

# Dialogue between ASLE-K and ASLE-J: Building Bridges between Korea and Japan through “Environment”

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### 1. Introduction

Although Korea and Japan are neighboring countries, differences in culture, language, national character, and so forth have accumulated between these two countries over the course of history, especially in modern times, making the two remain far removed from each other until recently. Enyô Shû comments on this situation with a sigh, stating, “Mutual understanding among East Asian countries remains on the level of sightseeing and popular culture” (35).

Because of the past colonial relationship, it was not until October 1998 that the influx of Japanese popular culture into Korea was officially liberalized due to then-president Kim Dae Jung’s visit to Japan. This first liberalization allowed imports of *manga* comic books, magazines, and such. This was followed by the second liberalization in 1999, allowing the screening of film-festival prizewinning movies, the third in 2000, covering animations and videos, and the fourth, covering CDs, movies, and videogames. According to the “Outline of Foreign Immigrants and Japanese Emigrants in 2006 (Flash Report)” by the Ministry of Justice of Japan (2007), Korea tops the list of “Top 10 Countries of Official Foreign Immigrants in 2006 (Including Reentries with Reentry Permits)” and “Top 10 Countries of New Foreign Immigrants in 2006.”

On the other hand, a public opinion survey announced by Japan’s Cabinet Office in December 9, 2006 revealed that 57.1% of the Japanese respondents thought that the relationship between Korea and Japan is not good. This figure was the worst since 1986, when the Office started the survey (“Kanryû-Bûmu”). The newspaper article states that, although there were more Japanese people having a greater sense of intimacy with Koreans after the co-hosting of the World Cup and the Korean boom in Japan, it appears the prime minister’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine and disputes over the ownership of Dokdo/Takeshima Island have cast a dark shadow.

The well-known architect Tadao Ando mentions in his essay in *The Asahi Shimbun* that “lack of communication in all senses lies at the root of various problems that the contemporary Japanese society is facing. When it comes to environmental issues, the lay public tends to make a big deal out of them; however, the important thing is that every single person is reminded of hearty communication and ensures relationships between themselves and people around them.” In the meantime, interculturalists Martin and Nakayama propose “dialogue” and “alliance-building” as the keys to improving intercultural relations (432).

In this panel, three ASLE-K graduate students will discuss three Japanese nature writers (ISHIMURE Michiko, YAMAO Sansei, and MIYAZAWA Kenji) (ASLE Japan 2007) while three ASLE-J graduates will encounter three Korean ecopoets (CHONG Hyonjong

Chong, KIM Chiha, and CHOI Seungho) (Kim 2006). The total of six Korean and Japanese graduate students will explore the possibilities of the key word “environment” as a means to create a bridge between the two countries and to construct better relationships.

## 2. Outline of Presentation

### <PART I: Presentations by ASLE-J Graduate Students>

#### 1. Two Lines. Analysis of “That Curved Line” by CHONG Hyonjong (NAKAMURA Yuko)

**Lines in Nature: Curved.** One of the poem’s (98) key words, “curved,” seems to denote the lines of necks of cows and horses grazing (Note that in *Mythologies*, Barthes says that a sign has both denotation and connotation.). However, “curved” may also represent “lines in nature” in general. There are no completely straight lines in nature that do not bend at least a bit. Nature’s lines are curved lines. The use of “curved” rather than simply “a curve” indicates that the lines are innately curved or bent by something transcendent like God. The word represents the creation achieved by nature.

**Meanings of Cows and Horses.** Cows have a long history as livestock in Korea. They are slow but so meek and powerful that people in many cultural regions love them as animals, which bring harvest and peace. On the other hand, horses have been used in wars because they can run very fast. From this point of view, cows and horses may symbolize opposite things: peace versus war and farmers/commoners versus warriors/officials. In this poem, these two opposite representations share a common ground for grazing. This may indicate a world where all living creatures can coexist in peace without conflict.

**“The Lines” and “That Curved Line.”** From the first to the third verse, the poet uses the plural form “the lines,” as many lines of animals and things in nature are portrayed. However, in the last verse, he uses the singular “that curved line.” “That” implies that the line is at a distance, or in his memory, or in an image. By expanding this analysis together with the analysis above, “that curved line” symbolizes the circulation of ecology, an image of the healthy living together of all the creatures in this world. That is the reason for the singular.

