

Issues in Cross-cultural Communication on Korean Studies: View from the Periphery

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국문요약

이 논문에서는 한국학의 국제적 소통을 위한 몇 가지 핵심적인 과제들을 밝히고자 한다. 다시 말해 한국의 한국학 연구자들과 서구의 한국학 연구자들이 교류하고 협력하는 과정에서 생길 수 있는 문제들에 대해 논의하려는 것이다. 여기서 말하는 서구의 연구자란 주로 서유럽과 북미의 연구자들이다. 연구 동향이 점차 세계화되고 소통의 방법 또한 다양해지고 있지만, 소통의 내용이 꼭 향상되지만 했던 것은 아니다. 국제간에 혹은 타문화간에 이루어지는 연구 과제들을 수행할 때는, 한국학의 정의와 역할에 대한 가정이나 제도적 틀이 서로 다르기 때문에 부정적인 충돌이 일어나는 경우가 있다. 번역 과제들의 예를 통해 볼 수 있듯이, 이 문제는 어느 정도 구조적이다. 즉 정부 지원 연구과제들이 전제하고 있는 제도 및 절차상의 어떤 가정들이 문제가 된다는 것이다. 이런 충돌과 문제들을 해결하기 위해서는 연구과제 등의 사업을 구상하는 단계에서부터 학문적 교류와 상호 간의 긴밀한 협력, 더 많은 대화의 장이 필요할 것이다. 한국학이 무엇을 담고 있으며 어떤 역할을 해야 하는지 논의하고 정의하기 위해서, 그리고 연구과제들이 안고 있는 구조적인 문제들을 극복하고 발전적인 방향을 모색하기 위해서, 이러한 국제적 소통의 장은 매우 중요하다.

Korean Studies, international communication, academic trends, translation, globalization

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I. Introduction

As the title of this paper indicates, it aims to identify some key issues in cross-cultural communication on Korean Studies. Simply put, it addresses some of the problems arising in the process of interaction and cooperation between Korean Studies (hereafter KS) scholars in Korea and KS scholars in the West, for the purposes of this study mainly Western Europe and North America.¹⁾ As the number of exchanges keeps intensifying and the two academic communities are ever more entwined, one would expect them to simply grow closer together and merge into a single community with shared

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1) This being the areas I am most familiar with. Although I would prefer not to essentialize “West” and “East,” as long as they are sufficiently qualified, I think we have to retain these concepts in order to allow for a focus on the larger issues.

goals and methods. However, as seen in the phenomenon of globalization, the globalization of a phenomenon does not necessarily lead to homogenization; although globalization usually involves the imposition of one cultural perspective (from the 'center') on the rest of the world (the 'periphery'), even if the dominant cultural view is accepted, it will undergo transformations in the periphery. Those transformations can then in turn subvert the dominant flow and even instigate counter-flows (Beyer 1994). In other words, it is a complex phenomenon, which (fortunately) does not lead to homogenization.²⁾ For Korean Studies, one could argue that for much of the twentieth century, in tandem with the dominant paradigm of Westernization in science, trade, culture etc., Korean Studies also adopted a Western, "Orientalist" perspective, which was then imposed on Korea; with the economic ascendancy of Korea, however, this trend has been challenged, and one could say even reversed. It is for this reason that I refer to my view as 'peripheral.' Many now agree that Korea has taken its rightful place as the center for Korean Studies (Wells 2007), and as a result, Korean Studies carried out outside of Korea can be labeled "peripheral."

While there is undoubtedly some truth in this, in this paper I do not intend to systematically investigate such discourses of power (though they will be touched on and are relevant for the background). Instead, my basic starting point is to investigate some key differences that still exist between KS research carried out in, say, a US university, and that carried out in Korea. Communication depends on the effective encoding and decoding of messages, and this process can be influenced by many environmental factors, notably culture; we can therefore infer from the outset that basic information on

2) Even the arch-model of global food hegemony, McDonalds, cannot resist local adaptations. See Watson 1997 for an interesting account of food globalization and its local adaptations.

