[page 25]

**“Translations” of Hong Kildong: From Story to Classic to Icon and Beyond**

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1. Introduction

In the middle of 2000, the National Gallery in London ran an exhibition entitled “Encounters: New Art from Old” (June 14-September 17, 2000). The exhibition featured works of 24 contemporary artists who made updated versions of works in the National Gallery’s permanent collection. Some of the works were linked closely to the older works that inspired them, whereas others were abstract interpretations of ideas and motifs in older works. The exhibition focused on how artists take themes and motifs from older works of art to create new works that reflect contemporary artistic sensibilities. Only a few months later in Tokyo, the capital of another island nation that frames the Eurasian landmass, an exhibition entitled “Mona Lisa’s Smile” presented an historical overview of various renditions and interpretations of the Mona Lisa’s famous smile. Replicas from the 17th to 19th centuries were exhibited side by side with Rene Margritte’s surreal version and Morimura Yasumasa’s 1998 photo-manipulation portraits of himself as the Mona Lisa.

What does “new art from old” in London and Tokyo have to do with Korean literature? A great deal because the idea of “new art from old” explains much about the evolution of contemporary classics, such as The Tale of Hong Kildong (Hong Kildong chon) and The Tale of Ch’unkyang (Ch’unhyang chon). In their traditional and contemporary forms, these stories and others like them are “creative translations” of the themes and motifs from the Hong Kildong story and the Ch’unhyang story that manifest themselves in many different forms. The tools of translation include parody, sarcasm, and various forms of adaptation and retelling. In the “new-art-from-old” paradigm, [page 26] as the Indian literary critic Ganesh Devy put it, “The true test is the writer’s capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original. And in that sense, Indian literary traditions are essentially traditions of translation” (Devy, 1999, p. 187). The translation of the Ch’unhyang story and the Hong Kildong story into different forms of artistic creation is thus akin to many translations of the Indian epic The Ramayana or the Chinese classics The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sangou yanyi in Chinese; Samguk yonui in Korean) or Water Margin (Shuihuzhuan in Chinese; Suho chon in Korean) as they have traveled through time and space.

As the first part of an extended study on creative translation in Korean literature, this paper will be broad and somewhat speculative. In this paper, I will explore the translation of the Hong Kildong story through time and space as part of a broader discussion of the social history of the arts in Korea from the Choson period to the present. Before discussing the Hong Kildong story, I will provide a brief overview on the translation (and later commercialization) of literary themes from the English and Japanese literary tradition. Next, I will discuss how the “new-art-from-old” view of translation relates to issues in literary translation from Korean into other languages.

2. Creative Translation in the English and Japanese Literary Traditions

2.1. The English Literary Tradition

Of all literary traditions, the issue of authorship is perhaps most important in the English literary tradition. Traditionally, texts have been viewed as unique creations of a single author. As the owner of the text, the author is the ultimate authority on the text, either through a close reading of an original manuscript or through an analysis of the conditions that might have affected the author during text creation. The ultimate icon of authorship, of course, is William Shakespeare. It is no coincidence that the rise of Shakespeare as the author of valuable literary texts coincided with the rise of a commercial literary industry of publishing and theater in 18th century England (Dugas, 1999). To attract larger audiences, theaters and publishers lowered prices, which allowed works to reach a wide audience for the first time. The identification of popular works with a single author thus created Shakespeare’s authorship.

Authorship is frequently a matter of controversy, and Shakespeare is no exception. Two sharp controversies over Shakespeare have raged in recent years. Among those who doubt Shakespeare’s authorship, one group of scholars argues that philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was the real Shakespeare, [page 27] and another group believes that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604), was the real Shakespeare. (For an overview of the debate, see a collection of short essays in Harper’s, April 1999 and Michell, 1999). They base their arguments on the fact that there is suspiciously little information about Shakespeare’s life and on the logical difficulty of explaining how the humble Shakespeare could have known so much about the world and politics in the English court.

The emphasis on authorship (or as some postmodernists would have it, the “worship of dead white males”) has caused many to overlook the long tradition of creative translation in English literature. Shakespeare, of course, has been translated frequently throughout the centuries, and with the rise of the global media, has spread around the world (Davies, 1988). At least 275 films in the 20th century were based on Shakespeare’s work. One of the most ingenious film translations is Akira Kurosawa’s samurai film Ran (1985), a translation of King Lear. Shakespeare today has become a thriving culture industry that sustains itself through the production of popular translations not only of “original works,” but also of the author’s life and image. The Shakespeare industry has thus given us everything from the new replica of the old Globe Theatre in London and the film Shakespeare in Love to T-shirts and coffee mugs. In the English-speaking world, Shakespeare has the widest “brand recognition” of all literary works.

