*Chŏn Chaekyŏng’s* Butterfly

*“Vestiges of old consciousness, transformed in the great kiln of the Cooperative”* – a literary window into ideas of criminal justice and rehabilitation in 1950s DPRK.

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**Introduction**

*Butterfly* is a short story written by Chŏn Chaekyŏng and published in 1956 in the DPRK’s literary journal *Chosŏn Munhak*. Written for a domestic audience, the story glorifies the passion and motivation of agricultural workers whose individual plots of land have recently been merged into one of the country’s new Agricultural Cooperatives, and praises the guiding role of the Party. But all is far from ideal in the Cooperative, not least because of an “impure element” called Ko Yŏngsu who is selfish, lazy, criminally deceitful, and the story’s protagonist.

*Butterfly* touches on several interesting areas. It is quite candid about rural poverty, describing agricultural workers as having just 600 grammes of rice a day, little or no meat in their diet, and where some evidently still question the very system of collectivisation. It also offers a perspective on gender relations: women participate fully and with confidence in public meetings, yet all managerial positions appear to be held by men. The proper attitude of Party officials toward workers is woven throughout the text, emphasising that they should use “humble and well-reasoned logic” to win over the views of the workers, and to lead by example. And surprising emphasis is placed on the role of competition between agricultural workers and teams in improving mutual motivation and production.

But the focus of this short essay is *Butterfly*’s exploration through protagonist Yŏngsu of ideas about rehabilitation and personhood. How should the Cooperative react to those who repeatedly offend, and show no inclination to change? This is the narrow focus of the story, and its handling of the question – and subsequent critical reception of the story – reveals insights into official narratives of criminal justice and rehabilitation in 1950s DPRK. More broadly, the story underlines the ambition of the DPRK authorities in transforming social and individual consciousness away from the selfishness of days gone past, and towards a cooperative attitude befitting socialism.

This essay uses long quotes from the story’s English translation to explore its ideas of rehabilitation and transformation: the full translation is available at http://yonsei.academia.edu/tristanwebb.

**‘Butterfly’ – A Plot Synopsis**

The story starts in late May, 1956, amidst workers weeding a field of corn in the newly created Cooperative farm. One worker shrieks at the sight of a large grub; whereupon another worker slices the grub, and mashes it, comparing it to their lazy and deceitful peer Ko Yŏngsu. We learn that Yŏngsu, this “impure element” within the Cooperative, was exposed recently for stealing 411kg of rice. Accordingly, a Cooperative-wide general assembly was especially convened so that all Cooperative members could gather and decide what to do with Yŏngsu.

In Part II of the story, we are taken back in time and shown the history of Ko Yŏngsu, the crimes he committed against the Cooperative, and the subsequent discussion at the general assembly. Yŏngsu had initially been well received by the Cooperative as an educated patriot, but this soon soured. His corrupt book-keeping at the Cooperative’s rice mill attracted a State audit and an order to pay compensation, he then mercilessly exploited his two adopted daughters by hiding them at home and having them make rope which he passed off as his own work, and he forever shirked physical work in the fields with the other Cooperative members, no matter how busy they were. The tipping point against him came when he was exposed for having stolen 411 kg of rice from the Cooperative.

The discussion at the general assembly about what to do with Yŏngsu is extremely heated. Despite much initial opposition, the Cooperative’s political officer, Chang Dalhyŏn, manages to persuade the workers that rather than punish or expel Yŏngsu, it is their patriotic and socialist duty to reform him. Yŏngsu reluctantly agrees to stop shirking and start doing tough manual labour in the fields: this, Dalhyŏn argues, will “cleanse the crimes” Yŏngsu has commited, and “correct the flawed attitude” he has displayed so far. Despite the apparent agreement, most remain sceptical.

