

Foreword from the Translators

In 1932 Walter Benjamin articulated that rather than exceptionalizing the originality of a particular language, to then romanticize the impossibilities of translating, that we think of translation as, “[S]erv[ing] the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages...Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, *a priori* and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express¹.” And we agree. Examining the reciprocity within language systems, and we would add political structures—between Korean and English—would be particularly illuminating to inspecting our contemporary neocolonial, neoliberal world.

Via representation the South Korean economy continues to be trotted out as an economic miracle: it suffered the war in anonymity, it carries forth and reproduces the structures laid out during colonization, it obediently selected US capitalism as its religion of choice.

As K-pop, K-beauty, Korean cinema, and even the alphabet, Hangeul test the limits of neocolonial, neoliberal expansion and consumption, consider too SKs other originalities.² Consider SK’s never-ending consumption for free trade agreements. Consider too SK’s shift from fourth place (2010-2014), to the largest weapons importer in 2015. Relationship: the United States, was the largest weapons importer in 2014 and do you know where it is today, dear reader as you read this? Relationship: The United States has remained the largest weapons exporter since 1950. The United States consumes itself. A cache of armory to protect *whiteness as property*³. Relationship: K-pop dance routines are exported across South East Asia—as an act of governmental “service.” Consider here: the K-corporate lawsuits pending in Cambodia, Burma (Myanmar) and China that against garment workers FOR protesting against their exploitation.

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” from *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn; ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1968.

² For more on this see, “South Korea’s entertainment industry is part of what’s known as “Hallyu” or “The Korean Wave.” CGTN October 3rd, 2018. And “Asian Idol Industries: South Korea sees soft power opportunity, as neighbors mimic K-pop’s business model,” CGTN October 4th, 2018.

³Harris, Cheryl. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review*. 106.8 (Jun., 1993): 1707-1791

South Korea's positioning as a neocolony, neocolonizer, mercenary state—as Don Mee Choi has described—can be witnessed in the ways its chosen prized cultural products of export (K-pop, K-beauty, K-film) move in direct contradiction to the aesthetics necessary for survival. The clear relationship forged between Korean & English: they are economic and political collaborators of the neoliberalization of the world. And?

So what is poetry, and particularly, the translation of Korean language poetry in these midst of this relationship?

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Kim Eon Hee (b. 1953) is a self-taught poet residing in Jinju, Korea. Her first collection, *Modern Ars Poetica* was published in 1989, and this collection *Have You Been Feeling Blue These Days?* her fourth collection was first published in 2011. She has published over 5 volumes of poetry, and has been organizing community poetry groups out of Jinju for 30 years.

Kim began the poetry group as a way of supporting herself and her community. Of the collective she notes that though prominent poets have emerged from their meetings, such as Kim Yideum and Yoo Hong Jun, the premise to begin the group was and is the fostering of a non-antagonistic poetic space for anyone interested. In particular Kim notes how, “Not everyone can take poetry classes, particularly the socio-economically disadvantaged.” And that, “I started this group because when I started writing I endured loops and holes. It was miserable. And I wanted others not to have to endure that.” She then clarifies how she positions her politics, which she defines as anarchist, and “On the side of the weak.”

Kim tells us that, “In the past, I was weak and right and in the future I remain weak. In the past, I was weak because I was weak...In the future, I am weak because I am dead. As a poet, I am an outsider of Korean culture (that is why I am weak). I am someone who has nothing left to lose. Which also makes me the strongest.”

This sentiment can be traced throughout Kim's poetry, which is contradictory, complex, unafraid of graphic disappointment or the pits. In her introduction she writes that she wants this collection to be, "Poetry that tears the paper: that kind of excellence. I wanted this to be so good that you cannot forgive me." Her poetry is as playful as it is stark, as ambivalent as it politically charged. Is this poetry another relationship betwixt Korean and English? The positioning of poetry, somewhere below and weak, somewhere easy and disregarded or too sacred and elsewhere? As the last export frontier?

