

“Reading as Re-Translating”: The Scandals of Translation in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*

Nami Shin

[Abstract]

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s experimental text, *Dictée*, is a text that asks us to engage with problems of translation. Major criticism has particularly focused on how the text introduces sites of translation in the form of dictation and translation exercises. Moments of dictation and translation appearing in *Dictée* invite critical reflection upon the asymmetries of power relations informing processes of language learning and immigration. This essay examines how Cha’s writing in *Dictée* enlarges notions of translation by bringing attention to varied forms of interpretation and mediation that emerge in the context of Korea’s colonial and postcolonial condition. Drawing upon the insights of Venuti’s discussion of translation as a cultural practice that is informed by the asymmetries of power, this essay argues that *Dictée* calls for critical engagement with the Korean colonial and postcolonial condition by pointing to the failures of translation shaped by the legacies of various cultural and political forces. Far from being limiting and thus failing, the gaps and holes of translation in Cha’s writing not only speak to the scandals of translation, but also call for acts of re-translation.

Key Words: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*, translation, experimental writing, Asian American literature, Korean colonial condition

1. Introduction

In his book, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, Lawrence Venuti calls for a reformulation of the traditional concept of translation. According to Venuti, the greatest scandal of translation is that “asymmetries, inequities, relations of domination and dependence exist in every act of translating, of putting the translated in the service of the translating culture” (4). Venuti’s emphasis upon the asymmetries underlying the act of translation is revealing in that it illuminates the importance of understanding the socio-economic context that informs a site of translation. As Venuti claims, the scandals of translation are “cultural, economic, and political” (1). Far from being “objective” and “value-free,” translation like any other cultural practice involves “the creative reproduction of values” (1). A translation communicates “an interpretation” through which a foreign text is inevitably altered by features and values of the translating culture. Translation as a form of interpretation assimilates foreign texts to “dominant values at home” (5). Thus, a translated text is inevitably domesticated by the act of translating.

Following Venuti’s discussion, close engagement with translation raises ethical questions in the sense it calls for recognizing the asymmetries informing sites of translation. Because of these asymmetries and inequities, however, translating can also become a potential site of resistance and innovation by attending to “linguistic and cultural differences” (6). The translator can challenge existing patterns of unequal cultural exchange and promote cultural difference. If translation has traditionally been

understood as an act of faithful reproduction of the original, Venuti advances a notion of translation that closely attends to problems of linguistic and cultural difference and seeks to remedy the asymmetries in translating.

Venuti’s discussion of translation offers useful insights for examining translation’s place in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s experimental text, *Dictée*. In many ways, *Dictée* is a text that asks us to reflect upon problems of language and translation. As many scholars have pointed out, Cha’s writing in *Dictée* particularly brings attention to how problems of translation illuminate histories of immigration, exile, and colonialism.¹⁾ Asian American scholarship on *Dictée* has particularly focused on how the text’s sites of translation invite critical reflection upon the asymmetries of power relations informing processes of language learning in the context of immigration. In this essay, I examine how the scandals of translation in *Dictée* are closely linked to Korea’s colonial and postcolonial condition. If Venuti discusses translation in the form of its literal practice, the translation of a text from one language to another, this essay examines how the term gains more complexity and larger meaning in Cha’s writing in that translation involves various forms of interpretation and mediation that cross genres. Focusing on the text’s multilingual and multi-genre aspects, this essay argues that *Dictée* calls forth ongoing engagement with Korean history through problems of translation.

