Review Essay

Translating the *T'aengniji*: A Review of Inshil Choe Yoon's *A Place to Live*

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> ***A Place to Live: A New Translation of Yi Chung-hwan's Taengniji, the Korean Classic for Choosing Settlements***, translated, annotated, and with an introduction by Inshil Choe Yoon. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. xiv, 234 pp.

Thanks to the support of the Academy of Korean Studies, in recent years the quantity of English translations of primary texts in Korean studies has increased enormously. Especially prolific in this respect has been a team of translators assembled by the Center for Buddhist Studies at UCLA (full disclosure: I am also one of the translators, although I have no connection to the translator of the reviewed work). It is especially welcome that among these texts is the *T'aengniji*. A literal translation of the title might be "Treatise on Selecting a Village," but the translator's title, *A Place to Live*, is short, striking, and memorable. The author, Yi Chung-hwan (1690–1756), was a marginalized member of an aristocratic *yangban* family who was pushed into exile on account of factional politics. *A Place to Live*, which he likely completed during the early 1750s, is a geographic account of eighteenth-century Chosŏn written with the purpose of helping fellow *yangban* aristocrats select a good place to live. After an introductory survey of the Chosŏn's system of social status, Yi

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surveys the eight provinces of Chosŏn mostly according to administrative districts. This he follows with a series of discourses on such subjects as "geomancy" and "economic potential."

This is a text of enormous value to modern scholars; indeed, it has been used extensively already. It also would be useful for teaching Korean history, and in fact I used a section of it in class this October. The translator, Inshil Choe Yoon of the University of Auckland, is no novice to the field: her PhD dissertation was a translation of a portion of the *T'aengniji* with scholarly commentary. She has already published this dissertation and articles on the complicated history of *T'aengniji* manuscripts.[1] This current translation is a revision of earlier work combined with new translations of previously untranslated sections. It provides a complete translation into English of this highly important text for the first time.

The translator's introduction is relatively short, at slightly less than thirty pages. For me, as a teacher, this seems to be the perfect length—enough to provide context but not so long as to attempt to predetermine the reader's understanding of the text. The section on the textual history of the book and reception during the late Chosŏn period, an issue in which the translator has shown considerable interest, is especially informative. One weakness in this introduction, however, is an uncritical dependence on the concept of *Sirhak* or "Practical Learning." As the author indeed recognizes, the concept of *Sirhak* is a modern term (21) used to categorize those late Chosŏn scholars who were interested in statecraft and are thus now seen as more practically oriented than the orthodox Zhuxiist scholars. However, it is also an ideologically charged concept, originating with the independence activists of the 1930s and gaining a new lease on life during the 1960s, when the study of "practical learning" was used to provide evidence of the internal capacity of Korea to achieve modernization without being colonized by Japan.[2] Although I myself find it impossible to avoid the category entirely, it suffers from a number of maladies, including a tendency to simplify Chosŏn tradition by dividing it into a failed, impractical, and reactionary majority camp and a progressive, forward-thinking, empirical,

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1. Inshil Choe Yoon, "A Study and Translation of T'aengniji" (PhD diss., University of Auckland, 1996); Inshil Choe Yoon, *Yi Chung-hwan's* T'aengniji*: The Korean Classic for Choosing Settlement* (Wild Peony Press, 1998); Inshil Choe Yoon, "Early-Period '*T'aengniji*' Manuscripts," *Korean Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013): 225–249.

2. There is a vast scholarship on "*Sirhak*." Here I refer primarily to Cho Sŏngsan, "Sirhak kaenyŏm ŭi kyebo wa hakp'ung," *Han'guksa simin kangjwa* 48 (2011): 20–36; and Donald L. Baker, "The Use and Abuse of the Sirhak Label: A New Look at Sin Hu-dam and his *Sŏhak Pyŏn*," *Kyohoesa yŏn'gu* 3 (1981): 183–254.

and practical minority camp. There has also been an unfortunate tendency to evaluate Chosŏn thinkers according to their (generally superficial) resemblance to European thinkers, who are thus implicitly treated as the standard.

Choe Yoon's introduction does not escape these maladies completely. For instance, at the very beginning of the book, she writes the following:

> The *T'aengniji* (Treatise on choosing settlements) begins with a seemingly innocuous statement: "In ancient times there was no scholar-gentry (*sadaebu*) class. All members of society were common folk." At the time of writing in the early 1750s Korean society was rigidly stratified, with the *yangban* class, which was composed of scholar-gentry, at the highest level. The opening sentence would therefore have come across as a shocking taunt to its contemporary readership, who were likely members of the scholar-gentry class. (3)

Although she later qualifies this statement by acknowledging that, in fact, Yi did not call for the elimination of class differences, she nevertheless insists that the very question that lies at the heart of the book, "where a *yangban* official should live," was "radical for its time" because male *yangban* who achieved a position in the bureaucracy would stay in the capital during their period in office and would then return to their hometowns (3). She provides no evidence, however, that the first sentence was perceived as a taunt by the scholar-gentry of that period, or that this search for a good place to live was viewed by anybody during the late Chosŏn period as radical. In view of the popularity of the text in the late Chosŏn period,[3] it is likely that this evidence is lacking because neither claim is true. Her assumption that Yi's position was radically outside of, and indeed opposed to, the mainstream is thus, I suggest, spurious—an artifact of modern attempts to draw far too strong a contrast between orthodox scholars and the so-called *Sirhak* scholars.

