The Compass of the Soul[1]

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To me, Chung Li-ho (1915-1960) is a theme played on a Yunnanese *bawu* pipe.

The film *Good Men, Good Women*, directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, was based on the book *Song of the Carriage*, which was interspersed with excerpts from Chung Li-ho's diary. Which is why, even though the main storyline focuses on Chung Li-ho's half-brother, Chung Hao-tung, and [Hao-tung's wife] Chiang Pi-yu, lines from Chung Li-ho's diary kept flashing through my mind as

[1] The following two paragraphs at the beginning of the story are repeated almost verbatim in the text and are therefore omitted in translation:
I have always been fond of the English name of the pale yellow "lemon migrant." It sounds as if a certain color has gone wandering. These butterflies gather at the Green Valley of Yellow Butterflies [near the rural writer Chung Li-ho's native place], because some wanderer chanced here upon a land of milk and honey. However, the iron-sword [*Senna siamea*] trees that provide sustenance for the butterflies were once planted by the Japanese for gunstocks, for killing.
Perhaps, before people "decide" what kind of forest they want, they should consult with the birds that drop seeds when they defecate, the squirrels that occasionally drop bits of their meals beneath the trees, and the wind.

I watched the film, as if a narrator was reading them aloud in my mind.

Hao-tung and Li-ho each had a will of steel. To them, idealism was as essential to life as air is to survival. They were like variations on the same theme, in certain respects. But I have a feeling that, although Chung Hao-tung was shot dead on October 14, 1950, in the White Terror, he nevertheless rests in peace because he died for his ideals, whereas Chung Li-ho, who underwent thoracic surgery that same day and lived another decade before finally succumbing to lung disease, died wearing an expression of grim regret that couldn't be wiped away.

In a short diary entry written after his surgery, Chung Li-ho weakly jotted down, "Ho-ming[2] is dead." He was probably afraid that something in him had perished, too. In the film, a traditional *bawu* pipe of the Hani people of Yunnan plays a reedy theme of powerlessness, the sound of something sinking helplessly, swallowed into quicksand. It's more "Li-ho's style" than "Hao-tung's."

To me, Chung Li-ho is also a mute yet sometimes vibrant tropical town.

In August of 2000, I came to Meinung for the Lemon Migrant Festival.[3] The next morning, the owner of the bed and breakfast, a man in his fifties, pointed at a distant hill and said, "That's Mt. Chien." I asked if he knew about Chung Li-ho. "Of course," he replied. My question got him talking. Meinung must be more knowledgeable about its local writers than any other town in Taiwan.

Mt. Chien is Mt. Li, the youthful mountain into which Chung Li-ho breathed literary life [in *Mt. Li Farm*]. "Vigorous, stubborn, and burning with the fire of life, as if it knows nothing of the laws of the cyclic alternation of the natural world," he wrote.

In the middle of the Qianlong emperor's reign (around 1736), [the Hakka pioneers] Lin Fongshan and Lin Guishan led a band of comrades from the Six Unit Volunteer Army formed from village militias [to fight Zhu Yigui] across the lower reaches of the Laonung River in Pingtung. Traveling north, they settled at the foot of what is now Mt. Meinung, founding Minung. A hamlet of twenty-four three-wing, central courtyard houses along today's Yung'an Street grew into a community of ten big and ten small villages. Minung, which sounds like you're looking out of a misted window right after getting up at the crack of dawn, was renamed Mino [Meinung] by the homesick Japanese, who were reminded of the Mino Plain in the south of Gifu Prefecture, at the foot of the Hida Mountains and Mt. Kisokoma. Nevertheless, both Mino and Minung inspire in me a sense of unchanging harmony, the ideal of Apollonian rule.

Yet the place has never stopped changing, both valley and society.

In the mountainous region near Meinung, the hardworking Hakka pioneers must have changed the local vegetation well before the Japanese arrived. In 1935, many indigenous plants were uprooted when the Japanese planted the Chikutōkaku Tropical Arboretum near Shuanghsikeng with imported South Seas species. This arboretum was a laboratory for the extraction of natural resources from the colony.

