

ESSAY

The Translation Politics of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*; or, The Task of the Reader of the Work in (English) Translation

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When the South Korean novelist Han Kang won the Man Booker Prize for her novel 채식주의자 (*Ch'aeshikchuiija*; *The Vegetarian*) in 2016, it was a watershed moment on multiple fronts.¹ The granting of such a prestigious international award to a South Korean writer was aided, in no small part, by the efforts of literary organizations and activists who had fought to draw attention to South Korea's vibrant literary culture. The Man Booker's decision to honor the novel's English translator, Deborah Smith, was likewise significant, signaling to many a similarly overdue recognition of translation work as a distinct, and equally important, form of literary production.² The monetary politics of the award reflected this division of labor: Han and Smith split the prize money—a cool fifty thousand pounds—neatly down the middle, to symbolize the equal weight of their artistic contributions.³

At the time of her Man Booker win, Han was already a towering figure in the South Korean literary scene, a decorated writer who received the prestigious Yi Sang literary award in 2005. Known for her stark, spare prose style and preoccupation with the darker elements of humanity, she writes about violence, madness, and grief as animating concerns in Korean social and political life. *The Vegetarian* relocates these concerns to the realm of the domestic, exploring the psychological fallout that results from a housewife's decision to stop eating meat. Smith, by contrast, was a virtual unknown, a twenty-eight-year-old graduate student at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London who had begun learning

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PMLA 138.3 (2023), doi:10.1632/S003081292300055X

Korean only three years before beginning the translation (Smith, “What”). But while Smith’s lack of translation experience and familiarity with the language did little to sour anglophone receptions of the text—on the contrary, the Man Booker award judges praised her “perfectly judged translation,” which they claimed matched Han’s “uncanny blend of beauty and horror at every turn” (“*The Vegetarian Wins*”)—its reception in South Korea was less laudatory. The initial elation at Han’s victory was quickly replaced with outrage as bilingual readers began to uncover increasingly grievous inconsistencies in Smith’s translation. These errors ranged from what might be classed as minor mistakes—confusing the names of common nouns or places—to far more serious ones, as in sentences where the speaker or the object of the sentence is misidentified or omitted altogether. News media articles chronicling these errors, as well as academic essays weighing the implications of the translation, proliferated in the weeks following the Man Booker ceremony.

The most damning charges against the translation stem not from what Smith left out, but from what she put in. According to research presented at Ewha Women’s University in Seoul in 2017, nearly a third of the descriptive prose in Smith’s version—31.5%—has no correlative in the original (Yun). The result of such liberal translation work is a drastic shift in the tone and style of Han’s prose, one that even Smith’s supporters are wont to point out. In his overview of the translation controversy surrounding *The Vegetarian*, the Seoul-based professor and translator Charse Yun describes the stylistic dissonance between Han and Smith as a case of literary apples and oranges (lemons and melons is the formulation he uses). He stresses the differences between Han’s Korean-language prose and Smith’s English using Western literature as a reference point. “Han’s sentences are spare and quiet, sometimes ending in fragments,” he explains; “in contrast, Smith uses a high, formal style with lyrical flourishes . . . the translation has a nineteenth-century ring to it, reminiscent of Chekhov. The example is extreme, but imagine the spare style of Raymond Carver being translated so that it sounds like Charles Dickens.”

But while Yun’s review is generally sympathetic to Smith’s translation—he praises her for, among other things, her “talent in English” and for having “introduced a work of literature to people who might otherwise never have had a chance to read it”—other critics were far more skeptical. Chŏng Gwa-ri, a professor of Korean literature at the prestigious Yonsei University in Seoul, remarked that Smith’s translation represented a separate 제 2의 창작 (“second creation”) and that it was irresponsible for translators to claim—as Smith did in the wake of the controversy—that there is “완벽한 번역은 없다” (“no perfect translation”), remarking also that “한국어에 대한 기본 지식을 토대로 해야 창조를 운위할 자격이 있[다]” (“one needs to have a solid understanding of Korean to speak of (trans)creation”; qtd. in Paek). The gendered dimensions of these critiques recall one of the offenses that Han’s novel sought to give expression to: that of men speaking for women in ways that are both dismissive and injurious. Smith, for her part, has pushed back against Yun’s suggestion that she invented the poetry of Han’s text, and she has also been vocal about the abusive tenor of the criticism she received, which left her “shaken” (Smith, “What”). There is also a tendency, among male critics especially, to downplay Han’s agential role in the translation—Yun makes a parenthetical reference, but many others fail to mention Han at all. In fact, Han read and enthusiastically approved of Smith’s translation, and the two have collaborated on multiple projects since, including the 2017 translation of *Human Acts*, her most political novel, and *The White Book* (2018). What ought to have been celebrated as a transnational, transgenerational feminist collaboration was subsumed by the louder voices of the male critics who occupy positions of authority in these linguistic and cultural spheres.

