On the Narratography of Lee Chang-dong:
A Long Translator's Note

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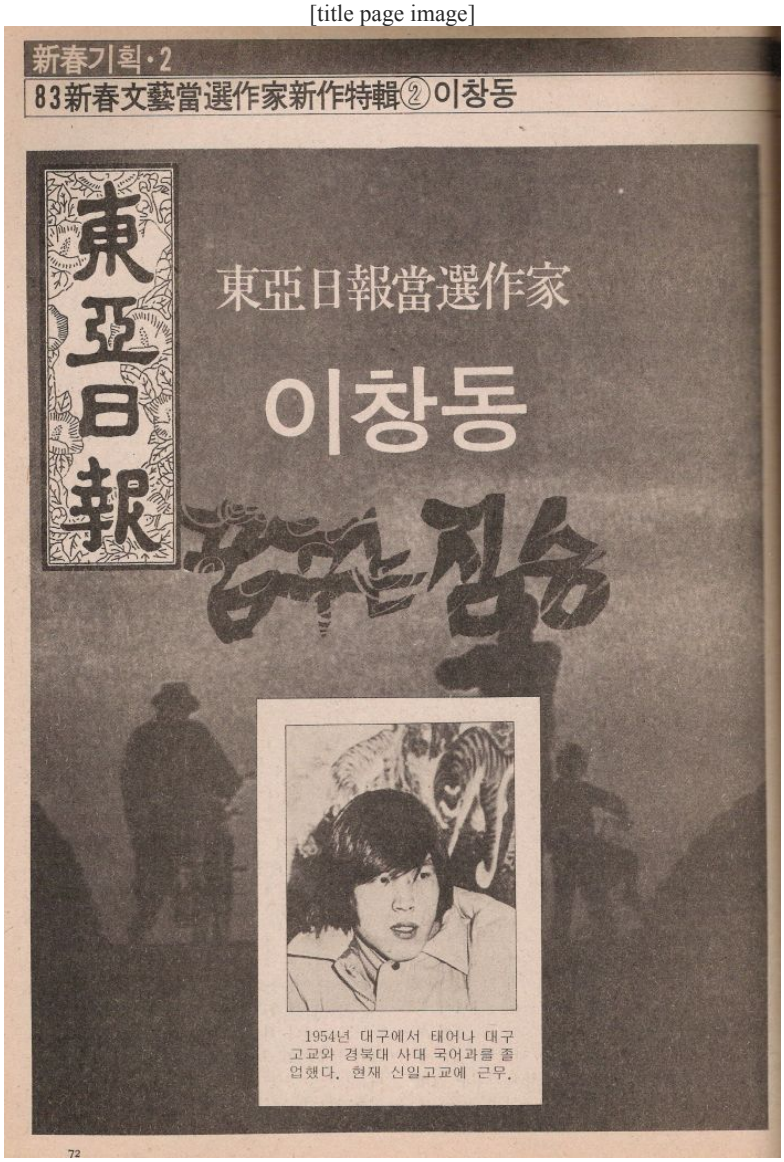
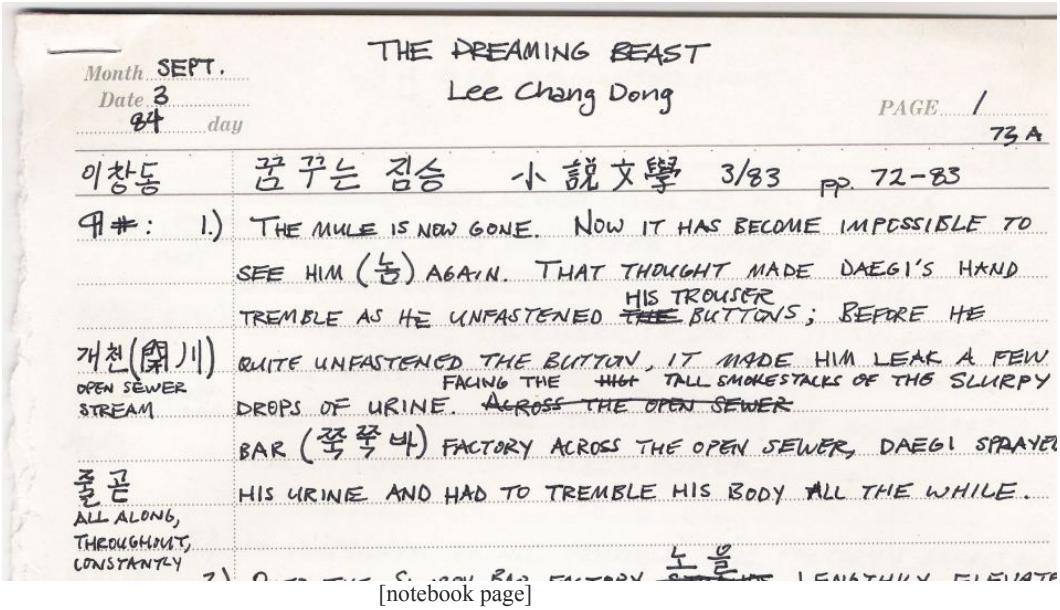