Among the imported species, the fast-growing iron-sword [kassod, *Senna siamea*], which yield hard yet flexible lumber, became the dominant planted tree in the area. This species, in the [sub]family Caesalpinioideae, was firewood to the Dai people. To the Japanese, it was material both for gunstocks, because its flexibility reduces recoil, and railway ties, which bore the burden of plundered colonial resources.

The iron-sword trees attracted the lemon migrants. I have

[2] Ho-ming was Hao-tung's first name, meaning, roughly, concord.

[3] Lemon migrants are a type of butterfly.

always been fond of the English name of the pale yellow butterfly. As if a certain color has gone wandering. It belongs to the genus Catopsilia [meaning "naked underside,' in reference to the relative paucity of wing scales]. In China the genus is literally "mobile scales," in reference to the speed of their unceasing flight. A lemon migrant can suck up the nectar of a flower with its proboscis in half a human heartbeat. When the lemon wanderers happened upon this land of milk and honey, they decided to settle down, turning it into a butterfly vale as they proliferated into a swarm of over ten million.

May and September are the breeding seasons, when a myriad lemon migrants court each other aerially, like beams of sultry sunlight that leap the moment a breeze blows through the leaves.

There are three types of lemon migrants, in order of increasing rarity: lemon-yellow, silver-dot, and ochre-dot. The silver dot is dotted on both fore and hindwings, the ochre dot only on the hindwings.

These three types were once categorized into three distinct subspecies. While experiments suggested they were merely variations of one, the cause of the variation remains a mystery. It is neither environmental (as in the case of the crow phoenix [peacock black swallowtail emerald, *Papilio bianor*]) nor seasonal (as in the case of the peacock pansy [*Junonia orithya*] from dry season to wet).

A species subject to environmental variation is more likely to be subdivided, though the boundaries between subspecies may be fuzzy. In 1953, E. O. Wilson reported inconsistencies in the feature variation by which subspecies were distinguished. In other words, the methodology was weak, so weak that Wilson argued for its abandonment. About a dozen years later, he reconsidered his argument, regarding it as imprudent. I've always defined science as "unceasing reflection on one's own constructed models of the world." By which definition, Wilson is a true scientist.

In the wild, I often see different types of lemon migrants wooing each other in flight. They seem to resist understanding, refusing monotony. Life is collective, general, but also individual, specific. Before such puzzles are solved by scientific ritual, my sense of the mystery of the unknown is somehow comforting.

I believe, rashly I'll admit, that Chung Li-ho must have noticed the lemon migrants, first because he wrote fictional descriptions of workers planting iron-sword trees and second because I think he had the spiritual constitution of a traditional farmer, giving him an intimacy with nature. Dingchuan, a character in *Mt. Li Farm,* mentions that those who are familiar with forests never lose their way in the mountains:

"Certain trees choose to grow in certain places. If you can recognize a kind of tree by the smell of its leaves, you'll know what kind of place you're at. And you can tell direction, too, because the bark facing the sun tends to be coarser, facing away finer, more tender."

This, to Chung Li-ho, was common sense, as obvious as the fact that summer follows spring.

I have been to the Green Valley of Lemon Migrant Butterflies [in Meinung] twice. The first time was in 2000, during the Lemon Migrant Festival. However, the festival was scheduled to avoid the breeding season, when the population peaks, for fear of ecological disturbance by crowds of visitors. In June 2002, though the lemon migrant butterflies of Shuanghsi seemed in fine form, there were few other species. This lack of diversity led to a subtle change in my attitude.