Korea may be decoded in very different ways in Korea and in the West. Despite the globalization of research trends, some important differences in approach remain: some are born from tradition, some from cultural-linguistic factors, and some also stem from struggles over interpretative discourses. Identifying some key environmental factors is the primary aim of this paper. It does not claim to be an exhaustive, theoretically grounded, and empirical study; rather, its approach is pragmatic and focused on concrete problems. To date, the amount of research on KS is already impressive, and an analysis of this material will be a main source of the data for this article. However, practical issues encountered in personal engagement with KS in Europe, the US and Korea will also inform this research.³⁾

Therefore, it is only natural that the choice of areas covered is also inspired by personal experience. The article will start with some observations on the problem of defining KS, and then move on to a discussion of the different research environments and agendas, and finally delve into the concrete issues that we are confronted with when trying to build bridges between “East” and “West.” Some of the claims made in this article will necessarily be provisional in nature, and some conclusions may sound very familiar to many; yet at the same time most issues have not yet been systematically discussed, and therefore this article should be seen as a starting point to such discussion.

2. Definitions

3) Currently I have a joint appointment as professor in the Dept. of Religious studies and as Associate Director of the International Center for Korean Studies, Kyujanggak. Thus my experience covers both that of grant recipient, grant coordinator, scholar, translator, and editor.

Although it may appear to be superfluous to define “Korean Studies” because the term seems so self-evident, nevertheless it is important to recognize that it is employed with very different assumptions. Therefore a systematic attempt at defining how it is used in different contexts, and ascertaining what the assumptions and expectations that lie behind it are, is certainly useful. Building on the results of previous research into this question,⁴⁾ rather than trying to define the term, I would like to focus more on how its different usage can lead to confusion.

Interestingly, most research that seeks to grapple with the issue of what exactly constitutes KS stems from Korea: there is now a very impressive amount of research that seeks to either define KS or grapples with issues that confront the field,⁵⁾ and an even larger amount of research on the “state of the field,” i.e. mainly taking stock in quantitative terms.⁶⁾ By contrast, I have seen little reflection on the nature of the discipline from European or US scholars.⁷⁾ There could be various reasons for this, but I assume that in the

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- 4) For a good overview of the varying assumptions and agendas behind “Korean Studies” see Jeon Seong-un 2009.
 - 5) Several journals on KS, e.g. *Gukhak yeongu*, *Hangukhak yeongu* etc. carry a substantial number of articles that explicitly seek to define or shape the field. It is impossible within the scope of this article to give a representative overview of this literature; see the articles by Jeon Seong-un, Gim Jung-sun, and Kim Keongil for a representative sampling.
 - 6) This ranges from studies of individual universities (eg. Cornell; see Hwang), to certain fields (eg. Korean Buddhism; see Kim 2006), to attempts at a comprehensive overview of KS across the globe (Korea Foundation 2007)
 - 7) Only Kenneth Wells (Wells 2007) seems to have embarked on some methodological reflections on the field of KS, while Eckert (2006) and Breuker and De Ceuster (2007) offer useful food for thought too; yet none of these is anything like a clear statement of purpose for KS. There may be more research that I have not yet come across, but this is not very likely. Perhaps tellingly, KS journals such as *Korean Studies* (Univ. of Hawai'i) and *Journal of Korean Studies* (presently published by the Univ. of Washington), unlike KS journals in Korea, do not carry any articles that engage in

West there has simply been a general consensus on what KS stands for – or at least an assumption that it is obvious – and hence few have felt the need for methodological reflection. Whether this is correct or not is not the point here – the important thing is that it has not been seen as overly problematic. This would entail that from the Korean perspective, where much more research is devoted to the issue, the term poses much more problems – I think this is the case, and will elaborate more on this below.

First, let us look briefly at the general perception from the Western side – in the absence of any clear statements on what KS should embrace, I will mostly venture my own views. From my studies at SOAS, participation in conferences, discussions with colleagues, reading of research output etc. the most logical conclusion that presents itself is that the perception of KS is an outgrowth of the European tradition of philological studies that emerged in the nineteenth century. When I did my undergraduate degree in Chinese studies (Chinese philology) at the University of Ghent (Belgium), the assumption was that you can study a culture through an integrated program paying attention to language, history, and literature in particular, with a heavy emphasis on the ancient culture and its origins. When Korean Studies took shape through the efforts of pioneers such as Edward Wagner in the US or Mikhail Park in the former USSR, they naturally turned to the models of Chinese and Japanese studies, which they copied to the nascent Korean Studies field. In how far not only the methodologies but also the prejudices of these fields crept in is outside the scope of this paper to determine;⁸⁾ but what is important, I think, is that it imparted a very strong sense of detailed, rigorous textual (or anthropological) analysis, together with the idea that this

reflection on the state of the field.

