

ASLE-Japan | Joint Plenary Speech at International Conference on Literature and Environment “Contemporary Literary Environmentalism in East Asia”

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The following joint plenary speech was fashioned in a way that represents the growing ecocritical community in East Asia and delivered at the International Conference on Literature and Environment, which was held at Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China, on November 8th, 2008.

YUKI Masami Raker, “Towards the East Asian Network of Ecocriticism”

It was a great honor to have been given the opportunity of giving a keynote address at this conference. Together with Shin Dooho and Bruce Allen, I wish to express our gratitude to the conference organizers, including Professor Nie and Professor Chen, who have invited us.

Since this speech is a collaboration between the three of us, we won't follow the normal track of a plenary speech. Rather than giving a detailed talk based on an examination of literary works, (which, by the way, we will do tomorrow at a panel session,) we wish to invoke a somewhat larger picture of what has been going on in the field of literature and environment in East Asia, Korea and Japan in particular. I'll briefly talk about some of the challenges we have faced in the development of an ecocritical network in East Asia; Dooho's talk will focus on theoretical and practical characteristics of Korean literary environmentalism; and Bruce will address issues of language and culture, especially those that come into play in translations.

Most of you here have probably heard of ASLE: the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. ASLE is a scholarly organization which shares and discusses issues of literature and environment, and it was first established in the United States in 1992. ASLE-Japan was founded in 1994 and ASLE-Korea in 2001.

Although Korea and Japan are geographically close to each other, there had not been any scholarly exchanges until 2005 when a bunch of scholars from ASLE-Korea and ASLE-Japan got together for a panel session at ASLE-US's biennial conference in Eugene, Oregon. Bruce was there, Dooho was there, and so was I. As far as I know, that panel,

which was entitled “Modernization and Literary Environmentalism: Asian Perspectives,” marked the first joint effort towards ecocriticism in Asia.

I should note here that this gathering of ecocritics in Asia would not have happened if there had not been an international hub of ecocritical study. What I am speaking of is of course the Literature and Environment Program at the University of Nevada, Reno. Scholars from all over the globe come to Nevada to work with leading ecocritics such as Professor Scott Slovic. Nowadays there is an increasing tendency to criticize American intellectual imperialism. I don't disagree with the need to consider such criticism, but in the case of the internationalization of an ecocritical network, we should not dismiss the effects of scholars such as those at UNR's L&E program. The three of us here have met each other through our relationships with Professor Slovic at UNR. And I infer that this conference was planned and prepared not only in Wuhan but also in Reno. The fact that American scholars have facilitated the development of scholarly network among ecocritics in Asia does not necessarily imply that an American intellectual viewpoint is the only choice. It seems to me that what is really implied in the phenomenon is a desire to create an intimate intellectual community of ecocritics who are willing to listen to each other.

Let me get back to the trajectory of ecocritical networking in East Asia. In the summer of 2007, ASLE-Korea and ASLE-Japan held a three-day joint symposium in Kanazawa, Japan. About a hundred scholars gathered, including twenty participants from Korea as well as several scholars from Taiwan and the US. (As an aside, if you are interested in the joint symposium, all the presentations are available online at the ASLE-Japan's website .) Not only were papers compiled in the multilingual format of Korean, English, and Japanese, the symposium provided an environment in which speakers could talk in their native languages by means of simultaneous interpretation. The issue of language is one of the biggest concerns; we simply could not expect that all the participants were fluent in English. Quite a few ecocritics, such as those who have majored in English, have no problem communicating in English, but that is not the case for many scholars of Korean or Japanese literature. Language is the most important issue for ecocritics; we talk about a green language, a forgotten language, and how language is rooted in a speaker's experience and his or her relationships with the world. When planning the joint symposium which was the first large-scale collaboration among ecocritics in East Asia, it seemed necessary that speakers should be able to use their native languages. The issue of language is indeed one of the biggest issues to be addressed when we pursue transnational ecocriticism. And in fact Bruce will talk about this issue later in more detail.

The scholars' network has been developing in quality. This last month, ASLE-Japan invited ecocritics from Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong for a panel session on current trend of ecocriticism in East Asia. In a couple of years, I've heard, another joint symposium will be held in Seoul. Like this, the East Asian scholarly community is becoming substantial with a shared hope to contributing to the world ecocriticism.