2. Translation as Unfaithfulness

For a long time, *Dictée* had been neglected by Asian American scholarship. It was not until the 1990s that *Dictée* started to gain attention from critics, which also led to the publication of *Writing Self Writing Nation* in 1994, a collection of essays

dedicated to the discussion of *Dictée*. Shelley Sunn Wong's introduction of *Dictée* preceding her discussion of the text in the collection well addresses the text's status as an anomaly within the Asian American literary tradition:

In the context of an Asian American identity politics that was steadily gaining ground throughout the 1970s, the two leading criteria for determining literary and political value were representativeness and authenticity. *Dictée*, with its formal experiments and its insistent undermining of generalized understandings of representation and authenticity presented itself as enough of an anomaly within the context of the political and cultural orthodoxy of Asian America that it was never drawn into public debate. (103)

Such earlier abandonment, as Wong points out, had been largely due to the text's experimental nature. Consisting of narrative pieces that include journal entries, photographs, letters, translation exercises, and poems, *Dictée* resists identification with a single literary genre. Rather, *Dictée* reads as a collection of narrative pieces that differ in language and genre. Furthermore, Wong observes that the text's fragmented form which defies linearity departs from familiar genres informing Asian American literature such as autobiography and the Bildungsroman which "are predicated on developmental narratives" (106). Similarly, Hyun Yi Kang notes that "there is no linear narrative of personal development in *Dictée*" (79). Although the text includes aspects of the author's life, it is not "a discrete autobiography" (79).

It was the shift in frameworks of reception within the Asian American community in the 1990s that enabled a re-evaluation of the aesthetic and political implications of Cha's work. As Wong further observes, such shift had been mainly due to "major demographic changes, the growing strength and influence of the women's movement, and the postmodernist concern with fragmentation and multiple positionalities" (104). Read in light of such shift in focus within Asian American discourse, *Dictée* gained

importance as a text that reveals the Korean American female as a site of multiple positionalities and contradiction that counters former consolidating impulses of the identity politics of Asian American nationalism. “*Dictée*’s insistence on the narrator’s multiple positionalities as woman, as colonial and postcolonial subject, as religious subject, and as Korean,” writes Wong, “problematizes the work in relation to a cultural nationalist sense of representative Asian American status” (105-6). In a similar vein, other critics have linked *Dictée*’s changed status within Asian American discourse to the shift towards a politics of difference within Asian American criticism. “Neither developmental nor univocal,” observes Lisa Lowe, “the subject of *Dictée* continually thwarts the reader’s desire to abstract a notion of ethnic or national identity—originating either from the dominant culture’s interrogation of its margins, or in emergent minority efforts to establish unitary ethnic or cultural nationalist examples” (36). The impulse that drives Cha’s text unsettles the authority of a single discourse for subsuming the text’s subject into a single notion of identity.

Critics focusing on the way *Dictée* came to be reconceived within the discourse of Asian American studies have particularly attended to translation’s place in the text. For many critics, the sites of translation informing *Dictée* are revealing because they emerge as sites of resistance against homogenizing forces that have shaped notions of ethnic and national identity. In particular, critics have directed attention to how the examples of translation exercises introduced in the text’s opening pages invite critical reflection upon the immigrant’s experience of language learning and assimilation. A striking feature of the translation passages is that they are part of a dictation exercise. Translation in those moments is driven by an imperative to repeat and reproduce. As Naoki Sakai remarks, “In *Dictée*, the problem of translation is never divorced from that of dictation, of a form of practice in which the learner imitates and attempts to reproduce utterances not so much in order to say what she means as to say what she

is expected to say *without meaning it*' (27). For instance, the text's opening pages introduce two passages that show a dictation exercise that involves translation:

Aller a la ligne C'etait le premier jour point Elle venait de loin point ce soir
au diner virgule les familles demanderaient virgule ouvre les guillemets ferme
les guillemets au moins virgule dire le moins possible virgule la reponse serait
virgule ouvre les guillemets Il n'y a q'une chose point ferme les guillemets
ouvre les guillemets Il y a quelqu'une point loin point ferme les guillemets

Open paragraph It was the first day period She had come from a far period
tonight at dinner comma the families would ask comma open quotation marks
How was the first day interrogation mark close quotation marks at least to say
the least of it possible comma the answer would be open quotation marks there
is but one thing period There is someone period From a far period close
quotation marks (1)

Dictation in this passage calls for the translation from French into English. The act of translation as part of the dictation assignment is shown to produce an equivalent of the passage written in French. On one hand, the dictation passage invokes the process of language learning in the context of immigration in that it depicts a subject that has arrived "from a far" (1). It points out how the immigrating subject must subsume to the rules of grammar of the host country's language.