Part III brings us to the present. It is now June, and the whole Cooperative is racing against time to plant out all the rice seedlings in the paddy fields. Yŏngsu, after intense anguish, emotional resistance, and delay, accepts that he should carry out the decision of the assembly and turns up for work, to the great joy of the rest of the Cooperative. Dalhyŏn is delighted to have set Ko Yŏngsu on the right path, and is confident the Cooperative members will keep him on that path as they collectively struggle for the 3rd Congress’s declared revolution: construction of socialism in the northern half of the peninsula, and the peaceful reunification of the fatherland.

**The Cooperative’s Debate on Rehabilitation**

In developing its argument for the rehabilitaiton of repeat offenders, Chŏn Chaekyŏng’s *Butterfly* starts by presenting the “entirely natural” but unpersuasive views of angry members as they debate what to do with Yŏngsu at the general assembly. The mood is electric: Yŏngsu’s peers are fed up with his deceit, idleness, and thieving, and want him expelled from the Cooperative at the very least. A young female worker called T’ansil gains the enthusiastic support of the crowd with her speech of moral outrage:

*“This isn’t his first time. He said he paid us back after his fraud last year at the rice mill, but I knew then it wouldn’t be the end of it. Here we all are: hungry, tightening our belts and working till bones break. And there he is: loafing about and living well off the back of exploiting kids so young they’ve still got runny noses. He says he was short on rice so tricked us and took half a tonne of it. But whose rice was that? It was rice given by the State to provide relief to all members of the Cooperative members! And Ko Yŏngsu ate it all by himself! He used us. I say we stop going on about it any more; let’s make Ko Yŏngsu give back all the rice he took, and chase him out of here.”*

Then another voice – this time, a young man insisting that Yŏngsu is incapable of rehabilitation and ought to be criminally punished as a traitor:

*“Cooperative member Ko Yŏngsu’s criminal actions are very serious. Before the ink had dried on the State’s investigation report into the rice mill fraud last winter he was doing the same sort of thing again. Why was he doing it again? I think it’s because the very essence of his character is opposed to working. It’s said he would sooner die than do hard work, and would rather take the opportunity to trick others.*

*“Ko Yŏngsu didn’t like the idea of a Cooperative from the start. He would prefer it fell apart, and that we all went back to farming our own individual lots. I suspect that to achieve this goal, he has been secretly trying to undermine the Cooperative. I therefore propose we expel Ko Yŏngsu from the Cooperative, but that we also apply Clause 31 of the Cooperative’s Regulations.”*

*“What’s Clause 31?” asked another member.*

*At the table at the head of the hall, the Chair of the Management Committee rifled through the ‘Management Committee Head notebook’ and found the regulation.*

*“I will read it out. “Standard Regulations Clause 31. The theft or waste of resources of the Cooperative or of the State, or damages to State agricultural machinery is treasonous to the public works of the Cooperative, and as an act that abets the enemy of the people must be punished according to the law.” In other words, we have to punish him by law.”*

*“Good!”*

*“That’s great!”*

*“Let’s apply Clause 31!”*

*The hall erupted in noise.*

An elder woman had previously used traditional rhetoric to express a similar sentiment:

*“Do you reckon you could fix Ko Yŏngsu’s bad streak then, even if you had a hundred years? No, you can’t learn manners to a dog!”*

Finally, a father takes the floor to argue that selfish behaviour such as Yŏngsu’sis inherently inimical to social order in the Cooperative, and that Yŏngsu must be punished to deter others from following his example:

*“I have seven children. If it’s not a crime to steal grain from the Cooperative well then, I will quit tomorrow and I too will find ways to start tucking into 400kg of the Cooperative’s grain. If I’m lucky, no one will catch me. And if I’m unlucky? What, I keep the 400kg and leave the Cooperative and nothing more?! No, I say we can’t just send out Yŏngsu without making him pay us back.”*

*“Yes, what he said is right!” the Cooperative members laughed and shouted out, united in voice.*

