

Overturning the Center and the Periphery: *Its Significance and Limitations*

Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature, by Heekyoung Cho. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016. 264 pages. ISBN: 9780674660045.

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The Research Trend of Korean Literature Mediated by Translation and *Translation's Forgotten History*

When we recognize, to the utmost, the necessity for our independent literature to express the people's thoughts, emotions, and ideals and simultaneously, investigate carefully the status of the Japanese literary community and its condition of internal existence within the global literary circles, we cannot help but feel shame and humiliation finding ourselves sweetly savoring its lees and brans.¹

Suju Byeon Young-ro wrote in *Dong-A ilbo* (Dong-A Daily) in September 1925 an editorial entitled Samjung yeokjeok munye (Literature and Arts of Triple Translation) which disclosed the bare face of the Korean literary community of the day. The main point he tried to convey in the article was that because Japanese literature, the object of emulation by Korean literature at that time, was nothing but the transplantation of Western literature and

1. Byeon Young-ro, "Samjungyeokjeok munye" (Literature and Arts of Triple Translation), *Dong-A ilbo* (Dong-A Daily), September 2, 1925.

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therefore, what Korean writers were doing amounted to “triple translation” or “triple imitation,” and this called for introspection from Korean writers. As shown in the excerpt, he yearned to separate the Korean literary world from the Japanese. The latter was, to Korean writers, the terrain of learning and at the same time, something to push away even by employing disparaging rhetoric.

Anyway, Byeon’s furious voice attests to the reality of Korean literary circles of the time which were piggybacking on the Japanese. Probably, he was not alone in noticing the phenomenon that what was fashionable among Japanese writers came to catch fad among Korean counterparts with a time lag. His admonishment came in the form of raising a vehement voice against the reality that everyone was aware of but no one could confess to. Later, it was echoed vividly in Im Hwa’s insightful conception of transplanted literature.

However, the history of literary learning or imitation, particularly through the mediation by Japan, was gradually forgotten in the description on the history of modern Korean literature. It would be more accurate to say that it had been wiped out purposefully. As long as the overwhelming influences of Western literature and its surrogate Japanese literature were approved of, the independent identity of Korean literary history would be inevitably threatened. In any case, an implicit collusion was most likely in operation among the stakeholders, causing Byeon’s thundering cry to become unsustainable.

This book takes issue with the phenomenon that the description on the Korean literary history converged only on “Korean literature of pure blood.” It serves for the valid cause of restoring the intentionally forgotten ‘history.’ Moreover, casting doubt on pure-blood Korean literature itself, she pursues intensely to assess what it means to be “unable to be of pure blood,” and this makes her work particularly significant.

To that end, she brings Russian literature to the forefront. This was an inevitable result when observing the modern Korean literary history’s flow. Cho Heekyoung accurately discerns the overarching influence of Russian literature in Korea’s modern literature. Among other things, an innumerable

number of writers of the time as well as those dealt with attentively in the book (e.g., Choe Nam-seon, Yi Gwang-su, Hyun Jin-geon, and Cho Myung-hee) recollected in person on the influence of Russian literature, or addressed it indirectly in their works. Studies assessing the relationship between Russian and Korean modern literature have a long history, including a representative early writing released by H. Kim (1972).² Objective indicators, such as translation statistics, tell the same story. Regarding novel translations of the 1920s when foreign literatures were introduced in throngs, B. Kim (1975) diagnosed that “what is most surprising to us in our investigation up to now is the fact that the foreign literary works introduced to Korea in the 1920s, as far as fictions were concerned, had more Russian novels than British, American, French, or German ones.”³

Considering such circumstances, it is lamentable that extensive research outcomes of sizable volume on Korea’s adoption of Russian literature have emerged only recently. Even so, besides Cho Heekyoung’s work, the synchronic publications in Korea of several books on the subject—including Kwon et al. (2016), Son and Han (2017), and J. Kim (2017b)—indicate that it may be an inevitable consequence in the stream of the research history inside and outside of the Korean Studies community. Of course, if seen separately, research papers released for the past ten years or so have produced more varied outcomes.

