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THE ART OF GROWING TOGETHER: KOREAN POETRY TRANSLATED INTO SPANISH

EL ARTE DE CRECER JUNTOS: LA POESÍA COREANA TRADUCIDA AL ESPAÑOL

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Abstract
Art has no frontiers, but when the art in question is literature, it is more the language itself that limits that art's diffusion and consequent appreciation. The translation of literature from other cultures, and especially from cultures that in earlier times were labeled exotic or alien to one's own, has assumed greater relevance in our era. This essay explores poetry and other Korean cultural artifacts, some ancient and others contemporary, as a means of identifying both touchstones for and obstacles to cross-cultural communication.
Keywords: Literary translation, Moon-Chung-Hee, Spanish poetry, postcolonial societies, cross-cultural comunnication.

Resumen
El arte no conoce fronteras, sin embargo, cuando ese arte del que hablamos es la literatura y su medio son palabras o el lenguaje mismo, su difusión se circunscribe y, por ende, su aprecio. La traducción de la literatura de una cultura a otra, especialmente de culturas que antes eran consideradas como exóticas o ajenas a la propia, ha asumido una importancia significativa en nuestros días. Este ensayo explora la poesía y otros artefactos culturales pasados y presentes de Corea, a fin de identificar puntos de convergencia así como obstáculos para la comunicación intercultural.
Palabras clave: Traducción literaria, Moon-Chung-Hee, poesía en español, sociedades poscoloniales, comunicación intercultural.

It is commonplace to say that art has no frontiers. However, when the art in question is literature, whose medium consists of words, it is more the language itself, rather than contrasting ideologies or time periods, that limits that art's diffusion and consequent appreciation. The translation of literature from other cultures, and especially from cultures that in earlier times were labeled exotic or alien to one's own, has assumed greater relevance in our era. In the case of Castilian literature, the concept of the exotic has its roots in events that began hundreds of years earlier, when the Spanish Empire financed overseas explorations with the aim of locating routes beneficial to commerce. These explorations ultimately led to the discovery not only of new trade routes, but of whole new civilizations. Within the space of only a few decades, Spanish voyagers expanded our knowledge of the globe to a degree unrivaled before or since. More than five centuries have now passed, bringing with them revolutions of every imaginable tenor. Today the process of globalization finds its impulse less from conquering armies, and more from economic blocs like the G-7 or the Asian Tigers. Then as now, economic, and political forces play starring roles; but in the modern day we must recognize that understanding the culture of a people previous

known only through commercial or political ties unquestionably elevates our comprehension of the human experience. Stated otherwise, if the citizens of this ever-contracting world can learn to appreciate the underlying unities of different cultures, then so too we grow in understanding of the past and present and can even imagine a future where co-existence amounts to something more than a bumper sticker. With these perspectives in mind, I argue for the need to translate literature, in this case the work of the Republic of Korea's female poets; their voices assume ever greater urgency if we are to strengthen the humanities of postmodern, postcolonial society.

I discovered Korean literature in 2014 when I first read the work of a woman poet named Moon Chung-Hee, specifically her poetry collection: *Woman on the Terrace* (2007), in English translation. Her verses repeatedly called to mind the writings of Latin America's modernist and post-modernist female poets. And it was precisely that feeling of reading something so strangely recognizable that inspired me to learn more about the literature of the Republic of Korea, popularly known as South Korea. I could not help but wonder why poems written by female writers in postcolonial Korean and Latin America were so similar. The answer came over time: because the human experience behind them follows such close parallels. This solution was surprisingly simple yet at the same time unexpected, since the pursuit of Spanish literature has usually consisted of studying the many permutations of genres, writers, and epochs within the same language—or its well-known influences through the centuries, influences such as Latin, Greek, French, Hebrew, Arabic, and English. But Asia? Is love, happiness, death, pain, feminism, parenthood, nihilism, and the search for God somehow different in essence in the East and the West, two macro-regions that now are so close yet still so far apart? The search for answers to these questions compels us to look for Spanish translations from non-Western languages literary works.