Although driven by an imperative to repeat and reproduce, the above passage's site of translation also emerges as a site of resistance against the homogenizing and naturalizing forces embedded in dictations. In fact, in the above example, the female narrator fails to reproduce an equivalent of the French sentence. For instance, in the English translation of the French dictation: "C'etait le premier jour point," the narrator writes "period" instead of putting a punctuation mark at the end of the

sentence. The narrator refuses to fully adhere to the rules prescribed by the dictating language. The site of translation, as Lowe has argued, becomes a site of "unfaithful reproduction" that disrupts and disturbs the hegemony of the dictating language (40–41). Read in light of the dictation exercise's immigrant context, the translating subject's refusal to produce a faithful reproduction is empowering. Through the act of unfaithful translation, the immigrating figure is able to rewrite the asymmetries between languages in the context of language learning and assimilation.

Furthermore, hierarchies among languages in light of the immigrant context are interrogated in that translation emerges as a site of resistance against the forced fluency imposed by the authority of standard English. In an early moment of the text, Cha inserts a translation exercise that asks for translating the passage from English into French. One part of the translation exercise contains a passage written in broken English: "She call she believe she calling to she has calling because there no response she believe she calling and the other end must hear. The other end must see the other end feel" (15). By offering a passage that is written in broken and pidgin English as a text to be translated into French, Cha challenges notions of what counts as correct and standard English. English is affirmed to be heterogeneous in its form. More specifically, broken or pidgin English is a mode of English usually practiced by someone who is new to an English-speaking culture and nation or holds a peripheral place in it.²) By presenting this passage as part of a language learning exercise, Cha depicts broken English as an integral part of the English language that someone aiming to learn the language is asked to closely engage with. Cha's writing affirms the presence of broken and pidgin English within an English-speaking culture and nation.

3. The Scandals of Translation and the Korean Colonial Condition

Most critical work that examines how *Dictée* foregrounds problems of translation has tended to address the text's most obvious sites of translation, the translation exercises preceding the text's first section. Because these passages call forth translation as part of a dictation exercise, translation in *Dictée* has generally been identified to be linked to problems of repetition and reproduction. Translating in these passages becomes a potential site of resistance that challenges the hegemony of the dictating language. The sites of translations introduced in *Dictée*, however, are not limited to problems of dictation. In what follows, I suggest that the sites of translation in Cha's writing are much more diverse with regard to their language and genre. In particular, they include narrative pieces of varied genres produced in the context of Korea's colonial history that might not at first sight seem to relate to problems of translation. For instance, in "Clio/History," we encounter a site of translation that records the biographical data of a Korean patriot figure:

Yu Guan Soon

Birth: By Lunar Calendar, 15, March 1903

Death: 12, October, 1920. 8:20 A.M.

She is born of one mother and one father. (25)

The record is followed by two pages, where on each page the Chinese characters that stand for "female" and "male" are printed. As a leader of the "March First Movement," a demonstration held against Japan's occupation of Korea on the first day of March in 1919, Yu Guan Soon is one of the most celebrated female heroine

figures of Korean history. Often compared to Jeanne d’Arc, Yu Guan Soon was a leader and martyr of the March First Movement. As the record states, Yu Guan Soon died in 1920 at the age of sixteen after her arrest during the demonstration.

The way her birth and death are recorded in the above passage invokes the Korean colonial context in several significant ways. Instead of written in the Korean language, the birth record is a translated text. It translates Yu Guan Soon’s biographical data not only into a specific form of statement, but also into English. Accordingly, instead of being written in its native language, Yu Guan Soon’s name appears in the romanized form. Considering the record is followed by pages that contain Chinese characters, this absence of the Korean letters cannot be simply read as a result of *Dictée* being a text that addresses an English speaking readership. The record’s translated form rather makes legible the subdued presence of the Korean language during Japan’s colonial rule.