The controversy over *The Vegetarian* thus offers a useful model for thinking about the politics of translating into English, and what the stakes of those politics are for the project of world literature, broadly construed. The controversy underscores, first and foremost, the peculiar invisibility of translation work in our current historical moment (Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility*). Translation criticism in the

anglosphere has, over the past few decades, addressed this invisibility in several ways, and the question of how a habitual elision of translation work might shape—and delimit—the reading and critical writing practices of the anglophone public remains an active issue. Among the many topics of discussion in anglophone translation criticism during the past ten years or so, two are most relevant here: “untranslatability” as a mode of theoretical engagement and the Orientalist and racializing impulses that undergird the production of world literatures.⁴ The Korean response to *The Vegetarian*'s English translation encompasses something of both of these topics, suggesting, on the one hand, that an ideal translation *is* possible (and that Smith's translation is deficient because she lacks the linguistic proficiency to render certain Korean terms in English), while also, on the other hand, pointing to the glaring inequities in the field (English-language translators are subject to far less rigorous editorial standards than are their non-English-language peers). Though these concerns inform *The Vegetarian*'s emergence onto the world-literary stage, they are not my primary focus here. My goal is rather to argue for the importance of reading translated-into-English works *as* translations, which requires careful engagement with what I call “textured moments” in translation.⁵

If Korean critics have overemphasized Smith's translation and its shortcomings, Western responses to *The Vegetarian* are marked by the opposite tendency—a seeming unwillingness to acknowledge the fact of translation at all. Under the sign of world literature, critics have overwhelmingly read Han's novel as a variation on a (Western) theme that we might call, following Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “madwoman fiction.” If this seems a dated reference, consider that several of the English-language articles currently in circulation on *The Vegetarian*'s gender politics rely on substantive engagement with French feminist theory from the 1970s to bolster their critique.⁶ This peculiar approach to the novel—where canonical Western theory and generic conventions are used to make sense of a non-Western text while its status as a translated cultural object is simultaneously

disavowed—raises several important questions about the assumptions undergirding world literature as a field of study. In what ways does this critical framing—which brings a Korean novel into contact with early feminist thinking that was undeniably Eurocentric, if not overtly Orientalist—allow for a similar presumption of cultural and linguistic equivalency, in turn eliding the politics and labor of translation?⁷ What does this refusal to acknowledge translation and its attendant (im)possibilities say about the vantage points and gatekeepers of world literature? And what might be gained if we were to take the politics and labor of translation as the starting point for critique, rather than an invisible given?

My aim in this essay is therefore to offer a provisional model for the process of reading *for* translation into English, so that the power imbalances involved in this process are foregrounded and made a focus of critique. Taking seriously Lawrence Venuti's recent call to “start realizing that every text is translatable because every text can be interpreted” (*Contra Instrumentalism* x), I aim to show how one might read for the sign of multiple, conflicting historical narratives in works of literature translated into English, and to make a case for why this kind of reading is important in a world literary context that still evaluates translations according to their fidelity to an original text or a singular idea. In the case of *The Vegetarian*, such an approach helps move the debate around the novel's English version away from discussions of translational accuracy and toward more substantive questions about the ways that gendered violence is written and received in both Korean and Western contexts. While Han's protagonist's descent into madness fits rather easily into a typified narrative of gendered submission and bodily subjugation—and the English translation of the text foregrounds this culturally portable content—the novel also arguably draws on the Korean concept of *han* (한/恨) in its exploration of female silences and their violent erasure. Read this way, the argument over *The Vegetarian*'s translatability far exceeds questions of word choice and descriptive embellishments. It also becomes an argument about the

possibilities and limitations that inhere in the project of translating affective structures, particularly those that are culturally and linguistically situated outside the dominant Western, anglophone paradigm.

Reading for translation means reading for textured moments in works of translated fiction. By textured moments, I mean awkward turns of phrase or the names of culturally specific landmarks, events, or individuals; it can also mean words in the source language phonetically rendered in English, or, in the case of multilingual literature, untranslated text. My claim here is very simple: that when one encounters such moments in works translated into English, it is incumbent on the reader to do further investigation into the meaning. My own experience teaching multilingual literature and literature in translation suggests that it is common to simply skate by the unfamiliar terminology so as not to disrupt the flow of reading. Approaching the text in the way I am suggesting requires reading like a translator. There is a common misconception that translators are necessarily fluent in the language they are translating, but even the most lexically gifted language workers do not translate in a linear way; translators stop, they examine words, they explore tangents, they conspire and consult with native speaker colleagues and friends. It is for this reason (among many others) that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak once called translation “the most intimate act of reading” (94). Reading for translation is a similarly intimate act, guided not by a desire to assimilate the text into one’s own cultural and linguistic frame of reference but by a deep curiosity about the cultures and encounters that shaped its emergence and transformation.

The appearance of *han* in both the Korean and the English versions of *The Vegetarian* offers ample opportunities to read like a translator in the way that I am describing. In both the original and the translation, *han* signifies doubly. It functions first as a culturally specific affect that resists easy incorporation within a universalizing “madwoman” narrative interpretation. At the same time, it also troubles the commonly held idea that *han* is a wholly untranslatable concept, inaccessible outside of a Korean linguistic and cultural idiom. This idea—which

locates the origins of *han* in Korea’s traumatic colonial history—is complicated in *The Vegetarian*, which offers alternative origin points for this affect while also gesturing at its afterlives, resonances, and entanglements with other cultural and national histories. I begin my reading of *The Vegetarian*’s translation politics by situating the novel within an uneven translation field, one inflected by essentialist ideas about gender and patriarchy that overdetermine which works from which national contexts are translated into English for the global marketplace. I then map the ways in which *han* has worked to facilitate Korea’s entrance into the world literature canon, paying particular attention to the differences in the term’s deployment across Korean American literature and Korean literature in translation. I conclude by modeling reading for translation by examining two instances of critical *han* in *The Vegetarian*, which—in referencing events in Korean history jettisoned from national and international accounts—invite a reconsideration of these events and the often-ambiguous forces that gave rise to them.⁸

