

A Study of Nature and *the Way* in the Poetry of Kim Si-seup

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The purpose of this paper is to study the diverse concepts of nature and *the Way* in the poetry of Kim Si-seup. In the poetry the representation of nature functions in relationship with the experience and life of the poet and his philosophy of *the Way* of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Through an analysis of the nature and function of Chinese characters and the poetry, as well as its expression of the experience and life of Kim Si-seup, including his views on the laws of nature, human nature, and being true to one's nature, this paper attempts to show that the representation of nature functions in relationship with *the Way* of Confucianism in the rational form of the poetry, in relationship with *the Way* of Buddhism in the compassionate purpose of its depiction of the world of impermanence and suffering, and in relationship with *the Way* of Taoism in its portrayal of the virtue and wonder of a life lived in accordance with the providence of nature.

Keywords: human nature, the laws of nature, *the Way*, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism

Introduction

Born in the early years of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), at a time when Confucianism was displacing Buddhism as the central social, philosophical, and institutional source of power, Kim Si-seup (1435-1493) belonged to a family which had secured a hold in the Confucian-based power structure and, naturally, was given an education in Confucian philosophy and ethics with the expectation he would take a position high in the ranks of government service. A student of outstanding ability who excelled in the study of classical Chinese, Kim Si-seup

had finished his formal education and entered Jungheung Temple on Samgak Mountain to continue his studies and prepare for the civil service exam, when in 1455, a man from Seoul came to the door with news that the throne of King Danjong (1441-1457), grandson of the Great Sejong (1397-1450), had just been usurped by Danjong's uncle, Saejo (1417-1468). The defining moment in the life of Kim Si-seup, his reaction to the news, is described by sixteenth century philosopher Yi Yi (1536-1584) in his introduction to *The Collected Works of Maeweoldang Kim Si-seup*.

From the moment he closed the door on the man who had come from Seoul, Kim Si-seup did not go outside for three days, during which time he cried bitterly, burned all his writings, fell into a fit of madness and, in escape from this mire, made a leap of faith and committed his life to Buddhism. (Eom 2000:38)

Now known as one of the six loyal followers of Danjong expelled from the court of Saejo, Kim Si-seup became a Zen Buddhist and, like many other monks, a follower of Taoism. Whether living in the mountains in refuge, or at the home he made for himself in Gyeongju, the old Silla capital, Kim Si-seup practiced his meditation in search of enlightenment while growing and collecting plants that might extend his life forever, according to some legends on Taoist hermits. As he made and consumed health potions and herbal medicines, Kim Si-seup also engaged in the study of Taoist philosophy and metaphysics, written in aphorisms and paradoxes in the works of Chinese philosophers Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu. Now a Buddhist convert and follower of Taoism unable to take part in the ritual worship of ancestors, forced outside the world of Confucian learning, and denied the right to serve a king and his subjects, all integral parts of Confucian society, Kim Si-seup was reborn in the agony of an injustice, left the world that had made him, and set out to discover a new life amid the mysteries and wonders of nature. And in his journey to find a purpose in the world of nature, Kim Si-seup began the long and difficult labor of freeing his mind from a self formed and bound by the structures of thought and the language he had learned while studying and following the principles of reason in nature and *the Way* of Confucianism.

Nature and *the Way* of Confucianism

With an incisive and learned mind refining in the practice of Zen meditation, Kim Si-seup turned his genius to the study of nature, the ground of reason and right action in Confucianism and, contrastingly, the Way of true being in Taoism. In the Taoist philosophy of nature, Kim Si-seup finds a way of being true to his nature outside rational and social structures, a notion contrary to the basic principles of Confucianism, whose ethical system rests on obligations performed in a hierarchy of social relations, with each member seen to be acting in accordance with reason in so far as he performs his role in family and society and follows his own essential nature, what Confucianism calls *the Way*.¹ At the same time, Kim Si-seup affirms the Confucian view of nature as the ground of reason, a notion contrary to Taoism, whose philosophy looks outside the structures of rational thought, viewing them as an obstacle to realizing true being in so far as they divide and distort the flux and flow of nature, what Taoism also calls *the Way*. In his article *Maeweoldang Kim Si-seupeui do bulgyo*, Yi Sang-ik describes the inherent philosophical contradictions between Confucianism and Taoism in Kim Si-seup's poetry.

According to Kim Si-seup, as *the Way* of reason is the paradigm of what Confucianism calls *the Way*, *the Way* of Confucianism leads to managing a harmonious life according to the essential nature of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. However, as Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu say there is no relation between human affairs and *the Way* of nature, their *Way* purports that nothing is gained from the fundamental principles of law and order or from what is acquired through learning and discipline. ...the humanity and righteousness of *the Way* of reason is not *the Way* of Taoism; but rather, as the Taoists disparage humanity and right-

1. Koh Young-jin writes, "As Neo-Confucianism became its dominant ideology the Joseon dynasty began to propagate Neo-Confucian social ethics. The 'three bonds and five relations' constituted the basic virtues of Neo-Confucian social ethics. The 'five relations' or five human relationships between father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, between brothers, and between friends were set up as unchanging, eternal truths, i.e., the social manifestation of the Heavenly Principle. The 'three bonds' stressed the bonds between father and son, husband and wife, and ruler and subject. The 'three bonds and five relations' applied to all social relationships including wife and concubine, legitimate and illegitimate child, master and serf, and landowner and tenant" (Koh 2003:66-7).

eousness as principles of a living community of men as social beings, *The Collected Works of Maeweoldang Kim Si-seup* is basically a criticism of *the Way* of Taoism. (Yi 1991:265)

According to Yi Sang-ik, rationalism and Taoism are inherently contradictory, at least from the point of view of Confucianism, which views nature as the ground of reason and the organizing principle of family and social structures. And as the rational form of language is the ground of reason in the poetry of Kim Si-seup, it affirms the basic principles of Confucianism in its rational form and presentation of a poetic self which is in its very formation in language rational in nature. This is contrary to *the Way* of Taoism, which sees the rational self as an obstacle to realizing true being in nature and which insists that the rational form of language cannot represent the flux and flow of nature. Yet, as the mind may seek to move outside of the rational self, trying to grasp the flux and flow of nature without necessarily denying reason as the ground of social order, so the rational structures of language do not prevent the dynamic movement of thought in the poetry from identifying with the flux and flow of nature. While this process occurs within the rational form of language, a consciousness or awareness appears in the form of a sensation or perception which is free of the poetic self. In fact, the state of being which this process produces represents the no-self of Zen Buddhism, a state of awareness which recognizes nature as both the source of consciousness and being and the paradigm of man's true self. It is in this view of nature that the practitioner of Zen Buddhism and Taoism alike seeks to become one with the universal and original mind which lies outside of rational thought.