As mentioned before, I first encountered Moon's poems in English translation, and for that reason I ended up working with English translations of Korean poems when comparing her own poetic production with that of female Spanish poets. However, this approach brought with it the overwhelming sensation of entering a vortex of complicating factors. Perhaps the central challenge involved balancing what was gained versus what was lost in transliteration. Translations capture at least part of the cultural richness and crafted beauty of Korean or Spanish, but by the same token inevitably result in diminished versions of those poems. Yet one must weigh this problem against the fact that without a common language, in this case English, most Korean, Spanish, or English readers would never have been able to appreciate the wisdom, deep philosophical perspective, as well as the likenesses those poems own. This latter consideration led to a search for Spanish translations of Moon Chung-Hee's poetry collections. Somewhat surprisingly, she has only been translated by a single Spanish editorial house: Huerga & Fierro Editores (founded in Madrid in 1975.) Under the "Poetry" section from Huerga & Fierro's latest catalogue only two of her poetry collections appear: *Yo soy Moon* ("I Am Moon") published in 2014, and in 2016 *Mar de Karma* ("An Ocean of Karma"), both editions being available in paperback.

The quest for contemporary Korean writers translated into Spanish on regular basis takes us to three other publishing houses, the first in Spain, the second in Mexico, and the third in Argentina. Modern Korean literature dates from the end of the nineteenth century, when Korea began to open its doors to Western influences, thereby inaugurating a period of modernization. Even a century later, Korean literature remained relatively unknown in the West, and to remedy that situation, Pio E. Serrano and Aurora Calviño founded the first of these two houses, Verbum, in 1990. For nearly three decades Verbum has published both Spanish and foreign literature, and boasts a catalogue of some 1,500 titles, grouped according to literary genre, and even has five *bibliotecas*, or series, reserved for non-Spanish language literature, among them its "Korean Language Series." In Verbum's 2023 catalogue we find fifty-seven translations of Korean titles or books related to Korean culture. This landmark achievement notwithstanding, their publications focus primarily on novels, essays, and short stories; we find no translations of Moon Chung-Hee. The Mexican company that publishes Spanish translations of Korean literature is Ediciones del Ermitaño, Editorial Division of Solar, Servicios Editoriales, based in Mexico City. The most recent edition of

its online catalogue shows sixteen titles in the "Korean Literature Collection" series, but again, we find no mention of translations of Moon, the emphasis once more being on novels, essays, and stories. Last but not least, Bajo la Luna is an independent editorial house based in Buenos Aires since 2002, but founded in Rosario, Argentina in 1991. One of its four main goals, according to Bajo la Luna own webpage is: the translation of marginal or lesser frequently translated languages such as Japanese, Korean, Dutch, and Islander—in that order. In 2016 they published *19,459 Km.: Antología de la poesía coreana contemporánea* (19,459 kilometers: An Anthology of Contemporary Korean Poetry), but in their 2023 online catalog, they do not offer any Korean-related material. Finally, in 2019 Hwarang Editorial started a small editorial house, currently its catalog has fourteen titles: six novels, four short-story anthologies, two publications dealing with various genres, one a cookbook, and a book exploring Korean words impossible to translate into Spanish.

The woman who occasions these inquiries has a distinguished literary past. Moon Chung-Hee was born on May 25, 1945—the year of liberation—in what is today the Republic of Korea (ROK), more commonly referred to as South Korea. As a matter of fact, in an interview with Silvina Friera, Moon recalled that during the Japanese military occupation, her parents were forced to speak Japanese, and she represents the first generation able to express themselves freely in Korean again. She grew up in Seoul. Her literary talents first revealed themselves during her years in preparatory school, where she won various student prizes, and where she became the first student of that level to publish a book of poetry Moon has since become one of the country's most celebrated writers and the representative of a whole new generation of artists. Her poems have been translated into nine different languages, including English, German, and Japanese, and have received prestigious international prizes. Since her 1969 debut on the literary scene, which took place in the Germany-based journal *Wôlgan Munhak* ("Monthly Literary Review"), her work has earned various distinctions, including the Prize for Contemporary Literature (Hyônde Munhaksang), the Sowôl Literature Prize (Sowôl Munhaksang), and the Yuksa Literary Award. In 2008 she received the Association of Korean Art Critics Prize for literature. She has produced some fifty works, including twelve poetry anthologies, chief among them being *For the Man* (Namdzarûl uihaio) and *I Am a Door* (Nanûn Munida).

At the same time, Moon has participated in several meetings and international programs on poetry and literature in general, among them the Centennial Prize for Contemporary Korean Poetry (University of California Berkeley, 2006). She has also been poet in residence at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy in 2011, and was invited to take part in the 2013 Poetic Spring, in France, and in the Meeting of Poetry Reading at the University of Stockholm the following year. Lastly, she was invited to Buenos Aires as a guest speaker for the 2016 Festival de la Poesía (2016 Poetry Festival). She currently holds an endowed position in creative writing at the University of Dongguk, in Seoul. By means of her poetry contributions she participates in the creation of textbooks for students of the secondary and preparatory levels.

