

The Multimedia Life of a Korean Graphic Novel: A Case Study of Yoon Taeho's *Ikki*

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In this article, I suggest that the multimedia life of the Korean graphic novel *Ikki (Moss)* exemplifies the prospects for Korean graphic novels both at home and abroad. I discuss author Yoon Taeho's utilization and engagement with the highly developed Internet infrastructure in the Republic of Korea, as well as the success of *Ikki* as a work of creative writing that resonates strongly with the trauma and abuse of power that have characterized much of contemporary Korean history. I anticipate that the multimedial opportunities enjoyed by Korean graphic novels today, combined with the translation of representative works into languages such as English, Japanese, and Chinese, will allow these works to take their place alongside better known components of the wave of Korean popular culture (*Hallyu*) that is increasingly driving popular cultural production worldwide.

Keywords: multimedia, webtoon, smartphone, portal, dissemination, trauma, domestication

Yoon Taeho's *Ikki (Moss)*, like other of his graphic novels and those of his contemporaries, has been made accessible through a variety of media.² Originally serialized online (2008–9) as a webtoon, *Ikki* was honored with a Puch'ŏn Graphic Novel Award (2008; the city of Puch'ŏn, Kyŏnggi Province, is home to the National Graphic Novel Museum), and the grand prize in the amateur graphic novel competition (2010). It was then published in five print volumes in 2010 by Korea Datahouse, made into a feature film by Kang Usŏk the same year, then reissued in four print volumes in 2015 by Woongjin. In 2015–16, *Moss*, Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton's English translation of the novel, was serialized online in its entirety by *The Huffington Post*.³

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² For the complete version of *Ikki*, see:

http://blog.daum.net/_blog/BlogTypeView.do?blogid=0TCSW&articleno=26&categoryId=9®dt=20100616123406&totalcnt=32.

³ *Moss*—the complete English translation by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton of *Ikki*—is no longer available at *The Huffington Post*. Selected episodes are available on a rotating basis from Spottoon, a Korean platform (as of this writing episodes 1–10 are available for free).

Hudson Moura's (2011) notion of snack culture and snack media conceptualizes the practice of sampling small helpings of popular culture on the Internet. Might we then view the life of *Ikki/Moss* as a multimedia feast, with the initial webtoon version of the novel serving as an appetizer, the initial print edition and the film version as the entrees, and the English translation at *The Huffington Post* as a cosmopolitan dessert that may very well be offered in different flavors in the future?

The dissemination of this graphic novel, both the original Korean version and the English translation, has implications for the marketing of Korean graphic novels in the English-speaking world. Access by mobile devices is especially promising. In this article, I analyze *Ikki* as a work of Korean fiction involving trauma and abuse of power, discuss its viability in English translation, and consider whether its multimedia life might serve as a model by which Korean graphic novels could attain the international visibility presently enjoyed by other manifestations of Korean popular culture, such as television dramas and K-pop music.

Yoon Taeho, the Author

Yoon Taeho was born in 1969 in Chŏlla Province, home to several of modern Korea's most distinctive literary voices, such as Ch'ae Manshik (whose home area of Kusan is where Yoon went to elementary school), the poets Sŏ Chŏngju and Ko Ŭn, and Cho Chŏngnae, a writer of epic novels. He began drawing as a child, as an outlet from life with an abusive father, and moved to Seoul at age 19 and became a disciple of Hŏ Yŏngman ("Yoon Tae-ho," 2018), the doyen of Korean graphic novelists at the time. He published his first graphic novel, *Pisang Ch'angnyuk (Emergency Landing)*, in 1993. His early work also includes intertextual novels inspired by stories from the Korean oral tradition. But it was not until 2007, when his work was honored with a Republic of Korea Graphic Novel Prize, followed by the success of *Ikki* and *Misaeng (An Incomplete Life)* that Yoon became recognized as perhaps the most accomplished graphic novelist in Korea in the new millennium. In 2013, he founded the webzine *A-Comics* in hopes of revitalizing the Korean graphic fiction industry (Lee, 2013). Currently he teaches creative writing with a focus on graphic fiction. Such is his visibility in Korea and his stature in the traditionally conservative and patriarchal power structure of Korean literature that he was the sole nonpoet/nonfiction writer among the handful of Korean writers represented at the London Book Fair in April 2014, at which Korea was the featured country.

***Ikki* and Internet Infrastructure in South Korea**

Not only *Ikki* but subsequent graphic novels by Yoon Taeho have enjoyed a long multimedia life. *Misaeng*, for example, was simultaneously serialized online (by Daum), published in book form a volume at a time (currently available on Amazon), and made into a six-part minidrama. A feature film version is also in the works. *Oebuin (The Insiders)*, dating from 2010, was also made into a film (2015). Research by Park Seokhwan, a professor at the Korea University of Media Arts, reveals that *Misaeng's* online version registered one billion views in 2013 alone, its print version sold more than half a million copies, and the six-part drama received 3 million hits from mobile devices (Park, 2016)—the last statistic offering

compelling evidence that digital dissemination is transcending desktop and laptop computer access and expanding rapidly to include access from smartphones and tablets; the webtoon is becoming the “smarttoon.”