I first started translating Lee Chang-dong's "The Dreaming Beast" late in the summer of 1984, a few days after I arrived in Seoul to begin my Fulbright Fellowship. I had read it the previous year in a literary journal called *Sosŏlmunhak*, a publication that came free-of-charge with the Korean women's magazine my mother often bought at the local Korean market in Marina, California. I still have those first several pages of translation notes neatly printed in technical pen, dated September 3rd.



THE DREAMING BEAST
Lee Chang Dong

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PAGE 1
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이창동 꿈꾸는 짐승 小說文學 3/83 pp. 72-83

메모: 1.) THE MULE IS NOW GONE. NOW IT HAS BECOME IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE HIM (놈) AGAIN. THAT THOUGHT MADE DAEGI'S HAND TREMBLE AS HE UNFASTENED ~~THE~~ HIS TROUSER BUTTONS; BEFORE HE QUITE UNFASTENED THE BUTTON, IT MADE HIM LEAK A FEW DROPS OF URINE. ~~ACROSS THE OPEN SEWER~~ FACING THE ~~HIGH~~ TALL SMOKESTACKS OF THE SLURPY BAR (쭈쭈바) FACTORY ACROSS THE OPEN SEWER, DAEGI SPRAYED HIS URINE AND HAD TO TREMBLE HIS BODY ALL THE WHILE.

개천(開川) OPEN SEWER STREAM

줄곧 ALL ALONG, THROUGHOUT, CONSTANTLY

노을

[notebook page]

"The Dreaming Beast" was a timely story for me to read in 1984. I had studied psychoanalytic theory as a graduate student, so I was both fascinated and puzzled by Lee's overt depiction of sexuality and use of sexual symbolism. How to convey his simultaneously conventional and unusual use of that imagery in English translation was a problem I could not tackle at that time.

What struck me about the story -- and I remember this very clearly -- was how its imagery seemed to transcend the words that conveyed it. The language wasn't all that elegant -- in fact, it was rather coarse in places and sometimes awkward -- and yet there was a visceral quality to the images that outlasted the dispersal of words in memory. I held the images of that story in my head permanently -- like the memory of a good film. The only words I recalled from it, for many years, were the characters' names, Taegi and Kidong, and the odd Slurpy Bar; and I remember that I had initially misread *nosae* (mule) as *noŭl* (twilight). The image of Taegi looking out across the twilit sewer at the looming smokestack -- that stayed with me as vividly as my own experiences. Perhaps it was because I had grown up outside ASCOM, the American army post near Inchon, which also had an open sewer along one of its boundaries with the local town of Pup'yŏng. You could see smokestacks from outside in the local camptown the GI's called "Sinchon."

When I saw the film *Oasis* last year, I felt an odd familiarity. It was as if the camera were my own consciousness playing memories back at me. In the opening scenes, when Jong-du, freezing in his Hawaiian shirt, does something as simple as eat the brick of tofu (a traditional ritual after release from prison), I felt tears well up in my eyes. He was just like a cousin of mine. The particulars of the world he lived in -- oddly down to specific camera angles -- were those I remembered from my own life, and the use of illumination -- from the mundane scenes to the fantasy sequences -- also felt oddly familiar to me. I did not realize that Lee Chang-dong was the director until I watched the DVD for the second time.

