

How the bestseller *The Vegetarian*, translated from Han Kang's original,
caused an uproar in South Korea

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<https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-korean-translation-20170922-story.html>

Before publishing his famous Chinese poetry translation *Cathay* in 1915, Ezra Pound apparently had no knowledge of Chinese at all. Instead, he worked from second-hand notes by another translator, boldly imposing his Imagist vision on classical Chinese poetry. Not surprisingly, he made quite a few errors in the process. And yet today, *Cathay* has become a deeply admired modernist classic; “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” appears in many poetry anthologies. The work is hardly considered a translation at all. A classics professor recently told me that he feels the same way about Pound’s “re-creations” of the elegies by the Latin poet Sextus Propertius: “I don’t even think of the changes as errors,” he said. The translator’s version has become canonized.

Would Pound’s free interpretations have been just as praised had he translated novels? Or if he published his works a century later?

The question came to mind as I pondered the recent controversy in South Korea over Deborah Smith’s brilliant but flawed translation of Han Kang’s novel *The Vegetarian*. Originally published in 2007, Han’s work received critical acclaim but didn’t enjoy a particularly wide readership. Many South Korean readers initially found the novel to be bizarre: a dark, surreal tale of a woman who refuses to eat meat and descends into madness.

All that changed when *The Vegetarian* won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. The award landed the book on American and British bestseller lists as media attention focused on Smith, a then-28-year-old British graduate student, making much of the fact that the translator had started to learn Korean only six years earlier.

In an interview with Public Radio International’s “The World,” host Marco Werman bluntly asked Smith: “Do you think if it weren’t for you, Han Kang wouldn’t have won the Man Booker prize?” In the awkward pause that follows, you can sense Smith’s hesitancy. It’s an odd thing to ask: Obviously, without translation, nothing could be read, and hence, nothing judged. What the interviewer seems to be asking is: Was it mainly your exceptional translation skills that brought about this achievement?

In South Korea, the question also began in earnest – but quickly turned critical. Korean-language media began to report allegations of numerous errors, omissions and embellishments. In contrast to the rapturous acclaim in the West, a sense of dismay began to emerge. The headline of *Huffington Post Korea* pronounced the translation as completely “off the mark.” One Korean scholar even declared that English readers had been “betrayed.”

Huff Post Korea took PRI’s awkward question one step further, twisting it into one of nationalist anguish: If the translation modified the original this much, can Korean literature even claim any of the glory?

The question, I thought, was absurd. When I first read Smith's translation, I was astonished. "Fantastic!" I thought.

Like Pound's *Cathay*, *The Vegetarian* is stylistically quite beautiful. Having copy edited South Korean literary translations for the last dozen years, I've striven to make them more readable. Here, finally, was a Korean book that worked spectacularly in English. As I've written elsewhere, Smith's prodigious talent is undeniable. The sentences were exquisite, and I admired them deeply.

Then I looked at Han's original text.

I was astonished for a second time, but in a much more sobering way.

First, there are indeed quite a few errors, which is not surprising for a relatively new learner of the language. And yet, I would argue that these are mostly minor and do little, if anything, to derail the plot. Most English readers will simply glide over them unaware. Few will know, for example, that Smith confuses "arm" (pal) for "foot" (bal) or that she mistakes the Korean term for "a good appetite" as being "a more than competent cook."

More troubling is that Smith occasionally confuses the subjects of sentences. In several scenes, she mistakenly attributes dialogue and actions to the wrong characters, as in one bizarre exchange where the brother-in-law ends up referring to himself in the third person.

One of my colleagues, professor Jung Ha-yun at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, pointed out that translation can be embarrassing because it reveals our weaknesses. "Your capabilities are completely exposed," she said. These mistakes compromise the original, and, according to Jung, make the translation a "lesser product as a work of literature." But obviously, they also did nothing to prevent the enjoyment of countless readers of it in English.

To my mind, Smith's mistranslations are something of a red herring. Critics have tended to focus on the mistakes, but a deeper issue is her stylistic alteration of the text.

Even if Smith had corrected all the obvious errors, it still wouldn't have changed that she "poeticized" the novel. In terms of tone and voice, *The Vegetarian* is strikingly different from the original.

For one thing, Smith amplifies Han's spare, quiet style and embellishes it with adverbs, superlatives and other emphatic word choices that are nowhere in the original. This doesn't just happen once or twice, but on virtually every other page. Taken together, it's clear that Smith took significant liberties with the text.

I find it hard to come up with an adequate analogy, but imagine the plain, contemporary style of Raymond Carver being garnished with the elaborate diction of Charles Dickens. Smith's embellishments create more suspense and interest for the English reader, but for those who can read the original, it can be quite jarring.

Interestingly, literary critic Tim Parks, without knowing a single word of Korean, was able to detect this dissonance in what is perhaps the sole negative review of *The Vegetarian*, published in the *New York Review of Books*. Noting the "nineteenth-century ring" that reminds him of Chekhov, Parks astutely points out the puzzling jumps in register and idiom

that clash with the plainspoken content of the narrative. There are parts, he rightly perceives, that are “totally out of line” with the narrator’s “expressive abilities.”

Parks’ insight is impressive, but the question is: Did the translation take things too far? One distinguished translator told me he felt the context and style were so different that it was more reasonable to speak of Smith’s work as an adaptation, not a translation.

But in some ways, the question is moot. Most readers of a translation will never read the original. Moreover, the “gains” of Smith’s effort, clearly a labor of love, have so far greatly outweighed any “losses”: Readers and critics have enjoyed the work immensely, South Korea has been placed on the world’s literary map, sales of both the original and the English version have exploded, and interest in Korean literary translation has soared. Most important, Smith successfully introduced Han, a highly respected South Korean writer, to much-deserved recognition abroad.

The Vegetarian may not be a masterpiece like *Cathay*, but like *Cathay*, it has morphed into a “new creation.” To my mind, it has to be taken as such. Another translator could have produced a more accurate version, but I find it extremely doubtful that anyone could have matched the virtuosity of Smith’s work. As a first-time effort, Smith’s translation is still a stunning achievement.

Of course, some critics will disagree. For them, the translation has deviated so far from the original that the disparity strains their eyes and ruins their enjoyment. Indeed, translation can be akin to having double vision. Sometimes you have to block off “one eye” just to focus on the target language.

For me, I can still admire the translation. I just have to keep one eye closed.

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