The evolution of Robin Hood offers a more useful comparison with Korean literature than Shakespeare. The Robin Hood story began as folk tales transmitted through ballads and rhymes in medieval England (Holt 1989). Much like the Hong Kildong story, the Robin Hood story most likely evolved from the acts of a noted individual, but research has yet to confirm who the historical Robin Hood was. The Robin Hood story began to appear in print in the 16th century and was published in many different versions in the 17th. By the beginning of the 18th century, the repeated publishing of Robin Hood stories led to canonization of the story, as Holt noted:

Repetition had overtaken invention. The printed versions of the ballads established a kind of canon. The tales were also issued in prose versions, as simple escapist literature which satisfied the taste for adventure and the antiquarian interests of the semi-educated (1989, p. 174).

As with Shakespeare, the influence of commercial publishing on the dissemination of the Robin Hood story was profound. From the 18th century [page 28] onwards, the story was mainly translated into prose versions, and then, in the 20th century, mainly as a children’s story. The Robin Hood story has been translated on film a number of times in the 20th century, including the popular 1973 Disney version that stimulated the production of a number of material translations of Robin Hood, such as lunch boxes and board games. Robin Hood: Men in Tights, Mel Brooks’s wacky 1993 parody of Kevin Costner’s 1991 Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, is, at the same time, a sarcastic comment on the commercial translation of the Robin Hood story.

2.2. The Japanese Literary Tradition

Like Shakespeare’s plays, the thousand-year-old The Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari), with Prince Genji as the main character, has been translated into various forms over the centuries, which has left a rich corpus of decorated scrolls, parody, textual notes, films, animation, comic books (manga), and modern and foreign-language translations. Most recently, a passage from it has appeared on the back of the new 2,000-yen bill that was issued to commemorate the new millennium. The Japanese literary tradition, however, is much closer to the Korean because of similarities in religious and philosophical tradition between the two countries. The spread of The Tale of Genji has not coincided with the creation of a cult of authorship around Murashiki Shikibu (978?-1026?). Though discussions of her life are included in most popular and scholarly studies of The Tale of Genji, her role as author is secondary to the text itself. Indeed, asserting national ownership of the text, as opposed to aristocratic ownership, was the main concern of Edo-period Genji scholars (Harper,1989). The original text is interesting to scholars, but in the public imagination that supports the Genji industry, the story of the search for release from formality through sexual love is what makes the story so appealing and translatable. The recent translation (1996-98) by Setouchi Jakucho became a best seller because Setouchi took liberties with the grammar by adding subjects, which makes it easier for contemporary Japanese readers to follow the narrative. In addition, the translation was sold in an attractive boxed set of hardcover books that middle-class Japanese think looks nice in their homes. Hashimoto Osamu’s 1991 translation, The Transformed Tale of Genji (Yohen Genji Monogatari), uses the first-person voice of Prince Genji to tell the story from a male perspective, thus making it the first cross-gender translation of the work. The best-selling modern translation of The Tale of Genji is no doubt the soft-porn comic book series by Yamato Waki, entitled Lived in a Dream (Asakiyumemisi, 1980-93), sold 16,000,000 copies, thus introducing the story to audiences that would not normally read literature for pleasure. [page 29]

This brief survey of translation in the English and Japanese literary traditions shows the power of translation in creating Shakespeare, Robin Hood, and The Tale of Genji as cultural industries that have consumer appeal. As mentioned above, The Ramanaya and such Chinese classics as The Story of the Three Kingdoms and Water Margin also fall into this category. All developed as folk tales that were transmitted orally in various combinations of prose, poetry, and song. The rise of commercial publishing stimulated their translation into mainly prose works as part of an emerging literary canon. The rise of film and other media in the 20th century, combined with “the commercialization of everything,” brought on a new wave of translation into a variety of media and turned the main character into a brand of cultural commodity in the form of icons. The late 20th-century “branding” of these works has transformed the old issues of authorship and authenticity in modern translations into areas of scholarly concern beyond the public imagination. They have become, in the language of the Internet, instantly downloadable literary brands that entertain through an appealing combination of exotic, romantic, and heroic motifs that decorate universal, if not simplistic, themes.