Research by Dal Yong Jin (2016) substantiates the crucial impact of the advent of the smartphone in 2008—and the surge of activity in social media occasioned thereby—in the dissemination not only of graphic novels but also of *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) in general. It is perhaps no coincidence that the initial serialization of *Ikki* gained popularity around the time that smartphones were hitting the market, a period that also coincides with what many consider the emergence of the second wave of K-pop. Such is the impact of the arrival of the smartphone and the mushrooming of social media that Jin cites the year 2008 as the genesis of Hallyu 2. In a discussion with Goran Topalovic, executive director of the New York Asian Film Festival, following a screening of the film adaptation of *Ikki*, Yoon emphasized that much of the appeal of webtoons lies in the ease of online browsing. Accessing webtoons on Korean Web portals is like visiting a department store, he said (“Yoon Taeho on the culture of webtoons and Moss,” 2015). Consumers consider webtoon producers to be service providers, and not just a few users start their day by accessing the latest episodes. According to Yoon, some 30 Korean platforms provide webtoon service to consumers, and at any given time, some 200 webtoons are available (“Yoon Taeho’s discussion about webtoon,” 2014). Conservative estimates place the number of webtoon viewers in Korea at about 6 million (Lynn, 2016b). With Korean webtoons now appearing in Japanese and Chinese translation in addition to English versions, Korean graphic novels seem poised to join K-pop, Korean television dramas, Korean cuisine, and Korean film as an integral element of popular culture worldwide (Lynn, 2016a). *Ikki* could not have become the multimedia success it is today without the South Korean Internet infrastructure to support it. South Korea is consistently ranked as one of the most wired nations in the world (see, for example, Ismail & Wu, 2003), and the ease of online access has resulted in a burgeoning of creativity in drawing and writing, two creative arts that have traditionally enjoyed an elite cachet and employed an elaborate and restrictive gatekeeping structure, but with access to the Internet has come an increasing variety of pictorial and literary content by writers and artists both amateur and professional, much of it reflecting the lives of the creators. We might say, then, that just as lifestyle has informed online creation, online creation in the form of webtoons has become part of the lifestyle of webtoon consumers.

***Ikki* the Film**

Ikki was one of the first Korean graphic novels to be adapted into a film following its webtoon incarnation, and is credited with enhancing the visibility of the source text (Han & Hong, 2011)—just as the film version of Gong Jiyong (Kong Chiyŏng)’s novel *Togani* (2008; trans. *The Crucible*) catapulted that publication to the domestic best-seller list. *Ikki* the film is generally faithful to *Ikki* the graphic novel, though the events at the crux of the novel—Ryu Mokhyŏng’s Vietnam War trauma and the mass murder at the prayer retreat where he subsequently isolates himself—are variously absent or downplayed. Notable in the film version are the expanded roles given to Yŏngji (spelled Youngji in the *Huffington Post* version), the only fully developed female character in the novel, and prosecutor Pak Minuk. In both the film and the novel, Yŏngji is portrayed as a victim first of the villagers with whom she grew up and then of the men in the village taken over by Ch’ŏn Yongdŏk (Cheon Yongdeok). But in the film version, she emerges

triumphant: the closing scene situates her at the railing outside the elevated home of Village Head Ch'ŏn as she looks down at Ryu Haeguk (son of Ryu Mokhyŏng), who is about to depart, with an expression that is in turns playful, wistful, cynical, and vindictive. Pak for his part emerges in the film as much more proactive than his graphic novel counterpart, who struggles to align himself with Haeguk, whose complaint of a misdemeanor early in the novel ultimately results in Pak losing his position as a public official and being banished to private practice in a remote seaside location.

The film version of *Ikki* is significant in that it skillfully blends the Hollywood-influenced thriller genre with a social-activist approach characteristic of Korean fiction produced during the period of military dictatorship in South Korea (1961–1988). The stronger role accorded Yŏngji in the film is consistent with the increased visibility of women in Korean literature in the new millennium as well as in Korean politics and society in general. The film's portrayal of prosecutor Pak Minuk as an activist is likewise salutary in the context of Korean history, both traditional and modern, in which literary representations of the bureaucracy are rife with images of inaction, incompetence, and lack of integrity.

***Ikki* the Literary Work**

As a work of literature, *Ikki* echoes both classical Korean fictional narratives in its melodrama and contemporary Korean literary fiction in its themes—the corruption of power, the sins of the fathers, misogyny exacerbated by vestiges of neo-Confucian gender role expectations and a patriarchal social structure, and the lingering effects of trauma. It is also contemporary in its psychological insight and the complexity of characterization of the protagonist and supporting characters.