In the representation of the poetic self, nature, therefore, functions as both the ground of reason and the source and paradigm of the true self. Accordingly, in the function of nature in relationship with *the Way* of Buddhism and Taoism, this self is formed within the dynamic movement of the language, emerging from out of the representation of the rational self of Confucianism as an empty no-self, as an awareness and state of being which identifies the consciousness of the perceiving subject as a selfless being and presence in the world of nature. At the same time, however, as this awareness and selfless presence cannot exist without the rational self from which it emerges, so the significance of the process of freeing the true self has no meaning outside of rational structures. It follows that this awareness and state of being can exist along with the rational self as the presence of a consciousness which does not identify with the rational form of language and thought which structures it. In other words, the poetic self can appear

as a Buddhist monk who speaks rationally about his faith and experience without having his true self identify with the rational form of his expression. And this is what happens in many poems in which the representation of nature functions in relationship with *the Way* of Buddhism.

Nature and *the Way* of Buddhism

While belief in a mind outside of human consciousness does not necessarily deny reason or social structures, the Zen belief in a sudden spiritual awakening through gradual purification of consciousness contradicts the Confucian notion of moral development through learning and discipline. In other words, from the point of view of Confucianism, the process of purifying consciousness through meditation is neglectful of the Confucian imperative to acquire knowledge through learning and develop understanding through thinking. In short, in the Confucian view, reason and character develop through learning and discipline (self-sacrifice) as knowledge is acquired and rational understanding changes. On the other hand, in Zen Buddhism, consciousness seeks to move outside of rational thought through meditation and discipline (devotion) as sympathetic understanding is acquired and perception changes.

It follows then that in Zen Buddhism mind is both prior to and independent of substance. So while Zen Buddhism seeks to apprehend the mind that lies outside of rational thought and is prior to being, a goal quite complementary to Taoism, and Confucianism strives to comprehend the nature of man's being in reason, the former implies the existence of a metaphysical principle of mind, a universal mind, and the latter, a principle of rational form, a correspondence between the forms of nature and rational structures of thought. In his article *Maeweoldang Kim Si-seup's Educational Theory- a Confucian Perspective*, Bak Jae-mun writes of a universal principle which posits form as the metaphysical ground of substance (the efficient cause of form in things in nature), and of reason and ethical being, represented by the correspondence of form to rational structures. This universal principle and philosophy called the Great Absolute of Neo-Confucianism extends the social and ethical structures of reason in Confucianism into broader structures of thought on nature and the universe and, as Bak Jae-mun says, is central to Kim Si-seup's understanding of Taoism and Zen Buddhism.

Kim Si-seup posits form as the final principle of the universe and substance² as its essential embodiment. That is to say, as form is the law of movement of the Great Absolute and the principle of being in Creation, substance is the nexus that realizes the embodiment of the Great Absolute in its form; and as the elementary substance of creation, the oneness of the Great Absolute, in accordance with, and through, its laws of movement and stillness, and of opening and closing, it appears as Yin and Yang; in accordance with the dual principles of yin and yang, in the movement of its cohesion and dispersion, and of its coming and going, it appears and appears without end. ...The form of substance is the indivisible metaphysical essence of form and substance. (Bak 1992:131-2)

In the Neo-Confucian philosophy of the Great Absolute, form is a metaphysical principle somewhat similar to Plato's ideal forms and yet, as it is inherent in principle in substance, it also determines the nature in which substance comes into being. On the other hand, while the Chinese character for substance also means "material energy," it also determines the nature of being, of things coming into being and passing away, and so is also part of the Great Absolute. As a metaphysical principle, substance is joined with form in the Oneness of the Great Absolute which, in the world of being, is called Yin and Yang. Hence, as substance embodies form in the world of being, it follows that form is primary, the ground of reason in nature; and yet, as the ground of being, substance is of "first importance," a view which Bak Jae-mun says Kim Si-seup affirms in his poetry.

Kim Si-seup gives first importance to substance. In placing substance first, he affirms that as the logical cause and effect of things and phenomena, form is not what is destroyed in individual entities, but rather is what is inherent in them, and that which is called the good is lost with the desire of man, and rather than existing in-itself the good is what he claims merely shows the direction which the desire of man must take, recognizing that which is "the will" as the thought of man and basis of his actions. (Bak1992:140)

2 The word "substance" here is a translation of the term *gi*, which also means "material force" or "material energy."

According to Bak Jae-mun, Kim Si-seup identifies the indestructibility of form with its inherence in things and “the will” with “the thought of man and basis of his actions.” In identifying form with what is inherent and indestructible and the good with what can “merely show the direction,” “the will” should lead “the thought of man” as “the basis of his actions.” Kim Si-seup implies that, as Neo-Confucian philosophy, the Great Absolute joins man and thing in an interconnected relationship, the wholeness and unity of which depends on man’s desire to free himself of desire. Such is the logic of Buddhist and Taoist thought and ascetic practice. It also follows, however, that there must be a correspondence between the form of things and thought if man is able to know the good. In other words, man’s ability to know the good rationally implies it is both conceivable and expressible in some form. Thus, there must be a correspondence between the form of the good and structures of thought if man is to know it and act accordingly. And yet, as the self is in its very nature identified with desire, the rational self that functions in relationship with *the Way* of Confucianism cannot realize the good which it is able to conceive. In other words, the good can only function in rational form in a social order in which the individual willingly sacrifices his desire to it. It is the social order, however, which also forms the self and its desires. Such is the logic of Confucian thought and social practice.