Actually, even along the road you can often see many varieties of littoral butterfly species, individually or swarming in mixed groups. They seem to paint the air by numbers: a single-species swarm of beauty waveline little grays [Formosan common lineblues, *Prosotas nora* ssb. *formosana,* Fruhstorfer] gathered in a corner of their own or even a mixed swarm of Taiwan glass little

greys [common hedge blues, *Acytolepsis puspa* ssb. *myla*], Taiwan blackstar little grays [Malayans, *Megisba malaya* ssb. *sikkima*, Moore], and beauty blackstar little grays [Quakers, *Neopithecops zalmora*, Butler]–all bearing silver-blue black-spotted bellies–or another mixed swarm of pale purple-scales [lesser gulls, *Cepora nandina* ssb. *eunama*, Fruhstorfer], spotscales [*Delias*], and lady yellow-whites [yellow orangetips, *Ixias pyrene* ssb. *insignis*, Butler], whispering secrets to each other like a pack of giggling kids who scatter whenever a stranger comes near. The deeper into the valley I went, the more longpalp butterflies [nettle tree butterflies, *Libythea celtis* ssb. *formosana*, Fruhstorfer] I saw. Sipping water with wings closed, they morph into rocks; and they bask in the sun when it warms up. That was the first time I'd ever seen such a swarm, three hundred at least, oblivious to my presence as they gathered for a drink. Sometimes a silver-spot little grey [Formosan angled sunbeam, *Curetis acuta* ssb. *formosana*, Fruhstorfer] would drop by to say hi. Some lemon migrants, too, though far fewer than in Shuanghsi Valley.

I refreshed my knowledge of their favorite food plants, which one by one grew in my mind into a lush tropical forest: duckleg lianas [snuffbox seabeans, *Entada pursaetha*], fineleaf *mantou* (steamed bun)-fruits [cheese trees, *Glochidion rubrum*, Blume], wild *tungs* [food wrapper plants, *Mallotus japonicus*], mountain mandarins [wild kumquats, *Fortunella hindsii*], sharp-leaved hill oranges [caperbushes, *Capparis acutifolia*, Sweet], Taiwanese nettle trees [*Celtis sinensis*], and iron-sword trees.

It struck me why Shuanghsi is different from Maolin [another butterfly valley thirty kilometers east]: Shuanghsi is a butterfly valley that has been shaped by man.

Perhaps Richard Watson's anthropocentric perspective on "preservation" is detestable, but in pointing out that people, who have the strongest will and power to change the natural world, are no ordinary members of kingdom Animalia, he offers insight into some practical aspects of equality-of-life ethics. Though all lives are equal, the ecological environment still changes according to the "power principle," in that organisms with an advantage, including humans, are always decisive factors in environmental change. The definition of wilderness should, therefore, not exclude people or preclude their intervention. If pale purple-scales had the power to decide, they might want a forest rich in sharp-leaved hill oranges while the nettle tree butterflies would choose a pure stand of Taiwan nettle trees. It is only because none of them has absolute mastery that life can continue to display its diversity in the wetlands of the valley.

The problem is that humanity has an unmatched power to dominate the world. So what do we human beings want Shuanghsi Valley to be like? A Green Valley of Lemon Migrant Butterflies full of iron-sword trees? A valley thriving with a diversity of plants that nourishes a kaleidoscope of dancing butterflies? Or a huge reservoir that would drown the forest in order to farm grass carp that would draw tourists with the promise of Thirteen Ways of Eating Fresh Fish? (To the animals it would be an unanticipated deluge.)

Iron-sword trees were introduced to Meinung from Southeast Asia to manufacture the gunstocks needed to fulfill the vain dream of a Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. "Nature" in the Shuanghsi Valley has been reshaped over and over by the human will, when the forest was overrun to plant orchards and again when it was replanted with iron-sword seedlings to "restore" the lemon migrants, a proposal that won support from both sides of the reservoir debate. What they restored was actually the traces of another era of human domination, an age of blindness in which trees were stocks for guns for soldiers to shoulder far from home and fire lead bullets into the bodies and souls of complete strangers they had no reason to hate.

As American nature writer Stephen R. Jones puts it, "Whenever we plan to restore an ecosystem to its natural state, we

probably should ask, natural during what time period?" (The Last Prairie: *A Sandhills Journal* 2006: 33).