8) For an assessment of Orientalist influence on Western KS see Gim 2003 and Shin 2003.

could still allow one to study Korea “as a whole,” on the first generations of Korean Studies scholars.

With only a few people to shape the field, naturally there developed a strong sense of community, of a small minority studying a country no one else studied. Even though these days the imprint of rigorous philological studies is fading fast, and even though many of the core ideas have been challenged (mainly under the banner of Orientalism) (Gim 2003), there is still very much a sense of common reference points, shared by most people working in the field. Even though they may be working in different disciplines, a sense of communion is engendered by, amongst other things, the use of the same textbooks and reference works, a shared concern for the Romanization system, use of the same online forum (KS List) and the same meeting venues (AKSE, AAS, PACKS) etc.⁹⁾ In one illuminating article, actually the introduction to a Festschrift dedicated to Prof. Boudewijn Walraven of Leiden University, Remco Breuker and Koen De Ceuster firmly put KS under the umbrella of area studies, and emphasize that rather than a weakness, the lack of a unifying perspective is the strength of area studies such as KS; yet they also acknowledge that it is “the fact that we watch from the periphery [that allows us] to create a single subject area as Korean Studies.” (Breuker and De Ceuster 2007, 6)

By contrast, in Korea there is, to begin with, no generally agreed term: *gukhak*, *Hangukhak*, *haeoe Hangukhak*, *Joseonhak* etc. are all used (Jeon Seong-un 2009, 319); each term seems to stand for quite different ways of looking at Korean Studies. This is of course natural – within the country,

9) That is not to say there is no “dissent”: see Dennis Hart, “Controlling Interests in Korean Studies?” Presentation at the World Koreanists’ Forum at AKS, Oct. 18, 2005, which alleges that certain cliques (old boys’ networks) control KS in the USA (quoted from memory; I could not locate a copy of the conference papers).

the pull of all the different disciplines (Korean language and literature, national history, Korean language education, etc.) is very great – and moreover there are very few Korean Studies Departments; thus loyalty towards disciplines overrides a sense of shared concern for a country, and hence various visions are influenced by the outlook of the discipline. For instance, there seems to be a sense that *gukhak*, as represented mainly by the Departments of Korean language and literature and of Korean history, is the true guardian of “the study of Korea.” Perhaps in reaction to this, especially recently, there is a strong emphasis on the practical aspects of KS: calls have been issued by many to make it practical through popularization.¹⁰⁾ This is connected to the trend towards mobilizing “cultural contents” for use in commercial media and entertainment industry. Additionally, another strong motivating current for practical KS is the development of Korean language programs for foreigners, together with the emergence of degree courses for teaching Korean as a foreign language;¹¹⁾ here one can see calls for conducting KS in Korean, and for studying Korean culture as a complement and aid to the language training programs. Finally, it should also be added that there has been consistent official and media pressure to “introduce Korea to the world.” The best way to promote any KS-related event is still to say that it will “promote the image of Korea,” which will ensure media attention.¹²⁾

10) E.g.: “The most important premise in the practical application of Korean Studies is its popularization and generalization” (“한국학 실용화의 가장 중요한 전제는 그것의 대중화 이고 일상화라고 할 수 있다;” Bak 2006, 369)

11) In 2002 the Ministry of Education recognized Korean language education as a separate academic field. Jeon 2009, 328.

12) This is sometimes referred to (informally and irreverently) as “Hanguk sogaeahak 한국 소개학,” as opposed to “Hangukhak.” See http://koreaweb.ws/pipermail/koreanstudies_koreaweb.ws/1999-February/001189.html; comment by Don Clark, quoting Peter Sch

Hence it would appear that the notion of KS is far more contested within Korea. Also, many of the trends, especially towards practical application of KS, are absent or resisted by Western scholars.¹³⁾ Yet at the same time, we should not underestimate the radical diversity of KS research in the West too: while there is still a common set of references (e.g. quoting Martina Deuchler's work for Confucianism or Robert E. Buswell Jr.'s for Buddhism), in fact KS really covers the gamut of all disciplinary fields. Perhaps, one might wonder, the sense of communality is engendered simply by the fact that in Europe, for example, the field is so small: with so few specialists on Korea around, it is natural that they will make more effort to build bridges with other specialists, even if those are in very different fields.

