



Translation and Recognition of Han Kang in China

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Abstract

*This study investigates the translation and recognition of Han Kang's literary works in the Chinese context. It traces the chronological development of Chinese translations of her writings since 2007. Combining close textual reading, media analysis, and reader-based data mining, the research further explores how Han Kang's image as a "feminist writer" has been constructed, reinforced, and contested across literary, academic, and popular discourses in China. While gender-based interpretations dominate, this study argues that this framing risks oversimplifying the philosophical and ethical complexity of Han Kang's work, particularly her engagement with themes such as trauma, historical violence, and the human condition. Through an in-depth analysis of her later novels, especially *We Do Not Part*, this study reveals the multidimensionality of Han Kang's literary vision, showing how her use of bodily imagery, natural symbols, and doubled narrative voices bridges personal memory and collective trauma. Finally, the study reflects on the mechanisms of global literary dissemination, drawing attention to the central role of translation institutions, translator agency, and reception dynamics in shaping cross-cultural literary recognition.*

Keywords: Han Kang, translation, recognition, literary dissemination

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Introduction

Han Kang (b. 1970) is a prominent contemporary South Korean female writer. Since publishing five poems, including “Winter in Seoul” (‘Seoul-ui gyeoul’) in the Winter 1993 issue of *Literature and Society* (*Munhwa-gwa sahoe*), she has gone on to publish seven novels, four short story collections, one poetry collection, two essay collections, and numerous individual short stories. In 2005, Han Kang received the prestigious Yi Sang Literary Award, one of South Korea’s highest literary honors, for her novella *Mongolian Mark* (*Monggo banjeom*). Her international acclaim surged in 2016 when the English version of her novel *The Vegetarian* won the International Booker Prize, bringing her into the global literary spotlight and allowing readers in China and around the world to appreciate the distinctive charm of her works. On October 10, 2024, in recognition of her remarkable literary achievements and broad international influence, Han Kang was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming the first Korean writer and the first Asian woman writer to receive this honor. This study aims to explore the translation and recognition of Han Kang’s works in China, with particular focus on the formation, meaning, and limitations of her widespread labeling as a “feminist writer.” On this basis, it further investigates the complexity and multidimensionality of her literary vision beyond a singular gender paradigm.

Methodologically, this research combines close reading, qualitative analysis, and quantitative study. It conducts in-depth textual analysis of major Chinese translations of Han Kang’s works, while also systematically reviewing relevant academic research, literary criticism, mainstream media coverage, and reader discourse in China. Additionally, it includes a sampling-based quantitative analysis of online reader reviews. The core data sources include key Chinese translations of Han Kang’s works published in the Chinese market since 2007, as listed in *The National Bibliography of New Books*; scholarly research from the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database; as well as critical commentary from traditional media and reader feedback from social media platforms.

In terms of data collection and processing, the materials for this study

are divided into four main parts: 1. Translations of Han Kang's works: This section primarily relies on *The National Bibliography of New Books*, where all translated works authored by Han Kang were identified and compiled. 2. Academic research on Han Kang's works: Relevant studies were retrieved from the CNKI database by using "Han Kang" as the keyword. All academic output discussing Han Kang's works were included within the scope of analysis. 3. Reception of Han Kang's works in traditional media: This section is based on searches conducted in the *National Index to Chinese Newspapers and Periodicals* (CNBKSY), using "Han Kang" as the keyword. All entries concerning the author or her works were incorporated into the corpus. 4. Reception of Han Kang's works among the general readership: This section employs data extracted via the Chrome extension Web Scraper from "Douban," China's largest social reading platform. A total of 1,000 valid reviews were collected, comprising 108,425 Chinese characters. The study first applied the WordCloud library in Python to extract high-frequency words from the textual data, followed by thematic clustering using the cumulative TF-IDF (c-TF-IDF) algorithm. Finally, a BERT-based sentiment classification model, trained on a corpus of 25,000 IMDB film reviews, was utilized to predict the emotional polarity of the selected reader comments. This approach seeks to present a multifaceted picture of how Han Kang's literature has been received in the Chinese context.

Although Han Kang is widely categorized as a feminist writer in China, this paper argues that the significance of her works extends far beyond gender issues. Through profound themes such as individual and historical trauma, love, and violence, Han Kang reveals both the fragility and resilience of human life, engaging in a sustained reflection on the universal human condition. Her Nobel recognition not only highlights the unique appeal of East Asian literature but also provides meaningful insight into how national literature can successfully reach a global audience.

The Translation of Han Kang's Works in China

The translation of Han Kang's works into Chinese began in 2007. To date,

five of her novels, two short story collections, and one poetry collection have been translated and published in Chinese. In addition, several of her short stories have been sporadically featured in literary magazines. The main translators involved in introducing Han Kang's writing to Chinese readers include Xue Zhou, Cui Youxue, Lu Hongjin, Hu Jiaotong, and Tian Hezi, whose dedicated efforts have significantly contributed to the widespread reading and reception of her works in China.

The first Chinese translation of Han Kang's work appeared in *Foreign Literature and Art* (*Waiguo wenyi*) in 2007, where Xue Zhou and Xu Lihong jointly translated her novella *Mongolian Mark*. Following Han Kang's receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Xue Zhou was interviewed by the media and reflected on his initial experience translating her work. In his words, "I remember being drawn to her because she had just received South Korea's most important literary award: the Yi Sang Literary Award. She was still very young twenty years ago, but the calmness of her language, her exploration of human nature, and the subtle dissection of interpersonal relationships all left a profound impression on me" (Xu 2024). It was the recognition Han Kang received from South Korea's most prestigious literary prize that first drew Xue Zhou's attention. As he delved deeper into her works, he discovered a unique artistic and spiritual resonance, which ultimately motivated him to introduce her to Chinese readers through translation. The Chinese version of *Mongolian Mark* was later included in *Anthology of 21st-Century Translated Literature in China: 2007 Volume* (*21 shiji zhongguo fanyi wenxue daxi: 2007-nian fanyi wenxue*), published in January 2008. In the preface to the anthology, editor Xie Tianzhen provided a brief commentary on the narrative and stylistic features of the story, noting that *Mongolian Mark* addresses "the psychological and spiritual anxiety and disorientation of modern individuals" (Xie 2008, 5). Through an ethical narrative framework, the author explores the path to self-redemption in contemporary life. Xie also observed that the story's style is "distinctly westernized" (Xie 2008, 5), evoking the sense of reading a work of Western modernist literature. Xie Tianzhen's commentary is regarded as the earliest critical evaluation of Han Kang's writing in China, succinctly identifying the defining characteristics of her early creative output.

Three years later, Han Kang's work reappeared before Chinese readers. In April 2010, *Writer* (Zuojia 作家) magazine released a special issue on contemporary Korean literature, featuring works by 28 Korean authors, among which Han Kang's representative short story *Left Hand* (Oenson) was prominently included. *Left Hand* appeared in her short story collection *Fire Salamander* (Norang munui yeongwon), and tells the story of a bank employee who, under immense pressure from work and family, finds his left hand acting independently of his brain. This hand begins to engage in absurd acts against his will—talking back to his boss, committing infidelity—ultimately causing him to lose both his job and his family. In a desperate attempt to end the absurdity of his life, he lifts a knife with his right hand, intending to sever his left, but in the violent struggle between his two hands, he accidentally drives the blade into his own heart. The thematic concerns of this work echo those of *Mongolian Mark*, previously translated into Chinese, as both portray the psychological disorientation and repressed anxiety of modern individuals. They prompt readers to reflect on the underlying causes of such existential distress and to search for paths to self-salvation. It is worth noting, however, that during this large-scale showcase of Korean literature in translation, Han Kang's presence was rather inconspicuous amid the many featured authors. The magazine cover displayed photographs of all 28 writers; although Han Kang's photo was placed near the center, it was the smallest in size. Moreover, her story was positioned after those of other female writers such as Kim In-suk and Shin Kyung-sook, suggesting that, at the time, Han Kang's work had not yet been fully recognized within Chinese academic and literary circles engaged in the study and translation of contemporary Korean literature.

