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## **Challenges Of Korean Novel Translation: The Case Study Of Love In The Big City**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the challenges of translating Korean literary fiction for international audiences, focusing on Park Sang-young's *Love in the Big City* and Anton Hur's English translation of the novel. While K-pop and K-dramas have become global cultural phenomena, Korean novels have not reached the same level of recognition, often due to the complexities of cultural translation. This research examines how translation choices shape the way English-speaking readers experience Korean fiction and how emotion, culture, and society are mediated across languages. It also considers accessibility in screen adaptations, understood here as the relative ease with which audiences from other countries may access, comprehend, and relate to the story on an emotional and cultural level, showing how the same stories travel differently in different languages and media. The study combines a close reading of the English translation of *Love in the Big City* with qualitative methods, including interviews and secondary sources. Insights from LTI Korea and translator Anton Hur are used alongside an analysis of online reviews to understand the novel's reception. By bringing these perspectives together, the paper highlights how translation decisions influence accessibility and cultural nuance, while adaptations function as interventions that provoke new interpretations of the text and give light to the broader dynamics of Korean literature's global circulation.

**Keywords:** accessibility; Hallyu; Korean literature; literary translation; multimodality

## **1. Introduction**

### **Background**

Over the past decade, South Korea has become a major powerhouse in the global entertainment industry, with its cultural exports reaching audiences worldwide and shaping new trends in global pop culture. From K-pop and television dramas to beauty and fashion, Korean content has achieved remarkable international recognition. Nonetheless, while music and screen media have successfully achieved a strong presence in Western markets, Korean literature has struggled to gain comparable recognition. Despite a recent rise in translations and some international acclaim, Korean novels remain relatively underrepresented in the global market.

This study focuses on *Love in the Big City* by Park Sang Young, translated into English by Anton Hur, as a case study for exploring why Korean fiction often struggles to connect with broader audiences, particularly readers in the United States. The novel's depiction of everyday Korean life raises questions of cultural specificity and accessibility in translation. In this context, accessibility refers to the degree to which a translated text can be understood and appreciated by readers without prior knowledge of the source culture. For instance, the narrator describes a night of drinking: "...sitting on the floor on some spread-out newspapers, drinking soju with some banchan of octopus and rockfish" (Park, 2021, p. 100). Choices such as preserving words like *banchan* reflect the conflict between cultural richness, which preserves authenticity, and potential barriers for readers unfamiliar with Korean contexts.

By examining the novel's English translation and using the film and television adaptations as points of provocation, this research explores how translation choices mediate cultural nuance and emotion. The adaptations are used here not as the primary subject of study, but rather as instruments that show how visual media can sometimes clarify aspects of Korean culture that are difficult to translate into text, or alternatively, simplify them in ways that reduce or distort cultural specificity. Situating this case within the larger context of Hallyu<sup>1</sup>, where visual and multimodal forms such as K-

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<sup>1</sup> Hallyu (한류) - originated as a Chinese term that translates to "Korean Wave" (sometimes referred to as K-wave). It refers to the global popularity of Korea's cultural industry, particularly in areas such as K-pop, K-dramas, movies, and other forms of Korean entertainment.

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dramas often travel more easily across borders, this study compares the ways that screen media and literature can reach global audiences. From this perspective, *Love in the Big City* shows that translation operates not only at the level of language but also at the level of culture, where emotions, identities, and social contexts are mediated for new audiences. The film and series adaptations, while not the central focus here, serve to provoke reflection on how these cultural translations can be clarified, altered, or downgraded as narratives move across media and borders.

At the same time, Korean literature's global circulation has been shaped by longstanding political, historical, and publishing obstacles. Unlike K-pop or K-dramas, which spread rapidly across borders, Korean novels have faced institutional and market barriers, including the legacy of colonial marginalisation, the dominance of Anglophone publishing markets, and the delayed establishment of institutional translation support. These obstacles serve as the background against which the investigation in this study is framed: how do translation and adaptation impact the global reception of Korean literature, and what do these cases reveal about the broader challenges facing Korean fiction in reaching American Western audiences?

### Research Objectives

This study proposes the hypothesis that the limited global recognition of Korean novels is not due to their literary quality but to how their global perception is shaped by publishing and translation systems. It assumes that when translated into English, linguistic and cultural peculiarities can both enrich and limit accessibility for Western readers. At the same time, adaptations into visual and digital media create additional pathways that often rise above these barriers by offering multimodal cues that text alone cannot convey. Using *Love in the Big City* as a case study, and by examining both translation and adaptation, this study aims to shed light on how Korean fiction strikes a balance between local specificity and universal accessibility, helping to explain why some works gain recognition abroad while others remain overlooked.

This study aims to:

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- Examine the barriers, including cultural, historical, linguistic, and possibly market-related factors and struggles that might prevent Korean literature from gaining traction in the American literary market.
- Study the connection between translation challenges, accessibility, and the reception of Korean novels among U.S. readers.
- Analyse how the English translation of *Love in the Big City* and its screen adaptations create different forms of accessibility for American audiences and examine how adaptations have influenced viewers to engage with the novel.
- Situate the findings from *Love in the Big City* within the broader discussion of Korean literature's struggle for global recognition, with a particular emphasis on the United States as a key literary market.
- Compare the response of *Love in the Big City* in its translated and cinematic adaptations, demonstrating how different media influence accessibility and engagement among viewers.

### Thesis Hypothesis

This research hypothesises that:

- Korean novels translated into English often struggle to reach wide readership in the U.S. because of culturally specific humour, narrative voice and cultural values that are quite difficult to translate in ways that feel accessible without losing nuance.
- International audiences, in the U.S., are more likely to encounter Korean stories first through dramas, films, or even webtoons and only later look for the novel, turning adaptation into a starting point instead than an extra.
- The success of Korean literature in translation relies not only on the text itself, but also on the cultural mediation provided by translators and publishers.

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- Korean novels frequently rely on publishing industry validation methods to get international recognition (e.g., Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* winning the Booker Prize). Without these honours, novels are unlikely to become popular.
- Text-only translations are less successful than multimodal formats (visual + text) because the latter are easier to follow and more effective at introducing cultural elements, especially as reading habits have been gradually declining in the U.S.

### Research Questions

1. How do different forms of circulation, including translation, marketing, and adaptations, shape the international visibility of *Love in the Big City*?
2. How do Anton Hur’s translation choices in *Love in the Big City*, for example, maintaining cultural terms, humour, and narrative voice, shape the accessibility and reception of the novel among U.S. readers, particularly in the way Korean queer identity and social nuance are mediated for Anglophone audiences?
3. What do Anglophone readers’ responses reveal about the challenges and possibilities of translating Korean literature?
3. Why did *Love in the Big City* gain significant international recognition, and what role did translation, institutions, and online platforms play in its reception within the broader landscape of Korean literature abroad?

### Scope of the Research

This study examines how Korean novels are received in the United States, with a focus on how translation and adaptation impact accessibility. While K-pop and K-dramas have gained popularity, Korean novels continue to struggle and fall behind in their attempt for recognition. This study examines the cultural, linguistic, and market barriers that contribute to this gap. The main case of focus is Park Sang Young's novel *Love in the Big City*, translated into English by Anton Hur and adapted into a film and television series. While the United States is the primary focus of research, similar patterns of

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reception can be observed in other regions, including Europe and South America, where Korean literature is likewise gaining visibility.

The scope spans roughly the 2010s to the present, when Hallyu gained recognition in the West and interest in Korean media became widespread. It focuses on translation approaches and institutional support, while also acknowledging the influence of digital platforms.

This study employs qualitative methods, combining a close reading of the novel's English translation with analysis of reader reviews and a questionnaire with Anton Hur, the translator. Screen adaptations serve solely as additional material, helping to show how certain elements of the novel are mediated across formats. The study does not include fan translations or unofficial works, focusing only on officially published materials.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it adds to discussions in translation studies, Korean studies, and the publishing industry by showing why Korean novels remain less visible in the U.S. compared to other cultural exports. While K-pop and K-dramas have reached mainstream success, novels still face cultural and linguistic barriers that limit their impact.

Another aspect of this study's significance is its focus on the value of literary diversity. Korean novels offer distinct voices, humour, and perspectives that, if given more attention, have the potential to improve the literary markets in the United States and worldwide. By addressing the challenges, this study provides insight into how Korean literature might better connect with international readers. Understanding these processes also helps to provide a more complete picture of how literature adjusts in a digital and multimodal setting.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Global Influence of the Korean Wave and Korea as a Soft-Power**

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, has significantly changed how the world views South Korea, transforming the country into a global leader and trend-setter. This phenomenon, which occurred with the increasing popularity of K-pop and K-dramas, wasn't just a natural cultural trend. It was also the result of South Korea's advanced digital infrastructure and strategic use of social media, as well as government policies to capitalise on culture as a kind of "soft power" (Shim, 2008, p. 16; Tolou, 2014, pp. 11–12). The government's goal in promoting Korean media on a worldwide scale was to boost South Korea's influence and presence overseas. Scholars note that K-pop's highly interactive fan culture and the emotionally engaging storytelling in K-dramas have resonated deeply with audiences worldwide, especially through accessible platforms such as YouTube and Netflix (Shim, 2008; Tolou, 2014).

#### **2.1.1 The Rise of Hallyu**

The term Hallyu (한류), or "Korean Wave," was first coined by Chinese media in the late 1990s to describe the rising popularity of Korean pop culture in East Asia. The initial wave began primarily with the export of K-dramas, most notably *Winter Sonata* (2002), which captivated Japanese and Chinese viewers and established Korea's cultural soft power overseas (Shim, 2008, p. 16). Following the drama boom, the second wave emerged in the mid-2000s through the global expansion of K-pop, later consolidated by BTS and BLACKPINK.