As this situation changes (i.e., as the group of specialists increases), however, there will be an increased need in the West too to define clearer boundaries for KS; that is, Western scholars should also start to debate what makes KS substantially different. Just considering any research related to Korea to be KS will, in my opinion, not prove feasible; already we are seeing, because of the increased pressure in Korea to publish in English, and the steadily increasing group of specialists within Korea able to write their work

roepfer; comment posted Feb. 7, 1999 to the Korean Studies list. [accessed Oct. 20, 2010] See also the banner on the AKS website: 국가브랜드 가치 제고를 위한 한국학진흥 "promoting KS to raise the value of our national brand" (<http://www.aks.ac.kr>; accessed Oct. 26, 2010)

13) This is clear for example in the treatment of Hallyu: while also studied in the West, it is inserted in the US tradition of "cultural studies," whereas in Korea many articles are concerned with how to actually link KS to Hallyu, eg. by proposing new areas for development. It is also clear from the otherwise excellent essay by Ken Wells: while he argues forcefully that "Korea should be the centre of the Korean Studies World" and that "engagement with the intellectual activities and concerns of scholars in Korea" should be a given in Korean Studies (Wells 2007, 20, 37), in fact he himself merely notes that many of these Korean concerns "serve the needs and ends of Korean society" (p. 38), and in fact does not engage these concerns very deeply.

in English, the steady increase of English research related to Korea. However, with the concomitant influx of articles in Korean Studies journals by many scholars who are not part of the traditional KS community, on topics that often are more centered on a particular discipline, of which Korea only happens to be a case study, the nature of KS becomes blurred. While their research deals with Korea, it is only in a circumstantial, unintended way; thus, for someone who is not an expert in the same field (eg. medical history, communication studies, economy...), the research does not generate much interest. In other words, it does not fit the “area studies” model that is still extolled in Europe, where general knowledge about Korean language, history etc. and an interdisciplinary approach is considered more important.¹⁴⁾

What is important from the perspective of communication here is that it is necessary to recognize that these different perspectives exist; we do not need, I think, a single definition of KS, but Western scholars need to reflect more on the identity of their field and come with more concerted efforts to give it a more positive definition, and Korean scholars need to recognize also that KS in the West often has a broader, inter-disciplinary and even border-crossing perspective with less interest in promoting Korea or “introducing” its culture.

3. Different academic environments

Against this background, with very different assumptions, it is hardly surprising that it is sometimes difficult to find common ground. What further compounds the issue is the different approaches to scholarship and the

14) On this see Breuker & De Ceuster 2007, 3. Also, one could add to this that it is the concern for what is specific to the Korean case that makes the research KS.

different academic environments. On the one hand, as seen in the previous section, KS in the West often lacks a strong institutional basis. As a result, with many scholars based in East Asian studies program, they tend to be interested in issues that fit in with the research agenda of Asian studies and attract students. Furthermore, despite the globalization of education and academic trends, important differences remain. While, especially in US academia, there is a strong tendency to apply theoretical perspectives and insights from other fields of study, in Korean academia, research styles frequently remain anchored in the venerated tradition that prioritizes sources over discourses. While this is of course only true in a very general sense – there are notable exceptions, for example, many scholars in Korea are fully conversant with the latest theoretical and methodological developments, even at the forefront of them – if one looks at studies on Korean history, for example, there are very obvious differences.