Indeed, in the case of *Translation’s Forgotten History*, its publication in the U.S. academic community brings in a new, different context. It is interesting to observe that its main structure is similar to that of Kwon et al. (2016) mentioned above. The main body of the book consists of three chapters, each dealing with the adoption of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenyev in Korea, and that is exactly the same in the latter. The statements in the preface of Kwon et al. (2016) quoted below show that the writers’

2. It is true that Korean writers of the early period of modern literature had great interest in modern Russian literature. Besides, it is also true that modern Russian literature had an absolutely critical influence on realist writers during the years immediately before and after the 1920s and those of proletarian literature of the following period. See H. Kim (1972, 146).

3. See B. Kim (1975, 442).

fundamental awareness of the problem is consistent with Cho Heekyoung's. It is because, in essence, both try to track down and unveil the change in Korean literature brought about by Russian literature under the constraint of Korea's conditions.

Particularly, this area has been a main object of literary analysis from the empiricist and comparative perspectives, but the volume of studies is rather minuscule, and most are elementary explorations based on the empiricist understanding of the causality, flatness and linearity of influences. In examining Korean and Russian novels in a comparative context, the focus is laid on the influence of a writer or a work on another writer or another work in a one-to-one corresponding relationship, that is, on discrete fragmented aspects. In reality, they fail to approach individual facts 'in consideration of the overall context of how a Russian writer or novel was introduced to Korean literature and adopted in its literary tradition and what kinds of refraction it experienced in the process.'⁴

However, looking at the actual outputs produced, only Cho's work seems to stay faithful to the initial problem. That is because while the other piece (Kwon et al. 2016) fails to actually manifest the angle mentioned in the excerpt, ending up with compiling the traits of translations and their critiques in a simple flat manner, Cho's *Translation's Forgotten History* delves into the transformation phase after the adoption. In other words, the two are differentiated in that while only Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev stand out in the former, the latter has selective alterations attempted by Choe Nam-seon, Yi Gwang-su, Hyun Jin-geon, and Cho Myoung-hee as key elements of discussion in each chapter concerned.

Obviously, this research attitude sustained in *Translation's Forgotten History* is not something commonly encountered in the studies on Korean translation literature. It is true that translation studies are being made briskly in recent years, but mainstream research has been focused on making empirical compilations of the characteristics of translations or discovering

4. See Kwon et al. (2016, xiv).

new texts that remain unattended to, put aside by creative texts. Besides, many studies have been concerned with the adoption of knowledge and the formation of modern literary style. While they have been able to build an area of their own, there is a prevailing tendency to simply multiply case studies which are consumed only within the framework of the “study of translation.” In the gaze thrown at creative writing and translation operates a solid hierarchy of the center and the periphery, making attempts to merge the two rather scarce. *Translation’s Forgotten History* is, clearly, quite unusual in the sense of presenting the possibility to break down the hierarchy of creative writing and translation.

Also, the work is efficient in depicting the whole picture, to a certain degree, based on a minimal number of case studies. Its main text consists of three chapters in the following structure.

Table 1. Structure of Three Chapters

Classification	Chapter I	Chapter II	Chapter III
Russian Writer	Tolstoy	Chekhov	Turgenev
Main Adopters	Choe Nam-seon, Yi Gwang-su	Hyun Jin-geon	Cho Myoung-hee
Time Period Concerned	1900s-1910s	1920s	1920s
Related Theme	Images of Intellectuals, Writers and National Literature	Social Phenomena and Journalism	Proletarian Literature Movement
Research Methodology	Examine the Vestiges Revealed in Various Writings	Make 1:1 Comparison of Literary Works and Analyze Trends Reflected in Newspaper Articles	Analyse the Relations of Translation Experience and Creative Writing

Source: Author.