Since 2013, the translation of Han Kang's works in China has entered a new stage, with her writings beginning to be published in standalone book form. In 2013, *Black Deer* (Geomeun saseum), translated by Jin Lianshun, was published by Jilin Publishing Group as part of its "New Classics Series of Contemporary Korean Literature." In the novel, the black deer is harmless to humans and dwells in the dimness of the underground, using its antlers to illuminate the darkness. It yearns for the air and sunlight of the world above. However, its pursuit of light comes at a heavy price. When it finally reaches

the surface, it dissolves into a pool of blood. The novel's four protagonists resemble the black deer in their own lives: each seeks light in the midst of personal darkness, regardless of the consequences. When asked about the intention behind the book, Han Kang stated, "We humans are the black deer ourselves: we all long to escape darkness and search for the light" (Y. Wu 2016). By the novel's end, each character emerges from hardship with a greater vitality, like flowers blooming from the black deer's blood. With her characteristic prose, Han Kang pays tribute to those who, though living in darkness, give everything in pursuit of light. For modern individuals trapped in anxious and fragmented lives, the story powerfully evokes a spirit of resilience, quiet endurance, and unyielding resistance. The Chinese translation of *Black Deer* adopts a balanced strategy of both domestication and foreignization. While the translator respects the uniqueness of Korean culture—rendering geographical names and certain culturally specific elements with appropriate foreignized treatments—they also take into account the expectations of Chinese readers by translating Korean idiomatic expressions into more natural and literary Chinese equivalents. This dual approach lends the translation a strong literary flavor. However, some culturally unfamiliar concepts are left unexplained, which may cause confusion for readers unfamiliar with Korean culture. Additionally, the omission of section numbers that appear at the beginning of each part in the original text results in a loss of structural integrity in the translation.

In the same year of 2013, Han Kang's best-known work among Chinese readers, *The Vegetarian* (*Chaesikjuuija*), translated by Qian Ri, was published by Chongqing Publishing House. This edition includes three novellas: *The Vegetarian*, *Mongolian Mark*, and *Flaming Trees*. The story centers on Yeong-hye, a woman tormented by her oppressive marriage, who is haunted by recurring dreams of blood and consuming raw meat. One day, she finds herself unable to tolerate anything related to meat and becomes a vegetarian. Her husband, unable to understand her condition, divorces her. Meanwhile, her brother-in-law becomes obsessed with a birthmark on Yeong-hye's hip, which he views as the inspiration for his artistic work. He attempts to make her his model and develops a dangerous infatuation with her. Yeong-hye's sister, witnessing her mental deterioration, sends her to a psychiatric

hospital. During regular visits, she realizes Yeong-hye's delusions have intensified: Yeong-hye begins to refuse food entirely and believes she is transforming into a tree. The novel's language and themes offer readers vast interpretive space, making it a focal point in academic discussions of Han Kang's work. The translator endeavors to faithfully recreate the aesthetic character of the original novel. Qian Ri, the translator, has stated that he secured a degree of translational freedom during the process, aiming to convey the artistic atmosphere of the source text rather than pursuing a strictly literal, word-for-word translation (Qian 2016). Overall, the Chinese edition largely succeeds in capturing the artistic essence of Han Kang's work, allowing readers to experience the distinctive texture of her language through the translation. However, the text is not without flaws: instances of mistranslation and omission are present, and certain passages (particularly those involving sexual content) have been subject to censorship and abridgment. In the translator's postscript, Qian Ri wrote: "The novel weaves together reflections on beauty, desire, taboo, discipline, punishment, and redemption. These are the serious and sincere questions that drive the author's writing. Perhaps this is precisely why the novel has been so well received in the Western literary world" (Qian 2016). This interpretation not only recognizes the richness of *The Vegetarian's* themes but also sheds light on the reasons behind its widespread international acclaim.

Around the same period, Han Kang's short story collections also began to be translated into Chinese. *Fruit of My Woman* (*Nae yeoja-ui yeolmae*), translated by Cui Youxue, was published in 2014 by Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House. The collection features eight short and medium-length stories written by Han between 1996 and 2000, including critically acclaimed works such as "The Baby Buddha" ('Agi bucheo'), recipient of the Korean Fiction Literature Award, and "Fruit of My Woman," which had a notable influence on the creation of *The Vegetarian*. Throughout the collection, Han Kang explores themes such as love, family, and marriage, portraying the confusion and struggles faced by contemporary women in their journeys of self-discovery. This translation is characterized by fluent language and elegant prose, effectively conveying the deeper meanings of Han Kang's work. It is regarded as one of the more highly acclaimed Chinese

translations among her published works. At the end of the volume is included an essay titled “Interpretation” by Korean literary critic Hwang Dogyeong. This was the first Korean critical commentary on Han Kang’s works to be translated and published in China. Hwang’s essay provides an insightful analysis of Han’s early fiction from three key perspectives. First, although Han’s works are infused with desire, this desire is stripped of its madness and instead appears frail and melancholic. Second, her writing is permeated with dreams: her protagonists, yearning to escape the binds of desire, often dream, and these dreams embody a longing to flee toward the “end” of the world, a symbolic departure. Third, her works are marked by a persistent yearning for a plant-like existence. At the end of pain and trauma, the protagonists encounter a vegetal realm: a world of absolute freedom, free from desire. The plant world and the world of desire are portrayed as opposites, yet their collision gives rise to a profound vitality (Hwang 2014). This critical essay offers a precise understanding of the thematic essence of Han Kang’s early work, allowing Chinese readers to gain a deeper appreciation of this novelist who masterfully employs dreams and plant imagery. It also plays a formative role in helping readers interpret her novel, thereby laying a foundational basis for the reception of Han Kang and her works in China.

The third decade of the new century marks a period of maturity in the translation and publication of Han Kang’s works in China. During this time, not only did retranslation and republication of her works occur, but the pace of translation and publication also accelerated significantly. In 2021, Hu Jiaotong’s new translation of *The Vegetarian* was published by Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House, once again igniting a wave of readership for Han Kang in China. Compared to Qian Ri’s translation, Hu Jiaotong’s version is more understated in tone. According to statistics, the translation contains numerous omissions (mostly involving sexually explicit content) and instances of mistranslation. Nonetheless, these flaws do not overshadow its overall merits. In 2022, Han Kang’s *The White Book* (*Huin*) was also translated by Hu Jiaotong and published by the same press. Beginning with a tribute to the narrator’s deceased sister, the book reflects on 63 white objects drawn from daily life. It can be read as a novel or

appreciated as a work of prose poetry. This piece exemplifies Han Kang's ability to channel lived experiences into writing that evokes deeper internal reflection, producing work that resonates profoundly with the reader's inner world. This translation is characterized by its use of plain and unadorned language, effectively conveying the author's subtle personal emotions and reflections to Chinese readers. In 2023, *Fruit of My Woman* was republished by Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House, retaining Cui Youxue's 2014 translation. In October of the same year, Han Kang's *Greek Lessons* (*Huirabeo sigan*) was translated by Tian Hezi and published by Jiuzhou Press. Written between *The Vegetarian* and *Human Acts* (*Sonyeon-i onda*), this novel tells the story of a woman who, after losing her mother, marriage, and child, suddenly loses the ability to speak Korean. She begins learning Greek to rebuild her linguistic framework and attempts to perceive and articulate the world through other senses. Han Kang uses this narrative to illustrate how the protagonist, in pushing language away, simultaneously strives to regain it. The novel suggests that we are constantly losing the world, drifting toward darkness and obliteration, and evokes a chilling awareness of how violent the world wrapped in silence can be. Due to both the nature of *Greek Lessons* itself (Han Kang's distinctive writing style) and the novel's content, which deals with themes of language and philosophy, the work is inherently abstruse. Translating a novel that is, in many ways, *anti-language* is an extremely challenging task. As a result, many readers have attributed the sense of obscurity and incomprehension they experienced while reading the book to issues in the translation. In January 2024, Han Kang's latest novel *We Do Not Part* (*Jakbyeol haji anneunda*) was translated by Lu Hongjin and published by Jiuzhou Press. This work revisits a once-obscured chapter of Korean history: the Jeju April 3 Massacre of 1948, during which over 30,000 civilians were indiscriminately killed as the islanders resisted colonial oppression by US military forces. Similar to *Human Acts*, this novel reconstructs the traumatic experiences of those involved through literary narrative, attempting to restore a brutal yet thought-provoking historical reality. As one of Han Kang's more recent works, this translation has attracted considerable attention. Overall, the translation is conventional and leans toward literalism. However, it has also

faced criticism on social media. For instance, in “author’s words,” the translator confuses the concepts of “philanthropy” (or ‘universal love’) and “romantic love,” resulting in a mistranslation such as “this is a novel about romantic love.” This misinterpretation has left many readers puzzled and uncertain about the book’s true thematic focus.

In addition to her novels, Han Kang’s poetry has also been translated into Chinese. Han Kang began her literary career as a poet, which partly explains the lyrical and poetic quality of her prose. Her poetry collection *I Put the Evening in the Drawer* (*Seorap-e jeonyeok-eul neoeo dueotda*), originally published in 2013, was translated by Lu Hongjin and released by Jiuzhou Press in September 2023. According to Hong Kong writer Liao Weitang, Han Kang’s poetry “at first glance appears deeply influenced by Ko Un [a renowned Korean poet], yet the themes of life and death in her work often swing to extreme poles: either seemingly unrelated or bound together by flesh and blood” (Liao 2024, 72). Her poems are filled with images of death, injury, and illusion, often presented through poetic sequences or cycles that create a persistent force: a sorrowful mourning. This distinctive style of writing inevitably invites comparison to American confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, whose works similarly stem from a history of feminine trauma and introspection. Following Han Kang’s receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature, growing attention has been drawn to her poetry. The “International Poetry Scene” column of *Poetry Periodical* (*Shikan* 诗刊) published ten newly translated poems by Han Kang in its first issue of 2025, accompanied by an interview with Han Kang.

