

## ***Song of Ariran* and the Question of Translation**

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### **Abstract**

A quasi-autobiographical text recounting the lifelong journey of a Korean revolutionary named Kim San (a.k.a. Jang Jirak), *Song of Ariran* (1941) remains a unique work offering an intimate view of the incessant political strife into which East Asia was thrown in the early twentieth century. The text stands out from many hagiographic works of its genre through the way that its narrator casts his political peregrination—one that takes in nationalism, anarchism, and communism—under a thematic rubric of compulsive failure. One outcome of this avowal of failure is an aporetic logic of narrativity, whereby the text is structured around a desire to invest meaning in experiences that consistently resist such signification. But the theme of failure in *Song of Ariran* extends beyond its probing of the problematic boundary of life and writing. For in acceding to the offer of a joint literary project with the American journalist Nym Wales (a.k.a. Helen Foster Snow) in the foreign medium of the English language, Kim San in effect raised the question of failure to the text's formal level by problematizing the idea of translation as a derivative form of linguistic communication. By drawing on Naoki Sakai's theoretical formulation of translation as "heterolingual address," my article attempts to show that the significance of a text like *Song of Ariran* for our time lies not so much in the moral or psychological dimension of its textual content as in its positing of the possibility of a special form of literary readership, which Kim San enacts via the traces of incommensurability arising from his collaborative encounter with his American writing partner.

### **Keywords**

"Arirang," Kim San, Nym Wales, Naoki Sakai, translation, incommensurability

My whole life has been a series of failures,  
and the history of my country has been a  
history of failure.

—Nym Wales and Kim San  
*Song of Ariran*<sup>1</sup>

Despite its canonical standing in Korea's colonial literature, *Song of Ariran* remains a relatively little known work abroad. This is perhaps surprising in that the original text was conceived in English, owing to its joint authorship by Nym Wales and Kim San—a.k.a. Helen Foster Snow and Jang Jirak respectively—a fact which helps to explain how it ended up reaching the improbable readership of the then US president Franklin Roosevelt (Snow, "To All My Beloved" 19). But then, it is not as if the recognition of the work was immediate in Kim San's home country. In fact, *Song of Ariran*, just like its real-life protagonist Jang Jirak, was virtually unknown until 1960, when its Japanese edition was accidentally discovered by a journalist travelling the neighboring isle (Rhee 6-7). What happened afterwards is nothing short of the stuff of legend. An unsung hero secretly admired amongst the elite literati under the despotic regime of the 60s and 70s, Kim San was suddenly catapulted into the mythic status of a revolutionary hero when the first Korean edition of his quasi-autobiographical text was published in 1984, thereby cementing his mystique as an uncompromising figure of emancipatory politics for years to come. And yet, it is precisely here, in this dramatic turnabout of the text from absolute anonymity to iconic stature that one can perceive the irony attending the familiar turn of phrase "victim of its own success." Granted that the logic of late capitalism is powerful and voracious enough to transform even the most resistant of its opponents into cultural icons—a select, but no less burgeoning company to which Kim San belongs alongside Che—how should one make sense of the triumphant appeal of a story which, according to the author himself, relates a life riddled with "failures"?

The present article examines the theme of failure crisscrossing *Song of Ariran* in relation to the concept of translation. To foreground failure as one of the central motifs in Kim San's biographical account is not only to accede to the form of violence with which Kim San chose to adjudicate upon the legacy of his thirty-two years of life (he died in 1938, one year after his meeting with Nym Wales) but to double the initial violent act by repeating it. Yet, if, at the same time, his self-

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in 1941 with the subtitle *The Life Story of a Korean Rebel*, the text's full title changed to *Song of Ariran: A Korean Communist in the Chinese Revolution* in the 1972 second edition. All citations from the text will be based on the 1972 edition.

abnegating verdict of equating his entire life with failure seems perfectly appurtenant, it is because the peremptory gesture—at once austere and excessive, humbling and accusatory—finds concomitant echoes throughout his life-long pursuit of egalitarian vision, which propelled a colonial youth at the age of fourteen to such intense politico-military battlegrounds as Tokyo, Manchuria, Beijing, Guangzhou, not to mention Yan'an, a two decade long journey which was also to transform the budding humanist into a diasporic nationalist, an idealistic anarchist, and a disillusioned Marxist without ever enabling a stable sense of identity. It was Nym Wales herself who ventured the first interpretation of Kim San's avowal of failure in her 1984 preface to the text when she retrospectively ascribed it to an expression of Nietzschean yearning to overcome *ressentiment* accrued from the latter's prolonged engagement in partisan politics (Snow, "To All My Beloved" 20). A more recent, psychoanalytically-oriented reading argues that Kim San's pronouncement is not so much an admission of personal shortcomings or limitations but, rather, an active embracing of existential deadlock as part and parcel of the revolution's immanent movement (Shin 70). As illuminative as they are in revealing the moral, psychological bearings of the remark, such elucidations confine the problematic of failure to the realm of the individual subject. As accounts of narrative, then, they remain at the level of textual content (or the object of narration which happens to be Kim San's life story in this case), without casting any light on the matter of textual form (the language of narration), from which, as I will argue, the genuine ethico-political dimension of the statement derives.