I went back to look for "The Dreaming Beast," digging up my old translation notes and the original text. The magazine itself was badly yellowed, the cheap newsprint having decomposed via its own acid in the intervening years. Something about the shadows of branches projected on the Oasis tapestry in the film had also reminded me of "The Dreaming Beast" -- its weird title page from back in the days before Photoshop. And there he was, Lee Chang-dong, looking oddly feral in his puffy coat, posed in front of a painting of tigers.


[Lee Chang Dong image]

Even while it generated a great deal of controversy, *Oasis* won numerous international awards. In 2002, Lee won the Chief Dan George Humanitarian Award at the Vancouver International Film Festival and he won Best Director, the FIPRESCI Award, and the Cinema Verine Prize at the Venice International Film Festival. Moon So-ri, who played Kong-ju, won Best Actress in Venice in 2002 and at the Seattle Film Festival in 2003, where Sol Kyung-goo also won Best Actor for his characterization of Jong-du. Lee had established himself as a significant force in the world of film, a director whom many now consider Korea's best. And yet many of my Korean friends had found *Oasis* impossible to watch because of the visceral discomfort it aroused; nearly all of the western critics tended to note this excruciating quality, though they understood it as an integral part of the film's themes.

I think that for Koreans, *Oasis* was, in an ironic way, too familiar, too close to home. It was a brutally realistic depiction of a part of Korean society that many found embarrassing and dissonant. Lee certainly understood precisely which buttons to push. But for those who could endure the discomfort, *Oasis* also offered a kind of transcendent release by its conclusion, and this was not only due to its power of characterizations and the underlying moral consciousness; a lot of the film's force had to do with the technique behind its cinematography, which I found to be already present back in the early '80s in Lee's first major short story.

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"The Dreaming Beast" is a narrative about the underlying human cost of industrial development. At its outset we are presented with a deceptively simple set of symbolic contrasts as the main character, Taegi, gazes across an open sewer at the towering smokestack of the Slurpy Bar factory. Taegi's mule has just died, hit by a truck, and he is comparing his own shriveled member to the gigantic phallic symbol whose smoke is blotting out the twilight. It's a particularly vivid and cinematic moment in the story; it serves as an imagistic establishing shot, but in this case what Lee establishes are not only character and setting, but the central tropes that propel the story.

On the one hand "The Dreaming Beast" is, to the Korean reader, a simultaneous homage to and response to a spectrum of modern short fiction. There are major allusions, for example, to Sŏnu Hwi's "The Season When the Buckwheat Blooms," Kim Sŭng-ok's "Seoul, Winter, 1964," and Hwang Sun-wŏn's "Twilight." The agrarian sentimentalism, urban existentialism, and nostalgic confessionalism of these three stories play throughout "The Dreaming Beast," paralleling it to its subtexts; but Lee pays homage to these works in a way characteristic of film and not literature. The allusions are not made into literary collage for the sake of irony or satire; they are here to create a palimpsest-like quality. Lee updates his subtexts, sometimes critically, while remaining respectful of their spirit. Those previous stories form the infrastructure of this one in the way the history of narrative film integrally weaves through any contemporary film as part of its technical and aesthetic infrastructure. The allusions are layered under the surface of the story, so "The Dreaming Beast" doesn't play like a Tarantino film, which relies on the viewer's conscious response to allusion; it is more like a Wim Wenders film, whose allusions are more organic. Of course, what I am trying to show is that the story plays ultimately like an early example of a *Lee Chang-dong* film conveyed in text.

Here, for example, is the opening of Hwang Sun-won's "Twilight":

> It was an enchanting twilight, a brilliant twilight that seemed to spread its evening radiance like a giant fan across the horizon, and then, in an imperceptible instant, to fold it up again. The scarlet, so clear until now, was turning a deeper shade of red. Was it the season, now verging on autumn, that made the twilight as beautiful as this? Or was it because the sky had just cleared after a hard rain and the clouds were dispersed so lightly like cotton across the western sky?
>
> A twilight this beautiful was only visible once in a lifetime, and yet it could disappear at any moment.