Korean Literature and (or as) World Literature

The resistance to the English version of *The Vegetarian* in South Korea is in many ways a reaction to the deeply unequal translation cultures that make possible the emergence of a disciplinary formation like “world literature” in the first place. Over the past forty years, South Korea has invested millions of dollars into organizations and initiatives devoted to disseminating Korean literature abroad, with the ultimate aim of securing the Nobel Prize. Since 1982, three organizations have led this charge: the International Communication Fund (ICF, est. 1982) and the Daesan Foundation (est. 1993), both privately funded, and the more recently established Korean Literature Translation Institute (KLTI, est. 2001), which is government-funded. The Korean cultural studies scholar Jenny Wang Medina situates the emergence of the KLTI within the context of the democratic president Kim Young-sam’s *seggyehwa* (세계화; “globalization”) policy, which sought to transform Korea into a “first rate nation” (396).

Whereas *Hallyu* (한류; “Korean Wave”)—a phenomenon similarly made possible by strategic maneuvers and investments on the part of the Korean government—has seen the rapid spread of Korean popular culture in the form of dramas, movies, and music abroad, there remains a deep-rooted desire among the literary elite to garner similar recognition for Korea’s national literature. The origin of this desire can be traced to Korea’s colonial history and is spurred, in no small part, by an “unconscious attempt to get compensation for a tragic history of Japanese colonization, during which Koreans were banned from speaking and writing their own language” (Kim Young-ha qtd. in Kim Se-jeong). That Japanese-born authors have won the Nobel three times since the establishment of the award in 1901 has only rubbed salt in the proverbial wound.

South Korea’s drive for international literary recognition has manifested itself in a uniquely metrics-driven translation culture. On the ICF, Daesan Foundation, and KLTI websites, one encounters a staggeringly detailed account of measures taken to promote and develop Korean literature in translation, including total funds spent, languages supported, and accomplishments achieved, broken down by year and dating back to the establishment of each organization. Tellingly, Smith features prominently on the ICF website, which boasts of its support for her Man Booker Prize-winning translation.⁹ Glancing at the titles that have received translation funding from each organization, one also becomes aware of the often-contradictory demands that Wang Medina sees as structuring Korean literature’s emergence onto the world literary marketplace. These demands include conflating North Korea and South Korea (where the latter comes to stand in for the former); alluding to an ancient or traditional culture while also foregrounding Korea’s technological prowess; and—pertinently for *The Vegetarian* especially—depicting “women struggling against and attempting to overcome an oppressive patriarchy,” which Wang Medina argues is a necessary requirement for “any ‘foreign’ or non-Western literature” seeking global readership (411).

This genealogy of South Korea’s world literature aspirations highlights two important aspects of *The Vegetarian*’s translation controversy and its reception by anglophone scholars of world literature. The first is that these aspirations are rooted in a distinctly postcolonial context and have grown and accrued more or less alongside South Korea’s economy and *segyehwa* policies. The second is that the very emergence of *The Vegetarian* onto the world literary scene—which is to say, pointedly, its translation into English—is predicated on its fulfilling certain expectations around non-Western cultures, which often involve revisiting or trafficking in the very colonial contexts the South Korean government would prefer to symbolically distance itself from through the claiming of a literature prize victory.

This uneasy relationship with the colonial past can be gleaned in the ways in which the South Korean literati has, at key moments, alternately rejected and accepted their symbolic affiliation with Korean American literature. Whereas the Japanese occupation and Korean War have long been fodder for Korean American writers, who have used these histories as a way of exploring legacies of trauma and forms of racialization and belonging in the United States, South Korean writers have tended to deny these writers’ claims to this history on the grounds that they speak and write in English only (Wang Medina 409). It was only once members of the Korean literary elite recognized that an affiliation with Korean American literature might be beneficial to the project of literary *segyehwa* that the translation institutes and literature promoters leaned in to the association (410).

A frequent (and often taken-for-granted) point of convergence between Korean American literature and Korean literature in translation comes in the form of that affect called *han*, often rendered as a kind of pervasive sorrow or rage that has its roots in the traumatic history of these literatures’ nation of origin. In what follows, I explore how such interpretations of *han*—in lending a kind of aesthetic coherence to an unwieldy and heterogenous group of diasporic texts—can also inadvertently function as what Tejaswini Niranjana has called translational

“strategies of containment,” whereby “in creating coherent and transparent texts and subjects, translation participates . . . in the *fixing* of colonized cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed” (3). I make a case for recognizing instead the ambiguity of the histories *han* annexes—their openness and partiality, in other words, rather than their fixity—and suggest that, in so doing, a fuller picture of Korea’s colonial pasts and their global afterlives comes into view.

Translating *Han*

Criticism about literature of the Korean diaspora overflows with references to *han*, and these references tend to proliferate exponentially when the literature in question features themes of gendered violence. But despite the abundant references to *han* in scholarship about Korean literature and cultural productions, there is a startling lack of definitional uniformity around the term. Often described as “a collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger” that emerges out of Korea’s protracted colonial history, *han* is also frequently figured as a genetic condition—a kind of inherited trauma in the blood of all Korean people (Sandra Kim 255). C. Sarah Soh observes that “in the Korean ethnopsychological imagination, *han* takes the form of a painful, invisible knot that an individual carries in her heart over a long period of time, made of a complex of undesirable emotions and sentiments such as sadness, regret, anger, remorse, and resignation” (80).