But then the meeting’s mood is changed by the “humble and well reasoned logic” of the political official, Dalhyŏn. Dalhyŏn argues that it is the patriotic, social, and glorious duty of the Cooperative to try and change Yŏngsu’s selfish way of thinking, to reform him:

*“Comrades, tonight we have heard the Chair’s report about comrade Ko Yŏngsu’s theft, and we have had plenty of debate about it. […] Reflecting on everyone’s opinions expressed tonight, there seems general agreement we should make him repay the rice he took and throw him out of the Cooperative; there is also the opinion that we should send him out of the area entirely, and the view that we should refer the matter to the police. I empathise entirely with these views: there is no place for someone like Ko Yŏngsu in our Cooperative, nor really in our society.*

*“But I think we have to ask ourselves this: if we throw him out, where will he go and what will he do? Let’s say he leaves the area and finds another Cooperative. Or let’s imagine he goes to the city, and looks for work. Won’t the same thing happen all over again wherever he goes? A person like Ko Yŏngsu simply has no place in the villages and towns of our country as it heads for socialism.*

*“Here is what I think about it. I think we have a duty to not send him out of the Cooperative, and to instead keep him here with us and for us to educate him, to reform him into a new person, an earnestly-working person. Is this not the goal for which Cooperatives were organised?”*

*Dalhyŏn finished speaking and searched the crowd for its response. Some people were expressing empathy by nodding their heads, but most people still seemed uncomfortable. He continued.*

*“Suppose we assign him our most difficult work: physical labour, whether digging mud for irrigation banks or shifting rocks. Someone here said ‘he would sooner die’ than do that sort of work. Well, let’s give him some of that work as if we had chased him out of the Cooperative. If he puts up with it, endures it, and gets on with it then we will be able to say that his consciousness seems to have been transformed. The vestiges of old consciousness cannot fail to be transformed in the heart of the big kiln we call the Cooperative! Or, let’s say we present the matter to the prosecutor’s office and they send him off to the re-education centre. Of course, the re-education centre is different from the prisons we used to have, and will make him a new person through education. But why should we deliberately yield such a glorious task to anyone else? Our country’s revolution was explicitly stated in that historical 3rd Congress of the Korea Workers Party – a struggle for building socialism in the northern half of the peninsula, and for peaceful reunification of the fatherland. The Party urged us to combine our entire patriotic capabilities for the peaceful reunification of the fatherland. In other words, it teaches us to join hands in power against Rhee Syngman and the US imperialists, their National Assembly, and even the military personnel of that puppet army. Yes, Comrade Ko Yŏngsu is a person with some kind of fault. But we all know that he hates the US imperialists and their accomplice Rhee Syngman. If he renounces his past and joins together with us, then our strength will grow by the same amount. Taking this sort of approach is part of our task for constructing socialism in the village, and is a way to help achieve reunification of the fatherland. So what I suggest is this: I think Ko Yŏngsu should return by June 15th whatever is left of the 411kg and pay back in cash for the grain he has already eaten, and that we should give him a severe warning, and make him take part in physical labour..”*

Here, Dalhyŏn insists on rehabilitation so that their society is stronger, but also because it is the morally right course of action. The key difference between his suggestion and those he persuades, is Dalhyŏn’s argument contains the assumption that a person’s character is capable of changing, and that it is society’s duty to try and reform them, to give criminals a second chance. This is the narrow focus ofthe story *Butterfly*.

**The Wider View of Personhood and Society**

The broader assumptions underlying Dalhyŏn’s argument for rehabilitation, and the broader focus of the story as a whole, are threefold.

Firstly, that one’s essential character is not fixed, but can be changed. This is the nub of the story, and is reflected in its title *Butterfly*. At the start of the story, Yŏngsu’s peers compared him to a selfish grub, which unthinkingly eats the corn so earnestly grown by the sweat of the agricultural workers. But when these same workers see how Yŏngsu’s attitude to working with them has changed, they compare him to a butterfly: the change is one of metamorphosis, and Dalhyŏn’s approach is vindicated. In a close parallel, the essence of the Cooperative has metamorphosed too: last year the members suffered from “child-like consciousness” and were ill motivated in the fields, suffering a poor harvest as a result. But in one year the efforts of the Party official transformed morale and the Cooperative into a cheerful, productive, and motivated social group.