One might have expected the issue of translation in *Song of Ariran* to have received more attention than that accorded its treatment of failure; it also needs to be reminded that no Western writer more prominent than Nym Wales has devoted a book-length publication to a modern Korean subject. And it is true that the last decade of textual criticism on *Song of Ariran* has seen a gradual shift of focus toward the question of language: one critic, for example, has highlighted the subjective dimension of the Eurocentric, not to say Orientalist, perspective informing Nym Wales's style of writing, as well as her *post scriptum* editorial decisions (Park 264-67), while another has emphasized the testimonial nature of Kim San's narrative as a mode of literary praxis which challenges the conventional frame of a representative narrative ideologically in league with the teleological compulsion of Western imperialism (Ko 9-12). Though both accounts draw much from critical insights developed by postcolonial theories, adding an extra layer of political dimension to the predominantly historiographical and romanticized readings of the past, they do not depart from the presuppositions of an earlier

interpretative outlook, in which, regardless of which side of the co-authors' role is emphasized and politically problematized, the nature of communicative medium between the two writers never gets questioned, leaving the idea of translation in turn as something secondary if not accidental. *Song of Ariran* does not, of course, fit into the genre of translation in its proper sense, since English is said to have been the language of choice from the inception of their joint literary project. However, once the notion of translation qua practice is distinguished, as Naoki Sakai suggests it must, from its after-effect, namely, the representation of translation, a different picture emerges (Sakai, "Translation" 75). For behind and in between the series of narrated events that take the readers through the war-torn, conflict-ridden East Asia of the early twentieth century lurks what cannot be summarily got across via a simple transfer of clear-cut messages—namely, the traces of a constant interpretative negotiation that opens up a vista of the incommensurable, starting from that unforgettable day of Nym Wales and Kim San's first meeting as recounted in the text's introduction.

### **Nym Wales the Translator**

If Nym Wales's 1939 introduction calls for an introduction of its own, it is not so much on account of what it seems to lack but because its self-contained style gives it the character of a vignette, which speaks more for itself than the following main text. Certainly her prefatory words do not inform us of her biographical background or how she got to Yan'an—the then headquarters of the beleaguered Chinese Communists; nor do they reveal in what kind of circumstance she was led to seek out Kim San, a Korean delegate who had belatedly joined the Chinese group.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the very fact that such circumstantial factors do not rise up to the level of questions serves to highlight the extent to which the thirty-year-old journalist single-mindedly approached her newly found subject matter. Gone, in that regard, is the dry, matter-of-fact tone of voice characterizing the preface of her lengthier work. Here instead, one finds the detailed depiction of the milieu of the two writers' repeated meetings and the dramatic rendering of their attendant conversations. In fact, the intimate and personally invested nature of her stance can

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<sup>2</sup> To answer such questions, one must refer to her *The Chinese Communists: Sketches and Autobiographies of the Old Guard*, a series of individual interviews for the purpose of which she embarked on the hazardous trip in the first place and whose inevitable comparison to the already acclaimed *Red Star over China* by her husband Edgar Snow ought to have been a source of unremitting anxiety.

be glimpsed from the moment of their initial rendezvous, which she recollects in the following glowing terms: “I saw that his strongly profiled face was curiously un-Chinese and quite handsome in a semi-Spanish sort of way,” adding just as immediately, “For a moment I thought he was a European” (42).

Problematic as they may sound from the purview of political correctness, these descriptive markers conjoining subjective impression with Eurocentric perception soon give way to a deluge of other equally striking modifiers, every one of which turns out to be just as transitory and replaceable as the others (“businesslike, impersonal,” “somber, quiet, self-disciplined, but sensitive and nervous,” “intelligent . . . frank and understanding”). And as the “stranger” from “a nation of idealists and martyrs” (42-46) passes through each checkpoint of identificatory efforts, the initial allure delineated in physical terms gradually veers toward a full-blown approbation of his moral character.

He was one of the most fascinating characters I had met in seven years in the Orient. He had certain qualities that seemed unusual among the revolutionaries I had met—and I had with some pains and a good deal of writer’s cramp written down the autobiographies of about twenty-five of them during the summer. I could not quite analyze these characteristics at first. Then I recognized what they were: He had an independent mind and perfect poise. (50)

Once more, the elusive figure distinguished from the surrounding Chinese revolutionaries, while at the same time that element of distinction is again assimilated to a primarily Western standard (“an independent mind”), thereby drawing him closer to her. The increasing proximity notwithstanding, it is one thing to desire to know more about this mysteriously hybrid figure; another to decide to actually devote a book to him. For as Nym Wales admits, her main interest lay in “vital immediate things, in movements that are making history,” which happened to be “the Chinese Soviet movement” and not the “lost causes and oppressed minorities” of a place such as Korea (47-48).