However, as substance is primary in Kim Si-seup’s philosophy of the Great Absolute, he relies on his intuition and experience and trusts that inner reflection and insight into his true self will allow him to see his nature is neither in the substance of things he perceives nor their form or conception, but rather in a universal substance called mind. Indeed, according to Buddhism, as substance is what forms all beings, perceivable substance is illusory, and form is nothing and nothing form. Consequently, as a Zen Buddhist, Kim Si-seup’s concern for substance is to realize both its illusory nature in perception and its universal being in mind. It follows from this that as his first responsibility is his own salvation, sincerity, which literally means “to grow as one,” defines the proper function of the mind in relationship with being, and is primary, and that compassion, which means “to suffer together,” marks the proper function of being in relationship with all beings, and so is also of first importance. In Zen Buddhism and Taoism, it is not a question of knowing or defining the good, or simply following rules or laws of conduct, but rather of seeking true being in nature and being true to one’s nature, or in other words, of doing nothing that is contrary to nature. This does not mean just doing nothing. Based on the principle of nothing in the universe formulated in Zen Buddhism and Taoism, as well as in the philosophy of the Great

Absolute, *the Way* is a principle which functions in and through man when he lives and acts in proper relationship with it. *The Way* is described in the virtue of its being and mystery by Lao-Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching* (*The Way of Virtue*). Chapter 37 gives a good general description of the function and power of *the Way*.

The way always does without willing to, and yet there is nothing that it does not do. If king or lord could keep to it, all things would self-transform. If I self-transformed and still desired something, I would submit myself to it with the nameless simplicity of a log. The nameless simplicity of a log desires nothing. Without desire I come to a rest, and the world goes still. (No 1984:138-9)

For Taoist and Zen Buddhist Kim Si-seup, as awakening to his true self requires seeing his purpose in nature and coming to a sympathetic understanding with the mind that lies outside of rational structures, commitment to the practice and discipline of Zen meditation is primary. This is in contrast to what he was taught in the academy, for as rational structures are essential to learning and self-cultivation in Confucianism, conformity to principles and rational thought and submission to the forms of society and government are required. So while obedience is the supreme Confucian value, sincerity is primary in Zen Buddhism, for it is what joins the will, the “material force” that determines the form a man’s life will take, with the principle of Creation, *the Way*. Accordingly, the will of the Taoist and Zen Buddhist is to use his will to live without a will, to live according to *the Way* of nature. And as sincerity is the inward embodiment of the will’s right purpose, so compassion for all beings is its outward expression.

In Zen Buddhism the realization of true being entails the recognition of the unity of substance in all beings and compassion for all forms of being. With the determination to act in accordance with the true substance of being, the source and paradigm of which is found in nature, Kim Si-seup is first and foremost guided by the principle of being true to his nature, which means being sincere in his practice to see and realize true being and acting on the compassion which naturally comes with enlightenment. Inherent in the humanity and righteousness of Confucianism, compassion is also a first principle of Buddhism, and so is at the heart of what defines the poetry of Kim Si-seup as well. A loyal subject who left the Confucian world that had made him, Kim Si-seup took a philosophical and spiritual journey into the world of nature, and in the attempt to express the

compassionate and providential purpose of his life and experience, the fruit of his lonely labor and suffering fills the pages of his poetry.

According to *the Way* of Buddhism, the source of this suffering lies in the mind and will of the rational self, and for Kim Si-seup the formation of this self, as well as the suffering it was bound to incur, begins with the illustrious form of his life as a child prodigy of classical Chinese and continues with the despair and dejection he felt as a young man who suffered deeply at his mother's parting and who experienced the shame and humiliation of his family's political and financial fall from grace. Expressed in the purpose and form of the poetry, the life of Kim Si-seup is shaped by the world represented in the nature and function of Chinese characters in fifteenth century Korea. Essential to *the Way* of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, the Chinese characters function in relationship with the society in which they were used and with the world of nature whose diverse forms they represent.

The Nature and Function of Chinese Characters

Written in the classical Chinese he had learned at home and in Confucian academies, in a language composed of characters which are also the source of Buddhist and Taoist writings, the poetry of Kim Si-seup is a convergence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Achieving a mastery of classical Chinese few Korean poets or scholars of his time were able to, Kim Si-seup had been a remarkable student. In fact, it was as a child prodigy of classical Chinese that he first met the Great King Sejong, a meeting which left a deep and lasting impression he cherished long into his adult life. And so, as Chinese characters were such an essential part of Confucian life not only as the means of embodying thought in Confucian philosophy, but also as a subject and source of learning in the academy, and as the roots of most characters represent objects and processes in nature, with characters functioning as both a means of expression and representations of forms and forces in nature, it can be said that Chinese characters not only represent ideas in the social, philosophical, and spiritual world of Kim Si-seup's poetry, but also shape the course of his life.

It was said that Kim Si-seup could understand the written characters of classical Chinese before he could speak and by the age of five had already read the basic works of Confucius and had begun writing poetry. When rumors of this child prodigy reached the Great King Sejong, he asked that the five-year-old boy

be brought before him to show his precocious talent. Awe-struck, Kim Si-seup went to the palace, received a gift of silk, and went before the King to answer questions and write some characters with a brush. When Kim Si-seup left the palace with the gift of silk, an expensive material used to make the robes of scholars who had passed the civil service exams and won a government position, he left with a promise of future procurement. For in the social and political world of fifteenth century Korea dominated by the thought and values of Confucianism, mastery of the written characters of classical Chinese, scholarly achievement, and social and political advancement were closely interconnected.