Moreover, Han Kang’s novels have been included in world literature curricula at Chinese universities. An excerpt from *The Vegetarian* was selected in volume 1 of *Selected Works of World Literature* (*Shijie wenxue zuopin xuan* 世界文学作品选), edited by Liu Hongtao and published by Higher Education Press in 2021. This selection reflects China and the world’s recognition of Han Kang’s literary value. Since the announcement of her Nobel Prize in 2024, the translation and dissemination of Han Kang’s works in China have entered an unprecedented stage. In its second issue of 2025, the periodical *World Literature* (*Shijie wenxue* 世界文学) published a special feature dedicated to Nobel laureate Han Kang, including translations of her

interviews and speeches, thus offering Chinese readers a deeper insight into her literary world. In February 2025, Motie Culture released a translation of *Yeosu* (full Korean title, *Yeosu-ui sarang*), under the Chinese title *Shangkou yuhezhong* 伤口愈合中, a collection of Han Kang's early short stories translated by Cui Youxue. In June of the same year, another short story collection, *Fire Salamander* (*Norang munui yeongwon*), also translated by Cui Youxue, was published. Meanwhile, her representative work *Human Acts* is also included in the publication plan. With these publications, nearly all of Han Kang's major works have now been translated into China. Given this growing momentum, it is reasonable to expect that Han Kang's literary works will continue to reach an ever-wider readership in China.

The Recognition of Han Kang's Works in China

From the moment Han Kang's works were first translated into Chinese, their dissemination and recognition began to take shape. Interest in Han Kang's writings in China has largely centered on two aspects: first, literary interpretation, with feminist readings focused on *The Vegetarian* and *Fruit of My Woman*; and second, literary transmission studies centered on the translation of Han Kang's works.

In the second decade of the 21st century, Han Kang gradually entered the academic view of Chinese scholars. However, in scholarship of this period, she is often mentioned merely as one of South Korea's younger or female writers, rather than being an independent subject of research. After 2011, Han Kang's works began to attract more attention within Chinese literary circles specializing in Korean literature. Her name began to appear in articles discussing the development of contemporary Korean literature. For example, in the article "Vigilance in Despair: A Decade in Review of New Century Korean Literature," Han Kang, along with Kim In-suk, is cited as a representative of South Korean women writers whose novels reflect resistance to patriarchy and traditional family structures—works that have been particularly well-received among female readers in Korea (Jiao 2011, 4). Similarly, in "A Review of South Korean Literature in 2011," Xue Zhou

discussed how younger writers such as Han Kang were actively exploring the relationship between reality and imagination, noting the publication of her 2011 work *Greek Lessons* (Xue 2012). Although no standalone critiques of Han Kang's works emerged during this period, these scattered references reflect the growing prominence of Han Kang as a representative figure among the new generation of Korean writers.

Although Han Kang's *Human Acts* has not yet been officially translated and published in Chinese, it has already drawn considerable attention from Chinese academia. Completed in 2014, the novel sparked widespread discussion upon its release in South Korea. In "Overview of the South Korean Literary Scene in 2014," Xue Zhou identified the publication of *Human Acts* as one of the two most significant literary events of the year, devoting substantial space to a detailed introduction of Han Kang's biography and the main content of the novel (Xue 2015). Through meticulous research and in-depth interviews, Han Kang reconstructs the events and personal stories surrounding the May 1980 Gwangju Uprising and its survivors. Literary critic Baek Ji-yeon praised the novel for its nuanced portrayal of wounded individuals caught in a world of darkness and violence, noting that Han Kang "confronts the brutal massacre of May in Gwangju with extraordinary courage. The intersection of the witnesses' tragic fate and the listeners' imagination creates a confessional narrative that painfully resurrects the indelible ten days" (Xue 2015, 16). *Human Acts* also marks a creative turning point for Han Kang, shifting her focus from individual existential concerns to broader reflections on historical trauma. Published in the inaugural issue of *New Perspectives on World Literature* (*Waiguo wenxue dongtai yanjiu* 外国文学动态研究) in 2016, Han Xiao's review, "The Withering Flower of Youth and the Violent Memory of History: On Han Kang's New Novel *Human Acts*," was the first critical article in China devoted entirely to Han Kang and her work. It highlighted the author's narrative intention: "The reader is urged not to focus solely on cruelty and violence, but to transcend them and reach out to the beauty of humanity" (Han 2016, 78). In fact, *Human Acts* continues Han Kang's enduring exploration of violence. From her earliest works, Han Kang has depicted the violence inflicted by men upon women in Korean society, as

well as the disillusionment with ideals in modern life. With later works such as *The White Book*, *Human Acts*, and *We Do Not Part*, her perspective expands to confront the violence of war and authoritarian regimes. In the face of such violence, both Han Kang and her protagonists often suffer profound trauma, leading to distortion, alienation, and loss of language. In her earlier works, protagonists often attempt to heal by transforming into plants, retreating into nature, or embracing religious life. In more recent works, however, they seek reconciliation by engaging with history and refusing to forget. This persistent motif of violence in Han Kang's writing is deeply intertwined with Korean national and cultural identity (He 2024).

Another of Han Kang's works that has sparked strong interest among Chinese readers is *The Vegetarian*. Following Han Kang's receipt of the International Booker Prize, Xue Zhou highlighted both the novel and the broader implications of her award for Korean literature, stating that it would "serve as a stimulant and catalyst for the Korean literary scene" and help "return Korean literature to the public eye" (Xue 2017, 86). In "Overview of the South Korean Literary Scene in 2016," Xue Zhou provided a detailed account of Han Kang's literary career and an in-depth summary of *The Vegetarian*. He guided readers to reflect on the novel's underlying themes: "What Han Kang is exploring is the complexity of human nature...Can becoming a plant truly resolve the darkness and contradictions within human nature? Han Kang's answer is strikingly honest: 'I can only pose the most difficult human questions through this extreme narrative'" (Xue 2017, 87). Clearly, Xue Zhou hoped to draw attention to the profound reflection and strong critical awareness of modern life embedded in Han Kang's work. As Han Kang gained wider readership in China, academic perspectives on her writing also began to diversify. Some studies approached *The Vegetarian* through the lens of literary ethics, analyzing the destructiveness of domestic violence on ethical order. These analyses argue that the violence inflicted by both family and society leads to a breakdown in ethical norms, placing characters like Yeong-hye in a moral dilemma in which they spiral into madness due to their inability to make correct ethical decisions. From this angle, Han Kang's intention in writing the novel is interpreted as a challenge to and reflection on traditional familial and ethical values (Shen 2019, 53).

Other scholars have employed Deleuze's theories of alienation to interpret *The Vegetarian*, focusing on the characters' estrangement and on the social and familial factors contributing to Yeong-hye's failed transformation into a plant. These studies argue that Yeong-hye's tragedy cannot be simplistically attributed to a binary opposition between male and female or to feudal patriarchy alone. Instead, a more nuanced analysis must consider the realistic social context, the characters' psychological profiles, and familial dynamics (X. Wu 2019).

Meanwhile, Chinese newspapers and magazines also began to feature interviews with Han Kang and her translators. On May 27, 2016, *Beijing Youth Daily* (*Beijing qingnian bao* 北京青年报) published an interview with Cui Youxue, the translator of *Fruit of My Woman*. Cui admitted that the sense of "discomfort" in Han Kang's works often left him emotionally distressed, to the extent that he had to pause translation at times to recover. After completing the translation, he confessed to having no desire to revisit the novel, believing that the emotional pain he experienced mirrored the pain Han Kang herself must have endured during the creative process (Zhang and Cui 2016). On June 23, 2016, *Beijing Evening News* (*Beijing wanbao* 北京晚报) published an interview titled "Cruel Flowers: Impressions of Contemporary Korean Literature," a dialogue between Han Kang and Wu Yue, an editor at the literary magazine *Harvest* (*Shouhuo* 收获). This marked the first interview with Han Kang to be published in Chinese media. In fact, the interview had been conducted as early as October 2013 but only released following Han Kang's receipt of the International Booker Prize. In the interview, Han Kang discusses how she draws from a wide range of literary and cultural traditions, both ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, to enrich her writing. She reveals that the inspiration for her novel *Black Deer* originated in Chinese culture and came from reading Borges' *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, in which she encountered the mythical creature. She also shares, for the first time with Chinese readers, that the inspiration for *The Vegetarian* came from a line by Korean writer Yi Sang: "I believe only humans are (truly) plants" (Y. Wu 2016).