#### 2. Two Thoughts. Rereading KIM Chiha: The Portrait of a Poet From Political Commitment to Environmental Awareness (YAMAMOTO Yohei)

KIM Chiha has been known as a political poet who committed himself to resistance movements against the autocratic government of the 1970s. Nearly thirty years later, this poet has been called an “ecological poet” who embodies the ideas of the interconnectedness in our environment. Why and how, if I may ask, has Kim become a poet who awakened his consciousness toward the environment? This question must be significant for environmental scholars, especially for Thoreavians who are interested in nature writing. Because Henry David Thoreau showed ecocritical points of view in some work and political viewpoints in others. In this sense, environmental literature may have much to do with political things. The list could go on and on: including, for example, Aldo Leopold and Edward Abbey from the U.S.A., and Kazue Morisaki from Japan. What sort of common understanding do nature-oriented writers show us? In the course of reading and discussing Kim’s poems, I

would like to evoke this kind of complicated question in my presentation.

At first, we read Kim's "Cracking the Shell" (Kim 37), the title of the anthological book itself, reviewing the discussion at a previous ASLE-J conference. Focusing on the imageries of rebirth in the poem, I suggested that he made much of his own sense of body to depict the recreation of the world. This time, I will try to read in his poems a sort of remnant of his political resistance to the oppressive establishment, even though he does not explicate his political attitudes in his poems. In "In the Past" (Kim 40), for example, he is likely to express something quite political in the imageries of rebirth such as "your nest" and "my self newly-born." His ecological impulses must derive from the Korean intellectuals' haunted memories of the past. I will also consider how differently poetry functions in Korea and Japan.

### **3. Two Natures. Reading Seungho Choi: An Attempt to Bridge <Outer Nature> and <Inner Nature> (MORITA Keitaro)**

In this presentation, I take up "Industrial Complex" (Kim 3) by CHOI Seungho, who is a Korean ecopoet and writes "postmodern," "deconstructed," and "deconstructionistic" poems (Kim and Sagawa 22), and attempt to highlight his bridging <outer nature> (= natural environment) and <inner nature> (= body). Regarding "Industrial Complex," I would like to bring attention to the following two points. The first point is that the poem criticizes the environmental damage caused by the modern society and includes, in sequence, signs that refer to modern environmental destruction. In the poem, what is destroyed is not only outer nature but also inner nature, namely the body, which is symbolized by, for instance, mother and child. Wu calls this "colonization of the human body" (xiv).

The second point is that this poem reminds me of the Japanese female poet ITO Hiromi's writing. ITO is a prolific poet and has produced a number of works on the subject of sex, gender, and sexuality and once stated explicitly that the pre-born baby was an "excretion." ITO is in the same generation as CHOI, being younger than him by just one year. Inner nature, including "hair," "breast," and "womb," is a common theme that the two radical ecopoets CHOI and ITO engage in.

In summary, "Industrial Complex" makes an attempt to bridge outer nature and inner nature, using signs related to industrial society (industrial complex, waste water, plastic cord, smokestack, rubber), body (child, mother, navel, brain, womb, scalp, hair), and sex/gender/sexuality (mother, breast, rape, womb, child).

When considering "environment," we tend to think only of outer nature and, thus, environmental literature has a tendency to focus merely on outer nature, except for some ecofeminists. In this presentation, however, I wish to insist that environmental literature from now on concentrate more on inner nature, such as the body, including sex, gender, and sexuality.

#### <PART II: Presentations by ASLE-K Graduate Students>

### **1. An Analysis of ISHIMURE Michiko's Literary Techniques in *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow* (LEE Kang Sun)**

In *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*, Ishimure Michiko asserts that environmental pollution brings not only nature's destruction but also human's demolition (ASLE-Japan 5-47). This presentation analyzes the author's literary techniques.

In this analysis, I suggest that there be three perspectives used in considering *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. The first one is that of the Minamata patients. The second is that of Chisso and the Japanese government and the TB patients. They deny (Chisso company, the government) or despise (the TB patients) or have no interest in (the others who are not inhabitants of the Minamata shore) the existence of Minamata disease. The third is that of the hospital and the newspapers showing the medical reports and journals' notations. The author's purpose is to make the people of the second perspective realize the danger of the environmental crisis. To achieve that goal, the author portrays the process of Minamata disease by using stream of consciousness, by showing contrasts between the former sea and the present sea through the use of flashbacks, and so on. The effects of Minamata disease, the collapse of humanity, are supported by the medical records and the journal's notations. As the records and the notations are short and cold but accurate and completely objective, they prove the existence of Minamata disease, the crucial effect of the pollution, and the result of humans' selfishness. That is to say, while the stream of Yuki's consciousness shows the inner process of losing humanity, the scientific report of the university hospital verifies the cause of the ruin of consciousness.

