



To cite this article:

Ayuningtyas, Lidya Pawestri. "Interview with Stephen J. Epstein, Korean and Indonesian Literary Translator." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 15 (December 2020): 55-60.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

Interview with Stephen J. Epstein, Korean and Indonesian Literary Translator

LIDYA PAWESTRI AYUNINGTYAS
State Polytechnic of Jakarta

Stephen J. Epstein is an Associate Professor in the School of Languages and Cultures at Victoria University of Wellington, where he directs the Asian Languages and Cultures Programme. He studied at Harvard and UC Berkeley in Classics and has published widely on contemporary Korean culture and society. Stephen has translated Korean and Indonesian fiction, including the novels *Contradictions* by Yang Gui-ja (Cornell University Press, 2005), *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* by Park Wan-suh (Columbia University Press, 2009), *The Long Road* by Kim In-suk (MerwinAsia, 2010), and *Telegram* by Putu Wijaya (Lontar Foundation, 2011). More recently, he translated Intan Paramaditha's short story collection *Apple and Knife* which was published in 2018 by Brow Books in Australia and Harvill Secker in the UK. He has also translated Intan's choose-your-own-adventure novel, *The Wandering*, published by Harvill Secker/Penguin Random House in 2020, which received both a PEN Translates Award from English PEN and a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant from PEN America. This interview was conducted online by exchanging emails in August and September 2020.

Lidya Pawestri Ayuningtyas (LPA): You translate short stories and novels from Korean and Indonesian into English. How did you become a translator of Korean and Indonesian fiction?

Stephen J. Epstein (SJE): My doctorate is in Greek and Latin literature, but I'd originally planned to major in East Asian Languages and Civilisations as an undergraduate, so my academic career has wound up coming full circle. The common thread has been an abiding interest in language and literature. While I was in grad school at Berkeley, students mobilised to have a course offered on Korean literature in translation for the first time. Since I had a lot of Korean-American friends, my interest was immediately piqued. The course itself was great. Everyone was very engaged, and the readings were fascinating.

Issues of translation came up regularly, and they really intrigued me since classical philology itself involves fine-grained analysis of words in context. Even though we were reading wonderful material, the translations themselves were uneven. Korean literature in English has developed enormously in recent years, but back then, in 1986, much of it hadn't been translated by native English speakers, and was clunky, sometimes not even grammatical. I thought, well, even if I never master Korean, I can produce more readable translations than most for the texts we had. I threw myself into study Korean and then made a few trips there before spending a year at Yonsei University in 1989-90 on a FLAS (Foreign Language and Area Studies) Fellowship for an intensive Korean language program between my PhD coursework and my dissertation. I published my first short story translation that year in the *Korea Journal*.

After my program finished, I had two months before returning to grad school and went to Malaysia and Indonesia. I'd also started studying Bahasa Melayu and found the language very compelling. Indonesia immediately enthralled me. Over the following decade, I visited Indonesia whenever I could and began reading a lot of Indonesian short stories. My Korean experience made me keen to work with Indonesian as well, although it was almost a decade before I made my first translation attempts. In my academic work generally, I focus much more on Korea, so translating Indonesian literature has been very much a labour of love.

LPA: Yes, in addition to being a translator, you are also a researcher and university professor. How do you manage your time?

SJE: Ha, good question. I don't often consciously think about "time management" beyond working out vague mental schedules of what I need to do. What helps everything hang together is that my central hobby (along with music) is studying languages. The creative aspect of translation projects means that they don't feel like work, and I happily slot them into evening relaxation. Research and academic writing require an entirely different level of concentration.

As I live close to campus, it's easy to move back and forth, so I get to be with my family a lot and make it a point to enjoy Wellington's beauty by jogging, hiking or cycling on a daily basis, which keeps me grounded. I've spent a lot of time amidst the pandemic listening to street interviews in various languages on YouTube, as they appeal to my linguistic and anthropological interests and satisfy some of the wanderlust that's currently squelched.

LPA: How do you decide which short stories or novels to translate?

SJE: It's often a matter of serendipity, especially with short stories. I might come across an intriguing piece or be asked to contribute to a project. With novels, I've chosen well-known texts or authors I've particularly liked, and in the Korean case, local connections have played a role: two of the novels I've translated have largely been set in Australia. And come to think of it, part of *The Wandering* is set in Sydney as well. But nothing in New Zealand yet.