The expansion of Hallyu was significantly supported by the South Korean government. As part of a national economic recovery plan following the Asian financial crisis of 1997, it invested in cultural industries such as music, film, and television. With international marketing initiatives, subsidies, and cultural policy frameworks, cultural content was promoted as a national export (Shim, 2008, p. 21). While K-pop and K-dramas flourished under this system, Korean literature did not ride the same wave. Novels struggled to achieve recognition overseas mainly due to language complexity, cultural specificity, and slower expansion to international markets.

### **2.1.2 Hallyu 2.0: K-pop and the Rise of Digital Culture**

By the mid-2000s, Hallyu entered its second phase, characterised by the global expansion of K-pop and the rise of digital platforms such as YouTube (Wingate, 2021, p. 14). Fans played a crucial role by translating, adapting, and circulating content themselves, actively contributing to the spread of Korean popular culture (Jin, 2016, p. 21). Groups like BTS and BLACKPINK consolidated this stage by combining music with storytelling and interactive fan culture, resonating deeply with international audiences.

This phase was marked by a more deliberate use of digital technologies and government support, which strengthened Korea's image as a cultural powerhouse. However, while K-pop and K-dramas thrived under these globalised digital conditions, Korean literature remained largely absent from this wave. Unlike instantly shareable media formats, novels depended on formal translations and institutional support, limiting their accessibility abroad.

### **2.1.3 Hallyu 3.0: Mobile Media and the Rise of Web-Based Narratives**

Hallyu 3.0, beginning in the early 2010s, signalled a shift into mobile, interactive, and cross-platform storytelling (Kim, 2013, p. 156). The defining feature was the popularity of webtoons and webnovels on platforms like KakaoPage and Naver Webtoon. These formats thrived due to their visual accessibility, user-friendly distribution, and adaptability across media, many were quickly turned into dramas, films, or games (Wingate, 2021, p. 27).

This stage made possible for Korean content to gain unprecedented global recognition through streaming platforms. International hits such as *Squid Game* and films like *Parasite* illustrated the success of transmedia narratives and the expansion of Korea's cultural presence worldwide. Yet, despite this global momentum, traditional Korean literature continued to struggle for visibility. Novels required translation grants, institutional backing, and skilled mediators, making them less flexible and slower to circulate in global markets compared with digital-native formats.

## **2.2 Historical Context and Early Marginalisation of Korean Literature**

Up until the late 19th century, Korean literary culture was largely shaped by classical Chinese traditions. As Brother Anthony of Taizé points out, most works were either written in Classical Chinese or modelled after it in style and structure. Although Hangeul had been created in the 15th century, it was long regarded by the elite as inferior, often dismissed as “women’s writing” and was rarely used for formal literary expression. As a result, pre-modern Korean literature remained mostly inaccessible and limited in its local and international circulation, particularly those works that were not written in Classical Chinese.

With Korea’s forced opening in the late 19th century and eventual colonisation by Japan in the early 20th century, a major transformation occurred in Korean literature. Japanese colonial policies, Western missionary influences, and the exposure to modern educational systems led to the emergence of “modern” Korean fiction. However, these advancements took place in a rather limited setting. Modern Korean literary styles started to emerge, but there was just no global infrastructure in place to introduce them overseas.

Throughout the 20th century, modern Korean literature experienced significant growth within Korea, yet only a small portion was translated into English or other major world languages. As Brother Anthony notes, it was not until the 1960s that any English translations began to appear outside Korea. Those few that did were largely the work of individual missionaries, such as James S. Gale. However, his efforts remained relatively unknown due to the absence of institutional support, limited publicity, and a lack of access to international publishing networks.

For decades, Korean literature was largely absent from major international literary festivals and foreign university curricula. This exclusion was a reflection of Korea's own relative lack of prominence on the international scene prior to its economic ascent. Medina (2018) argues that Korean literature has been shaped by its multilingual history, conflicting national narratives in North and South Korea, and by the absence of a consistent international readership.

### **2.2.1 Early Reception in Translation**

Korean literature's global circulation began later than that of its East Asian neighbours, with fragmented and minimal efforts. The first known English translations were produced by missionaries such as James Scarth Gale, whose version of the classical novel *The Cloud Dream of Nine* appeared in 1922. These efforts were not primarily intended to introduce Korean literature abroad, but rather to provide linguistic and cultural material for missionary and academic work, thus they only reached a small, specialised audience (Brother Anthony, 2014; Fulton, 2011). During the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945), with Korean-language publishing under strict control, opportunities for translation and circulation outside Korea were greatly reduced (Brother Anthony, 2014).

After the Korean War, some works appeared in English anthologies, but these were shaped by Cold War politics and cultural diplomacy. Medina (2018) notes that they often focused on trauma, war, and division, which gave Western readers a limited and one-sided view of Korea's literary identity. Fulton (2011) adds that most translations were carried out by academics or small Korea-based presses with limited distribution, preventing them from reaching wider audiences. As a result, Korean literature in translation stayed relatively obscure until the late twentieth century, especially when compared to the wider international presence of Japanese and Chinese literatures (Medina, 2018; Fulton, 2011).

By the 1980s and 1990s, authors such as Hwang Sun-won, whose works included *Trees on a Slope* (1983) and *The Descendants of Cain* (1996), and Kim Yong-ik, whose short stories appeared in English-language anthologies, had begun to gain foreign audiences, although their overall impact remained limited. Brother Anthony (2014) and Fulton (2011) point out that without a coordinated strategy, works were often selected according to translators' preferences rather than with international readership in mind. This early period makes clear the late entry of Korean literature into global circulation and the structural challenges that restricted its reception before the institutional efforts of the 2000s.

### **2.2.2 Institutional and Market Barriers**

Throughout the twentieth century, the international circulation of Korean literature was driven by individual translators' preferences rather than institutional strategy (Fulton, 2011; Medina, 2018). This approach, combined with broader institutional and market barriers, resulted in only a small number of translations, often short stories or anthologies, reaching readers abroad. These works offered a limited and uneven picture of Korea's literary scenery, leaving the world's perception of Korean literature fragmented and inconsistent.

Additional challenges were also brought about by publishing structures. Most translated works were issued by small Korea-based presses or academic publishers, which lacked global distribution and marketing channels (Brother Anthony, 2014; Medina, 2018); even well-written translations had difficulty being seen, especially among Anglophone markets. According to Fulton (2011), Korean institutions tended to prioritise short stories and novellas, genres valued highly within Korea. However, publishers in the U.S. and U.K. preferred full-length novels, which placed Korean works at a disadvantage, since the mismatch in format made it difficult for them to compete in international markets. Due to their greater institutional support, Nobel Prizes recognition, and longstanding translation traditions, Japanese and Chinese literature oftentimes overshadowed Korean literature (Medina, 2018; Fulton, 2011).

By the end of the twentieth century, it was clear that institutional support was essential for Korean literature to enter international markets. The creation of the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) in 1996, together with programs developed by the Daesan Foundation<sup>2</sup>, signalled the move towards a more coordinated approach to translation. These organisations introduced translation grants, training programs, and databases of available works, while also funding participation in international book fairs (Publishing Perspectives, 2016). As a result of these efforts, around two million copies of Korean literature were exported between 2018 and 2022 (Korea.net, 2023).

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<sup>2</sup> Daesan Foundation - established in 1992 by the Kyobo Life Insurance Company. Its aim is to support the promotion of Korean culture abroad through grants for literary translation, publication, and international exchange.

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By 2019, there were more than 150 titles per year in over 27 target languages, up from just 14 titles in 2001, according to LTI Korea (as cited in Publishing Perspectives, 2016). These numbers show how regular institutional investment helped Korean literature gain international reputation by progressively overcoming previous market limitations. This paved the way for additional notable achievements in the 2010s and 2020s.

### 2.3 The Role of Institutions and Literary Awards

A major turning point in the international recognition of Korean literature came with Shin Kyung-sook's *Please Look After Mom*, which won the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011. Often described as Korea's first real entry onto the global literary stage, the novel's success showed how a single high-profile award could attract both publishers' interest and wider readerships abroad (Gowman, 2023). This momentum was consolidated a few years later with Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, which won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize in Deborah Smith's English translation. As Fulton (2011) and Brother Anthony (2014) remind us, Korean fiction in English had remained pretty invisible until the late twentieth century. Thus, these turning points represented a dramatic shift from decades of marginalisation. Additionally, they proved that translation could succeed when cultural nuance and social themes were presented in ways that resonated globally. In this sense, awards not only promoted individual novels, but also showed how the challenges of mediating Korean society through translation could be turned into opportunities for recognition.

These achievements also show that institutions are essential for keeping Korean literature visible internationally, even after the attention from a major prize fades. Since its founding in 1996, the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) has played a central role in this effort, funding thousands of translation projects and building global networks of publishers, translators, and readers (Publishing Perspectives, 2016). According to LTI Korea's president Kim Sa-in, between 2015 and 2017 the number of foreign publishers requesting Korean titles rose dramatically. This signalled a move away from Korean agencies persuading foreign publishers, as international demand began to arise more naturally. This suggests that beyond funding and logistics, institutions play a decisive role in framing which components of Korean culture and

society are presented as translatable and marketable abroad. Awards like the Man Booker created visibility, but institutions ensured that visibility could be converted into lasting circulation. Awards such as the Man Booker Prize increased interest, but institutions ensured that this new gained visibility would be long-lasting.

