

# The Multicentenaries

by John Holstein and Lee Byung-hyun

*The poem which runs through this article is "Heart of the Tree," found in all high school Korean textbooks, by Lee Un-Sang (1903 - 1982).*

Name: Sok Song-Ryong  
Sex: Male  
Citizen ID number: 3750-00248 Age: 600  
Height: 10 meters...

Hold on a sec. Six hundred years old? Ten meters tall? What do we have here—a person or a building?

Maybe we can find a clue in this title to his land. Let's see... "Inherited land from Lee Su-Mok in 1928." Must be a person, then. And his tax record says blah blah blah, ah yes: "...a little over \$1,600 annually from farming tenants..." and "...pays income tax, defense tax each year..." Here, too, he "...got a grant of around \$5,000 from former President Park Chung-Hee to establish a scholarship to help gifted children...dispensed annually..." Etcetera, etcetera. Yep, definitely human. And here—"...weighs 1,000 tons"?

Nope, he's neither human nor building. He's a tree. Sok Song-Ryong got his surname from the flooding Sok-kan Creek he was fished out of when he was just a sapling, and his given name from the fact that he's a pine (*song*) who has supernatural powers (*ryong*). For most of his 600 years he was revered as the village guardian, and in 1928 villager Lee Su-Mok gave him a name, registered him, and bequeathed to Sok the 6,600 square meters of land he now lives on. After Lee Su-Mok died President Park established a scholarship in Mr. Sok's name.

Yes the tree, like you and me, also has a heart.  
And he breathes, and he aspires, and he too can love.  
Embrace him and caress him—watch him dance for you.  
But abuse or try to fell him—hear him cry to you...

Another pine, also at the ripe old age of around 600 years, is the oldest living government official in the world. He lives at Popchu Temple at Songni Mountain in North Ch'ungch'ong Province. He may also hold the record for longest tenure in office, for he was appointed a minister by Sejo (r. 1455-1468), seventh king of the Choson Dynasty, and still holds his rank. This king, riding in his sedan chair, noticed that his bearers did not see the awesomely big and beautiful red pine just ahead and were not aware they were going to run straight into one of its lower branches, so he shouted to them, "Watch that branch there!" But he needn't have. The old pine graciously raised its branch itself.

Admiring such trees is one thing, but registering one as a citizen and appointing another to the court may seem to be going a bit far. Well, a grand old Korean tree is not just a big old tree, not just a thing of beauty and majesty. It has a persona all its own, akin to a Greek demigod, part human—with a sometimes benevolent, sometimes vindictive personality—and

part supernatural, with the power to determine the fate of humans.

We are able even today in this burgeoning industrial society to happen upon many an ancient tree. In the middle of Seoul we come upon a bulbous old ginkgo in the middle of the sidewalk, a hoary lace bark pine depriving developers of a juicy construction site, a twisted juniper diverting thousands of cars a day on one of Seoul's busiest thoroughfares... Thousands of these venerable spirit trees, shrine trees, and legend trees have been honored in this century with the title of Natural Treasure, and in the countryside they are still the social and spiritual core of the village.

## In the beginning

Neolithic Koreans held animistic beliefs. Everything that occupies the natural world has a soul, and many of these occupants have supernatural powers. One of the greatest of these is the tree, for it embodies the Cosmos Tree, intermediary between heaven, earth and the nether world. Exactly 4,327 years ago Hwanin, King of Heaven, sent to earth his son Hwanung. It was on a sandalwood tree on the peak of the sacred Mt. Paektu that Hwanung alighted and here that he later became progenitor of the Korean people.

Four millennia later, the sophisticated culture of the Shilla Dynasty (57 BC - AD 935) still revered the tree in its cosmic function. The stylized figures of trees rising from the headband of the royal crown symbolized the concept of the Cosmos Tree and the intermediary role of the shaman priest-kings who wore the crown.

## The tree of legend

The pine is the tree Koreans feel closest to and is regarded as the nation's guardian. It shares in the nation's joys and tribulations and represents in painting and poetry this society's highest virtue, steadfast integrity. The climate and soil of the peninsula help the pine live to a very old age. Korea's oldest tree, Ullung Island's juniper, has already lived two millennia. This juniper grows out of the side of a granite cliff, apparently having sustained itself for centuries without the help of soil, and is thus regarded an especially good representation of the resourcefulness and tenacity of the Korean spirit.