Kim Si-seup was born into a family that had achieved status and recognition and had connections in the realms of power, and when the boy showed such early promise, naturally everyone's hopes were raised, even those of the common people, who had heard the rumors of this child prodigy. Though Kim Si-seup's father was a nobleman, as a member of the landless class, his use and worth as a court servant depended on his talent and expertise more than the power that land and possessions would have brought. Living with the knowledge that his livelihood depended on the favor of another, he would have sensed more deeply than any other the value of the talent his son had shown and of the favor King Sejong had bestowed upon him. One in a series of four poems written later in life when his health was deteriorating, "Unraveling the Anguish 2" looks back at Kim Si-seup's visit to the royal palace as a young boy and the effect it had on his life. It also records the fall from grace his father would later experience, the loss of livelihood that followed, and the effect it had on Kim Si-seup's life when he was a young man.

When I was a little child, I ran to the golden palace, where the king honored me with silk robes. The treasurer called for me to climb on his lap; and a eunuch pressed me to write with a brush. There was wrangling to name a true talent; there was jostling to see a great writer rise. How could I have known family affairs would turn to ruins and I would grow old with wormwood? (Eom 2000:666)

Starting with the title, the poem is marked by a self-deprecating tone that humanizes the speaking voice and helps us to share in the experience recorded. The first half of the poem conveys the awe and excitement the five-year-old boy must have felt at having been summoned before the Great King Sejong. One can also sense how the praise the boy received must have affected him and his life.

His excitement and hopes fall flat, however, with the matter-of-fact statement of the next to last line, which drives home the simple truth that reason cannot foresee the adverse changes that lie ahead. The poem closes with the speaker's somewhat shameful confession that he is now growing "old with wormwood," an image which aptly expresses his humble circumstances, while identifying the fallen family fortunes and the process of aging with the things and processes of nature.

After enjoying this early recognition, Kim Si-seup was sent to an academy and continued on with his life, receiving a traditional Confucian education like any boy from a nobleman's family would until the age of thirteen when his mother suddenly died. Already given to introspection, Kim Si-seup seemed to turn even deeper inward after this tragic loss. At his mother's passing, the deeply wounded Kim Si-seup was taken away by an older relative to be raised in her family, and yet just a few years after he had settled in, she passed away, leaving him to return home bewildered by these unforeseeable changes in fate. Things continued to go bad for Kim Si-seup, for it was just after he had lost his mother that his father lost favor at court, causing yet another turn for the worse in the family's fortunes, one which saw living conditions fall drastically.

It was at this time, in the wake of his mother's passing and amid the penury and shame of a declining way of life that Kim Si-seup turned his troubled mind to Buddhism, a religion and philosophy of thought which recognizes the impermanence of all beings, sees the world lost in suffering, and offers escape through a transcendent state of mind known as nirvana. As a teenager, Kim Si-seup had made friends with Buddhist priests, with some becoming teachers and mentors, and when at the age of twenty-one he received news that the throne had been usurped, and with it the promise of his future, his fall into despair and consequent leap of faith and commitment to Buddhism were natural and sincere. "Unraveling the Anguish 4" describes what Kim Si-seup went through when his mother passed away and the family's fortunes fell. It also notes with a self-deprecating tone the solitary life the speaker has made for himself as a Buddhist monk in his mountain retreat.

When I was thirteen, I lost my mother; so then grandmother took me off to rear. Soon after she was lowered into her grave, and my calling grew ever more shameful. The desire to hold high office waned; my mind stuck more to the clouds and forest: and think only of forgetting the things of this world, lying as I please in a mountain glen. (Eom 2000:666)

Like the first, this poem unfolds in a series of expository statements; however, the direct statement of the opening differs from the first poem in that its effect is to shock with its bareness of expression, its lack of an emotional response to the death of the speaker's mother. Instead, the poem simply continues with his being taken away to be raised by his grandmother, an event which emphasizes his powerlessness and vulnerability to the forces at work within his life. This is reinforced by the death of his grandmother which follows soon after, and which foreshadows the loss the speaker experiences in the close of the first half of the poem. After detailing his loss of ambition and desire to win a place in the world, the speaker goes on to describe the positive effect these losses had on his life, though now turning inward to show the change that results from his initial response to such a difficult experience. In response to his feeling desire and ambition wane, his interest in nature and the metaphysical world grows. Recalling his losses and the discovery of a new world, the speaker shows his inherent vulnerability, weakness, and humanity. He also shows how spiritual growth occurs out of weakness and suffering. His final response after his egotistical drives have been frustrated and his psychological response to that has passed is to turn inward to a life of thought and meditation and to think about "forgetting the things of this world" while losing himself in the rest he has found high up on a mountain.

While these two poems use details in the life of Kim Si-seup to show his fall from the world of power and prestige represented by the scholar-bureaucrat of Confucianism, they also depict his transformation into a Buddhist monk. They show him taking refuge in the natural world, devoting his life to prayer and meditation, and freeing the self from the restrictions imposed on it by the structures of power and reason as represented by the use of Chinese characters in Confucian society. Both poems also end with the speaker identifying himself as an awakened being hidden in the natural world. And though this awakened self identifies itself with nature, that world is not really developed to any great degree in these poems. They record the difficult and painful process of getting free of the false self instead. It is in other poems set in the mountains and in other scenes in the natural world that *the Way* of nature and the true self really emerge.

The Way of Nature

When Kim Si-seup left Jungheung Temple after a year and a half stay, having finished his preliminary training to become a monk, he burned the clothes of the traditional Confucian scholar he had worn in the academy. As the governing principle of Korean society since the start of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), however, Confucianism had indelibly shaped his life and thought. Defining man and his goodness in relation to others, while holding the principle of humanity to be the heart of being human, with duty as a natural and logical moral imperative, Confucianism became deeply rooted in Korean society in its insistence upon righteousness, wisdom, and propriety of action. While Neo-Confucianism was coming into bloom in Korea in Kim Si-seup's time, Confucian values were being firmly entrenched at the center of social and political reality. At the same time, as the ground of rational and social structures in Confucianism, nature was seen as the source of reason, a view which led to the study of the principles of nature both as the basis of Confucian society and as the embodiment of the Great Absolute in the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism. In "The Principles of Nature," one of several essays included in his collected works, Kim Si-seup describes the ethical and philosophical principles of rationalism which underlay the familial, social, and political structures of Confucianism in fifteenth century Korea, defining human nature within the laws of nature, which Kim Si-seup refers to as *the Way*.

