

BOOK REVIEW

Serk-Bae SUH, *Treacherous Translation: Culture, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Korea and Japan from the 1910s to the 1960s*. The Seoul-California Series in Korean Studies No. 6. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 222 pages. ISBN: 978-1938169-06-9 (Paperback). 25.45 USD.

Serk-Bae Suh's book, *Treacherous Translation: Culture, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Korea and Japan from the 1910s to the 1960s*, examines the key role that the act of translation played in shaping Korea's culture, nationalism, and literature in conjunction with colonialism during and after Japanese rule (1910-1945). Suh focuses on works of literature, including literary history, play scripts, critical writings, and poems, because he sees literature as a major "cultural institution in which nationalism and colonialism converge" (xv). By tracing colonial Korea's cultural difference from Japan through literature, he critiques a foundational premise of translation—the "equal exchange" and "reciprocal relationship" between the colonizer and the colonized (xviii). As such, his work is a meaningful addendum to the growing body of scholarship on colonial translation in East Asia which serves to maintain a dialogue with existing colonial and post-colonial studies by Bhabha and others.

Treacherous Translation consists of five chapters of case studies, along with a preface and an introduction in which Suh lays out the critical discourses by Levinas, Marx, and Derrida as points of engagement for the different cases of colonial translation he examines. According to Suh, "the colonizers think, speak, and act on behalf of the colonized" through translation (xix), and their mode of thinking occludes the existence of other beings. In order to criticize colonial domination, Suh adopts Levinasian ethics, which underlines the alterity of the other. If Suh's use of Levinas is concerned with the ontological context, that of Derrida is centered on linguistic identity. According to Derrida, there is an always a slippage in the delivery of meaning because meaning is expressed through signs and those signs are expressed only by other signs (10). By highlighting this chain of signs that complicates transparent communication between the colonizer and the colonized, Suh challenges the authorial voice of the colonizer in translation. Lastly, Marx is used to debunk the premise of "equivalences between languages" in translation (xviii). Contextualizing the idea of equal and reciprocal exchange in translation in the structure of colonialism, Suh accounts for why Japan failed to understand colonial Korea through translation during and after colonial rule.

The central question of Chapter 1, "Translation and the Community of Love: Hosoi Hajime and Translating Korea" is why this Japanese socialist sympathetic towards colonial Korea failed to form a harmonious community between the two ethnicities. With the case of Hosoi Hajime (1886-1934), Suh problematizes the issues of reciprocity presumed in translation. As the prolific translator of Korean classics and author of *Chōsen bunkashiron* (Treatise on the History of Korean

Culture, 1911), Hosoi sympathized with Koreans and wanted to “build a genuine community” through love (*ai*) (21). According to Suh, Hosoi’s sympathy for Koreans could not be reciprocated for two reasons. The first is Hosoi’s dual stance regarding the function of translation. While assuming that his translation of Korean classics would contribute to Japanese understanding of Korea’s national character, Hosoi disregarded Korean intellectuals’ translations of Chinese classics as blind imitations of Chinese civilization (28). Secondly, Hosoi’s idea of love was “modeled after patriarchy or hierarchical fraternity between siblings”—Korea was presented as a thirteen-year-old girl and Japan as her parent or older brother (37). Although Hosoi idealized a reciprocating community between Korea and Japan based on love, his act of translation, Suh argues, only confirmed the hierarchical difference between them.

In Chapter 2, “Traacherous Translation: The 1938 Japanese-Language Theatrical Version of the Korean Tale *Ch’unhyangjŏn*,” Suh attempts to read Marx through Levinas in order to critique “the idea of equal exchange based on reciprocity” assumed in translation (47). *Ch’unhyangjŏn* (The Tale of Spring Fragrance), which Chang Hyŏkchu (1905-1998) translated into Japanese and Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-1977) tinged with the Kabuki style, was harshly criticized by Korean audiences for its lack of originality. In this case of translating a Korean folktale, Suh finds a homology between translation and the colonial assimilation policy. Translation intends to “bridge the difference between two languages” but ends up “point[ing] out those very differences, so, too, colonialism aims at erasure of difference between the colonized and the colonizer while simultaneously retaining discriminatory practices” (59-60). Referring back to Levinas and Marx, Suh explains why the colonizer’s projection of the equal and symmetrical exchange is doomed to fail.

