

Chong Yag-yong's "Howling of a Woman, with the Penis Cut off Her Husband," A Poem of Old Korea

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Abstract Chong Yag-yong's "Howling of a Woman, with the Penis Cut Off Her Husband" written in Chinese characters is a poem that we call people's poetry. The poem contains in it some subjective emotion and intellect, which I analyze in this paper. I translate the whole poem into Korean for the readers.

Key words Chong Yag-yong; people's poetry; emotion; intellect; *Mongmin simso*

What follows is a translation of an old poem in Chinese characters, "Howling of a Woman, with the Penis Cuff off Her Husband,"¹ by Chong Yag-yong, the greatest *Sirhak* (practical science) scholar (1762-1836):

The howling of a woman echoes
Through the court of a government office
Toward the indifferent sky.
I often hear that a husband who joined the army could not come back,
But I have never heard that a man cut off his own penis.

Along with her Father-in-law who is dead and her own child
who was just born,
Her husband is enlisted by the army, and, in fury and protest, the woman
ran to the Office, with the blood-dripping penis cut off her husband,
But the tiger-like guard at the gate is holding her off,

And turned her back with his threatening voice;
He even comes and drives their cow away from the cowshed.

The husband having blamed his own penis
For giving birth to a child, he went into his room with a knife;
The red blood is flowing in the room.
What a thunder in a dry sky!

Though guilty, how could he be thus punished?
Though worried, how could he cut his own penis?

Like Heaven and Earth, the yin and yang are in harmony;
To give birth to a son and a daughter is the Heaven's law;
When even a castrated horse or pig is saddened.
Wouldn't a wife, who could no longer give birth, be sad
when her husband is no longer a man?

Those in power live and play for life,
Paying no tax, neither a grain nor a piece of cloth.
Both he and they are the same people;
How could they then treat him like that?

I sit by the window alone and just recite poems
of cuckoos and doves in the Book of Poetry. (Lee, Si Whan 11)

I have translated the poem into Korean so the readers can understand it easily. According to *Mongmin simso* (*Admonitions on Governing the People*), one of the many books he wrote in banishment and forced retirement, Chong composed this poem in the fall of 1803 at the age of 42 while living in Kangjin, Chunnam, the south western province of Korea; the poem deals with a special case. A young woman who lived with her husband in the reedy field gave birth to a baby, and the infant was enlisted in the Military Conscription Registration in three days of his birth. And a government servant came and drove away their cow. Her husband said, "It is because of this that we have been suffering," and cut his penis off with a knife. His wife went to the Government Office to protest, carrying the blood-dripping penis, but though she was crying and asking him to let her in and report it to the Governor she was chased away. Hearing about the sad story, Chong composed a poem.

Even before we study the subject and the form of the poem, because we are moved by the sad story alone, we consider this poem good. Because of this, the poet—the novelist, in particular - wants to find a special topic. I want to draw attention to the Modernist movement in Korea that stresses the choice of subject matters in literature.

It is important for writers to find good subjects; if you are not interested, it is difficult for you to find a good topic, and in this respect, paying attention to the subject of a poem is meaningful, of course.

Looking back now, we can vividly recall various movements, such as rural literature, national literature, people's literature, and workers' literature, all of which actively participated in reality. At that time, poetry dealt with special stories and incidents of people's life: self-immolations, poison drinking, tortures, uprising, criticism, and so on. But now they are nothing but passing winds. It is because a special story or incidence is only a subject; if a poem focuses only on revealing it, it may neglect the poet's subjective emotion which can move the readers. As a result such a poem is like a heap of bones of a body without flesh. People forget such a work once the world changes. If literature wants to stay alive and be moving - no matter what it deals with in whatever situation or reality - it must depict in positive light what is essential in humanity, what is universal.

Chong Yag-yong's "Howling of a Woman, with the Penis Cut Off Her Husband" written in Chinese characters can be considered what we call people's poetry. It contains in it some subjective emotion and intellect. By subjective emotion, I mean the emotion expressed by the poet who has heard about the incident. In this poem the speaker reacts in two ways: emotionally and intellectually. Emotional responses are expressed in such lines as:

1. ... I have never heard that a man cut off his own penis;
2. Both he and they are the same people;
How could they then treat him like that?
3. I sit by the window alone and just recite poems
of cuckoos and doves in the Book of Poetry.

And the intellectual responses are found in such lines as:

Though guilty, how could he be thus punished?
Though worried, how could he cut his own penis?

Like Heaven and Earth, the yin and yang are in harmony;
To give birth to a son and a daughter is the Heaven's law;
When even a castrated horse or pig is saddened.
Wouldn't a wife, who could no longer give birth, be sad
when her husband is no longer a man?

As quoted above, the speaker criticizes the inhumane legal system and also says that humans live following the principle of yin and yang from generation to generation by giving birth to offspring. Besides, the speaker is brave enough to criticize the local government by exposing the dark life of people:

Those in power live and play for life,
Paying no tax, neither a grain nor a piece of cloth.

As in this poem, a good poet should state not only the fact but also express his emotion and intellect in poetic diction. But excessively emotional or intellectual displays could do more harm than good in a poem. A good poem is an emotional response in a form striving for aesthetic truth in poetic language characterized by implication, comparison, emotion, music.

To cite an example from the poem: is the speaker able to calm down hearing the astounding story of a couple, by just reading the "poems/ of cuckoos and doves in the Book of Poetry"? Probably not. He is in banishment; it may be that the speaker in the poem is making a comparison between this incident and the principle in the poems he is reading: just as there is a law of nature in the birds raising offspring, there should, he seems to claim, be a law of governance between the ruler and the people. And there is in the poem helplessness for an intellectual who is in banishment and cannot do anything for the people, too.

Note

The original poem is 哀絕陽：

蘆田少婦哭聲長 / 哭向縣門號穹蒼 / 夫征不復尙可有 / 自古未聞男絕陽
舅喪已縞兒未澡 / 三代名簽在軍保 / 薄言往愬虎守閭 / 里正咆哮牛去阜
磨刀入房血滿席 / 自恨生兒遭窘厄 / 蠶室淫刑豈有幸 / 閩閩去勢良亦憾
生生之理天所予 / 乾道成男坤道女 / 驅馬殯豕猶云悲 / 況乃生民思繼序
豪家終世奏管弦 / 粒米寸帛無所損 / 均吾赤子何厚薄 / 客窓重誦鳴鳩篇

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