

Celebrating the Poetry of Yoon Dong-ju

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Yoon Dong-ju (1917-1945) lives on today as one of South Korea's most celebrated poets. Despite his persecution and death at the hands of the Japanese, Yoon's poetry continues to inspire and teach that colonization can't defeat the human spirit. Yoon's poetic framing of independence arises from the insistence to take life on its terms. He insists on the value of a life well-lived despite suffering under oppression.

In this year of 2020, some 75 years after his death, Professor Choi Yearn Hong invited me to address the Yonsei alumni gathering in Chicago, Illinois. Several years ago, Choi made a pilgrimage to Yoon's hometown in Jilin, China. However, because of the COVID pandemic, this summer's meeting wasn't possible. I learned about this poet from Professor Choi. I want to share some thoughts as a student of Korea on reading Yoon Dong-ju's poetry.

When I read Kyung-nyun Kim Richards' translated collection entitled *Sky, Wind and Stars* (Asian Humanities Press, 2003), I'm struck by Yoon's love of life. The poems suggest his seeming quietude, the prevalence of *han*, and his intent to overcome it. In these accessible poems, one senses a young man's love of his land, people, and life, and of the passions that his loves caused. Yoon's poetry reveals a wonderful human being!

Yoon saw himself as a poet and didn't think it an easy life. Clearly, "A Poem that Came Easily", written while he was a student in Tokyo, shows a self-conscious adoption of the poet's life. He lives in an "alien country" but longs for Spring. His way of living is to write poems, in some sense consuming himself in this action. It isn't a completely happy or naïve life: "The poet has a sad vocation." Yoon eventually contributed to the protest and foment of producing independence from Japanese persecution. He did so not because he chose to but because it was his way to share his poems. Yoon's poems represent a humble person who cares and wishes to share the personal, political, and universal in his life of suffering and overcoming.

How else can we understand his "Self-Portrait", which mentions self-hatred but reveals a transcending and quietist spirit? Yoon sees himself in the universe, his limits or seeming insignificance. However, he loves the familiar, even if circumstances limit his experience. In turn, he values and cares about his life, even if at times he hates it. Love and hate are sides of a coin. If one can see the still waters, one also senses Yoon's depth. "Mountain Forest" suggests Yoon's striving for perspective and peace by setting his consciousness in karma, akin to a thousand-year-old forest. The "young heart" finds hope pondering what is above, outside, and beyond "the stars" surrounding the night darkness.

Some will read "Tomorrow" to show despair and loss of hope. However, Yoon focuses on the moment – the Now. He accepts the fragility of what is precious in life. So many of Yoon's poems are wonderful glimpses of "normal" events and moments. We can imagine and share those moments with Yoon, as well as apply his thinking to our own lives.

As "Foreword" proclaims, we shouldn't be romantic about Yoon's thinking, or else we'll miss its power and poignancy. He resolves to live without shame and to love all things. This is assuming the heavy burden of his world – perhaps any world. Yoon accepts suffering but finds much that's beautiful, uplifting, and consoling despite all that's wrong.

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I would like to thank Professor Choi, Yearn-Hong for his encouragement of me to learn about the poetry and life of Yoon Dong-ju.

We know Yoon grew up in Jilin as a Joseonjok (people in China of Korean ethnicity). Life handed him a glass most would call less than half-full. A member of a notable family, he learned as a boy to value his Korean ethnicity and would later study at Yon-hee College in Seoul, what is today Yonsei University. Even more amazing was his attending graduate school in Japan as a young man. This sealed his fate, since Yoon was not a poet writing in a cave. We know he shared his poetry and felt he had to do so. Yoon wrote out and shared his poems with friends and teachers. Leadership need not involve government service or the Army. Ideas have effects, and words are actions when they're published.

Yoon's love of life is realistic to pessimistic. He doesn't mull morbidly on the pain or the suffering, but it's clear he knows and understands their place in his life. "Life and Death" shows his contemplation of the maxim "All things that come to be pass away" or as he puts it "the song of life which melts their bones". We are born and we die on earth. And life on earth has its accidents of suffering and joy.

