

Cultural encounters through translation in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

Translation is not merely a form of intercultural communication, it is a cultural encounter between two different worlds. The process of translation opens up an arena in which conceptual boundaries are expanded, meanings are contested, and power conflicts emerge. In this issue of *News from Northeast Asia* we examine how the act of translation can also shed light on the nature of the relationship between the countries in which the original and translated texts were produced.

The way in which translation can lead to bilateral exchange is illustrated by Kyusik Jeong of Wonkwang University in 'Asian workers' solidarity and cultural exchange'. Translation can also act to provide a common ground for engagement, as Nihei Michiaki, Professor Emeritus of Tohoku University, reminds us in 'The translation and cultural exchange of the Japanese classic *Genjimonogatari*'. Translation may

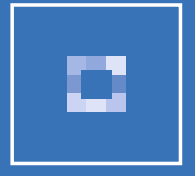
also be accompanied by active attempts to reconfigure power relations and bring about change to the status quo; this is demonstrated by Kyushu University's Tanaka Mika in 'Aspects of Japanese publication translations in Sinmunkwan's magazines'. However, translation may also contribute, perhaps unintentionally, to the reproduction of long-standing prejudices, as can be seen in the case of the Japanese translation of the works

of a Korean dissident presented by Kyung Hee University's Moon-seok Jang in 'Across the Korea Strait and the Yellow Sea. Kim Ji Ha in the 1970s'.

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Asian workers' solidarity and cultural exchange

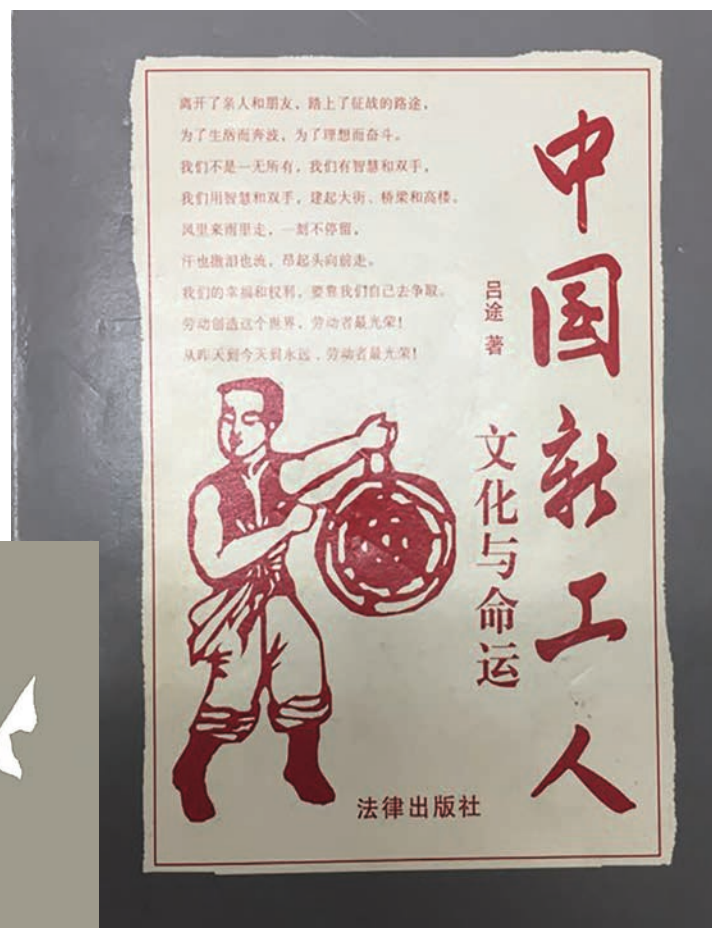
Kyusik Jeong

As Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019 gained the world's attention, reports that the citizens of Hong Kong had sung 'March for the Beloved', South Korea's representative grassroots activist song, led some to ponder upon the influence of Korea's democracy movement on these demonstrations. Yet cultural exchange and practice should not be regarded as one-way phenomena; they are lifestyles constructed and modified according to their needs by various organizations and activists over a long time of solidarity and cross-reference.¹ Indeed, 'March for the Beloved', recognized since the 1980s as a key cultural text symbolizing Korea's democracy movement, had already become Asia's 'The Internationale', transcending time and space to be sung throughout Asia, in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Cambodia, and Malaysia.