Bodily expressions of *han* have even been recognized as the basis for a condition called *hwabyung* (화병)—literally “anger disease”—in a move that Sandra So Hee Chi Kim calls “the biologism of *han* taken to a logical extreme” (256). Anthropologists and medical professionals alike recognize *han* as a cultural syndrome that has an especially high incidence rate among middle-aged Korean and Korean American women (Kim Jong-woo 52). An aura of silence attends the psychological symptoms of this condition, which medical professionals attribute to pervasive stigmas around

mental health in Korean society and Korean diasporic communities.

In literature about the Korean diasporic experience, then, the physical symptoms of *hwabyung*—and the accompanying silence around or unwillingness to speculate about their psychic origins—often become a critical shorthand for talking about *han*, a term that, as literary translators and Koreanists alike tend to overstate, “has no equivalent in English” (Chu 97). Often, gendered figures from Korea’s traumatic history—chief among them the “comfort woman” (위안부; *wianbu*) and the “Western princess” (양공주; *yanggongju*)—emerge in these narratives as markers of these unspeakable, or untranslatable, histories, a thematic invocation of *han* that emerges as “the psychic impact of Korean history on individual lives” (Sandra Kim 269).¹⁰

More recent work on *han* has sought to decouple the term’s supposed untranslatability from its historical moorings in order to think through Korea’s broader affective connections with the post-colonial and the post-traumatic. Hellena Moon, for example, argues that *han* “is transcultural, intercultural, and extant in all human communities” and locates its particular resistance to translation within a “unique experience of suffering that in and of itself is always untranslatable, and that melancholy marks any colonial and postcolonial context” (420). Soh notes, similarly, that “the concept of *han* is not unique to Korean language and culture; it is represented in the languages of China, Korea, and Japan by the same Chinese ideograph” (80).

Sandra Kim traces *han*’s origins to the “beauty of sorrow” discourse popularized by the Japanese art critic Yanagi Muneyoshi during the early twentieth century, when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule. Yanagi, Kim notes, believed that art reflected the psychological condition of its people, and when he praised Korean art, he did so in a way that underscored his belief in Korea’s national inferiority. “It is impossible to believe that those Korean workmen possessed intellectual consciousness,” he wrote, and “it [is] precisely because they are not intellectuals that they [are] able to produce this natural beauty” (qtd. in Sandra Kim 259). In his writings on Korean art, Yanagi describes

Korea's essence—a result of its history of vulnerability to foreign attacks and occupation—as “lonely, sorrowful, and superstitious,” and these qualities, coupled with the beauty of Korea's artistic productions, lay the groundwork for what would later become *han* discourse (260). According to Kim, Koreans embraced *han* because it was one of the few terms available—in a context otherwise set on eradicating Korean culture—that affirmed Korean national and ethnic identity. She writes:

Nationalist Koreans, in reaction to these contradictory discourses, latched on to the racialized differences that were already available in the colonial sphere as symbols of identity that pushed against the pressures of assimilation and ethnic erasure. Consequently, while the idea of the Korean aesthetics of sorrow helped to legitimize the Japanese colonial project of helping a sorrowful, naive people, *han* is the Korean word that translates this colonial construct, which Koreans themselves embrace as a special and unique racial essence. . . . colonial modern subjects not only desired to construct symbols of Korean tradition, but to also authenticate their feelings as part and parcel of a racial imaginary that distinguished Koreans from Japanese in an essential, biologicistic way. The idea of *han* then translated itself into the discourse of ethnonationalism within a pervasively biologicistic understanding of the Korean people as a nation. (264)

Read this way, *han* appears not as an untranslatable—as it has so frequently been described—but as a term constituted through acts of translation, and which invites multiple, and conflicting, translations and interpretations in turn. Indeed, Kim writes, “in the context of the concept of *han* . . . the act of translation is often created together between the colonizer and the colonized, initiating a string of translations across time that can bury the genealogical traces of a colonial construct” (264–65; my emphasis). In order to move away from theorizations of *han* that naturalize or pathologize the term's emergence within the Korean body (bodies) politic, she argues for a reconceptualization of the term that attends more robustly to the fraught historical origins of this Korean untranslatable. Critical *han*, she writes,

“aim[s] to emphasize how the term itself is embedded in a specific history that we should not forget. The word *han* carries within it a history of unmitigated collective traumas” (274).

Kim's critical *han* offers a framework for thinking about Korean literature translated into English that safeguards against homogenizing narratives about Korean history and culture. Drawing on this concept—which holds in tension the dubious origins of this term as well as its potential to be mis-translated—I turn now to the first book of *The Vegetarian* in order to demonstrate what “reading like a translator” looks like in practice.

Critical *Han* and the Shapes of Silence in *The Vegetarian*

Though the Man Booker win has all but cemented *The Vegetarian*'s status as a novel, Han's text was originally published in serial form. The three novellas that make up the book—*The Vegetarian*, *Mongolian Mark*, and *Flaming Trees*—center on the titular vegetarian Yeong-hye but are narrated entirely by members of her immediate family: her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister (in that order). With the exception of several dream sequences in the first novella, Yeong-hye's voice is largely absent from the text itself; in the rare instances where she is given a voice, she is largely ignored. Though this poses certain interpretive challenges to the reader, Han appears to offer a clue as to how to read this character-in-absentia in the first novella, in a passing reference to Yeong-hye's work history. Yeong-hye, we are told, first worked “as an assistant instructor at the computer graphics college she'd attended for a year, and was subcontracted by a manwha publisher to work on the words for their speech bubbles, which she could do from home” (Han, *Vegetarian* 4; my emphasis).¹¹ This image—of a kind of rhetorical or narrative filling in—is illustrative of the rhetorical position one is interpellated into as a reader of *The Vegetarian*. Each novella offers an account of Yeong-hye and her experiences of physical and sexual violence, but they are all articulated, crucially, at a remove. The novel therefore asks us to consider what empathy—and its attendant

demands of witnessing and speaking out—might mean, or look like, when faced with such abstraction.