Han Kang's work consistently returns to the central question of "What does it mean to be human?" For instance, *Black Deer* contemplates whether

humans are beings akin to the mythical deer, while *The Vegetarian* asks whether it is possible for a person to eliminate violence entirely—and whether survival is possible in a state devoid of violence. Following the retranslation of *The Vegetarian*, *Southern People Weekly* (*Nanfang renwu zhoukan* 南方人物周刊) interviewed Han Kang in January 2022, focusing on the divergent reader responses to her work and feminist writing. Using *The Vegetarian* as an example, Han Kang explained: “This novel has many layers—human violence and the rejection of violence; questions about normality and madness; questions about whom we are capable of understanding...One of these layers is the voice of female anguish...My identity as a woman and my identity as a writer are not in conflict at all. Nor do I believe that being a female writer imposes any limitations, because there is no such universalized notion of gender here” (Lin 2022, 60). Han Kang’s response invites deeper reflection among Chinese readers on themes such as gender identity, violence, and corporeality in her work.

In addition to traditional media, the reception of Han Kang’s works among general readers in the Chinese context displays a dual characteristic centered on heightened gender consciousness and emotion-driven projection. This study adopts a combined approach of text mining and sentiment analysis to systematically examine reader response data to five representative Chinese translations of Han Kang’s works published in mainland China: *The Vegetarian*, *The White Book*, *Fruit of My Woman*, *Greek Lessons*, and *We Do Not Part*. Using the Chrome browser plugin Web Scraper, 1,000 valid reader comments were collected from Douban, the largest social reading platform in China, totaling 108,425 Chinese characters. In the text mining phase, the study utilized Python’s WordCloud library¹ to extract high-frequency words and employed the cumulative TF-IDF (c-TF-IDF) algorithm for topic clustering. The statistical results show that the top ten high-frequency words in the comments include: “Han Kang,” “women,” “story,” “plant,” “world,” “words,” “Korea,” “language,” “author,” and “The Vegetarian.” The distribution of these words clearly reveals a gendered and culturally embedded focus in Chinese readers’

1. http://amueller.github.io/word_cloud/index.html.

engagement with Han Kang's works. Notably, the term "women" ranked second only to "Han Kang," indicating that her work has been heavily framed within the reception paradigm of a "feminist writer" in China. Readers typically approach her texts through the lens of gender issues, engaging extensively with depictions of women's experiences, bodily writing, and gender oppression—thereby constructing a highly label-oriented reading schema during the reception process. Simultaneously, the frequent appearance of words like "language," "expression," and "author" reflects readers' sensitivity to her stylistic features and authorial subjectivity, while the prominence of "Korea" suggests a strong awareness of national-cultural context. This creates a reception structure marked by both cultural identification and distance. For the sentiment analysis, a BERT-based classifier (Devlin et al. 2019) was trained on a dataset of 25,000 IMDB movie reviews² to predict the emotional tendencies of the Douban comments. Results indicate that only 10.3 percent of the comments were positive, 15.9 percent neutral, and a striking 73.8 percent negative. This overwhelmingly negative sentiment does not necessarily signal a rejection of the works' literary value; rather, it reflects the psychological tension and emotional resonance readers experience when engaging with Han Kang's narratives of deep trauma and oppressive atmospheres. Common high-frequency negative words such as "none," "pain," "unable," "is not," "violence," "loss," "cannot," "death," "don't know," and "silence" closely mirror the recurring themes of extreme situations and existential crises in Han Kang's writing. This finding further reveals the underlying cognitive differences encountered in the cross-cultural interpretation of the aesthetic characteristics embodied in Han Kang's works. Her writing is highly imagistic and often departs from conventional narrative coherence, a nontraditional aesthetic orientation that may create a form of "structural disadvantage" in cross-cultural transmission. Many Chinese readers, whose narrative expectations tend to prioritize plot progression and story logic, may experience difficulties in comprehension when faced with texts dense in imagery but weak in narrative linearity. Consequently, such readers may misinterpret these works as "obscure" or

2. <http://ai.stanford.edu/~amaas/data/sentiment/>.

“distant.” Therefore, the emergence of negative emotional responses reflects not only an affective reaction to themes of trauma but also a sense of cognitive frustration that arises when readers struggle to decode and reconstruct non-linear narratives. In other words, these negative emotions result from the interaction between emotional intensity and cognitive difficulty, forming a layered response that combines affective and interpretive feedback to the text’s emotional weight and thematic gravity. This emotional response structure resonates with Han Kang’s own aesthetic of trauma and narrative of death, constituting the second salient feature of her reception in China—deep engagement driven by cognitive and emotional tension.

In sum, the reception of Han Kang’s works in China reveals both the predominance of gendered meaning construction and the emergence of a cognitively and emotionally mediated reading experience, together forming a distinctive reception pattern within the Chinese context. This reception trajectory highlights the re-encoding of textual meaning in cross-cultural literary transmission and reflects the cognitive preferences and psychological schemas that shape literary interpretation among Chinese readers.

Table 1. Top 10 Words in Chinese Readers’ Comments on Han Kang’s Works

Word	Frequency	TF-IDF
Han Kang (韩江)	0.0126	0.0076
Women (女性)	0.0069	0.0064
Story (故事)	0.0059	0.0056
Plant (植物)	0.0052	0.0051
World (世界)	0.0050	0.0050
Words (文字)	0.0050	0.0049
The Vegetarian(素食者)	0.0049	0.0047
Author (作者)	0.0048	0.0047
Korea (韩国)	0.0048	0.0048
Language (语言)	0.0045	0.0048

Source: Authors.

Table 2. Top 10 High-frequency Negative Words in Chinese Readers’ Comments on Han Kang’s Works

Word	Frequency	TF-IDF
None (没有)	0.0042	0.0022
Is not (不是)	0.0036	0.0014
Unable (无法)	0.0035	0.0015
Pain (痛苦)	0.0034	0.0015
Violence (暴力)	0.0025	0.0013
Cannot (不能)	0.0020	0.0010
Loss (失去)	0.0019	0.0010
Don’t know (不知道)	0.0019	0.0009
Death (死亡)	0.0018	0.0010
Silence (沉默)	0.0016	0.0009

Source: Authors.

From the empirical data above, we can see that Han Kang has from the very beginning been regarded as a “feminist writer” by Chinese readers. The label of “feminism” appears to have taken deep root in the minds of her Chinese readership. A 2017 article published in *Korean Language Teaching and Research* (*Hanguoyu jiaoxue yu yanjiu* 韩国语教学与研究), titled, “An Interpretation of the Construction of Binary Oppositional Characters in Han Kang’s Novels—Focusing on *The Vegetarian* and *The Plant Wife*,” marked the beginning of feminist-themed studies on Han Kang’s fiction in China. Due to the abundance of plant imagery and vibrant life force depicted in her works, her writing has frequently been associated with ecofeminism. However, Han Kang’s literary creation transcends a mere gender-based discourse and reflects “a profound concern for both the fate of humanity and that of nature” (Yin 2018, 1). Han Kang is adept at employing hybrid narrative perspectives to structure her stories (S. Wu 2019) and frequently utilizes postmodernist techniques to explore female subjectivity (Hu 2023). Her feminist writing generally revolves around three key themes: first, the exploration of character construction centred on female protagonists; second, a multi-perspective narration that reflects women’s

experiences in contemporary society; and third, symbolic and allegorical elements, along with dreamlike sequences, which capture the distorted mental states of women living under absurd and oppressive realities. Han Kang's novels reveal the oppressive nature of patriarchal ideology in South Korea, where women, trapped in desperate and inescapable circumstances, are left with no option but self-destruction. Through her writing, Han Kang aims to "help more women—and even society at large—come to recognize the often ineffable conditions of women's lives and struggles for survival in the real world" (Zhu 2021, 77). Other studies have sought to approach Han Kang's work from a comparative perspective, highlighting the ecofeminist elements in her writing. For instance, one study draws parallels between Han Kang and Chinese author Chi Zijian, suggesting that both writers express "a yearning for ecological harmony" and share deep concerns about the social realities faced by women (Zhao 2022). From the above interpretations, it is evident that feminism serves as a dominant thematic axis in Han Kang's literary oeuvre, significantly shaping how her work is received in China and how her authorial identity is constructed within the Chinese literary context.