In fact, the Korean Hangul was suppressed during Japan’s colonization of Korea. The Japanese suppression of the Korean language is particularly well addressed in “Calliope/Epic Poetry.” The section’s narrator depicts the mother’s experience of not being able to speak the Korean language while living in exile during the Japanese occupation. The mother of the narrator is shown to be forced to speak Japanese, “the tongue the mandatory language” (45). “The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue,” the narrator observes, “You speak in the dark. In the secret. The one that is yours. Your own. You speak very softly, you speak in a whisper. . . . To utter each word is a privilege you risk by death” (45). The mother’s act of speaking Korean in a secret manner is shown as an act of resistance against the suppression of the Korean language by the Japanese colonial force.

Throughout *Dictée*, the Korean Hangul only appears once. At the moment Hangul appears, it holds only a very peripheral presence. It appears in the form of a wall

carving that precedes *Dictée*'s main narrative. It reads as follows: "Mother, I miss you, I am hungry, I want to go home." This carving has attracted much attention from critics. According to Elaine Kim, it refers to an inscription found on the walls of a Japanese mine which was carved by a Korean laborer in forced labor (10). During Japan's colonial rule, "hundreds of thousands of Korean peasants were pressed into forced labor in Japanese mines and factories in the 1930s and 1940s" (10). The presence of Hangul in the carving gives voice to the presence of labor migrants who had been displaced from the home country and forced to work in Japan. The Korean language carved on the walls of a mine gives witness to the migrants' displaced condition.

Thus, read in light of the suppression of the Korean language, the absence of Hangul in Yu Guan Soon's birth and death record reminds us of its suppressed state during Japan's colonial rule. Moreover, as a site of translation, the record unravels the legacies of various forces that shape the way Yu Guan Soon's life is interpreted and recorded. As Wong points out, "What is remarkable about the biographical data is not its testimony to the brevity and heroism of a life . . . but, rather, the way in which it reveals how a seemingly neutral/natural genealogical record is intimately bound up with a colonial record" (125). Not limited to the influence of Japan, the statement further reveals the legacies of Chinese culture that have bearing upon the Korean subject and intersect in the record. Within Korean history, Chinese culture has held the status of hegemonic power in its cultural influence over Korea. Although China never officially ruled Korea, its cultural hegemony is found throughout Korean history, especially, in the field of language. Until the Korean letter system was invented in 1443, Korean language was recorded in Chinese letters. In Yu Guan Soon's birth record, the continued presence of Chinese cultural hegemony is visible through the presence of the lunar calendar system that marks Yu

Guan Soon’s birth. The hegemony of Chinese culture exists in a less explicit form in Yu Guan Soon’s birth record. Yet, as the insertion of Chinese letters following the birth record reveals, *Dictée* points to its continued existence.

In the same section, the text introduces a newspaper clipping that records the atrocities during Japan’s colonial rule under the title of “Suppression of Foreign Criticism”:

September 26, 1907

‘We are informed that a bad fight took place about eight miles from Su-won on Sunday, September 12 th. Thirty volunteers were surrounded by Japanese troops, and although no resistance was offered, they were shot down in the most cold-blooded fashion. This not being quite enough to satisfy the conquerors, two other volunteers who had been captured were brought out and were decapitated by one of the officers. **We may mention that this news does not come from native sources; it comes from European.**’ (emphasis added, 31-32)

Dictée does not cite the source of the newspaper. It can be conjectured from its content and language, however, that it is an article that quotes the atrocities of a massacre. The news is revealed to be resulting from European sources’ interpretation of the Korean colonial situation. The fact that it is written in English suggests that it is part of a newspaper that circulates within an English speaking readership or an international one. The circulation of the news in its translated form suggests the global hegemony of English.