Most Western studies on Korean history are driven by certain issues – they seek to answer a particular question, prove a point, or apply a perspective that happens to be current in other humanities research. Also, they tend to focus on “big issues” such as slavery, Confucianization, or social groups, often looking at phenomena over many centuries. By contrast, reading Korean papers feels like a throwback to the methods of Ranke. Personal perspective is eschewed, and so is any reference to a particular method or discussion of the relevance of the research (this is especially the case for studies on pre-modern Korea). What we get is a delineation of an often very narrow topic, and a thorough discussion of all the sources that give information on the topic. Of course, this is the very groundwork of historical study; yet it is also not more than that: no superstructure is erected on top of the foundations, at least not visibly – there are of course implicit

statements present.¹⁵⁾ The narrow focus on very detailed areas of research often makes it difficult to see the forest through the trees, and for larger trends one can often only turn to more popularizing accounts. Symptomatic of this approach is also the lack of monographs: during my initial forays into KS, I was often disappointed that what I imagined were monographs turned out to be mere collections of papers (usually containing “yeongu” in the title)

This has an obvious repercussion for dialogue on, for example, Korean history: given the very different approaches, joint conferences are usually not very successful (in my opinion, at least) because of the difficulty in transcending one’s style of scholarship; to Western scholars, Korean research often appears inconsequential because it cannot be inserted in any clear modern academic trend and often appears to state the obvious, and therefore Korean scholarship is simply used as a way to access the primary sources; to Korean scholars, Western research will probably appear superficial because sources are not exhaustively covered or because small mistakes are found. Also, Western scholars – perhaps because there are so few – tend to work on much larger chunks of history and sometimes move across fields, again probably giving an impression of amateurism – although in fact working on larger time frames (*la longue durée*) is a perfectly valid method of historical research.

A concrete example of such differences coming to the surface was the review of Martina Deuchler’s *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* by Prof. Choi Jae-seok;¹⁶⁾ while the reviewer took the author to task for allegedly stealing his arguments, in fact his views are clearly cited and

15) On the hidden agendas behind ostensibly objectivist scholarship, see Breuker 2005.

16) See *The Review of Korean Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005); Rejoinder by Martina Deuchler, *Ibid.* vol. 9 no. 2 (2006). Prof. Choi’s review is the English translation of an article originally published in Korean.

credited in the book – without going into the details of this discussion, it is clear that a least part of the problem here is that the reviewer failed to acknowledge the different research style, where you can integrate or synthesize the work of previous scholars as part of the construction of your own argument. Conversely, the work of Western scholars is very rarely acknowledged in Korea, except when it is perceived to be blatantly wrong and in need of correction.¹⁷⁾ Yet the acknowledgment of the other's research is an important act of validation, which can form the basis of a dialogue; in the current situation, there is in many ways no real dialogue (which should be between equals; all too often, there is a perception that “one knows one's own culture best,” which is not necessarily the case).

There are of course instances where research is acknowledged, for example in the case of the volume on colonial modernity edited by Shin Giwook and Michael Robinson; this volume, which appeared in 1999, was itself inspired by post-colonial studies in other areas, and is fairly frequently cited in Korean research articles; however, it seems to be better known by social scientists than historians. In general, Western, especially US scholarship on Korean history, has been dominated for the past decade or two by the issues of colonial history and nationalism; these are mainly generated simply by the US academic climate, but in Korea, of course, there are many different social and academic issues that shape the kind of research that is carried out.¹⁸⁾

17) See for example the discussions on James Palais' theory that pre-modern Korea was a slave society, and his views on internal development. Kim 2003, 161. However, it would be far too simplistic to say that Western scholarship is ignored for being “from the outside;” in general, given the emphasis on discussing new subjects and sources, most Korean scholarship does not engage in a debate with other scholarship, but seems to avoid it.

18) I am deliberately focusing on issues of style and presentation rather than those of contents and substance; for a good overview of debates on substantial issues such

Currently research in the humanities in both West and East is under increasing pressure from the scientific model, in which every 'output' has to be measured and validated. Concomitantly, we see a move away from the monograph to the scholarly article in the West too (Schneider). Yet at the same time, the pressure on research output will make it more difficult to carry out long-term research that tries to bridge the gap between the two worlds, because it requires an extensive knowledge of both worlds, hence time and a project that does not easily result in quick research output.

4. Case study: translation projects

Besides differences in conceptions on KS and research approaches, there is also the factor of institutional support that should be taken into consideration. Since the early 1990s, through the Korea Foundation and other organizations, Korea has taken the initiative in supporting KS programs overseas. In many ways this has been a resounding success, and despite occasional complaints that the level of support remains far behind that enjoyed by Chinese or Japanese studies,¹⁹⁾ this support is vital in maintaining KS programs across the globe. However, there do of course remain different visions as to what the best way of supporting a KS program is. In this final section, I would like to focus on one particular type of program that has gained considerable importance after 2000, and that is the area of translation grants.