Yet, even with these supports, Korean literature has moved at the slower rhythms of translation and publishing compared to the speed of other Hallyu exports. This slower pace draws attention to yet another difficulty: cultural distinctiveness is far harder to translate into long-term readership than visual or musical formats. As Kim (2018) notes, literature circulates through publishers, grants, and distribution networks, processes that take years rather than months. Even so, space has been opened for broader experiments with genre and readership. Writers such as Jeong You Jeong and Kim Un Su, whose thrillers have been translated into English and published by major Western houses like Little, Brown and Knopf Doubleday, have received distinctions such as New York Times “Editor’s Choice” and “Must Read” lists. According to *Publishing Perspectives* (2016), Korean literature in translation is no longer restricted to prize-winning “literary” works but is increasingly present in popular genres that cross cultural boundaries more easily. This shift points to both the growing variety of Korean voices in translation and the accumulated impact of institutional support and awards in reaching international readers.

### **2.3.1 LTI Korea and Translator Support**

The Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) has been the main institutional instrument of support for Korean literature’s internationalisation since its establishment in 1996. Its mission is the “development and globalisation of Korean literature” and its vision is to act as a vital institution helping Korean writing circulate as world literature (LTI Korea, 2024–2028 Management Strategy). In practice, this includes translation grants, training programs, translator networks, and digital platforms. One of the Institute’s most visible contributions is its translation academy, which trains aspiring translators across multiple languages. LTI Korea also sponsors events such as the Seoul International Writers’ Festival and international policy forums, linking Korean authors with foreign publishers and readers.

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Beyond events, LTI Korea operates a digital library that offers hundreds of translated excerpts and full works, serving both as an open-access resource for readers and a database for publishers and scholars. Its translation projects range from contemporary poetry to classical texts, preserving Korea's literary heritage while also presenting diverse works to international audiences. The Institute also experiments with new promotional strategies, including the use of social media and celebrity endorsements, which connect literary promotion to broader Hallyu culture.

Although these activities show a clear institutional commitment to promoting Korean literature internationally, there is still little critical scholarship on LTI Korea itself. Most of what is written comes from the Institute's own materials or journalistic reports, leaving its role largely unexplored in academic research.

### 2.3.2 International Prizes and Visibility

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, which won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize in Deborah Smith's English translation, is widely regarded as the breakthrough that brought Korean literature firmly onto the international stage. Readers and critics alike began to see Korean fiction not simply as niche "world literature," but as literature that contributes actively to global literary exchange (Licher, 2016, p. 297). Importantly, the award also demonstrated that translation could succeed when cultural nuance and social themes were mediated in ways that resonated internationally, turning the challenges of cultural specificity into opportunities for visibility. This moment drew on previous achievements, such as Shin Kyung-sook's *Please Look After Mom*, which received the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize and was seen by many as Korea's first major stride toward worldwide literary visibility (Gowman, 2023). Taken together, these milestones showed how translation and international prizes could generate momentum for Korean authors in Anglophone and wider markets.

Prizes also had an impact on industry dynamics. As *Publishing Perspectives* (2016) notes, after these awards foreign publishers began requesting far more Korean titles, moving away from a model where Korean institutions had to push for interest toward one where demand developed naturally. In doing so, awards promoted individual authors while also establishing Korean literature as a field with cultural and commercial

value. Crucially, they also shaped which aspects of Korean society and identity were considered exportable, privileging some narratives while leaving others untranslated.

The impact of these recognitions can be seen in subsequent cases. Bora Chung's *Cursed Bunny*, shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize, signalled that Korean literature could succeed internationally outside the realist or trauma-driven narratives that had previously dominated. Its use of horror, folklore, and speculative tropes showed that prizes can widen the scope of what international readers are willing to engage with, disrupting the expectation that only "serious" or culturally heavy novels from Korea deserve attention (Nikkei Asia, 2024). Similarly, while Park Sang Young's *Love in the Big City* did not win a prize, Anton Hur's English translation gained traction in this setting of increased awareness.

Still, the visibility generated by prizes has limitations. As Medina (2018) notes, they risk creating a narrow canon that favours works which match Western tastes for cultural difference, marginalisation, or experimental styles. This dynamic leaves more conventional but popular Korean genres, such as romance or domestic fiction, underrepresented despite their success with domestic audiences. Even classics like *The Cloud Dream of the Nine* or *The Story of Hong Gil-dong*, published in English by Penguin Classics, remain largely circulated only in academic spaces rather than reaching a wider public. At the same time, these trends remind us that visibility is uneven and selective. It is not only formed by the quality of Korean writing, but also by the tastes and structures of the global literary marketplace, and by the ongoing challenge of translating Korean society and culture into forms that remain accessible to international readers.

## **2.4 Challenges in Translating Korean Culture**

Translation continues to be one of the key obstacles to the global circulation of Korean literature. Instead of originating from a coordinated strategy aimed at international readerships, the selection of works for translation has mostly mirrored the individual choices of translators. Because of this, the majority of English-language translations were, until recently, published by small Korean presses with little access to global distribution networks, marketing tools, or mainstream visibility (Medina, 2018, p. 398).

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For much of this history, fidelity to the original text has often been prioritised above accessibility (Medina, 2018), even when it left readers struggling to engage. As a result, works that resonated deeply with Korean audiences sometimes appeared distant or opaque to Anglophone readers.

In recent years, however, scholarship and practice have shifted toward a more reader-oriented approach, paying closer attention to reception in the target culture (Kang & Wakabayashi, 2019; Sun, 2012; Fernández-Guerra, 2012; Kiaer, 2019). These more flexible and accessible translations have opened new space for Korean novels abroad. Yet this shift highlights a deeper issue: the main obstacle is cultural rather than linguistic. Translating Korean fiction requires one to manage the social logics, cultural hierarchies, and emotional patterns embedded in the narrative. As Snell-Hornby (2006) points out, literary translation is less about word-for-word substitution and more about negotiating cultural meaning between languages. This is particularly evident in Korean literature, where language is closely tied to social structures such as hierarchy, age, and collective identity, making direct translation into English especially difficult.

### 2.4.1 Translating Society and Cultural Nuance

One of the most difficult aspects of translating Korean novels is conveying not only the language but also the society and culture that surrounds it. Translation is better understood as cultural negotiation than as simple substitution since it involves transmitting ways of thinking, feeling, and relating that are unique to the source culture (Kramersch & Hua, 2019; Rubel & Rosman, 2003). In Korean fiction, elements such as age-based hierarchy, honorifics, kinship terminology, and cultural concepts like *jeong* (정<sup>3</sup>) form an integral part of how characters speak and interact. While *jeong* is often loosely translated as “affection” or “bond,” it is an especially poignant example of the cultural nuances that run the risk of being lost or flattened in translation, since it features layers of social and emotional meaning that have no exact English equivalent. As Kang and Wakabayashi (2020) point out, these culturally specific characteristics have no direct English equivalents, making them particularly susceptible to omission or

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<sup>3</sup> Jeong (정) - refers to a deep emotional connection formed through shared experiences and obligations, central to Korean social life.

oversimplification during the translation process. For Korean novels entering the Anglophone market, this issue is more than technical: it shapes how readers perceive Korean society itself. When nuances are simplified or omitted, the text risks becoming more accessible but less authentic; when they are retained, readers may struggle with unfamiliarity.

The larger challenge here is that translation involves negotiating cultural meaning in addition to just transferring words between languages. Fernández Guerra (2012) notes that the true issue is not always language barriers but rather “culture-bound terms” and ideas that are deeply embedded in social life (pp. 47–48). Kramersch and Hua (2019, p. 5) share this viewpoint, stating that in a globalised setting, culture should be viewed more as “meaning-making practices” that take place across communities, histories, and technological advancements rather than as a fixed national identity. This is particularly evident in Korean literature, where even “universal” themes, like love or grief, are expressed and resolved in ways that are culturally distinct. When readers lack the social or historical cues needed to interpret these nuances, they may disengage, leaving the translator to act not only as a writer but also as a cultural mediator (Schulz, 1981). Schulz further emphasises that the absence of shared cultural cues, visual, historical, or behavioural, can make translated texts difficult to interact with unless additional framing is provided.

Medina (2018) further observes that Korean literature is often saturated with local experiences shaped by national division, colonial legacies, and rapid modernisation. While these layers give the works depth and resonance in the domestic context, they also make them harder to transmit internationally without careful cultural framing. What may feel intuitive to Korean readers, whether social structures, historical memory, or everyday customs, can present barriers to those without the same background knowledge.

Unlike K-dramas or webtoons, where audiovisual elements offer immediate context, the Korean novel depends entirely on the translator’s mediation to make its society legible abroad. Nelson (2007, p. 216) argues that translation does not merely transfer meaning but actively shapes how cultures are represented. From this perspective, the

translator's work becomes central to how readers abroad encounter Korean literature, not only as narrative, but as a cultural experience grounded in a different worldview.

#### **2.4.2 Readability, Accessibility, and Cultural Weight**

Readability in translation involves both cultural accessibility and linguistic clarity. For Korean novels, this often requires balancing the decision to domesticate culturally specific terms or to preserve them without direct equivalents. Accuracy, readability, and acceptability are the three main aspects of translation quality, according to McDonald (2020). While linguistic proficiency is sufficient to achieve accuracy, readability and acceptability depend on the target audience's familiarity with the source culture's stylistic and social norms. In markets such as the United States, where readers are accustomed to narrative immediacy, this creates challenges for Korean novels that resist domestication.

Yifeng Sun (2012) introduces the concept of "cross-cultural readability," noting that even technically accurate translations can fall short if they fail to bridge cultural gaps. In practice, this places translators in the role of cultural mediators, negotiating whether to simplify concepts for readers or to retain unfamiliar terms. Venuti's (1995) well-known distinction between domestication and foreignisation is relevant here, as it frames readability as an ongoing negotiation between making texts fluent for the target audience and preserving the cultural specificity of the source.

