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**Review of Sok-yong, Hwang. *Familiar Things*
(trans. Sora Kim-Russell)**

CARRIE MIDDLEDITCH
SOAS University of London

Sok-yong, Hwang. *Natikeun Sesang*. Seoul: Munhakdongne, 2011.
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Familiar Things is the latest work by South Korean author Hwang Sok-yong to be published into English by translator Sora Kim-Russell. Hwang's works are distinctive for their focus on the marginalized groups called the *mitbadak*, literally meaning the 'floor beneath' or 'lower floor'. Within personal narratives of struggle, he interweaves socio-historical effects with structural metaphors. One of the most vivid illustrations of this approach is in the 1973 novella *Road to Sampo*, which tells the story of a trio of misfits wandering the newly constructed roadways commissioned by the Park Chung Hee administration (1963-1979). The story navigates the roads they walk along, and their rootless lives are juxtaposed with the smooth, unending highways. With these devices, Hwang confronts the Korean reader with the high social costs of consumer capitalism and progress. His works do not directly engage the larger socio-historical elements at play, instead depicting them through the perspectives of those most affected. As an outspoken proponent of the *Minjung* writers' movement of the 1970's and 80's, Hwang has been a critical voice towards the aggressive economic policies of the Park Chung Hee administration, and has spoken out against the regime's censorship and imprisonment of many artists, including himself.

Familiar Things is set in 1980's Seoul, where a street-wise boy nicknamed Bugeye moves to 'Flower Island', the ironic moniker for a landfill forming an island mass in the Han river, to eke out a living picking trash with his mother. The reader is introduced to a world parallel to the glamorous metropolis of rising skyscrapers. The only things in ascendance on Flower Island are trash heaps, with daily deposits hauled in from surrounding districts. For the island's inhabitants, progress is merely survival, the daily desperate scrabbling over discarded items. Bugeye, his mother, and the community of other pickers are those excluded from Korea's economic 'Miracle on the Han River', as it has become known.

Hwang's Flower Island stages the folkloric subconscious of modernizing Korean society; the place teems with ghosts, goblins, spirit possessions, and ritual. Korean shamanism figures prominently as a literary device, as in the author's previous works. Like in the 2002 novel, *The Guest*, and *Princess Bari* (2015), elements of Korean shamanic ritual and *kut* exorcism become central themes in the story. For example, the twelve chapters of *The Guest* coincide with the twelve stages of a *chinogwi kut*, a ritual meant to purge frustrated spirits from the body. In *Familiar Things*, those latent energies are symbolized by the piles of festering trash on Flower Island.

A translator of *Familiar Things* faces the particular challenge of reconciling the cultural dissimilarity between native Korean shamanism and a modern context that valorizes science over folk belief. And as is the case with any work of world literature, the novel requires a negotiation of embedded cultural references in the source text with the audience in the target language. In an interview on her translation of *Princess Bari*, Sora Kim-Russell explains how she used the approach of folding cultural references into the character's narrative. She observes, "the tricky part is revealing the overlap enough to make it easier for the reader to

picture, while still keeping that item culturally distinct” (Gowman 1). This action of folding, meant to conceal and to intermix, is also present in *Familiar Things*. Throughout the novel, Russell’s domestication of cultural oddities presents opportunities to further describe the outer or inner emotion of the characters. For example, in one scene where Bugeye accidentally swallows a fly during his first meal on the island, a worker comments:

“It’s fine, it’ll put hair on your chest. We must’ve eaten a whole pint of flies this summer” (*Familiar Things* 17)

“그것두 다아 몸보신 감이다. 우리가
여름내 먹은 파리가 한 뒷박은 될걸”
(*Natikeun Sesang* 23)

This sentence contains two examples of adaptation. For the first, the Korean simply refers to the vitality of the body, yet the phrase “put hair on your chest,” while at once characterizing the speaker, also underscores the rugged masculinity required of Flower Island’s impoverished inhabitants, while also alluding to Bugeye’s transition passage into adulthood. In the following clause, the translator works to localize the Korean word for a dried, hollowed gourd (뒷박), which was commonly used as a decanter for rice wine. The term “pint” therefore serves as a contextual equivalent appropriate to modern readers’ sensibilities.

With her continued use of such tactics, Russell achieves the basic goal of the translator, which is to render a similar effect from the source text into the target audience through a tactful use of domestication and adaptation. Translators perpetually navigate a continuum on which domestication and foreignization are two opposite endpoints, and that creative tension is often evident in the work itself. Valerie Henitiuk provides an innovative description of translation activity as a process akin to the refraction of light when shone through a prism, which reveals a myriad of colors that can be interpreted as versions of interpretations. Rather than downplay the negotiation of norms (faithful versus free or domestication versus foreignization) as merely necessary to the process, Henitiuk embraces what she calls the “creative by-products” of that bargaining process (5). Those “creative byproducts” in turn, reflect the current, synchronic perceptions of the source literature and culture; indicating at once how a translation of that moment is valued and evaluated. The international visibility of Korean culture continues to increase, along with the esteem and recognition accorded to Korean literary products, for example among prize juries. Therefore, we can perceive Russell’s ‘refraction’ of Hwang’s original as a reflection of its current state in this matrix of world cultural exchange, and one that continues to enhance mutual intelligibility.

Sora Kim-Russell’s refraction of Hwang Sok-yong’s original text reads effortlessly in its target language. And just as her rendition of *Princess Bari* accomplishes, she resolves dissonances and folds cultural references throughout the narrative, helping readers to contend with cultural dissimilarities, notably with the shamanic themes. In effect, the translated version of Hwang’s work reads remarkably like its source through its clever adaptations. *Familiar Things* is another such amalgam, a negotiation between the source culture and the target culture—a work of world literature which embodies both cultures and their representative values.

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