It is well known that just as Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev had their own characteristics, Yi Gwang-su, Hyun Jin-geon, and Cho Myoung-hee are representative of divergent trends in the history of modern Korean

literature. Avoiding an across-the-board approach for analysis, the author selects themes according to each adopter's traits and core texts in discussion and applies a different methodology for each theme. Also, the application of the concept "translation" shows variances across the chapters. In Chapter I, it is construed as the mode that Choe Nam-seon, and Yi Gwang-su selectively borrowed Tolstoy's stance and dictions. In Chapter II, it refers to Hyun Jin-geon's *Bul* (Fire) itself as a "productive appropriation" of Chekhov's *Sleepy*. In Chapter III, it encompasses the translation of *On the Eve* by Cho Myeong-hee herself and her creation of *Nakdonggang* (Nakdong river) as its variation. Thanks to those multifarious approaches, the book constructs an intensive discourse based only on the three case studies.

Another merit of the work is the depth of analysis. For example, it is quite impressive that Chapter II does not finish with the comparison of *Sleepy* and *Bul* and goes further to compare more mediums and foreign cases. Things like this buttress the author's main argument: "A translation or adaptation is situated in reciprocal relations not only with the source text it utilizes but also in the further rewritings that have been, and are still yet to be, created" (p. 130). In the comparison in Chapter III of the original text of *On the Eve*, its translation published serially in *Chosun ilbo* (Chosun Daily), and *Nakdonggang*, she pulls through a very persuasive interpretation by looking into the rationale of praxis held by the proletarian literary camp in colonial Korea and the switch to a short story format.

What Is Lacking in the Utilization of Recent Studies

Despite those achievements, however, I would be remiss if I fail to point out things that remain to be desired. Let me mention, roughly, two points. Firstly, hardly any review on the recent translations of literature in the Korean Studies community has been conducted. This implies that the starting point of the author's critique—that is, "Despite the fact that translation was an indispensable element of and process in the formation of both the concept (or consciousness) and the substance of national literature,

the process itself has been diminished and forgotten—or intentionally erased by history writing that portrays national literature as an autonomously developed outcome.”⁵—may be no longer a valid assessment for the current Korean Studies community. Since the mid 1990s, the research trend of Korean literature has intensified in the direction of overthrowing the ethnocentric perspective, which is no different from disintegrating the nationalist ideology cumulated in literary studies. Among the research trends derived from it are East Asian Studies, which relativizes “what is uniquely Korean,” and “translation (literature) studies,” which relativize the “Korean canons and canon writers.” Although the author acknowledges that the Korean Studies community has actively explored the problem of translation since the 2000s,⁶ most recent research outcomes published since 2010 do not appear anywhere in the book. This is in contrast with the fact that some studies published in the United States cite research findings as recent as 2015.

Following her arguments in the introduction of the book, it is very likely for one to perceive that translation is still treated as an insignificant issue in the Korean Studies community. For instance, prior studies examined with focus in the subchapter, “Problematic Assumptions in Studies of Translation in Korea,” are limited to B. Kim (1975) which was released over four decades ago. Even if quite recent studies by Park Jin-young and Choi Tae-won are mentioned briefly, they are readily rejected for treating the concept “adaptation” as something tentative and preset.⁷

5. See the preface (p. x-xi).

6. In the 2000s, however, Korean studies scholars in Korea and the United States began to pay serious attention to the issue of translation in modern Korean society. The topic has become a valuable line of inquiry among a number of groups of scholars trying to understand the fundamental characteristics of modern Korea (p. xi).