Something else, if not more, would then be needed to overcome her initial hesitations; an extra nudge to quell the apparent misgivings about making public the story of this secretive man. Hence the need to carefully follow the logic of her ensuing justification:

After I had got into the heart of [Kim San's] story, I saw that it was going to be dramatic and interesting. The breadth of his experiences amazed me. The book was going to cover, not only Korea, Japan, and Manchuria, but the existing course of the Chinese Revolution as well. Only a wandering Korean revolutionary could have had such broad and differentiated experience, and only an outsider could have such a clear perspective on all these movements and peoples of three countries. (52-53)

An outsider just like herself amongst the cadre of Chinese Communists, in other words: for if only such an alien or alienated figure as Kim San could vouch for the "kaleidoscopic picture of the whole Far East" (53), as she puts it, only a fellow-outsider like herself can recognize and acknowledge him in turn. All the preceding attempts at differentiation, all the excessive signifiers mobilized as a means to define and stabilize Kim San's identity culminate in this sublime partnership based on exception, even if the final act of identification will have required invoking and traversing some of the most naïve and virulent prejudices based on ethnic stereotypes, which cannot but underscore the essential abyss separating the two signatories.<sup>3</sup> No less noteworthy, however, than this intricate interplay of the same and the different is the radical and fundamental manner in which the structural dynamic between the margin and the center gets challenged and overturned on the level of Nym Wales's geopolitical perspective, since acceding to and thus privileging Kim San's story and, by extension, foregrounding the modern history of Korea would be tantamount to abandoning wholesale her previous Sino-centric view, which had driven her to East Asia from the start.<sup>4</sup>

Such seems to have been the impact Kim San exerted on Nym Wales in their first meeting, the force of an inexorable pull, whose overpowering effect would not only outstrip in terms of its pulsating quality of rhythm and tone but also on the level of its sheer duration any single biographical account from her more ambitious

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<sup>3</sup> Nym Wales's enthusiastic approval extends not only to Korean people but to the country's natural landscape: "Korea is in many ways the most beautiful country in the Far East, so rainy-fresh and green with beautiful sharp-profiled mountains and swift-moving rivers. It reminds one a little of Japan, but on full scale instead of miniature . . . I had decided immediately that the Koreans are far and away the best-looking people in the Far East . . ." (46).

<sup>4</sup> Earlier she noted, "I am not at all personally interested in Korea. Of course, I am anxious to learn about it for general background on the Far East. But my time and energies are limited . . . I am really afraid I'll take too much interest in Korea. I am always getting involved in lost causes and oppressed minorities" (47).

*The Chinese Communists*. Only natural then that she try to mitigate and curtail this overriding force. For as with any genuine event that derails the routine course of life, the power of attraction, when it verges on excess, can turn into its opposite, the source as much as the cause of resistance, insofar as that magnetic force threatens to swallow up one's innermost sense of being. It is surely tempting to explain this singular force of attraction in physical and psychological terms. Yet if such eroticized reading entails inevitable neutralization of the predominantly politicized ambience of the situation—that is, insofar as the Communists in Yan'an constituted a political minority in mainland China, a foreigner like Kim San would make up a minority within a minority—it also fails to account for the question of racial difference, which marked the Korean off from the surrounding Chinese. Whence the need to recall the crucial difference of linguistic medium, in which Nym Wales's two set of interviews were conducted. Unlike her interviews with the Chinese Communists, all of which were carried out with the assistance of a bilingual interpreter, that with Kim San took place in English: a fine, but pivotal difference, whose significance acquires a decisive edge when aligned to Sakai's theoretical take on the concept of translation.

According to Sakai, “homolingual address”—here “address” being specifically distinguished in its inherently performative nature from the metaphysical notion of communication which presupposes its own accomplishment (Sakai, Introduction 4)—refers to the linguistic relation which, based on the premise of pre-existing independent linguistic communities, assumes the “normalcy of reciprocal and transparent communication” within the same language group, rendering translation as a task derivative to the naturalness of everyday communication. “Heterolingual address,” on the other hand, adheres to the view that “every utterance can fail to communicate because heterogeneity is inherent in any medium, linguistic or otherwise,” rendering the function of translation as originary in any discursive situation (Sakai, Introduction 8). Based on this dual distinction, Nym Wales's interview with Chinese Communists would snugly fit the mold of homolingual address in that the foreignness of the Chinese language inevitably undergoes normalization based on linguistic equivalence thanks to the arbitrate role of the interpreter. The extended series of her conversations with Kim San, on the other hand, would necessitate the constant emergence of the incommensurably foreign within the seemingly homogeneous medium of a single national language. There is, however, a more precise sense in which Sakai claims that translation concerns with “the allocation of the foreign” (Sakai, “Translation” 73) and why, by extension, the translator is “internally split and multiple, devoid of

a stable position” (75). Neither an addresser nor an addressee in the conventional sense, the translator exemplifies a primary figure who is fated to hover over the boundary of the foreign, i.e., the ambiguous border between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, etc. Moreover, it needs to be remembered that though encounter with the foreign is an ontological share minimally allotted to everyone in principle, the translator bears the additional burden of having to continuously efface her voice as well as her presence from the surface of the text (Sakai, Introduction 8-9). But then, is this not the very position Nym Wales in effect occupies apropos of Kim San’s autobiographical narrative, the scene of a life story to which she can only arrive as a belated ventriloquist?

