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The Task and Risk of Translating Classical Korean *Sijo*: Yun Sŏndo and Hwang Chini¹

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1.

One translates literary works out of love—perverted perhaps and mostly unrequited love, but love nonetheless, since the sheer amount of labour and pain translators accept as their lot cannot be explained otherwise. Some may translate with a view to pecuniary gain, but the pay never quite compensates the toil. The endless hardship of the work can be likened to that of a galley slave, chained to the oar, serving the pleasure of the captain, in this case the original author, ceaselessly rowing until the destination is reached. The glory and booty accrue to the author and not to the translator. The invisible wretch has little more reward than his own aching limbs, or if he has not been disabled yet, the prospect of more rowing. If this is love, then, let us pray to be free from it. But there are those accursed creatures who, professionally or otherwise, cannot extricate themselves from the clanking clutch of the chain. In my case, being a slave serving two masters, English Literature and Korean Literature, one flamboyant and prosperous, the other obscure but nonetheless exacting and squeamish, I chose to turn my abjection into affection, bordering on addiction probably, shuttling between the two, hoping to please both.

English Literature, that renowned, magnificent, palatial edifice is a master or mistress who pays my bills and keeps my family fed, housed, and clothed. There's no shortage of lovers offering service to him or her, lovers of all persuasions, hailing from the four corners of the planet. Korean Literature, on the other hand, commands my native attachment, the language and the tribe being my own, despite some minor aberrations in my biography. Lovable as she is, Korean Literature enjoys, if at all, only a meagre share of recognition in the English-speaking world: slim chance of running into it at Waterstones in the UK and shamefully low in the Amazon.com sales ranking. Even in the league table of subjects constituting Korean Studies, literature seems to occupy its nether regions. The British Library catalogue returns an overwhelming number of books on the Korean War when searched under "Korean"; mainstream

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media loves to lampoon North Korea, while some portion of the youtube and blogs sphere patronize Korean Pop. The success story of South Korea's export-driven economy courts envy, but "Samsung" and "LG" brands, true to their business instincts, do not always trumpet their national provenance. That Korean Christianity, both orthodox and heretical, has a global profile is not well known among the secular Westerners, but it commands greater respect than Korean literature to judge from the Korean translation of the notice message of St Paul's Cathedral's Sung Eucharist service booklet. No canonical institutes in the literary world have granted comparable honour to Korean classics: no single volume of Korean fiction has made it to the Penguin Classics list; no single work of poetry has been invited to the Norton Anthologies.

Surely Korean literature deserves better courtesy than to be totally assigned to virtual invisibility? But what is this entity, object, or body called "Korean literature," or to narrow it down a bit more, "Korean classical literature"? Canonical English literature flaunts some renowned names who stand shoulder to shoulder to support the phalanx of its canon. Classical Italian literature, despite the fact that a unified Italian state did not exist until the 1860s, stands on the solid grounds secured by the great Tuscan masters: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Even our ancient rival the Japanese, as Koreans have to remember morosely each autumn when the Nobel Prize for literature is announced, have seen their literary output appreciated and acclaimed by the wider world, thanks not only to their economic might but to the continuous vernacular tradition such as *monogatari* dating from the 9th or 10th centuries. When or with whom does classical Korean literature begin? Who represents its greatest achievements? These basic, broad, and baffling questions we cannot attempt to broach here. But they haunt any discussion of classical Korean literature, however perfunctory or evasive the approach. Korean is an undoubtedly ancient language, as old if not older than Japanese, but the written language, *hangŭl* is contemporary (1443-46) with Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* or Quattrocento Renaissance artists such as Donatello, early by Western standards but infinitely younger than the spoken tongue it was devised to transcribe. Even after King Sejong's marvellous invention and proclamation of the new phonetic alphabet, the landowning literate elite chose to hold on to written Chinese, scorning their native alphabet as something below them and deriding it as *amkŭl* ("female writing"), fit for un-lettered women only.