Snell-Hornby (2006) describes this shift as part of the "cultural turn" in translation studies, where translators are seen not as invisible but as active cultural interpreters. From this perspective, readability is not a fixed quality but a balancing act between accessibility and authenticity, between explanation and strangeness, and between linguistic clarity and cultural weight. Given its intricacy, literary translation is never a purely mechanical process but a creative one, requiring translators to weigh faithfulness to the source text against the risk of alienating readers.

#### **2.4.3 Linguistic Barriers as Cultural Obstacles**

The structural features of the Korean language add significant complexity to translation, not only at the level of form but also in how they convey cultural worldviews. As a language isolate, Korean has no close relation to English or other Indo-European

languages, meaning that many of its grammatical and semantic features resist direct equivalence (Yeon & Brown, 2011, pp. 1–6). Honorifics, kinship terminology, and idiomatic expressions illustrate this difficulty: while English uses a single word such as *uncle*, Korean distinguishes between maternal and paternal relatives and further marks differences in age, embedding social hierarchy directly into the vocabulary. These distinctions go beyond language, reflecting a culture in which hierarchy and relational identity are fundamental.

Sound symbolism further stresses how language and culture intertwine. Korean makes extensive use of onomatopoeia (*uiseongeo*) and mimetics (*uitaeeo*), with terms such as *쿵쿵* (*kung-kung*, heavy footsteps) or *반짝반짝* (*banjjak-banjjak*, sparkling light) conveying sensory intensity and rhythm. While such forms enrich Korean prose, they rarely survive intact in translation, often being replaced by descriptive phrases or omitted altogether (Kim, 2014, pp. 35–42). The risk, as Mohácsi (2022) notes, is a “semantic loss” that reduces not only style but also the cultural resonance present in everyday language. These examples present the challenges of translating Korean literature and how they extend beyond technical grammar, they reveal how language encodes social values, perceptions, and lived realities.

#### **2.4.4 Translation Practices: Fidelity vs Accessibility**

By the early twenty-first century, however, translation practices began shifting toward a more reader-oriented approach. This echoed wider debates in translation studies, where scholars such as Sun (2012) and McDonald (2020) stressed that accuracy, readability, and cultural accessibility must work together if a text is to be understood by international audiences. These examples highlight translation’s dual role: not only a linguistic transfer, but also an act of cultural negotiation.

Translators must constantly decide whether to keep terms such as *noraebang*, *han*, or *kimchi* in their original form, explain them through glossaries or footnotes, or replace them with familiar equivalents. Each decision shapes how readers interact with the text. Some translators have argued that fidelity and accessibility are not necessarily opposites but can be approached as complementary aims, with the translator’s task being to remain faithful to the source while producing a text approachable for Western readers.

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The tension between faithfulness and accessibility remains unresolved, but recent successes such as Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Bora Chung's *Cursed Bunny* suggest that translations which strike a careful balance between cultural specificity and readability can reach wide audiences. As Mohácsi (2022) reminds us, even when “semantic loss” is inevitable, thoughtful mediation can preserve much of a text's emotional impact. These debates provide the framework for understanding how Korean literature navigates its position within world literature: negotiating the need to remain locally rooted while also speaking across borders.

### 2.4.5 Genre Mismatches and Market Expectations

Another persistent challenge lies in the mismatch between domestic literary traditions and global publishing expectations. In Korea, short stories and novellas have long held cultural prestige, supported by university journals, literary magazines, and national prizes that reward shorter forms. Translation initiatives have often mirrored this preference, prioritising short fiction for overseas circulation.

However, Anglophone markets tend to privilege the full-length novel, which is seen as more marketable, easier to position for awards, and better suited to commercial distribution. As Fulton points out, this divergence creates obstacles for Korean literature abroad, since texts preferred at home may not align with what Western publishers recognise as “literary fiction” (p. 780). As a result, there is a structural imbalance: Korean culturally significant works are frequently disregarded outside due to their form rather than their merit.

This mismatch also intersects with practical concerns of publishing. Short story collections and novellas are harder to promote to general readers, who are used to investing in long-form narratives. Even when translations are produced, they usually end up in academic settings or small publishers, which restricts their potential for broader distribution. On the other hand, Korean novels that have been translated, such as Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* or Cho Nam-joo's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, have had greater success breaking into mainstream markets, in part because they adhere to international standards for form and length. Taken together, these elements show how genre norms act as an extra barrier to translation. The problem is not only linguistic or

cultural, but also material: the forms most appreciated in Korean literary culture do not often translate well into the marketing frameworks of foreign publishing. Beyond linguistic, cultural, and genre-based barriers, another challenge emerges from the medium itself. In an increasingly visual and multimodal media environment, text-heavy novels face additional obstacles in appealing to international readers.

### **2.5 The Visual Barrier: Multimodality and Changing Reading Practices**

One of the biggest challenges Korean novels face abroad lies not only in translation but also in the very nature of the medium itself. Novels depend entirely on text to build emotion, set a scene, and convey cultural meaning. In contrast, U.S. audiences, particularly younger ones, are increasingly accustomed to multimodal forms of storytelling that combine visuals, sound, and interactivity. From TikTok clips and YouTube vlogs to webtoons and K-dramas, cultural consumption increasingly favours formats that are quick, immersive, and easy to follow. In this context, novels can appear heavier and less accessible, since they demand prolonged concentration and greater cultural imagination.

Multimodality offers a useful lens for understanding this challenge. Kress (2010) argues that contemporary media is inherently multimodal, drawing meaning from a blend of written, visual, and auditory cues. Similarly, Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of remediation notes how new media continuously reshapes earlier forms, establishing new standards for how stories are consumed. For readers accustomed to narratives being shown rather than told, a translated Korean novel may appear slower or more demanding, not because of its content but due to a mismatch between medium and audience expectations.

Global literacy trends reinforce this point. According to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), reading scores across OECD countries declined by ten points between 2018 and 2022, with one in four students performing at the lowest levels in reading, science, and mathematics (OECD, 2023a). The same report notes a marked shift toward short, screen-based consumption (OECD, 2023b). Books in the United States therefore compete in an ecosystem increasingly biased toward visual and fast-paced media, especially when combined with unfamiliar cultural cues.

Screen-based storytelling not only feels more engaging but also aligns with multitasking environments in which audiences can watch while scrolling or chatting online.

The consequence of these trends is what can be described as a “visual barrier”: the disadvantage faced by text-heavy literature in a cultural landscape where narrative is increasingly mediated by visual forms. Webtoons and K-dramas provide immediate cultural cues—facial expressions, tone of voice, background details—that novels in translation cannot replicate. They also offer audiences a sense of immediacy and accessibility that text often struggles to match.

### **2.5.1 Social Media and BookTok as Literary Gateways**

Institutions and awards continue to play a significant role in the international distribution of Korean literature, although social media platforms have become increasingly valuable as other avenues for visibility. Among these, the book community on TikTok, popularly referred to as BookTok, has become a powerful global force that has the ability to change how translated literature is distributed. BookTok uses short, affect-driven videos instead of traditional review, where readers discuss their favourite passages, display their emotions, or visually stage books in carefully selected digital spaces (Harman, 2024; Ridzuan & Ahmadrashidi, 2023).

The effect has been significant: in 2021 alone, BookTok-driven content was linked to around 20 million print book sales in the United States, doubling in 2022 (WordsRated, 2023). Nielsen BookScan reports that over 50% of teenage book buyers now use TikTok for discovery (BookMachine, 2022). These figures suggest that virality can bring translated works into mainstream circulation even when they lack institutional promotion.

However, BookTok's popularity creates unique challenges for translating Korean literature. While Korean novels frequently rely on cultural immersion, contextual knowledge, and sensitivity to linguistic complexity, the platform favours immediacy and visual intensity. Characteristics that are crucial to understanding Korean society, such as kinship terms, age-based hierarchies, and indirect forms of expression, might not be as relevant in a setting where emotional impact is more important than cultural

depth and attention spans are short. In algorithmic platforms, where visibility is driven by accessibility and fast connection, what makes a translation authentic could thus become a barrier.

At the same time, BookTok's affect-oriented logic can work to the advantage of certain translations. Identity, intimacy, queerness, and a sense of displacement are among the themes that are frequently found in Korean fiction and are ideal for triggering the visceral reactions that are highly effective in social media formats. Queer spaces, in particular, resonate with younger audiences who seek representation and emotional connection, allowing novels like *Love in the Big City* to gain traction beyond traditional literary circuits. However, this visibility is frequently separated from the translator's role: the intricacy of cultural mediation typically fades behind reduced excerpts, leaving readability, fidelity, and nuance issues out of the discussion. This can reinforce the broader challenge of translation, where works are consumed as global commodities but the interpretive labour of translation remains invisible.

From this perspective, BookTok is best understood as a double-edged gateway; it helps translated literature reach new readers but often prioritises emotional immediacy at the expense of cultural nuance. This dynamic is even more challenging for Korean novels, since translations not only have to negotiate cultural meaning across languages, but also compete in digital spaces that give more value to visual impact, quickness, and emotional performance.

Yet despite the increasing scholarship on Hallyu and Korea's cultural exports, Korean literature remains underexplored in comparison to music, dramas, and digital based formats. While scholars have discussed issues such as translation, institutional promotion, and prize recognition, there is still very little sustained work on how Korean novels actually move across borders and why they struggle to gain visibility. This thesis fills that gap by tracing the mechanisms through which Korean novels move beyond domestic borders and into global readerships. Taking special attention to the role of translators, institutions, and readers, and by asking how cultural translation influences the way these works are received and understood outside Korea.

### **3. Methods and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

##### **3.1.1 Rationale for Case Study Approach**

This study uses a case study approach to examine the challenges of translating Korean literature for Western audiences. By looking closely at *Love in the Big City* by Park Sang Young, translated by Anton Hur, the aim is to identify how linguistic, cultural, and market barriers appear in the translation process. Focusing on a single novel makes it possible to analyse in detail how specific choices, such as the choice method of translating cultural terms, narrative voice, or tone, affect the accessibility and reception of the text abroad.