In many ways, this positionality resembles the translator's dilemma that Mona Baker outlines in *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account*. "Translators and interpreters face a basic ethical choice with every assignment," Baker writes: "to reproduce existing ideologies as encoded in the narratives elaborated in the text or utterance, or to dissociate themselves from those ideologies, if necessary by refusing to translate the text or interpret in a particular context at all" (105). Drawing on the late sociologist Erving Goffmann's work on frame analysis, Baker argues that "translators and interpreters, in collaboration with publishers, editors, and other agents involved in the interaction—accentuate, undermine or modify aspects of the narrative(s) encoded in the source text or utterance, and in so doing participate in shaping social reality" (5). They do this, she argues, by deploying a number of framing strategies, including "temporal and spatial framing, framing through selective appropriation, framing by labelling (including rival place names and titles) and repositioning of participants" (5). If we understand the translator's decision to accept a project in this way—as, in essence, a form of complicity—then the question of how a reader of the text translated into English might engage responsibly with that work becomes all the more pressing. My contention here is that readers, even monolingual readers or readers who do not have access to the source text, can and should do work to understand these decisions.

We might think of textured moments—places in translated-into-English texts where the difficult work of translation makes itself visible—as traces of the frame work that Baker describes in *Translation and Conflict*. In what follows, I draw on Baker to read two articulations of critical *han* in *The Vegetarian's* first novella. Though I have elected to offer a comparative reading of Han's Korean and Smith's English, in part to emphasize the fact that *The Vegetarian* (in English) is a translation and a creative work in its own right, my emphasis remains on how the anglophone reader (or in this

case the reader who does not know Korean) might engage with the text on these terms—that is, as a work of translated fiction.

In *The Vegetarian*, heteronormative domestic orderliness is turned upside down by something that seems rather inconsequential on its face: the housewife Yeong-hye's abrupt decision to stop eating meat. "Before my wife turned vegetarian," her husband, Mr. Cheong, remarks, "I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Han, *Vegetarian* 15). In these opening lines, Han presents an image of a marriage of efficiency marked by tensions between traditional Korean gender roles and modern individualism. Yeong-hye does all of the cooking and cleaning, for instance, but she also holds a job and earns her own income. In her spare time she pursues a life of the mind, reading books that her husband describes as "so dull I could barely bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers" (17). Her husband's utter lack of ambition, by contrast, is out of place with what we might associate with the traditional Korean patriarch; he prefers to "diligently carry . . . out [his] allotted tasks at a company whose small size meant they would value [his] unremarkable skills" rather than strive for a more lucrative position that might advance his social status or provide a more comfortable life for his family (4).¹²

Mr. Cheong's passive acceptance of Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is significant because it strains against a reading of the text that upholds Wang Medina's criteria for world literature currency in the strictest sense—that theme of "women struggling against and attempting to overcome an oppressive patriarchy," typically against a backdrop of the domestic sphere (411). While Mr. Cheong is dismayed by his wife's sudden shift in dietary choices—a shift accompanied by a refusal to wear appropriate, or appropriately feminine, clothing—he tolerates and even accepts it in private. He abides her rational choice argument for eating a daily meatless meal at home, and even appears underwhelmed by her refusal to have sex with him, claiming that his body "smells of meat" (Han, *Vegetarian* 17). That anglophone critics have refused to linger over this dynamic speaks to the extent to which such

narratives carry currency within world literature studies today.

The turning point in this marital relationship occurs only after Yeong-hye's obstinacy becomes an embarrassment to her husband in public. After bringing Yeong-hye to an important work-related dinner, Mr. Cheong suffers a series of humiliations that begin with his realization that she has neglected to wear a bra to the function (21). This problematic bodily display is compounded by Yeong-hye's bizarre explication of her vegetarianism and refusal to entertain questions about her diet from her husband's colleagues. Though Mr. Cheong is eventually able to produce a socially justifiable explanation for her behavior, the damage has been done, and the couple are gradually edged out of the dinnertime conversation. Perhaps most damningly, Yeong-hye refuses to apologize or offer a penitential countenance to her fellow dinner companions, instead offering—to her husband's horror—a blank and socially inappropriate stare, prompting her husband to think that “in that moment, she was utterly unknowable” (25).

