

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

New Directions in Korean Literary Studies

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Heekyoung Cho. *Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 264 pp. \$40 (cloth).

Dafna Zur. *Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 304 pp. \$65 (cloth).

This is a great time to be a scholar of modern Korean literature in North America. Over the last five years, a number of fine monographs have been published, including English-language studies by Hanscom (2013), Suh (2013), Hughes (2014), Poole (2014), Park (2015), Kwon (2015), and Lee (2015). Because of them, we now have an excellent understanding of the emergence of modern Korean literature during the first half of the twentieth century as an institution created within a charged force field shaped as intensely by nationalism as colonialism, by capitalism as socialism, and by tradition as revolution. More specifically, these studies have shed light on critical issues relevant to the domain of literary production, such as language ideologies and reform, practices and theories of translation, and material conditions of publishing and censorship, as well as questions of genre and medium. They have also helped us to situate the formation of modern Korean literature within global flows and comparative horizons, whether of the proletarian wave or global modernism.

The two books under consideration in this essay expand on such scholarship by taking a more specialized approach, focusing on two bodies of texts that had previously received only fleeting attention: Russian literature in the case of Heekyoung Cho's *Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature*, and Korean children's literature in the case of Dafna Zur's *Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea*. Whereas scholars have long

appreciated the vital importance of each of these genres for understanding the formation of modern Korean literature, neither had yet merited a book-length study in English. Thus, in addition to providing valuable scholarship, these books may be viewed as exciting signs of the growth and maturation of the field.

In *Translation's Forgotten History*, Heekyoung Cho argues for the need to accord translation “due attention as a constituent force in the formation of modern Korean literature” (27), and identifies nineteenth-century Russian literature as the most important body of foreign texts to be enthusiastically imported by Korean writers during the formative first two decades of the twentieth century. After a substantial introductory chapter that makes a compelling claim about translation, which I will discuss later, Cho devotes the three body chapters to the reception and rewriting in Korea of the works of three Russian writers: Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Ivan Turgenev.

Chapter 1 focuses on Tolstoy as the figure of aspiration, identification, and ultimately self-validation for the two men universally characterized as the founding figures of modern Korean literature: Ch'oe Nam-sŏn (1890–1957) and Yi Kwang-su (1892–1950). Cho shows how these Korean writers selectively drew on Tolstoy's life and works while they sought to articulate their theories of national literature and their identities as modern intellectuals. The selectiveness of this process of appropriation is glimpsed in Cho's careful comparison between Ch'oe Nam-sŏn's Korean translations of six short stories by Tolstoy, published in Ch'oe's magazine *Sonyŏn* (Youth), and their Japanese source texts. Cho analyzes how Yi Kwang-su's concept of emotion as the basis for the “spiritual civilization of a nation” (86)—elaborated in his famous 1916 essay, “What Is Literature?”—represented a particular refraction and perhaps even a distortion of Tolstoy's emphasis on emotion as consolidating the universalist function of art. Both Ch'oe and Yi bleached out the more radical aspects of Tolstoy's writings inflected by socialism and anarchism, and yoked his authority to a gradualist paradigm of education and enlightenment that they advocated as Korean cultural nationalist intellectuals in a Japanese colony. In that sense, Cho concludes, Tolstoy functioned as a “flexible and half-empty signifier” for modern Korean intellectuals who sought in the image they deified a model for their own (68).

The second chapter is devoted to Hyŏn Chin-gŏn (1900–1943), sometimes called “Chosŏn's Chekhov” for his mastery of the short-story genre (98). Cho provides a close comparison of Hyŏn's “Fire” (1925) with Chekhov's “Sleepy” (1888). Both stories feature a

young female protagonist who commits a violent act as a way of lashing out against the system that exploits her. In this comparison, Cho analyzes how the foreign source text helped Hyŏn to create an entirely new female character type that did not previously exist in Korean literature and use this figure to deliver a blistering critique of contemporary social reality. The chapter also situates Hyŏn's fictional text in a dynamic relationship with journalistic accounts of crimes related to child labor exploitation in Korea. According to Cho, Hyŏn's story may have drawn upon actual cases, reported in contemporary Korean newspapers, of arson committed by young female victims of patriarchal oppression. After the story was published, a dramatic increase in news reports of similar incidents suggested that the fictional account may have become a template for interpreting and registering real-life events. Cho argues that at the beginning of modern Korean literature, a degree of porosity existed between fictional and journalistic narratives, making translation not simply a matter of rendering the same content into another language but "a mode of intervening in ongoing public debates" (121).