If *Song of Ariran* can be called a work of translation and the role of Nym Wales that of translator, it is first and foremost on account of that sustained exposure to the foreign, to which the process of its writing drove the American co-author. And the mark of effusiveness recognizable in her introduction bears witness to the sense of freedom occasioned by Nym Wales’s return to her own voice, released, as it were, from the “pronominal disjunction” necessitated by the main body of the text, which forced her to address without addressing, to speak without speaking (Sakai, Introduction 12). This is not to say that her own embodied voice is or will be completely relieved from the enthrallment of the ambiguity inherent to the foreign. For the originary tensions and ambivalence generated by the encounter of the two writers would find more dramatic expressions years later. Thus, for example, Nym Wales will eventually deign to correct not only her judgment on Kim San’s linguistic skills—though deemed “remarkable” at first, his English is revealed to have been ungrammatical combinations of simple phrases in retrospect (Snow, “To All My Beloved” 17-18)—but even the strategic acumen of his mind, claiming that “he did not possess diplomatic skills” nor should he have come to Yan’an (Ri and Mizuno 39-42; 53-54). If these two examples of devaluation fall under the revisionary attempt at a more objective appraisal, time’s passage can take another route to reveal further intensification of Nym Wales’s libidinal investment. How else to make sense of her remark when, more than a half century later, she declares that she played the “divine role of imparting immortality to him”? (Ri and Mizuno 66) No doubt, this blatant apotheosis will not have been possible had it not been for that certain manifestation of original excess, that irrepressible surge of over-enthusiasm which marked Nym Wales’s initial encounter with Kim San and

which, when combined with her partiality for fiction,<sup>5</sup> found its outlet in *Song of Ariran*.

### English as the Language of the Other

“I hated Korea” (57): so begins, according to the text’s second edition, Kim San’s prologue to his autobiographical narrative. In excising the preceding short passage, whose markedly morose, nostalgic tone stood in stark contrast to this rather forceful beginning of the original third paragraph, Nym Wales may have seen fit to underscore the emphatic nature of Kim San’s lingering resentment toward his homeland, a sentiment which all the later Korean translations will invariably try to downplay by sticking to the earlier (1941) version and opting for a less strident form of expression (the Korean term *wonmang* displacing the verb “hate” roughly translates into “to have a grudge against” or “to blame”). Leaving aside the question of whether and to what extent Kim San intended such an explicit gesture, what is clear is that so far as the statement is concerned, he could in no way have been sure of how his words would eventually resonate. And that is first of all because Korea, as a colonized nation was, in the sphere of the international law as well as in the eyes of many, nonexistent; second, because it would have been next to impossible to rigorously distinguish, let alone distill, the pure affect of hatred from its opposite, *amor patriae*, even across the demarcated gap between the past and the present; and last but not least, because the English idiom of the singular personal pronoun “I” will have inexorably sounded foreign to Kim San as if he were forced to try on someone else’s shoe. The last point needs to bear an extra emphasis since it returns us to the topic of translation and the problematic role of Nym Wales as the text’s co-author.

In tasking herself to co-authorship, Nym Wales appears to have, willingly or not, taken on the role as well as the responsibility of translator, whose relation to the text is “internally split and multiple.” The case of Kim San would be no different, in fact, only all the more excruciatingly so because the strenuous road to that elusive pronoun “I,” which is to say, the subject of the enunciated, would require interminable negotiation with some of the most traumatic personal memories. Recounting experiences so insistently marked by deaths, betrayals, defeats, not to mention physical tortures as those suffered by Kim San would be difficult in any

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<sup>5</sup> She confesses at one point in the introduction: “I have always wanted to write a novel about someone like you.” (51)

language; to do so in a foreign tongue would be tantamount to thrusting the previous theme of failure to a whole new dimension. In accepting the English language as the medium of his biographical confession, there must have been then a motive outweighing the obvious limitations imposed by the decision. One perhaps ought to recall at this point why Kim San, after an initial surge of reluctance and resistance (he twice refused Nym Wales's invitation to meet in addition to declining her initial offer of co-producing his biography) finally decided to embark on the joint literary venture which would end up bearing the title *Song of Ariran*. But then, what if he consented to Nym Wales's offer *precisely because* it was to be written in English?