If chapters 1 and 2 are focused on the Japanese intellectuals who interacted with Korean culture through translation, Chapter 3, “The Location of ‘Korean’ Culture: Ch’oe Chaesŏ and Korean Literature at a Time of Transition,” turns to the logic of a Korean critic’s embrace of a Japan-led East Asian future. Ch’oe Chaesŏ (1908-1964) was a renowned Korean critic, well-versed in English literature. He shifted from a belief in adopting Western civilization for the promotion of Korean culture to the idea of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere,” claiming to overcome the West, which now became the “root of totalitarianism,” extreme individualism, and “regressive ethnic nationalism” in the 1940s (81). While oscillating between these two contending ideological poles, the superiority of Western civilization and that of Japanese culture, Ch’oe searched for a third way—arguing for the uniqueness of Korean culture and at the same time, accepting Japanese political dominance in Korea. Unlike Bhabha who detects subtle resistance in the ambivalent mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized, Suh finds the colonized’s conformist rhetoric in Ch’oe’s ambivalent stance (89). Furthermore, Suh elaborates on why such ambivalence was not effective at justifying the colonized’s collaboration with colonial rule while referring to Derrida’s indeterminacy of meaning. According to Derrida, writing adds what speech lacks, and at the

same time, it substitutes for what is already in speech. The oscillation between supplement and substitution makes meanings ambiguous. The signified is always deferred because the signifier is replaced with another sign. The referent Japan is undetermined in Ch'oe's compliance with Japan's assimilation policy.

Chapter 4, "Translation and Its Post-Colonial Discontents: The Postwar Controversy over Tōma Seita's Reading of Kim Soun's Japanese Translations of Korean Poetry," again deals with a Japanese leftist intellectual who could not fully comprehend Korea through translation, but this time during the post-war era. Tōma Seita (b. 1913) attempted to locate the collective identity and sentiment of Korean poems to establish a bulwark against postwar American imperialism and prewar ultra-nationalism. A conflict arose when Tōma read Pak Yongch'ol's "Kohyang" (Hometown), which Kim Soun (1908-1981) had translated, albeit with his own liberal embellishments. Kim translated the Korean line, "I wonder [...] if the brook near the village has changed its course" into Japanese as "I wonder if the village well has been moved" (121, 117). By creatively picturing a community of villagers gathering around a well, the everlasting and changeless lifeline for the people, Tōma developed his image of Korean identity. And yet, Kim expressed his rejection of such a national allegorical reading, denying the identification of Koreanness with the static image of the well, and pointing out that the nature of the brook in the Korean version is constantly moving and changing. Here Suh again brings in Levinas who negated any attempts to totalize individuality, and with such logic, criticizes progressive Japanese intellectuals' search for national allegory in Korean works. Similar to the postwar Japanese pursuit of national identity, Korea also developed strong attachment to linguistic nationalism during the post-liberation era. With the case of the bilingual poet Kim Suyōng (1921-1968), who thought in Japanese first and translated the ideas into Korean later, Suh debunks the monolithic premise that there is a strong tie between national sentiment and mother tongue in Chapter 5, "Toward a Monolingual Society: South Korean Linguistic Nationalism and Kim Suyōng's Resistance to Monolingualism."