The translation of Han Kang's novels has also become a subject of great interest among both readers and scholars. Following Han Kang's receipt of the International Booker Prize, a report on the English translation of her work began circulating on social media. In a *Los Angeles Times* article, Charse Yun analyzed how Deborah Smith, the English translator of *The Vegetarian*, adopted a narrative tone markedly different from Han Kang's original, with a more lyrical and poetic style that introduced numerous embellishments absent from the source text (Yun 2017). This sparked heated discussion among Chinese readers: if the novel's success was heavily dependent on the translator's literary intervention, could the award truly be said to belong to Korean literature? This question, however, is not difficult to address. Firstly, the International Booker Prize is inherently a prize for translated literature; the award explicitly acknowledges the importance of translation by splitting the prize money equally between author and translator. High-quality translation is therefore a fundamental prerequisite for the award. Secondly, media interviewed Anders Olsson, Chair of the

Nobel Prize for Literature Committee, to obtain his view on translation. Olsson remarked, “We had to read several versions of *The Vegetarian* in different languages to make a fair assessment” (Chen 2024). His response reveals that the idea of a translation alone winning the award is a misconception. Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding the translation underscores the crucial role translation plays in the international dissemination of national literatures. The debate over *The Vegetarian* serves as compelling evidence that “translated literature is no longer a marginal component of literary discourse, but a central force in the exchange of world literature” (Wang 2024). The Nobel Prize’s emphasis on translated literature also reflects the broader global trend of contemporary literature gaining international reach through translation, affirming the translator’s vital role in literary transmission. As translator Qian Ri noted in the postscript to *The Vegetarian*, “The reception of a foreign writer’s work in another country is much like a woman’s pregnancy—it requires time, effective care, and patience, until the baby breaks free with a cry and brings honor to the mother” (Qian 2016). The international reach of Han Kang’s works would not have been possible without the strong support of the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea). Han Kang’s early works translated into Chinese—such as *Black Deer*, *The Vegetarian*, and *Fruit of My Woman*—were all supported by LTI Korea’s publication funding schemes. Moreover, Korea’s translator training system has evolved through three major stages. The first generation consisted primarily of Korean native speakers; the second generation was characterized by cross-cultural translator partnerships, often involving international couples; the third generation comprises foreigners who, influenced by Korean culture, voluntarily engage in translation work (Guo 2019, 28). Han Kang’s Chinese translations have all been completed by members of this third generation. This demonstrates the significance of cultural appeal in the cultivation of literary translation talent.

Nevertheless, the recognition of Han Kang’s work in China has not been limited to positive interpretations and artistic exploration; critical voices have also emerged. Taking *The Vegetarian* as an example, some argue that the portrayal of female characters and the male-centered environment depicted in the novel—along with motifs such as vegetarianism and madness—

do not transcend the conventional tropes of Western postmodernist writing. This, they suggest, contributes to a misleading representation of Korean literature as part of the so-called “New World Literature.” A close reading of Han Kang’s early works reveals narrative patterns reminiscent of Western feminist literary traditions, particularly those outlined in the classic feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic*. From another perspective, it is also understandable why a relatively *modest* work such as *The Vegetarian* could receive the International Booker Prize and gain popularity in the Western world. As critics point out, “The connections made in *The Vegetarian* among food, the body, and silent resistance unfold within the logic of a strong Western literary tradition” (Hao 2023, 179). This view had, in fact, already been anticipated by scholars such as Xie Tianzhen and the translator Qian Ri. They noted that Eastern and Western understandings of vegetarianism and the body differ significantly; in the West, food is often treated as a sociological or political construct, while the body functions as a metaphor or vessel for political and spiritual themes. In contrast, Eastern traditions tend to associate vegetarianism and the body more closely with religion, ethics, and ecology. From this perspective, Han Kang’s award-winning work may not have revitalized “New World Literature,” but instead aligned itself with established Western literary tastes.

Since Han Kang was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, Chinese literary circles have begun to approach her works from more diverse perspectives. Increasing attention has been paid to themes such as history, violence, trauma, and suffering. For example, in 2025, the journal *Foreign Languages and Literature* (*Waiguo yuwen* 外国语文) published a special issue titled “Han Kang and World Literature Studies,” which examined Han Kang’s Nobel recognition as well as the historical consciousness and cultural metaphors present in her works. However, on the whole, scholarly engagement with Han Kang in China remains largely confined to feminist interpretations and to her novel *The Vegetarian*. On the one hand, this indicates the deep cultural impact of her work; on the other, it reflects the relatively limited scope and delayed development of Han Kang studies in China, suggesting ample room for further exploration.

More Than a Feminist Writer: The Complexity of Han Kang's Creative World

Since receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024, the translation and recognition of Han Kang's works in China have entered a new phase of heightened attention. Throughout this process, feminist discourse has emerged as the dominant narrative surrounding her award, with some readers even categorizing her writings within the broader framework of so-called *Korean women's literature*. While this label is undoubtedly connected to South Korea's rich tradition of feminist literature and the strategic introduction of Han Kang's early works, it also risks oversimplifying the deeper meanings embedded in her literary creation. A closer reading of Han Kang's literary world reveals that feminism is by no means the foundational tone of her work. Rather, her writings are permeated by the intricate interplay between the personal and the historical, between love and violence. This complexity is not only reflected in her intertextual exploration of individual memory and historical trauma, but also in her poetic language and symbolic imagery, through which she probes the fundamental questions of war, violence, human existence, and the nature of love.

Han Kang's works have been widely interpreted as *feminist* literature in China—a phenomenon that is far from incidental. Rather, it emerges from a complex interplay of literary tradition, market dynamics, and patterns of reader reception. First and foremost, South Korea's robust tradition of feminist literature provides a rich contextual foundation for the feminist framing of Han Kang's works in China. Since the 1970s, Western feminist thought began to attract the attention of South Korean female intellectuals. In the 1980s, under the fervor of South Korea's democratization movement, feminist activism gained significant momentum. As a result, feminist literature has long held a prominent place in the South Korean literary scene. O Jeong-hui explored maternal belief in "The Toyshop Woman" (Wangujeom yeoin) as early as the 1960s; Park Wan-suh (Bak Wan-seo) began addressing gender issues in the 1980s; and Eun Hee-kyung (Eun Hui-gyeong) in the 1990s focused on questions of female self-identity (Ye 2024, 142). Perhaps due to their shared East Asian cultural background, South

Korean feminist literature has also resonated with Chinese readers. In recent years, works such as Cho Nam-joo (Jo Nam-ju)'s *Kim Ji-yeong, Born 1982* (82 nyeonsaeng Kim Jiy-yeong), Choi Eun-yeong's *Bright Night* (*Aju huimihan bicheurodo*), and Shin Kyung-sook (Sin Gyeong-suk)'s *Please Look After Mom* (*Eoma-reul butakhae*) have garnered widespread popularity and sparked vibrant discussions across Chinese social media platforms. It was amid this wave of literary interest that Han Kang developed her own distinctive style—boldly confronting the patriarchal oppression entrenched in Korean society and exposing the tensions of life through visceral, even brutal, language (Hao and Kim 2024, 68). While her early works focused on the plight of women, Han Kang's unique narrative approach naturally led Chinese readers to associate her with the feminist literary tradition of Korea, positioning her as a representative figure of so-called Korean women's literature.

Secondly, the consolidation of Han Kang's image as a *feminist writer* within the Chinese context is closely tied to the structural operations of the *patronage system* during the process of translation and dissemination. As André Lefevere has argued, the translation and reception of literary texts are invariably shaped by a tripartite structure of patronage—ideology, economics, and status—which collectively determine which texts can cross linguistic boundaries into a target culture, and how they are interpreted once they arrive (Lefevere 1992, 16). First, the economic component governs whether a text is “worth investing in” or “deserves to be circulated,” influencing whether a work can effectively reach the target readership. Translation activities are inherently embedded within publishing mechanisms and consumer logic. When acquiring foreign works, publishers prioritize marketability and topical appeal. Han Kang's early translated works introduced to China, such as *The Vegetarian* and *Fruit of My Woman*, drew widespread attention due to their intense content, sensitive themes, and avant-garde style. These works met the publishing industry's demand for emotional appeal and cultural provocativeness, aligning with a consumer culture increasingly driven by emotional expression and identity politics. As a result, texts focusing on female bodies and repressive experiences were deemed particularly commercially viable. Second, ideology, as the dominant

force within the patronage system, determines which ideas, values, and aesthetic tastes are considered *acceptable* in a given cultural context. It plays a filtering and guiding role in the circulation of translated works. The introduction of Han Kang's works coincided with the expansion of feminist discourse in China's popular culture. The themes of gendered suffering and bodily experience in her early works were readily appropriated into ideological narratives of *female emancipation* and *gender resistance*. Within this framework, her writing was consciously or unconsciously framed as representative of feminist literature, while the more complex thematic dimensions of her work, such as historical memory, political violence, and existential inquiry, were overshadowed or downplayed. Finally, the status component manifests as a hierarchy within the cultural system, determining whether a text can obtain legitimacy and symbolic capital within the target culture. Translation and publishing function as cultural filtering mechanisms shaped by publishing policy, the distribution of academic resources, and institutional preferences. In practice, publishing houses are more inclined to select works that align with mainstream ideological orientations, are likely to pass censorship, and can quickly penetrate the market. Consequently, Han Kang's more philosophically dense and historically conscious later works, such as *Human Acts* and *We Do not Part*, were not widely translated at first, limiting her reception in China to the early *feminist narrative* framework.