Perhaps "butterfly valley conservation" needs a reinterpretation. Maybe it should mean respecting the natural evolution of the vegetation of the valley. The descendants of the Hakkas, who settled the area centuries ago, do have the right to make modest adjustments to the environment to meet their basic needs. As for whether to make it a valley just for lemon migrants or for all kinds of butterflies, perhaps they should ask the birds whose droppings transport tree berries, the squirrels that leave "rice grains" on the forest floor whenever they eat, and the wind that is always ready to carry away tufted comose seeds.

Human beings, who build reservoirs exclusively for their own use (for what other animal needs reservoirs?), obliviously abuse water resources while complaining they don't have enough. After all, we live in a water-rich country, in which the average water consumption per day is 350 liters per person, which is more than double the Dutch.

Why do we tend to be "thirstier" than most everyone else on the planet?

A lemon migrant took a quick sip from a long-spike [nettle-leaf velvet-berry, *Stachytarpheta urticaefolia*] flower, leaving a curved track in the air, a question mark that can never be retraced.

In 1955, Chung Li-ho completed the first draft of *Mt. Li Farm*, in which he described this community as follows:

"Here, time is either frozen or progressing as slowly as a snail. Everything, every color, every flavor, has been preserved. All is the quality of stasis expressed in Chinese landscape painting, as if [the Hakka] are still living in centuries past, and are prepared to continue leading their lifestyle for centuries to come."

But as Heraclitus reminds us, you cannot step into the same river twice. In this case, you cannot visit the same Meinung twice. The town can hardly remain as it was in *Mt. Li Farm*. Between 1950 and 1978, ninety-two species of tree, half of the total number, disappeared from the Shuanghsi Parent Stand. In 1988, a swarm of more than 10 million lemon migrants might still form, but swarms a decade on numbered only two or three hundred thousand. Oil paper umbrellas, once everyday necessities, have become decorations, while tobacco drying halls, once used in agricultural production, have become quaint settings for tourists to taste *leicha*, pounded tea. The people of Meinung started aquafarming Thai shrimp and stopped consigning paper notes to the fire of the community hearth pagoda, a traditional way to show reverence for the written word. Some stone brick Grand Uncle Altars are now called Earth God Temples, as in Hoklo. In 1993, the Water Resources Agency of the Ministry of Economic Affairs announced the construction of a huge dam. The Labor Exchange Band, famous for its opposition to the dam, belted out "new Hakka songs," while the For the Love of Meinung Community Development Association gathered local forces to oppose weak-willed politicians.

Change has deprived Meinung of something, but has given it something as well. Change has made Meinung more distinctive, but also more complicated. "Culture" grows as fast as a forest. Of course, it disappears at just the same speed.

Hakka migrants, lemon migrants, and a changing rural and alpine landscape.

Two years after completing *Mt. Li Farm*, Chung Li-ho wrote in his diary,

"The clock never stops ticking, because a safer, more rational and comfortable life always seems to be at the far edge of the present. So the human soul continues its endless pursuit."

I repeated the resolute words of the novelist over and over again in my mind. Then I realized that I couldn't help but doubt them. I couldn't help it. The people of Meinung are now seeking

new ways to befriend Mt. Chien and Mt. Moonlight, the Meinung River and the Laonung. Perhaps they have already realized that the modern definition of a more comfortable life might not be safer or more rational. However, it's never wrong to continue the endless pursuit. Time might be a loop that bites its own tail, but it is irreversible. We can never draw two circles in quite the same way. All "restoration" is "change."

On my way back from Meinung I worried about making a wrong turn because I wasn't familiar with the roads. That phrase of Chung Li-ho kept ringing in my heart and I kept thinking about how fast our souls are changing our lives, how fast our lives are changing our souls.

My car was soon swept up in the asphalt loop of civilization.

Selected from *Diedao* [The Dao of Butterflies]. Taipei: Eryu Wenhua, 2012, pp. 183–193.