Before closing, I wish to quickly present what seems to be the major themes in East Asian literary environmentalism. First, there is the issue of modernization and industrialization and their influence on environmental discourse. One of the things that became clear in the Korea-Japan joint symposium last year is that, in both countries, scholars pay considerable attention to how rapid post-war modernization and industrialization changed both the physical environment and cultural perceptions of the environment. Secondly, there is a shared desire to pursue a place-based non-binary theoretical framework, by this I mean one which does not assume a fundamental opposition between humans and environment. Closely examining literary representations of place, scholars have attempted to develop an idea of place as a potentially new environmental discourse, exploring and creating a new vocabulary for a humans-in-environment world. Finally, and this seems most distinctively different from American ecocriticism, there is an increasing tendency to reevaluate knowledge from the past. Paying attention to the past, especially that of so-called common people whose knowledge seems to have been learned directly from the environment, ecocritics reexamine it as a reference point from which to critically analyze the present society and explore an alternative relationship between humans and the environment.

These are just a few examples and I hope to learn more about the shared topics of Asian ecocriticism in future exchanges with scholars and the interested public. I began my career as an Americanist and sometimes wonder why I am so devoted to Asian ecocriticism. Why does Asian ecocriticism matter? I believe that Asian ecocriticism should not present itself as a counter theory to American or Western ecocriticism. Rather, we should develop Asian perspectives in a way that introduce new ideas, concepts, and perceptions to refresh the greater body of human understanding and expands ecocritical theory and practice. It seems to me that what we need is a world ecocriticism that is reinforced, approved of, and sustained by place-based perspectives. Being regional and being cosmopolitan should not counter but compliment each other. In the current ecocritical environment in which American perspectives are still dominant, I believe that there is a lot to be expected of Asian ecocriticism.

SHIN Dooho, “Challenges and Promises of Asian Ecocriticism—A Case of ASLE-Korea”

It's a great pleasure to have this opportunity to exchange ideas with each other here in Wuhan, and it is a special honor for me to share my ideas with you all. To begin, I will briefly talk about ASLE-Korea in regards to how we started, what challenges we have faced and how we have tackled them. This talk, however brief it may be, will hopefully shed a light on our discussion of developing Asian perspectives of ecocriticism, of which Masami Yuki has just concisely presented.

After two years of reading meetings, a group of scholars officially launched the Korean affiliation of ASLE in 2001. The founding members of ASLE-Korea were all English major scholars. This homogeneity membership contributed to ASLE-Korea's inclination to British and mostly American environmental literature and theory. It didn't take long for ASLE-Korea to realize that it needed more than just English environmental literature and Western-oriented environmental theory, because ecocriticism calls for literary scholars' social responsibility and active participation in, say, raising environmental awareness in their own territory first. This was the first major challenge that ASLE-Korea faced in the way toward a distinct critical school or movement. Since our affiliation's inception, we have known all along that more than a few scholars of Korean literature had been engaged in what can be described as Korean ecocritical studies, even though they haven't organized any identifiable group. Thus, we decided to encourage Korean environmental literary scholars to join ASLE-Korea. With some initial doubts and hesitations they finally joined and now they form a substantial body of ASLE-Korea.

The two academic groups within ASLE-Korea have not as yet reached a fully-fledged cooperation or integration. But the joining of Korean scholars in our affiliation infers a significant meaning. In fact, it has become the first attempt that both scholars of Korean and English literature have joined in an effort to reach the same goal. Traditionally in Korea the two fields have obstinately remained divided and isolated, not only neglecting the other but also avoiding academically dealing with their work and subjects. It is environment/ecology as a subject that has brought these two fields together, even though in dealing with this subject, the scholars of Korean and English literature demonstrate fairly different characters in scholarly orientation. Scholars of Korean literature incline toward emotional/retrogressive approaches, more than often resorting to deep ecological ancient Asian/Korean native thinking of nature with little theoretical frames. On the other hand,

Korean scholars of English literature tend to heavily rely on Western theory of ecocriticism and mostly focus on the analysis of British and American literature, often taking Korean literature and environmental context into little consideration.

Such different characters in critical orientation have worked as a hindrance to an academic interaction between the two groups. However, both groups are working hard to cross-fertilize to each other. The scholars of Korean literature can be benefited, through the scholars of English literature, in adopting a more realistic and issue-oriented theory of ecocriticism, while those of English literature can learn, through the scholars of Korean literature, to appreciate Korean literature and adopt East Asian/Korean context in their ecocritical discourses. The amalgamation of the two fields promises a possibility of a new version of ecocriticism. It can prevent ecocriticism from slipping away into a habitual 'back-to-nature' retrogression and become more appropriate to the modern context of Korean environmental conditions and situations. ASLE-Korea makes all possible efforts toward this cross-fertilization.