Recently, a growing number of books and articles on Korean literature have adopted transnational perspectives. For instance, the studies "Rewriting Chekhov" (2008) by Heekyoung Cho, *Empire of Texts in Motion* (2009) by Karen Thornber, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea* (2012) by Theodore Hughes, and *The Proletarian Wave* (2015) by Sunyoung Park, have positioned Korean literature in the larger context of East Asia or beyond and traced the meaning of cultural interactions between different regions. Together with this body of transcultural scholarship, Suh's *Treacherous Translation* provides a useful lens to explore the translational effects colonial translation brought into both Korea and Japan during and after the colonial period. Especially Suh's introduction of the Japanese writers and thinkers and their intellectual dialogues with Korean writers is very informative to scholars of Korean literature, who tend to have some difficulty handling Japanese-language materials.

Despite the aforementioned usefulness, various aspects of Suh's book also

leave something to be desired. Since Karen Thornber already mentioned those points in her review,¹ let me simply recapitulate them here: 1) lack of engagement with the field of translation studies, especially with regard to colonialism; 2) repeated returns to and heavy reliance on Western thinkers, such as Marx, Levinas, and Derrida; and 3) not adequately engaging with scholarship in “intra-East Asian literary and cultural exchange” (2-3). I agree that if Suh’s book had incorporated Thornber’s points, it would have been more complete. Yet, *Treacherous Translation* is itself worth reading because Suh’s engagement with modernity and colonialism pushes readers to expand their horizons to think about the function of cultural translation beyond East Asia. One relevant case can be found in the Latin American context, especially the “Modernity/Coloniality” group.

Arturo Escobar well summarizes the rise of a new paradigm aiming to dismantle the “great modernist narratives (Christianity, liberalism, and Marxism)” in his essay “Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise” (2007, 180). Against the backdrop of liberation theory, dependency theory, and subaltern studies from the 1960s through the 1990s, a group of Latin American scholars came to debunk the eurocentric mode of thinking, in particular, the “linear sequence linking Greece, Rome, Christianity, and modern Europe” (184). Moving further, scholars like Walter D. Mignolo, in *The Idea of Latin America* (2005), argued that the idea of America as a continent culturally inferior to Europe, was invented more than discovered, and that this was the condition for capitalist expansion as well as for structuring coloniality as a hidden part of modernity (xii, xix). Coloniality cannot be isolated from modernity in this modern world system, and in his eyes, “the genocide of Indians and African slaves [is] the very foundation of ‘modernity,’ more so than the French or Industrial revolution” (xiii). Seeing Korea’s colonization from this Latin American perspective, one may be curious of the position of Korea vis-à-vis Japan, which was not part of the West but was still a colonizer. Considering this, would one still want to locate the failure of forming a linguistically equivalent community in the impossibility of reciprocating and equalizing the exchange between Korea and Japan? In other words, if inequality, hierarchy, and asymmetry are already embedded in the pursuit of modernity as Escobar and Mignolo point out, on what theoretical platforms can we build our critical understanding of Korea’s colonization under Japan? What role did translation play in this?

Another domain where we may think of Korea’s cultural translation of modernity differently is recent scholarship on the European Enlightenment. Against the premise that the Enlightenment was an intra-European phenomena, some have found multicultural transactions, particularly with Asia, including China, India, and Persia. Voltaire (1694-1778), for instance, was a Sinophile and is known for the saying: “the East is the civilization to which the West owes

¹ Karen Thornber, “Review of Suh, Serk-Bae, *Treacherous Translation: Culture, Nationalism, and Colonialism in Korea and Japan from the 1910s to the 1960s*.” *H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews*, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=42396>.

² J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 3.

everything.”² In fact, he idealized Confucianism as a remedy for the religious strife between the Catholic Church and Protestants in France. Of course, this was another extreme that sought to highlight the difference between the East and the West; however, this comprehensive understanding of Western modernity as a multicultural hybrid within and without shakes the monolithic imagery of the West that Said-like orientalism had objectified. How can one situate the scholarship on Korea’s cultural transition of modernity in the long lineage of what Clarke calls “oriental enlightenment,” if any? Suh’s book thus draws our attention to the still-yet-to-know terrain of modernity and coloniality.

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