

Networking the English Departments in Asia: What EPASIA Can Do

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You taught me language; and my profit on't

Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you

For learning me your language!

(*The Tempest* Act I scene II 365-367)

1. Asian scholars of English: “rough” translators?

Let me begin with Chakrabarty's term “provincialize,” which we borrowed for the title of this conference. What Chakrabarty intends to do by “provincializing” Europe is to explain the political modernity of India without having recourse to the historicist model of modernity invented by the colonizing Europe. Historicism, according to Chakrabarty, is the real villain in the colonizing process.

Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This “first in Europe, then elsewhere” structure of global historical time was historicist (Charkrabarty 7).

Chakrabarty wants to exorcise the historicism of this kind from his account of modern Indian history. But such exorcist practice is not so easy to perform because all the basic concepts and academic ideas that have to be used in the process of exorcism are the very inheritance of the tradition of European thoughts that Chakrabarty wants to expel from his work. Chakrabarty's work, therefore, contains an element of self-denial which, I think, is a common fate with non-European scholars in every other field, including scholars of English Studies. We Asian scholars of English Studies are dealing with Western literary classics for research and education. As long as we accept the universal value of classic English literature to teach or do research about in our native country never minding its “belatedness,” we do not have any problem except the bit of inconvenience that comes from using a foreign language as a tool of our profession. As soon as we realize that the “great tradition” of English Literature, all the mythic character bestowed upon English canonical writers like Shakespeare or Wordsworth was more or less an invention of Victorian period, created for specific political reasons connected to the colonial strategy of imperial Britain, all our academic projects and research agendas become

very problematic all of a sudden. We now begin to remember that we are teaching Asian students, not English or American ones, that we are writing mainly for Asian readers rather than English or American ones, and that we have been teaching, in fact, without a particularly keen awareness of our ethnic background or vernacular culture. Why? Because we have learned our stock in trade from the West, unwittingly accepting the basic categories, pedagogical paradigms, and academic conventions, which led us to endorse the historicist model in literary studies.

We simply want to make sense of our profession as literary scholars in the context of our native culture, yet that is where we meet Chakrabarty's predicament: to make sense of our professions in our own cultural context, we first must disavow the intellectual inheritance from the West as Chakrabarty did, and then begin to suspect the universality of the literary value allegedly found in the Anglo-American classics which we have naively distributed in our native countries for general consumption. Obviously, it is the time for us Asian scholars to be more self-conscious and self-reflective in our profession.

When we "self-consciously, self-reflectively" examine the public roles we have been playing, we have to admit that we are, most of all, translators. We translate, annotate, and explicate the Western classics in English for students in our classes. We translate the literary works in English into our vernacular languages and publish them for the general public. Our translation is not simply a linguistic transfer from English to our vernacular languages or vice versa, but a cultural translation as well. Translation is not a mechanical process; the final result of the translating process is contingent upon for whom and why that translation is taking place. Chakrabarty's remarks on "translation" are particularly perceptive in this context. If the "universalist political-theoretical categories of European origin" are to be applied to the materials of non-European history, those materials should be translated first and the translation should be a process through which the unwieldy materials from native India are transformed into something adaptable to the European categories. Such translation, therefore, ought to be "rough."

The glossary reproduced a series of "rough translations" of native terms, often borrowed from the colonialists themselves. These colonial translations were rough not only in being approximate (and thereby inaccurate) but also in that they were meant to fit the rough-and-ready methods of colonial rule. To challenge that model of "rough translation" is to pay critical and unrelenting attention to the very process of translation (Chakrabarty 17).

Yes. We need to be more attentive to "the very process of translation." Translation is inevitably a process of approximation. But if the approximation was motivated by a political intention to sustain a colonial rule, translation is no more a matter of academic debate, but a political issue

in itself. Being a translator of a culture, therefore, cannot be an innocent job: We have to decide politically on which side we locate ourselves, those who translate or those who are translated, the colonizer or the colonized. Chakrabarty's "provincializing Europe" project leads us to ask such uncomfortable but necessary question about our academic identities as translators between the West and the non-West.

The answers will be all different from individual to individual, but the simple facts that there has been no significant scholarship in the landscape of English Studies by an Asian scholar politically motivated like Chakrabarty; that postcolonialism itself was initiated basically by the Western academia, not by the local Asian scholars; that we Asian scholars of English Studies have not particularly been aware of the presence of the other Asian scholars in our academic pursuits--all these suggest that we have been inclined to be more sympathetic to those who produce the texts of Anglo-American literature than to those who consume them in our native region. That is, in Chakrabarty's terms, we have been more faithful to the colonizer than to the colonized, being the producers of "rough" translation in their stead rather than challenging it.