LPA: What are the biggest differences in translating from Korean and Indonesian into English?

SJE: I think the biggest difference is that Indonesian sentences are generally shorter and clearer, and I usually can reach a working draft on the first pass. I've sometimes felt that you need to put sentences together in bringing an Indonesian text into English otherwise many authors would wind up sounding Hemingway-ish, when they're not meant to. Korean literature tends to longer sentences than English, so I often go in the opposite direction of breaking them up. Korean is grammatically and syntactically different enough from English that even getting a passage to sound idiomatic while capturing the original is often a challenge. And that's before you start to think about polishing for literary quality.

That said, I think the stylistic variation between different writers in each language is at least as great as the differences between the two languages. I'm musing out loud here, but over the last couple of decades I've had the impression that literary style in both has converged somewhat in the direction of English, with Korean becoming more concise and Indonesian sentences growing slightly in length. I don't want to say that this is a direct result of English influence but there may be a move towards a subconscious global standard with increasing cross-fertilization, even as many authors in both languages are becoming more experimental than ever before. Hmm. This deserves a study—maybe some already exist?

LPA: *Contradictions* by Yang Gui-ja and *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* by Park Wan-suh were co-translated with Kim Mi Young and Yu Young-nan respectively. How did the collaborations work in practice?

SJE: Yes, in the 2000s, the Literature Translation Institute of Korea was keen to support teams bringing together an inbound and an outbound translator. The first thing to note about collaborating with Mi Young, though, is that she's my spouse and we recently celebrated our 20th anniversary. (Certainly makes meeting up to work easier!) She had never done any literary translation before we met, but as a high school English teacher in Korea with an MA in Applied Linguistics, she was keen. We've tried a few methods to see what works best. On our first project, a short story by Park Wan-suh, we sat together and went through the text sentence by sentence. When we started on *Contradictions* in the early 2000s, she did the first draft and then I'd edit and polish but we shifted over the course of the novel as we found that that was less efficient than having me start and then take her input into account.

The percentage of our relative contributions has shifted over the years, which probably reflects my own deepening experience with both the Korean language and literary translation more generally. We currently have an unpublished manuscript of a novel whose translation carries both of our names, but the text was very straightforward. I'd consult with her on questions here and there, and she read the whole against the original, but I'd say about 90% of this project would sit with me.

Translating with Young-nan differed for many reasons, not least because she was already a prominent translator in her own right. We'd long wanted to collaborate on a project, as we'd been friends for several years given our shared interests. Young-nan did a first draft, and sent me chapters one at a time, which I'd edit, and we went back and forth a few times, trying to reach an English text that we felt read well. I deliberately avoided the original at this stage so that I could be free of its influence and edit more creatively. Occasionally I'd ask for a phrase or sentence or two if I had specific queries. Only after the third or maybe even the fourth round did I read the original closely against our own text.

In retrospect, this method was great as I came up with renderings that I wouldn't have if the source text had been imprinted in my head. When I finally read the original, I had a high sense of anticipation, and it was fun to see how it matched my own sense of what might be there. Sometimes I found that I'd moved further away from the original than I'd needed to, and in others the original sparked possibilities I'd not considered. Our translation of *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* remains one of the projects in my career I'm proudest of.

LPA: From your conversation with Intan Paramaditha on Asian American Writers' Workshop website (2020), your first longer translation work from Indonesian is Putu Wijaya's novel *Telegram*, why did you choose that novel to translate?

SJE: The library at UC Berkeley had an edition of Putu's short stories with a facing translation produced by Ellen Rafferty. I loved the imagination and critical eye in his fiction, and the facing translation helped me build up my vocab and reading speed in my early stages of studying Indonesian. I must have worked through that volume four or five times over the years. I eventually wanted to try my hand with an Indonesian novel, and John McGlynn of the Lontar Foundation pointed me to *Telegram*, one of Putu's earliest publications. I was really taken with how the way its narrative constantly jerks the rug out from underneath the reader, but finishing the translation took me almost a decade, with other projects getting in the way.

LPA: Can you tell us about the translation process with Intan Paramaditha's fiction? What are the challenges in translating *Apple and Knife*, and *The Wandering* particularly with regards to its structure?