We take cue from that heritage of denigration in this cursory discussion of the difficulties and challenges translation of Korean classics into English pose. Of the two lyricists from post-*hangŭl* Chosŭn era who have demonstrated the poetic force of vernacular Korean, in a manner comparable to the contributions of Petrarch or Chaucer to their native tongue, is a woman, a *kisaeng* moreover. But Hwang Chini (known to have lived and died in first half of the 16th century) embodies all that is unique as well as universal about Korean classical poetry: its

sustained melody, its compelling emotional thrust, and its sensuously concrete morphology, as superbly as Yun Sōndo (1587~1671), coming a couple generations later than her. One could do worse than to focus entirely on these two to identify one salient landmark of classical Korean literature (classicist Chinese poetry imitated by Koreans belongs elsewhere, in my view).

2.

But how can one convince English readers of the literary worth of Hwang Chini and Yun Sōndo? If they fail, well then, the entire troupe of classic Korean poetry must pack up and return to the crowded peninsula. Even before considering the technical problems of linguistic barriers, geographic distance between the cultures constitutes a redoubtable obstacle. When translated into English, cultures of the Far East can benefit from no “common textual grid” (Bassnett 19) ensuring a minimal degree of recognition, unlike translations from French, German, Italian, or even Russian. Take that iconic (and laconic) statement opening the *Analects (Lun Yü)* by Confucius (Kǒng Zǐ), which surely occupies a key spot in the “common textual grid” of the literate tradition in the Far East:

學而時習之，不亦說乎 (孔子，論語，學而第一，第一句)

Two translations of this sentence, available on the internet, offer plausible but not fully persuasive rendering:

- (1) “To learn and to practise what is learned time and again is a pleasure, is it not?” (The Lun Yü in English, <http://www.confucius.org/lunyu/ed0101.htm>)
- (2) “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?” (Chinese Text Project, <http://ctext.org/analects/xue-er>)

What suffices in Chinese proves insufficient in English, since “to learn” used without any specific object may sound sonorous in Chinese (or Korean) but vague in English. Faced with this translation, the inbred Aristotelian mindset of English readers would urge them to respond, “Yes, perhaps, but it depends.” First of all, at what point the said pleasure is yielded is not clear in the formulation: whether in the learning process or in the practicing phase. The second translation seeks to preempt this question, but it seems to have belittled the clear temporal distinction between “學” and “時習,” which places learning in a separate, prior position in

relation to the “constant perseverance and application.” Furthermore, one cannot but be curious as to whether all subjects are pleasant to learn or to practice, or only some subjects are pleasant in either its acquisition or application stage. Dentistry would elude all of these possible cases, being rarely pleasant in the learning stage or in its professional application. The pleasure, if at all, comes after and outside the labour of pulling out rotten teeth, in spending money earned from the chore. Art history must be as delightful to learn as to apply your learning, for instance, as a curator—except that job vacancies in the field are few and far between. The great master himself seems to have been aware of the possible irony that any learning inherently involves pain, that the monotony of “constant perseverance” or repeating “time and again” can rarely be joyous. The almost intimidating “is it not?” (不亦) almost anticipates the sullen reaction of the majority of learners to his rhetorical question. Confucius/ Kǒng Zǐ in translation has a different import and substance, then, from the original, which, moreover, is as often “experienced” as framed brush calligraphy to be contemplated in silence, as analyzed and debated.

If a relatively lucid philosophical statement of a canonical East-Asian text risks being misapprehended or mistreated, the slippery, sensitive, and subtle *belles lettres* of the region should be prepared to face a fate far worse when transformed into Western tongues. As John Balcom complains about the thankless task of translating Chinese literature,

East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. This is a feeling to which all translators of Chinese literature are at times subject. Readers or critics rarely understand the work of a translator of Chinese, in all its dimensions. Translations of literary works are generally evaluated solely on the merits of readability or to what extent the text reads as if it were originally written in English. However, to make a work of literature in Chinese come to life in English is a complex process that involves a scholar's knowledge of Chinese language and culture as well as a profound knowledge and creative flair in the English. Each poem, essay or work of fiction presents unique problems for which a translator must find creative solutions. (Balcom 118)

Substitute “Korean” for “Chinese” and the passage will sound absolutely apposite to those translators working on Korean texts. Particularly intimidating to them would be the requirement of “a scholar’s knowledge of ... [Korean] language and culture as well as a profound knowledge and creative flair in the English.” In acquiring the former, one tends to lose touch with the latter; in exhibiting the latter, one risks distorting the former. Poems, moreover, at least the very best ones worth remembering and reciting in their original versions or in translations, are self-contained, arcane, taut mini-universes each and every one of them, a “well-wrought urn” as the

old New Criticism of the past century put it. Each, therefore, “presents unique problems for which a translator must find creative solutions,” which no general theory or guideline can completely predict or prescribe.