The novel was selected because of its particular relevance to this study. In the U.S. market, it has attracted critical and commercial attention while simultaneously raising questions of fidelity, readability, and cultural specificity. As such, it provides a valuable case for examining how translation strategies can shape the reception of Korean literature abroad, simplifying access while also addressing the remaining limitations.

This study also takes into account the role of institutions. A questionnaire was submitted to the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) about their support for translators and publishers, and strategies on how they promote Korean literature overseas. These insights help to show how institutional practices influence the translation process, from funding and training to decisions about which works are prioritised for international circulation.

Beyond the translator and institutional role, this study also considers how the novel has been received by international readers. Reviews written in English, particularly by American readers, provide information about how cultural nuances, style, and readability are perceived outside of Korea. Bringing in these responses makes sure the analysis captures not just professional or institutional perspectives, but also the everyday experiences of readers.

Lastly, the case study also incorporates the novel's screen adaptations. Rather than replacing the book, the film and drama work as separate acts of translation, where the shift into a visual medium makes some cultural and linguistic elements easier to convey. Looking at the translator, the institution, the readers, and the adaptations side by side makes possible to look at how *Love in the Big City* moves through international literary and cultural channels.

### **3.1.2 Rationale for Qualitative Approach**

Given the nature of this study, a qualitative approach is the most effective way to investigate the challenges of translation. Quantitative methods would not capture the subtle ways in which linguistic choices, cultural references, and institutional decisions affect how Korean literature is received abroad. A qualitative approach makes it possible to closely examine translation strategies, institutional practices, and reader responses, with particular attention to how meaning is negotiated across both languages and media.

This approach makes it possible to look at perspectives from different angles, translator, institution, readers, and adaptations, without reducing them to statistics. Instead, it focuses on the richness of lived experiences, interpretation of texts, and the work of cultural mediation. Such a framework is particularly suited to exploring *Love in the Big City* as a case study, since its translation and adaptation history raises questions that cannot be addressed through quantitative analysis alone.

### **3.2 Target Population**

This study focuses on four main sources that provide different perspectives on the challenges of translation:

- LTI Korea (Institutional Perspective): Responses from the Literature Translation Institute of Korea, which were collected through a questionnaire, will be used to understand how institutional priorities: funding, training, and book selection, shape the translation process and influence what reaches international readers.

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- Translator (Anton Hur): As the translator of *Love in the Big City*, Anton Hur provides firsthand insight into how social, cultural and linguistic issues are addressed in practice. His approach is central to analysing how translation is negotiated in this case study.
- Readers and Reviewers: English-language reader-reviewers on Goodreads will be examined through detailed reviews that comment on socially and culturally specific aspects of translation, as well as on style, readability, and narrative structure. These responses reveal how translation choices are interpreted and experienced by American audiences.
- Adaptations (Film and Series Versions): The film and series adaptations of *Love in the Big City* will also be included as multimodal forms of translation. They serve as an additional lens for examining how cultural and linguistic challenges are negotiated when the story is reinterpreted through different media.

### 3.3 Sample Size

The scope of this study combines participant input and existing sources, including questionnaires, published reviews, and adaptation materials. In addition, the film and series adaptations of *Love in the Big City* will be included as supplementary material for analysis, though they are not participants.

- Anton Hur (translator of *Love in the Big City*), contacted through a questionnaire for this study. In addition, third-party interviews and public statements will be used, to further support his point of view.
- 1 institutional questionnaire submitted to the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea), focusing on their role in supporting translation efforts, coordinating with publishers, and promoting Korean literature internationally.
- A total of 10 English-language reader reviews were selected for analysis. Of these, 7 are written by U.S.-based readers and serve as the core focus, while additional reviews from Canada and Ireland, along with five from unidentified countries, provide supplementary perspectives. Reviews were selected based on their depth, with particular attention to those that discussed cultural references, narrative style, readability, and key themes.

### **3.4 Data Collection and Analysis Methods**

#### **3.4.1 Questionnaire for Translator (Anton Hur)**

Written questionnaire focusing on translation challenges in *Love in the Big City*, supplemented with third-party interviews and public statements. The questionnaire was created to investigate the specific linguistic and cultural issues associated with translating Korean novels into English. It questioned whether particular features of Korean storytelling are at risk of being lost, altered, or misunderstood during the translation process, and how these choices influence international reception. Particular attention was given to the difficulties of translating culturally distinctive humour, slang, and queer themes, which are particularly difficult to translate directly into English. The questionnaire also asked Hur about his thoughts on whether translators play any role in shaping or influencing subsequent adaptations of the texts they translate. Finally, it looked at how he personally balances faithfulness to the source text with accessibility for English-language readers.

#### **3.4.2 Questionnaire for LTI Korea**

A parallel questionnaire was sent out to a representative of the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) in order to better understand the institutional processes that promote the global circulation of Korean literature. This included concerns about translation support, project selection, international promotion, collaboration with publishers and translators. LTI Korea's perspective serves to contextualise how institutional initiatives combine with translation practices and therefore affect the international visibility of Korean texts.

#### **3.4.3 Reader and Reviewer Case Studies**

This part of the chapter draws on 15 Anglophone reviews of *Love in the Big City*. The main focus is on 7 reviews written by U.S.-based readers, since American reception is the core focus for this thesis. To give a fuller picture, I also include reviews from Canada and Ireland, as well as five English-language reviews where the reviewer's location is not clear. Together, these different perspectives help make clear how readers interact with Anton Hur's translation, with special attention to issues of readability, cultural detail, and stylistic choices.

### **3.4.4 Adaptations Analysis**

This project will also use the film and series adaptations of *Love in the Big City* as analytical tools, investigating how cultural and linguistic issues are addressed when Korean narratives are translated into visual media. Adaptations give an extra layer of information since visual signals, performance, and location can highlight aspects of Korean society that are implicit or ambiguous in text. By looking at how themes, settings, and cultural references are mediated through screen narratives, the analysis can show how adaptation either solves or presents new challenges to the international dissemination of Korean literature.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Approach**

The collected material will be analysed qualitatively, with the aim of identifying recurring themes and translation challenges across different sources. The responses from Anton Hur and LTI Korea will be coded thematically, using categories such as fidelity versus accessibility, cultural specificity, institutional influence, and the treatment of socially marked language. Reviews by English-language readers will undergo content and thematic analysis to trace patterns in how translation choices are perceived, including points of clarity, difficulty, or cultural resonance.

In parallel, *Love in the Big City*'s adaptations will be examined through textual and visual analysis, treating them as forms of multimodal translation. Attention will be given to how cultural markers are emphasised or adjusted in screen narratives compared to their handling in literary translation. The analysis will focus on interpreting how different forms of translation and mediation reveal similar challenges, without comparing them directly.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

A number of ethical issues pertaining to data gathering and analysis are acknowledged in this work. Participation in the questionnaires with Anton Hur and LTI Korea is entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before any questions were distributed. Since both participants are well-known individuals acting in their professional capacities, any direct quotes will be provided with clear attribution. For reader and reviewer material, data is drawn from publicly available platforms such as

Goodreads. In order to respect privacy, usernames will not be disclosed, and quotations will be anonymised where necessary. Only reviews that are already available in the public domain will be included. The usage of film and television adaptations creates issues of intellectual property. These works are analysed under the framework of academic fair use, with an emphasis on thematic and cultural translation rather than commercial aspects. Overall, the study seeks to authentically convey all perspectives while respecting participant permission, confidentiality when needed, and intellectual property boundaries.

### **3.7 Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it draws on a small sample: one translator, one institutional body, and a limited set of reader reviews. While this scope allows for close analysis, the findings cannot be taken as representative of all Korean literature in translation. Second, reliance on reader reviews introduces potential bias, since individuals who post online may not reflect the wider American reading public. Even so, focusing on detailed reviews ensures that the material remains rich in interpretive content. Third, while film and series adaptations offer a useful multimodal perspective, the analysis is limited to the finished products themselves. Direct perspectives from producers, directors, or scriptwriters fall outside the scope of this study.

Lastly, this study centres on a single novel, *Love in the Big City*, which restricts the generalisability of its findings. Even so, the focused case study approach allows for a deeper exploration of the broader challenges involved in translating Korean literature for Western audiences.

## **4. Findings and Results**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the analysis of the case study, focusing on the novel *Love in the Big City* by Park Sang Young in its English translation by Anton Hur. Throughout In Chapter 4, I treat translation not as word substitution but as cultural, emotional, and social mediation, focusing on how voice, relationships, and place are made accessible for new readers. The purpose here is to examine how the challenges presented in the literature review, such as readability, cultural specificity, and mediation, play out in practice. The analysis draws on the main sources: the translator's own perspective, institutional support and priorities as outlined by the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea), English-language reader reviews. The novel's adaptations into other media are also considered, though only as a complementary source.

By bringing these perspectives together, this chapter shows that translation functions not only as linguistic transfer but also as cultural negotiation, shaped by institutions, audiences, and media environments. The discussion is organised into sections that examine each source in turn, showing the common issues they raise and the insights they provide into the global reception of Korean literature.

### **4.2 Translator's Perspective (Anton Hur)**

Anton Hur is one of the most known Korean-to-English literary translators working today, and his career sheds light on how Korean writing reaches readers around the world. According to his official website, he has translated works such as *Love in the Big City*, *Cursed Bunny*, and *Violets*, among others, and he also publishes his own writing (Hur, n.d.). Raised in multiple countries and now based in Seoul, he occupies a unique liminal space between Korean and Anglophone literary spheres.