More characteristic of graphic fiction but less evident in contemporary Korean fiction is the vivid presence of evil. Korean, Korean Canadian, and Korean American readers report that they are drawn to *Ikki/Moss* by its suspense and thrills. The images are in color, but with a predominance of black, brown, and gray tones. Much of the story takes place at night, indoors, or underground. Readers report that author Yoon's depiction of his characters' eyes is especially effective.

The sinister mood of *Ikki* is reinforced by its setting in a village that is both familiar—in its rice paddies, tractors, greenhouses, and tool sheds—and yet strange in its remoteness from the nearest town, its lack of women, and the prominent, elevated location of the largest dwelling, that of Ch'ŏn the village head. Author Yoon Taeho reported to co-translator Ju-Chan Fulton and myself that his immediate inspiration for this graphic novel came from an automobile journey he took to the Korean countryside, in which he exited the expressway and found himself alone at night on a solitary tree-lined track with the expressway looming impossibly high above him. He was struck by the thought that if misfortune were to befall him there, he would not soon be found.

Ikki is an allegory of the abuse of power, a problem that was endemic during the period of military dictatorship in South Korea. It also incorporates strong elements of trauma as well as addressing issues of class, gender, and community. In these respects it is reminiscent of Korean literary fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, which addresses the social, political, and historical realities of those decades. Readers of *Ikki* might see in Village Head Ch'ŏn a more twisted version of the protagonist of Yi Ch'ŏngjun's novel

Tangshin tŭr ūi ch'ŏnguk (1976, trans. 1986 *This Paradise of Yours*), a former military man who runs a leper colony on an island in the West Sea.

In *Ikki*, protagonist Ryu Haeguk, a young man whose obsessive-compulsive disorder has led to estrangement from his wife and child, receives word that his father has died in the remote village where he moved after serving in the Republic of Korea's forces in the Vietnam War. Haeguk journeys to the village and finds an odd assortment of men at the center of whom is the village head, Ch'ŏn Yongdŏk, a small, mousy-looking man and former police investigator, who informs Ryu that he is the "be-all and end-all of the village." Surprised to learn that there was no medical examination of his father's body, Ryu decides to remain in the village—even though it is clear that the locals want him to return to Seoul as soon as possible—and investigate the circumstances of his father's death as he processes his father's belongings. For the time being, he is given a room at the back of the village store, which is run by Yŏngji, a young single woman who seems to be the only female resident of the village.

Exploring his father's spacious home, Ryu discovers in the basement a tunnel that leads to the home of Chŏn Sŏngman (Jeon Seogman), one of the group of men beholden to Ch'ŏn, the village head. Ryu learns from one of the other men of Chŏn's troubled past, including several suspicious deaths related to him. Upon release from prison after the most recent of those deaths, Chŏn is taken under the wing of the village head, who back when he was a criminal investigator handled the inquiry into that death. When Ryu breaks into Chŏn's home in search of evidence that might link the man to his father's death, Chŏn surprises Ryu, stabbing him with a gimlet and then pursuing him to an overlook, where Ryu turns on him and sends him plunging to his death on the rocks below.

This chain of events is repeated with another of Ch'ŏn's henchmen, who dies in a blaze at his home, where he has kidnapped Ryu. At this point Ryu enlists the aid of former prosecutor Pak Minuk, with whom Ryu has a conflicted relationship. There follows a confrontation between Ryu and Ch'ŏn in which Ryu learns of his father's traumatized past—while in Vietnam during the war, the elder Ryu mistakenly shot and killed a Vietnamese woman at full-term pregnancy, and the woman's dying act was to release the stillborn baby. Returning to Korea, Ryu's father proceeded to abandon his wife and young Ryu and settle in the remote country village, drawn by the possibility of atonement at a prayer retreat located there. But under the influence of Ch'ŏn, who by then has retired from the police and relocated in the village, and the unscrupulous woman who directs the retreat, the residents of the retreat are persuaded to part with their money, which is used in a massive land-buying scheme. When this scandal comes to light, Ch'ŏn and accomplices react by carrying out a mass murder of the sleeping residents (reminiscent of the mass suicide at Jonestown in northern Guyana in 1978), which Ryu's father witnesses and comes to feel complicit in. With evidence of his misconduct accumulating, Ch'ŏn decides to eliminate Ryu. But Ryu, with Pak and national law enforcement personnel, strikes first, confronting Ch'ŏn. After one last lecture to his accusers, which calls to mind Lady Chang's protestations of innocence as she is forced to drink poison in the mid-Chosŏn fictional narrative *Inhyŏn wanghu chŏn* (*The True History of Queen Inhyŏn*) and Magistrate Pyŏn Hakto's reminder to Yi Mongnyong at the end of the ever popular *Ch'unhyang chŏn* (*The Tale of Ch'unhyang*)(Rutt & Kim, 1974) of the importance of maintaining the social order and the laws of the land, Ch'ŏn produces a pistol, positions the barrel under his chin, and blows his head off.