Does Yoon think ours is the best possible world? No, but it's a beautiful world nonetheless. To access and express this idea, Yoon typically sees human life in the natural world, Nature, or in natural life. "Red Pepper Field" touches on the beauty of ripe peppers, how they remind him of love and women, and the pattern of life between generations tending the fields. He accepts the limits of earthly things and shows wonder about the patterns of daily life. "A Single Candle" embraces life on its terms. Yoon accepts that life takes part in sacrifice, or "the candle burns them all".

At times Yoon gives way to outright optimism and joy. This is obvious in "Spring 1" with its evocation of new life amid a gentle sun and breeze – and a kitty cat! "Spring 2" says "Rise up joyfully from whatever field you happened to be in . . ." Yoon's "Clamshell" is "a precious gift . . . a joy" reminding of the wonderful "sound of the sea". "Doves" shows that for Yoon, Nature is like a Mother and one that embraces us all. A pair of doves resemble parents who resist Nature's difficulties to return to their young with food. "Morning" brings the image of healthy cows and green grass, as well as hardworking farmers and doenjang chigae (soybean stew). "Blue Sky" represents the sky's natural beauty as a metaphor for the human spirit.

It grows harder with age to preserve a sense of the optimism embodied in Nature. And yet, I think Yoon succeeds because he accepts that life on earth isn't forever. "Rain in the Sun" celebrates the life-giving properties of nature that bring fields of ripe corn and rainbows. The sun smiles, and we can dance in this understanding with Yoon! I love roasted potatoes from a street seller in Seoul or elsewhere, but Yoon longs for country times in "The Chimney."

In "What Do They Live On?", Yoon has become a person "of the stars". His understanding and poetry take him outside the natural rhythms here. In this way, "Confessions" bespeaks a lonely figure under the universe's sky but also one intending to confess his embrace of life on its terms. Sometimes, as in "Lovely Memory", we glimpse a typical embrace of youth, but that is a minor descant. While his family may long to reunite with Korea, in Korea, as Koreans, I'm not sure he would've phrased matters this way. He can live with a living memory of his identity. If he wanted or thought of a lost Korea, he's also thought of life as his friend.

I don't believe Yoon was Christian, but he thought about the words and works of Christian poets and thinkers, such as Rainer Maria Rilke. Just as Rilke's poems contain a style that reaches to mysticism, so do Yoon's. His "Cross" shows an awareness of Christ's suffering and death-giving life but mutes the Resurrection. Yoon sees beauty beginning with himself in what life not necessarily demands but exacts.

Han can help us access Yoon's thinking and poetry. This isn't the place to write a philosophy of *han*. However, Koreans believe in a collective persona, a cultural self-understanding and national identity that speaks to life and suffering. *Han* is life with fatalism. It also takes note of life's poignancy, beauty, passion, and humility. The humility as outer face masks a brimming tide within. Consciousness of *han* includes the awareness of life on terms often beyond us. Life binds us irrespective of our wills. We should comport our wills to life, to Nature. This isn't the Stoic's mind over matter. It's an embrace out of acceptance. This acceptance leads to an understanding of reality as beautiful, meaningful, and touching. This acceptance also leads to an understanding of suffering and the dreadful, temporal, finite and sad.

Yoon's poems suggest a sense of loneliness without depression, as in "Water from the Depths of a Valley". Yoon's world suffered Japanese fantasies of domination and terror of fascism. Yoon's life limited him to writing and sharing his poems. Yoon still loves life and loves what he sees in it. He knows that he's writing poems and living the life of a poet in the middle of it all, and in the enemy's land.

Overall, I see Yoon as a person full of love and wanting love, but it's a love never completed or fulfilled. His spirit and passion are clear in "Like the Moon". Yoon "aches" but he remains composed, alert, forward, and full of feeling. This is how we should read "The Wind is Blowing." Yoon speaks of his virginity. I can't tell if what he describes in "Not one woman have I loved" changed or was meant literally. There is the mention of Soon in "A Palace of Love" and Sooni in "A Youth" and "Snowy Map". Yoon speaks in "Another Morning at the Beginning" of opening his eyes to the cycle of life in line with Adam and Eve. From his transparent sense of self in his poetry, anyone can see Yoon would've made a good friend. We know from "Streets Flowing" that Yoon had close friends and cared about his friendships deeply. Yoon's poems tell the Confucian respects of son for parents, brother for siblings, and friend for friends.