The third chapter of *Translation's Forgotten History* is devoted primarily to Turgenev as an important source of inspiration for writers of proletarian literature in Korea. Cho accords greater influence to nineteenth-century Russian literature in shaping this tradition than to the postrevolution Soviet literature of the twentieth century. A fascinating tale of multilayered negotiation emerges in this chapter's account of how the important Korean proletarian writer Cho Myŏng-hŭi (1894–1938) engaged with works of Turgenev, a bourgeois Russian writer. Cho Myŏng-hŭi was at first the translator of Turgenev's 1860 novel *On the Eve*, and worked with several different Japanese translations of it to produce what Heekyoung Cho characterizes as relatively faithful to the original for serialization in a Korean newspaper in 1924. Two years later, Cho Myŏng-hŭi published his own short story called "Naktong River," drawing on the plot, characters, and themes of the Russian novel in noticeable ways, albeit in only seventeen pages. Positing continuity between Cho Myŏng-hŭi's act of translation and his act of creation, Heekyoung Cho analyzes how he steered his texts toward a greater socialist worldview and minimized the pessimistic tones of the original. Particularly astute is her analysis of how Cho Myŏng-hŭi's division of the translated text into serialized installments emphasized ideas of altruistic love and unification of the people over the importance of personal happiness. This worldview received a fuller and more explicit elaboration in "Naktong River." Thus, Heekyoung Cho shows how even a "faithful

translation” becomes an occasion for “creation,” one that moreover has important political implications.

Well researched and effectively synthesized, the three chapters strongly support the central claim, forcefully made in the book’s introduction, regarding the primacy of translation in the construction of modern Korean literature. Translation was the very process by which modern Korean literature as such gained conceptual coherency and public recognition. Heekyoung Cho argues against the tendency of existing scholarship to denigrate texts that bear visible marks of translation and hybridization as “transitional forms” lacking aesthetic authority and integrity in their own right. Translation, writes the author, was “not only the act of introducing foreign literatures but the practice of writing in a new idiom, or discipline, which was itself the defining characteristic of that literature as well” (26). This is not a new argument, of course. But the excellent examples that the case of Russian literature in Korea furnishes, combined with the erudition and cogency with which Cho discusses these examples, make the argument come alive in an entirely fresh and compelling way.

Two other major arguments follow from the book’s central argument regarding the primacy of translation. The first concerns Japanese-language mediation. Because the Japanese colonized Korea during the first half of the twentieth century, translation in Korea was in fact double translation; few Korean writers had the capacity to translate directly from the Russian. They likely worked from Japanese translations. As the book’s title suggests, this history has tended to be downplayed, if not actively forgotten, often for political reasons. For writers like Yi Kwang-su, acknowledging Tolstoy as the provenance of his ideas made it possible to occlude the Japanese mediation and sidestep the colonial question altogether in his construction of the theory of modern Korean literature. Even in postcolonial Korea, Japanese mediation has continued to structure the ways that works of Russian literature are chosen, translated, and interpreted, but without being recognized as such. For this reason, Cho argues that “coloniality,” like translation, was constitutive in the construction of modern Korean literature (97).

The second major argument concerns the concept of world literature. For Cho, a reenergized notion of translation has additional value in its ability to combat “the diffusion model” of world literature. This model seeks to redraw the world map and chart the movement of texts across the globe. However, advocated by such literary critics as the French critic Pascale Casanova and the Italian scholar Franco Moretti, this concept of world

literature inevitably ends up succumbing to Eurocentrism by privileging the origins of certain literary forms. Cho calls instead for thinking of world literature “less as an entity made up of certain literary works than as a totality of entangled literary and cultural relations” that ever generate new meanings and implications (129). In this regard, New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield’s rewriting of the figure of the sleepy nursemaid who “first” appears in Chekhov’s “Sleepy” and later in Mansfield’s “The Child-Who-Was-Tired” (1910) should be seen less as a case of “plagiarism” than as an intertextual enrichment and a form of “reciprocal relations” (130). The same might be said for Hyŏn Chin-gŏn’s creation of a new female character type in colonial Korea. This insight undergirds Cho’s call for a different type of literary history that is neither developmental nor teleological, neither nationally bound nor nonchalantly worldly.