## **2. Reading YAMAOKA Sansei (LEE Young Hyun)**

YAMAOKA Sansei's ideas were based on real life. As a leader of a commune and farmer himself, he practiced the ecological life in person. According to "Afterwords" to *Under the Palm Leaf Hat* (ASLE-Japan 62-64), his dream to be a farmer in the lowest strata of the society shows his determination not to accept the common idea of capitalism, in which actually every one of us wants to go higher and higher.

As we see in "Afterwords," he places a high value on the hand culture, which is being replaced by the standardized monoculture of technology quickly covering the whole earth. It must be a disaster to all of us. The writer wants to tell us how ruinous it will be if we live under a society of monoculture.

In "Twenty-four Seasonal Cycles" (ASLE-Japan 67-68), the writer compares two different kinds of time concepts ("linear time" and "permanently returning time"). Our current notion of time is, as he calls it, a "linear time of civilization" (ASLE-Japan 67). One of the characteristics of this time concept is that it is sustained by contemporary values of "progress" (ASLE-Japan 67). By comparing the two concepts of time, he makes us ask ourselves if we are much happier now than in the past. I do not think that there are many people to agree with that.

In "On the Five Elements" (ASLE-Japan 69), although we usually think of the four elements, water, earth, fire, and air, the poet writes about 'the five elements,' adding trees to the four. The poet might have wanted to show us how elemental and essential trees are.

In "Under Palm Leaf Hat 3" (ASLE-Japan 70), the poet writes, "I harvest potatoes out of earth, I harvest potatoes without words, (Chernobyl! Fallout)!" By talking about harvesting potatoes and Chernobyl at the same time, he leads us to compare those two. Chernobyl reminds us of death and destruction whereas potatoes, the staple food for many people, give us life. The poet might have wanted to harvest potatoes and thereby save people's lives, even though humankind is in such a disastrous situation.

### 3. Reading MIYAZAWA Kenji: Crossing the Border between Two Worlds (KANG Yeon Haun)

MIYAZAWA Kenji is one of the most prominent writers in Japanese literature, who devoted all his life to giving love toward the marginalized beings such as animals, plants, and inanimate things. As IWAMASA Shinji points out, MIYAZAWA's writing is deeply rooted in an overwhelming empathy for other peoples and things (ASLE-Japan 72). With regard to MIYAZAWA Kenji's *The Bears of Mt. Nametoko* (ASLE-Japan 76-92), I would like to talk about two subjects: hunting and language imperialism.

The first subject is how to understand hunting in *The Bears of Mt. Nametoko*. Considering MIYAZAWA Kenji's warm-hearted attitude toward Kojuro, who killed the bears of Mt. Nametoko to make his living, we can surmise that MIYAZAWA condones Kojuro's hunting. Unlike the two men who enjoy hunting just for fun in *The Restaurant of Many Orders*, Kojuro's hunting is tolerable because he not only kills bears for his living but also has sympathy for the animals he kills. This fact, however, does not mean that human beings have higher laws than animals. Miyazawa tries to figure out the ideal relationship between human beings and animals through the concept of Buddhist Alms (布施). Besides, Kojuro's hunting reminds me of "Thinking like a Mountain" by Aldo Leopold and *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. I would like to present different attitudes toward hunting in these literary works.

The second subject is language imperialism. Looking inside of *The Bears of Mt. Nametoko*, the bears of Mt. Nametoko, interestingly, seem to understand what Kojuro says and even to speak in human language. On the surface, the communication between two different species, human beings and animals, goes on wonderfully. However, we can consider this anthropomorphism as expression of anthropocentric perception, which forces animals to give up their languages and to adopt human's ideology. When we think of MIYAZAWA Kenji's two other tales *The Nighthawk Star* (Miyazawa 66-76) and *Wildcat and the Acorns* (Miyazawa 77-89), language imperialism is at the heart of the exploitation of nature for humans. Even though we cannot deny the trace of language imperialism, I think that MIYAZAWA Kenji uses anthropomorphism as a means of eliminating differences between humans and animals in *The Bears of Mt. Nametoko*, just as Gary Snyder does in his poetry.

In summary, MIYAZAWA attempts to cross two borders freely through his writings. All things, including humans, animals, and things around the world are members of our big ecological community. Therefore, we can conclude that everything is deeply connected to one another.

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