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Book Review

Translation's Forgotten History: *Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature*

Edited by Heekyoung Cho. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center Press, 2016. 242 pages. ISBN: 9780674660045.

Susanna LIM

The past two decades have seen the publication of a group of works devoted to modernity and modern literature in East Asia, mostly in the English language by US-based scholars, in relation to postcolonialism, nationalism, empire, non-Western modernities, transnationalism, and translation (Lydia Liu's *Translingual Practice*, 1995; Indra Levy's *Sirens of the Western Shore*, 2006; Karen Thornber's *Empire of Texts in Motion*, 2009; Serk-Bae Suh's *Treacherous Translation*, 2013; Nayoung A. Kwon's *Intimate Empire*, 2015). To this growing body of scholarship comes Heekyoung Cho's *Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature* (2016), a provocative and groundbreaking work on the ways Korean writers of the colonial period translated and appropriated Russian literature through Japanese mediation, i.e., by retranslating from Japanese translations, and how this process of translation/retranslation shaped the very formation of modern Korean literature in the early twentieth century. Cho's study is also in dialogue with recent Korean-language studies on translation in modern Korean literature, such as the

Susanna LIM is an associate professor of Literature, Russian Studies, and Korean Studies at University of Oregon. E-mail: susannal@uoregon.edu.

work of Pak Chin-yŏng (which she refers to on p. 27).

Translation's Forgotten History consists of a preface, an introduction, three chapters, and an epilogue. In the first two sections Cho lays out the theoretical context and questions surrounding translation as a methodology. Chapters one through three present specific case studies of the processes of translation/retranslation involved in the Korean reception of different nineteenth-century Russian writers (Tolstoy, Chekhov, Turgenev). The epilogue contains observations on the translation of Russian literature in postcolonial Korea, as well as reflections on a shared modernity of East Asian countries in connection to Russian literature.

As the title indicates, the protagonist of this study is neither Korean, nor Russian, literature, but translation. Indeed, the first sentence of the book's introduction is a fresh, provocative (re)definition of translation as "a mode of generating new meaning and a medium for change in society" (1); here and throughout the book, translation is nearly interchangeable with, and certainly inseparable from, literature itself. Following scholars of translation studies, Cho argues that translated literature, far from being derivative, is a creative and authentic activity equal to other forms of writing. Having thus redefined and placed translation firmly at the center, Cho then makes several claims that challenge deep-rooted assumptions regarding translation: first, what we have come to accept as "national literature" was impossible without the work of translation (6, 101); second, despite its constitutive role, national literatures have forgotten or erased translation from their histories (7); third, we need to rethink translation, above all, in our thinking of modern East Asian literatures (14–15).

In addition to these broader claims on translation, perhaps equally important to understanding the book's analysis of colonial Koreans' reception of Russian literature are the specific forms or methods of translation it highlights. Here, too, the study unseats common assumptions by demonstrating that, in early twentieth-century colonial Korea, the translation practices that mattered were not of the literal, faithful, and complete kind, but of the liberal, adaptive, and partial kind. Importantly, Koreans by and large translated not directly, but indirectly, from the Russian

source texts, through the medium of Japanese translations. The question Cho asks, then ("What does it imply […] to translate Russian literature from Japanese into Korean?") (22), is fundamental to examining the complexity of translation processes, as well as the nature of the impact of Western literature on modern Korean literature. Finally, and most intriguingly, Cho suggests that such adaptive and indirect translation had the potential to function as a form of resistance against cultural hierarchies and imperialism; to become a form of indigenization and a way of demonstrating agency under dominance (19–20).

While fully agreeing with the above-mentioned points, in discussing the primacy of adaptive and indirect translation in the colonial period, one wonders whether there were more practical or expedient reasons that would have been worth mentioning. One factor is time, both in the sense that retranslations were simply more expedient, and also because a sense of lagging behind in a linear path of progress determined by the standards of Western modernity loomed heavy in the minds of many Korean intellectuals. Korean retranslations, in their very hurriedness and urgency, reflected an anxiety to "catch up to" a real or imagined global standard.