During the Choson Dynasty (1392 - 1910) Chu-Hsi Confucianism was Korea's official system of thought and morals, and loyalty to one's sovereign was a primary virtue. Kwan Um Song, an 80-year-old resident of a remote village in Kangwon Province when the deposed boy-king Tanjong spent his first days in exile there, witnessed (*kwan*) the boy's lonesome existence and heard his poignant complaints (*um*), and apparently offered such tender sympathy that the boy often sought solace at the base of this pine (*song*). That was centuries ago, and Kwan Um Song appears healthy enough to go another five.

Koreans also admire the ginkgo. Confucius taught his disciples under this tree, so every school in Choson Dynasty Korea tried to have its own ginkgo. In the early fifteenth century a Confucian scholar planted a pair of ginkgoes at the nation's highest school, the Sungkyunkwan in Seoul, to implant there the spirit of Confucius. These two ginkgoes certainly were imbued with this spirit; when one of them inadvertently dropped a nut on the king's shoulder as he was passing beneath its limbs, both were so mortified that they stopped producing their fruit, and have not to this day.

At Yongmun Temple (just outside Seoul) resides another revered ginkgo. Some say the last crown prince of the Shilla Dynasty planted it here on his lonely way to exile over a thousand years ago, while others say it sprouted from the can of Uisa, a Buddhist monk of the same era. Now, a tree planted by either one of these luminaries would have tube hard to cut down, and when somebody once tried it, the blood spurting from its trunk and a warning clap of thunder in the sky persuaded him to try another tree. The Choson Dynasty's great King Sejong in the fifteenth century recognized the ginkgo's celebrity and honored it with a rank just below minister, which is probably one reason that, learning of the forced abdication of Kojong in 1907 and knowing this meant Japan's annexation of Korea, it dropped a major branch in its heavy grief.

### The people's tree

Your blossoms bloom, your leaves unfurl,  
your fragrance fills the air,  
and branches grow, then grow their own, offering  
their shade.

Then every sort of bird comes 'round and or two  
and joins in choral song  
and people too will gather for a rest, a word or  
two...

Or more. The old tree has always been much more than a place for a chat on a hot summer's day. It is a powerful social force.

In his description of the village rites conducted annually for Sok Song-Ryong, author Lim Kyong-Bin says, "this type of tree is a source of village pride and, as the focus of rites in which all the villagers participate, encourages unity among the villagers." Its role as provider and protector naturally draws the villagers to it when they have decisions to make, serving as Korea's version of the American town hall. "The place under this shade tree has served as a democratic forum for the villagers because on a hot summer day or even in autumn, people who were invited here by the tree naturally discussed various plans and measures for their village development. One thing more that must be added is that the children learned and studied from their teacher under this tree."

It is also the village's moral center. In lunar December the inhabitants of Yejak Island select a virtuous elderly couple to conduct the rite to Grandmother Ilex for harmony and peace on the island. Then everyone purifies body and mind in prepara-

tion for the rite. And in the first month of the lunar new year they offer a rite to Grandfather Pine, again to maintain good relations among themselves.

### Helper and protector

Stinging frost, blasting snows assail as they may,  
through tempests and upheavals he stands and  
endures,  
grows a ring with each onslaught, thickens and  
matures,  
then provides roof and rafter, pillars for our  
homes...

The tree's social and moral roles stem partly from its supernatural role of benefactor and guardian. In this capacity of spirit or shrine tree it is girded round in a straw twine festooned with cloth streamers or paper fillet in bright primary colors.

Kunsa Hamlet's zelkova, which sprouted from General Yu's walking stick 700 years ago, has always been the village protector. A cholera epidemic killed off many in the district just after Liberation in 1945 but did not even touch this village, which offers annual rites. "The village preserves these trees because these trees preserve the village," says Lee Ch'ang-Bok, author of *Korea's Famous Trees*. He quotes a hamlet elder: "In the war our boys would pay their respects [to our zelkova] on their way to battle, and nary a one of them got even a scratch. In fact, our village is always peaceful and we always have a good harvest. And that's why, when a carpenter once wanted to use a fallen branch for furniture and then sell the furniture—for money yet!—we asked him, 'How can you sell the village guardian?'"

Lay people too will pray to it to conceive a child, cure an illness, pass an exam... When he erected his estate in Songsan County in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Chief Minister Lee Yong-je planted a pagoda tree for a wish as grand as his rank: to ensure the prosperity of his family and all his descendants ever to come. The chief minister's sixteenth-generation descendant now thinks that was a great idea; the family is doing just fine.