Aside from some romanization issues and a glaring typographical error that leads to a factual error—Russian literature was introduced to Korea in the late 1800s, not in the late 1900s as stated in the book (98)—my chief complaint about the book is that it ends too soon, a complaint I insist on making despite the reluctance of academic presses nowadays to publish a manuscript if it exceeds one hundred thousand words. From a book bearing the subtitle “Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature,” a reader expects a chapter on Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoyevsky at least, but also Maxim Gorky. Although these writers receive passing mention in various parts of the book, especially chapter 3, an explicit justification about why their reception in Korea was not given more extended discussion would have gone a long way toward addressing the sense of imbalance. I also wondered about the large body of Russian and Soviet poetry translated into Korean during the first half of the twentieth century, and whether its inclusion in the book would have significantly altered the main arguments. But this question lies beyond the purview of Cho’s book.

Let me now turn to Dafna Zur’s *Figuring Korean Futures*. “Save the children”—the desperate cry that ends Chinese writer Lu Xun’s 1917 short story “Diary of a Madman”—reverberated in my mind as I read Zur’s book, a reminder of the sense of urgency that East Asian intellectuals shared about the future at the turn of the twentieth century. By carefully examining young readers’ magazines published in Korea between 1908 and 1950, Zur shows how the child came to be considered as a distinct category of personhood in Korea during the early twentieth century, how childhood became a touchstone within the projects of

socialization and nationalization embarked upon by both colonial and postcolonial states, and how print culture enabled these projects to materialize. She engages a diverse body of scholarship on relevant topics ranging from affect theory to science fiction, and contextualizes the Korean case within East Asian and even more global histories of childhood.

Zur's book proceeds chronologically from the eve of Japanese colonization to the heady years immediately following liberation. Chapter 1 "situates" and "historicizes" the emergence of young readers' magazines by focusing on the first Korean magazine to address children as a distinct readership: Ch'oe Nam-sŏn's *Sonyŏn*, first published in 1908. According to Zur, however, only with the publication of the Korean literary magazine *Ŏrini* (Children) started by Korean children's rights activist Pang Chŏng-hwan (1899–1931) some fifteen years later does the child become visible for the first time in Korea. Chapter 2 locates the magazine's rise within multiple contexts, including the influence of the belief in god's immanence in man as advocated in the indigenous Korean religion of Ch'ŏndogyo (Son Pyŏng-hŭi, an important Ch'ŏndogyo leader, was Pang's father-in-law), and Pang's indebtedness to developments in childhood studies and children's literature that were taking place in Japan. In chapter 3, which tackles the language problem that emerges in writing for children, Zur compares translations of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* into Korean by Ch'oe Nam-sŏn and Pang Chŏng-hwan. Chapter 4 examines *Pyŏllara* (Star world) and *Sinsonyŏn* (New youth), two leftist magazines that remained in print for a good decade until the mid-1930s, because they made children visible as the most vulnerable and exploited population in colonial Korea, and as the group to be targeted for revolution because of their superior moral qualities and an inherent sense of justice. Chapter 5 explores late-colonial children's magazines published during the era of imperialization, namely *Sonyŏn*—not to be confused with Ch'oe Nam-sŏn's 1908 magazine of the same title—and *Ai saenghwal* (Children's life). Wartime propaganda is prominent in these magazines. However, Zur reads certain counter-hegemonic possibilities in the linked story cycles of Hyŏn Tŏk, which delve into the deeper structures of socioeconomic inequality that cannot fully be manifested in a single story, and the deployment of irony and humor on display in a reader-contributed section of *Sonyŏn* called "Laughing Corner." The last chapter focuses on such magazines as *Chugan sohaksaeng* (Primary student weekly) and *Ŏrininara* (Children's world), published in the immediate aftermath of Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule when the investment

in the child as both an “emblem of the nation and its developmental hopes” (52) and the bearer of the newly liberated nation’s fate became especially pronounced.