The Way is that which is just and right in the world. The first Confucians said that *the Way* is like a road; that, essentially, *the Way* is not outside a thing's nature; and that a thing's nature is not outside *the Way*. And so, Tzu-Si [the grandson of Confucius] says "following the nature of a thing is *the Way*." Thus if you follow the true nature of each thing, *the Way* of just and right action is sure to be in each of the things you do each day. This is what is called *the Way*. If you follow the true nature of humanity, *the Way* is in all things, from the bond that ties father and son through to the humane treatment of the people and the love of material things; that, if you follow the true nature of righteousness, *the Way* is in all things, from the duty of a king and his courtiers through to the reverence of compassion and respect for one's elders; that, if you follow the true nature of propriety and respect and defer to right reason, *the Way* is in all things; that, if you follow the true nature of wisdom in distinguishing right from

wrong and good from evil, *the Way* is in all things. There is nothing that is not endowed with this one principle, which is, widely, called nature; consequently, it cannot be lent to another man, as everything is naturally endowed with it, with that which is called *the Way*. (Eom 2000:1098)

As the Confucian Yi Yi writes in his introduction to the *Collected Works* some eighty-nine years after the death of Kim Si-seup, the general view of the poetry is that it is at heart Confucian with traces of Buddhism. And as it is rational in form, it is reasonable to suppose Confucian thought is essential to its meaning. The vast majority of poems are set in nature and use nature as both the source and expression of meaning, with reason directing and leading the unfolding of sense. As this sense is expressed through concepts and mental formations of habit, desire, and faith which function in relationship with *the Way* of Buddhism, these ideas and forms of thought might be said to appear merely as traces of Buddhism within the rational thought and form of the poetry. However, as a poem unfolds through the movement and development of thought, a process which identifies the poetic self with its rational form, sensations and perceptions appear and form the consciousness of the speaker, a process which identifies the unfolding of thought with nature as the source of the sensations and perceptions and which forms the consciousness within the rational structures of the poem.

The result of this is that the conscious awareness of nature which often ends a poem is identified in its presence and source with nature. Thus the nature of the true self is revealed not in the rational form of the poetic self, but instead in the awareness or state of being which identifies nature as its source. Though this true sense of being appears out of the rational self, and cannot, in fact, appear without it, because it is a form of awareness which identifies with nature, its virtue lies in its simply being. And so, to add to Yi Yi's judgment of the work, perhaps it would be a little more accurate to say the poetry represents the rational form and mind of *the Way* of Confucianism, the universal substance and purpose of *the Way* of Buddhism, and the living virtue and mystery of *the Way* of Taoism, and in functioning in relationship with these, follows *the Way* of nature.

In the poetry metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech are grounded in nature and are about nature as the ground of being in the life and consciousness of a rational man. And though identified with its rational form, the poetic self often turns reason back-in upon itself, in effect freeing consciousness from the rational structures which contain it. It follows from this that irony is central to the expressive technique of the poetry. In an irony which marks the very form of

the poetry itself, the speaker is often critical of himself as he reveals his weaknesses and humanity. Yet it is these weaknesses and the suffering which accompany them which motivate the consciousness behind the poetic self to detach from the self that gets attached to things in rational thought. It is also the source of the shifting perspective which marks the expressive technique of the poetry.

A good part of the subtlety and power of expression in the poetry comes from its shifting perspective, a perspective which identifies the poetic self with divergent concepts and mental formations. It follows that the poetic self has a kind of shifting identity, one minute objectively identifying with some aspect of the natural world and its manifestation in the consciousness of man and the next examining this correspondence in its full implications as its emotional and existential consequences are revealed. This was already seen in the poems about Kim Si-seup's childhood, especially in "Unraveling the Anguish 2," and yet another good example is a poem called "One Minute It Clears and One Minute It Rains."

One minute it clears, and again it rains; and then the rain once again clears. Though such is the logic of the skies, the way of the world is much more so. Once it has praised me, it slanders me once more; and in a minute a run from fame turns itself into a quest for fame. Blossoms open and blossoms fall, and in what way is spring involved? Clouds roll out and clouds roll in, and mountains cannot deny it. These words are written for the world to be noted and kept in mind: nowhere will you find happiness all through the life that you get. (Eom 2000:212)

This poem opens with a display of the impermanence of nature. It then compares the world of man to nature, showing it to be even more impermanent. Among the distinguishing qualities of the world of man is the meanness or baseness of his ability to follow praise with slander and his enormous capacity for self-deception. The speaker does not express his feelings directly, but remains detached by making his statements about nature and the nature of man in a matter-of-fact way. Accordingly, the poem shifts its perspective back to the world of nature at the beginning of the second half. Here the matter-of-fact tone continues, though now rhetorical questions work within the understatement and irony which has marked the poem from its beginning.

The poem comes to a logical conclusion as the speaker refers to his words and addresses the world directly. Expressing what has been implied all along,

the speaker says simply that there is no permanent happiness to be found in this world. Not a particularly welcome message, the exhortation is made by a Buddhist monk who has had an intimate acquaintance with the world and suffered for it. The world of nature is therefore given as the way through which the true nature of things is reached, and *the Way* of nature for conscious beings is the way of suffering. Hence, at the end of the poem the speaker is detached not only from the content of what he has expressed, but also from the poetic self which has been presented up to the closing exhortation.