After her residence in Venice, Moon published *Karumaui bada.* 카르마의 바다 ("An Ocean of Karma") (2012). This book was inspired by her encounters with Venetian life and history and was translated into Spanish and published in Madrid—as we mentioned before—by Huerga & Fierro editors under the title *Mar de Karma* (2016). One poem among this collection: "Poeta de espada" ("Poet with a sword"), majestically compresses her life and the transcendental moment she has lived and continues to live. The following is an excerpt of it in Spanish, followed by our English translation. The footnotes were originally at the Spanish version, nonetheless we have here rendered them in English for the sake of convenience.

> Nacida después de la colonización, la guerra coreana y
> la división del país. El levantamiento del abril 19, el golpe del Estado, la dictadura.
> La democratización de mi juventud y

la industrialización que llevaba arrastrándolos
Kwanju y los Juegos Olímpicos, G20…
Llevo encima el *Keksu-guanghu*, el *Hwangji-yi*, al rey Sejong el Grande.
Llevo encima de mis hombros la montaña más pesada de cualquier otra montaña
del mundo
La velocidad y la competividad de los europeos de 400 años.
Hemos recorrido de un paso a toda máquina en 40 años llenos de salpicaduras
De sangre,
las heridas excavadas al rojo vivo y aquella ciudad, resplandor de cementos,
Seúl monstruosa…
He venido llevando encima la tierra de la cabeza de cerdo que muerde un puñado
de billetes manchados de sangre y sudor
Vengo arrastrando agujeros falsos, los errores e impaciencias siempre
con la cabeza alta erguida doy saltos altos pang, pang
No body, no body (sic) but you … ("Poeta de espada", 6-23)

I was born after the colonization, the Korean War, and
the division of the country. The uprising of April 19th, the coup-d'état, the dictatorship.
the democratization during my youth, and
the industrialization that was sweeping away all these moments
Kwanju and the Olympic games, G20…
I carry the *Keksu-guanghu*,[1] el *Hwangji-yi*,[2] the King Sejong[3] the Great.
I carry on my shoulders the heaviest mountain of
the entire world
The speed and competitiveness Europeans have achieved over 400 years.
We have done it at full speed in 40 years bursting with
bloody stains,
Red hot wounds carved, and that city, gleaming with cement,
monstrous Seoul…
I have been carrying on me the dirt from the pig's head that bites
a handful of bills stained with blood and sweat
I'm always coming dragging with me false holes, mistakes and impatience
With my head held up tall I'm jumping very high pang, pang/
Nobody, nobody but you…[4]
(my translation)

Moon's poems interest us in the way that they open paths to the literary processes in these so seemingly different countries. At the same time, one must recognize that it is no easy matter to recreate poetry in another language, given the fact that poetry is the highest form that a language possesses, and as a result requires enormous skill. We find succinct expression of this fact in the words of Pakistani poet Fahmida Riaz, who translates literature from Urdu to English. As she remarked in an interview given to the British Council (Hahn and Riaz, 2014), translating poetry is the most formidable literary task of all. The reason lies in the fact that a translator must communicate the connotations each word conveys, but at the same time capture something of the inner beauty of the words chosen. Riaz goes on to explain that something an Urdu reader understands almost instinctively might not be so clear for a non-Urdu reader, due to the cultural

1 The oldest poem from the Korean literature (Moon, 2016).
2 It is believed she was the most famous *gisaeng* (courtesan lady) in Korean history (Moon, 2016).
3 The king who invented the Hangul or alphabetic system to write the Korean language (Moon, 2016).
4 A K-pop female singing group' song lyrics (Moon, 2016).

meaning's words bear. Moreover, the difficulty of the task is often belied by the ostensible similarity between the languages in question. Upon being asked which linguistic qualities were the hardest to recreate in other tongues, Riaz replied that all words are difficult to translate, since no two words are identical in different languages. Besides, any word or idiomatic expression is necessarily attached to the culture from which it emerges. Korean is no exception. Sophie Bowman, who has produced an English version of *Sosdae Munhak*, an anthology of poetry written by Koreans with physical disabilities, has commented on precisely this point in an interview she gave to Korea.net (Yoon, 2015), in which she points out that Korean words formed by four Chinese characters, or by the interpretation of distinctive folkloric expressions, pose colossal challenges that she can only surmount with great difficulty.