2. The World Wide Web : "A brave, new world" for Asian Scholars?

Somber reflection on the cultural role of English scholarship in Asia does not permit an easy solution or an optimistic prospect even if we become more honestly aware of the political ramifications of our profession in the global context. Chakrabarty tries to revise the "rough" translation of India with his first-hand knowledge of Bengali history creating a new "center" of historical understanding outside Europe. How can we do the same in English Studies? Where could we find such a "center" outside the West (UK & US in the case of English studies)?

Such trying questions are not in fact entirely new to Korean scholarship in English studies. For example, one of my old teachers, professor Nak-Chung Paik, who is a scholar of D.H. Lawrence as well as the founder of one of the leading literary magazines in Korea once suggested that Korean scholars of English studies could claim such a revisional reading of English literary classics only if they are equipped with the so-called "Third-World Perspective" that has been made available to the people of the Third-World through their distinctive historical experiences. The colonized people, to make a long story short, are free from the historical false-consciousness of the colonizing people, which makes them more precise, more creative readers of Western literary classics (Paik 156-166). Such an argument is worth a serious debate, and is psychologically comforting to us, too. But it is very hard to see how Korean scholarship of English literature has become much more creative and original in reality because of the historical perspective professor Paik talked about.

Where do we find such an alternative "center" from which to build up our literary scholarship of English Studies in our own way, then? The arrival of the World Wide Web, in my

view, allowed us Asian scholars a whole new prospect for our profession of literary scholarship both theoretically and practically.

The WWW is a space without a center. The WWW is boundless. Furthermore, The WWW is free from authoritative control. George Landow explains the politics of hertext (the basic textual form of the WWW) as follows.

As the capacity of hypertext systems to be infinitely recenterable suggests, they have a corresponding potential for being anti-hierarchical and democratic. ...the boundary between author and reader should largely disappear. Moreover, readers rather than authors decide how they will move through the system, for the reader can determine the order and principle of investigation (29).

The democratizing aspect of the WWW, which is illustrated above through the relationship between author and reader can easily be applied to the unequal relationship between Anglo-American scholars and Asian scholars, between the West and the non-West. The authority and power of the Western literary scholars comes mainly from their control over the texts: they have all the original manuscripts of classic texts in their own libraries, which allows their control of these texts in a practical sense. Their authority as the editors of standard editions, for example, comes directly from their physical control of the original manuscripts. Textual criticism, therefore, is also their exclusive field of research. The power to set the standard edition of a text, and the power to explicate the text in the context of the original manuscript, belong to them entirely. Thus the unfillable gap between Western scholars and Asian scholars was, in fact, created by their different levels of access to the original texts.

Creating an alternative “center” means, of course, much more than gaining physical access to the original manuscripts; it means rather a unique viewpoint which allows us a kind of distinctive hermeneutic power so that we claim an original insight into a text without having to refer to the authority of Western scholars. It is a hermeneutic independence with which we replace the “rough” translation with our own “precise” understanding of the texts we study. Changing the medium from print text to electronic hypertext does not automatically secure such a viewpoint, of course. But the physical reconstruction of a textual form does affect the hermeneutic process. J. Bolter’s view is classic in this line of argument.

As long as the printed book remains the primary medium of literature, traditional views of the author as authority and of literature as monument will remain convincing for most readers. The electronic medium, however, threatens to bring down the whole edifice at once. It complicates our understanding of literature as either mimesis or expression, it

denies the fixity of the text, and it questions the authority of the author (153).

What the Western scholars have lost in the incoming information age is not just a symbolic “center” from which to wield academic authority, but also the idea of literature itself. Bolter’s pessimistic verdict on “old literature” based on print culture is also shared by one of its senior practitioners in a different context.

The Bastilles of the old literature, the reality of “literature,” the creativity of the author, the superiority of authors and literary works to critics and readers, and the integrity of the literary art work, have now been stormed. The attackers carried many banners, but all were associated with the political radicalism of recent decades, and all drew their authority in varying degrees from two closely connected skepticisms, structuralism and post-structuralism or deconstruction, which were the enabling philosophies of the new left (Kernan 76-77).

Undoubtedly, hypertext, an incarnation of deconstructive theories, is carrying its own banner among the “attackers” ready to strike a final blow on the “old literature.” How much truth these verdicts contain, how “dead” the “old literature” of the West is in reality is a whole different issue requiring another debate. But the demise of “old literature” in information age, if it is true, may not necessarily be good news to Asian scholars. What Caliban wanted to see was the downfall of Prospero, not the submergence of the whole island by the tempest.