The same may be said of her unconvincing attempts on pages 12–13 to compare Yi to such pioneers of European geography as Alexander von Humboldt and even economic geographers such as Alfred Weber. Whatever his many merits, Yi was not engaged in quantitative analysis, nor was he an economist. Comparing Yi to these scholars seems to be an artifact of earlier attempts to establish the precocious modernity of *Sirhak* thinkers and does not aid our understanding of *A Place to Live*. In fact, although Yi produces some stunningly lively descriptions of local societies and economics (I note for instance his account of merchant activity in Wŏnsan on page 46), many of his descriptions of locales are quite conventional and not very different from

3. Ably demonstrated by Choe Yoon herself, 9–16.

ordinary gazetteers. Rather than link him with very different European thinkers, it would be better to locate him within Chosŏn's own geographic traditions.

As for the translation itself, which is based on Ch'oe Namsŏn's (1890–1957) printed edition of 1912, it is both readable and accessible—a joy to read. A consistent problem with any translation of this sort is that the translators are forced beyond their area of knowledge—their intellectual safety zone—into subjects over which they may be less than expert. Errors are inevitable. One of my areas of interest is Sino-Korean relations and late Chosŏn-period Ming loyalism, and for that reason I noticed some errors in her rendering of terminology related to Sino-Korean relations. For instance, in her translation of matters related to the Qing invasion of Chosŏn during the 1620s and 1630s, she renders *Ch'ŏngin*—literally "Qing People"—as "Qing Chinese" (87). Some of the Qing soldiers were indeed Han Chinese, but by no means all of them, and certainly few in Chosŏn considered the Qing to be a legitimate heir to the Chinese emperorship.

On page 89, Choe Yoon renders the name of the Qing general of Manchu background, Inggūldai, by Romanizing the Korean rendering of his name, Yonggoldae, into *pinyin* as Long Guda, as if Long were his surname and not simply the first syllable of his given name. Another similar case is her rendering of the name of the Qing official Mu-ke-deng (1664–1735, his name in Manchu was perhaps Mukdeng) on page 44. To quote the passage in full: "In the year of *chŏngyu* (1717), during the reign of King Sukchong, the [Chinese] Kangxi Emperor (1661–1722) had Mu Kedeng climb Mount Paektu to set the boundary between the two countries." Once again, Mu-ke-deng was a Manchu official, although from a generation that would have spoken Chinese as well as Manchu. "Mu" was not his surname; rather, Mu-ke-deng as a whole is his given name rendered in Chinese characters. The original text gives the wrong date for the expedition, which in fact occurred in 1712. While Choe Yoon is right to translate the error as is, it would have been a good idea to note this error in an endnote, along with perhaps some information about this expedition.[4] Finally, Yi takes a notably anti-Qing line in this passage, describing Mukdeng as corruptly concealing evidence of the tombs of Song emperors in Qing territory. It is thus unfortunate that Choe Yoon refers to the Kangxi emperor as a Chinese emperor (few Chosŏn *yangban* viewed him as such, and Yi here clearly does not) as opposed to a Qing emperor.

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4. For this expedition, see Seonmin Kim, *Ginseng and Borderland: Territorial Boundaries and Political Relations Between Qing China and Chosŏn Korea, 1636–1912* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 65–70.