Reading in English and a foreigner, it's difficult for me to make out any overt nationalistic qualities in Yoon's writing. I'm not claiming he wasn't a poet of independence. I think he wasn't trying to be "a Revolutionary", but I think by writing, publishing, and living when and where he did, he was a poet of independence. Clearly, Yoon loves his homeland: the worry about Kangnam in the rainy season in "A Rainy Night" speaks of "the land I long for". "The Road" recognizes that his life has conditions he wishes weren't there. His family and he, like so many others, had lost everything, or a great deal, under their confinements, moves, conscriptions, and daily insults at the hands of Japanese administration: ". . . the reason I am living is only because I am looking for what I have lost." As a boy, Yoon's "On a Day Like This" clearly shows a political awareness that children may have lacked. Yoon was a child and then a young man without his country, living the "contradiction". In some sense, the life he seeks or wants eludes, like the "obstinate friend" in this poem. Yoon seeks a paradise regained with the sensitiveness of a young man who knows it's likely not to happen.

"A Sunny Spot" contains his admonition to children playing with maps not to disturb or lose the "shallow peace" that can break. Yoon speaks of maps. Maps represent boundaries and the political. He shows us that colonization of innocent children tries to teach the false prudence of not knowing oneself.

Yoon may see a road lost, but more likely the road to find again. He speaks of "My road is always new: today, tomorrow . . ." ("The New Road"). Part of Yoon's road is to seek what he's lost. Along the way, he understands life on its terms without fear. He does that as a poet occupied and preoccupied by a world under Japanese control.

In this vein, I much like "One Night I Count the Stars". One sees Yoon's love of his mother, his love of his early life and school friends, and his love of nature. Yoon suggests, as often he does, a tenderness and sensitivity as well as earnest passion and longing. His use of the metaphor of stars reminds me of the American poet, Sara Teasdale, and her poem, "Stars". While her stars describe a place of unreachable majesty, Yoon's frame Nature as accessible rhythms surrounding ours. Indeed, the stars, the sky, and the sea ("The Two of Them", "The Sea") give Yoon comfort in the finite. They stand as horizons of reassurance, at times hope and joy, but of insight and wisdom beyond his years.

Korea is matrifocal in at least one sense. Motherhood, the fount of life, the province of the inner home, also stands for intimacy and acceptance, for harmony and peace. Yoon mentions his mother or motherhood in various poems. "Home in My Hometown" expresses this sentiment. "The Southern Sky" tells us all living things yearn enduringly for a mother's embrace. In "Stocking Patterns", Yoon praises his mother's thrift with calligraphy paper and pencil stubs. Certain of Yoon's poems also align with an understanding in fond words of his "big sister". Others depict sympathy for women more generally, as in "The Marketplace" with its jostled, tired, hardworking women. I like the image in "Sunlight and Wind" of the little child poking holes in paper on the door looking for his mom as she goes and returns from the market.

In "The Bed-Wetter's Map", Yoon sympathizes with his younger brother. He seems aware of the trauma of absent parents, of longing for parents. And in "An Impressionist Painting of My Younger Brother", his filial regard is clear. He places his mother's spirit on a star in "One Night I Count the Stars". Joseonjok siblings suffered because of politics that disrupted family harmony. Similarly, another blue-sky poem compares children to chickens who "had lost their land and freedom" and must toil ("The Chicken").

The poetry of Yoon Dong-ju remains an invaluable source to understand persons of Korean descent living in Japan before Korean independence. It prefigures the democratic and nationalist spirit of Korean youth. It shows how life lives with and overcomes *han*. Finally, Yoon's poems are a series of precious reminders about the beauty and importance of his life. Yoon lived in love, love of family, love of country, and love of self as one among others. While Nature doesn't sit well in any complete sense with human nature, it remains as our surest way. His poems help us stay alive and alert in mind and spirit amid so much that was insane. Yoon continues working out through these poems his wisdom and love as our big and caring brother.

To end, I'd like to say I'm not going to recommend thinking Yoon Dong-ju was a sad or pathetic figure, let alone a pessimist. I love his quiet determination to be happy in a time of great difficulties. We are all his friends in that sense, and as the poem "Go With Your Eyes Closed" says:

Go, scattering the seeds
you have!
And if you stumble on a stone,
open the eyes you have closed!