7. This assessment needs reconsideration. The problem of narrowness in the concept “adaptation,” which Cho Heekyoung points out, arises inevitably, as soon as Park Jin-young and Choi Tae-won use the term to refer to novel adaptations published serially in *Maeil sinbo* (Daily News) in the 1910s. While Cho Heekyoung’s concept of adaptation is derived from translation of a macro sense, Pak and Choi utilize the term while employing text groups of a certain time period as the object of study; therefore, they are not at the same dimension from

However, for the past ten years or so, studies of translation in the Korean Studies community have strived as much as *Translation's Forgotten History* to restore the “forgotten history of translation” and impart new significance to it. Particularly, in the sense of investigating the relations between Korean literature and the adoption of foreign literature via Japan, studies by Cho Jae-ryong, Hwang Ho-duk, Ku In-mo, and Son Sung-jun as well as Park Jin-young mentioned earlier are on the same line as that of Cho Heekyoung.⁸ Their research goals do not lie in the exploration of translation per se, but in new reflections on modern Korean literature through the medium of translation. Despite the presence of those researches, however, Cho's achievement should be duly recognized for its rarity and creativity. Nonetheless, I must point out that incessant efforts made by Korean Studies circles are invisible in the composition of the book.

That may do a disservice to the enhancement of Cho's work or its effective communication. J. Kim (2007a) discusses the topic of Yi Gwang-su and Tolstoy in a chapter of a book, just like Cho Heekyoung. Despite the overlay in the object of study between the two authors, they each have their own realms and strengths. Yet their use of preexisting studies shows great differences. Planting throughout the text recent studies on such topics as “Tolstoy portrayed in the magazine *Sonyeon* (Youth),” “Korean-style adoption of *Resurrection*,” “Yi Gwang-su and Tolstoy,” and “Yi Gwang-su and fascism,” Kim jin-yeong uses them as a thrust to bring out his messages.⁹ In

the outset. For that reason, even if the term ‘adaptation’ is used in a limiting fashion by the latter, it is too rushed to judge that it diminishes the potential of translation literature. To take an example, Pak's core argument is that novel adaptations came ahead as the preparatory stage for the appearance of *Mujeong* (the Heartless). Although that could be seen as an attitude of endorsing the linear development of literary history, even so, no, because of that, it appears as an active attempt to incorporate the potentiality of novel adaptations into the history of mainstream literature, contrary to Cho Heekyoung's criticism that “their accounts thus reiterate the common teleological perspective that excludes translated texts from consideration as legitimate constituents of modern Korean literature” (p. 28).

8. While it is unnecessary to give detailed accounts on related studies, let me mention as a representative one, Cho (2011). Meanwhile, a group of researchers studying translation in Korea—including those I mentioned here—recently published in joint efforts the book. See Y. Kim et al. (2017).

9. Refer to J. Kim's two books (2007a; 2007b).

contrast, Cho Heekyoung's discussions on similar themes do not present the proper research history comparisons to help gauge how advanced her assertions are. In the same context, if she had referred to existing researches of direct relevance in Chapter III on Cho Myeong-hee's translation of *On the Eve*, she could have arrived at a more fine-grained and richer interpretation than what it is now by merging it with her own perspective.¹⁰

The Problem of the Composition of Comparison

The other thing I would like to point out is the possibility of scaling down the whole picture, which is embedded in the composition of the book. Here, "the whole picture" concerns, in a macro sense, the images of "Russian literature" and "Korean literature" formulated in the book, and in a micro one, it refers to individual "adoptees" and their "adopters."

Let us first examine the macro composition of the study. As it is suggested in the subtitle, "Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature," *Translation's Forgotten History* is based on the explicit thesis that "Russian literature mediated by Japan made an enormous influence on the formation of modern Korean literature." In the present context of research outcomes cumulated by translation studies, any researcher in this field would agree to the argument. Yet the cases analyzed in the book are not really sufficient to explain what ought to be explained within the structure, i.e., i) the "image of Russian literature" introduced to Korea through Japan and ii) the "image of Korean literature" formed by adopting Russian literature through Japan.