The process of translating a highly compact language such as literary Sinitic into English while also making the Chosŏn period understandable to people in the present day requires a number of difficult choices. Inevitably, I disagree with some of these choices. An enormous challenge in work of this sort is place names, specifically suffixes that follow place names, such as *-san* (mountain), *-ryŏng* (pass, ridge), and *-kun* (county). The translator chose not to translate most of them, but to treat them as part of the name. This is certainly a defensible decision, and one with which I am in broad agreement, although without sufficient commentary this makes the translation less accessible.[5] There are exceptions, such as *san*, which she translates as "Mount," and also the names of magistracies, which are followed by a range of suffixes to denote the rank of the magistrate in charge. Roughly, the suffixes are *-pu*, *-mok*, *-kun*, and *-hyŏn*, and the magistrates range from the *puyun*, who governed important districts such as Chŏnju-bu that generally had the status of a secondary capital, to the *hyŏn'gam*, who, though in charge of a separate local administration, was very low-ranked. Though English does not have an equivalent system of ranking local administrations, there have been various attempts to translate them, most notably by the influential scholar Edward Wagner, who placed his authority behind a series of standard translations that are frequently still used: magistrate of a great county for *kunsu*, magistrate of a county for *hyŏllyŏng*, magistrate of a small county for *hyŏn'gam*, magistrate of a special capital for *puyun*, magistrate of a special city for *taedohobusa*, magistrate of a city/island for *moksa*, and magistrate of a town for *tohobusa*.[6] Palais, by contrast, simply translated them all as district or prefecture (sometimes with a descriptive adjective),[7] a much wiser choice when one considers that these different grades of magistracies determined staffing levels and reflected the perceived importance of the region to the Chosŏn state (including the extent of predicted trouble from the region) and had no relationship to population, level of urbanization, etc. Wagner's translations, much though they might provide a feeling of completeness, do not in fact reflect the distinctions between these administrative units but are misleading. The province of Hamgyŏng-do, for instance, has an unusually high number of *tohobu* not because it had an unusually large number of towns and cities compared to Ch'ungch'ŏng-do, with far more *kun* and *hyŏn*, but because it was a frontier province, with districts requiring special care.

5. She helpfully explains her translation conventions at the beginning, on xiii–xiv.

6. Edward Willett Wagner, *The Literati Purges: Political Conflict in Early Yi Korea* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1974), 128–129.

7. See the glossary in James Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions: Yu Hyŏngwŏn and the Late Choson Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 1153–1192.

Unfortunately, not only does Choe Yoon follow Wagner's ill-considered translations but she also does so inconsistently and without providing any sort of a guide to these distinctions, leaving the reader with highly misleading descriptions of locations as cities, towns, and counties. She seems to generally translate *pu* as "city" regardless of whether the magistracy was governed by a *puyun*, *taedohobusa*, or *tohobusa*; the mere fact that the suffix *pu* appears in the text is enough to determine this translation. Where the place name is followed by *kun* or *hyŏn*, she translates the location as "county." For instance, on page 56, she translates Ch'ŏrwŏn-bu as Ch'ŏrwŏn City (although it was in fact a *tohobu*) and Kangnŭng-bu (with a few interruptions, generally governed as a *taedohobu*) as Kangnŭng City. According to Wagner's translations, only Kangnŭng was a city, but neither would have resembled what people now think of as a city. A similarly confusing case is on page 88 in her discussion of Kanghwado, a key administrative district to the west of the capital based on a large island off the west coast. As she translates, "The distance between the north and south of Kanghwado is more than one hundred *ri*, while that between east and west is fifty *ri*. A resident commander is based in the city." Choe Yoon had not previously informed the reader of the administrative circumstances of Kanghwado. From the text, one might imagine that there was a separate city in Kanghwado. In fact, the entire territory of the island was a *pu*, governed, as the text states, by a magistrate with the special status of *yusu* and a rank of junior two. During the Koryŏ period, and even the early Chosŏn period, this particular rank of magistrate was sent to former capitals, but by the late Chosŏn period the status was assigned to magistrates of districts that played a role in the defense of the capital, as indeed did the magistrate of Kanghwado. "Resident commander" is an excellent translation of *yusu*, but an endnote would certainly have been useful at this point.

She translates *ŭp* 邑 throughout as "town." In modern Korean, this is indeed the correct translation, but, as a general rule, in Chosŏn-period texts *ŭp* is in fact just a synonym for "administrative district" and not the population centre from which the district was governed. In nearly all cases in *A Place to Live* *ŭp* should simply be translated as "county" or "district." When Choe Yoon includes references to both "towns" and "counties" in the same passage it leaves the confusing impression that Yi is distinguishing the county as a whole from the town center, even though he almost never is. In fact, when Yi wishes to refer to the town center with the magistrate's offices, he does not use *ŭp* on its own but uses terms such as *puch'i* or *ŭpch'i* (generally nicely translated by Choe Yoon as "administrative center," for instance on page 59).

The confusion caused by her selection of terms for administrative regions is

especially visible on page 62, in her description of Mun'gyŏng. I reproduce the passage in full:

> On the right side of Kyŏngsang Province lies Mun'gyŏng County below Choryŏng. Majestic Mount Chuhol is to the North and Taet'an to the south. Mount Hoeyang and Mount Chŏnghwa lie to the west and Mount Chŏnju and Mount Taewŏn to the east. Therefore, Mun'gyŏng is on a small plain surrounded by mountains and is the most prominent town on the border of the Yŏngnam region. This town directly faces the road that connects north and south. At the time of the Hideyoshi invasion, when Japanese soldiers advanced to the north and reached Taet'an, they were very afraid of this place. They passed through here only after making sure that the town was not defended. They did the same upon reaching Choryŏng. The town is made up of rocks, however, and is in the middle of very rugged terrain. Geomancers say that the place is less affected by malevolent energy.