The true self that appears as a manifestation of the underlying mind or consciousness at the end of the poem contrasts the self which is portrayed before it. In the end the speaker is identified as a presence or consciousness which possesses an awareness of being which is not identifiable in its source with the concepts or mental formations which contain and define it. An awareness and way of being which has suffered from its attachment to rational thought and the world, and which has returned to the source of its being, the presence that appears at the end of the poem expresses a compassion for all beings not in its words alone, but in its very being as well. Like most of Kim Si-seup's poetry, this poem is built on a rational structure of fifteenth century Confucianism and the philosophy of *the Way* of Buddhism. With the salvation of man as its goal, however, Buddhism is particularly distinct in its view of life as suffering and rational consciousness as a distortion of the true nature of being. And though the poem affirms the basic principles of Confucianism in its rational structure, it uses reason to explore the limits of reason and affirm the basic principles of Buddhism.

Nature and *the Way* of Taoism

Affirming reason as the principle of distinction in learning and acquiring knowledge of the world, while pointing to what lies beyond it, Kim Si-seup uses reason to explore "the region at the far edge of *the Way*" of reason without giving in to the futility of irrational thought. As a Buddhist and follower of Taoism, he explores the limits of reason and the illusory nature of consciousness, whose essential being lies outside the categories of reason, within the realms of being and nothing, in the unending flux and flow of nature. In endorsing the Confucian ideals up to a point, Kim Si-seup affirms reason as a principle of distinction and

humanity as the ground of ethical being, and yet his experience teaches him his reason has limits, as his compassion, his essential being, leads him to become a Buddhist. In his compassion, Kim Si-seup seeks to relieve the suffering of others not just through applying the principles of his humanity, as Confucian philosophy dictates, but also through his work as an agent of salvation, a view which leads to the recognition of the poetry as both an act of compassion and love.

As a Buddhist whose love is central to his being, Kim Si-seup comes to endorse the hierarchical world of feudalism, a view which recognizes both the social distinctions of Confucianism and the central position of love as a transcendent principle which defines the role of each being. On the other hand, as a monk and hermit, Kim Si-seup develops a philosophical and spiritual view of the self based not on religious or social institutions, or on a particular notion of the right social order, but instead on the thought of Taoism, a philosophy grounded in the world of nature. A loyal subject who left the world he was born to serve, Kim Si-seup turned to Buddhism and Taoism and set off on a journey, studying the principles of nature not just as the source of right reason, but also as the unheard ground of being. The basic principle of Taoism as defined by Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu is that man's true nature lies in doing nothing that is contrary to nature. Accordingly, being and nothing are states that all things pass through in the unending flux and flow of nature, and though man is aware of his being through reason, because it divides being into separate, knowable states, it is a barrier to knowing true being. So while reason alienates true being by falsely dividing nature into distinct, knowable forms of being, it causes consciousness to wrongfully know itself in contrast to nothing, which in fact is the ground of being in *the Way* of the Great Absolute. Thus, as the paradigm of the mind in its proper relationship with being and nothing, nature functions as *the Way* of being true to one's nature.³

3. *The Way* through nature lies in bringing the mind and body back into an accord with the formless energy of heaven and earth through meditation and ascetic practice. The latter includes the practice of controlling the breath in an attempt to realign the material force of the body with *the Way* of heaven and earth. "The gist of nurturing and prolonging life as put forth by Kim Si-seup lies in moderating and controlling the breath. Through the exercise of inhalation and exhalation, the resulting return of the flow of *gi*... may be called the stealing of *gi*. For a Taoist adept, stealing the primordial vital energy *gi* means the stealing of authentic *gi* by those adepts who would accomplish longevity by cultivating themselves. In other words, stealing of the authentic vital energy *gi* means nothing but the training of the control of inhalation and exhalation. One person's breath should be in accord with the breath of Heaven and Earth" (Gang 2008:351).

The Way of Taoism and Zen Buddhism lies in an ascetic practice which tries to bring body and mind into accord with the dynamic flux and flow of natural being. A reality which can only be intuited in the dynamic of nature and language, *the Way* is always nameless. Trying to capture something of its dynamic in the first line of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-Tzu says, “The way that can be called the way is not the endless way” (No 1984:32). Immediately after that he claims that the paradigmatic reality of *the Way* (which means both “word” and “principle”) cannot be represented in language, saying, “The name that can be named is not the unchanging name” (No 1984:32). So while Buddhism leads Kim Si-seup to explore the limits of reason, Taoism takes him to the place where the purpose of his being appears in the ever-changing world of nature as it functions as the paradigm of the mind’s proper relationship with being, the virtue of which is in “doing nothing contrary to nature.” One of many poems which show *the Way* of Taoism functioning within *the Way* of Buddhism in the poetic world of Kim Si-seup is “To Holy Man Jun.”

Though its title identifies it as a Buddhist poem, the sensations and perceptions which embody the consciousness of the speaker are identifiable with concepts and mental formations which function in relationship with *the Way* of Taoism as well. In viewing these expressions of habit and desire in the light of principles of both Buddhism and Taoism, the poetic self examines and disregards a false form of being. After that it is shown functioning in relationship with principles of Buddhist and Taoist faith and the sensations and perceptions which embody them in consciousness. As the poem progresses these are separated from the concepts and mental formations of the poetic self and gradually become identifiable with consciousness and being itself. In this way “To Holy Man Jun” functions in relationship with *the Way* of Buddhism and Taoism to reveal an innately virtuous being, a being which is identifiable with the title of the poem and its purpose and form.