As an unexpectedly politicized space?

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The official relationship between Korean and English is that Korean is an isolate language—meaning there is currently no discernable linguistic lineage. English is classified as a West Germanic language, with infusions from the romance languages. Systematically the relationship is so disconnected inventions have been required: third person gender pronouns were invented in Korean to accommodate English translations.⁴ Politically: everything has been made possible.

We found Kim Eon Hee's poetry during a cultural and economic moment in which K-poetry became "trendy."

People with little to no knowledge of Korean, Korean history, with no ties to its literary and political history have become translators and consumers of Korean poetry. How?

We can already feel the energies that will be put behind this response: it has been explained to us formally and informally from multiple corners of the spectrum that translation and consumption have moved *past*

⁴ See Krista Ryu's "Gender distinction in languages." *Language Log* Oct 2017.

linguistic knowledge. One does not need to know the non-western language to translate it into a western language (don't you dare the other way), one only needs the enthusiasm and desire whatever that may be. Uh-huh.

Benjamin predicted this confusion writing, “Fidelity and freedom have traditionally been regarded as conflicting tendencies. This deeper interpretation of the one apparently does not serve to reconcile the two; in fact, it seems to deny the other all justification. For what is meant by freedom but that the rendering of the sense is no longer to be regarded as all important?” So without spiraling into an uninteresting and worn debate regarding authenticity, accuracy, and the politics surrounding aptitude and freedom—as we care for none of that—we do think it's vital to discuss authority as it relates to knowledge.

In translating Kim Eon Hee's poetry our Korean was pushed; our English ever more fragmented. We realized that we knew less than we believed—which is not an occasion for celebrating and justifying our mistakes—but reminders that countered what began as our assured authority.

What we offer here are not translations, but our relationship between Korean and English.

What is here is the semblance of a feeling that we hope you know we can witness only outside of language.

What we have labored through is the acceptance of this distance, and the hope of its pending something else.

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Last note of importance regarding relationships: Though this is our first translated collection, we have been forever translating. Like mundane immigration narratives we grew up translating and interpreting for our family members. Our mother in particular refused English. She refused it in public. At home. At church. She refused her language lessons. Our father would enroll her in community college courses and she would demand that he do her homework. She then stopped going to the classes.

We called all the operators. We started by telling them the truth. One of us would say: hello I am the daughter of xyz and I calling to interpret for her. Hello I am the son of so and so and I'm calling to interpret for. The operators would respond aggressively, suspiciously—sometimes they would demand: how old are you. The number of security questionnaires piled up so we just started stating: hello I'm xyz, I'm calling about my phone service. You over billed us. Again.

This an ordinary story that fits many. Growing up as the interpreter, as the translator means you run twice as many errands. It means you sit through all their meetings. It means the gossip you overhear is multi-generational. Because our parents worked in a church, we overheard everyone's secrets. Did you know he's having an affair with abc? But she doesn't know! This is where their money comes from. Etc.

Our mother, other than refusing this dialect, refused driving. The two things often demanded of subjects in the United States, she said: No. She hated the activity overall but driving home one day, a man crashed her car by rear-ending it. When she got out of the car and he saw her hesitation in responding to him, he called a friend to drive over and act as a witness. And then he called the police. His friend the "witness" told the police officer that my mother was recklessly driving and suddenly stopped, so yeah maybe the guy rear-ended her but it's not his fault. In the very least it's both of their faults. It's her fault for not speaking english, and it's his fault for rear ending her. This formula equals it is both of their faults. And my mother said: Fuck this not in english and stopped driving altogether.

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Since our parents have immigrated back the motherland our interpretation and translation requests have plummeted. Now at the request of no one, we interpret the power dynamics that structure our relationships and translate their ethical stakes.

We consider this book to be the first public extension of this new project.

—Sung Gi Kim, Eunsong Kim 2019