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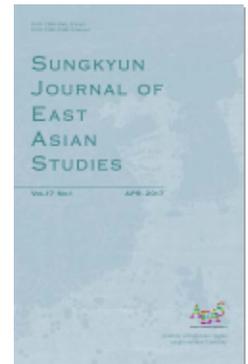
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*Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature,  
Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean  
Literature* by Heekyoung Cho (review)

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## BOOK REVIEW

Heekyoung CHO, *Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center Press, 2016. 242 pages. ISBN: 9780674660045 (Hardcover). 39.95 USD.

*Translation's Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature*, is a welcome addition to English-language scholarship that situates Asian literatures within broad cultural and linguistic exchanges and brings the role of translation in the formation of national literature back to the center. It comes in the wake of such contributions as Lydia Liu's *Translingual Practice* (1995), which questions the presumed equivalence of meanings between translated categories and attends to the process of acquisition of legitimacy through transnational circulation; Indra Levy's *Sirens of the Western Shore* (2006), which explores the practices, aesthetics, and ideologies of translation that contributed to the formation of modern Japanese literature; and Karen Thornber's *Empire of Texts in Motion*, which examines the movement of Japanese literature across national boundaries and within contexts of imperial power and subjugation. Closer afield in Korean literature, Serk-Bae Suh's *Treacherous Translation* (2013) studies the role that translation between Korean and Japanese played in the shaping of nationalist and colonial discourses and highlights the false equivalences and reciprocity that were embedded in the acts of translation. Nayoung Aimee Kwon's *Intimate Empire* (2015) scrutinizes literary translation as a form of intimacy that blurs, rather than accentuates, the borders that define languages and national identity. To this growing body of work, Cho makes an original contribution by shedding new light on a relationship that has received little attention in Korean literary history: the Russian-Japanese-Korean network of literary exchange. By examining how Japanese translation mediated the reception of Russian literature in Korea, Cho interrogates Korea's literary origins as well as the essence of the modern and the national in the period that is considered the beginning of modern Korean literature.

*Translation's Forgotten History* proposes to introduce translation not as a supplement to national literature but as its kernel (ix). Cho argues that the process of the formation of a modern literary canon necessitated a regime of amnesia, a deliberate forgetting of any non-indigenous influence of form or content that might undermine its claims to authenticity. In Korea at the turn of the century, literature was articulated as the vessel that contained the nation's soul, privileged above other artistic forms in its ability to make accessible the interior enclave of emotion expressed in Korea's vernacular sounds and letters. For this reason, Cho explains, Korea's literary history could not possibly admit its debt to genres or plots of foreign origin, not the least that of the Japanese colonizer. And yet the debt is there, and Cho finds its traces in new literary characters and plots, in the public role of writers, and in the formation of leftist literature. By no means was translated

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The book is framed by a brief preface and epilogue, and its core consists of a substantial introduction followed by three chapters dedicated to different Russian authors whose works had a lasting impact on colonial Korean writers. The introduction sets up the trajectory of the book by presenting two main claims: that translation was central to the formation of Korea's national literature, at the

center of which was its development of a literary vernacular; and that Russian pre-revolutionary literature, which Koreans accessed through Japanese, provided the kind of political engagement that made it conducive to Korea's own nascent modern literary project and to the development of proletariat sensibilities. Chapter one focuses on the influence of Tolstoy on Ch'oe Nam-sŏn and Yi Kwang-su, who under Russian influence created both a theory of literature and a new authorial role without acknowledging the Japanese mediation that made the reception of Tolstoy possible. In chapter two, Cho shows how Hyŏn Chin-gŏn appropriated the works of Chekov, and argues that Chekov's work provided Hyŏn "with a new way of perceiving his own lived reality, and thus affected his way of interpreting, constructing, and shaping it" (123). And chapter three highlights the influential works of Turgenev on writers like Cho Myŏng-hŭi and Yi T'ae-jun, and more generally seeks to revise the understanding of the roots of proletarian literature by showing that it was pre-revolutionary literature, rather than contemporaneous Soviet works, that served as models for the leftist writers of colonial Korea.

Even between structurally similar languages such as Japanese and Korean, the act of translation demands multiple decisions about how to move from the language of origin to the target language. Given Cho's virtuosic command of Russian, Japanese, and Korean, it would have been illuminating to learn more about how Japanese translators navigated the transitions from Russian into Japanese on the level of diction, tone, and sentence structure, and how the Koreans then made these translations their own in a way that pushed the development of Korea's burgeoning modern literary vernacular. Another fascinating argument that could have been broadened is the one in chapter three, which interrogates the role of fiction in determining new ways of projecting "reality" into journalism, a profession in which many colonial Korean writers were engaged. Rather than claiming that a transformation of reality in its colonial complexities brought about a change in literary language, Cho makes the provocative assertion that fictional language, born of translation, made it possible for reporters to write reality in a different way. It would have been enlightening to learn more about how creative translation and the Real was navigated during a period when colonial modernity made the relationship between the two anything but straightforward. The questions raised by Cho's captivating study are a testament to the richness of her analysis and to the multiple conversations that her work has begun. *Translation's Forgotten History* has made a significant intervention in the complex discussion of the limits and possibilities of a "national" corpus by bringing translation, in its fullness of creativity and innovation, back to the center.

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