have questions: 'Why still Jan Tschichold?' 'Why only talk about him?' I had doubts and tedium before preparing this issue", expressing his frustration with the idolised understanding of Tschichold.²⁶ He further explained the motive behind the special issue, writing:

Tschichold's achievement is truly stupendous. His works and texts will forever remain classics representing the era, and we will still continue to read him. But perhaps we could create a work while using him as an apparatus for introspection rather than a goal to follow, because we cannot stay here forever. I would like to look back into that work one day, and I wish to find this very publication somewhere in the opening passage of that work.²⁷

16 Ahn and Kim 2015: 216.

17 Jun 2017a: 264.

18 *Ibid.*: 264.

19 Ahn left the school in 2012 and founded PaTI (Paju Typography Institute), an alternative design school. Jeon 2012: 141.

20 Byung-jo Kim, who studied at Hongik University, suggested that "students were influenced by Ahn Sang-soo not Tschichold who influenced Ahn Sang-soo." Ahn and Kim 2015: 219–220.

21 Kim, B. 2015a: 164–179.

22 Jun 2017b: 84.

23 Kim, D. 2015: 296.

24 Ahn became a member of AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale) in 1991 and was vice-president of Icograda (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) from 1997 to 2001. In 2000 he convened Icograda's congress in Seoul and in 2007 received the Gutenberg Prize from Leipzig. AGI n.d.

25 Kim, J. 2015: 6.

26 Kim, B. 2015b: 8.

27 *Ibid.*

To trigger such new approaches, *LetterSeed* 10 included various contents that explored different aspects of Tschichold and his influence in Korea, such as research articles on the Sabon typeface and the 1946 debate between Tschichold and Max Bill, interviews with Sang-soo Ahn and Christopher Burke, reproductions and reviews of Tschichold-related publications and a printed “exhibition” of graphic design works by KST members paying homage to Tschichold.

While diverse material was gathered in the special issue, contributors also acknowledged the lack of substantial knowledge about Tschichold. Pointing out that until 2013 *Typographische Gestaltung* was the only book by Tschichold translated into Korean and that “a meaningful academic book on him” had not been published in Korea, designer Dong-shin Kim suggested that Tschichold had been “a mystical source that has not been read”.²⁸ The subsequent publications of *Active Literature*, the new edition of *Typographische Gestaltung* and *LetterSeed* 10 between 2013 and 2014 provided richer and more in-depth information about Tschichold beyond the “yellow book”. Then we might ask: have these publications changed how Korean designers understand Tschichold? Did the designers actually demystify and examine him more critically, or use “him as an apparatus for introspection”? Has Tschichold “been read”?

An Interview with Sung Min Choi and Hwalsung Park

To answer the questions posed above, I interviewed two practitioners who have played important roles in further introducing Tschichold into Korean design in the 2010s. Byung-jo Kim noted that he felt that the Korean editions of Robin Kinross’s *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History* (1992)²⁹ and Burke’s *Active Literature* “made the illusion of Tschichold disappear”.³⁰ The former was translated by Sung Min Choi of the graphic design duo Sulki and Min and the latter by editor Hwalsung Park of Workroom Press.³¹ Choi and Park certainly cannot represent all those involved in typography and graphic design in Korea, but their views give us insight into how practitioners in the field experienced the impact of Tschichold from the 1990s to the 2020s.³²

Choi and Park both contend that myths or illusions around Tschichold in Korea have not disappeared.³³ Choi thinks that the myth around Tschichold, if there was such a thing, “completely lacked substance”. Tschichold’s name may have been familiar to many Korean designers, but his design, theory and achievements were

hardly examined or incorporated into their work. Park also explains that Tschichold may have been better known among some designers and students directly related to Sang-soo Ahn, such as those at Hongik University or Ahn Graphics, but his name was usually mentioned superficially as a subject in Korean design and publishing. He thinks that the myth around Tschichold itself, rather than being formed in Korea, was made in Euro-America

28 Kim, D. 2015: 297.

29 Kinross 2009.

30 Ahn and Kim 2015: 221.

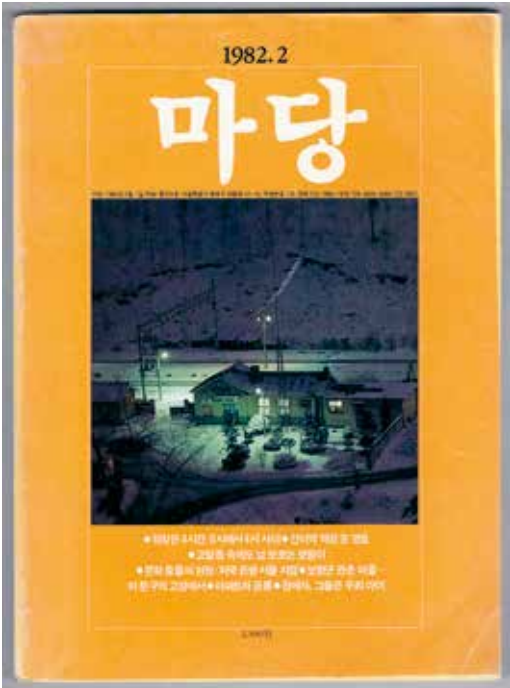
31 Choi is a member of the KST, and although he was not directly involved in the publication of *LetterSeed* 10, he has incorporated historical perspectives in his work and has written and translated many texts on graphic design history, including Burke 2011, Kinross 2009 and Kinross 2018. Park is editor-in-chief at Workroom Press, the publishing house of the design studio Workroom.