Whereas the translation of literary works, pre-modern writings in Hanmun (Classical Chinese) or Hangeul, or academic books into Western

as nationalism and the internal development theory, see Kim 2003.

19) See e.g. "한국학 교수 8명, 일본학은 44명" [Korean Studies Professors: Eight; Japanese Studies Professors: Forty-four] Chosun ilbo 2009.07.08.

languages was once the domain of private passion and academic endeavor, there are now many institutions that provide translation grants and fellowships. Perhaps the best known of these is the Korean Literature Translation Institute (KLTI), which was launched in 1996, and has gradually been building up its support for the translation of Korean literature in many languages. In 2007, the Academy of Korean Studies also launched its “100 classics” project, aimed at translating the 100 most prominent “classics,” i.e. important pre-modern works written by Koreans or about Korea, and has arguably become the most important grant program for the translation of Korean works – in particular, pre-modern works.

There is certainly a great need for more translations. Even though most scholars would prefer to check their sources in the original language, in fact this is a very-time consuming business. Translations are therefore undeniably a very convenient shortcut, especially in the case of difficult works in Hanmun or pre-modern Hangeul: therefore many scholars would first leaf through Ha Tae Hung’s translation of the *Samguk yusa* before going to the original text or a modern Korean academic translation, while to read the *Hanjungnok*, nearly all Western scholars would rely on JaHyun Kim Haboush’s translation.

However, translation is not an easy business. As the saying goes, *traduttore traditore*, “a translator is a traitor” – and this saying is usually applied even to the best translations: inevitably, the translator will have to rethink and rephrase in order to make the translation culturally acceptable to his target audience, and in the process has to sacrifice some of the meanings of the original. Thus the translator always has to find a compromise between faithfulness to the original and fluency of the translated text. An interesting example of this struggle in KS is the debate between two translators of

traditional Korean poetry, Peter Lee and Kevin O'Rourke, the former emphasizing faithfulness to the original and the latter preferring a translation with literary quality.²⁰⁾ But while both may be struggling to find the ideal balance on different extremes of the spectrum, at least they show awareness of the issues and are both well-respected for their contributions. However, within the organizations that sponsor translations, unfortunately, the difficulty of producing a good translation is not sufficiently appreciated. While the number of translations of Korean works (literature, classics, non-fiction,···) is increasing, unfortunately there is very little or no discussion on how to go about the translation.

While it is of course impossible to give an overall assessment of the state of translations from Korean to English, it is obvious that there are many problems. On the one hand, there are a small number of people who have devoted themselves over the years to the translation of Korean literature – people such as Bruce Fulton, Brother Anthony of Taizé, Peter Lee, Kevin O'Rourke, to name but a few. Also, there are many scholars who have translated pre-modern works in the course of their academic studies – including for example Robert Buswell's translations of Buddhist works, Jonathan Best's of part of the *Samguk sagi*, and so on. All these initiatives have been the result of academic and personal interest. But on the other hand, unfortunately, the examples and standards set by these pioneers have also been ignored, and there is a vast amount of translations that is substandard.²¹⁾

20) See the exchange of views prompted by Peter Lee's review of O'Rourke's *The Book of Korean Sijo*. O'Rourke 2003.

21) This is of course a subjective assessment – there is, to my knowledge, no general assessment of the merits and demerits of various translations. But for an indication of the pitfalls, see Breuker 2007.

In recent years, the initiative in the translation of Korean works has definitely shifted towards Korean institutions, as mentioned above, and projects seem to be coming hard and fast. Ambitious translation projects are frequently launched, often with an eye to create a media impact; at least, the projects are of such scope and ambition that they seem to promise to redraw the map of Korean studies. Typically, however, they have to be accomplished in three years – or whichever short period of time the bureaucratic apparatus allows for everything to be neatly processed. This is, however, an almost ridiculously short period. Even for a translation from classical Chinese into Korean – far easier, if only for the large amount of vocabulary that does not need to be translated – the time needed is often much longer, and there is a much larger pool of potential translators to draw from.

