Translation and the Empathetic Imagination

An Interview with Literary Translator and Marygrove College Professor,
Dr. Chae-Pyong Song
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A translation is no translation … unless it will give you the music of a poem along with the words of it.

JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE
The Unsung Hero

Despite the fact that most American readers are familiar with the long-sustained success of translated works, few of us have thought to peek behind the velvet curtain to thank the unsung poet-hero who allows us to experience them: the translator.

Consider successful contemporary novels like *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Reader*, or *The Kite Runner*. Who wrote these? If you don’t know, I can either tell you – Stieg Larsson, Bernhard Schlink, and Khaled Hosseini, respectively – or you can check the cover of the book. Next question: *Who translated them?* I have no idea. All three texts sit before me, cover up, but the translator is, as *Chronicle for Higher Education* writer Jennifer Howard would say, “Like a discreet waiter who keeps the glasses filled while remaining practically [and unjustly] unnoticed.”

Translation is not as simple as a one-for-one word exchange

To the unknowing reader, translation appears to be a simple currency exchange, a “one-for-one” deal – one word in X language for one in Y language – or as *Why Translation Matters* author Edith Grossman would put it, “an act of magic, like altering base metals into precious ones...”

But as Grossman explains, translation has much more to do with “creative decisions and imaginative acts of criticism.” It’s not that readers intentionally overlook the translator, it is simply that, as Grossman suggests, most of us do not understand the complexity, the overwhelming responsibility and the linguistic dexterity essential to the art.

We all know bad translation when we see it—that’s easy. But when it’s seamless, when it’s impeccably on, the translator etherizes and the author bows before us.
The Translation Process

To offer not only a defense of why translation studies matters, but to walk us through the translation process, we are pleased to share with you a transcribed audio interview of Marygrove College associate professor of English, Dr. Chae-Pyong Song. He, along with collaborators Dr. Anne Rashid (an assistant professor of English at Carlow University in Pittsburg) and Dr. Darcy Brandel, have translated upwards of 200 poems; their ongoing collection can be viewed here.

The interview was held on May 22, 2012 with the Gwangju Foreigner’s Network (GFN), which is the only English radio station in Gwangju, Korea. Since November 2011, the station has been using Dr. Song’s translations for their program, “The Poems of Korea.”

Q: Could you tell us about the translation process?

Chae-Pyong Song: As you may know, translation, literary translation in particular, involves the complex ways of negotiating with the cultural specificities of language. At every translation, I go through multiple drafts: at a beginning stage, my focus is on making the draft as faithful to the original as possible. At this stage, I try to make every effort to understand the original poem and make literal translations, paying careful attention to the author’s voice and the sound of the text; then as I move toward final stages I focus more on readability issues. In other words, does this word make sense to the English speakers? Does this Korean metaphor work? Also, at this time I consider all the components that make a poem a poem: rhythm, sound, tone, etc.

Toward the final stages I try to get help from my friends like Anne Rashid and Darcy Brandel who are English professors and also poets. Ultimately, it is a meticulous, multi-layered process but it is also a rewarding process because there is always a room for your own creativity. It is much more than a passive process of finding equivalent English words for Korean words.

1 Although we acknowledge that literary translation is an essential cultural activity, one that is capable of, as Dr. Song suggests, expanding imaginations and bridging cultural gaps, few translators are fortunate enough to make a sustainable living in this line of work. Therefore, the emphasis of Marygrove’s Modern Language Translation program is on translating journalistic, commercial, legal, and scientific texts.
**Q:** Could you give us some examples of the biggest challenges you face as you translate?

**Chae-Pyong Song:** That’s a good question. English and Korean languages are from very different cultural backgrounds, so writers use culture-specific images, rhythms, and metaphors; negotiating with these specificities of different languages is a challenge every time I translate. How to translate the complexity of cultural references without losing their specific nuances is a challenge.