The second challenge that ASLE-Korea has faced with is doubts toward our credentials as an environmental discourse provider from outside the humanities. An impenetrable wall between the Humanities and the Science has persisted in Korean academics, and it has been a taboo area for many years. In the midst of a recent tendency of inter-disciplinary reconciliation, even between the two fields in the West, such Humanities-Science divisive tendency in Korean academics, that C. P. Snow strongly lamented 60 years ago, still persists. Under this cold war between the two cultures in Snow's term, environment or ecology has been regarded exclusively as a subject of sciences; therefore, ecocritical approaches by literary scholars have been given the cold shoulder by non-Humanities scholars who consider ecocritical activities to be inappropriate or even nonsensical. Even some dogged mainstream literary scholars also have given doubt to ecocriticism, because with limited humanistic vision they still believe literature and its studies are supposed to deal with human value systems only.

As literature scholars you may as well agree that the environment or ecology is an appropriate subject or study area that both the Humanities and the Sciences can not only approach independently but also, more importantly, find a common ground to listen to and learn from each other. Environmental problems need to be dealt within both scientific discourse and poetic discourse. ASLE-Korea has tackled this challenge through two different tactics: 1) inviting environmental scholars from non-Humanities areas; and 2) participating in interdisciplinary study groups. The ASLE-Korea invites non-Humanities

scholars of environment as keynote speakers to every biannual conference. As I we speak here in Wuhan, the ASLE-Korea is holding a two-day Fall Conference where this time we have invited a chemistry scholar who will address the relationship between environmental change and human physical adaptation and its consequent stress. Through these guest speeches, we learn how the environment is studied in the fields of science and technology and thus broaden our scope of understanding nature. Second, ASLE-Korea organizes a small study group together with environment-related scholars from various fields. We have been running this study group for 3 years and the current group consists of scholars from forest sciences, environmental sciences, geography, fine arts, ethics, and several ASLE-Korea scholars of literature. This group, on a regular basis, holds seminars and goes out for field trips. In seminars we read environment-related materials from various fields and have discussions, and during field trips our members from field sciences such as forest science, geology, environment studies guide us into the field knowledge of ecological and environmental world of nature. I personally joined another inter-disciplinary study group whose members are scholars from a dozen different disciplines. Each member takes turns and delivers how his/her discipline defines key terms like nature, ecology, environment, landscape, etc and what the important issues are. Based upon our group study and discussions, we plan to compose a series of books on the environment including an interdisciplinary textbook for college students. Such interdisciplinary study through subject-oriented study group offers a valuable opportunity that allows ecocritics to extend our breath of understanding to the concepts and issues of our multi-faced environment. This study approach also helps scholars from non-Humanities area realize why the environment can and should be an important addition to literature study as well.

The above-mentioned two challenges that ASLE-Korea and Korean ecocritics have encountered, I believe, do not sound too foreign to ASLE-Japan, other upcoming ASLE affiliates, or ecocritics in East Asia, because East Asian academics share similar circumstances of divisiveness between native literature studies and foreign literature studies, and also between the Humanities and the Sciences. The forementioned ASLE-Korea's attempts, I hope, can be of some help in giving hints of how to tackle the challenges for the other ASLE affiliates and ecocritics in East Asia. To sum up: first, scholars from native literature and English literature need to cooperate in order to develop an East Asian version of ecocriticism in which a bio-, eco-centric vision of ancient East Asian nature thinking purported by scholars of native literature should be valued. At the same time, a more diverse, up-to-date issue-oriented Western version of ecocriticism purported by those of English literature should also be taken into serious consideration.

Second, environment-oriented scholars from the Humanities need to overcome their narrow vision through interdisciplinary study activities, the vision that has been dominated by somewhat retrogressive and unrealistic perspective. In this way, they can achieve a comprehensive understanding of the nature and environment, embracing both the scientific and regulatory environmental discourses as well as poetic ones.

When we East Asian ecocritics are equipped with balanced perspectives of our own ancient ecological wisdom and modern ecocritical theory, tune into our social conditions and cultural context, and with comprehensive understanding of environment issues, we can further develop an inter-East Asian ecocriticism. This new version of the ecocriticism will not only be benefited from cultural proximity in this region but also, more importantly, it needs to cooperatively address interrelated environmental issues of the past and now, i.e., Japan's colonialism and its environmental consequences in other Asian countries, or the current environmental problems interrelated to these countries in the wake of modernization and globalization. Considering the colonial history and sensitive current power struggles in this region, it is we ecocritics who can grope for a non-political environmental network of East Asia which otherwise can be a sensitive political issue. This is the reason, I believe, why we are all here in Wuhan at this moment. We have the same goals, the same dreams and a mutual understanding of each other.

Bruce ALLEN, "Ecocriticism and the Craft of Translation"

It is a great honor and a pleasure to be here in Wuhan and to contribute to what I hope will be an important new step in the development of international environmental literary study. Today I'd like to focus very specifically on the work of literary translation. I think that translation is a particularly important topic for us to consider at this conference because in a multi-language, multi-cultural situation such as we are in today, in order for us to talk knowledgeably about the literature of each other's country, first most of us need translations. The French writer Andre Gide once wrote that every writer has a responsibility during his or her lifetime to translate at least one great work from another language. This is so that we may increase our knowledge of world literature and in turn deepen our understanding of other places and cultures. And so today, in a similar spirit, I hope that I might encourage some more of us, as well, to join in this work of translation.