The scandals of translation informing the newspaper clipping are further interrogated by the narrating voice in the pages that follow the article:

To other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History's recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for this experience, for this outcome, that does not cease to continue. (32)

The passage reads as a critique of history's function as master narrative. The narrator points out the limits of historical narrative's language for conveying the Korean colonial condition and its impact upon the Korean people. As Timothy Yu has claimed, Cha "could have chosen many different ways to dramatize the Japanese colonization of Korea" (131). Yet, Cha "suggests that conventional methods cannot show how the colonizer becomes embedded in language itself" (131). In the above passage, history's recording, as the narrating voice points out, is revealed to be failing in that the words are "unfathomable" and "not physical enough" (32). The narrating voice calls for a new language that can convey the pain of Japan's invasion and atrocities "that doesn't cease to continue" (32).

The narrator's words, however, also redirects us to problems of translation in order to address this imperative of a new language. Cited by foreign sources, the Korean situation in the newspaper clipping is interpreted not from the native's perspective. Instead, it reflects a European source's interpretation of the event. As a document that records events of Japan's colonial rule in Korea, the newspaper clipping's final comment raises questions about the mediated nature of the information provided by the article. Despite the article's attempt to convey the colonial experience from a third party's perspective, Cha's writing brings attention to the limits of the article's translation. More specifically, the narrating voice remarks

that something is lost in this process of mediation. “To the others, these accounts are about (one more) distant land, like (any other) distant land, without any discernable features in the narrative, (all the same) distant like any other” (33). The problems that arise from this kind of translation are, as the narrating voice suggests, that the reality of the Korean subject’s colonial experience remains “distant.” Cha’s writing emphasizes that the news clipping, although attempting to communicate its interpretation of the Korean colonial state, fails to grasp the physicality of the suppression and atrocities. The Korean colonial situation becomes interpreted as affairs of “a distant land” in the accounts of foreign powers (32).

Problems of translation are further invoked by a map that depicts the Korean peninsula after Korea’s separation into the North and South. In “Melpomene/Tragedy,” Cha inserts a map that features the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) line that crosses the middle section of the peninsula and divides the Korean peninsula into North and South Korea. In his discussion of the map’s presence in the text, Eric Hayot observes that a map is “another translation, another dictation authored by the intersection of land’s topographical surface and the political, human arrangement of that surface into countries, cities, borders, and demilitarized zones” (610). Through its representation of the two Koreas, the map is a visual translation of the Korean geopolitical condition after gaining independence from Japan. The DMZ line particularly foregrounds Korea’s postcolonial condition marked by the stark separation into the North and South during the Cold War.

At the same time, the map’s translation unravels how the way the Korean peninsula and its surrounding geographies are interpreted and named reflect the legacies of Japan’s colonial rule. A striking yet often overlooked feature of the map that informs its translation of the Korean geopolitical condition is the way the Korean East Sea is marked as “Sea of Japan.” Despite Korea’s independence and

recovery of its East Sea from Japan, international maps have continued to mark the Korean ocean as “Sea of Japan.” The dispute regarding the naming of the East Sea continues to this day with Japan still insisting that the Korean East Sea belongs to Japan’s territory. By inserting a map of the Korean peninsula, Cha’s text reveals how the map as a translated text not only reflects the nation’s postcolonial condition, but contains traces of the ongoing legacies of Japan’s colonial rule.

4. Reading as Re-Translation

As earlier parts of this essay have shown, the various sites of translation in *Dictée* offer insights into Korea’s colonial condition. If the greatest scandal of translation, according to Venuti, is that every act of translating is informed by asymmetries and inequities, *Dictée* directs attention to how translations produced in the context of Korea’s colonial and postcolonial condition are interpretations shaped by the legacies of various cultural and political forces. The biographical record of Yu Guan Soon, the newspaper clipping, and the map attempt to communicate interpretations of Korea’s colonial and postcolonial condition. By pointing out how each site of translation fails to convey the experience of the Korean people, Cha’s writing calls forth close engagement with the gaps and holes of translation.