Translation across the great divide between East and West, then, is impossible. But it is also possible, paradoxically, thanks to its very impossibility, for making a Chinese, Japanese, or Korean poetry “come to life in English” is a challenge that never ceases to entice efforts, all bound to fail perhaps, but as interesting failures they encourage renewed attempts. What human handiwork can ever be absolutely free from imperfection, anyway? Besides, any slip in literary translation may not lead to casualties, as would a serious blunder in mechanical engineering or heart surgery. Money-wise trade documents can tolerate no dubious translations, but the muse of poetry has a broader spirit. Translators of texts as removed from English as Korean may hearten themselves with such thoughts; they can be encouraged, moreover, by current translation theory. Fear no more the old bogey of linguistic equivalence, for the new spokespersons of cultural translation proclaim translation can or should consider itself a “rewriting” (Lefevere and Bassnett 10). Nor should we be overly oppressed by the spectre of “readability” or “fluency” since a politically correct translation should never shy away from sounding boldly foreign and subtly strange (Venuti 120). Even before this cultural and political “turn” in translation theory, translating poetry was considered a special case, a recreation of a “metapoem” rather than a word-for-word translation (Holmes 10).

The issue which a more flexible view of translation can never ignore, however, is that of cultural capital or prestige (Lefevere 1998: 41). Translation of Confucius gains nothing by diminishing his stature in the target language; that of Hwang Chini or Yun Sōndo far less so, given the virtual lack of recognition of their worth in the English-speaking world. A translation or rewriting of their work, or a creation of a metapoem based on their original production, must strive to yield through its English rendering an impression or image (Lefevere 1990: 27) of their cultural standing in their home language. In what follows, we shall briefly sample the published outcomes of the efforts to translate classical *sijo* in English to locate what tasks still remain to be tackled. At the end of this paper is appended my own answer to the questions raised.

3.

Translation, under whatever rubric and however “foreignizing” it dares to be, can never escape the boundary of a pre-existing linguistic and cultural code of the target language, *into* which a source text is transported. Moreover, translating a foreign verse, unless one opts to resort to prose paraphrase, involves making it look like poetry. This never happens naturally. To believe that some poetic “essence” would be detectable in any language is groundless. What defines the

distinctive feature of poetry of any language does not concern us here. Debating whether the essence of poetry consists in a “poetic function” inherent in language (as twentieth-century poetics had it) or resides in the “picture” in words (*ut pictura poesis*, as wrote Horace in the first century) can be left to the more leisurely sort. For the translator, the shape or body of English poetry is what matters most, for otherwise, the translated verse would not be recognized as such. Merely trusting the generous margins of printed pages to do the trick hardly justifies the cost of printing: poetry should be something better defined than a certain convention of making uneconomic use of papers. If poetry means verse and if verse means something different from prose, it has to have rhythm, a certain pattern of regularity in sound that informs the line division. English being a stressed language, the sound pattern of poetry in English follows its natural property, the most commonly used being iambic (unstressed + stressed), with trochaic (stressed + unstressed), anapestic (unstressed + unstressed + stressed), and dactylic (stressed + unstressed + unstressed) adding variety to it. Each foot, in whatever format, must have a stressed syllable, matched with one or two unstressed syllables, except for the “headless” first foot of the opening line. Spondaic has two stressed syllables coming together, but it is used only as an exceptional device, for the simple reason that English words or phrases typically do not sound like that. Two unstressed syllables in a foot does have a name, “pyrrhic,” but its appearance in English poetry, past and present, would be considered a bold deviation.

How conservative, if you will, English prosody is can be demonstrated by comparing an iconic stanza from Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence with a recent American “free verse” (those in bold are stressed syllables, and dashes mark each metrical unit):

Shall **I** / compare / thee to / a **sum**/mer’s **day**?
Thou **art** / more **love**/ly **and** / more **tem**/perate:
Rough winds / do shake / the **dar**/ling **buds** / of **May**,
And **sum**/mer’s **lease** / hath **all** / too **short** / a **date**:
Sometime / too **hot** / the **eye** / of **hea**/ven **shines**,
And **of**/ten **is** / his **gold** / comple/xion **dim**m'd
And **ever**/y **fair** / from **fair** / **sometime** / **declines**,
By **chance** / or **nat**/ure’s **chang**/ing **course** / **untrim**m'd

—William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18 (1594?-99?)