There exists no evidence to suggest such possibility other than a hint evinced by the fact that unlike his Chinese comrades, Kim San was immersed in English, more specifically in library books written in English, the rumor of which piqued the American visitor's interest in the first place. If the English language proved its mediatory role par excellence by channeling knowledge unavailable in other languages, not to speak of an alternative geopolitical perspective embodied in the figure of Nym Wales, the following remark by Kim San on their work's potential future provides an additional angle from which to gauge the function of English as lingua franca: "I hope [the book] is read by Chinese and Japanese and by Koreans abroad, as well as by Americans and British, to remind them that Korea is not a lost cause" (51). Though this sounds suspiciously vague, a closer examination of the remark reveals the priority of geocultural groupings, wherein emphasis falls on the three neighboring East Asian nations in conflict, making the two English-speaking countries seem something of an afterthought by comparison. From this we begin to understand what an exceptional work *Song of Ariran* was for its time, and not simply in the manner of an exotic tale—though this is certainly how it must have struck many mainstream Western readers—but in the precise theoretical sense of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), whereby the more or less familiar story of an anti-Imperialist struggle becomes all the more unfamiliar for having passed through the lens, if not the prism, of the radically other, which in this case happens to be the singular diction and tone of Nym Wales's language.

Yet, there is another, even more specific sense in which the writing of *Song of Ariran* appears to have exposed Kim San to radical otherness, and that has to do with the question of gender that comes to prominence in the beginning part of Kim San's narrative, which presumably would have been transcribed in the early stage of his cooperation with his newly found American partner. It will be remembered that from offering the invitation for a meeting to proposing their joint literary work, it

was always Nym Wales who did the bidding. As the unfolding story will reveal, this was certainly not the first time that Kim San had come across a forthright, independent-minded woman. Even prior to the spread of Communism, the New Culture movement of the May Fourth period had made sure that Confucian values, including the idealized image of the submissive female, were a thing of the past in China (Wang 3). And yet, to converse on a daily basis with this American lady, who had the audacity to come all the way to the blockaded Communist stronghold in those tumultuous times and who had managed to ferret out a marginal figure like himself, must have been an experience on an entirely different level—especially since, for him, the figure of femininity had been, from his childhood days, indissociably linked to the idea of powerlessness in the haunting form of repeated traumas. It is in this context that one ought to read the opening of the first chapter:

I hated Korea when I ran away that autumn day in 1919, vowing never to return until the weeping was changed to fighting slogans. She wanted peace, and peace she got—after the “peaceful demonstrations” had been dispersed in helpless blood. She was a foolish old woman naively mouthing feminine pleas to the great powers for “international justice” and a promise of “self-determination.” We were betrayed by her foolishness. I resented the accident of my birth that made me the child of such shameful helplessness. (Wales and Kim 57)

It may be coincidental that Kim San’s story begins with the striking image of powerlessness-cum-femininity, or powerlessness-as-femininity, in such a concentrated manner. It is likewise possible that the choice of those specific tropes and metaphors, combined with the code of the feminine—“weeping,” “peace,” “feminine pleas,” “foolishness,” “shameful helpless” and so on—owes something to a flourish of poetic license on Nym Wales’s part. And if it is therefore going too far to discern in Kim San’s inceptive gesture a certain reactive assertion of his manhood, two things at least would seem certain. The opening passage would not have taken the particular shape it has, had it not been for Nym Wales’s singular contributory role as Kim San’s confidante and translator, a role that ought to have involved constantly inviting him to delve deeper into his repressed memories. Equally poignant is the fact that Kim San’s inability to guard and protect the utterly defenseless and thus helplessly besieged femininity—as it changes its form of manifestation from the scene of his mother getting beaten by a pair of Japanese

policemen (Wales and Kim 67), the colonized populace on the march brutally quashed in the 1919 May First movement (78), not to mention the tragic massacre of a hospitable Korean family in the town of Sanyuanp’u (108)—will have constituted the primal element of Kim San’s memory of failure.

### **From Nationalism to Communism and Back to Humanism**

Living under colonization is often compared to living on the border in that the subject is caught in the double bind of being subsumed under the Imperial rule while being simultaneously excluded racially (Ukai 110). For all that, crossing the Yalu river allowed Kim San a whiff of “freedom and high adventure” (99), a sense of reprieve whose duration proved utterly short-lived when he was accosted by the news that a Korean pastor and his household, who had gone so far as to take him under their wing, were grossly mutilated by Japanese soldiers. In particular, the unknowable fate of the young daughter, whom Kim San later reminisces as his first love, reinforces the realization that traumatic memories of powerlessness will never be easily overcome. Joining the military school of the Korean Army of Independence in Hani-ho, Manchuria may then have been the only logical next step. From then on his itinerary in China would take in some of the most famous geography and political affiliations of the diasporic history of Korea’s independence movement: from 1920 to 1921 the “Siberia-Manchuria” nationalist group (113-15) and the anarchist group known as “Uiyold-dan” (122-26) in Shanghai; from 1921 to 1925 in Beijing the Communist Youth and the Peking Korean Communist Party (143); and from 1925 till 1927 in Guangzhou the Kuomintang and the Red Army, in which he fought alongside his Chinese comrades (149). Surveying the list of illustrious political organizations in which Kim San participated throughout the 1920s, it is not hard to see that these names are the stuff of legend. Nevertheless, it is equally conceivable that his continuous drift from one partisan group to another attests to the possibility that the genuine band of brotherhood he sought in each eluded him, failing to provide a proper ideological, not to say fraternal, footing.

