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Voice from the Source

My fateful Korean adventure began in 2010, and I never would have dreamed back then that someday, I would be receiving a translation award.

I would not be here today if I hadn’t received a scholarship for foreign students given by the Korean government, which gave me the opportunity to live and study in Korea for the past three years. During this time, I fell in love with Korea’s culture, and naturally enough, with its literature. What has most attracted me to Korean literature has been the fact that it carries within it the very narrative and thoughts of the Korean people. It’s my belief that when Korean literature is at its most Korean, it’s at its most beautiful. This is the presumption most Korean literary translators work from, and it is also the core ideal behind the success of Korean literature overseas. But how do we go about realizing this ideal?

We literary translators must become great actors. We have to “act” what is written in another language in our native tongue, and do so in such a way that we must find and foremost listen closely to the voice of the source text and hear the voice we find there in our own translations.

In our work, we are faced with countless tasks such as these. What makes our job so difficult is that from an objective standpoint, Korean is, compared to European languages, much more complex and difficult. The Korean language is also rich with synonyms. If two words are translated as the same word in their dictionary entries, how are we to tell the difference between them? What are their subtle differences? What are their semantic or stylistic differences? Any single word that represents a feeling is like an ocean to a translator. To say nothing of the honorifics and polite forms, and of the most difficult aspect of all: stylistic allusions to other literary texts. How do I capture and express all of that in Polish?

Perhaps if we could see the foreign culture in question from within our own parts, it would be easier to understand. I believe that in aiding this process, we as translators must try to strike the perfect balance between being faithful to the source text while providing our own interpretation.

And to see one’s translation being distinguished from others is surely one of the greatest rewards a translator can receive. That is how I feel about this moment. I am sincerely thankful to LTI Korea, the judges, and to the many people who have given me the opportunity to pursue my interests. I hope this award is the beginning of an exciting journey into inspiring interest in Korean literature among Polish readers and to seeing this interest spread throughout Europe and the world.

by Katarzyna Rolinska

The 15th International Translation and Publication Workshop

The New Avant-garde: Classical Literature Translators

If translators are traitors in the common Italian quip “traduttore = traditore,” then translators of classical literature are imposters. Not only do they betray the original text, they present on the pedestal of the “classical” a translated text whose linguistic texture, cultural status, and historical trajectory cannot possibly be adequately transposed into any other language. The complexities a translator, especially of non-Western classical literatures into Western languages, has to take into consideration are daunting.

Take prose: attempting to make palpable the patterns of a Chinese “regulated poem” in English can only result in hopelessly exoticizing antiparliamentism in our historical moment, where novelistic prose reigns supreme and almost all acceptable poetry has become free verse; yet, as translators and readers do we not miss the poem’s “heartbeat”? Or consider register: we want the translator of a stīpa to create a sense of accessible time lag, some taste of our taste for the “classical”, yet, the fine line between cozy contemporarization and unnecessary dusty distance is thin and subjective.

Or, more worrisome, think about the precarious relation between translated text and implicit subtext: a translation of classical texts laden with references to an earlier literary repertoire requires footnotes explaining cultural specifics or unpacking literary references; the translation of classical poetry can become more footnote than poem. Worse yet, the Anglophone reader who needs to laboriously read up on literary repertoire lacks the cognitive reflexes of the native reader of the past to read the poem through the literary repertoire, as metaphor, analogy, allusion, or allegory, antithesis, or remnostoration.

The act of understanding a translated poem goes far beyond explicable knowledge and in the eyes of the Anglophone reader a simple classical poem can look artificially complex and “erudite,” a combined effect of the abundance of footnotes and lack of cognitive wiring. There is a challenge of yet greater order: How to create a “translation hierarchy” reflecting the genre hierarchy of the literary culture which produced our original text? The translation of authoritative Sino-Korean poetry (banjo), such as a piece by Yi Kyubo composed at royal command, requires a different register than the translation of a stīpa by the gyeong Hwang Jins, which is in a different direction from a more scholarly vernacular kabo by Jeong Cheol on, yet more different, from the haenyeo script Song of Chungjang. Even the translation of a Chinese-style (hansum) version of The Story of King Gilding requires a different texture than the translation of a vernacular version. Ambitious translators translating these various genres and styles struggle with how to accommodate the genre hierarchy of the original text’s literary culture along a spectrum of "Englishes" broad enough to capture the enormous linguistic and stylistic variety of “classical” texts.

This is a particular challenge because of the different language development in East Asia and Europe. Vernacular literature and vernacularization emerged several centuries earlier in Europe than in East Asia; unlike Latin in Europe which increasingly lost its power since the eighteenth century, literary Chinese continued to be a creative literary force in East Asia.
Throughout the early twentieth century. Yet, unlike in Europe, where the process of Latin’s decline was much slower and more cultural and political, the rapid vernacularisation movements emerging around the turn of the twentieth century in East Asia were a crucial point in the agenda of nationalistic movements. This led to an ideological marginalisation of Chinese-style literatures in particular in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and attempts to construct a national canon based on pre-modern vernacular traditions. In Japan, which has the best-documented, most continuous and richest vernacular tradition, the first history of Japanese literature of 1850 categorically divides Chinese-style literature and enthroned literature written in classical Japanese as the legitimate representative of national literature.