Anyone, / **growing** / **up** in a / **space** you / **hadn**'t / **used** yet
Would've **done** / the **same**: / **bother** the / **family**'s / **bickering**
to **head** / **straight** into / the **chan**/nel. **My**, / those **times**

crackled / **near** a/**bout** us, from / **sickly** / **melo/drama**
instead / of **los/ing**, **and** /the **odd** /**confu/sion...con/fusion**.

—John Ashberry, “Instead of Losing” (2011)

Whereas Shakespeare employs a steady iambic pentameter with minor variations (underlined above) used for emphasis (as in “Rough winds”), Ashberry, after almost five centuries and endless list of great English poems, experiments with a more syncopated, uneven beat, with trochee (starting from “Any-one”) predominating rather than iambus. Even so, Ashberry self-consciously creates a certain metrical rhythm by distributing stressed syllables strategically. The one glaring exception, underlined above, visually marked as such with ellipsis (“confusion ... confusion”) can dramatize the disturbed mind of the poet—confusion instead of losing the unpleasant past scenes entirely to amnesia—thanks to the overall regularity of other parts. English poetry has set up through centuries and across the oceans, a fairly formidable standard of versifying.

Can translation of Korean poetry into English, if it is to be considered a “rewriting” or a “metapoem,” afford to ignore the written or assumed rules of English poetry, not to mention its numerous examples of enviably successful achievement? Yes, only when all pretensions to sound poetic have been jettisoned. Since no translator would consciously embrace such defeatism, the burden of making a Korean verse turned into English sound (and surely not just look!) like English verse can never be discarded. However, as we browse the more accessible translations of Korean classic poetry, we find that Korean verse has been transformed into English poems which have so little poetry in them. In Peter Lee’s *History of Korean Literature* published by the venerable Cambridge University Press, Lee illustrates the greatness of the “Great Poet” Yun Sōndo by his own translation of a short verse of Yun’s:

되는 길고길고 물은 멀고멀고
어비이 그린뜰은 만코만코 하고하고
어디서 외기러기는 울고울고 가나니

A chain of mountains is long, long;
waters flow far, far.
Love for parents is endless
and my heart is heavy.
Far off, crying sadly,
a lone wild goose flies by. (Lee 2003: 206)

Leaving the more decorous questions of diction or trope quite alone, one scans the translated verse, only to find little to convince the English reader of the poet's greatness in its sound:

A **chain** / of **moun-**/tains is **long**, / **long**;
waters / flow **far**, / **far**.
Love for / **parents** / is **end**/less
and my / **heart** is / **heavy**.
Far off, / **crying** / **sadly**,
a **lone** / wild **goose** / flies **by**.

The first three lines all stumble on incomplete foot; most awkward is the third, ending with a single unstressed syllable (“-less”). Iambic and trochaic meters emerge randomly, with only the last line attaining a noticeable regularity of iambus. Lee's adherence to the letters of the original may be held responsible for the metrical disarray: the repetitions of “길고길고” and “멀고멀고” have been rendered literally as “long, long” and “far, far.” Yet a rigorous principle of linguistic equivalence does not seem to have been consistently enforced either, since to “만코만코 하고하고” and “울고울고” are assigned semantic counterparts of “endless,” “heavy,” and “crying sadly” which have no physical resemblance to the repeated units in the original.

Considering how filial longing cannot hope to find sympathetic reception immediately among British or American readers, the middle portion had to be given extra care. “Love for parents is endless,” however, does little to make the sentiment appealing, while “my heart is heavy” is really an unwarranted extrapolation (Yun Sōndo's “하고하고” implies no such psychological self-diagnosis). Whatever Lee thought he was doing, the translation seriously erodes the literary worth of the original. Considerably diminished, its “cultural capital” hangs on feebly to the closing image of “a lone wild goose” flying away. But surely it should be possible to capture the spirit of the original in a more self-conscious translation than this (see my own translation at the Appendix below, which sought to address the two tasks of recreating the repetitious sonority of the original and the central theme of filial piety).