3. Creative Translation in the Korean Literary Tradition : The Hong Kildong Story

3.1. Overall Pattern of Translation

The translation of the Hong Kildong story follows the contours of Korean history from the mid-Choson period to the present and overall trends in “world culture.” Differences in origin and theme of each work naturally effected what was translatable, but the overall pattern was similar for these and many other traditional stories. In the first period of translation, each story evolved from an orally transmitted folk tale into a written form that had a number of differing versions. The imperialist push for hegemony over Korea, which culminated in Japanese colonial rule from 1910-45, is the second period of translation. In this period, the story was translated into a “literary classic” that became codified as part of the official canon of literary works. The third period began with liberation from Japanese rule and continues to this day. In this period, the story was translated from a “literary classic” into a cultural commodity that appealed to a combination of cultural nationalism and popular sentimentalism. The appeal to cultural nationalism is a “Koreanesque” brand that provides a postcolonial reading of imagined Korean past.

[page 30]

3.2. The Hong Kildong Story

In the historiography of Korean literature, the Hong Kildong story fills the combined roles of Shakespeare and Robin Hood. Like works of Shakespeare, which define the potential of English as a literary language free from Anglo-Saxon baggage, The Tale of Hong Kildong is recognized as the literary work that marks the independence of the Korean language from Chinese. School children in Korea learn that The Tale of Hong Kildong, written in 1618, is the first classical novel written in hangul and that the author was Ho Kyun, who was stigmatized because he was an illegitimate son of a high government official. Like Shakespeare, The Tale of Hong Kildong is also a source of several authenticity controversies. The first concerns authorship of the text and the second concerns the authenticity of the hero Hong Kildong. Both are interesting because they indicate insecurity over using an “authorless” text with a “fictional” hero as the text that marks Korean literature’s triumphant emergence from Chinese literature. If The Tale of Hong Kildong were not written in hangul, then what work would count as the first hangul novel? This question is key to a historiography of Korean literature that emphasizes the transition from classical Chinese literature to hangul literature and from aristocratic literature to popular literature. Recent research (Yi 1997), however, has shown that The Tale of Sol Kongch’an (Sol Kongch’an chon), written in 1511, is the oldest extant novel in hangul, which will no doubt affect future discussions of The Tale of Hong Kildong.

The controversy over authorship of The Tale of Hong Kildong centers on whether Ho Kyun was the author or whether the text emerged from oral tales of a mythic hero known as Hong Kildong (for overviews of the authorship controversy, see Hwang and Chong, 1984 and Paek, 1995). Standard literary historiography supports the argument that Ho Kyun was the author, based on a comment by Yi Shik (1584-1647), who wrote in The Memoirs of T’aektang (T’aektang Chapcho) thtat Ho used Water Margin as a model for The Tale of Hong Kildong. Those who argue against Ho Kyun’s authorship, however, point out that there are no records of Water Margin being read in Korea at the time Ho was supposed to have written the story and that the structure of the stories is quite different (Paek, 1995). They also point out that none of the existing versions of the story goes back further than the late 19th century and that a copy of The Tale of Hong Kildong has not been found with any of Ho Kyun’s other writings. In 1997, a complete wood-block text was discovered in Kangnung, that, based on word choice and orthographic conventions, experts believe was written around 1850. Others argue that social conditions in Choson-period yangban society were not conducive to the creation of such an [page 31] anti-establishment work as The Tale of Hong Kildong, even for an illegitimate son of a high government official, such as Ho Kyun. Until proof of Ho’s authorship other than the comment by Yi Shik is found, it is more accurate to assume that Ho Kyun was not the author.

As with Shakespeare, a creative-translation view of The Tale of Hong Kildong makes issues of authorship and authenticity secondary to the issue of how the story is translated through time in the hands of different groups of people. The question of how a Choson-period story has been translated amid the upheavals of twentieth century Korean history and the continuing division of the peninsula into two competing states is relevant to an overall theory of literary translation because of the wide range of social forces that have affected the reception of the story. In the rest of this section, I will focus on how the Hong Kildong story has been translated through time.