In the following pages, I present three case studies of the challenges that Riaz and Bowman describe, each case with its own degree of thematic difficulty. The first example is an extremely complex poem that Zyanya Gil Yáñez translated from Korean to Spanish (Gil, 2016). Mexican by birth and nationality, Gil is a professional translator who lives, studies, and works in Korea, translating between English and Korean but dedicating much of her time to rendering Korean literature into Spanish. Before delving into this translation, we want to emphasize her experience as translator. In 2012 she won the national prize that the Institute of Korean Literature awards to new translators for rendering children's books into Spanish, in recognition for work with the short story "Espadas" ("swords") by Lee Seung-Hoo. In 2015 she participated in the translating the children's book *Panadería* ("bakery"), a work that Nostras publishers issued in paperback. Finally, in 2016 she translated a third book, *Flotando* ("floating"), which appeared on the Madrid-based company Lata de Sal. She also translates poems that she publishes on her personal blog. It is here that we find the *sijo* (a Korean version of the Japanese *haiku*) transcribed below. This *sijo* was written in the sixteenth century by the woman poet Hwang Jin-yi (1520-1560) and is titled, "Río de las montañas verdiazules" ("river of the blue-green mountains").

청산리 벽계수야 수이 감을 자랑 마라
일도 창해하면돌아오기 어려오니
명월이 만공산하니 쉬어 간들 어떠리.
(황진이)

Río de las montañas verdiazules
tu andar veloz no alardees,
pues una vez que al amplio mar arribes
no será fácil volver.
La luna anega colinas desiertas,
sosiega el paso una vez.
by Hwang Jin-yi

River of the blue-green mountains
Don't pride yourself on speed
Since once you reach the wide sea
You will not easily return.
The moonlight inundates desert hills;
slow down for a moment.
(my translation)

In the Spanish translation we can appreciate that Gil Yáñez not only translates the words but also endows them with beauty and even a degree of rhyme; moreover, in her blog he accompanies the translations with a lengthy explanation that reviews the history behind this old and outstanding *sijo*. She also elaborates on the difficulties she encountered as translator, and in so doing echoes points made by both Riaz and Bowman. For example, the three verses in the original Korean version result in six in Spanish, because some Korean words have Chinese origin. This latter language employs words short in length but rich in inner meaning, so much so that Spanish renditions often swell into lengthy passages. After a few more lines of regarding modification of both form and content, Gil explains to her readers how this *sijo* invokes sentiments by means of images and sums up by pointing out how the river as a metaphor for life shares its meaning with a classic line from the Spanish poet Jorge Manrique: 'Our lives are the rivers that flow to the sea of death." It is precisely this link to experiences common to different societies that both surprises and intrigues. At the same time, it is heartening to see young translators capable of tracing those common points, in this case between a Korean poet of the sixteenth century and the fifteenth-century Spanish poet Jorge Manrique (1440-1479).

As a second example I present a somewhat less complex poem from Moon's *Woman on the Terrace:* "Detour." This brief work provides a clear illustration of the dynamics that Riaz, Bowman, and Gil Yáñez describe. The poem calls to mind the very Buddhism that is its theme: beautiful for the economy and simplicity of its words, but at the same time profound in meaning:

Do not approach the stone Buddha
whose eyes and nose are gone.
Only its traces remain.
No longer a Buddha,
it's returning to perfection,
it's returning to stone.
Karma carved eyes and nose
in this Ingak temple courtyard
a thousand years ago.
Buddha's prison is sacred and profound.
Time does not exist
in the natural process
of returning to uncarved stone.
Don't clasp your hands in prayer in vain.
Let the word "perfection" be enough.
("Detour", 1-15)

This poem presents relatively few problems to understanding, although the non-native reader appreciation will certainly grow with a few words concerning the work's religious, historical, or literary nuances. We might begin with the title itself, "Detour." In the English version found in the collection *Woman on the Terrace*, the translators mention in an endnote that the "Ingak" in question is found in "Gooneui," in the province of Gyeongsngbuk, South Korea, and that it was there that the famous Buddhist monk Ilyon (1206-1289), penned his compilation entitled *Samguk Yusa* ("Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms"). The purpose of this note is to inform the non-Korean reader that said temples is not simply a product of Moon's imagination, but rather a real place with a documented history. Perhaps for the Korean reader this note appears a bit odd, since the temple would be referred to as "Ingaksa: ("-sa" being a suffix particle denoting a temple, the term "Ingaksa Temple" thus sounding redundant). But that same reader would certainly recall that Ingaksa is one of the republic's historical treasures, and that it is located near the city of Gunwi, not far from the far larger city of Daegu, in Gyeongsanbuyk-do province ("-do" being a suffix particle indicating a province). Moreover, while information identifying Ilyon (or "Il-Yon") as the principal author of the