However, categorizing Han Kang's literary work solely under the label of feminism inevitably limits a comprehensive understanding of her overall artistic vision. While it is true that feminism constitutes an important theme in her writing and that she consistently addresses the existential struggles faced by women, the significance of her work goes far beyond this dimension. An excessive emphasis on the feminist framework may obscure the deeper layers of her literary engagement, including her profound concern for the human condition and her exploration of fundamental philosophical questions. Han Kang's narratives often weave together the personal and the historical, as well as themes of love and violence, in a complex and subtle manner. Through this interplay, she constructs a spiritual and ethical landscape that cannot be fully explained by gender

discourse alone. In this context, a close reading of her representative works, particularly her more recent writings that focus on trauma and memory, is crucial for understanding the artistic transformation and intellectual depth that characterize her later creative phase.

The complexity of Han Kang's literary work manifests across multiple dimensions, one of which is her intertextual engagement with personal memory and grand historical narratives. In *We Do Not Part*, Han Kang vividly demonstrates how she transcends the depiction of individual predicaments by intricately interweaving micro-level experiences into broader historical realities, thereby constructing both narrative depth and philosophical resonance. The novel follows Kyung-ha (Gyeong-ha), a writer tormented by long-term anguish and nightmares after publishing a book on the Gwangju Uprising. At the request of her friend Inseon, a documentary filmmaker hospitalized after an accident, Kyung-ha travels to Jeju Island to care for Inseon's pet bird left behind. Braving a snowstorm, she eventually arrives at Inseon's residence, only to fall into a state of psychological disorientation. In the space between dreaming and waking, she encounters Inseon's spirit and gradually comes to understand the enduring sorrow of Inseon's mother, Kang Jeong-sim, who lost her family during the Jeju April 3rd Massacre. Through this spectral encounter, Kyung-ha begins to approach the concealed truth of that historical trauma. As a representative work from Han Kang's later creative period, *We Do Not Part*, alongside *Human Acts*, deeply explores the collective memories buried in Korean history. It exemplifies her shift in literary focus and the increasing complexity of her themes. This section takes *We Do Not Part* as a case study to analyze how Han Kang, through narrative strategies such as bodily pain and psychological doubling, creates an intertextual dialogue between personal memory and historical trauma, thereby illuminating the profound intricacy of her literary vision.

In her fiction, Han Kang frequently employs bodily pain as a medium for inscribing and bearing memory, allowing personal suffering and collective trauma to converge within the corporeal experience. Characters in her novels often suffer physical afflictions: headaches, aphasia, bone fractures, and even partial loss of the body. These *case-specific* somatic

experiences evoke in readers a broader reflection on collective trauma, imbuing the narrative with symbolic density and heightened emotional resonance. In *We Do Not Part*, Inseon, who loses a finger in a workplace accident, must receive injections every three minutes to stimulate the nerves and prevent necrosis. “While the pain of keeping her fingers intact may feel greater now, if she gave up on reattaching them, she would have to live in agony for which there would be no remedy or relief” (K. Han 2023, 31). This paradoxical statement not only articulates the inextricable entanglement between the self and the body, but also metaphorically illuminates a central epistemology of historical trauma: to forget is to anesthetize at the cost of erasure, while to remember is to endure pain indefinitely. Han Kang herself remarked at the novel’s launch event: “The essence of life is ‘flow,’ and such flow necessarily entails pain—but also love” (OCEANUNRAVEL 2023). Inseon’s own pain becomes a point of convergence with the suffering of victims of the Jeju April 3rd Massacre, and by extension, with those who have experienced similar historical violence. Her individual agony is layered atop the multitude of those sacrificed, absorbed into a continuous “stream of pain.” In this sense, her suffering transcends isolated corporeality; through associative memory and empathetic imagination, it becomes part of an expansive traumatic network—encompassing Kyung-ha, the Gwangju Uprising, the Jeju Massacre, and even the inherited trauma of her parents. Her pain thus functions as a recursive node in the cycle of historical affliction, and in so doing, acquires ethical and affective significance. The cumulative resonance of pain in the novel is especially striking. Kyung-ha, after publishing a work on the Gwangju Uprising, is left physically and emotionally exhausted, haunted by recurring nightmares. Inseon must endure regular piercing pain to prevent the death of her finger’s nerves. Upon arriving in Jeju, Kyung-ha suffers fever, headaches, and vomiting from exposure to the cold. And, of course, the victims and survivors of the April 3rd Massacre endured torture, mass killings, and the endless silence of unacknowledged grief. All of these corporeal and historical sufferings are situated within a single narrative plane, producing a dense and immersive landscape of affliction. Critically, *We Do Not Part* is not merely a historical novel that seeks faithful representation of the Jeju Massacre; its narrative

focus also lies in tracing the psychic and physical toll exacted upon Kyung-ha and Inseon as they internalize and grapple with the inherited burden of historical violence. The novel thus foregrounds bodily pain not as mere metaphor, but as a profound epistemological and ethical mode through which memory, trauma, and history are apprehended and inhabited.

Han Kang's fiction frequently features the motif of the *double* or alter ego: figures that serve as extensions of the author herself or her protagonists. Through these doubles, Han constructs alternative narrative perspectives that invite readers to reexamine painful historical memories from oblique angles. In *The White Book*, for instance, Han references her older sister who "died two hours after birth," described as a "newborn whose face was as pale as a crescent-moon rice cake," an "eight-month premature baby" (K. Han 2022, 15). Han was born and raised in the same place where her sister had passed away, and in mourning this sister she never knew, she simultaneously embarks on a profound meditation on loss, grief, and historical consciousness. This deeply personal act of memory writing lays the emotional and philosophical groundwork for what would become her sustained poetics of pain. In *We Do Not Part*, the boundary between author Han Kang and her protagonist Kyung-ha remains deliberately blurred throughout the narrative. At the novel's outset, Han does not immediately introduce the character by name; instead, she employs the first-person pronoun "I" to convey the protagonist's state of mind: "The dream had come to me in the summer of 2014, a couple of months after the publication of my book about the massacre in G—" (K. Han 2023, 3). Readers familiar with Han Kang's writing history would readily associate this voice with Han herself. In fact, Han has openly acknowledged this connection, stating, "I wrote the first two pages of this novel in June 2014" (K. Han 2023, 281), and "after *Human Acts*, I was uncertain whether I should write another book about a massacre. The dream I wrote about was, in truth, a dream I had after the publication of *Human Acts*. It was undoubtedly related to the Gwangju Uprising I had depicted in that book. While writing it, I had been plagued by brutal, bloody dreams. I had assumed those dreams would stop once the book was finished. But later, I realized the dream still wanted to tell me something" (OCEANUNRAVEL 2023). This introspective prelude is

immediately followed by a vivid account of the historical pain endured by “I”—a figure who functions as Han Kang’s symbolic double. Through this literary doubling, the protagonist becomes a vessel for the author’s own confrontation with historical trauma and the compulsion to re-narrate it. The process of *writing pain* in *We Do Not Part* thus transcends the boundary between fiction and reality, seeping into the narrator’s everyday life. Even four years after the dream, its lingering effects remain potent and unresolved. The end of *Human Acts* similarly depicts the author’s own anguish and reflection during her confrontation with past violence, forming a mirrored intertextual relationship with the opening of *We Do Not Part*. This structural parallel signals to the reader that the latter novel is, from its very inception, deeply rooted in and shaped by the corporeal and psychic suffering explored in its predecessor. In the dream, the “I” sees a tombstone gradually submerged by seawater. Initially, this image is associated with the suffering of the Gwangju Uprising; however, through unconscious association, the dream gradually shifts toward the narrator’s personal anguish and ultimately gestures toward the traumatic memory of the Jeju “April 3rd Massacre.” Through this dream connection, the pain of the past, present, and future overlaps, recurs, and extends across temporal dimensions, surging like successive waves. Both Han Kang and the character Kyung-ha are acutely aware that if pain cannot be avoided, it must be entered and confronted directly. This marks a transformation in the narrator’s stance—from passively enduring pain to actively facing it. Rather than turning away from the dreamscape of black fir trees and graves swept away by the tide, “I” choose to confront it: “because there is no other way” (K. Han 2023, 17). Beginning with the trauma of Gwangju, and proceeding through the narrator’s dreams and corporeal suffering, the novel ultimately turns toward the memory of the Jeju April 3rd Massacre, which is soon to be written, and is transformed into the unfolding narrative landscape. Speaking through the voice of the narrator, Han Kang dramatizes the narrative impetus of the novel with a strong sense of writerly self-awareness. In other words, *We Do Not Part* is a novel in which the author, through the construction of a fictional *double*, sets out from the pain of writing itself and deliberately enters the heart of historical and personal suffering.