This failure to forge a lasting political kinship has not certainly stopped a growing circle of admirers from forming posthumously around the figure of Kim San. In that respect, his colorful, but ultimately abortive, political career merits comparison with that of a more renowned revolutionary figure in Korea’s twentieth century history, namely, Kim Il Sung, whose legendary legacy consists as much of his famous anti-Japanese military campaigns in the late 1930s as of his role in

founding the official ideology of North Korea known as *Juche* (Wada 29-35; 155-57). More than anything, *Juche* is a philosophical doctrine designed to organize the masses in mobilized form with the mythic figure of Kim Il Sung serving as its founding center. In that regard, it exemplifies what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the “myth’s will to power,” which is essentially totalitarian in nature insofar as it presupposes the possibility of “absolute community” (Nancy 56-57). In comparison, what Kim San illustrates via his evolving engagement with different political affiliations is the recognition that the community is “community precisely because we are exposed to a forum where our differences and failure in communication can be manifest” (Sakai, Introduction 75), which is another way of saying that, as Nancy puts it, “community is the presentation [to its members] of the finitude and the irremediable excess that make up finite beings” (Nancy 15).

But failure comes in different shapes and sizes. Navigating the shifting political terrain may have helped Kim San to attempt new forms of release from his recurring experience of existential deadlock. When the deadlock approached in the unexpected form of “abyss,” triggering a “strange uneasiness” (228), as it did in 1930 when he encountered a Chinese girl named Liu Ling in the Chinese Communist Party of Beijing, it would not be so easy to manage a way out. For she would make “[e]ven the smallest details of everyday life . . . interesting and full of pleasure” (229). His “ideal girl” in all respects (239), not only does she remind Kim San that a revolutionary is also a man at his heart, she also hauntingly prefigures the persona of Nym Wales with her “free and competent” character, which, to his surprise, becomes too much of a burden for him (241). One year later, he confesses he met yet another woman, this time a more traditional type of “unselfish, loyal little person,” whom he believes he can “mold to his will . . . [and] make . . . the perfect revolutionary wife, [by] build[ing] up her mind and knowledge.” And he ends up tying the knot, forsaking the “dream . . . of finding a woman to love forever” (302). The fact that he does not recount his latter decision in a self-congratulatory manner may be revealing in itself. In order to find a more glaring incidence of how an unalloyed dream can turn into a nightmare, however, one needs to go back three years to the soviet commune Hailufeng, where he arrived after the military debacle at Guangzhou.

The bloody battle at Guangzhou had exposed Kim San to trauma on a monstrous scale. It was there that he was made to witness the cruel retribution wreaked by the peasants in Hailufeng on their former landlords in a manner resembling “death by a thousand cuts”—all with the party leadership’s approval. For an idealistic yet undogmatic comrade in arms that he certainly aspired to be, the

experience must have been like watching paradise descend into hell. Faced with the brutal spectacle of the purge, he confesses: “I couldn’t move. My head was so heavy it dropped on my chest. I felt humanity was a stranger to me. I was not of it,” leading him to wonder, “[w]hat would a humanitarian like Tolstoy say and feel at a time like this? (189)” It is significant that rather than blaming the party for condoning such cruelty, he ends up criticizing the residual influence of his own “humanitarian Christian and Tolstoyan training” (186). One critic interpreted this self-reproachful gesture as an illustration of what Žižek, following Lacan, calls *passage a l’acte* a process whereby the subject, confronting the utter contingency of his being (or, in this case, his way of thinking), assumes full responsibility for the obscene excess of the Other (the party or the peasant masses) as the inevitable price to pay for the sake of revolution (Shin 53). And indeed, Kim San himself appears to give credence to such a line of argument, when he admits near the end of the text, “through many years of heartache and tears, I have learned that ‘mistakes’ are . . . an integral part of the development of men and of the process of social change” (319). But then from what kind of temporal perspective could one validate such global development? More to the point, could the envisioned progress justify such an unconscionable act of violence?

The fact that another “mistake” of such ineluctable nature would ultimately cost him his life, when the Communist Party in 1938 sentenced him to death on the charge of being a Japanese spy, might constitute further support for such teleological optimism, since, belated though it be, his innocence and party membership will eventually get officially restituted by the Chinese Communist Party in 1983 (Baek and Hong 1529). In the mid-August of 1937, when Kim San was working on his autobiographical text with Nym Wales, he could in no way envision the dire fate waiting to be dealt out on him by his comrades, the “organized internationalism,” which seemed to promise double rescue from his life’s failures and the failure of his country’s history. Unless, of course, it is the case that his decision to embark on the unusual literary venture reflected a lingering suspicion that nothing is for certain, that the foreign stranger who had out of the blue accosted him in the then headquarters of the Chinese Communists held the only grain of hope that his story might reach the outside before the shadow of failure once more caught up with him. In the final section of *Ariran*’s last chapter, Kim San reflects on the deaths of his friends and comrades and says: “They failed in the immediate thing, but history keeps a fine accounting . . . nothing that [a man] has ever done or failed to do is lost in the final balances of forces” (320). A hopeful forecast reminiscent of Benjamin’s Judgment Day, the passage can also be read as

yet another admission of failure, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of averting failures even after having run so far away from himself and his homeland.<sup>6</sup> For Kim San may have sensed, without knowing it, that the hindsight proffered by the futurity of the absolute, or the aura of inevitability time's progress will generate can only come through the ears of the other, from the strange foreigner who would end up outliving him by half a century.