***Ikki* in Translation**

There are a variety of challenges in translating a webtoon version of a graphic novel. Whereas with a print volume one can easily go back and forth between the original text and the translation, with a webtoon we work on an online platform that presents the Korean text and images on the left and only the images on the right, to which we add the English text. In the case of *Ikki to Moss*, because author Yoon made changes in the webtoon version prepared for online subscription and for *The Huffington Post*, Ju-Chan Fulton and I were essentially negotiating four texts: the initial five-volume print version, the subsequent four-volume print version, Yoon's initial webtoon version, and finally the slightly modified webtoon version delivered to *The Huffington Post*.

Second, *Ikki* is not an easy story to follow. Like most good fiction, and especially works that involve political and social problems, there's a great deal of hidden meaning. Even after reading the five-volume print version twice and the four-volume print version thrice, we still generated nine pages of queries for the author, which we had an opportunity to discuss with him when he visited the University of Washington in March 2015. Questions continued to arise as we translated the entire work. Those whose first language is Korean admit to difficulty in understanding certain areas of the story.

Third, onomatopoeia is a constant challenge. Do we Romanize sound-words (*ŭisŏng'ŏ*) or use English equivalents? For example, to represent the sound of a motor vehicle, both the engine and the wheels on the road surface, Yoon uses *booong*. We utilized that Romanization, prompting one of my students to ask why we hadn't used the English *vrooom* instead. Good question. A similar decision is involved in translating *ŭit'aeŏ*, Korean words that represent actions rather than sounds—for example *hoek*, which indicates a sudden movement. In this case we opted for Romanization, figuring that however one pronounced this word, the aspiration required by the initial *h* might prompt readers to think of similarly aspirated words such as *whoosh* or *whirl*.

Fourth, editing a webtoon translation is more of a challenge than editing a print translation. The text has to be consistent with the images, and most of the text we are translating is dialog rather than narrative. A further complication is that typographical errors by the Rolling Story team that prepared the webtoon version of *Ikki* for translation for *The Huffington Post* proved difficult to correct. For example, in an early installment, our "attorney at law" came out as "attorney at low." We found it necessary to go through each batch of installment translations at least twice after completing a first draft, referring constantly to the images, and especially to the facial expressions of the characters—for example, to assess how strongly or how subtly to render the language in a particular dialog.

Subtext—what is implicit rather than explicit in a text—is a constant challenge in literary translation. Many of the images in a graphic novel are unaccompanied by dialog, and the translator must bear in mind a target audience that is not necessarily used to reading between the lines when encountering a work of foreign literature in translation. How much "dumbing down" (which is essentially what the pejorative term *domestication* means) should the translator do? Our approach was to add cues we believed would aid readers in understanding the basic story line—an important consideration with a graphic novel that in its first print edition ran to five volumes—as well as the cultural subtext. For

example, we found the map appearing at the beginning of episode 9—a sketch by Ryu Haeguk of his father’s house and its environs—to be insufficient in comparison with the narrative and dialogue provided by the author, and we augmented it accordingly.

The greatest challenge, and perhaps the part of the process that offers the most satisfaction in translating a graphic novel, is the dialog. Here, inevitably, less is more, and there has to be rhythm and movement to the language. It is essential at this stage to read the translation aloud and to hear it read aloud.

Conclusion

As a final consideration, I cite anecdotal evidence from my students at the University of British Columbia suggesting that *Moss*, the English translation of *Ikki*, has significant potential for commercial success in addition to its demonstrated appeal in the courses I offer on modern Korean literature, the modern Korean novel, and Korean popular culture. In recent years I have used episodes from *Moss* in my courses and then canvassed my students as to whether a translation of the entire novel would be economically feasible. They agree overwhelmingly that it would. Perhaps the most intriguing comment I heard was from a Korean Canadian student who is bilingual and bicultural; he argued that the parents of Korean American and Korean Canadian students are desperate for English-language materials that will offer their children a gateway to the wave of Korean popular culture that is now sweeping the globe. A colleague at Harvard commented that there is an urgent need for an English translation of a contemporary Korean graphic novel, and observed that *Moss* would be the first published English translation of an entire Korean graphic novel not limited to a specific age group. It would therefore seem that a viable literary translation could serve as more than merely a cosmopolitan dessert in a multimedia feast; building on the ever increasing sophistication of digital platforms for the delivery of cultural content, it could become the capstone of the multimedia life of a Korean graphic novel, marking a progression from *misaeng* (an incomplete life) to *wansaeng* (a complete life).

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