

Harmony of Tree and Bird : Ecological Imagination of Novels of Yi Chong-Jun

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1. Taoism and Deep Ecology

Taoism does not recognize the world as a fixed object; because the world as object exists in the transition and the epistemological subject is circumscribed in the limited capacity of recognition. Therefore, establishing relationships with the world in terms of Taoism commences from accepting the fact that the conventional recognition of subject must be regulatory, not affirming that an object has immortal and exclusive essence.

Taoist thinking consequently requires us to transform the conventional perspective and to escape from all the preexisting orders such as spatial environments, conventions and intellectual systems. The escape mentioned here is escape from and negation of all the centralist *egos*. After negating the ego that is different from the other and exclusive, because all the things do exist in the mutual relationships, we come to think it is impossible that the eternal and independent essence and universal criteria exist in any case. Through incessant negation and escape, we can be united with the *nature* and hold harmonious and energetic relationships with it. This perspective of Taoism corresponds with the one of deep ecology.

How does the man live, who takes principle of nature as his principle of behavior? In the text of *Tao Te Ching*(道德經), Lao-tzu(老子), it reads:

Here, the myriad things are made, yet not separated.

Therefore the sage produces without possessing,

Acts without expectations

And accomplishes without abiding in her accomplishments.

(“萬物作焉而不辭, 生而不有, 爲而不志, 功成而弗居,” Charles Muller, from ch. 2 of *Tao Te Ching*)

We usually believe that the successful life is the thing in which we strengthen ourselves and accumulate our own properties; we feel happy when we grasp the things that we *have to have*, and *register* our own sign in the results of the work. Lao-tzu does not say that this is wrong; instead, that there is more tremendous method than this sort of success, happiness and registration. Look at the nature. Does the spring try to keep

the flowers for eternity because it makes the flowers blossom? The answer is no. Nature moves to the summer indifferently, just leaving them on the earth; it is on the path to the autumn without any sympathy, not putting grain and fruit in its basket but leaving them behind. Nature can remain in its greatness as *Great Nature* because it does not stand on the success of its own work, or possess or show off it. Then, Lao-tzu subsequently said:

It is precisely because she [sage] does not abide in them

That they never leave her

(“夫唯弗居，是以不去。”，Charles Muller, from ch. 2 of *Tao Te Ching*)

This remark should not be regarded as negation of profane success and value or protection of hermitage. Lao-tzu did not argue that “the sage should not abide in her accomplishments” to encourage the life of a Taoist hermit or dew; as shown in the following phrase, to emphasize the accomplishment of “not being left.” This principle of behavior suggested by Lao-tzu leads us to expect greater results in the very meaning. The doing of “Not-Doing” is basically significant for Lao-tzu because it is a way makes all the things happen (“無爲而無不爲”, from ch. 37 of *Tao Te Ching*) and brings unimaginable success to us.

2. Symbiosis and World of Natural Not-Doing

For Yi Chong-Jun, the fiction is a sort of *dream of words*; the dream is interwoven with the hope for liberty, truth, forgiveness and love of an individual; it is the harmonious aspect as a whole of lives. He seems to have suffered from the conflicts between liberty and pressure, forgiveness and revenge, ideal and reality, language of existence and language of relationship, and reality of an individual and dream of the collective and to have been trying to synthesize those. Additionally, he has continued experiments of mind with a series of open form. He leads us to consider what the reality of a writer is, by avoiding to possess his own recovery of thoughts and experimented forms and escaping from it to find out extraordinary doors to a whole new world.

There are few people who object to name Yi Chong-Jun one of the most intellectual writers illuminating the history of Korean contemporary fictions. In the history of Korean modern literature, his chronicles of writing can be focused on as the most truthful traces of soul, ranging from the first work “Leaving the Hospital” in 1965, serial works such as “Preface to Linguistic Sociology” and “People from the South,” novels like *Paradise of Your Own* to recent works such as “Last Memorials of the

humanist Mr. Mu-so-jak” or “The Basement.” His fictions do not demonstrate phenomenon and reality in which they have resided; approaching the essence of soul and reality of life beyond the appearance, they reveal the source of implications and profound symbols. His endeavors to untie with words and music the entangled reality and to make enough room for spiritual liberty will be the touchstone for the truthfulness of our lives and literature.

The most remarkable story of Yi Chong-Jun is “Bird and Tree” in terms of his dream of fictions, previously mentioned; the figural title itself is noticeable; it was interpreted by the writer himself in an essay. The tree is self-sufficient reality “nursing branches, opening leaves and baring fruits by absorbing the water and sunshine by itself.” When leaves have been thickened, birds come to the tree and beautiful music nests there. “The tree of love or the life, with high and thick branches, which hundreds of birds are flying into and singing the chorus with” is the tree of the most beautiful life or of liberty, love and light, which he can dream in terms of fiction. (Yi Chong-Jun, “Between Language of Existence and Language of Relationship”)

Seemingly, the tree reminds us of the sound of heavenly flute, which was mentioned in “Discourse on Seeing all things as Equal(齊物論)” of Zhuangzi; the absolute sound of nature that sinks all the sounds in their own harmony. It is, however, the very form that is not apart but in-between the harmony of absolute nature. The harmony or dream about bird and tree for Yi Chong-Jun appears to be longing for that sort of dimension.

In “Bird and Tree,” a wanderer, strolling in the southern part of Korea to find real art of Pan-sori, comes to be told by a man like tree about a rain bird; the narrator narrates that the man “seemed to be a tree,” when the wanderer discovered a man in an apparently shut orchard in the middle of his wandering; the man waved his hand to call him as if he were a neighbor and he came up to the man as if he were enchanted by something; the man offered dinner for the stranger and even a sleeping place; until the midnight, they came to talk to each other. Main stories are roughly two sorts; one of the elder brother of the man and one of a poet.