For instance, not long ago, I collaborated with Darcy Brandel to translate one of Oh Sae-young’s poems, entitled “Dwelling in Winter”; it is a beautiful winter poem about pots standing as if they are in meditation. Here, we met with the image of the typical Korean pot terrace (장독대), a distinct space in most rural homes used to store ceramic crocks of soy sauce, bean paste, pepper paste, etc. In this case, Darcy and I spent significant time looking at online images of various pot terraces so we could effectively capture not only the visual significance of this space but also the emotional and metaphoric sentiment regarding the process of meditation in the poem.

Since most English readers are not familiar with this distinctly Korean space, we took great care in our translation of “Dwelling in Winter” to communicate the nostalgic tone of reflection that accompanies the image throughout the poem. We had another challenge in translating this poem. It includes rhythmic, mimetic words in the Korean phrase (올망졸망); this cannot be translated. So we spent quite a bit of time, and finally decided to add the alliterative “cuddled in clusters” to produce the nostalgic sweetness of the original sentiment, while maintaining the use of a formal literary device for linguistic emphasis.

“If we, no matter where we come from, could imagine others, and if we could place ourselves into the place of others, in other words, if we could exercise our empathetic imagination more willingly, the world could be a better place.”

– Dr. Chae-Pyong Song
**Q:** What makes you do this translation in spite of these challenges?

**Chae-Pyong Song:** There is a translation journal titled *Three Percent;* its title comes from the reality that only three percent of non-English publications in the world are translated into English. Edith Grossman, a fascinating translator who translated *Don Quixote* into English, said in her recent book titled *Why Translation Matters* that "Translation expands our ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time. It permits us to savor the transformation of the foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live outside our own skins, our own preconceptions and misconceptions. It expands and deepens our world, our consciousness, in countless, indescribable ways" (14).

I wholeheartedly agree with her. If I could, with my translations, help English readers expand their cultural imaginations a little bit, it would be great. With such a hope, I continue to translate. Also, I love the challenges that I talked about earlier. The word, translate, comes from a Latin word, which means “bearing across.” As a translator, I bear Korean words across over to English words. As I do “bearing across,” I want to bridge the gap, chasm that exists between cultures.

For now, there is such a great imbalance between Korea and for instance America. The world is still painfully divided. If we, no matter where we come from, could imagine others, and if we could place ourselves into the place of others, in other words, if we could exercise our empathetic imagination more willingly, the world could be a better place. I want to make a contribution to such a world. It may sound so grandiose, but I guess it’s my grand goal.

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I still do not know the name of the man with the disheveled hair. The mountain man came down stealthily like a fox when the night deepened, and hid himself in Sister’s room.

나는 아직 그 더벅머리 이름을 모른다 받이 길으면 여우처럼 몰래 누나 방으로 숨어들던 산사내

To view an ongoing collection of contemporary *Korean Poetry in Translation* by Chae-Pyong Song, Anne Rashid and Darcy Brandel, please visit their website.
Modern Language Translation is a field that is growing exponentially. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a ten-year growth rate of 42 percent for interpreters and the certified translator (the average growth rate for all occupations is 14 percent); they also list 2010 median pay for document translators as $43,300 per year ($20.82 per hour).

If you are interested in becoming a certified translator, you should know that Marygrove College offers an online program in Modern Language Translation. Our online program is designed for professionals who plan to pursue a career in translation and train for the American Translators Association (ATA) certification exam and provides translation training from Arabic, French, or Spanish into English. In our program, students will not only study the linguistic and cultural aspects of language transfer, but they will take a hands-on approach to translating journalistic, commercial, legal, and scientific texts. These include printed and online promotional and informational material, as well as various types of business correspondence and transactions.

You should also know that Marygrove College is reducing tuition rates for this online graduate program by 19 percent! This is one step – amongst a few others – that the college is taking to ensure that a Marygrove education is an achievable, financially-sustainable investment.

“Marygrove’s Certificate in Modern Language Translation is a rigorous program. I have been translating for a long time and I still learned a lot. It’s also a protected, friendly and multicultural environment that stimulates creativity. When you’re here, you’re home.”

– Aliah Zeidan, MLT GRADUATE

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