Samguk Yusa may seem a trifle obscure to Western readers, that same fact would indeed bear relevance for Koreans, since the *Samguk Yusa* is one of the only two chronicles of Korean history, and incorporates myths, traditional tales, and historical narratives of the three main pre-unification kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla), along with those of the minor kingdoms (Gojoseon, Joseon, Buyeo, and the Gaya confederation). I believe that Moon Chung-Hee, being a literary artist herself, chose to write about this temple with full knowledge of its historical and literary importance.

More extensive notes might be useful for helping non-native readers appreciate other aspects of this poem. For example, the poem gains profundity from the rich history of Ingaksa, since this temple was built by Queen Seondeok, who ruled the Silla kingdom in the years 632-647 AD, and under whose reign many Buddhist temples were completed. Ingaksa is small and has been restored following its designation as a national treasure, having deteriorated considerably over the course of the centuries. Nevertheless, its place on the list of national treasures owes in considerable part to its link to the afore-mentioned *Samguk Yusa*. This foundational document was written in *hanja* or *hanmun*, the characters that Koreans borrowed from the Chinese and subsequently modifed for their own uses and pronunciations. *Hanja* was the only medium of Korean writing until the mid-fifteenth century, when Korea's legendary King Sejong of the Joseon dynasty commissioned the creation of *hangul*, the alphabet used today. But learned people continued to use *hanja* well into the twentieth century, until *hangul* at last prevailed in the post-1945 era. Taking all this into consideration, I believe that Moon Chung-Hee used Ingaksa as a way commemorating that place as the origin of tales, myths, and histories of this extremely ancient land. At the same time, the poem offers a tiny compendium of Korean history.

Another area of information useful to Western readers concerns the poem's exploration of Buddhism. Among its few remaining treasures, Ingaksa is home to two stone Buddha images dating from the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392). Both statues have suffered severe erosion; Moon is mediating over one of these statues. She links its description to Buddhism itself, which she appears to understand well, perhaps not surprising, given that Buddhism and Confucianism are the two belief systems with the deepest cultural roots in Korea. In reading "Detour" we find that Moon emphasizes the word "Karma" (7); she makes three mentions of the word "returning" (5-6; 23), and two references to "perfection" (5; 15). In *The Story of Buddhism* (Lopez, 2001) explains that "karma," like many words originally associated with Buddhism, is Sanskrit, and that it denotes a law of cause and effect that makes the accumulated actions of our many rebirths determine our current experience. With this idea in mind, the phrase "Karma carved eyes and nose" (7) expresses the idea that the statue representing the Buddha assumes its physical condition because of its karma. This same concept of karma carries with it the idea of "returning," that is, of the many lives which Buddhists believe living creatures to possess. Lopez (2001) states that the returns or rebirths are called *saṃsāra*, and that their ultimate objective is to liberate the individual from serial incarnations and instead reach a "perfection" in which *nivāna* destroys the seeds of earlier existences. In this way the individual attains the hoped-for enlightenment of being "awakened," or Buddha.

An initial reading of this poem in English captures our attention for its rich and beautiful imagery. However, for a deeper understanding we must decode the linguistic connotations the English translation lacks, since the English words cannot provide the cultural richness anchored on the original language. Once these concepts have been clarified, the non-Korean reader gains closer access to the process the stone Buddha is undergoing, but also can appreciate the poem's allusion to a religious theme touching nearly the entire Korean body of literary, mythological, and traditional stories of the past thousand years. But Moon goes even further. She seems to suggest to the contemporary reader not to "approach" (1) old chronicles by steering shallowly toward them, nor praising them "in vain" (14), but rather by reflecting on the transcendental wisdom that is their "perfection" (5; 15.)