We can probe the reasons by examining what is "not included" in i) and ii) in a micro sense. Gorky, whose works were translated and emulated

10. I showed in a study that the reason why the printed version of Cho Myeong-hee's translation of *On the Eve* in *Chosun ilbo* suffered in quality as it progressed toward the later part was directly related with the inspection by the colonial authorities. I also investigated the fact that, faced with the problem, she published a new translation in book form and how it circumvented the inspection. See Son (2015).

as extensively as those of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev, and Dostoevsky who exerted a great influence on many Korean writers, like Yeom Sang-seop, even if his novels had not been yet translated directly into Korean, are excluded in i), which has allegedly been “recovered” from “oblivion” by the author. In addition, because her analytic focus lies on novels, the reverberations of Russian poetry, play and criticism are out of the loop. Considering the facts that Turgenev’s proses took up the largest share of foreign poems translated in Korea during the 1920s and that criticisms by Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gorky were translated steadily, the author does not seem to discuss sufficiently the diverse genres of Russian literature adopted in Korea and their diffusion effects.

Moreover, because the discussion concentrates on the conditions up to the mid 1920s, what happened after that period remains unknown. The fact that colonial Korea was once connected with the discourse initiated in the Soviets of the same period—e.g., the controversy over socialist realism in the 1930s—is not mentioned anywhere. Meanwhile, what is omitted in ii) are names such as Hong Myeong-hee, Jin Hak-mun, Kim Eok, Yeom Sang-seop, Choi Seo-hai, Kim Ki-jin, Pak Yeoung-hee, Na Do-hyang, Ju Yo-han, Im Hwa, Yi Tai-jun, Ham Dai-hun, Chai Man-sik, and Kim Tai-jun, who also ranked among the main players of modern Korean literature and translated and emulated Russian literature as much as those key figures of the book. Even if some of them are mentioned in the book, it is far from sufficient, considering that each one actually had a conjoining point with Russian literature as much as Choe Nam-seon, Yi Gwang-su, Hyun Jin-geon, and Cho Myeong-hee.

In short, the book’s depictions of i) and ii) are mere representations based on the author’s own criteria, which are different from the whole picture in which objectivity is assured. Of course, one should not attribute blame entirely to the author. The whole picture of Russian literature transmitted to Korea is so profound and extensive that anyone would find it almost impossible to command a complete view of it. Moreover, the influences of Russian literature on the formation of modern Korean literature were, obviously, exerted in complex circuits like the sheer number

of adopters listed above. Under such circumstances, Cho Heekyoung's case studies can be viewed, albeit with some missing points, as the outcome of significant efforts to represent the whole picture studded with complexities based on her own criteria.

However, even if such facts are to be recognized, the case studies presented by the author in Chapters II and III are schematized in a 1:1 format between the 'adopted Russian writers' and the "adopting Korean writers," which exhibits another possibility of shrinking the whole picture. The two chapters, which are built on the frame of "Chekhov to Hyun Jin-geon" and "Turgenev to Cho Myeong-hee," respectively, make it difficult to imagine adopting Chekhov and Turgenev in a fashion other than that of Hyun Jin-geon and Cho Myeong-hee, respectively, and to imagine their literary worlds beyond the auras of Chekhov and Turgenev.

To question the one-to-one corresponding relationship also means to take issue with the fact that there is a lack of sufficient investigation on "the mediator, Japan," which is one of the three interlocked axes. Main analyses in the two chapters are made in the format of Russian novels vs. Korean novels, while Japan serves as an add-on in the interpretation. As a result, major ingredients that remain in the end in each chapter are a Russian and a Korean writer.

What is really problematic here is the possibility of refracting the whole picture by making the comparison relying on a single writer. Yet Chapter I is different. In Chapter I, plural adopters (Choe Nam-seon and Yi Gwang-su) are treated relatively equally, which reminds us of the fact that Tolstoy could be appropriated differently depending on the adopter, without an explicit mention of it. Furthermore, it has a positive effect in the sense that it leads to pondering on the whole picture of the complex literary community of colonized Korea. On the other hand, the analytic focus in Chapters II and III is concentrated on an individual writer, Hyun Jin-geon and Cho Myeong-hee, respectively. Here the relationship between the "adopter" and the "adoptee" is construed as a sort of a symbolic corresponding pair; thereby, "individual particularity," i.e., Hyun Jin-geon's adoption of Chekhov or Cho Myeong-hee's adoption of Turgenev, implicates the danger of immediate

substitution by the imaginary framework of “Korean particularity.”