Hwang's title is actually "*Chŏnyŏk Noŭl"* (literally "Evening Twilight"), and the passage sets us up for a confessional story full of nostalgia and sentimentalism. Lee begins "The Dreaming Beast" very bluntly, with "*Nosaenŭn chigŭm ŏpda* -- literally, "The mule is now gone." He plays on that odd association of *nosae* and *noŭl* (mule and twilight) before presenting his own description of a twilight, alluding to Hwang's, that turns it into the image of the dead mule, still figuratively present:

> Twilight stretched itself across the sky above the factory. Taegi closed his eyes. That scarlet light -- the same glossy sheen as the mule's back when it was brushed, scrubbed, and combed -- would vanish without a trace if he opened his eyes to look.
>
> Slowly the scarlet changed into a deep purple, the color of the dried and clotted blood trailing from the mule's dead body. The city was swallowing everything up into its dark abyss once again -- the smoke shooting out of the factory smokestack was spreading like ink in water, blotting out the sunset.

Hwang's story includes an important moment in which the young boy gets up at night to pee; Lee's opening scene happens while Taegi is pissing. While Hwang's "Twilight" hinges its tragedy on a woman's pregnancy (i.e., her fertility), Lee's story hinges much of its thematic power on the issue of fertility (i.e., the possibility of a prostitute conceiving a child by the figuratively castrated Taegi). This sort of parallel interweaving of allusions also happens with Lee's numerous other subtexts, and I would not have noticed had I not translated Hwang's "Twilight" back in 1984, shortly after reading "The Dreaming Beast."

This syncretism of allusion was difficult for me to convey as translator; it was one of those problems that makes for easy rationalization and avoidance. Perhaps for a western reader, unfamiliar with modern Korean fiction, these qualities are not necessary to point out. But many of Lee's subtexts now exist in English translation. Is it the translator's job to recreate allusions in the target language to other previously translated texts? Perhaps, ideally.

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It was especially difficult for me to convey the sense of ironic earnestness in "The Dreaming Beast." On the surface, the imagery in the story is easy to read in English as Freudian hyperbole. It would be very difficult for a western story to pull off the apparent symbolism without being self-consciously sarcastic, satirical, comic, or absurd. Yet in Korean (circa 1981), these symbolisms are not Freudian symbols. They are simultaneously more matter-of-fact and more profound. In conjunction with the action in the story, they produce an effect that closely approximates what Lee does two decades later in *Oasis*, which also succeeds in transcending a set of potential pitfalls and, despite its predominantly mundane surface, creates something both viscerally powerful and aesthetically elegant. What a western reader might take as a use of universal Freudian sexual symbology is integrated with culturally-specific allusions. Let me begin by talking about a parallelism that occurs at the level of action and is thus most *visible* in both works.

There is a particularly touching moment in *Oasis* when the mentally retarded Hong Jong-du asks about Han Kong-ju's name. He tells her that he is the 18th-generation descendant of a great general named Hong Kyung-rae. He resolves to call her "Your Highness" and she calls him "General." He bows to her, as if she were receiving him in state. The scene is heartwarming, but as a depiction of a mentally retarded man playing general with a physically disabled woman playing national princess, it is also an uncomfortable mockery, a political statement. As Kong-ju explains to Jong-du, his ancestor was not so much a great general as a traitor to the state.

[OASIS bowing scene]

By the end of the film, the political allegory becomes clear. In a country in which the state and the family are analogous, in which Confucian familialism remains both a corporate and national ideology, Jong-du betrays his family as his ancestor betrayed the nation. Likewise, Kong-ju's family has exploited her handicap (abandoning her in a dark and dumpy apartment, leaving her vulnerable to rape) in the same way the nation has exploited its young women. "Princess" is a Korean euphemism for prostitute, particularly in the term *yang kongju*, "Yankee Princess," meaning a prostitute who services American soldiers. Jong-du is also the *18th*-generation descendant of Hong Kyung-rae. In Korean, 18 (*ship p'al*) sounds like "to fuck" (*ship hal*). Indeed, Jong-du initially rapes Kong-ju, and though that incident goes undetected by Kong-ju's family, it is their discovery of consensual sex between the two characters that results, ironically, in the rape charge that precipitates the ending of the film.

"The Dreaming Beast," also features an important bowing scene in which Taegi and the prostitute act out the ritual of the wedding night, with the layers of irony similar to those in *Oasis*:

> The girl got up quietly. She spread out the blankets that were folded up on one side of the room and stood in front of Taegi. Facing him, with a voice full of modesty, she said, "Please receive my greeting."
>
> She drew her hands together at eye level and slowly knelt, lowering her head. It was an old-fashioned traditional bride's bow. Taegi watched her, bewildered. "My name is Mija," she said, still on her knees. "I am at your service."
>
> Taegi had no idea what to do.
>
> The girl suddenly lifted her head and burst out laughing. "Ho, ho". That expression on your face -- you look just like a new groom."