The man had the elder brother, who could not go to middle school after graduating from elementary school because of the poverty. When other children went to the town to study, he culminated in leaving for the town, after flying a kite and seeing the string of a kite escape from the reel one day. The bewildered mother planted a camellia tree in front of house and took care of it, telling the story of a rain bird.

The story, reminding us of a conte “Story of Rain bird,” which was presented by Yi Chong-Jun in 1977, forms the multi-layered meanings in this work. The rain bird is a

(fictional) bird that sings sorrowfully just on the rainy day from spring to autumn. Because it has no nest to rest in even on the rainy day, it cries and wanders in the rain. The reason why the mother told the story and planted a tree is because she would have tried to provide shelters for rain birds on the primary level; however, on the second level, she might have missed her son.

After a long time, the son, who had not get any success, came back home and guessed his mother's intention like a tree, looking at the big tree. The mother asks: "Where were you wandering for the long time on the streets? Where did you find a shelter on a cold windy and dark night?" The son answers: "I met many old people who had children in remote areas like you; thanks to their hospitality, in good shape, I am here now." The elder brother, who came back home, planted and cultivated trees around their house as if he wants to reward his mother's favors. However, when she passed away, he went away again. In the place of mother, the younger brother or the man took the task to plant trees for a pitiful rain bird; he is waiting for the brother similar to rain bird.

On one day, the man, waiting for his brother, met a poet who came to the forest; exhausted by urban life, the poet came to encounter a space that was expected to bring peace to his worn out soul. For the man, it was sure that the poet looked like a rain bird, sitting on the place for half a day until the sunset. Therefore, he decided to help him. The poet hoped that he would buy the estate first then settle there if he got more money. The man negotiated with the owner of the farm, helped to make a contract even without deposit, planted trees everywhere except for the place where the house would be built. However, the poet could not nest there due to shortage of money. For the poet, who could not make dreams come true and passed away unnaturally, the man wanted to make *yin house*(陰宅) or grave instead of *yang house*(陽宅) or house in the real life but he heard the news of his cremation. In spite of this, he is waiting for rain birds, still planting trees and comes to meet the wanderer.

Naturally, the wanderer understood the reason why the man looked like a tree at the first glance; "he[the wanderer] was a bird in the rain and the man was a tree in the forest; therefore, the bird saw the tree and in turn the tree saw the bird. It was the reason why he felt comfortable in the unfamiliar house; then, his interpretation follows:

Considerations of the man were not confined to his brother any more; even if what he was waiting for was not the imaginary brother but the real brother, the brother, having left home, was coming back to the forest in the form of rain bird. The

man was inviting all the tired wanderers passing by in his forest or rain birds, as his mother had not planted the camellia tree only for her son long time ago.

The man's attitude provokes comprehensive reflection on the world view of those who have established modern civilizations by cutting down trees since modernity. For instance, let us concentrate on the following remark; "everybody wanted to make egocentric relationships; he tried to make relationships in which he would knock down and dominate other people; in the relationship, he attempted to sell his own persona and place; that was the relationship of possession and domination"; we have to reflect on the fallen reality by egocentric possession and desire to dominate; the writer evokes that it is not "the right feature of man" and "the right place for man."

The man did not expect to get any income by the trees he planted. He thought: "it's a bitter and ridiculous life to regard trees as a way of making money; they are just for showing flowers"; he said "I simply planted and took care of trees; I simply helped fruit-bearing trees bear fruits, flowery and leafy trees blossom and leaf; I never lived on them." He answered a question if he had not thought about the transplantation of trees planted for the poet on the land of another person to his own forest:

Why do I have to pull out trees I planted from the ground? I just let the trees grow there. Since plants and trees have their own life, the life is not my own. People often pull out and move the living things because they might think of the life of others as their own life. If they insist that the life be their own, anybody can insist the same thing in that way. Each is living in each place; man in man's place, tree in tree's place; the life of tree has the right like that.....

This passage corresponds with the world of Lao-tzu previously mentioned("功成而弗居" and "無爲而無不爲"). In this story, tree and bird are beings that accord with each other by sharing things. For sure, the portrait of tree is more foregrounded in "Bird and Tree."

Both the mother's tree and the man's tree is a sort of cosmic tree. Vertically, the tree circulates heaven and earth, and water, soil and air; horizontally, it lets the bird dance with its leaves and fruits; this is life of tree. These trees make sacred forest; in the forest, all beings can be mysterious, beautiful, peaceful and happy. This cosmic dynamics of tree gives us ecological truthfulness and esthetic sympathy, with the connection with ethics of compassion, pity, sharing and giving.

The desirable society for Lao-tzu is the one in which pure states of beings before differentiation are supported and all the things are influenced by principle of nature. Tropes in “Bird and Tree” of Yi Chong-Jun are nothing less than the natural state. Bird and tree act as principle of nature or “Not-Doing Nature.”(自然 無爲) Lao-tzu suggested the idea of *Nature*(自然) because he tried to argue that everybody could develop his nature according to his own need not according to class need; he also suggested the idea of *Not-Doing*(無爲) for different needs to be harmonized and balanced. Besides, it is for the development of one’s own specificity of subjects that Lao-tzu applies the idea of Not-Doing Nature to the real politics. In this respect, “Bird and Tree” of Yi Chong-Jun is the form to long for the world in Not-Doing Nature itself; it is touched with the universal recognition of ecology of the East.