In Han Kang's fiction, the intertextual interplay between individual memory and historical trauma ultimately culminates in a profound philosophical inquiry: in the face of extreme violence, how can one continue to seek meaning in love and life? This overarching question unfolds through her portrayals of war, the deployment of natural imagery, and the persistent interrogation of *love* as both concept and experience. It reveals a humanistic concern and philosophical depth that transcend the boundaries of specific historical events. First and foremost, Han Kang's writing is deeply rooted in a sustained engagement with war and systemic violence. Even a novel like *The Vegetarian*, often read as a feminist exploration of female agency, contains implicit reflections on historical traumas, such as the South Korean government's participation in the Vietnam War. In *We Do Not Part*, Han Kang engages even more directly with historical atrocity, incorporating eyewitness accounts, newspaper clippings, and other documentary materials to depict the brutal realities of war and massacre. In the novel's second part, the character Inseon—through letters between her mother, Kang Jeong-sim, and Jeong-sim's younger brother, as well as the mother's meticulous collection of newspaper clippings—gradually unveils the long and painful process by which her mother sought the truth about her brother's death during the Jeju April 3rd Massacre. As a leading member of a survivors' association in Gyeongsangbuk-do province, Jeong-sim remained actively committed to remembrance well into old age. For thirty-four years, she compiled and annotated newspaper clippings, drawing lines under dates and names to mark nodes of memory, while relentlessly searching for the remains of the victims. These private acts of remembrance, little known during her lifetime, were discovered by her daughter only after her death, revealing a painstakingly reconstructed landscape of truth and grief. The magnitude of Jeong-sim's suffering in her solitary confrontation with massacre memory is vividly portrayed. She hides a coping saw beneath her mattress, believing that "the superstition that lying down to sleep over sharp metal warded off nightmares" (K. Han 2023, 62). Yet she continues to suffer from night terrors, "gasping, trembling, and sometimes crying out like a wild cat" (K. Han 2023, 62). Her younger sister, also a victim of the massacre, was still breathing when Jeong-sim found her. In a desperate act of intimacy

and care, she bit her finger and placed it in her sister's mouth—"the sister sucked the tip of her finger like an infant" (K. Han 2023, 215), and Jeong-sim was "so overjoyed she could barely breathe" (K. Han 2023, 215). Even in her later years, after developing Alzheimer's disease, she would insert her finger into her sleeping daughter's mouth, indicating how deeply this trauma had imprinted itself upon her body and daily life, persisting across decades. When speaking of the three central women characters in *We Do Not Part*, Han Kang remarked: "At first, I thought Kyung-ha would be the protagonist. As I continued writing, it became Inseon. By the end, it was Jeong-sim. Among them, the one I felt most empathetic toward was Jeong-sim. I kept thinking about her, trying to live like her, imagining what she would do throughout the day. I think that's why the character came to embody an extreme form of courage and love" (OCEANUNRAVEL 2023). Jeong-sim, then, is not merely a symbolic victim of history, but a powerful emblem of endurance and love in the face of dehumanizing violence. The novel also presents contrasting attitudes toward historical trauma. In one testimonial, an elderly woman who once agreed to recount the beachside massacre she had witnessed later refused further interviews, saying: "Didn't I tell you to stop coming? I've said all I have to say—why do you keep coming back?" (K. Han 2023, 192–193). This illustrates how the refusal to recall traumatic memory often functions as a form of psychic self-protection. Yet Jeong-sim's perseverance offers an alternative mode of remembrance: one grounded in resilience, integrity, and refusal to forget. A particularly symbolic tale appears in the novel: "an old beggar knocks on every door in a village asking for food but is turned away by all except one woman, who gives him a bowl of rice. In gratitude, he warns her to climb the mountain before dawn and to tell no one. She is also instructed never to look back before crossing the ridge. As she climbs, a tsunami and torrential rains engulf the village. Acting on instinct, she turns back—and is transformed into stone" (K. Han 2023, 205). While reflecting on this story, Kyung-ha and Inseon ask, "For what? What had she kept turning back to see?" (K. Han 2023, 207). When she was younger, before losing her fingers, Inseon believed that "if she hadn't turned around, she would have been free" (K. Han 2023, 205). But in later conversations, both characters revise their interpretation: even if the

woman's "pelvis, heart, and shoulders turned to stone" (K. Han 2023, 206), this was not necessarily death: it might signify a form of rebirth. Jeong-sim, who slept on a saw to resist her nightmares, symbolizes a refusal to escape the past. She embodies not a superficial *freedom* from pain but a determination to live alongside trauma, to carry memory as a burden and a form of resistance. In the petrification of her body, a *new life* gestates. Thus, the myth of the "stone woman" becomes a metaphor for a generation of survivors like Jeong-sim—those who could not look away from the horrors of history, whose physical and psychic selves gradually "turned to stone," yet who survived, unbroken, as living witnesses. They are not erased by the trauma they bear but endure within and through it, becoming the embodied memory of collective suffering.

While revealing the brutality of history, Han Kang skillfully employs natural imagery as both a silent witness to violence and a symbolic medium for human compassion. Elements such as plants, snow, and the sea frequently appear in her works, functioning as silent recorders of bloodshed and suffering, while also bearing witness to the miracle of life's tenacious continuation through love amid the ruins. *We Do Not Part* begins with the image of "a sparse snow was falling" (K. Han 2023, 2) and concludes with the scene of Inseon and Kyung-ha clinging to each other in a snowy field. Snow, as a recurring motif, constructs a quiet yet potent symbolic tension throughout the novel. Discussing the snow in the novel, Han Kang explains: "The snow never stopped. It connected heaven and earth, darkness and light, life and death, silence and noise. In the end, snow fills the void of loss. It melts into water and refreezes, cycling over and over, just as we too, in various ways, become connected to one another" (OCEANUNRAVEL 2023). In this interpretation, snow is not only a medium that links space, time, and existence but also serves a historical witnessing function. The snow falling on Jeju Island silently witnesses the bloodshed and brutality of the April 3rd Massacre. It covers bodies, conceals crimes, and records, without words, a history long suppressed and silenced. The stark contrast between the snow's whiteness and the violence it covers highlights the absurdity and tragic depth of the historical reality. Though emotionally neutral, snow carries the imprints of pain and death, becoming a vast and

silent presence that lingers. In addition to snow, the bird “Ama” is another important symbol in the novel. At Inseon’s request, Kyung-ha travels to Jeju Island to care for the bird left behind at home. Although the bird is already dead upon her arrival, Kyung-ha takes care to bury it properly. Han Kang, speaking on the bird’s symbolism, notes: “Birds symbolize the spirit and soul. It’s the same in Korea. For example, if someone dreams of a butterfly or bird, people often say it is the soul of the deceased returning for a visit” (OCEANUNRAVEL 2023). Thus, the bird not only advances the plot but also holds spiritual significance. Kyung-ha’s journey to Jeju to *save* the bird becomes a metaphorical response to the retrieval of the truth about the April 3rd Massacre. This rescue mission, ultimately futile because the bird is already dead, reflects the irreversible nature of historical violence. Yet, Kyung-ha’s burial of Ama represents a gesture of respect for that obscured history and a symbolic restoration of dignity for the victims. For decades, the government suppressed speech and denied facts, while the bereaved never ceased searching for their lost family members—the bodies buried in tunnels, the mixed, unidentifiable remains that should have received proper burial rites. Kyung-ha’s act of burying Ama becomes a form of posthumous consolation and recognition. While the ritual cannot resurrect the dead, it enacts a belated but deeply significant gesture of spiritual reconciliation. The ocean is another prominent motif throughout the novel. Jeju Island is surrounded by sea, and many of the massacres occurred near the shoreline. After the events, the victims’ families returned to the coast, hoping to find witnesses, breaking down in tears amid the crashing waves. In Han Kang’s narrative, the sea is both an indifferent bystander to violence and a witness to familial bonds and mourning. It also carries deeper metaphorical meanings, symbolizing the fluidity of consciousness and spirit. In her writing, consciousness is likened to the sea—not the possession of a single individual, but rather a vessel of collective experience and historical memory. It ebbs and flows, washing over the temporal shorelines of memory and ruins. Some fragments are drawn to the surface, briefly visible; others are pulled into the depths, never to return. Through a fluid narrative structure, Han Kang evokes a tidal sense of time in *We Do Not Part*. The narrative unfolds like waves of memory filtered through consciousness,

projected as a sequence of visual fragments across the screen of the mind. These fragments together form the novel's temporal logic, in which the past is not a closed chapter but a persistent echo in the present. Moreover, the sea also symbolizes the final resting place of the dead—those lost, unremembered souls submerged beneath history's surface. It holds enduring memory and serves as a deeper symbol of love and suffering in Han Kang's literary universe. In *We Do Not Part*, through the falling snow, the bird's death and burial, and the sea's ebb and surge, Han Kang constructs a symbolic system that is both mournful and lyrical. Nature becomes the silent chronicler of history and a resonant vessel for human emotion. Through this system, her fiction not only commemorates the pain of the past but also reimagines the possibility of connection, healing, and memory in the face of violence and loss.