This call for ongoing engagement with both the text and Korea’s colonial and postcolonial condition is particularly invited by the way *Dictée* omits translations for the passages written in a language other than English. By leaving passages written in languages other than English untranslated, as is revealed, for instance, through the insertion of Chinese characters in the pages following Yu Guan Soon’s birth and death record, the text’s readership, especially its English readership, is not only left

perplexed about its meanings, but also asked to configure them on their own. Even the only appearance of Hangul in the text, which takes the form of a wall carving, is not accompanied by a translation. For the English speaking readership, this experience of alienation from the text and its language puts the reader into a reverse position from its hegemony. In this light, it could be said that *Dictée* displays the asymmetries of power between languages and cultures through the various sites of translation, but also temporarily reverses them. Although only temporarily, the authority of English is challenged through the insertion of foreign letters without translations. Thus, the presence of multiple languages left untranslated in Cha's text exist as important sites that not only interrogate the asymmetries of power relation between languages, but also call for the reader's role as translator.

By revealing the sites of translation not only as sites of literal translations from one language to another, but also as sites that include varied acts of interpretation and mediation, *Dictée* advances a notion of translation that allows us to critically reflect upon Korea's colonial past. By pointing to the gaps and holes of translation, *Dictée* displays failures of translation to be recognized and re-translated by the reader. In *Dictée*, the text's varied female narrators are depicted to undergo the painful process of coming into speech through acts of stuttering and speaking broken English. It could be said that the reader undergoes a similar process by being asked to come to terms with the Korean colonial and postcolonial condition through acts of translation and re-translation. Thus, if Venuti calls for the translator's practice of "minoritizing translation" as an ethical response to the asymmetries of power relations underlying the act of translation, it could be said that *Dictée* calls for the reader's active role as translator. Through this ongoing process of translation and re-translation, reading in *Dictée* emerges as an ethical engagement with the scandals of translation. Close engagement with the gaps and holes of translation not only

mediates ongoing engagement with Korea's colonial history, but also invokes new ways of engaging with history.

Notes

- 1) For major critical work on translation's place in *Dictée*, see Lowe, Sakai, and Wong.
- 2) For a detailed discussion of the way broken and pidgin English is introduced in various parts of *Dictée*, see Kang and Park.

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국문초록

다시 번역하기로서의 읽기: 번역의 스캔들을 통해 살펴본 테레사 학경 차의 『딕테』

신 나 미 (연세대)

본 논문은 로렌스 베누티의 번역의 윤리에 대한 논의를 바탕으로 테레사 학경 차 (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha) 의 작품 『딕테』에서 드러나는 번역의 문제를 살펴보고자 한다. 『딕테』는 여러 가지 형태로 번역과 관련한 질문을 독자에게 던진다. 『딕테』와 관련한 기존 비평은 작품 속에서 번역의 문제가 받아쓰기의 상황을 통하여 보여주고 있음에 주목하였다. 특히, 많은 비평가들은 작품이 소개하고 있는 받아쓰기 예문들이 언어 및 문화간 권력의 차이를 효과적으로 보여주고 있다는 사실에 집중하였다. 받아쓰기가 새로운 언어를 습득하는 공부의 과정이라면, 작품 속 번역의 예문들은 이민자가 새로운 언어의 습득하는 과정에서 겪는 문화 및 언어간 권력 구조를 비판적으로 바라보게 하는 의의를 가진다. 기존 비평이 『딕테』 작품 속 번역의 문제를 받아쓰기의 예문들을 통해서 주요하게 다뤘다면, 본 논문은 번역이 차학경의 작품 속에서 좀 더 다양한 형태의 해석 행위를 포괄하고 있다는 사실에 주목한다. 『딕테』 속 번역의 다양한 예시들을 살펴봄으로써 본 논문은 차학경이 번역의 문제를 통하여 한국의 식민 역사적 상황에 대한 비판적 고찰 및 재해석을 강조하고 있음을 주장한다.

주제어: 테레사 학경 차, 『딕테』, 번역, 실험적 글쓰기, 아시안 아메리칸 문학, 한국 식민지적 상황

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이름: 신나미 (강사)

소속: 연세대학교

이메일: namishin@gmail.com