In China, the socialist state that has turned into 'the world's factory', the active movements of the New Workers group are said to have referenced the culture and experience of South Korea's labor activism. A prime example of this can be found in the Beijing Migrant Workers' Home located in Picun, a village outside Beijing where a high concentration of workers reside. This organization, which began in 2002, aims to build a commune that seeks "the construction of New Workers group culture, various educational activities, and the possibilities of community economy and solidarity". Members have been developing an alternative cultural movement based on the realistic lives and needs of workers, under the following recognition: "Without our culture, our history is lost, and without our history, our future is lost". This organization is headed by Sun Heng, also the leader of the New Workers Art Troupe, who first heard 'March for the Beloved' in 2005 and was so impressed that he adapted it into 'Song of Praise for Workers (劳动者赞歌)', which addresses the lives and struggles of Chinese workers. The song gained popularity during the 'New Workers Culture and Arts Festival' celebrating the new year in 2012 and subsequently became the most popular

song among Chinese labor activism organizations and activists.

Another legacy of Korean political and labor activism that spread throughout Asia is the *Biography of Chun Tae-il* (written by Cho Youngrae in 1983). Recording the life and struggle of Chun Tae-il, an icon and martyr of the Korean labor movement who self-immolated in 1970 for the improvement of the poor working conditions, crying "Workers are not machines" and "Abide by the Labor Standards Act", this book was translated into English in 2003 as *A Single Spark*. It has since come to be read in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Mongolia. It became a must-read text for Chinese labor organizations and activists following the publication in 2012 of the Chinese translation by Liu Jianzhou, *A Single Spark: Biography of Chun Tae-il* [星星之火: 全泰壹评传].



Above: *The New Workers of China: Culture and Destiny*, written by Lü Tu and published by Legal Publishing House in 2015, presents an analysis of the social structure that the 'New Workers' of China face, as well as a vivid account of their life stories. It was translated into Korean as *The Future of Chinese New Workers* (left) and published in 2018 by Nareum Books. Images provided by the author who participated in the volume's Korean translation.

Lü Tu, an expert in developmental sociology who studied at Wageningen University in the Netherlands, was once a university professor in China, and now lives with workers at the Beijing Migrant Workers' Home carrying out research, education and community activities, confesses that she felt an indescribable range of emotions after reading the biography. As she says, in the lives and struggles of Chinese New Workers, it is possible to observe that the 'Spirit of Chun Tae-il' lives on, beyond borders and language barriers, in the hearts of people who respect the value of life.

It should be noted that the experience and culture of Korean labor activism has not stopped at merely being accepted in China but, through the Chinese New Workers, has evolved and become disseminated within Korea. All three books of Lü Tu on the Chinese New Workers have been translated into

Korean. Among those, *The Formation of Chinese New Workers* and *The Future of Chinese New Workers*, for which the author of this piece served as the main translator, calls for the establishment of subjectivity in the New Workers as both individuals and groups through the analysis of the social structure that those workers are situated in, as well as their 'life stories'. Moreover, *We Are Justified* (the Korean translation published in 2020) presents a detailed examination of the lives, work, and struggles of Chinese female workers. The fact that this book was published as part of the 'Joint Publication Project Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of Chun Tae-il's Death', which was planned by the Chun Tae-il Foundation and eleven Korean publishing companies for the continuation of Chun Tae-il's spirit in the present age, is significant indeed.

In this sense, translation does not stop at the transferring of print from one country to another, but rather is a kind of cultural struggle that calls for the exchange of thoughts and experiences as a mediator of conversations and encounters. Thus the encounter of Chun Tae-il and Chinese New Workers through translation becomes a sign that promotes the solidarity and cultural exchange of Asian workers, transcending industry types, regions, genders, generations, and borders. This would be the true meaning of what Lü Tu said to this author during her visit to Korea in 2015: "Your paying attention to the realities and future of Chinese New Workers is paying attention to the fate of the world's workers, and that is the reason why I am interested in the life and death of Chun Tae-il".

The encounter of Chun Tae-il and the Chinese New Workers continues strong into the present day. In 2020, Sun Heng and Lü Tu came together to compose the song 'Brilliant Spark: In commemoration of Chun Tae-il', a video of which² was screened during the closing ceremony of East Asia People Theater Festival, held in 2020 in Korea to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Chun Tae-il's death.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Raymond Williams' assertion that culture is "a whole way of life", in: Williams, R. 1958. *Work and Society*, Chatto & Windus.
- 2 <https://tinyurl.com/BrilliantSpark-ChunTai-Il>