This is a parallel inversion of the scene in *Oasis*, in which the "general" bows to the "princess." Here the "bride" bows to the "groom," but instead of a real bride and groom, we have a charged

set of stand-ins. Taegi is a part-time garbage man with a small penis, and his name ironically evokes "great flag" (implying the pole) or "great *qi*"; though without the *hanja* we may read it as "abomination," "abhorrence," "great talent," or even "atmosphere" -- all in keeping with the interwoven themes in the story. Hardening the T sound in Taegi's name to TT turns it into the diminutive suffix *ttaegi*, which is similar to '-ling," in keeping with his small member. -- Bowing to him is a prostitute in thick make-up, who calls herself Mija, literally 'beautiful child,' which, in the context of the story, also invokes "beautiful letter" (or, for a glimpse of nationalist politics, "American master"; the sound of her name is as close to *mijae* as Kidong's is to *kidung*).

What Mija says to Taegi when she bows to him does not translate easily because of the underlying cultural context. In Korean, what she says is actually "*Chal put'ak hamnida*," which translates, literally, as a petition for Taegi to treat her well. Even when the sentence has become a figure of speech in Korean, its irony tinges the scene with complex layers of resonance. It is a mockery of the wedding night; it reminds the reader that johns typically abuse prostitutes; it reveals Mija's irrational and pathetic hopes tempered by harsh sarcasm; and yet it also evokes sentimentality and nostalgia.

Like *Oasis*, "The Dreaming Beast" ends shortly after a sex scene in which the complex tropes (that play out the theme of growing industrial power and diminishing human *qi*, or life force) all converge in what would, on the surface, appear to be an obtrusive Freudian cliche:

> In the darkness, Taegi felt around for her sheath, and into it he slipped his blade, so stiff it was on the verge of snapping.

But once again, the story transcends its conventional symbolism through its orchestration of the imagery that follows -- imagery, which I found, in retrospect, to be highly appropriate for a writer who was destined to become a major director. Since it involves the central trope of light and illumination, I will begin by discussing a couple of prominent examples of its use in *Oasis*, where it is actually visible to the viewer, before returning to the ending of "The Deaming Beast."

In two of *Oasis*'s scenes -- which some critics have called "magical realist" -- Kong-ju plays with her hand mirror and, contorting her face with effort, her hand gnarled by cerebral palsy, she reflects sunlight onto the ceiling of her dim apartment. The bright patches of light transform into white doves that flutter about in her room. Later, after she smashes her mirror, the fragmented pieces reflect smaller patches of light that become white butterflies. The doves and butterflies exist only for her -- when other characters enter the scene, they turn back into mere blobs of reflected light.

[OASIS dove scene and butterfly scene]

Through this technique, Lee visually represents Kong-ju's imagination for the viewer. We understand, intuitively, that we are seeing Kong-ju's fantasy made real for us. This idea carries over into the main fantasy episode in the film, in which Jong-du and Kong-ju are dancing, the images in the Oasis tapestry coming alive in the room, and we see Kong-ju, for the first time, the way she would appear if she were "normal." This technique makes its counterpoint use of shadow and darkness all the more poignant: when we see the image that frightens Kong-ju -- the quivering black silhouettes of the bare tree branches, reminiscent of her contorted fingers, projected onto the Oasis tapestry. Lee does not visualize her imagination for us. The *viewer's* imagination amplifies the terror in the same way a horror film engages the viewers to represent the unimaginable monster.

[OASIS shadow of branches in tapestry]

At the very end of *Oasis,* in its denouement, Lee floods the interior of Kong-ju's apartment with new light, and though she is reading Jong-du's correspondence from prison, the tone is romantically optimistic. All the trauma and negativity of "the night before" have been transformed into a bright condition full of hope and potential. As Kong-ju sweeps her apartment with a hand broom, the dust motes float in the air like luminescent snowflakes.

[OASIS dust mote scene]

"The Dreaming Beast" ends similarly, with the trope of light transforming an earlier darkness, both literal and figurative. -- The story, if you recall, opens with an ominous image of darkness:

> The city was swallowing everything up into its dark abyss once again -- the smoke shooting out of the factory smokestack was spreading like ink in water, blotting out the sunset.