Official Records of the Choson Dynasty (Choson wangjo shillok) refers to Hong Kildong as the leader of a peasant rebellion in Yonsan County, South Ch’ungch’ong Province, around 1500. To date, most literary scholars agree that orally transmitted folk tales about the historical Hong Kildong became the basis of The Tale of Hong Kildong, regardless of whether Ho Kyun was the author or not. If Ho Kyun’s authorship is assumed, then he essentially translated orally transmitted stories of peasant rebellions and the real Hong Kildong to written form, the act of which would have constituted a direct and indeed dangerous challenge to the ruling ideology of the Choson dynasty. If Ho Kyun’s authorship is rejected, then the translation of orally transmitted stories took place gradually from the 16th century to the 18th or 19th century. Though the evidence of translation from oral to written form dates only to the late 19th century, it is highly probable that the translation coincided with the development of a market economy and ensuing trade in literary works in the 18th and 19th centuries (Kim 1997). This is no different from the way the rise of commercial publishing precipitated the translation of the Robin Hood story and the rise of Shakespeare as a popular author.

The Hong Kildong story entered the late 19th century as a popular tale and gradually made its way into the emerging literary canon by the early 20th century. The 20th century interest in the Hong Kildong story was noted by Keith Pratt and Richard Rutt (1999, p. 168): “There is an underlying theme of protest against injustices in Korean politics and society, which has added to the book’s value for 20th century critics...” Though some have argued that the Hong Kildong story was a “textbook” for peasant revolution (Chin and U 1994), the evidence suggests that the Japanese allowed The Tale of Hong Kildong to become part of the literary canon. The March 1 Movement of 1919, however, [page 32] changed things, as the Japanese became worried about their position in Korea and adopted a more heavy-handed policy of political control. In a commentary on the first Japanese translation of The Tale of Hong Kildong that appeared in a series of translations of classical Korean literature in 1921-22, Hosoi Cho noted that Japanese authorities should be careful of The Tale of Hong Kildong because it might have helped incite the March 1 Movement (Kaiji 1986). The Tale of Hong Kildong was not banned, however, and it was made into a popular film in 1934, with a sequel following in 1936. The film attracted 100,000 viewers, making it one of the most popular Korean-language films of the colonial era. The Japanese thus permitted the use of The Tale of Hong Kildong as a critique of the Choson ruling elite that they had displaced and as a way to negate influence of the Chinese tradition on Korean culture. Indeed, Hong Kildong’s search for a new “third nation” in the form of the utopian Yuldoguk that appears in the story could have been appropriated by the Japanese to legitimize their rule as a “third way” between the continuation of the Choson Dynasty and traditional Chinese hegemony. The danger for the Japanese, as has already been mentioned, was that the Hong Kildong story could incite rebellion against that economic and political injustice that existed under colonial rule. This may explain why The Tale of Hong Kildong was not published as frequently as other classical tales, such as The Tale of Ch’unhyang, during the post-1919 period. In his index of more than 500 classical novels, Skillend noted:

Kim Kidong used what might have been the first edition, 70 page s, and the same publishers advertised it in 1923 and 1935. Several other publishers listed it in 1925 and 1926, but it is rather surprising in view of the opinions now held concerning it [first novel in hangul], how few such lists issued by publishers of paperbacks it appears in (Skillend, 1968, p. 234).

Censoring popular media, such as film, while discussing the publication of the printed version fits in with other forms of covert thought control that the Japanese used during the 1920s and early 1930s. The official ambivalence about the Hong Kildong story is reflected in the brief evaluation of the story in Kim Taejun’s 1939 A History of the Korean Novel (Choson sosolsa), the most influential history of Korean literature published during the colonial era. A more detailed study of production and reception of the Hong Kildong story in Korean and Japanese during the colonial period is critical to an understanding of the degree to which the story became politicized. [page 33]

Liberation from Japanese rule in 1945 and the division of the peninsula into two hostile regimes put nation-building efforts in the context of a competition between North and South for legitimacy as the sole ruler of the Korean peninsula, bringing about new uses for the Hong Kildong story. The three years from liberation until the division were, as is well documented, a period of political and ideological turmoil. Culturally, however, the era was also period of great experimentation that derived its energy from nationalistic passion. The overriding concern of much of this activity was the creation of a new national culture that was progressive in its future orientation and Korean in its identity.

