

Treacherous Translation: The 1938 Japanese-Language Theatrical Version of the Korean Tale *Ch'unhyangjŏn*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the controversial staging of a Japanese-language version of the popular Korean romance, *Ch'unhyangjŏn* (*The Tale of Spring Fragrance*) by the Japanese theatrical company Shinkyō in 1938. By analyzing the arguments of Japanese and Korean intellectuals about the play, I reveal that the idea of translation as equal exchange—the focus of much present-day theoretical debate on ethics and translation—was embedded both in the colonizer's affirmation of the play as an exemplary step toward cultural assimilation and in the colonized's protest against it as an “inaccurate” or “unfaithful” translation. I also examine how the limitations of colonized intellectuals' cultural nationalism led them to retreat to a conciliatory insistence on cultural autonomy. Finally, drawing on Karl Marx's critique of equal exchange and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the other, I attempt to reframe translation as ethical as well as political practice against the lure of cultural nationalism on the part of the colonized and the enterprise of colonial domination.

BIO

Serk-Bae Suh teaches Korean literature at the University of California, Irvine as associate professor. His first book, *Treacherous Translation* examines the role of translation in shaping attitudes toward nationalism and colonialism in Korean and Japanese intellectual discourse from the 1910s through the 1960s. His current research project deals with the problem of sacrifice by examining the critical occasions of literary imagination that envisioned an autonomous space for literature under the pressure of the developmental state in 1970s and 80s South Korea.