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Yeong-hye's display of feminized obstinacy draws the ire of the men in her immediate family, culminating in violent encounters with both her husband and her father—and it is within the context of these encounters that critical *han* appears in the text. The first of these instances occurs shortly after Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat at the company dinner: furious and still feeling the sting of public emasculation, her husband comes home after a night of drinking and rapes her. The language he uses to describe the attack—or, more aptly, to rationalize it—is worth parsing in detail:

아내를 덮쳐보기도 했다. 저항하는 팔을 누르고 바지를 벗길 때는 뜻밖의 흥분을 느꼈다. 격렬하게 몸부림치는 아내에게 낮은 욕설을 뱉어가며, 세번에 한번은 삽입에 성공했다. 그럴 때 아내는 마치 자신이 끌려온 종군위안부라도 되는 듯 멍한 얼굴로 어둠속에 누워 천장을 올려다보고 있었다. 내 행위가 끝나는 즉시 그녀는 옆으로 돌아누워 이불 속에 얼굴을 숨겼다. 내가 샤워하러 나가 있는 동안 뒤처리를 하는 모양으로, 잠자리에 들어와보면

그녀는 아무 일 없었던 듯 바로 누워 눈을 감고 있었다. (Han, *Ch'aeshikchuuija* 40; my underlining)

I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully. Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a “comfort woman” dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services. . . . [B]y the time I returned to bed she was lying there with her eyes closed as if nothing had happened, or as though everything had somehow sorted itself out during the time I'd spent washing myself. (Han, *Vegetarian* 30)

In presenting us with this scene of extraordinary violence—and narrating it with such a flat and unemotive affect—Han asks us to think about the iterability or translatability of a term like *han*, which is more fraught with internal contradictions than popular definitions might allow. How, she asks, are we to read the invocation of Japanese colonialism and martial masculine violence, deracinated from its historical context and erupting, seemingly from out of nowhere, into this scene of spousal rape set in our contemporary moment? What, too, does it mean that Mr. Cheong aligns himself with Korea's historical aggressor, without any seeming remorse? And what does this scene suggest about how sexual violence against women gets codified—remembered, acknowledged, defended—along a historical continuum?

On the one hand, this reference to comfort women works, as I have suggested, as a kind of metonym for *han* in its popular understandings—a choked silence rooted in the traumatic history of a nation. But the spectral appearance of this figure is also worthy of note. In her writing on the figuration of haunting in literary and cultural productions, the sociologist Avery Gordon suggests that ghosts are not merely the image of a person (or persons) long departed, but indicative of a larger and more complexly imbricated historical narrative whose

persistent bearing on the present moment has gone unnoticed for far too long. The ghost, for Gordon, is “not simply a dead or a missing figure, but a *social figure*, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Read this way, the comfort woman—in her emergence as a kind of sociospectral figure—becomes a way of enabling Yeong-hye to speak in the absence of any sort of real voice. Like the comfort women whose stories went unspoken for decades—and even now are denied legitimacy by their historical aggressor—the battered and abused woman is taken for granted, hidden in plain sight.

Han and Smith employ specific strategies to underscore the relevance of the comfort woman history to present-day discussions of sexual violence, both in Korea and in a more global context. One of the translational framing strategies that Baker explores in *Translation and Conflict* is “labelling”—wherein a label is used for “pointing or identifying a key element or participant in a narrative and provid[ing] an interpretive frame that guides and constrains [audience] response to the narrative in question” (122). “Comfort woman” is even the representative example Baker provides for this translational strategy, which she describes as a “euphemism . . . coined by imperial Japan to refer to young women who were forced to offer sexual services to the Japanese troops before and during the Second World War” (123). But as Soh has observed, the English translation of this euphemism—which emerges and gains currency only in the 1990s as part of a larger global movement to redress wartime sexual violence against women—disregards the plurality of terms that have been used to describe women and girls (of various nationalities) who were forced to work at comfort stations during the Japanese occupation. One of these, *jūgun ianfu* (Japanese) or *chonggun wianbu* (Korean), is worth discussing here:

In postwar Japan, the term *jūgun ianfu* (comfort women who followed or accompanied the troops) appears to have prevailed over the unmodified euphemism *ianfu*, the official wartime lingo. . . . Advocates of the redress movement in Japan and

Korea, however, have become sensitized to the connotations of the term *jūgun*, giving the impression that comfort women were *voluntary* camp followers. . . . We should [also] note here the additional connotation of “obedience” in the characters for *jū/chong* in *jūgun/chonggun* (in Japanese/Korean). . . . Traditionally, the rule of “three obediences” applied to females throughout their lives within the context of the patriarchal family structure: obedience to the father as a daughter, obedience to the husband as a wife, and obedience to the son as a widow. (Soh 70–71)

In the passage by Han quoted above, Han uses the term *chonggun wianbu* (which I have underlined). The effect is an unsettling elision of enforced sexual servitude in both a militarized context and a marital one. In drawing together Mr. Cheong’s act of sexual violence against Yeong-hye with the example of the comfort women, Han—as a translator of history—engages in what Baker calls temporal and spatial framing: the process of “selecting a particular text and embedding it in a temporal and spatial context that accentuates the narrative it depicts and encourages us to establish links between it and the current narratives that touch our lives, even though the events of the source narrative may be set within a very different temporal and spatial framework” (112).

Likewise, while Smith’s translation uses the more readily recognizable *comfort woman* (in keeping with the English standard) Smith employs similar tactics to produce an unsettling effect in the translation. The use of quotation marks around the term, for instance, works to emphasize both its euphemistic invention and the discrepancy that inheres between the words used and the violence described. In Han’s version, the nationality of the soldier is not specified, and other details—“against her will,” “demanding her services”—are likewise Smith’s additions, nowhere to be found in the original. The Korean critic Kim Yōng-shin argues that this embellishment of Han’s text here has the effect of helping English-speaking readers understand a loaded cultural and historical context that they might not otherwise be familiar with (42). But rather than think of these additions as instrumentalist moves that seek to replicate or approximate a

singular account of comfort woman history, I suggest that the ambiguous appearance of *han* in the original novel—and its linkage to a more contested term for comfort women in the Korean context—instead functions as a reminder that the source text “comes to the translation process always already mediated, capable of supporting multiple and conflicting interpretations which are limited only by the institutions where a translation is produced and circulated” (Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism* 40). In other words, if we think about *han* as a concept that is embedded in a chain of translational choices from the outset, multiple histories of gendered violence—both from within Korea and from without—come into view. Reading for textured moments, for the mark(s) of ambiguity, allows us to hold these competing versions of history in tandem. Reading with a fixed or singular idea of *han* in mind, by contrast, forecloses the possibility of multiple interpretations by yoking the text once more to ideas about translational fidelity and cultural essentialism.