SJE: Your earlier question raises the issue of what makes a co-translation. My work with Intan is extremely collaborative and although she is not a native speaker, her English is terrific, and that is usually her medium for academic writing. To a certain extent, she could be considered a co-translator of her own work. In this case, my method has been first to produce a rough draft that captures the meaning of the original. I then do edits without reference to the original where I treat it as a self-standing English text. After I get the draft reasonably polished, I send it to Intan with questions, comments and alternative possibilities for her point of view. In working with her, I've been inclined to be more free and adventurous than in other translation work as she can readily tell me whether something works for her or not. I don't have to worry as much about the original text itself determining the translation when the author herself can be the arbiter.

On our projects we've also had much more extensive editorial input from others than with any Korean texts I've translated. We have been very fortunate to work with experienced and talented writer/translators such as Elizabeth Bryer, the editor for *Apple and Knife*, and Tiffany Tsao. We'd worked with Tiffany when we first published an excerpt from *The Wandering in Asymptote*, and she gave the full text a thorough read and offered several great ideas. I really enjoy being edited, even if I ultimately don't take a suggestion. It's always interesting to get others' points of view and consider alternatives that may work better for different readers.

Some people have assumed that the choose-your-own-adventure structure of *The Wandering* made it more difficult than other texts to translate, but I'm not sure that is the case. I translated it by working straight through and ignoring the branching options the first time --which, incidentally, I've come to think is the most profitable way to read the novel as it forces you to hold multiple threads in your head simultaneously. Later, in my editing stages, I made it a point to go back and work through each thread individually just to make sure that I'd harmonised everything well.

LPA: Would you like to co-translate Indonesian fiction in the future as you've done with Korean?

SJE: Probably not, other than that I'd be delighted to continue working with Intan whenever possible.

LPA: Can you tell us about any upcoming translation projects from Korean and/or Indonesian?

SJE: I'm concentrating on other academic projects at the moment related to Korean popular culture and society and don't have any new translations immediately planned. I'll be keen to work with Intan when her next novel is finished, although given how busy she is, I'm not expecting that to happen too quickly. I also hope to see the unpublished Korean novel manuscript mentioned above into print, but the situation is complicated. A small publishing house has already expressed interest, but the agent and author want to reach a broader audience. When they find a press that suits them, I'll then do a full revision, which will have the benefit of quite a lot of aging time, but we'll see....

LPA: I have heard that ideally translators should learn and understand translation theory. Do you agree?

SJE: Every piece of knowledge and understanding that we acquire can help us become better translators. Ideally, sure, but a must? No. I'd say that theory helps you explain

and justify your choices more readily and may push you in directions you would not have opted for previously, but people translate successfully all the time without a background in theory.

LPA: Do you have any advice for emerging Korean and Indonesian literary translators?

SJE: In my academic work as well, I'm much more a fan of solid empirical studies than theoretical excursions. I'd encourage those who are interested to dive in head first and get a sense of what a challenging but fun endeavour it is. Only by practicing do you develop strategies for dealing with the difficulties that translation regularly tosses up. Read as much as you can in the target language you work in. If you discover that the field is for you, make contacts with other translators and organisations that support literary translation. More networks exist than ever before, both language specific and for literary translators more generally. For some languages, such as Korean, whose star has certainly risen in the world in recent years, publication has become more complex as agents now play a much bigger role than a decade ago, but there are also more opportunities and a far larger audience globally than there once was.

LPA: Finally, as you have a doctorate in Classics and translate from Korean and Indonesian, how many languages do you know, and which language(s) are you most familiar with?

SJE: I always find this question impossible to answer, because understandings of what "knowing" a language means can differ so radically. Ultimately, English is the only language I command at the level I'd like to, and I'm still learning new words or etymologies in my native tongue on an almost daily basis. I wouldn't feel competent to translate literature into any language besides English.

My abilities in the four standard skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—differ significantly among the languages I've studied. As an obvious example, I devoted several years of my life to Ancient Greek and Latin, but I've never had a conversation in either. The languages I feel comfortable holding an extended conversation in are French, Spanish, Korean and Indonesian, and at various points in my life I'd have said the same but at a lower level for Nepali, Mandarin, Bislama and German. I've also worked hard on a half dozen other languages as an avid traveller, often leveraging off of others that I know (e.g. with the Romance family), and probably made it up to an A2/B1 level in them at my best. As I've often said, the issue isn't learning languages so much as retaining them. Active production degrades much, much more quickly than passive reception. Finally, and let this be something of a speech act, this year, because of the regions I'd most like to visit again when we can travel once more, I've been sinking a lot of effort into improving my Japanese and Russian.

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