All day wearing straw sandals, I went where feet were sure to go; having walked all of one mountain, there was another mountain greening. With no attachments in my heart, why would I work for my body? And without a name from its start, how could *the Way* be lent? While morning dew had yet to dry, the mountain birds made wild chatter. The winds of spring blew endlessly as fields of flowers grew brighter. I went back holding a small staff, where a thousand mountain peaks stood silent, as mist whirled up the blue cliff wall and dimming skies cleared. (Eom 2000:154)

Identifying the purpose for walking with the impulse to walk and the state of simply having “sandals” on with the completion of a natural cycle, the rising and setting of the sun, the poem opens in the form of a recollection of a journey. Yet instead of naming its destination, the speaker describes it in terms of a physical or intuitive impulse and the sensations and perceptions experienced, saying his feet simply walked of themselves, and when they came to the end of one mountain, walked towards “another mountain” which was “greening.” The result is that the physiological process of walking is identified with the natural process of the mountain “greening.” It follows that as walking is identified with both the cycle of time and the creative principle functioning in relationship with it, the experience or resulting state of being which appears at the end of the day is identifiable with the providence of nature. And as the day ends at the end of the poem, where the presence of the poetic self gives way to sensations and perceptions in the consciousness of the speaker, the process in which the journey and the form of the poem unfolds is identifiable with both providence and rational form.

The presence of Buddhist thought functions in relationship with this process and is made evident in the poem with the speaker’s reference to not having any “attachments” in his “heart.” In the reference and what follows, the speaker is shown to have had “attachments” of habit and desire, causing the poetic self to be identified with the world of man. And though he does not take part in the habit of “work” to satisfy the desire of his “body” this day, the irony of his rhetorical question implies that he knows these things from experience. The next line turns to the thought of Taoism by referring directly to the opening of Lao-Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*. As the speaker alludes to *the Way* as the “nameless” “beginning of heaven and earth,” his journey is identified with both the “nameless” and “endless” flux and flow of nature as the source of being and the “unchanging” principle of creation it embodies, the intuitive knowledge or experience of which cannot be imparted even temporarily to another.

In the second half of the poem the speaker turns his attention back to his experience of the natural world, and the description which follows is naturally identifiable with *the Way* of Buddhism and Taoism. Though the poetic self is identified with Buddhist and Taoist concepts and related mental formations, they are left behind with the unfolding of the description of nature. And so, ending with an awareness or state of being which identifies nature as the source of the sensations and perceptions which form it, the poem presents itself as an embodiment of the purpose and providence of nature. By the end of the poem the

speaker is weakened by his journey and, correspondingly, the presence of the poetic self displaced by sensory perceptions of the natural world. As the sensory perceptions in the closing contrast those which precede it, with “silence,” “mist,” and “dimming skies” marking the displaced presence of the poetic self, all that remains in the growing darkness is a consciousness and an awareness of being in the world that identifies the poem itself with an order, purpose, and providence in *the Way* of nature.

An Order, Purpose, and Providence in *the Way* of Nature

While Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism all see Chinese characters as part of the expression of an order, purpose, and providence in *the Way* of nature, Confucianism tends to place the greatest emphasis on order and Taoism on providence. Among the many references to the presence of a providence functioning in the universe and nature in the *Tao Te Ching* include the last line of chapter 41, which reads, “Only the way is good at providing and completing” (No 1984:156), the last line of chapter 67, which says, “Heaven saves the one that is protected by love” (No 1984:226), and the conclusion to chapter 25, which reads, “Man is bound to earth; earth to heaven; heaven to the way; and the way to nature” (No 1984:103). This Taoist sense of a living providence at the heart of the universe functions in relationship with the Buddhist sense of purpose and the Confucian sense of order in the poetry of Kim Si-seup. Consequently, as its language represents the correspondence between the form of things in nature and consciousness, and as nature represents *the Way* of the universe, so the poetry functions in relationship with *the Way* of nature as an expression of an order, purpose, and providence in the universe. The poetry is set in nature, takes nature as its subject, and affirms an order in nature. And though it does this, its ultimate purpose is to identify the true self with the world of nature outside of rational consciousness and the corresponding form of things in nature and language. This paradox is also evident in the fact that this purpose is realized through the corresponding form of things in nature, consciousness, and language in the poetry.

Despite the paradox inherent in the form of the poetry, the realization of its purpose leads to the uncovering of a hidden providence in the universe. Sometimes the form in which the poetry realizes its purpose is different, and so at times instead of representing a providential discovery of the true self in nature, the poetry uses metaphor, simile, and allusion to evoke the presence of a hidden

providence in nature. This is what happens in “Cheongpyeong Mountain from the South Window of Saehyang Temple 1.” This poem achieves its purpose through the intimations of a hidden providence in nature, and in doing so, represents an order in the natural world through the sensory and cognitive perceptions of the poetic self. As mystery and wonder abound in the poem, it is in the evocation of a hidden providence in nature that the poet’s true self is identified with the purpose of the poem. In contrast to the poems which unfold as a process of self discovery, this poem does not express the sufferings of a tormented or troubled being. Instead, the consciousness of the poetic self identifies with nature, and so functions in a harmonious relationship with its order, purpose, and providence.

As the morning sun tries to rise, the dawn light divides; in a clearing in forest mist the birds call out to their fellows. Floating blue at a far-off peak is seen when a window is opened; and a bell from a nearby temple is dimly heard in obstructing peaks. The blue birds spread the news about; the herbal kitchen is watched over. A double-blooming peach tree drops petals in shapes on a moss bed. A feathered traveler duly returns from the morning’s first assembly and under the pine trees leisurely spreads a small book of the first characters. (Eom 2000:187)

Set at Cheongpyeong Temple in Chuncheon in the province of Gangwon, this poem, which opens in the breaking light of dawn, is companion to another, which records the beauty of Cheongpyeong Mountain in the fading light of dusk. In this poem the expression works to capture something of the wonder Kim Si-seup experiences at the temple at dawn. Opening with the spreading of dawn colors, the poem also recognizes that light is the source not only of mystery and wonder in the world, but of perception and reason too. This notion of the complementary nature of wonder and reason is shown both in the mystery and beauty of the dividing “dawn light” and in the principle of distinction functioning within it. It is also shown in the implied correspondence between the enlightenment of a mind and “a clearing in forest mist” in which the interpenetration of mind and nature is represented by the “birds” which are heard “call[ing] out to their fellows.”