As part of this research, I reached out to Hur to better understand his translation philosophy and professional experiences, and this exchange informs the analysis that follows. The following subsections examine how he balances fidelity and accessibility, how he presents queer representation without sanitisation, and how his work.

### **4.2.1 Fidelity and Accessibility**

One of the most visible challenges in *Love in the Big City* is how Anton Hur balances fidelity to the Korean source text with accessibility for English-speaking readers. Rather than consistently applying one method, his translation shows a combined approach, preserving cultural and linguistic bluntness in some moments while softening or adapting in others.

In the opening wedding scene of Part One , Hur conveys dialogue such as “애들 사이에서는 너 죽었다는 소문 돌았는데 멀쩡하네” as “Hey, there was a rumor that you’d died, but here you are!” (Park, 2019/2021, p. 1; p. 1 in Korean). Hur’s decision here stands out for its plainness. Instead of softening the line into a smoother, more conventionally polite English expression, he retains the original bluntness. In Korean, such straightforward speech is common in casual settings, but when carried over into English it can feel unusually rude and abrupt. By choosing not to softening this tone, Hur expresses the nature of everyday Korean communication, even if it risks sounding awkward to Anglophone readers. This method underlines the fact that translation is more than just conveying meaning; it also requires bringing the social register and emotional impact of the original work over.

An additional useful example comes from a conversation between the narrator and Jaehee on the night of her wedding. Jaehee explains, “I wrote up a whole contract with oppa. That we’re never going to have babies. As for the in-laws, well, I’m going to think of it as having two more birthdays to take care of” (Park, 2021, p. 44). In this case, Hur chooses to keep *oppa* in the text, a culturally significant word that in Korean refers not only to an older brother but, depending on context, can also signal a boyfriend or husband when addressed affectionately by a woman. By leaving it untranslated, Hur keeps the meaning of the term intact, forcing readers to get acquainted with Korean forms of address instead of replacing them with simpler English words. At the same time, he translates the reference to the in-laws into a simplified English phrase. In Korean, such terms would specify exactly which relatives are being discussed, with distinctions based on gender, age, and lineage. Hur simplifies the term to “in-laws,”

prioritising accessibility and giving English-speaking readers a straightforward equivalent instead of potentially confusing detail.

This example depicts Hur's approach to hybridity: accessibility through the reduction of familial distinctions to "in-laws," and fidelity through the preservation of oppa. It follows Sun's (2012) claim that "cross-cultural readability," in which translators strike a balance between cultural specificity and intelligibility, is necessary for successful literary translation. Instead of treating fidelity and accessibility as opposed, Hur shows how both can coexist within the same sentence, depending on what best serves the text's readability and authenticity.

Hur himself opposes the idea that translators should be concerned with whether cultural nuances will turn off readers. In my questionnaire, he explained: "I don't think about alienating the reader at all, really, I grew up on Joyce and Woolf, readers are sophisticated and they'll get it" (Hur, 2025; Appendix A). This position reflects his faith in translation's worldwide readership: instead of softening cultural bluntness or specificity, he presumes that readers can adapt to it. At the same time, Hur has stressed in multiple interviews that fidelity and accessibility should not be understood as opposites but as aims that work together. As he explained in my questionnaire, a translator's job is to stay faithful to the original text while also making it approachable for Western readers (Hur, 2025; Appendix A). In another interview, he described translation as "making space for each other" rather than erasing cultural difference (Chaffa, 2025; Appendix A). These statements clarify that for Hur, the challenge is not choosing between fidelity and accessibility but balancing them so that cultural nuance is preserved while the text remains readable for international audiences.

Hur's comments make clear that the challenge is not deciding between fidelity and accessibility, but learning how to balance them in practice. For him, translation involves preserving cultural nuance while still producing a text that international readers can follow. This viewpoint clearly draws attention to one of the main issues of translating Korean literature: the challenge of preserving cultural nuance without compromising readability for the Anglophone market.

#### **4.2.2 Cultural Markers, Humour, and Voice**

One of the main difficulties in *Love in the Big City* is not grammar but the cultural and queer themes expressed in the text. Kinship terms, food, social spaces, pop-cultural references, do not translate smoothly into English. Hur approaches this not with a fixed rule but with a flexible strategy. Sometimes retaining Korean words to preserve cultural weight and at other times adapting them into English to keep the narrative flowing smoothly for readers.

Another example tied to kinship is the narrator's repeated use of *umma* instead of "mum/mother" when referring to his mother (e.g., pp. 10, 52). Keeping *umma* in Korean keeps the sense of intimacy and mirrors the emotional tone of the original, while the surrounding English makes its meaning clear enough. It creates a subtle form of foreignisation that relies on readers to learn the word through context.

The novel's social geography such as PC rooms, *noraebang*, late-night drinking, appears with minimal explanation. "PC rooms" (pp. 4) are rendered with the Konglish term familiar to many K-culture readers; *noraebang* later appears as *noraebang* rather than "karaoke room" (p. 191). Both choices keep the Korean naming intact while the narrative context (songs, microphones, competing to "outscreech each other") does the explanatory work. Once more, Hur lets meaning emerge from context instead of spelling it out.

When it comes to food and drink, the novel casually contrasts soju with *Chungha* (a branded clear rice wine): "*what was with the Chungha instead of soju?*" (p. 223). Keeping both terms in Korean preserves the cultural significance of the decision: *Chungha* indicates something more refined and clean, while soju indicates something cheap and social. If replaced with generic terms like "vodka" or "rice wine," this nuance would be lost. Because the sentence itself is simple, the passage remains easy to read while still carrying these cultural markers.

When it comes to humour, Hur is clear that Park's writing did not require cultural adjustment. In my questionnaire, he explained: "Not in LITBC, his humor is very ironic in an Anglo-Saxon kind of way ... very Jane Austen, very David Sedaris" (Hur, 2025; Appendix A). This shows that queer irony, bluntness, and sudden tonal shifts in *Love in*

*the Big City* were already stylistically familiar to Anglophone traditions. Hur therefore translated the humour not by domesticating it but by leaning into its natural cross-cultural appeal.

The same applies to queer spaces. Hur recalled: “I just remember going, ‘Oh I totally recognize that bar. I totally recognize that club.’ ... Sang Young sees Seoul as a world city, and all cities are kind of very similar at some level, really” (Hur, 2025; Appendix A). For Hur, Seoul’s queer geography does not need to be over-explained, because it shares recognisable features with urban gay cultures elsewhere. This view explains his choice to keep cultural references such as *noraebang* or particular music acts, presenting Seoul as a city that is understandable to global readers rather than as something radically “other.”

Across these examples, the pattern is consistent. Hur retains terms whose cultural weight cannot be reduced (*umma*, *oppa*, *soju*, *noraebang*) while adapting elements where too much detail would distract rather than clarify (specific in-law distinctions, indirect politeness formulas). Although pop-cultural and queer references remain untranslated, the overall prose is made accessible, which lets the novel preserve its cultural and queer character without smoothing it out. His own comments reinforce this strategy: by recognising humour and urban space as already globally accessible, Hur positions translation not as a process of explaining Korea to the world but of maintaining the text’s rhythm and letting readers encounter its culture directly.

### **4.2.3 Institutional and Market Context**

Translation does not happen in isolation. In addition to linguistic and cultural choices, translators work under institutional and commercial frameworks that both promote and limit the content that is available to readers overseas. Anton Hur has spoken openly about these pressures. According to him, Korean institutions and publishers have often preferred diaspora or foreign translators, while showing less confidence in Korean nationals. He explained that this bias shifted only after his translations were longlisted and shortlisted for the International Booker Prize, which altered institutional perceptions of his work (KF Interview, 2022). This shows that institutional legitimacy

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is not simply about providing support, but also about deciding who is recognised as able to represent Korean literature internationally.

Hur has reflected on how prizes and readerships influence the course of a translator's career. Earlier in his career, he felt that he did not match what prize committees wanted from a translator. Rather than waiting for recognition, he turned his attention to building a readership, emphasising that translated fiction can only survive if people actively buy and engage with it (The Booker Prizes, 2023). This shows that translators must negotiate not just institutional agendas but also the commercial expectations of publishers and audiences.

At the same time, Hur has expressed strong criticism of the way LTI Korea carries out its mission. In his questionnaire response, he explained: “they’ve done a pretty awful job promoting Korean literature in translation as they are hostile to translators and treat us like dirt, like we were some necessary evil. They can’t wait to replace us all with AI, I bet. They’re like that rich family in *Parasite*, who look at translators like parasites, when they themselves are the real parasites, parasiting off the labor of translators” (Hur, 2025; Appendix A). His argument draws attention to a conflict between institutional strategies, which frequently place a higher priority on marketability and prestige, and a translator's dedication to maintaining cultural uniqueness and promoting marginalised voices. This dispute demonstrates that institutional support is never neutral; rather, it represents conscious decisions concerning the type of Korean literature that is presented to readers around the world.

A central part of Hur's stance is his refusal to “sanitise” queer writing for Western audiences. He has said that his selection of projects is deliberate, aiming to centre queer and minority voices and to resist what he calls both “white-supremacist” and “Korean-nationalist” narratives (Grove Atlantic, 2021). At the same time, he points out that Anglophone readers of translated fiction, particularly younger ones, are often less conservative than assumed, and thus more open to the rawness and openness of works like *Love in the Big City* (The Booker Prizes, 2023).

Hur's remarks ultimately reveal a profound mistrust of LTI Korea. According to him, the Institute is more of a barrier than a force for global circulation. It's a company more

focused on appearances than on actually supporting translators. For him, the international visibility of Korean literature depends more on translators and readers than on the work of LTI.