A few side issues first: Choe Yoon does not explain clearly that "the right side" was more than just a rough description. Kyŏngsang Province was divided into the Right Province and Left Province, with the Naktong River as a dividing line. Right Side should thus be capitalized, as it is a proper noun. Second, Choe Yoon's choice to leave the names of natural features untranslated obscures the meaning of the passage. The Choryŏng—which could be translated literally as "Bird Pass" and is also referred to in the Korean vernacular as *Saejae*—is one of the key routes north and south. The failure of the Chosŏn military to block the Japanese invaders at this most defensible of locations was often considered as one of the great failures of the Imjin War. This is what Yi is discussing here. Taet'an (Great Rapids) also needs some explanation. Those not familiar with the geography of Mun'gyŏng might want to know which great rapids are referred to here, or if indeed this is a location of great rapids. From the context, it is clear that it was this forbidding geography that the invading Japanese feared and not the town or district itself.

Choe Yoon's phrasing gives the incorrect impression that Yi is distinguishing the "town" of Mun'gyŏng from the county. He is not. The *ŭp*, which Ch'oe Yoon translates as "town," refers to the space of the county in its entirety, and Mun'gyŏng was not so much a "prominent town" as the first county one reaches upon crossing the *Saejae*, using the most usual route south from the royal capital (present-day Seoul) into Kyŏngsang Province. The entire county of Mun'gyŏng, not just the administrative centre, was on the north-south route that passed through the *Saejae*. It was not "facing" the road, but rather the road passed through the county. "The town is made up of rocks" gives the misleading image of a walled town built of stone. In fact, the term here, *amŭp* 巖邑, refers to a strategically important district. Perhaps the passage might thus be better

translated as "the district is strategically located, in the middle of very rugged terrain." What Yi is telling us is that it should have been easy to defend, but tragically the Chosŏn military did not defend it, and thus allowed the Japanese invaders to advance toward the capital. Choe Yoon's translation obscures Yi's message.

Another confusing passage is the following: "In the district of Naep'o, both Kongseho in Asan and Yugungp'o in Tŏksan are connected by deep and long waterways. Kwangch'ŏn in Hongju District and Sŏngyŏn in Sŏsan District although [located] on streams, have access to tidal waters, and are therefore ports where merchant ships can anchor and transport goods" (107). Naep'o, I note, is not an administrative district but a description of a coastal region of Ch'ungch'ŏng Province that was an important center for trade and transportation. Elsewhere, Choe Yoon recognized that it is a region and not a district (73), so presumably this is in part an editing error. I am not sure what character she is translating as "connected by," and the phrasing is slightly confusing: connected to what? Kongseho (referring to the location more commonly known as Kongsegot) and Yugung-p'o are connected to each other through waterways, but I expect the key issue is that both are on waterways that connect to the sea and transportation routes. Likely "on waterways" would be better than "connected by waterways." Above all, it would have helped to provide some more commentary on these names, perhaps in an endnote, because it might have been helpful to the reader to know where these places were and also what they were: that the *p'o* in Yugungp'o means a small port, that the *ch'ŏn* in Kwangch'ŏn and the *ho* in Kongseho are both terms for bodies of water, as is the *yŏn* in Sŏngyŏn, and also that both Sŏngyŏn and Kwangch'ŏn are the names of subdistricts (*myŏn*) within Kyŏlsŏng and Sŏsan respectively. Above all, scholars now appreciate *A Place to Live* in part for its descriptions of commerce in Chosŏn following the Taedong reforms of the seventeenth century, so some more clarity on the commercial geography of the Naep'o region would have been useful.

Of course, this is a thorny and difficult issue, and I am not sure how I would have handled it. I think her decision to leave much geographic terminology untranslated was quite reasonable, and she might understandably have wanted to avoid having too many endnotes. Perhaps instead of endnotes, some more redundant phrasing would have been helpful: "Choryŏng pass," for instance. As for terminology for administrative regions, my own preference is to ignore Wagner's ill-considered translations in their entirety. If one does wish to use them in a text of this sort, readers will need some sort of a critical apparatus to explain what these terms mean. In any case, Yi rarely uses *ŭp* to mean "town"

and it should not be translated as town.

This is, of course, an immensely complicated and difficult process. Without question Choe Yoon has produced a highly readable, enjoyable translation of a difficult and important text. I write my own comments here with great trepidation, feeling that I condemn myself (as I will surely commit many far more serious errors in my own translation). In fact, my biggest objection to this book is its cost. At sixty-five USD it is beyond what I can ask of my students, although the Kindle edition is certainly much more reasonable. Because close reading is easier with paper copies, I do hope that a paperback, perhaps with some revisions, will come out soon.