The mystery sensed in the natural world intensifies with a focusing in on physical details, coupled with allusions and references to mythical creatures and magical beings. For example, while the “blue birds” that appear are real birds

whose color is associated with the blue skies of dawn, though unrecorded in the translation, Kim Si-seup is also referring to a three-legged bird of Chinese mythology, a messenger which, like the birds in the poem, carries important news or tidings to the world. Next, in saying “the herbal kitchen is watched over,” the speaker refers to the mysterious herbal potions of Taoism, a philosophy and mystical religion which teaches about the body and the ascetic practices by which it can be brought into a state of perpetual life. The “double-blooming peach tree” provides fruit to help the speaker sustain his life and is also a supernatural presence that leaves signs of the mysterious force in which it grows as it “drops petals in shapes on a moss bed,” a sign of a providence that exists behind the visible world.

Out of nowhere appears a “feathered traveler,” a conventional symbol of a Buddhist monk who moves about from place to place like the birds, and who is identified as a living force or agent of nature come to complete its purpose. The “morning’s first assembly” he returns from is both the prayer and meditation of a monk and the awakening to the world of nature that the Taoist hermit strives to achieve in his daily practices. The “book” that he “leisurely spreads” can be read as “the book of nature,” yet here it also refers to an actual book of Chinese characters. The character that is translated simply as “book,” *zhuàn* (篆) actually refers to an ancient source book of Chinese characters and is particularly well-known for the beautiful style in which the characters are represented. The poet’s intention here is to draw a parallel between the beautiful and original form of the characters in this book and the beautiful forms of nature. For in its correspondence with the forms of nature and the source of their original creation in character form, the poem works to complete the purpose of nature in the providential act of its creation.

Like “Cheongpyeong Mountain 1,” Kim Si-seup’s poetry might seem difficult to understand because it encompasses such a broad philosophical perspective. Like all great poetry, however, the poetry of Kim Si-seup allows the reader to enter into the experience recorded. Poetry is not philosophy, nor is it religion, and while there is philosophical and religious poetry, if it is any good it allows the reader to experience something of what it is the poet has seen or heard. Kim Si-seup’s poetry is rich in sensations and perceptions of the physical world, while recording a particular experience that the poet has had. That experience and the sensations and perceptions which embody it are usually presented in the framework of a meditation on the nature of the human condition; and for Buddhist Kim Si-seup, being human means to suffer, the overcoming of which

involves self-sacrifice and self-awareness. Reading the poems of Kim Si-seup, one gets a very strong sense of the man and his life. Many poems have a kind of confessional nature in which Kim Si-seup presents his suffering as an object of meditation, while recognizing his own shortcomings; however, these are always put in a broader context, showing the plight of man and the faults inherent in his nature. So while the poems offer mature religious and philosophical meditation, they also present a life, a consciousness, and a suffering being that maintains a sensitive awareness of his nature while experiencing the hardships and tragedies of life.

Conclusion

After the usurpation of the throne of King Danjong, Kim Si-seup lived for a time in Seoul and at Bokgae Mountain in Gangwon Province. He then traveled the countryside for several years, visiting temples and places of interest to a Buddhist monk. After his long journey, he moved to the old Silla capital of Gyeongju, where he built a home and settled down. It was while living in Gyeongju and experiencing the early signs of failing health that Kim Si-seup wrote his famous novel *Keumosinhwa*, as well as many poems about what he saw and experienced while visiting temples near or around the old capital. After leaving Gyeongju and living at Surak Mountain, Kim Si-seup wrote the first of several works on Buddhism; and, at the age of forty-four, surprised many when he suddenly let his hair grow and started eating meat again. Abandoning the priesthood, he also started worshipping his ancestors, once again taking part in the Confucian rites that he had abandoned when he took his vows as a young monk.

He also married and started a family, and yet as if destined to a life of loneliness and hardship, lost his wife soon after she gave birth and the child shortly after as well. Shaken by the loss of his wife and child, a tragedy beyond all reason, at the age of forty-nine Kim Si-seup left the comforts of his home and started on another journey that would last many years. This time, however, because of failing health, his movements were much more restricted, forcing him to spend most of his remaining years at Muryang Temple in South Chungcheong Province where, at the age of fifty-eight, he died, ending a life of unceasing turmoil, suffering, and profound creativity, with the work remaining as a testament to the success of his struggle to overcome the difficult circumstances that shaped

his life. More importantly, however, the purpose of the poetry is realized in its tracing the journey he undertook to discover and follow his true self.

In so far as it is identifiable with its rational form, *the Way* of Confucianism is an essential part of that purpose. Indeed, this aspect of its purpose is reinforced by the representation of the poetic self as a rational being, a fact which causes the form of the poetry to unfold in a dynamic process which functions in relationship with *the Way* of Buddhism and Taoism. Accordingly, in this process the unfolding of Buddhist and Taoist concepts and mental formations identified with the poetic self give way to the underlying presence of a consciousness and awareness, a state of being formed from sensations and perceptions of the world of nature. At other times, when the poetic self is clearly identified as a Buddhist monk and follower of Taoism, the poetry simply represents an unseen providence in the universe by describing a hidden purpose in the world of nature.

As every being must function in the reality of form in nature, however, reason does not extend to the recognition of a universal mind. Thus, instead of identifying true being with an inherent substance, *the Way* of Confucianism posits a correspondence between reason and nature and from the rational correspondence between nature and language establishes principles of thought, conduct, and laws society is compelled to follow. And yet, as this compulsion is neither natural nor morally binding, the logical conclusion of this view of the world is that force or might is the ultimate reality, a notion which the usurpation of the throne of King Danjong confirms. A man of deep moral integrity, intelligence, and sensitivity, Kim Si-seup could not accept such a base view of reality. So while his search for an endless source and unchanging paradigm of being paradoxically affirms both the rational and illusory nature of form and consciousness, his destiny was to look beyond rational form as it functions in relationship with *the Way* of Confucianism to a purpose and providence in nature in *the Way* of Buddhism and Taoism.

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