Secondly, that the turning point in changing individual and social character is a question of resolve. Just as the dramatic change in productivity of the Cooperative was ascribed to the change in worker’s attitudes and motivation, so too Yongsu’s personal salvation is explicitly ascribed to his resolve: to his desire to *want* to do the labour. The key section is where Dalhyŏn exhorts Yŏngsu to properly understand the decision of the general assembly:

*“Mister, you still don’t see it. You have to do hard, physical work. It must be this way to cleanse the crimes you have committed against the Cooperative members up till now, and to gain your dignity. You need to do hard, physical work to correct the flawed attitude you’ve had up till now. It is only through hard work that your mind can change. […] Look, we’re not going to order you to be killed and thrown away. If working hard really does make you collapse, then we will find something else for you to do. What really matters is that you are willing, and that you have the determination and resolve to work even to the point of fainting. Do you understand what I mean?”*

Upon reading this I had thought first of George Orwell’s 1984, written just eight years before *Butterfly*, and the scene where O’Brien interrogates Wilson in room 101:

*“We are not interested in those stupid crimes that you have committed. The Party is not interested in the overt act: the thought is all we care about. We do not merely destroy our enemies, we change them. Do you understand what I mean by that?”*

In both cases, O’Brien and Dalhyŏn are concerned with changing the individual’s consciousness, much more so than seeking compensation for damage incurred, or punishment for a crime committed. Though there are differences between the two, those differences might perhaps be fairly reduced to nothing more than the difference between the authors’ optimism and cynicism respectively.

Finally, that the goal of transformation is the full socialisation of the individual and of the group. This is portrayed not just to support the Party and nation, although these are aspects which are emphasised. Rather, this goal is presented as leading to individual and social fulfillment of potential, as a “dirty, horrible” grub becomes a butterfly. Thus once Yongsu has shed off his selfish, egotistical consciousness and adopted a caring, sympathetic view to his peers, he becomes a physically transformed character that for the first time smiles, and even laughs. The agricultural workers too, having moved from a system of individual farm plots into a collectivised model, are portrayed as delighting in their collective work, whether competing against other teams or bursting into impromptu songs in their teams in the field. This is a hallmark of Socialist Realism, that portrays the workers delighting in the new socialist order. But the idea of an ideal person being social and caring for others appears to have been already present in Korea: Chongko Choi, former President of the Korean Association of Legal History, describing the first of three key Korean legal thoughts wrote: “The ideal type of Korean existence is to be beneficial toward others as opposed to egoistic. […This is…] the idea of *Hongik Ingan*, which means the man who gives benefit to human kind.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We might therefore be careful to not dismiss this last aspect as something no more than the wholesale import of a Soviet literary ideal, but rather something which possibly interplayed to an indeterminate degree with existing ideals of personality and society.

**Critical Reception of‘Butterfly’**

Shin Hyungki et al note in their 2007 collection of DPRK literature, from which this story was selected, that at the time of *Butterfly*’s publication:

“it was praised by literary figures such as Ŏm Hosŏk for its critical portryal of schematicism, but in the 1959 ‘Struggle against Vestiges of the Bourgeousie’ it was criticised by Han Chŭngmo, Han Sŏlya,and other literary figures for idealising negative characters.After this criticism, Chŏn Chaekyŏng disappeared from the literary scene.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Writing in 1957, writer Kim Hyŏngkyo praised the story for its nuanced handling of the negative protagonist Ko Yŏngsu:

“The author applies a psychological examination and critical stance to his negative protagonist Ko Yŏngsu, sometimes calculating the weight of the man, at times standing on his head, and at other times elevating him as high as the roof, all the while peering inside at the dark innards of the man. The approach does not lampoon, yet drives the reader to disdain Ko Yŏngsu, and with no exaggerated caricaturisations of the protagonist’s mean and hypocritical character, the reader considers him with both contempt and empathy.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

A little later in 1958 Ŏm Hosŏk agreed, and praised the work for its literary technique in triumphalising the socialist achievements made in rural villages:

“The literary contribution of *Butterfly* is the astuteness in which it describes Ko Yŏngsu’s deepening internal conflict and subsequent reformation, achieved through vivid accounts of his character development, of his fate, and dramatic exposure of his tendencies. The author seeks to demonstrate that the superiority of Agricultural Cooperatives and strength of efforts for socialism are now so well established in the countryside, that there is nothing to stop even those with flaws as severe as Ko Yŏngsu’s individualism and selfishness from fixing themselves and joining the Cooperative. Therefore, even though the story is devoted to criticism of Ko Yŏngsu, this criticism’s message is a positive one. Put another way, hidden within the author’s whip of criticism against Ko Yŏngsu is none other than the new capabilities of our rural villages.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

But then the reaction of Chŏn Chaekyŏng’s peers turned for the worse. Writing in 1959, Han Sŏlya and Han Chŭngmo fiercely criticised the story and made personal attacks against its author. Han Sŏlya wrote:

“Chun Jaekyong uses the mouth of Ko Yŏngsu to pour slanderous and malignant words against our party and our system but, what is worse, even more than the anger and alarm this causes, is that such a character is personalised, and portrayed as a success, even celebrated.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Han Chŭngmo added:

“In the short story *Butterfly* Chun Chaekyong consistently gives a distorted description of the lives of the north Korean people after liberation, and aims to corrode the hearts of the people with a lack of confidence in the party’s policies and the socialist system.”

After this criticism from Han Sŏlya and Han Chŭngmo, Chŏn Chaekyŏng did not reappear in the literary field. As Shin Hyungki notes, Chŏn Chaekyŏng’s portrayal of his negative protagonist had crossed a line, the crimes he commits in the story came to be regarded as too severe, too dangerous to be responded to by such a generous approach toward rehabilitation as Chang Dalhyŏn’s.

Chŏn Chaekyŏng’sdisappearance points to the political and ideological role ascribed to literature in the DPRK, and its consequent sensitivity to shifting political analysis and critique. Marshal Pihl describes the climate at this time as becoming increasingly politicised, where the *Chosŏn Munhak* journal’s authors came to “write less for the reader and other writers than for the eyes of the party hierarchy.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The irony is indeed a sad one, that for portraying a debate on how peers should deal with a perceived impure element like Ko Yŏngsu, Chŏn Chaekyŏng should himself end up soon after embroiled as the subject of just such a debate about his own actions.

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1. Chongko Choi, *Law and Justice in Korea: North and South*, 2005, Seoul: Seoul National University Press, p78-80 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 신형기 et al., op cit. p.463. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 김형교, ‘비판적빠포스,’ “문학신문,” 조선작가동맹 중앙위원회 기관지(1957.1.3), quoted in 김미, ‘1959년대 북한 “문제”소설에 나타난 농민 형상 연구: ‘나비’와 ‘봄보리’를 중심으로,’ “한국문학논총” 제60집(2012.4) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 엄호석, ‘해방후 신문발전의 길,’ “해방후 우리 문학,” 조선작가동맹출판사(1958) quoted in 김미, op cit. p.247 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 한설야, ‘공산주의 교양과 우리 문학의 당면 과업,’ “공산주의 교약과 창작문제,” 조선작가동맹출판사(1959) quoted in 김미, op cit. p.247 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marshall R. Pihl ‘Engineers of the Human Soul: North Korean Literature Today,’ in *Korean Studies*, Vol. 1 (1977). p.81 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)