If the spectral emergence of the comfort woman in this scene troubles a generalizing definition of *han* along the axis of gender, the text also resists—through a similarly ghostly figure—the idea that the source of *han* is “Korea’s position as a vulnerable peninsula, which purportedly has subjected it to a long history of foreign invasions and colonisation” (Sandra Kim 276). This haunting history, which annexes Korea’s own participation in violent conflicts abroad, emerges in a conversation between Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye’s father, whom he has contacted to inform of Yeong-hye’s increasingly erratic behavior. Mr. Cheong is surprised to hear his father-in-law—a veteran of the Vietnam War, we learn in this conversation—express regret over his daughter’s actions. “It shocked me to hear this patriarchal man apologize,” Mr. Cheong says, because

가부장적인 장인은 지난 오년간 들어본 적 없는 사과조의 말로 나를 놀라게 했다. 배려의 말 따위는 그에게 어울리지 않았다. 월남전에 참전해 무공훈장까지 받은 것을 가장 큰 자랑으로 여기는 그는 목소리가 무척 크고, 그 목소리만큼 대가 센 사람이었다. 내가 월남에서

베트남 일곱을.....하고 시작되는 레퍼토리를 사위인 나도 두어 번 들은 적이 있었다. 아내는 그 아버지에게 열여덟살까지 종아리를 맞으며 자랐다고 했다.

(Han, *Ch’aeshikchuuija* 38; ellipses in original)

in the five years I’d known him, I’d never once heard such words pass his lips. Shame and empathy just didn’t suit him. He never tired of boasting about having received the Order of Military Merit for serving in Vietnam, and not only was his voice extremely loud, it was the voice of a man with extremely fixed ideas. *I myself, in Vietnam . . . seven Vietcong . . .* as his son-in-law, I was only too familiar with the beginning of his monologue. According to my wife, he had whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old.

(Han, *Vegetarian* 29; ellipses in original)

Two important things emerge out of this brief conversation. In referencing South Korea’s military involvement in Vietnam, Han gestures to an aspect of South Korean history frequently elided in Western accounts of the conflict—the nearly fifty thousand South Korean soldiers who were deployed, under the Park Chung-hee government, to rural areas of the country to fight the Vietcong. Allied closely with the US forces under the command of the Lyndon B. Johnson government, the South Korean army played a pivotal role in two of the deadliest battles of the Vietnam War, at Ha My and My Lai—an irony not lost on historians of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, whose observation of the similarities between the conflicts are well documented.¹³ And while some recent attempts at redress between these nations have been made—as when, most notably, the former South Korean president Moon Jae-in spoke of South Korea’s “debt of heart to Vietnam”—the imbrication of both countries’ national economies have impeded any efforts toward true reconciliation.¹⁴

The italicization of “*I myself, in Vietnam . . . seven Vietcong . . .*” does important work in the English translation. This translational choice encourages the reader to consider this moment of present-day patriarchal violence in South Korea in relation to what Heonik Kwon calls “the ghosts of

war”—that is, within a much longer history of Korea’s imperial and martial encounters. The implicit reference to Park Chung-hee’s military efforts here also serves as crucial contextualization for Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis over the course of the following novellas. In aiming to become a plant—Yeong-hye’s ultimate goal in refusing to eat meat and, eventually, refusing to eat altogether—Yeong-hye draws on a distinctly literary tradition of passive resistance and nonviolence in Korea. In writing *The Vegetarian*, Han drew inspiration from a quote by the great modernist poet Yi Sang: “I think that humans should be [like] plants” (qtd. in Kim Ji-yŏng). Han took this phrase, which Yi jotted in the Korean script *hangul* that was banned under Japanese colonial rule (and thus a kind of translational counterpoetic gesture in its own right), to be an inward-turning, nonviolent response to the violence of colonialism, one that she applies to the contemporary moment. In so doing, she encourages her readers to think about how historical traumas become embedded in the everyday, if one only looks—or reads—for the signs of their texture.

Conclusion: On Reading Translations as (Feminist) Practice

Of the many biting and deeply necessary provocations Venuti puts forth in *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic* (2019), his account of the lack of translation pedagogy in US English or comparative literature departments is perhaps the most sobering. According to Venuti, a mere twenty-five percent of the schools offering comparative literature in some form offer courses in the theory, history, and practice of translation (45). It is an “appallingly low” figure “for a field that could not exist without the extensive use of translations” (45), and the field itself remains woefully imbalanced, weighted toward the European languages with Africa, Asia, and Latin America relegated to postcolonial and area studies (42–43). Academia around the world, Venuti argues, “urgently needs . . . to recognize that translation lies at the core, not only of humanistic study and research, but also of the geopolitical economy that structures social relations today” (40).