This poem's deeply evocative nature inspired me to travel to Ingak temple in May 2017. From Daegu city and using public transportation, the but worked its way from one small farming

town to the next, and from a remote station to an even tinier and more distant one. Finally, the bus left me at Ingak, attended by quizzical looks from the Korean locals with whom I shared the vehicle. The place looked abandoned, but several monks inhabit the premises. They do not speak to visitors. There is also a small museum and a visitor's information booth, but nobody to offer more detailed explanation. Walking the site, I found a stone Buddha statue at the quad (see Figure 1) located, as Moon said: "in this Ingak temple courtyard (8)" This is a seated Buddha carved of stone; his hands gesture or *mudrā* is called "Touching the Earth" or "Subdue Demons" and happens to be the most common posture in Korean temple statuary. It represents the moment prior to Buddha's Enlightenment: the right-hand hangs over the right knee out of mediation posture while his index finger points to the earth. The left hand remains on the lap in meditation posture (Gyun, 2005, pp. 194-195).

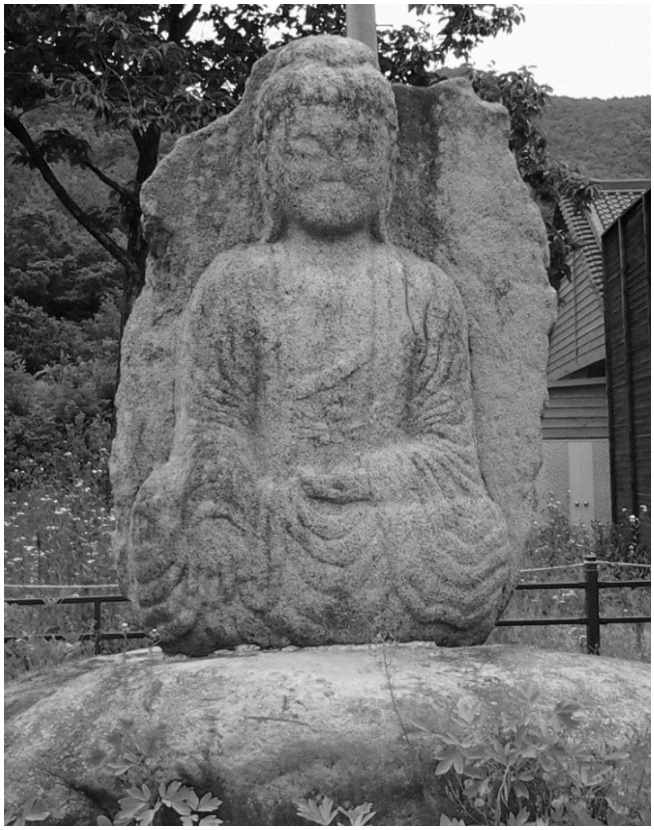

Figure 1. Courtyard Buddha, Ingak temple, South Korea (author's photo).

Despite erosion by weather and time, this Buddha's features are still evident, so the description that opens "Detour" is not entirely suitable: "Do not approach the stone Buddha/ whose eyes and nose are gone. / Only its traces remain. / No longer a Buddha (1-2)". Before this Buddha sits a historical marker that describes him as: "Gyeongsngbuk Tangible Cultural Heritage Num. 339 250." But after exploring Ingak temple for almost two hours, I was about to leave when by chance I found another Buddha statue in a small modern hall (see Figure 2). Contrary to the previous Buddha, this one was surrounded by candles, flowers, and offerings. His arms no longer remain, only his head and trunk; this Buddha was beheaded at some unknown moment, and his nose was broken. He also shows an amateurish restauration driven more by profound devotion than expertise. His nose therefore now looks whiter than the rest of his face, and his neck is attached to his trunk with a darker brown substance. This damaged Buddha is not named as a Tangible Cultural Heritage,

but nevertheless has been rescued from the weather, and has been placed in a hall or shrine so he can be worshiped.

Figure 2. Buddha in a hall, Ingak temple, South Korea (author's photo).

The practice of supplementing poetry with some form of visual image informs at least one other of Moon's works. Her *Karumaui bada*, the poetry volume she wrote after Venice, comes with eight of the author's own black-and-white photos of that Italian city and its surroundings. One is a page in length and the others consist of two-page photo spreads. Those pictures add a visual dimension that allows us to better appreciate her poems for and from the "City of Water" or "City of Bridges," built on the Venetian lagoon. However, since Venice is probably better known to Spanish speakers than to Koreans, the Spanish translation of this book sacrifices the photographs in favor of several charming full-color drawings of a female figure performing different activities close to an ocean. If the inclusion of photos helps Korean readers relate to the poems, it also provides much the same service for Moon's Western readers. One is inclined to suspect that the poem "Detour," the very one who sent me traveling through the Korean's countryside looking for the actual Ingak temple, might profit from a photo and more extensive notes; beyond deepening our appreciation, it might also increase our ability to relate to her verses, since it would be a fairly simple matter to adapt this poem to the statue of a Christian saint from some centuries-old Western church.