### The Song Called "Arirang"

"My whole life has been a series of failures, and the history of my country has been a history of failure. I have had only one victory—over myself" (135). The statement appears at the beginning of the text's epilogue. The retroactive decision by Nym Wales to place it at the head of the chapter instead of in the ninth paragraph of the second page, where it had originally appeared in the earlier edition, intimates how central she deemed the remark to be in relation to the autobiographical story as a whole.<sup>7</sup> No less crucial, at least in regard to the topic of translation, is the fact that the pronouncement marks one of the illuminative instances where she gives, in her dual role of the translator and editor, assent to Kim San's self-abnegating verdict—as if to say, without actually saying it, "yes, that is true, his entire life amounted to a heap of failures," thereby allowing the repressed echoes of all the failings, disappointments and disillusionments permeating Kim San's life to be heard to a maximal effect in conjunction with the deadening weight of his country's modern history. But then what to make of the adjoining second sentence? Could that appeal to exception evident in the phrase "only one victory—over myself" signal anything more than an attempt to qualify the preceding avowal of failure?

Earlier in this essay it was pointed out that readings that attempt to analyze Kim San's remark from either moral or psychological perspective have the limiting effect of privileging the textual content over the form. This critical assessment, however, does not so much concern the conventional debate over the form versus content but has to do with the idea of translation as heterolingual practice, as advanced by Sakai. For if the traditional view of translation as a "process of

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<sup>6</sup> In "Theses of the Philosophy of History," Benjamin hypothesizes under the name Judgment Day the possibility of a redeemed mankind . . . [whose] past become citable in all its moments," an imponderable, yet necessary postulate, which allows a historian to deconstruct the distinction between major and minor historical events. (Benjamin 254)

<sup>7</sup> It is also the sole utterance by Kim San she will recall verbatim in her 1991 preface to the Korean edition.

homogenization and of establishing equivalence” inevitably gives rise to the normalizing fantasy of transparent communication, the heterolingual view underscores the nature of any linguistic practice as a socio-political act responding to the originary condition of incommensurability (Sakai, Introduction 8). And it is precisely from that perspective that the critic claims, further, that, “the translator cannot be an ‘individual’ in the sense of *individuum*, the undividable unit . . . [but rather] a *singularity* that marks an elusive point of discontinuity in the social” (Sakai, “Translation” 75; emphasis in original). In approaching Kim San’s pronouncement of failure, one then should take into account not only the particular abyss separating the man from his self of thirty years before but also what we might grandiosely call *the vista of the incommensurable* opening up before him as he strives to arrive at a lucid self-judgment in that language of the other known as English. Which leads to the question, what if, in his limited linguistic capacity, Kim San was swayed by the language to venture such a statement? Might there not be a chance that he enunciated the way he did because he was forced to subscribe to the convention, the law, not to mention a certain unfamiliar logic constituting the discursive idiom of English language?

Not that English parlance lends itself to such emotionally charged terms as victory and failure in a particularly partial manner; rather, for a language to predetermine the contour of what can be said, there has to be something more essential and distinctive, something as pervasive as, say (to draw examples from the citation in question), the regularity of the present perfect verb tense, to which Kim San could not resort, not at least in such explicit grammatical fashion, in his mother tongue, and that compulsively prevalent appearance of the first person pronoun, which his native speech likewise disallowed due to its linguistic convention as well as the residual inertia of traditional ethics excoriating egoism. In order to ascertain the restrictive hold English wielded on Kim San’s speech, it would be ideal therefore if one could find the obverse instance where articulation is possible without the constraining pressure of foreign linguistic conventions, a situation where he is permitted to express his thoughts without recourse to the regulatory grammar of verb tense and the magisterial flair of a self-proclamatory “I.” Such an exceptional moment presents itself at the very beginning of the text, where one discovers the lyrics to the “Song of Ariran,” since here for once Kim San ought to have been able to voice more than a string of words in his own tongue.<sup>8</sup> Since the

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<sup>8</sup> The glossary to *Song of Ariran* lists twenty-four Korean vocabularies, indicating that Kim San did use a limited number of Korean words in his dialogue with Nym Wales.

song survives only in the version already translated and transcribed in English, the best thing would be to compare it to the one that translates the English version back into Korean. In both renditions, one does not come across any verb form in the present perfect; on the other hand, the personal pronoun “I” appears twice in the English version, whereas allusion to the self remains, just as in everyday discourse of the Korean language, implicit in the other.<sup>9</sup> It would be both naïve and reductive to suppose that this marked difference in the mode of self-reference offers any basis for a generalized thesis. What is clear is that during the duration of singing the song, he would have finally felt at home, borne up by the familiar rhythm and tune. But what could that sense of being “at home” possibly consist of?