Here we are in danger of falling into the wrong kind of globalization: the unilateral imposition of one country's agenda on the rest of the world. This is one area where dialogue is needed, yet where it seems to be sorely lacking. Translators are often contacted only after the whole translation agenda has been set, and then asked to simply carry out the task. Yet translation is not a passive task: it is a very active, complicated, and absorbing task, which also requires years of training to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and competence. Furthermore, it is also often overlooked that translation starts with the selection of the work: which work is feasible, which work is needed, which work would be well received (and actually read);²²⁾ also barely considered is how it should be carried out: as a team effort, as an individual effort, as a scholarly work or as a popular work... All these questions should

22) Brother Anthony of Taizé (An Sŏnjae), for example, has written on this topic, arguing that the crucial question is "who are we translating for," a question that is unfortunately hardly ever considered in major Korean translation projects. See An 1996.

be addressed in consultation.

One concrete example that can be mentioned to illustrate this, is the translation of Wonhyo's works. As the most famous Korean Buddhist "philosopher" his work has attracted much attention, even though it is extremely hard to translate. Robert Buswell in particular has devoted an important part of his career to the translation of Wonhyo's commentary on the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra* (*Geumgang sammae gyeong*), publishing in 1989 a translation of the sūtra itself and an extensive discussion of its Korean context (Buswell 1989), and in 2007 a translation of Wonhyo's commentary (Buswell 2007). The latter volume, incidentally, is the first volume of a planned translation into English of all Wonhyo's works, the International Association of Wŏnhyo Studies' "Collected Works of Wŏnhyo" project. This project is typical of "Western" academic translations: they are often projects that take up one scholar's entire career, and it may take ten years or more from the start of the translation to publication. By contrast, in 2007 the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism launched an ambitious project to translate, in eleven volumes, representative works by Korean Buddhist monks. Everything was planned to be completed in a mere two years! Though it involved selections of works rather than complete works, the parts on Wonhyo, for example, still represent very sizeable chunks. Besides the problem of duplication – although different in nature from the translations by Buswell, do we really need another translation of Wonhyo's commentary on the *Vajrasamādhi sūtra*? – the unrealistic targets for completion, the lack of consultation on the selection of texts, the question of whether the English translations of Hanmun texts should match the translations into Korean – all these issues show that neither the translators nor the target audience for the translation have been seriously considered, and that there remain serious

differences in terms of assumptions, best practice models. etc. on the art and craft of translation, differences that need to be discussed much more thoroughly.²³⁾

Undoubtedly the different institutional background of Korean and US or European academia forms a barrier to effective exchange and communication. One of the most successful translations of Korean classics – if only selections of them – is the well-used *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, which meets the demand of a college-level textbook that gives students direct access to key sources. As Ch'oe Yŏng-ho, one of the scholars involved in this project, points out in an interview, however, the project lasted much longer than the anticipated five years, which caused tremendous difficulties. On the pressure from the bureaucracy, he remarks “their only concern was to satisfy their bureaucratic formula of signing off our work... without regard as to who would publish it.” (Kim 2010, 158) In fact, the pace of academic projects and publications in the West can be glacial, certainly when compared to Korea; thus the time from planning (1978) to first publication (1993) of the *Sourcebook* may seem excessively long, but it is certainly not exceptional, and if the result is good, I think it is well worth the wait.

The ongoing project under the auspices of the Academy of Korean Studies to provide funding for the translation of “100 classics”²⁴⁾ seems to have taken into account some of the problems described above and tried to overcome them; thus, the actual translations are overseen by overseas Korean Studies

23) Vermeersch 2009. The translation project is entitled “한국전통사상총서” [Comprehensive Series on Korean Traditional Thought] For full disclosure: the writer of this paper participated in the translation project.

24) See <http://siks.aks.ac.kr/html/mainproject/project1.asp> (accessed Dec. 19, 2010) Again, for full disclosure, the author of this paper is a translator for this project.

centers, the translations are eventually to be submitted for publication with major academic presses, and a timescale of twenty years has been envisaged. At the moment of writing this paper, the first stage (2007-2010) is being completed, so it is as yet premature to make any pronouncements on its success, yet all the same we can put it into the context of what has been said above.