As a third and final example, I explore an even more accessible Moon's poem from her *Women on the Terrace*: "Putting on Makeup." Here the poetess gently satirizes the exaggerated care dedicated to skin, body, and makeup, a preoccupation for which modern Korean women have rightly or wrongly acquired a reputation throughout the world.

Painting my lips scarlet,
I see in the mirror a vain princess, all made up—
my small face an array of international cities,
a theater where fictitious dramas

staged by cosmetic illusionists converge,
a small territory where lavish flags wave.

Sexy brown is the color *a la mode* this fall.
Rouging my cheeks, as Chanel instructs,
adhering to the myth of glamour,
I realize the conspiracy is almost complete.
Occasionally frightened at my mind's enslavement,
I'm once again bewitched by cloying perfume,
an apparition painted in soft tones,
and my sporadic protests are weak.

To stop time's winged chariot,
need I be adorned in such sad fragrance?
With Estee Lauder eyeliner, I carefully
draw a dark border around my eyes
and dab a drop of Christian Dior behind my ears.
The colonized *femme élégant* ready to *sortie*!
She makes her entrance slowly, like a tragic heroine.
("Putting on Makeup", pp. 1-21)

Any reader, Korean or otherwise, can readily appreciate the humor and irony behind these verses. Their elegant and intelligent wordings require no digression into matters of religion, geography, or history. Perhaps the only annotations we might add by way of cultural commentary (and which are not essential for a basic understanding) concern matters of beauty norms and body image. First, in Korea a small face is considered both attractive and desirable, a fact that has led to many persons undergoing operations to reduce their chin size. Second, the Korean ritual of makeup application, although involving a formidable panoply of products, aims at an aesthetic end goal of pale colors imposed over the whitest skin possible: rose and peach tones are favorites, while lips should approximate cherry red, as opposed to crimson or wine red. For these reasons Moon's poem remarks on "My small face" (3) and "painted in soft tones" (13). Her words tempt us to reflect on how far women have traveled in post-colonial societies, but how persistently retrograde are the canons governing appearances, and how silently and passively we accept those canons as Moon's telling phrase puts it, "like a tragic heroine" (21).

An example of this contradiction of fashion finds visual treatment in a 2011 sculpture of a 380 x 120 x 250cm. shiny red and black high-heel slipper, created by the Korean artist Lee Mae-Lee, and exhibited in June 2017 at the Gwanju Museum of Art at Gwanju city. The name of this sculpture is "Portrait of a Shoe" and conveys some basic ironies. First, the title refers to a form of art (portraits) for depicting people, not objects. Second, since portraits constitute a painting genre, their usual medium is canvas, not a three-dimensional mixture of resin and Styrofoam. Finally, even though high-heel slippers force ladies to walk in an unnatural and physically risky manner, they are sold world-wide as icons of sensuality, a must-have accessory for any truly chic woman. But if they are red and black, their message attains its highest impact. It seems that Lee's sculpture expresses in faultless fashion a strong opinion about modern-day Korean consumerist society, which very often reproduces occidental fetishisms. As the Curator of Zuecca Project Space International Program Maurizio Bortolotti (2020) wrote at the Media Art Archive Gwangju about "Portrait of a Shoe": "The artist believes the shoe is her own Alter Ego. She takes it as a starting point to explore a female public identity, transforming it into a personal obsessive feminine image. The shoe's red color and high heel offers an image of today lifestyle, a social female ideal. It is an idol of modernity as symbol of desire and consumerism in a society devoted to consuming; but it is also a representation of fugacity of life summed up in an icon. It is a female image, connected to a

traditional idea of female role assigned by fashion and spread by media in society. So, Lee uses this image as representation of a social relationship, as it relates to the roots of Modern Korean society."

We encounter another example of the iconic jumbo high-heel slipper (see Figure 3) close to a Seoul higher education institution for women, in July 2017; but now the outsized shoe is used not as a social commentary, but rather as advertised focal point to attract (presumably female) consumers.[5]

Figure 3. High-heel slipper, Seoul (author's photo).