4.

Classical *sijo*, such as the Yun Sōndo piece discussed above, is musical poetry, before and after everything else is considered. It was meant to be sung rather than read aloud, much less scrutinized in silence. The repetitions so troublesome for English translators reflect that

convention, facilitated by the natural consonance of Korean vernacular phrases. Even without the melody, comparable to a long-breathed slow-tempo plainchant, *sijo* bears the marks of its melodic amenability, as Richard Rutt, the pioneer translator of *sijo* into English, was keenly aware. Rutt sensed *sijo*'s prosody is structured on "a strong caesura half-way through," as in French alexandrine, which balances "the play of sounds, the assonance of the vowels and the alliteration of the consonants" (Rutt 2003: 194). Metrical units, however, unlike in English verse, never break a word into separate feet; its meter is "segmental," according to Kim Hunggyu, as "the boundary between one segment and the next clearly falls between syntactic divisions and metrically important syllables" (Kim 40). Rutt's approach highlights the caesura, visually separating each of the three lines along their main syntactic break, as the following rendition of "T'aesani Noptahatoe" graphically illustrates:

태산이 높다 하되 하늘 아래 뉘이로다
오르고 또 오르면 못 오를리 없건마는
사람이 제 아니 오르고 뉘만 높다 하더라

Though they say the hills are high,
 yet they are still below heaven,
By climbing, climbing, climbing more,
 there is no peak cannot be scaled,
But the man who never tried to climb
 he says indeed the hills are high. (Rutt 2003: 195)

Notable in this translation (first published in 1970), particularly when placed next to Lee's translation of Yun, is the solid iambic tetrameter which conveys a sense of continuity of the long-breathed melisma of *sijo* chants, with just the right amount of variation mixed into it to keep it from sounding mechanical, as the underlined parts in the metrical analysis of the same shows:

Though / they **say** / the **hills** / are **high**,
 yet **they** / are **still** / below / **heaven**,
By **climb**/ing, **climb**/ing, **climb**/ing **more**,
 there **is** / no **peak** / cannot / be **scaled**,
But the man / who **nev**/er **tried** / to **climb**
 he **says** / **indeed** / the **hills** / are **high**.

The “headless” foot in line one, trochaic ending of the second, and the anapest opening of the fifth line enrich the music of the translated poem.

Apart from such fine prosodic recreation of *sijo*’s musical character, Rutt also sets an instructive model for translators of classical *sijo* by avoiding word-to-word equivalence to add or expand, when necessary, either for metrical or thematic purpose. The reticence of *sijo* in its “script” form calls for such bold intervention on the part of the translator, for its explicit, assertive, and exclamatory style (in keeping with its sung format) demands a more verbose articulation than what a literal equivalence would yield. *Sijo*, in fact, has an expansiveness which should not be misconstrued into a “haiku”-like sparseness, although excessive wordiness may equally mar its poetic economy. Rutt’s three lines (or six half-lines) do ample justice to the three-line form of *sijo*, each of which, to emphasize again, the chanter relishes for minutes before moving on. Such long breath surely condones supplementing the translation with words and phrases to garnish and accentuate the sense implied or asserted in each line.

5.

The didactic *sijo* “T’aesani Noptahatoe,” however, having no convoluted imagery or word play melted into it, is a relatively simpler piece to grapple with. Many steps above it in poetic ingenuity, as well as in musical depth, stands Hwang Chini’s “Tongchittal Kinakin Pamül.” The central conceit holds the poem together wonderfully: the poet cuts off a chunk of cold winter night, warms it in her bed, to spread it out when her lover comes to her. Pathos seasons this poetic conception: the singer is a *kisaeng* who has to cope with the unpredictable absence of her lover. Being a high-class well-educated demimondaine, she is no common prostitute, so that she may choose to stay celibate sexually, merely offering her musical service to those clients demanding her presence, until her favourite returns to her house. Missing, waiting, and longing—these universal emotions offset the intellectualism of the witty imagery which eloquently attests to the writer’s exceptional mind as well as her legendary charm. To this superb *sijo* Rutt gives the following rendering:

동짓달 기나긴 밤을 한 허리를 들어내어
춘풍 이불아래 서리서리 넣었다가
어른님 오신날 밤이어든 굽이굽이 펴리라

I will break in two the long strong back
of this long midwinter night,

Roll it up and put it away
under the springtime coverlet.
And the night that my loved one comes back again
I will unroll it to lengthen the time. (Rutt 1971: no. 77)

The metrical structure of the translation can be analyzed as,

I will **break** / in **two** / the **long** / strong **back**
of this **long** / midwin/ter **night**,
Roll it / **up** and / **put** it / **away**
under the / **springtime** / **coverlet**.
And the / **night** that / my **loved** / one comes **back** / **again**
I **will** / **unroll** / it to **length**/en the **time**.

Unlike in his translation of “T’aesani Noptahatoe,” consistency in prosody, indispensable for a reconstruction of the melodiousness of *sijo* chant, seems less perceptible. The first two lines both begin with anapest, followed by iambic meter. The lines in the middle switch gear to trochaic and dactylic (“under the” and “coverlet”), which may have sounded less jarring had the final lines returned to “unstressed – stressed” meters of anapest and/or iambus. In a sense this transition is made in the fifth line, the first two feet being trochaic, and the remainder iambic and anapest. But the anapest of “one comes back” severing the two iambic feet somewhat pushes the tune off key, and the division of the last line into two iambus and two anapests is far too experimental to use on such a highly codified verse form as *sijo*.

The formidable semantic or thematic task Hwang’s original imposes may have played a role in disrupting the musical regularity of the translation. How to render “한 허리를 들어내어” is one hurdle, while recreating the onomatopoeic associations of “서리서리” and “굽이굽이” is another. Somewhat unexpectedly, Rutt misinterprets “한 허리를 들어내어” as “will break in two the long strong back.” The original gives us an erotic connotation attached to the winter’s waist, which “the long strong back” patently lacks. More damaging still is turning “들어내어” (“cutting” as in “cut-and-paste,” or “heaving or scooping something out”) into a “breaking in two.” The broken backbone of midwinter’s night would carry little erotic value for the poet storing it for her lover. Nor can it be “rolled up” under a “coverlet”: a piece of bone is far too stiff and dead for that. Of the second challenge presented by the parallel phrases of “서리서리” and “굽이굽이” the translator chose to handle it semantically, instead of trying to reproduce its

musical and sensory attributes. Matching “roll” with “unroll” deserves applause perhaps, but “unroll it to lengthen the time” sounds far too prosaic and explanatory.

But can a translation into English of Korean traditional *sijo*, so different, foreign, and strange, be any better than that? It is easy enough to find fault with translations, but what improvements can be made on it, if at all? A food critic, typically, need not be a good cook. He knows something about cooking, but it really is his sensitive palate and his writing skills that secure him his contracts. A football pundit, on the other hand, would generally be an ex-footballer, and hence the monotonous comments on what already is a severely monotonous sport. What about critics of translations? Shouldn't they have had some experience of the sorely trying task of translation? This question haunts translation studies, or so it should, in my view. For generalizations about translation or critical assessments of other translators' products need practical justification as to their necessity. What's the point, if it does not lead to better translations? After all, readers read translation, and not criticism of translations. Thus, in lieu of conclusion, I humbly present my own translations of Yun Sōndo and Hwang Chini (turned to five, instead of six, lines, to capture the spirit of the odd-numbered three-line form of the original). Brazen and shameless as it may appear, I do so really out of “love” for the two literatures I straddle, risking calumny and derision. I leave it to the reader to judge whether they sound proper.

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Appendix: Translations of Yun Sōndo and Hwang Chini by Hye-Joon Yoon

1. Yun Sōndo, “Moenūn Kilgokilgo”

Ridge upon ridge, the mount rolls boundless,
 Rippling, rippling, the stream flees far.
Regrets and regrets gather to mounds,
 For parents gone, their love unthanked.
Forlorn flies a wild goose, cooing, crying

2. Hwang Chini, “Tongchittal Kinakin Pamŭl”,

Of this night endless of midwinter
 One fulsome arm’s worth slice I shall,
To warm it snug in my bed with vernal breeze,
 And when the night comes of my love’s visit,
Spread it I shall, smooth and supple.