At the end, just after the obtrusive knife-into-sheath scene, Lee reiterates the movement of the story as a whole by beginning once again with darkness. Then, he slowly brings up the light (I have italicized the relevant words for clarity):

> Taegi opened his eyes at *first light*. The interior of the tiny room was *dimly lit* by the *morning sun*. He could see the dark blotches on the wallpaper. The girl was still sleeping.
>
> Taegi listened for a moment to the quiet sounds of the street -- cars, people talking loudly, things he couldn't quite make out.
>
> Now *a beam of light* pierced the girl's hair, tangled like a wad of threads, and *illuminated* her upper lip. Her mouth was half open in a faint smile. Taegi put on his clothes carefully so as not to wake her from her sweet dream.
>
> . . . .
>
> With the *morning sun reflecting* from their *glossy* tops, the cars *flashed* quickly by like silver arrows. It was a fresh morning -- for everything. Someone tapped Taegi on the shoulder.
>
> "I thought you had left by yourself," said Kidong.
>
> Taegi took his hand. They looked at each other like two people just meeting. But Taegi could see Kidong's hair growing, growing beautifully like the mule's mane *gleaming blindingly* in the *morning sun*.
>
> "Are you really going?" asked Kidong.

The story ends with the same optimistic and post-cathartic affect as *Oasis*. The figuratively castrated Taegi and Kidong have proved their potency. Kidong, whose name could be read as "wonderful child," "prodigy," or "starter," had been sheared like the biblical Samson, but now his hair is growing back as light. In fact, Lee seems to be playing with the resonance of Kidong with *kidung,* and the revitalized Samson pushing down the pillars of the Philistine temple (before Delilah cut off his hair, Samson killed 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass). *Kidung sŏbang* also happens to be a reference to a pimp, and Kidong was the one who procured the prostitute, albeit by accident. Together, with the combined physiognomy of their names, Taegi and Kidong symbolically knock down the polluting smokestack and replace the polluted darkness with a bright new atmosphere.

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My purpose, as a translator, is to convey qualities of the original work that go beyond the surface of the text, to weave together the effect of underlying connotations while trying, at the same time, to provide lexical equivalents of words. The process requires a kind of Kabbalistic imagination, especially necessary for a language like Korean, in which multilayered wordplay is so prominent. It also requires -- at least for me -- a clear interpretation of the text I am translating. I need to believe I know what the story is *really* about on its various levels before I can recreate its effect in English. (To give an extreme example, I could not finish my translation of Jo Kyung-ran's "Looking for the Elephant" until I was able to recreate her Polaroid Spectra photo of the elephant.)

By the time I completed the first draft of my translation of "The Dreaming Beast," I was analyzing its prefiguring of *Oasis*. I had also realized that the inexplicably redemptive/transcendent ending of *Oasis* somehow works like confession and absolution. I have come to believe that *Oasis*'s true power is in demonstrating to viewers the universality of Jung-du and Kong-ju; suggesting that we, like them, have potential for goodness trapped within deceptive surfaces that may be willfully misunderstood, abused, and exploited by society. This element of universality may relate to many viewers' simultaneous revulsion at and identification with the film and its characters. With its redemptive ending, Lee suggests that, under our ugly surface qualities, there may be authentic love and light.

Given its prominent images of sterility, pollution, castration, and squalor -- and its ironic focus on the dead mule, sterile despite its incredibly long penis -- it might seem surprising that a similar redemptive trajectory emerges in "The Dreaming Beast." But a similar trajectory does begin to emerge, once one answers the question implied by the title. What is the mule gazing at? What is he dreaming? What would a mule like him idealize?

When I finished the translation, I knew the answer was a horse, the celestial white horse of Korean myth and legend, associated with divine favor, protection, salvation, and power. The iconography of the white horse is pervasive in Korean cultureï¿½one finds it in shamanic dreams, in pseudohistories, in Kyongjuï¿½s Heavenly Horse Tomb of the Silla period, in legends of great savior generals. The White Horse Brigade was legendary for its fierceness in Vietnam; the winged *Chollima*, associated with morning, is an important icon in North Korea.

[Saddle from Heavenly Horse tomb] http://www.marymount.k12.ny.us/marynet/TeacherResources/SILK%20Road/html/sillatang.htm (The image from the birch bark saddle in the Heavenly Horse Tomb in Kyongju.)