My own provocation would be that the question of whether Smith’s translation of Han’s text is successful is the wrong one to be asking in the climate that Venuti sketches—success, after all, being yoked here to instrumentalist ideas about translational fidelity to an original or singular idea. A better point of focus would be on how anglophone criticism, academic or otherwise, might responsibly engage with *The Vegetarian* (or any book translated into English, especially from a non-European context) as a work of translation, as a work “always already mediated.” This idea is something that the recent MacArthur fellowship recipient Don Mee Choi—the South Korean born translator, experimental poet, and spiritual ancestor of Yi Sang—places at the core of her translation work, which comprises activism as well as creative practice. Choi’s reflections on her work with the International Women’s Network Against Militarism (IWNAM) are instructive here:

The International Women’s Network Against Militarism . . . is made up of students, teachers, researchers, and grassroots activists from Okinawa, Japan, South Korea, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and the US. The US members make up a group called Women for Genuine Security, based in Oakland. My role in the network was to translate and interpret for South Korean activists and survivors of military violence and sexual exploitation. At the Network’s third international meeting in Okinawa, Japan in 2000, the Network members first articulated what has since become a core part of our approach: that “interpretation is a political act.” We were able to arrive at this perspective because of the knowledge the women in the Network had been accumulating and creating since the first meeting in 1997—the knowledge that not only our lives and struggles are interconnected, but that our languages are also interconnected by histories of imperialism, colonialism, and militarism, and by increasing economic interdependence.

(17; my emphasis)

Choi’s reflections on her work with the IWNAM reveal a core tenet of feminism that literary scholars working on works of translated-into-English

literature would do well to remember: that positionality matters and that interpretation is, indeed, political. Every reader comes to the translated-into-English text equipped with a different set of interpretive tools, inflected by their own unique racial, gendered, linguistic, and cultural background. The wider the gulf between the reader's positionality and the text's, the more effort should be made to seek out and sit with its translational frame work. In the case of *The Vegetarian*, the task of the reader of the work in English translation is to take seriously its textured moments in order to reflect on the larger histories of encounter and violence that color South Korea's geopolitical entanglements and shape the literature of its diaspora. Such a practice is a way of ensuring that the ambiguous histories embedded in translated works are never fully whitewashed or relegated to the margins, but rather are made the focus of critique.

NOTES

1. All Korean names and titles have been romanized using the McCune-Reischauer romanization system. Translations from the Korean, unless otherwise specified, are my own.
2. Since the Man Booker reconfigured its award to recognize translated works (and translators), other major international literary prizes have followed suit, including (most recently) the National Book Award. See Alter.
3. The award Han and Smith won is now known as the International Booker Prize. A photo of Han and Smith is featured on the web page glossing the history of this award ("International Booker Prize").
4. Representative examples addressing the former are Apter's *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* and Cassin's *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (*A European Philosophical Vocabulary: Dictionary of Untranslatables*); Muftić's *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* is an example addressing the latter.
5. Though I do not wish to reenter the debates around the usefulness of the term *untranslatable* to the study of world literatures, my own approach to thinking about translation's (im)possibilities is in line with Venuti's in *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*. Translation, Venuti writes, "is an interpretive act that necessarily involves ethical responsibilities and political commitments" (6). Reading for textured moments is a way of recognizing these translational choices, which are abundantly (and necessarily) present in translated-into-English fiction.

6. Beeston's "The Watch-Bitch Now" and Zolkos's "Bereft of Interiority" use the work of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, respectively, to read Han's novel in English.

7. Consider that Julia Kristeva wrote, in 1977, a book titled *Des Chinoises* (*About Chinese Women*).

8. For more on translation and historical hauntings in Han's work with a focus on the later book *Human Acts* (also translated by Smith), see D. Kim.

9. See Smith, "Han'gungmunhak."

10. Grace Cho's book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* focuses on the *yanggongju* and the *wianbu* as haunting sociological figures; in literature, Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (Penguin Books, 1997) and *Fox Girl* (Penguin Books, 2002) are representative examples. In Cho's reading, the *yanggongju*—who services American soldiers on Korea's many military bases—is part of the same imaginative lineage as the comfort woman.

11. *Manwha* (만화) is the Korean word for comics.

12. Both Yeong-hye's and her sister In-hye's marital arrangements present different models of shifting gender roles within the Korean family unit in the aftermath of the harsh economic policies introduced by the International Monetary Fund after the 1997 financial crisis. For more on this, see Kim and Finch.

13. See Kwon. For more on South Korean involvement in the Vietnam War, see Cumings, and, in a literary context, Kim and Nguyen.

14. Choi Ha-young writes, "The wording 'debt of heart' was used by ex-President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004 when he visited Ho Chi Minh City. Earlier in 1998, Roh's predecessor Kim Dae-jung expressed regret during his Hanoi visit, which drew enormous flak from conservatives here."

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Abstract: This essay argues that the translation controversy surrounding the South Korean novelist Han Kang's Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Vegetarian*, offers a useful model for thinking about both the politics of translating into English and what the stakes of these politics are for scholars of world literature invested in questions of globalization and empire. Positing a model of "reading like a translator" as a way of engaging meaningfully with a text from a source language that one does not have a foundation in—and applying this practice to a reading of *The Vegetarian* that turns on an understanding of a Korean untranslatable, *han*—this essay argues that the task of the reader of *The Vegetarian* in English is to take seriously the "textured moments" that populate the text, in order to reflect on the larger histories of encounter and violence that color South Korea's geopolitical entanglements and shape the literature of its diaspora.