At the outset, I think it is important to recognize that, historically, the activity of translation has involved some cultural problems of bias and unbalance. Due to the force of the cultural imperialism exerted by the English language, we now have—what should I call it?; an “abundance”?—or from another perspective I might say an “unbalance,” or even a “domination”—of English works that have been translated into other languages. This body of translations from English into other languages includes not only of course such popular works as the Harry Potter stories, but also even some fine environmental literature such as that of Rachel Carson, Henry Thoreau—and some lesser-known writers in English. But, looking at translation from the other direction—that is, from non-English languages into English—how many works of environmental literature have been translated from, for example, Korean, or Chinese, into English? Unfortunately, I know of only a few—although I hope some of you will teach me of others during this conference.

To cite a good example of this problem, at the Japan-Korea Joint Symposium on Environmental Literature, which we held in Japan in 2007, one of our biggest problems came from the lack of translations of each other’s literature. Prior to the symposium we in the organizing committee made an effort to remedy this by translating several examples of each other’s environmental literature into English to provide joint reading and discussion. But we realized that we were just barely getting started, and strongly felt how much work there is left to be done if we are to develop a truly international exchange and understanding—that is, a truly multi-cultural, multi-lingual ecocriticism. In short, we realized the need for more translations.

Next, I’d like to speak briefly about my own personal involvement in translating a work of Japanese environmental literature. For a number of years I have been translating into English a novel by Japan’s leading environmental writer, Ishimure Michiko. This novel, titled *Lake of Heaven*, deals with the effects of dam construction on people, their culture, and environment. I will discuss this work in greater detail in my presentation later in this conference. But today I’d like to speak about the process of translating this book. This project actually started way back in 1996, when it was requested by the US and Japan branches of ASLE; the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment at an International conference held in Hawaii. We chose it in our hope of making a contemporary work of Japanese environmental literature available to a worldwide English-speaking audience. After twelve years’ time, I’m happy to say the translation was finally published last month.

Twelve years is quite a long time to complete a translation—probably far too long—but it has been a very valuable learning time for me. And I hope that my experience might in turn serve to encourage some others of us to translate environmental writing. I must admit that when I started I was almost completely untrained as a translator. But an important point I'd like to stress today is that many, or perhaps most translators of literature have started as rather untutored, but inspired beginners. This is part of the reality—as well as the excitement—of translating little-known, but important works. Since these works usually aren't known to foreign readers, it often requires a kind of gamble to nurture and bring these works to a new international readership. I say a “gamble” because often it can be difficult to find a publisher willing to take on the financial risks of publishing unknown literary works from other cultures. In my case, after I finished the main work of translation it took about 4 years to find a publisher. Even though the Pulitzer Prize winner Gary Snyder generously recommended my translation to a number of publishers, I received numerous refusals before finding a publishing company willing to publish the book. Ishimure's work seemed too risky for most publishers—since it was written by an unknown, foreign, woman writer, and in an unusual genre that combines elements of the novel, Japanese noh drama, and epic poetry. But fortunately in the end, and with the help of friends in ASLE, I found an editor who already knew and loved Ishimure's work. He was able to convince his publishers to take the gamble and publish it.

I just spoke of some of the difficulties of the translation process. But let me now talk at least briefly about the imaginative process of translation—and of some of its special rewards. Certainly I can offer no advice hints to explain the process. Let me simply say that I believe that an essential part of the process of translation lies in the way that it allows the translator to enter deeply into the spirit of a work and its author's imagination. The translator can enter this spirit so deeply that the he or she begins to inhabit the deepest level of imagination that generated the work. This is what I like to call a sort of “language that exists even before the language of words.” This level provides a kind of universal language from which the translator can then work the text back into his or her own native language.

Let me end by stressing that translation is a labor of love. This labor allows the translator to look intimately into the soul of a work, a writer, of a place, and a culture. It allows the translator to develop a more sensitive ear for the sound of language, and with this, for the places we inhabit. All good writing provides both a kind of looking glass and a kind of sounding board that we can use to peer into and to listen into the souls of writers and words. Being involved in translation deepens this looking and listening process—allowing us to approach more closely the art and spirit of literature and place. And so I'd like to conclude

today by repeating my encouragement for many of us to translate literature. Our work in the inter-cultural sharing of environmental literature is just in its beginning stages today. For this process to deepen and mature we will need many more excellent translations. And so, I encourage you to help in this work of translating and sharing our literatures. Thank you.

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