If you eat the fruit of Samin Village's nutmeg tree your parasites will soon be looking for a new home. If newlyweds put the dried flower of Oryu Hamlet's Chinese nettle under their pillow, their affection for each other will double; and if later their ardor should cool, they can boil and eat its leaves to fall madly in love again.

If a grand old tree chooses not to provide, it will at least forewarn. Near Inchon they predict their harvest by the order in which the blossoms open on their pagoda tree (now 500 years old). Blooming from the top down portends a good year, from the bottom up means a bad year. And if the flowers of the fringe tree outside of Masan all blossom at the same time the villagers know they are in for a good harvest.

When the tree's forewarning is not heeded, it is still big enough to offer sympathy. Hwasun Village's 800-year ginkgo howls when disaster strikes the nation, as do the 1,000-year ginkgo in Kimje and the relatively young (400 years) nutmeg in Samin. Prof.

Kim Un-sill of Kukmin University recently used an increment borer on a lace bark pine to confirm its age, which legend sets at 600 years. The test showed it to be only 300—but it also showed that the pine had stopped growing for 35 of the 40 years of Japanese occupation.

Yet, as helpful and sympathetic as the tree can be, it is not one to fool with. One particularly touchy willow in Kimje will wreak havoc on your household if you take just one of its leaves home with you. Some can get so arrogant that even the birds will pass up a free perch. In the bowels of many dwell *imugi*, a serpent aspiring for the magic gem that will turn it into a dragon; it turns really vicious if things don't work out for it after a while. Humans passing within gobbling range of Sangju's red pine and Yongwol's millennia-old ginkgo have been known to disappear. On a foggy day, when the mist gathers in the branches of such a tree, you will not want to get close anyway, because its serpent lets out with a bloodcurdling wail. But you never know—you might also be carried off by the goblins which reside in some of these other grand old trees.

Some have died a mysterious death after felling one of these trees. Kwon Ch'a-Yong, a resident of Andong, tells us about the 400-year pagoda tree that stands resolutely smack-dab in the middle of a highway just outside town. "About ten years ago they wanted to build a road where the pagoda was. Now, everyone knows that two people already died right after trying to chop down this tree, so they offered a healthy sum to anyone who would do the job. Along comes one smart aleck who doesn't believe in 'superstition,' saying he'll do it. Well, he took one swing of his ax and fell right down sick. And sure enough, next morning they found his corpse, all set upon by some sickness nobody ever heard of." Lee Byung-Hyun's family in his remote hometown village tells of that time "the geomancer warned a family not to bury the deceased near an old willow. Too much energy was concentrated there and it would bring disaster. But they ignored the advice. Soon the son went mad, and then died, still in his thirties. Should've listened."

### Roles reversed?

Yes, the tree knows you and me, what is in our hearts.

But then why are you and so blind to the tree?  
If both we and the tree would help each other out  
our land would be a paradise glorious to see.

Special attention is being paid, to the grand old ones at least. Over five thousand of them have been designated as natural treasures and receive special protection against developers and road builders. Provincial environmental agencies are even helping them produce offspring.

When the new Constitutional Court was being built in Seoul much concern was directed to the lace bark pine there. It had come here from China in the fourteenth century, either pilfered by Korean emissary Mun Ik-Jom or presented as a gift from emissaries of China's Ming Dynasty. Now it stands in its own small park with specially prepared sand-and-clay soil, its convoluted and circling limbs protected by anti-typhoon supports. One day they will move it elsewhere to protect it from the city's pollution, but before that they are gathering its pine cones and sending them to the national forestry agency to ensure offspring, just in case.

Recently the Sungkyunkwan did some \$30,000 worth of cavity work on a couple major limbs of one of its ginkgos. An 800-year-old juniper in Kangnam, the bustling southern part of Seoul, almost fell victim to the mad rush of road building, but its status as a national treasure saved it from the bulldozers. Now it stands in the middle of an eight-lane highway.

In 1990 authorities realized that Andong's 700-year-old "howling" tree would be lost to the reservoir they were planning, so they hired a development company to save it. After a lot of head scratching they hit upon a method to manipulate the 1,000-ton tree: jack up one side a couple centimeters, pack soil under it, jack up the other side a couple centimeters, pack, and so on till, three months later, it was enthroned on its own island. The entire job cost over \$2 million. This spring the reservoir was filled and the ginkgo produced leaves. And the birds have returned to perch in its branches.

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ASIANA Monthly In-flight Magazine, October 1994 Vol. 6, No. 10. Photos by Hyun Kwan-Uk.