How do these macro-historical developments affect today’s translators? East Asia’s earlier vernacularisation means that for translating Chinese-style poems today English has far fewer registers available than the modern East Asian languages. Whereas Latin’s "Chinese-style" fiction is still a prominent part of translating classical poetry into Japanese or Korean, translating with a similar amount of Latin into English would probably land us somewhere with John Dryden in the seventeenth century—certainly a register extinct for today’s readers. The much more sudden and politicised demise of East Asia’s venerable lingua franca of literary Chinese has led to a public marginalisation of the Chinese-style literatures. Because education in classical Japanese literature (and less so Korean) does not include sufficient training in literary Chinese and the Chinese canon any more, competency in hard to earn and translators of East Asia’s Chinese-style literatures into English are accordingly feeble. Collectives memory is waxing. This is part of a powerful macro-historical shift: the loss of East Asia’s distinctive bi-literacy, the inscription of texts along a spectrum ranging from orthodox Chinese-style poems to much moister hybrid vernacularised forms of prose. The dynamic between the "cosmopolitan" language of literary Chinese and "vernacular" forms of writing, which has been central to Japanese and Korean literary culture, has for the first time in history disappeared, leading to a flattening of linguistic registers in modern Japanese and Korean, although much less advanced than in contemporary English.

These dramatic macro-historical shifts not only complicate the translation of classical literatures, but also their global propagation. If we wanted to stay true to the genre hierarchy of pre-modern Korea, we should put han’guk first by far, followed by sijo and kusa, and classical literatures in literary Chinese and the vernacular. But I made radically different choices when selecting the Korean texts for the new edition of the Norton Anthology of World Literature (forthcoming 2018). As about 75 percent of the 100,000 to 120,000 students taking introductory World Literature courses based on anthologies use the Norton every year, my choices have powerful impact on the image of classical Korean literature for the younger generation raised in the US. I chose the adventurous The Story of Hong Gildong, selections from pansori, The Song of Choson, and from The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong, female autobiographical writing which does not even belong to any significant traditional genre. When we first redesigned the Norton in 2012 to become more worldly and worthy of the name, we had to square the circle: choosing works important in their native tradition and representative of its culture, which are at the same time a "good read" for undergraduates at US colleges. Sometimes the absence of reliable and exciting translations sealed the fate of a text that would have belonged in the anthology.

How can these works nevertheless represent "classical Korean literature" today? As we live in the age of the novel, poetry and the genres on top of the traditional genre hierarchy are a hard sell to students; unless it is haiku, the only East Asian genre that has made it globally and that everybody raised in the US will remember fondly from their humble haiku exercises in school. Poetry would more accurately represent classical Korean culture. But the bliss of rebelling against social discrimination while staying a filial son in Hong Gildong, the admirable resistance of a lower-class female folk-hero who lectures the Confucian officials on what Confucianism really means in Choson, and the tortured voice of a royal woman embroiled in the most tragic case of fikik in Chinese history in Lady Hyegyeong’s Memoirs are not just riveting reads for students; they also represent "national literature" as it came to constitute Koreanness since the modern period (except for the more complex case of the Memoirs). Ironically they, rather than the literat genres of classical Korean culture, will speak more easily for Korean "heritage" on a global stage. World literature, with its paradoxical thirst for ethnic identity, makes us abandon the historical reality of "classical culture" for the modern construct of "classical (national) literature"—a sad fact, although it does not diminish our reading pleasures of the fantastic pieces featured in the Norton.

While I fervently believe that East Asia’s Chinese-style literatures deserve much more attention from both scholars and translators, this is not the moment to pit one part of classical literary heritage against another. Rather, the central question is whether the translation of classical literatures should continue to emphasize the scholarly over the creative and the antiquarian over the appropriative modernizing, a tendency which for classical Chinese poetry took over in the 1970s, as an effect of the increasing professionalization of the field of Chinese literature. No question, we want a degree of accuracy that measures us that we are indeed reaching into those ancient worlds rather than into the box of the translator’s antics. But was the earlier moment around the mid-twentieth century when American modernism was kissed by the muse of East Asian classical poetry, like with Ezra Pound or the beatniks, not a golden age of true poetic relevance of the non-Western classical other? Nostalgia will not take us far, but a sense of a new global responsibility in the twenty-first century will. Translating modern literature is closer to linguistic translation; though not linear, contemporaneity creates a common ground for global fans and consumers, as the Haruki Murakami phenomenon shows. In contrast, translating classical literature is always an experiment in metonymic cultural translation, an act of mediation not just between works and languages, but cultures and world-views enshrined in language.