#### **4.2.4 Adaptations and the Translator's Role**

As outlined in Chapter II, one of the main obstacles facing Korean literature abroad is the “visual barrier”: novels depend entirely on text, whereas much of today’s cultural consumption relies on multimodal formats such as K-dramas, webtoons, or short-form video (see 2.5). This places pressure on the translator, whose task is not only linguistic but also imaginative. The translator must write prose that helps readers to create these images from text alone, as K-dramas instantaneously convey, visual signals such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and background information. Hur's translation of *Love in the Big City* serves as an example of this challenge. He makes sure that Anglophone readers can visualise the meaning of the Korean text without the need for visual aids by capturing cultural nuances and queer humor in English language that is both striking and natural.

This becomes especially clear on platforms like BookTok (see 2.5.1). Once a novel exists in English, passages can be quoted, clipped, or staged in visually appealing ways. Hur’s translations combine clarity and cultural energy in ways that capture younger audiences, often creating the momentum that leads to screen adaptations. The case of *Love in the Big City* makes this cycle especially clear: it was only after the novel had gained visibility in print through translation that it was adapted, first as a feature film (TIFF, September 2024; cinema release the following month) and then as a TVING drama. Now that both versions are on Netflix, it becomes clear that the novel’s journey started with print, which remains the base that makes this kind of wider media success possible. These adaptations show how translation can act as more than a bridge for Anglophone readers. Hur’s English version helped build the international visibility that positioned the work for global streaming platforms and film festival circuits.

Hur presents adaptation as another mode of translation. In my questionnaire, he explained: “I have great respect for TV and film and think actors and directors are extremely fine-tuned translators of emotions through movement and mise en scène”

(Hur, 2025; Appendix A). This perspective shows why he does not see adaptation as a dilution of literature but as an extension of the translator's work across media. In this sense, the translator is not only mediator and catalyst but also part of a larger chain of cultural translation, where novels, films, and social media all contribute to the circulation of Korean stories on a global scale.

### **4.3 Institutional Perspective (LTI Korea)**

In addition to individual translator strategies, institutions have an important role in influencing how Korean literature circulates internationally. The Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) has been the most significant body in this area, providing funding, training, and platforms for global promotion. Its activities not only help translators, but they also impact which works are chosen, how they are presented, and the types of readers they are expected to draw in. Looking at LTI Korea's activities reveals how institutional frameworks both support and constrain individual translation choices in the process of circulation.

#### **4.3.1 Funding and Training**

The Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) supports the international circulation of Korean literature mainly through its funding schemes and translator training programs. In response to my questionnaire, the Institute emphasised that "high-quality translation is the single most crucial factor in introducing Korean literature abroad," which is why translator training is placed at the centre of their long-term strategy (LTI Korea, 2025; Appendix B). The Translation Academy is described as a "systematic training program for aspiring and professional translators of Korean literature" that not only teaches practical skills but also encourages "a community of translators who can act as cultural bridges." Many of its graduates are now active worldwide as professional translators, researchers, and publishers, and their work has "directly contributed to expanding the global readership of Korean literature" (LTI Korea, 2025; Appendix B).

Alongside training, LTI Korea offers a quarterly grant program to overseas publishers that have obtained the rights to Korean works. As the Institute explained in the questionnaire, "the proposal is evaluated by a professional judgment committee in

accordance with our internal guidelines.” Applications are not judged on genre, author prestige, or publisher background; instead, selection is based on “the literary quality of the work and the publisher’s commitment to promoting Korean literature in their region” (LTI Korea, 2025; Appendix B). This approach makes sure that support depends not only on cultural merit but also on a clear plan for circulation abroad, showing the Institute’s focus on both literary value and practical viability.

Put together, these initiatives underline LTI Korea’s dual role as educator and facilitator. By supporting translators through the Translation Academy and encouraging publishers with grant programs, the Institute builds the infrastructure needed for Korean literature to reach global audiences.

#### **4.3.2 Book and Project Selection**

Alongside its support for funding and training, the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) influences which Korean works gain circulation abroad. According to my questionnaire, the Institute runs a “quarterly grant program for overseas publishers,” with each proposal evaluated by “a professional judgment committee in accordance with our internal guidelines” (LTI Korea, 2025; Appendix B). Selection is “not limited by genre, author recognition, or publisher background,” but is instead based on “the literary quality of the work and the publisher’s commitment to promoting Korean literature in their region” (LTI Korea, 2025; Appendix B). Applications are also judged on their “literary and cultural significance,” “international appeal,” “feasibility and market strategy,” and “translator’s competence” (LTI Korea, 2025; Appendix B).

These guidelines show how institutional support overlaps with the problems discussed in Chapter II. The emphasis on international appeal is particularly relevant to discussions about cultural accessibility in translation, as texts must strike a balance between staying true to Korean nuance while keeping the clarity required in Anglophone markets (Venuti, 1995; Sun, 2012; Snell-Hornby, 2006). By stressing both accessibility and cultural value, LTI Korea puts into policy the same balancing act that translators deal with in practice. Similarly, the Institute’s framework reflects the issue of genre mismatches and market expectations. As discussed in Chapter II, while short stories and novellas hold prestige in Korean literary culture, they rarely fit the

preferences of Anglophone publishers, who prefer full-length novels (Fulton, 2011). By stressing publishability and market strategy, LTI Korea shows awareness of this mismatch and supports projects that stand a stronger chance of success abroad, even when they differ from local traditions.

Finally, book and project selection is closely linked to international prizes and visibility. LTI Korea notes that awards are one of the main ways success is measured, with sales and nominations tracked each year (LTI Korea, 2025; Appendix B). This institutional focus parallels the dynamics discussed in Chapter II: the 2016 Man Booker International Prize for *The Vegetarian* and the 2022 shortlist for *Cursed Bunny* both boosted individual authors' visibility while shifting global interest toward Korean literature (Licher, 2016; Gowman, 2023; Nikkei Asia, 2024). By prioritising projects with international appeal, the Institute strengthens the connection between translation support, market selection, and the broader mechanisms of global literary recognition.

Taken together, LTI Korea's policies show that institutional choices are far from neutral. They act as forms of gatekeeping, shaping how the challenges discussed in Chapter II play out in practice: the push for readability and accessibility, the preference for the novel form, and the weight given to international prizes. All quotations in this section come directly from my questionnaire with LTI Korea.

### **4.3.3 Promotion and International Visibility**

Beyond training and funding, one of the main ways in which the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) looks to expand the global reach of Korean literature is through its promotional activities. These initiatives aim not only to promote the act of translation, but also to improve international visibility, particularly in countries like the United States, where exposure is more limited in comparison to other cultural exports such as K-pop or K-dramas.

Korean Literature Now (KLN), the English-language quarterly magazine published by LTI, is a key component of the above strategy. KLN, which is distributed to over 3,500 universities, libraries, and cultural organisations worldwide, introduces Korean authors via essays, interviews, and translated excerpts. The entire magazine can be found online for free, which removes many of the barriers that usually prevent translated works from

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reaching U.S. and Western readers (LTI Korea). By offering accessible, curated content, KLN helps bring Korean novels into the global literary conversation and makes sure they reach international critics, academics, and publishers.

LTI has also built digital infrastructures such as *KLWAVE*, which offers searchable databases of authors, translators, and rights information. These resources are designed for publishers, agents, and festival organisers abroad, making it easier to discover and secure Korean titles (KLWAVE). At the same time, LTI Korea's translation and publication grants give foreign publishers a clear incentive to pick up Korean books. The grants, offered quarterly, cover a large share of translation costs by genre and language, with English treated as a top priority (LTI Korea). This technique highlights how promotion is linked to market logic, with the goal of not only increasing awareness but also lowering the practical barriers that prevent publishers from expanding internationally.

LTI Korea also builds international visibility through fellowships and exchange programmes. The K-Literature Fellowship, for example, connects Korean publishers and translators with global industry figures, creating opportunities for rights sales and wider circulation. In 2025, its exchange programme supported 29 projects in 18 countries, showing the Institute's role in advancing transnational literary exchange (The Korea Times, 2025). Such initiatives demonstrate that the Institute's promotional model is more than just advertising Korean literature overseas; it is actively integrating it into global literary markets via networks of publishers, critics, and readers.

For this thesis, these activities are important as they reveal how much institutional promotion can stand behind one novel such as *Love in the Big City*. The translator's decisions affect how readers connect with the text, but its larger visibility also relies on institutional structures of distribution and promotion. Without KLN, grant structures, or fellowship events, Korean novels would struggle to gain international recognition, especially in Anglophone markets where translated fiction already faces a small readership base. In this sense, LTI's promotion strategies provide the infrastructure that allows novels such as Park Sang Young's to be read, discussed, and eventually adapted into other media.

#### **4.4 Readers and Reviewers**

Readers and reviewers are important for understanding how *Love in the Big City* is received abroad. They offer another angle alongside translator and institutional perspectives, showcasing how Anglophone readers respond to questions of style, cultural reference, and queer identity in the text. For this study, I looked at thirteen English-language reviews. Most of them were written by U.S.-based readers, with others coming from Canada, the UK, Ireland, and a few where the location was unknown but the review was in English. Together, these reviews give a sense of how Anton Hur's translation is read internationally and what this can tell us about the wider reception of Korean literature in global markets.

##### **4.4.1 Readability and Style**

For many U.S. readers, the question of readability shaped their reading experience of *Love in the Big City*. Vanessa W. (Dallas, TX) found the prose "awkward" and the flow disjointed, suggesting that the translation at times clashed with her expectations of smooth English style. While Vanessa doesn't cite specific passages, the novel itself often shifts abruptly between timelines and perspectives. "*— Please take your seats, the ceremony is about to begin. (...) The summer we turned twenty, Jaehee and I became best friends. ... 'Be honest with me. You and Jaehee. Were the rumors true?'*" (Park, 2021, p. 3) — jumps in rhythm and chronology can feel fragmented to readers who expect a smoother, more linear narration. This also reveals a wider problem: the struggles Korean novels face in English-speaking markets are not just about translation but also about narrative style. What works smoothly for a Korean audience, with its quick jumps in time and shifting viewpoints, can feel unfamiliar or even unsettling for Anglophone readers, which makes these novels harder to approach and less widely received.