“[A] song of death and not of life,” so Kim San tells us, “Ariran” is a tune originally composed by a young political rebel imprisoned during the Chosun dynasty and sung on his way to execution in the locale called Hill of Ariran. Since then, the piece has become something of an unofficial anthem among Koreans both home and abroad (Wales and Kim 59). So it is hardly unexpected that Kim San should turn this song into a political allegory, whereby “twelve hills of Ariran” stand for not only the tragic cycle of life in all its metaphysical sense but also the chronicle of Korea’s struggle, of which his life-long endeavor constitutes a part. Hence the powerful sense of belongingness warranting the metaphor of home. But to the extent that the notion of home (*Heimat*) or homeliness (*Heimlichkeit*) cannot avoid being haunted by its other—the countervailing force of the unhomely (*Unheimlich*), which constantly disrupts the stability of the primordial gathering—so too Kim San’s imagined community of predominantly male “idealists and martyrs”<sup>10</sup> would be overshadowed by other voices and other memories, which happen to be as markedly feminine as personal. For what Kim San forgets to mention is that out of approximately 36,000 variations of some sixty folksongs that share the namesake “Ariran[g]” and the near identical refrains “Ariran[g], Ariran[g], Arari O,” the most popular versions converge in expressing the sentiment of grief deriving from betrayed love, and always from the viewpoint of a feminine persona (“Arirang”). So much for transparency and unrestricted freedom ascribed to the

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<sup>9</sup> The first and final stanzas of the “Song of Ariran” as rendered by Kim San go as follows: “Ariran, Ariran, Arari O!/ Crossing the hills of Ariran./ There are twelve hills of Ariran/ And now I am crossing the last hill. . . . Now I am an exile crossing the Yalu River/ And the mountains and rivers of three thousand/ li are also lost./ Ariran, Ariran, Arari O!/ Crossing the hills of Ariran” (56).

<sup>10</sup> Nym Wales’s expression which aptly sums up the long list of bandits, rebels, dissident scholars, poor farmers evoked by Kim San.

medium of the so-called native language, then. The idea that a voice will always be, already have been, contaminated by the other, by the unappropriable others overdetermining its articulation is a familiar one perhaps requiring no further elaboration. Yet, if that deconstructive logic of impossible univocity forces its bearings on our reading, it is because similar echoes, similar dissonance to those generated by the “Song of Ariran” apply to the paired relationship of Kim San and Nym Wales, whose joint literary output reenact and repeat the same admixture of the masculine and the feminine, the political and the personal, not to mention the life and the fictive.

In 1939 when Nym Wales came to edit and revise the manuscript she and Kim San coproduced two years earlier, she could not know that she was trying to give voice to a man who had already been dead for nearly a year. But the figure of the ghost haunting the text of *Ariran* extends well beyond the scope of an individual author. Stressing the abiding relevance of the song “Ariran,” Kim San told Nym Wales, “We are many dead, and many more have ‘crossed the Yalu River’ into exile. But our return will not be long in the future” (6). The irony is that the companions of his return journey may not be of his choosing since his name will be remembered more in association with that of a Western foreigner to whom, seemingly by chance, he confessed his life story during one brief summer than any through association with his fellow expatriates. Nor is it likely, as so many ghost stories testify, that his autobiographical testimony will be received in the particular way he intended. And the same appears to be true in the case of his dream of political revolution spreading like a chain of wildfire across the East Asian region. Yet, as the paradoxical logic of the gift reminds us, the legacy of *Ariran* perhaps needs to be sought elsewhere, via another dimension of revolution, which Kim San and Nym Wales together bring into view, without themselves intending it, in that doubled mode of writing which disrupts the circular journey of a single autonomous voice from ever revolving back to the point of its origin to proclaim its indivisible sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> For what their conjoined literary effort manages to show beyond

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<sup>11</sup> Noting the paradoxical logic of the gift which annuls itself the moment it gets recognized by either the giver or the receiver, Derrida emphasizes the singular nature of “the gift that is not a present, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unrepresentable, and as a consequence secret” (Derrida, *Gift* 29). For Derrida’s discussion on the political dimension of sovereignty, please refer to *Rogues*, where he stresses the theoretical difficulty of thinking the “desire for or naming of democratic space without the rotary motion of some quasi-circular return or rotation toward the self, toward the origin itself, toward and upon the self of the origin, whenever it is a question, for example, of sovereign self-determination, of the autonomy of the self . . .” (Derrida, *Rogues* 10).

conventional notions like sincerity, authenticity, and the concept of the proper constituting the material authority of a literary work is the innumerable echoes of disembodied voices populating the text. Such perhaps would be one of the aleatory lessons imparted by *Ariran* if one traced the gaps and intervening silences crisscrossing the text, allowing each of the two authors to speak once more as they did during their joint sessions of ventriloquized writing.

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