Two recurrent motifs tie these chapters together. The first is the notion of visibility and visuality. As noted earlier, Zur argues that children became visible for the first time in Korea during the early twentieth century, an observation that is then linked to the visuality of print culture targeting children. The young readers’ magazine was, in fact, a visual medium, one that required silent recognition of the letters printed on pieces of paper rather than the voiced elocution that had characterized reading practices of the past. Visuality in children’s magazines was further emphasized through the many illustrations that accompanied the texts. Throughout *Figuring Korean Futures*, Zur provides several close readings of these illustrations, including two comparable, but fascinatingly divergent, illustrations of the seafaring motif in Ch’oe Nam-sŏn’s *Sonyŏn* and Pang Chŏng-hwan’s *Ŏrini*. The realization that children constituted a distinct kind of personhood rather than merely an incomplete stage of adulthood led to the view that young readers needed and deserved a language of their own, a distinct mode of stylization that relied heavily on the visual mode of representation.

The second—and more important—motif is *tongsim*, which Zur translates literally as “the child-heart.” Although this term had long been in circulation in East Asia—Mencius and Laozi receive a passing mention in the book’s introduction for the way they equate child-heart with a state of purity—Zur credits Pang Chŏng-hwan for giving child-heart the specific and lasting contours that would help avail the child to projects of socialization and nationalization. Analyzing Pang Chŏng-hwan’s influential essay, “In Praise of the Child,” Zur summarizes the child-heart as follows: “It has privileged access to the natural world. Its movements emerge not from a socialized or cultured core but emanate spontaneously. What the child-heart feels is necessarily true, and when the child expresses this truth in language it becomes poetry, and expression in drawing becomes art” (58). In thus marking the child as having special access to reality, and elevating the child in cognitive, affective, aesthetic, and moral terms, Pang drew upon Ch’ŏndogyo beliefs about the innate sacredness of human beings, on the one hand, and aspects of the children’s culture movement then in full swing in Japan, on the other. In turn, Pang’s articulation of the child-heart became the shared premise upon which subsequent writers and intellectuals—whether leftist, imperialist, or nationalist—crafted their works for young readers. By thus allowing us to see continuity rather than rupture in the way child-heart was discussed and deployed across time, Zur takes issue, albeit

quietly, with postcolonial renditions of the history of children's literature in Korea that jump from Pang, as the discoverer of the child-heart and the father of Korean children's literature, to the postliberation era. Zur bemoans the overtly leftist and imperialist versions of children's literature in the latter decades of the colonial era as ideologically motivated blips in that history.

Thoughtfully presented and informative, the book makes it clear that Zur read widely and conscientiously, combing through not only the magazines themselves for worthwhile opportunities to put her considerable powers of close reading to work, but also a great number of secondary sources on a wide range of subjects. My list of praises for this book is long and my complaints few. One criticism is that Zur is overly conscientious and much too deferential. She seems unwilling to explicitly challenge the works of the scholars she names, even when her view stands in clear opposition to them. As a result, the stakes of her argument are muted. She also launches into several lengthy "literature review" sections, as if compelled to give one-sentence nods to all the major works she has read on any given subject. Although these sections are helpful in providing the lay of the land, they ultimately proved distracting in my understanding of the specific trajectory of Zur's own thoughts.

The book also would have benefitted from a more substantial discussion about the question of readership. Zur mentions that in 1930 only 11 percent of the entire Korean population was literate and in 1929 only 20 percent of Korea's children attended school. In other words, only a small percentage of Korean children read these magazines. What is the impact of this fact on her argument? Who were these child readers with privileged access? Did all the different imaginings of the adults that went into the formation of a distinct children's literature during Korea's colonial era—the projected qualities of the child-heart and stylistic innovations emphasizing visual elements—actually work in some appreciable ways? A reference to the letters and jokes the children submitted to "Laughing Corner" hints at this group, but the important question regarding the actual existence of the young reading public that these magazines so strongly conjured up remains largely unaddressed and unanswered.

These minor complaints aside, Zur's book, like Cho's, gives an admirably cogent overview of an important subfield of modern Korean literary studies, and, in the process, manages to illuminate broader concerns regarding modernity, coloniality, nationalism, and

translation. These two books should be read widely, in the field of Korean literature and beyond.

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