At the deepest core of Han Kang's literary work lies her persistent inquiry into love and healing. She firmly believes that only love has the power to mend the wounds inflicted by life. In 1979, at the age of eight, Han Kang wrote in her childish handwriting in a self-made "little poetry collection": "Where is love? What is love?" These two questions have remained the deepest inquiries within her work, reflecting a lifelong pursuit to explore the essence of love through literature. In her early writings, love often manifested as romantic affection between men and women. In *Fruit of My Woman*, she asks: "If love truly exists, it must be a moment of truth. If you acknowledge this momentary truth, then I do love you. But do you believe in eternity? There is no such thing as eternity. Do you really want to endure till the end? Will you persist?" (K. Han 2014, 26–27). Han Kang has always harbored skepticism about romantic love, regarding it as something ephemeral and easily obliterated when confronted with violence. Attempts to preserve such love, to her, appear ultimately futile. In her 2024 Nobel lecture, Han Kang reflected on the questions that emerged during the writing of her major works. Looking back on *The Vegetarian*, she further questions: "Can a person ever be completely innocent? To what depths can we reject violence? What happens to one who refuses to belong to the species called human?" (K. Han 2024, 2–3). Recalling *Greek Lessons*, she reflects: "Could it be that by regarding the softest aspects of humanity, by

caressing the irrefutable warmth that resides there, we can go on living after all in this brief, violent world?” (K. Han 2024, 4). Speaking of the period after writing *Human Acts*, Han began to shift her focus away from romantic love and towards a broader sense of empathy and compassion for the world: “Why are human beings capable of such atrocities against one another? I had long lost a sense of deep-rooted trust in humans. How, then, could I embrace the world?” (K. Han 2024, 5). Reflecting on *We Do Not Part*, she continues to ask: “To what extent can we love? Where is our limit? To what degree must we love in order to remain human to the end?” (K. Han 2024, 9). From the vanishing of love in the face of violence to using love as a balm for the scars left by violence, Han Kang has spent nearly two decades offering her own response to the intertwined themes of love and brutality. Yet her questioning continues: “Is it that we want to love humanity, and this is the agony we feel when that love is shattered? Does love beget pain, and is some pain evidence of love?” (K. Han 2024, 7). For Han, the relationship between love and violence is subtle and intricate: violence does not always take the form of physical aggression, but can also emerge as emotional upheaval or deep psychological conflict. In some sense, a kind of *violence* can even originate from love itself. Through her works, Han Kang invites us to continuously reflect upon the relationship between love and violence. What truly matters is not merely how they relate, but how we define love itself: is it a love rooted in dependency and possession, or one that is free and unconditional? Love is what allows us to feel pain and violence—and it is also what enables us to perceive the beauty of the world.

Han Kang’s distinctive literary style is both a core strength of her artistic appeal and a potential limitation in the context of cross-cultural transmission, sometimes giving rise to a sense of *estrangement* among certain Chinese readers. From a thematic perspective, as early as 2011, some critics remarked that Han Kang’s works were “monotonous in theme... seemingly never departing from family and gender relations, revisiting them repeatedly in painstaking detail” (Jiao 2011, 4). While somewhat harsh, this critique does reflect a discernible tendency in Han’s earlier works. Prior to the publication of *Human Acts* in 2014, many of her narratives focused on marriage, domesticity, and interpersonal dynamics. Though these themes

were handled with psychological depth and emotional nuance, their recurrence led to a sense of aesthetic fatigue for some readers. On the level of narrative technique, Han Kang's poetic and symbolist style, marked by lyrical prose, rich imagery, and philosophical introspection, is central to her artistic identity. Her works often transcend linear plotlines to explore universal human anxieties and existential questions, thereby constructing a highly recognizable aesthetic tension and intellectual depth. However, this highly figurative and less traditionally cohesive storytelling can become a disadvantage in cross-cultural contexts. Some Chinese readers, for instance, find her narratives lacking in plot development and overwhelmed by dense symbols, leading to critiques of her work as "opaque," "distant," or "difficult to engage with." In the reception of *Greek Lessons*, one reader noted that it delivered "a sweeping yet indistinct emotional force," with unclear narrative progression and excessive imagery, lacking the plot-driven tension typically associated with traditional storytelling. *The White Book* pushes this even further by adopting a prose-poetry format, resembling "a breath of white mist blown into the void." For readers more accustomed to conventional narrative structures with clear exposition, climax, and resolution, Han Kang's style can present a significant barrier, contributing to an emotional and interpretive distance from the text. This reception gap is not limited to Chinese readers; similar debates have emerged in international literary discourse. For example, following the International Booker Prize awarded to *The Vegetarian*, some critics dismissed the work as "unremarkable" or as one that "caters to Western literary tastes," pointing to the complicated power dynamics and cultural scrutiny within the framework of "New World Literature" (Hao 2023, 182). However, as the preceding analysis demonstrates, Han Kang's work does not seek to cater to any particular cultural tradition or literary market. Rather, it is rooted in shared human experiences and existential questions. Her unique aesthetic approach enables her to explore themes of violence, trauma, isolation, death, love, and redemption in a way that both transcends and dialogues with specific cultural boundaries. In this sense, her work holds significant value within East-West literary exchanges. Thus, the *controversy* surrounding her work should not be seen as a flaw, but as evidence of its complexity. The stylistic

and thematic elements that elicit varied interpretations in different cultural contexts speak to the depth of Han's literary project. They also illuminate a broader challenge facing contemporary national literatures in a globalized world: how to maintain the integrity and potency of local expressions while fostering genuine cross-cultural communication and understanding. This tension—so vividly embodied in Han Kang's work—is precisely what demands deeper reflection.

Conclusion

The translation and recognition of Han Kang's works in China not only showcase her distinctive literary charm and profound philosophical reflections as a writer but also offer multifaceted insights into the global dissemination of national literatures. By analyzing the complexity of Han Kang's writing beyond the label of "feminism" and examining the mechanisms of interpretation and reception in the global context, it becomes clear that translation plays an irreplaceable and central role in literary globalization. The frequent retranslation and republication of Han Kang's works in the Chinese market, along with the recognition of translated literature by the International Booker Prize, all attest to the fact that translation is a vital bridge that connects civilizations and facilitates cultural exchange.

For the international dissemination of national literature, several strategic insights can be drawn.

First, it is crucial to establish an institutionalized, state-level system for translation support. The experience of the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) offers a valuable reference point: a consistent and high-quality translation review and feedback mechanism should be built, alongside joint publication and copyright subsidy programs aimed at the international market. Such measures would encourage the global translation and publication of national literary works. On this foundation, a digital translation database and an international exchange platform should be developed to enhance long-term visibility, accessibility, and quality

assurance.

Second, the experience of third-generation translators provides an especially valuable model. The dissemination of national literature abroad requires a strategic focus on translator development and the attraction of foreign talent who possesses deep cultural understanding and emotional connection with the source culture. This goal calls for a comprehensive approach, including the establishment of specialized literary translation training programs at overseas universities, the provision of long-term residency fellowships or field research grants to foster cultural immersion, and the organization of mentorship activities that facilitate the transmission of skills and experience between established translators and emerging ones.

Most importantly, promotional strategies must embrace cultural pluralism and avoid simplistic labelling. In light of the Chinese translation and reception of Han Kang's works, it becomes evident that the overseas promotion of national literature should highlight thematic diversity, narrative complexity, and universal human concerns. This can be achieved by supporting transnational academic symposia to embed the works within multiple interpretive frameworks, encouraging nuanced and non-stereotypical coverage in foreign media, and curating thematic exhibitions or digital storytelling projects to showcase the artistic and intellectual richness of the literature.

Only by executing specific and layered strategies can national literature truly earn broader recognition and deeper resonance on the global literary stage, achieving sustainable and meaningful international reach through its inherent artistic and *intellectual merit*.

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