One of the most interesting and significant questions the book raises is that of why Koreans repressed the fact of Japanese mediation in their reception of Russian literature. Cho explains this in part by pointing to the amnesia regarding foreign influences typical of national literary canons in general (x). But there are also reasons more specific to the Korean-Japanese relationship in the context of colonial modernity, which Cho refers to intermittently (24–25, 107), but which could, perhaps, be more fully drawn out. In the Korean case, it is noteworthy to point out that writers generally did not have a problem acknowledging Western influence; the denigration of foreign influence Cho speaks about pertained largely to the Japanese one. This simultaneous elevation of Western sources and masking of Japanese mediation may partly be explained by the fact that both Korean and Japanese writers, during the first decades of the twentieth century, endorsed the notion of Western superiority under the slogan of "civilization and enlightenment" (J: *bunmei kaika*; K: *munmyeong gaehwa*). The Eurocentric

assumptions of cultural hierarchies, which Cho critiques in relation to critics who devalue translation, were also, more often than not, internalized by the Japanese and Korean translators themselves. Another dimension to consider is whether or not Koreans' refusal to recognize Japanese mediation by limiting its role *exclusively* to that of a medium or instrument on the path toward modernity was in itself a form of resistance (however passive, indirect, or ineffective it may have been). Japanese mediation, after all, could be perceived as showing a lack of Korean agency in the selection and translation of Western literature, as a cultural corollary to the political subjugation of colonization.

Particularly illuminating in connection to the development of modern Korean literature is chapter three, which examines how 1920s proletarian literature grew out of writers' selection and appropriation of not Soviet proletarian, but prerevolutionary Russian, literature. Korean writers' preference for the nineteenth-century Russian classics over Soviet models, which Cho views as being counterintuitive, is perhaps not as surprising: Soviet literature was still in formation in the 1920s, and it is well-known that the Soviets themselves actively appropriated Tolstoy, Turgenev, and other nineteenth-century writers (Lenin famously called Tolstoy the "mirror of the Russian Revolution"). But the chapter's rich analysis of Korean proletarian writers' (Kim Ki-jin, Cho Myŏng-hui) interpretation of Turgenev sheds fascinating light on the differences between the Korean and Japanese receptions of Russian literature. Cho points out, for example, how the anticolonial Bulgarian protagonist Insarov made Turgenev's novel *On the Eve* much more popular among Koreans in comparison to Japanese (141, 146). In chapter one, Cho masterfully analyzed how Ch'oe Nam-son used Tolstoy's death in 1910 to mourn not only the loss of the Russian writer, but that of the Korean nation as well. Considered together, such examples stimulate further questions on the Russian-Japanese-Korean translation dynamics, one of which could be: Korean intellectuals used Japanese mediation on their journey to Russian literature. Did they ever use Russian literature to address, or talk back to, the Japanese? Was Russian literature, in its turn, ever a medium between Korean and Japanese writers? The exchange

between Kim Ki-jin and the Japanese socialist Aso Hisashi centered on Turgenev, for example, is very interesting in this respect (149).

The final observation concerns the translation of Russian literature in postliberation contemporary South Korea discussed in the epilogue, in which Cho refers to the "continuing Korean practice of translating Russian literature from the Japanese" (175). While this is certainly true to an extent, the rapid transformations following the dissolution of the Cold War order of the last three decades which impacted Korea and beyond have produced an entirely new generation of Russianists/Slavists. Following liberation, with the door to Japan conspicuously shut, Koreans studied Russian literature in Germany and the US in the 1980s, and, after the establishment of Korean-Russian relations, increasingly in Russia and in Korea itself. On the one hand, the image of Russian literature created in the colonial period is still very strong on the popular level. A collection of short stories by Tolstoy, translated by Pak Hyŏng-gyu, a Russianist of the older generation, topped the bestseller list in 2003. On the other hand, there is the publishing company Open Books (*Yeollin chaekdeul*), which was founded in Seoul in 1986 with the express purpose of publishing Russian literature in direct and complete translations. The publications include Maksim Gorky's *Mother* (1989), as well as the Complete Works of Pushkin (1999), and of Dostoevsky (2000). Although it may be too early to gauge the long-term impact of these changes, it is clear that Koreans' understanding of Russian literature today is a result of a complex interaction of historical changes, diverse mediators (U.S. scholarship may now well be the most significant one), and native scholarship.

But these are only further questions and a minor quibble which, needless to say, hardly detract from the value of Cho's meticulously researched, and lucidly written, book. That *Translation's Forgotten History* is a significant and original contribution to translation and comparative literature studies is beyond question. One suspects, though, that its most provocative and profound impact will be on Korean studies, for to rethink translation in the way Cho urges us to means to reexamine and stir up the very roots of modern literature in Korea and confront its

colonial legacy. Japanese mediation in the early twentieth-century Korean encounter with Western modernity is a question (or problem, according to nationalist thinking) that is often ignored, mentioned only in passing, or, if acknowledged and addressed, criticized or lamented by Korean scholars. The beauty of this book is that in squarely addressing the question, it brings into focus the target/receiving culture and restores its agency, in a feat of scholarship that is blissfully free of nationalist assumptions.

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