In an interview with Eduardo Jaramillo (2001), South Korean author and poet Byong-Sun Sung remarked that, "Art is imposture." He tells us that Korean is difficult to translate, not so much for its vocabulary, but rather for its syntax and absence of punctuation marks. This comment adds a couple of extra considerations to what I have mentioned before. Fortunately for the future of translations, there exists an educational institution the supports this sort of intellectual endeavor: the Universidad de Málaga, in Spain. This university offers a degree program only in Korean studies, not Chinese or Japanese studies. Moreover, it counts on support from and collaboration with the Literature Translation Institute of Korea, or LIT Korea, which holds frequent overseas translation workshops in Spain, but also in countries like Germany and France, as well as "Classical Korean Literature Events" in Perú, and in 2016 it was responsible for the invitation extended to Moon Chung-Hee to a Poetry Festival in Argentina. La Universidad de Málaga invites Korean authors that its students are working on, so that as Fahmida Raiz expresses: "The insight the author can bring to the translator's reading of the text, to their understanding of it and consequently to the translator's decisions this understanding will inform. And the very fact of having that conversation forces the translators themselves to articulate their own thinking, to formulate questions and suggestions."

To recapitulate, I have spoken throughout this essay of the importance of coming to terms with literature from countries historically far from our own, with the intention of enriching the human experience in a profoundly global world. I have also touched on some of the challenges that confront those who translate literature from an entirely different linguistic family, individuals such

5 It was impossible to obtain a permission from Lee Mae-Lee for publishing our picture of her "Portrait of a Shoe."

as Fahmida Riaz, who translates from Urdu to English, or Sophie Bowman and Zyanya Gil Yáñez, who have both worked to render Korean poetry into English and Spanish. These challenges include the selection of vocabulary, the differences of syntax, the lack of punctuation marks in one of the languages, the beauty that must be retained as an intrinsic component of the poem, and finally, the expressions written in four Chinese characters that bear a distinct cultural stamp and do not always lend themselves easily to a Western language. Using examples drawn from translated Korean poems we have also shown the variety and conceptual richness that are contained therein, and which are in turn shared with Spanish literature, regardless of the thematic content. The *sijo* of poetess Hwang Jin-yi, "River of the blue-green mountains," is certainly the most complex of these examples; Moon Chung-Hee's "Detour" maintains a certain cryptic distance, while the most accessible is Moon's "Putting on Makeup." Finally, we have explored the publishing houses that provide Korean literature translated to Spanish. These include Spain's Editorial Verbum, Huerga & Fierro, Mexico's Ediciones del Ermitaño, Argentina's Bajo la Luna editors and Hwarang Editorial.

I can also make some observations regarding the premise that modern societies experience, often in negative form, the influence of societies other than their own. Said influence comes in part from large transnational companies, in part from pressures by international political forces anxious to expand the limits of their own influence. From those facts we can deduce that modern-day nations face a difficult situation, since never in history we have consumed such an of abundance products from faraway regions, and yet without a corresponding expansion in our understanding of the cultures involved. At the same time, our consumerism is based on the idea that the greater the acquisition of foreign goods, the more urban and modern the society, and by extension, the more Western. This latter idea, itself a by-product of prolonged consumerism, subtly but deeply prolongs colonialism in societies that preen themselves on having put colonialism behind them. Moreover, a world based on the power of acquisition as the measure of personal value inevitably generates antagonisms, intolerance, and social separations that lead to dehumanization. But literature enjoys the ability to promote reflection and to enrich introspective processes, as opposed to the exalted tribute that consumerism pays to the external and the ephemeral. Beyond even that, the translation of the literature of other countries contributes to understanding, tolerance, and reflection. The act of transforming the written word from one language to another moves in direct opposition to the erasure that consumerism often inflicts on post-colonial societies. Rather, translation carries a different and far more positive effect, namely, to provide alternative readings through which one can rediscover the value of what one already has. Translation offers how readers can review the consequences of historical events in the lives of different peoples and, in so doing, develop a sharper sense of shared goals for a better future. This essay has attempted to explore the writings of one group of Korean poets—women—because they have been marginalized for centuries.

Finally, we know that the work of translation has its limits. In a world where economic policies control overall directions and end goals, the limitations that those policies impose over the translation of Korean poetry into Spanish are therefore economic in nature. To carry out these translations we must be able to count on educational institutions forming translators capable of working with the two languages, proficiently and idiomatically. We need publishers with a commitment to printing and promoting this literature. As a final item on this list, we require academics who dare to expand their academic interests beyond immediate research concerns. For scholars that process requires broadening their linguistic and thematic reach without sacrificing academic rigor. We would like to close this article with a phrase by Portuguese novelist and 1988 Nobel Prize winner José Saramago: "Writers construct national literature, and translators construct the universal."

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