

「苦與樂」研討會

「苦與樂」專題討論第三節

On the Happiness of a Tree...and of Men and Women

Dr. Chiu Chu Lee, Julie (Department of Translation, Lingnan University)

趙茉莉博士（嶺南大學翻譯系）

Elizabeth Costello (J.M. Coetzee's fictional character), proclaiming that "there are no bounds to sympathetic imagination," imagines herself into the being of a bat. There should be, then, no limit either to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of a tree, and ponder its (un)happiness in the present postmodern era. Costello offers a counter-Cartesian definition of being as "fullness": "not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the [affective] sensation...of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world."

Our ancient-Greek counterparts need not imagine themselves into the tree-being because to them trees are humans metamorphosed or sanctuaries of gods and goddesses. An ancient plane grove, for instance, was said to be built by Hercules as a place of worship for his father Zeus. These and other plane trees were revered (prayed to and protected by a guardian, "the chief among trees" [Pliny]), rich (ornamented with gold and watered with wine), famous (associated with Zeus's abduction of Europa, among other colorful stories), and long-lived (some believed to have lived 1,300 years)—these trees of the rural past, we imagine, were happy. *Wutong* (Chinese parasol tree), the plane tree's alleged remote relative (mostly likely unrelated), appeared in classical poetry as old as the *Book of Songs*, and was known to the Chinese in many images: the single *wutong* by the well, the first *wutong* leaf that falls at summer's end, the broad *wutong* leaves on which the midnight rain falls. We also imagine these trees, revered by scholars as the only kind where the phoenix would stoop to repose, happy.

In the present times, however, even a botanist (Bauer-Bovet) feels obliged to imagine himself into the plane tree's unfortunate lack of "fullness of being": "*Platane*...comes from the Greek *platos*, which means ample, large, stretched out. ...[T]hink [not] of our own pitiful plane trees, dreadfully mutilated, which raise in winter toward the sky cankerous and deformed fists. No, one should think of the immense plane trees of the [south]...when they grow in freedom, without having to suffer the tortures inflicted by men, launch their branches magnificently toward the sky and so create a high canopy clear, airy, splendidly shaped. No relation to the poor sick trees often too fat which live and die of boredom in our squares and open places and along our sidewalks." Today, native Chinese confuse *wutong* with French colonists' plane trees, the latter now taking over China's major cities after a century of importation and breeding. Plane trees win over for their practicality (effective shades, fast growth, and resilience to urban adversities) and for their exotic touch of French romanticism.

Supposing a tree's affective faculty extend beyond its sensation, we can further imagine its unhappiness in its relationship with humans due to the latter's confusion, oblivion, and indifference. No longer a significant feature of the landscape, a tree does not induce the feeling of home or exile, nor is it revered as a divine dwelling. Plane or parasol, modern trees feature in contemporary urban landscaping like bricks and cement for space organization.

Planted in shallow plots and spaced narrowly, their features of leaves and flowers fade out, and their trunks are manipulated to make lines and spots of geometric-perspectival interest in the backdrop for urban activities..

Among contemporary humans, two conflicting associations are attached to a tree. On the one hand, a feeling of nostalgia for the good, old rural past when life was better, safer, and more "real" (as opposed to a sense of disillusionment with the urban present when life is hostile, unsatisfactory and obscure). Trees, planted in parks, squares, malls and housing developments, are to invoke such a collective imagination of rural tranquility. On the other hand, a feeling of primitiveness and boredom in life in the backcountry, embarrassed by a lack of facilities, convenience, and culture. To find out the personality and botanical categories of a tree, a symbol of primitive life irrelevant to urban excitement and prosperity, is of low priority to a city-dweller.

Focusing on the cases of plane and parasol trees, this paper proposes to address the problem of happiness (or unhappiness) of a tree, and also of the human kind, in a postmodern urban setting: To what extent is an urban tree full or void of being? What competitions (with human beings and with other tree species) does a tree face to survive and propagate? To what extent and in what ways is human beings' fullness of being dependent on a tree's full being? What manipulation of the tree (the natural) is exercised by urban dwellers, and what does such manipulation reflect about the happiness or unhappiness of their lives in the postmodern era?