32 I conducted the interview with Sung Min Choi and Hwalsung Park on 20 April 2023 at Choi’s studio in Jongno-gu, Seoul. Choi and Park 2023.

33 Quotations in this section, unless noted otherwise, are from Choi and Park 2023.



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fig. 139 Front cover of Jan Tschichold's *Taipogeurapik dijain* (*Typographische Gestaltung*), translated by Sang-soo Ahn, Ahn Graphics, Seoul 1991. Designed by Se-young Lee. Photo by Yongkeun Chun

fig. 140 Front cover of *Madang* (Yard) cultural magazine, February 1982. Designed by Sang-soo Ahn. Photo by Yongkeun Chun

fig. 141 Layout design of *Madang* cultural magazine, February 1982, pp. 76-77. Designed by Sang-soo Ahn. Photo by Yongkeun Chun



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fig. 142

Sulki and Min, "Being Tschichold", in *LetterSeed*, 10 (Jan Tschichold), 2015, pp. 48–49. Offset lithography.

and then imported to Korea. According to Choi and Park, Tschichold and New Typography in Korea can be better described as neglected rather than mystified.

Park's translation of *Active Literature* in 2013 has partly contributed to overcoming such an ignorance about Tschichold, but he explains that he translated the book more because Workroom was trying to establish itself as a publisher specialising in design and Burke's book was a well-researched one, not because he thought that Tschichold was particularly relevant to design in Korea at the time.³⁴ He also believes that, given the poor sales of the book for the past decade, only few people know, or were willing to know about Tschichold, even to the extent described in *Active Literature*. Choi and Park point out that, considering Tschichold's relative fame as a Modernist designer from the 20th century, ignorance about him alludes to a more general disinterest in design history in Korea.

Regarding *LetterSeed* 10, Choi recalls that Byung-jo Kim played a leading role in publishing the KST's journal at the time and was interested in historical matters, so the special issue on Tschichold may have been affected by Kim's personal academic interest.³⁵ But Choi found the proposed critical re-examination of Tschichold to be somewhat "out of the blue" at the time, as there had been little examination of the designer in the first place. He explains that Sulki and Min's contribution to the special issue, "Being Tschichold", a pair of photographs featuring the duo posing like Tschichold in one of his famous portraits, was "a little bit like a joke" that subtly expressed their doubt about the significance of Tschichold in Korean design. (fig. 142) He acknowledges that academic archiving and research gathered in the special issue are certainly substantial and meaningful, but he is unconvinced that they led to a more critical understanding of Tschichold.

Choi and Park also agree that Tschichold may have become even more irrelevant or uninteresting in Korea in the past decade, where younger designers and design students now tend to seek references within Korea, not from Europe, the US or Japan, as has been the case for decades in the post-war years. They think that this may be due to the cultural confidence that the younger generation of Koreans has developed, but it is also limiting their interest in Western historical references like Tschichold's *New Typography*. Despite their generally sceptical view towards the influence of Tschichold and *New Typography* in Korea, Choi and Park do not dismiss their significance completely. They think that if objects designed by Tschichold himself – not just reproduced images and theoretical texts – that show the complexity and diversity of his works become accessible in Korea in the form of exhibitions, they may attract fresh interest of design researchers and practitioners.

34 Since then, Workroom Press has published in Korean biographies of some key designers that are lesser-known in Korea than Tschichold, such as Paul Renner, the designer of the typeface Futura (Burke 2011), and Hiromu Hara, the influential typographer and graphic designer in 20th-century Japan (Kawahata 2017). More recently, Workroom-Specter, the imprint founded jointly by Workroom and Sulki and Min, published the Korean edition of Christopher B. Wilson's *Richard Hollis Designs for the Whitechapel* (Wilson 2021).

35 Unfortunately, Byung-jo Kim passed away in 2022 and I rely on his writings as reference.

Rediscovering Tschichold's Relevance in Korea

Tschichold and his earlier Modernist typographic principles were introduced to Korea by Sang-soo Ahn, but their direct influence on graphic design practice was relatively short-lived. By the time *Typographische*

Gestaltung reached a wider range of Korean designers in 1991, Ahn himself had moved from the functionalist design style presented through *Madang* to more experimental designs, symbolised by his “non-rectangular” (*talnemoggol*) *hangeul* Ahnsangsoo typeface and “avant-garde” art direction for the magazine *Bogoseo/bosogeo* (Report/report).³⁶ Nonetheless, Tschichold remained an important figure in the following decades in Korea, but mostly as a name or an image, without substantial research or critical adoption of his theories. Some texts published in the early 2010s offered a more multifaceted knowledge on Tschichold, but as Sung Min Choi and Hwalsung Park point out, these approaches by more research-oriented practitioners had limited impact on the wider field of typography and graphic design. It seems that Tschichold generally remains “unread” in Korea.

Despite the doubts about their relevance to design in Korea, texts by or about Tschichold continue to be translated into Korean.³⁷ How these newer publications will impact and be accepted by younger generations of Korean researchers and designers remains to be seen. Choi wrote in 2014 that there is no need for designers in Korea to know Tschichold’s principles of typography because many of them “have become useless” in contemporary Korean typography and others have been “accepted as common sense”.³⁸ To rediscover Tschichold’s relevance in Korea, in addition to translating works published elsewhere, original historical research into how his design principles became useless or how some others were slowly absorbed in Korean design is necessary.

36 See Noh 2017; Kim, B. 2017.

37 Bosshard 2017; Tschichold 2022.

38 Choi 2014: 152.

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