In "The Dreaming Beast," the main characters are all initially associated with the dead and infertile mule, but by the end, I could see the horse associations throughout the text, some of them quite subtle. The girls at the factory, for example, are directly compared to horses. Kidong's Elvis-like sneer is horselike and his hair is associated with a mane. Mija's laugh could be taken as a horselike snicker, and when she acts out the wedding night with Taegi, there is an implicit allusion to the custom of a groom riding a white horse.

But there are two especially important horse allusions in the story. The first occurs when Taegi is anxious about what to do with the prostitute after she turns the lights out. In the darkness, the "words, separated by thin partitions in his head, full of restless rustling sounds" turn into silence. These words, in Korean, are *maldŭl*, homophonous with "horses," telling here because the image is reminiscent of a stable. The words in Taegi's mind are like restless horses in their stalls, compartmentalized in the same way he occupied his box-like home in The Projects and the prostitute works in her tiny stall-like room in the boarding house. (By coincidence, a pimp's girls are called his "stable" in English.)

The allusion is even more telling because of what Mija says shortly after she breaks the silence to talk about her dream: "*Kkum sogesŏ nan marijyo*." It is a simple sentence fragment, which I translated as the phrase "In the dream, you know" -- because of its context. But Lee could easily have joined it to the next sentence as the introductory phrase, which it is. The fact that he left it as a fragment draws particular attention to its layered meanings, which all play thematically in the story. "*Kkum sogesŏ nan marijyo*," read as its own sentence, taking the words literally and out of context, could be read as, "In the dream, I'm a horse."

By this point in the story, we realize that all the characters are "The Dreaming Beast" of the title. In fact, one could say that all humans are "dreaming beasts." And with this realization, the relationship between the story and the film finally came together for me.

The "magical" sequences in *Oasis*, which rely on the reflection of light from a hand mirror, show that Kong-ju, too, is a "dreaming beast." A hand mirror, oddly enough, is also associated with Kidong's dream in the story:

> Kidong wore his hair long. It was his great pride -- glossy and stylishly flipped back. Whenever he had a spare moment, the first thing he did was take out his hand mirror so he could admire his hair.

Kidong's characteristic sneer is parallel to Kong-ju's distorted facial expressions, which are highlighted for the viewer when she looks upward, like the dreaming mule in the story.

I realized that Lee's short story had not only prefigured much of the film, but that it was also aware of its own medium -- it was a subtle piece of metafiction. The fragment, "*Kkum sogesŏ nan marijyo*," literally, with the words out of context, could also be read as:

> "In dream, I am words."
> "They are words born in a dream."
> "It is a horse born in a dream."

This is a kind of literary synesthesia, ultimately linking the darkness-to-light imagery of the story; it is parallel to the twilight/mule becoming the morning/horse and illuminates the power of the word. The fact that the mule (*nosae*) is associated with sterility, castration, and disempowerment is consistent with its association, at the beginning, with the twilight (*noul*). Likewise, the mule's enormous penis (*pal-ki*), its symbol of phallic power, is nearly homophonous with illumination (*palg-ki*), and the hopeful ending is heralded by horse imagery, sexual intercourse, fertility, and the light of morning. We begin with a gloomy twilight and end with optimism and the potential for life.

From a western perspective, this nexus of associations evokes the *Logos Spermatikos* of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God and the Word was God," God, of course, being characterized by light. The western mythos also suggests the morning sun rises, drawn by Apollo's celestial horses. But the connection between the horse and light go back to pre-Vedic times in Asia, to the symbology of the heavenly solar horse fertilizing the Earth. In ancient India and China, the symbolic intercourse of the white horse and the terrestrial queen were major state rituals. In Korea, Pak (*Palg*) Hyŏkkŏse, mythic founder of Silla, was hatched from an egg laid by a heavenly white horse.

Back in 1981, Lee was a writer fully conscious of the connection between words and light; he demonstrates it in "The Dreaming Beast," in the medium of text. More than 20 years later, he literally projects light onto a blank screen in the medium of film, making manifest the same trope he explores in the story. Given Lee's ongoing fascination with the meaning and medium of light, I was not surprised to learn that his entry at Cannes this year is *Miryang* -- *Secret Sunshine*.

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