First of all, it should be noted that the agenda of this project should be seen in the context of South Korean academic research and government support. The scope is ambitious, and the magical number “100” seems to promise the *nec plus ultra* for Korean Studies, the translation of virtually all the important pre-modern texts. However, is it really appropriate to frame an academic project under such an artificial and ultimately meaningless number? Who decides which works are included and which not? On what criteria is it compiled? Apart from quibbles over details, it is certainly correct that all the books on the list are important and worth studying. But ultimately, it is compiled on the basis of criteria valid mainly in the Korean context. Whether these “classics” can be recognized as classics once they have been translated, remains to be seen.

Once transposed to the context of North American academia, the limitations of the project become obvious. At present, interest in pre-modern history is at an all-time low in the US, meaning that, first of all, very few people are capable of taking on the translation of a pre-modern *Hanmun* text, and second, that there will be less interest once a translation is published – most undergraduate students, and even many graduate students, are ill equipped to tackle a text, even in English, that is far off their cultural radar. Thus it is important to consider carefully which texts would be most welcomed by academics, students, and possibly even general readers, and

then consider who might translate it, and how it might be translated.

Of course such factors are being considered and negotiated to a certain degree, but the fact remains that, looking at the current state of publishing on Korea, publishing 100 books, even over the course of twenty years, is an unrealistic goal. The ultimate goal should be to generate interest in these classics, to study them, to train people who can appreciate and translate them. The translation cannot be a goal in itself – as the participation by Korea in the 2005 Frankfurter Buchmesse has shown, the mere feat of selecting and translating a certain number of works can become pointless if those works fail to register on the consumer market.²⁵⁾ It is important to create the right context for the realization of such project; for example, at the moment there is not a single sound handbook for the translation of technical terms such as offices or institutions,²⁶⁾ and only one outdated reference guide to classical works (Kim 1976). The only way to institute such a context is by creating a communicative model that integrates the “supply side” (of projects and funds – i.e., Korea) and the “demand side” (of translators and readers – i.e. North America, Europe, etc.)

25) See An 2005. Many books were translated especially for this event, but mainly into German – although the Frankfurter Buchmesse, one of the world’s foremost book fairs, takes place in Germany, it is aimed at an international audience. Korea was the Guest of Honour at the 2005 fair.

26) There is the Glossary of Korean Studies (Song 1993); though useful, it pales in comparison with a sinological reference work such as Charles Hucker’s *A Dictionary of Chinese Official Titles*. Hucker 1985.

5. Conclusion

On the one hand, there are excellent communication facilities for Korean Studies: large international conferences, consultation meetings, exchange programs for scholars and students, individual networks, online networks, etc. Yet despite the increasing sophistication of the communication channels, the contents of communication has not always improved. As outlined in this paper, different assumptions of what Korean Studies stands for and how it should operate, and different institutional frameworks, often act in counterproductive ways when it comes to implementing border-crossing projects. As shown through the example of translation grant projects, part of the problem is the simple administrative process of accountability, which demands that projects are carried out within a certain time frame and that results are shown within strict deadlines. Yet, traditionally the art of scholarly translation has taken place within the context of an academic career, not as a project to be funded separately. As such, scholarly translations are usually calculated in decades rather than years, and thus the imposition of 2, 3, or even 5-year deadlines presents almost insurmountable challenges. Thus, ways should be sought to include more communication on these projects from the planning stages, to ensure that projects that are both feasible and needed may be developed.

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Abstract

Issues in Cross-cultural Communication on Korean Studies: View from the
Periphery

Sem Vermeersch

This paper aims to identify some key issues in cross-cultural communication on Korean Studies. It addresses some problems that may arise in the process of interaction and cooperation between Korean Studies scholars in Korea and Korean Studies scholars in the West, for the purposes of this study mainly Western Europe and North America. Despite the globalization of research trends and the increasing sophistication of the communication channels, the contents of communication has not always improved. This paper shows how different assumptions on what Korean Studies stands for and how it should operate, together with different institutional frameworks, often have a negative impact when it comes to implementing international, cross-cultural projects. As shown through the example of translation grant projects, part of the problem is systemic, i.e. originates with the organizational and procedural assumptions inherent in government-sponsored projects. It is argued that besides scholarly exchanges, closer cooperation and increased communication on defining the contents and tasks of Korean Studies, as well as on the development of projects from their planning stages onward, is needed.

Keyword Korean Studies, international communication, academic trends, translation, globalization