Further, the one-to-one composition can simplify the images of Hyun Jin-geon and Cho Myeong-hee, irrespective of the author’s intention. Chapter II describes that Hyun Jin-geon, who is introduced with the appellation, “Korea’s Chekhov,” arrived at the creation of an entirely new female character in Korean novels and the writing of *Bul* by appropriating *Sleepy*. In Chapter III, Cho Myeong-hee not only translated Turgenev’s novel, *On the Eve*, but also produced her own novel *Nakdonggang* by playing a variation on that piece. I consent to the author’s view. Nonetheless, the more she dwells on the relationships of the corresponding pairs in analysis, the more it reinforces the effect of diminishing the images of Hyun Jin-geon and Cho Myeong-hee.

Strictly speaking, Chekhov was, to Hyun Jin-geon, one of several writers of emulation, and so was Turgenev to Cho Myeong-hee. I do not deny the fact that the presence of the two Russian writers was indispensable in the formation of their literary worlds; all I want to emphasize is that the presence of other writers of “foreign origin” should not be forgotten. To take an example, if one makes an observation out of Cho Heekyoung’s framework, one can see that Turgenev had a greater influence than Chekhov on Hyun’s literary world. Hyun already contributed translations of Turgenev’s *First Love* and *Rudin* in *Chosun ilbo* when he published *Bincheo* (Poor Man’s Wife). His first full-length novel, *Jisae-neun angae* (Overnight Fog), had clear vestiges of Chekhov’s *On the Eve*, whereas most of his short stories written in the later period were close to colonized Korean versions of Turgenev’s *A Hunter’s Sketches*.¹¹ Cho Myeong-hee was, as the author mentions, inclined towards Gorky in thought (p. 161), and in her novels the traces of Gorky were as dense as those of Turgenev.¹² She also published a translation of Tolstoy’s play, *The Living Corpse*, before translating *On the Eve*. As shown in those examples, there are other corresponding pairs hidden behind those highlighted by the author, even when the search is confined to

11. Refer to Son (2014a).

12. Refer to Son (2014b).

Russian literature. A complete understanding of their literary worlds, which were forged by absorbing the literatures of numerous countries in the world, including Russia, duly requires to explore world literatures.¹³ This fact—which the author must know, too—remains unclear in her analysis of Hyun Jin-geon and Cho Myeong-hee as currently presented in the book. In short, a “one-to-many” composition, not a “one-to-one,” would be more effective to obtain a more realistic and intensive view of the whole picture of Korean literature. And a “many-to-one” composition would be more beneficial to look into an individual adopter’s literary world in depth.

The reason for such discussions on what is lacking in the author’s work—despite the fact that she expands the horizon of understanding Korean literature and writers—is, on the contrary, that I fully agree to her viewpoint and direction of study. The symbolic significance of the cases analyzed in the book is far from cursory. Notwithstanding, I believe that what she tries to investigate from the inception, i.e., to elucidate the “image of Korean literature” which was formed by adopting Russian literature through Japan, still feels incomplete. The fact that Chapter II and Chapter III investigate only a part of Hyun Jin-geon and Cho Myeoung-hee, respectively, has implications for the entire composition of the book. It means that “modern Korean literature” which will be reestablished by overturning the center and the periphery calls for full-scale comparative studies beyond the category of Russian literature. I do not doubt that the author will continue to tread on the remaining path and I hope that my review would be of assistance in the long journey.

13. An effective piece of circumstantial evidence is Hyun Jin-geon the translator. In my view, Hyun Jin-geon is more suitable than Cho Myeong-hee for the research method of attending to the association between translation experience and creative writing. To list the nationalities of foreign novels he translated, there are Russian, German, British, French, and Polish. Examining several cases, I have found that his personal experience of translation, small or large, left various traces ingrained in his world of creative writing.

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