The interest in national culture stimulated a number of former modernist writers, such as Kim Kirim, Pak Taewon, and Yi Taejun, to explore Korean cultural and historical themes. Pak Taewon published his version of the Hong Kildong story in 1947 (Chi, 1995). The work represents a dramatic change in the direction of Pak’s work from the experimental modernism of the late 1930s, for which he is better known, to an interest in historical and nationalistic themes in the post-liberation period. Pak’s interest in “classical literature,” however, began in the 1940s when he started translating Ming Dynasty classics as a way to survive the intense censorship during the war years. Between 1941 and 1944, he translated The Story of the Three Kingdoms, Water Margin, and Monkey from Chinese into Korean. His translation of The Tale of Hong Kildong focuses on Hong Kildong’s emergence as a rebel leader in the countryside who gradually gathers supporters in his battle for justice. The end of the work depicts a battle between Hong Kildong and his followers as they head for Kyongbuk Palace to take on the corrupt rulers. By ending with a move to conquer Kyongbuk Palace, the center of power in Choson and colonial Korea, and omitting the conquest of Yuldoguk, Pak alludes to the immediacy of the political battles over the creation of a new Korean state that were taking place in post-liberation Korea. In Pak’s translation, Hong Kildong is the rebel leader who reflects the aspiration of the masses, not a martial arts super-hero who fights alone, as is common in later translations of the story.

For North Korea, The Tale of Hong Kildong fits neatly into the nationalistic Marxist narrative of literary history as heroic struggle against the oppressive “feudal” society (Yun, 1979 and Minjok munhaksa yon’guso, 1991). The creation of a Utopian “third nation” is taken as a sign of the innate revolutionary spirit in the Korean people. The North Korean interpretation of The Tale of Hong Kildong is similar to the Japanese interpretation in that it draws on the condemnation of the Choson-period ruling elite and the search for a new “third nation” to suggest that the new regime is different from the past [page 34] and satisfies the desire for something new. To be too revolutionary, however, would risk legitimizing the act of rebellion. The 1986 North Korean film version of the Hong Kildong story reflects this concern. The plot pays homage to Kildong’s anti-yangban feelings, but turns him into an appealing martial arts hero instead of a troublesome revolutionary. The end of the film is particularly telling because it shows Kildong leaving on a boat for Yuldoguk, but offers no vision of what the new paradise might be like. The viewer is left to assume that the “real world” is a paradise, thus negating the need to search any further. The similarity between Japanese colonial and North Korean postcolonial use of the Hong Kildong story suggests that the story has undergone only minor translation in North Korea.

The translation of the Hong Kildong story in South Korea has been much more profound. As in North Korea, The Tale of Hong Kildong plays a key role in the literary canon as the first “hangul novel.” The anti-yangban message of the story, however, has been translated less as a rejection of the Choson inheritance than as a rejection of greed and corruption in the present, This, of course, serves the needs of South Korean rulers who have used the public’s revulsion at corruption and misrule of the previous regime to purge political enemies and legitimize themselves as just rulers in the eyes of an apprehensive public. This served the needs of Park Chung-hee in the 1960s as he created a unique South Korean nationalism that combined pride in economic growth with a “Confucianized” national identity. Hong Kildong in the 1960s was thus turned into a comic book and animation film martial arts (= tradition) hero who fought for justice (= economic development) as a good military leader (= Park Chung-hee). The comic book in particular was a massive hit among the generation of children born in the 1960s that grew up to lead pro-democracy demonstrations in the 1980s and the Internet boom in the 1990s. It did for the Hong Kildong story what the 1973 Disney animated film did for the Robin Hood story: turned it into an enduring ‘‘children’s classic.”

The political message in the Hong Kildong story has been embellished in a number of recent South Korean translations. In 1993, MBC TV broadcast a madangguk translation of the Hong Kildong story as part of its Madangnori series. Madangguk is a new genre of drama performed outside, which became popular on university campuses in the late 1960s and 1970s with the revival of interest in Korean culture (Nam, 1993). In 1996, Pak Yangho published a three-volume parody of the Hong Kildong story entitled Hong Kildong in Seoul (Soul Hong Kildong) that followed the political events from the Rhee Syngman years to the 1980 coup d’etat. The stories replaced the corrupt yangban with corrupt persons in contemporary elite and Hong Kildong with a just and sincere [page 35] 20th generation descendent of Hong Kildong.