Likewise the reality of our “brave, new world” of hypertext will not necessarily be an easier one. Cyberspace is a place where commercial interests are more ruthlessly pursued and corporate power (that of Microsoft, for example) rules more predominantly than in the offline world. Cyberspace is also a place where the dominance of English as the global language is almost completely established, America being the biggest provider of digital contents consumed by the world’s populace. Even in Web’s academic projects in English Studies, all the significant breakthroughs, such as Alan Liu’s *Voice of the Shuttle*, David Erdman’s *The Blake Archive*, and George Landow’s *Victorian Web*, to name a few, were all done by American scholars making it clear that the “First in Europe(America in this case), then Elsewhere” principle is even more completely being brought into practice online than it ever was offline.

Despite all these drawbacks, WWW has still provided us Asian scholars with a new infrastructure where we can participate in the academic communities of English Studies more on an equal footing with Western scholars. First of all, the WWW’s environment and recent IT innovations have made an enormous improvement in the availability of primary and secondary materials. The result is little short of magical. If I am allowed to exaggerate a little, one third of

my research time, when I was writing for my degree 15 years ago, was spent in front of a Xerox machine copying all those journal articles and book chapters which would be unreachable once I came back to my home country. And to be honest, that was when I felt most vividly my own marginality both as a person and a scholar. But now, I can get hold of most published books in my field within a week if I pay some extra for quick service. I can even print out many recent journal articles right on my writing desk through Jstor or Project Muse.

But what is more exciting to us is the new type of academic collaboration the WWW environment has made possible. Carl A. Raschke, for example, predicts the appearance of a “global university” where all the academic materials are simultaneously shared world-wide and all the academic activities take place everywhere in the world, free from any local restrictions. What prevents such an educational utopia from coming into being at the moment is, of course, commercial interests and copyright restrictions, making it “a distant, if not inconceivable, prospect.”

Yet the new global knowledge space is slowly becoming defined, if only at an embryonic level. Although the oligopoly power of traditional educational institutions in the developed world, as well as force of habit, has kept electronic course delivery and formats from breaking free of their ‘experimental’ and marginal curricular status, in the Third World an entirely different scenario is emerging. Indeed, outside the advanced economies of the West, the Internet is speeding a planetary revolution in learning...The internet itself...will lay the groundwork for ‘networked global partnerships’ involving learning centres, industry specialists, and publishers along a broad spectrum (Raschke 88).

3. What EPASIA can do: Towards a “networked global partnership” of English Studies

The Website EPASIA is the very first step we have taken to materialize our professional ambition to make a “networked global partnership” in cyberspace among Asian scholars of English Studies. It would take a long time to talk about the menus of this site in detail, but let me explain very briefly the principles and the objectives of this digital project. EPASIA is a multi-purpose academic portal site exclusively for English Studies developed by myself and nine doctoral students of my department. It is an ongoing project, still in the middle of its making, waiting for the contributions from our future partners in other Asian countries.

a. Global Scope: EPASIA is an Academic Portal Site specialized in English Studies, which was, of course, inspired by Alan Liu’s *Voice of the Shuttle*. Whereas VOS is a comprehensive portal covering all subjects in the humanities and social sciences, EPASIA is only for English Studies. What is unique about EPASIA, however, is its truly global scope; it covers not only Anglo-American regions (UK, US, Australia) but also many Asian countries

such as China, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, the Philippines, India, and Korea. So far we have uploaded information about a little more than 700 sites for English Studies collected from all over the world and we are hoping to increase our number of items and the quality of our information with the collaboration of our foreign partners. If they contribute contents produced in their native regions perhaps after their own “translation,” EPASIA can become a truly unique collection of site information, which, I hope, will make the hitherto-unknown Asian scholarship in English studies more visible to Western academic communities.

b. Collaborative Networking: EPASIA is also an annotated Webliography (bibliography of academic web contents). EPASIA’s annotations are given by an open-ended, bilateral network of scholars and graduate students in Asia. A site concerning Jean Rhys maintained by professor Pin-chia Feng of Taiwan, for example, was annotated by a graduate student at Ewha majoring in contemporary British fiction who maintains her own website related to her major field. An annotator is asked to contribute reviews of items in her major field to EPASIA in a standardized format, just in the way an independent local TV production company provides a national broadcasting system with its own programs. The contents of EPASIA are thus uploaded and maintained by a networked community of students and scholars who best know the contents in their own professional fields. The academic network supporting EPASIA exists now only among Ewha students, but could easily be expanded nationally and internationally.

c. Digital Publishing & Archiving: EPASIA presents an international academic journal of English Studies, published both as a peer-reviewed e-journal and as a paper journal. Print or audio-visual materials produced through international conferences, workshops, and lecture series are collected and archived in the EPASIA database, and some of them are already provided to the general public. Digital mediations of local academic activities will also make Asian scholars a more significant presence in Western academic communities.

What we can do with a digital project like EPASIA may seem at first to be little more than Caliban’s clumsy challenge to Prospero. With a little bit more solidarity and positive participation among us, however, we may achieve something far more constructive than Caliban’s curse.

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