The economic boom, the beginnings of which supported the success of the Hong Kildong story as a comic book and an animation film, turned South Korea into a middle-income nation by the late 1980s, which coincided with democratization in 1987. As economic growth and democracy continued to advance in the 1990s, a newly rich middle class was able to afford travel and foreign study for the first time. Together, these trends ushered in a period of unprecedented cultural diversity that tied Korea closely to contemporary global trends in which images and words have become brand-named commodities of great value and global reach.

Increased consumption levels and the “branding of culture” greatly expanded the market for translations of the Hong Kildong story. The slow transition of Hong Kildong into a children’s hero, which began with the comic book and animation film in the 1960s, gathered force in the 1980s and 1990s. A series of three children’s films that portrayed Hong as a martial arts super-hero appeared during this time. The 1996 animation film The Return of Hong Kildong (Toraonun Hong Kildong) received critical acclaim for raising the standards of Korean animation to those of Japan. The film is a simplistic battle between super-hero Hong Kildong and a monster-like yangban king. It ends with the defeat of the evil king, thereby establishing justice in Choson. Like Pak T’aewon,s version of the story, the escape to and conquest of Yuldoguk is omitted, which gives the anti-yangban message a moralistic immediacy. Most recently, Hong Kildong has been translated as a SBS TV drama and a computer game.

Recent discoveries about the historical Hong Kildong and the origins of the story have affected scholarly interpretations of the story. In the mid-1990s, research by Sol Songgyong (1998) uncovered detailed information on the historical Hong Kildong. According to Sol, Hong Kildong was born in Changsong County in South Cholla Province in 1443. He led a number of peasant rebellions, including a major rebellion in 1495 in Yonsan County, South Ch’ungch’ong Province, which was recorded in the Official Records of the Choson Dynasty (Choson wangjo shillok). In an attempt to escape Korea, he traveled south in 1500 to Haterumajima, a small island between Okinawa and Taiwan that is part of the Ryukyu Island chain. He traveled extensively in the Ryukyu Islands and died in 1510 on Kumejima. Memorial tablets and folklore relating to Hong Kildong exist on several of the islands today. This information confirms the arguments of those who believe that the story, whether authored by Ho Kyun or not, developed from folk tales about a real person name Hong Kildong. The escape to the Ryukyu Islands is particularly [page 36] interesting because it suggests that Yuldoguk is indeed a non-Choson, non-Chinese “third place.”

In keeping with the times, however, Changsong County has taken the historical Hong Kildong and turned him into a local “culture industry” (see the county’s Website at http://www.chonnam.rda.go.kr). In 1997, the county named the road that goes past Hong Kildong’s birthplace “Hong KiJdong Road.” Since 1999, the county has sponsored a two-day Hong Kildong Festival in May that includes seminars and other special events in areas where it is believed that Hong Kildong lived. To help promote the Hong Kildong industry, the county devotes a considerable section of its Website to the Hong Kildong tour, festival information, and, of course, an official icon, or “county character.” The discovery of the historical Hong Kildong and subsequent creation of a local culture industry is a form of “retro-translation” that takes the story closer to its origins as an oral tale about an historical figure. Instead of being transmitted orally, the story is now translated “mutlimedially” through the icon, the festival, the tours, and the Internet. Perhaps this confirms the existence of a “Choson postmodernism” that corresponds to Umberto Eco,s (1986) Medieval postmodernism or Karatani Kojin’s (1993) Edo postmodernism. Instead of being a conscious, often state-sponsored return to the past like Neo-Classicism in 18th-century Europe, these retro-postmodernisms have appeared spontaneously in many forms around the globe.

In 1998, Changsong County and SBS fought over the rights of the use of a Hong Kildong character (“k’aerikto”) (Kim 1998). In 1997, Changsong County began developing a cartoon figure as its official icon. In 1998, SBS developed a cartoon figure for its Hong Kildong drama series. Fearing that the SBS cartoon figure would displace its own effort, Changsong County complained to SBS, arguing that it had a patent on the use of Hong Kildong as an icon. A group of county officials came up to Seoul and protested in front of the SBS headquarters, which prompted SBS to stop development and use of its Hong Kildong cartoon figure. To complicate matters, the city of Kangnung, where Ho Kyun was born, developed a “Hong Kildong mask,” and has plans to develop other Hong Kildong souvenirs. An advertising industry source in Kim (1998) said that the potential market for Hong Kildong products is huge because the image of Hong Kildong as a fighter against corruption and injustice strikes a chord with the public. The battle over the use of Hong Kildong underscores the value of Hong Kildong as an icon and the creative power of translation.

The Hong Kildong story thus entered the 20th century as a “family of works” (chakp’um kun), but left it as a “family of translations” (ponyok kun). The late 19th century works themselves were all written translations of the [page 37] orally transmitted story, but the late 20th century translations cover a wide range of media: animation, books, comics, drama, film, icon, and textbook. The translation from folk hero to literary protagonist to icon has turned Hong Kildong into a postmodern cultural product that takes multiple forms and means many things. Nothing better symbolizes this than the ubiquitous use of the name “Hong Kildong” in examples of how to write personal names appropriately in a given format. Like “John Doe,” “Hong Kildong” can be whoever you want him or her to be.

In the case of English, the Hong Kildong story has been translated a number of times. In the 19th century, it was a “Korean tale” told in Victorian English (Allen, 1889); in the mid-20th century, it was a serious piece of “classical literature” told in abridged form in American English (Pihl, 1969); in the late 20th century, it was a children’s story told in a storytelling voice (Kim, 1993); and, in the first year of the new century, it was an important piece of “Korean culture” told in stilted academic English alongside a Korean “original” (Kojon Munhak Yon’guhoe, 2000). There will no doubt be many other English translations of the Hong Kildong story in the future, but among them the best translations will be those that make “new art from old,” that turn the story into something that speaks to new audiences in English. They may be faithful and complete translations of one of the originals or creative translations, but, in the end, the authenticity of the text and authorship will matter little to reception of the story and its eventual placement in a canon of world literature.

4. Conclusion: Creative Translation and Postcolonial Translation Theory

At the beginning of this essay, I implied that the “Encounters: New Art from Old” exhibition at the National Gallery in London had something to do with Korean literature. Through the preceding examination of the translation of the Hong Kildong story from its inception as a folktale to its current status as an icon, I have shown that the creative splendor of the Hong Kildong story comes from its multiple and never-ending translatability, not from the fame of its author, or its former status as the first novel written in hangul. It is endlessly translatable because of its simple universality. Like other great stories, such as the Ramayana, Robin Hood stories, The Tale of Genji, and Water Margin, it sets good against evil, while offering hope that liberation is possible. The times define “good,” “evil,” and “liberation” in different ways, but Hong Kildong is always there at the center of battle.

Creative translation as discussed in this paper offers a new perspective on [page 38] the translation of the Hong Kildong story into foreign languages. Must there be an original? If so, where is the original? How free is the translator to play with the story, to translate it creatively as has been done in Korea for hundreds of years? What constitutes a “good translation” of the Hong Kildong story? These questions apply not only to the Hong Kildong story, but also to other classical Korean stories, such as the Ch’unhyang story, that have been translated “multimedially” in Korea.

In a group interview about Shakespeare on film that appeared in the film magazine Cineaste (1998), directors were asked the following question:

It is almost always necessary to make cuts and other changes in the text when cinematicaliy adapting a Shakespeare play. What is your own philosophy or strategy for making cuts, for updating antiquarian or obscure words, or for rewriting or rearranging scenes?

To which Sir Peter Hall, director of the 1968 version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, responded:

This is why I prefer Shakespeare in a foreign language. The best Shakespeare films to me―such as Kurosawa’s Throne of Blood and Ran and the Solzhenitsyn Hamlet―are those that take his themes and characters and ignore his text. I think Shakespeare’s text is essentially theatrical and it’s dependent on an imaginative make-believe between audience and the actor, Jive at the particular moment that they are doing it.

Though focused on the film translations of Shakespeare, Hall’s comments offer hope to those who want to translate the Hong Kildong story into foreign languages. Translators of the Hong Kildong story who worry about “loss” and adherence to the “original” as attributed to Ho Kyun overlook what is, in the words of Devy (1999, p. 187), most important about translation: “capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original.” With the Hong Kildong story, however, they have the added luxury of having many “originals” to choose from. The question for the future, then, is whether the translation of Hong Kildong will be taken into yet unforeseen directions or whether it will reach some outer limit of translatability.

[page 39]

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