Jake (unknown) shared a more balanced take. While he felt that the fragmented structure left parts of the narrative underdeveloped, especially the friendship with Jaehee, he still found the narrator's voice vivid and compelling, and at times very relatable. Jake saw the disjointed form not as a weakness but as part of the novel's effect, capturing how life can feel divided into separate moments and recollections.

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By contrast, Simone Stacy (Illinois) called Hur's translation "revelatory," stressing how it kept the rawness of Park's voice while still being engaging in English. She doesn't cite a specific passage, but Young's sharp remarks about his mother's church obsession capture the clipped humour and irony she highlights. Gisele (location unknown) also emphasised the role of humour in shaping the book's readability. She laughed at Young's sarcasm and wit even as the story moved into darker territory, suggesting that this mix of tones made the novel feel alive and accessible rather than heavy or confusing. This contrast shows that readability is not fixed in the text itself but depends on both the translator's choices and the reader's own tolerance for bluntness, irony, and shifting rhythms. Where some readers find the novel difficult to follow, others see these same features as a strength.

Outside the U.S., Troy (Canada) praised the novel's style as accessible and easy to follow, placing it within the familiar tradition of Anglophone autofiction<sup>4</sup>. For him, the book's readability came from how well it connected with literary forms he already recognised. By contrast, Livia (unknown) read the book through the absence of Jaehee. For her, Jaehee's departure made Young's world feel much "duller," and this coloured her perception of the chapters that followed. This suggests that readability depended not only on language or style but also on the presence of characters that sustained the novel's energy

Belton (US) described the book as "perfect" and reread it several times. He annotated quotes and praised Park's raw, blunt writing, finding it one of the novel's greatest strengths. For him, the very qualities some readers saw as awkward or fragmented became the reason the book stood out.

This means that the way readers frame the novel not only affects but also shapes their expectations. If *Love in the Big City* is picked up as "foreign literature," the sudden tone changes and fragmented style often come across as confusing or even poorly written. But when it is read as autofiction, where rawness and shifts in mood are part of the genre, those same features feel intentional and effective. In this way, the label

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<sup>4</sup> Autofiction - a literary genre that blends autobiography with fiction, where the narrator's experiences partly mirror the author's own life.

with which the book is read influences whether readers perceive its style as a weakness or a strength.

These mixed responses link back to the frameworks discussed in Chapter II. McDonald (2020) and Sun (2012) emphasise that readability in translation is not just about comprehending the language, but also about how cultural and stylistic elements are handled for the target audience. Venuti's (1995) distinction between domestication and foreignisation is also visible here: readers like Vanessa W. leaned toward domestication, while others appreciated Hur's foreignising approach, especially his decision to keep Korean terms and cultural references visible in the text. What the reviews make clear is that readability is never universal but something that shifts with cultural expectations. This shows that reception is never determined by translation alone, but also by the interpretive habits and preferences of Anglophone audiences.

#### **4.4.2 Cultural References and Accessibility**

A common pattern in U.S. reader responses is the tension between keeping Korean culture visible and making the text accessible. Several reviewers noticed the way that Hur decided to keep Korean terms and references, however they responded differently to the way it impacted their reading. For some, these cultural details added authenticity and depth.

Simone Stacy (Illinois) praised the translation for not over-explaining, calling it an "immersive" experience where she could pick up meaning from context. Similarly, S.A. Corro (U.S.) described the book as both "mirror and bridge," saying that the use of kinship terms, foods, and social spaces encouraged readers to engage more actively instead of smoothing away cultural differences. Their responses connect to Sun's (2012) idea of "cross-cultural readability." This concept stresses that understanding does not come from direct substitution alone but from the way readers pick up meaning through surrounding context, style, and cultural cues.

Other reviewers, however, expressed frustration with these same strategies. Vanessa W. (Dallas, TX) found the untranslated cultural references confusing and even alienating, writing that *Love in the Big City* "feels like a lot got lost in translation" and that there was "not enough context to really ground us [in Korea]" (Appendix B). While she does

not specify, her criticism might point to elements like drinking culture and kinship terminology, which she felt were not fully clarified and created distance instead of drawing her in. Ricky Schneider (Florida), on the other hand, praised the novel's honesty and cultural value but admitted that Park's use of autofiction and detailed cultural references sometimes felt "long-winded" and "meandering," which for him made the story less accessible to Anglophone readers (Appendix B).

Other readers raised similar concerns about how accessibility is tied not only to language but also to form and character presence. Jake (location unknown) described the novel's four parts as "kaleidoscopic" snapshots, striking in detail but sometimes leaving clear gaps between different stages of Young's life. He noted that the time jumps often reduced context and left some relationships, especially with Jaehee, feeling incomplete. Livia (location unknown) also focused on Jaehee's absence after Part One, saying that her disappearance left the later chapters feeling "duller" and harder to invest in. For both readers, accessibility was shaped less by untranslated terms than by structural choices that altered how much continuity or energy the narrative carried.

Readers outside the United States likewise commented on the way cultural references were presented. Owen (location unknown) drew attention to the use of terms like *oppa* and *hyung*, which Hur opted to leave untranslated. He saw this as a deliberate choice that made the novel feel more authentic, giving readers a direct sense of Korean queer social life without softening it through extra explanation. A UK reviewer similarly welcomed untranslated terms such as *umma* and *noraebang*, seeing them as markers of authenticity rather than barriers. Taken together, these contrasting perspectives show how cultural detail can be experienced in opposite ways: immersive for some, but alienating for others. This dynamic reflects what Snell-Hornby (2006) describes as the "cultural turn" in translation studies, where readers are negotiating not only with words but with the cultural codes embedded in them.

Taken together, these reviews point to the main challenge of cultural translation: what might feel enriching to some readers can just as easily exclude others. As Anton Hur explained in my questionnaire, he does not worry about "alienating" Anglophone audiences but trusts them to "get it" (Hur, 2025; Appendix A). The mixed responses make this clear. Some readers enjoy the cultural density, while others find it distancing.

What this shows is that *Love in the Big City*'s accessibility is not built into the text itself but emerges in the space between the translator's choices and the reader's expectations.

#### **4.4.3 Responses to Queer Themes and Social Contexts**

Reader responses to the queer themes in *Love in the Big City* show both the possibilities and the difficulties of bringing culturally specific stories to international audiences. Its open portrayal of sexuality, illness, and queer urban life drew particularly strong reactions from U.S. readers.

Ricky Schneider (Florida) praised the novel's "rare candor," calling it an "OwnVoices representation of gay life in South Korea" that he found both eye-opening and culturally important. He stressed that the book's refusal to downplay HIV or queer relationships gave it a raw honesty that felt unique within the Anglophone literary scene (Appendix B). In a similar way, S.A. Corro (U.S.) described the novel as both a "mirror and bridge," noting how its focus on gay relationships spoke to those yearning for stories that expressed intimacy, joy, and sorrow (Appendix B). Vince Caparas (Vancouver) also drew attention to this, describing Young as one of the most "realistically rendered" queer narrators he had encountered in first-person fiction. He especially valued how the novel addressed HIV stigma with nuance rather than falling into sensationalism. Similarly, Achilles (location unknown) emphasised the book's authenticity, likening it to a raw, late-night conversation with a friend. He described it as tender, funny, and melancholic at the same time, and praised the way it captured queer loneliness while still keeping its humour and warmth.

At the same time, some U.S. readers responded with discomfort. Vanessa W. (Dallas, TX) recognised the importance of queer representation but felt the novel's focus on sex and drinking was "shallow" and at times "offensive," criticising what she saw as a flippant treatment of serious issues such as illness and relationships (Appendix B). Similarly, s.penkveich (Michigan) noted that although the book's depiction of queer life was powerful, its raw focus on loneliness, rejection, and HIV stigma could feel emotionally heavy and hard to take in (Appendix B). Julie (location unknown) appreciated the novel's honesty and distinctiveness as one of the first openly queer Korean works she had read, but also wished Jaehee's presence had extended further

into the later sections, showing that the novel's representation is tied not only to sexuality but also to friendship and loss. Anne-Marie (location unknown) took a slightly different angle, noting the weight she placed on the author's and translator's notes, which for her reinforced why queer Korean stories should be voiced and circulated globally, even when challenging.

Responses outside the U.S. reinforce this divide. Troy (Canada) praised the mix of humour and melancholy, noting that the novel broadened his perspective on queer culture in Korea while remaining deeply relatable (Appendix B). These varied reactions show that queer representation in *Love in the Big City* operates as both a bridge and a barrier. It reminds us that queer visibility in translation doesn't always land evenly: what feels intimate and affirming to one reader might feel disorienting or unsettling to another. Yet it is precisely in this tension that its force becomes clear.

Overall, these reviews reveal how *Love in the Big City* makes queer visibility both connective and disruptive. Some readers connect with the humour and honesty of the novel, while others feel unsettled by its direct approach to illness, sex, and identity. This split is not simply a weakness; it points to the value of queer translation. Books that refuse to be softened for easy reading may be harder to take in, but they also push Anglophone audiences to widen their sense of what counts as literature.

#### **4.4.4 Adaptations and Audience Reception**

The global reception of *Love in the Big City* is also tied to its move into other media. In October 2025 it was adapted both into a feature film and an eight-episode series on TVING. The film centred on "Jaehee," the novel's first chapter, while the series covered all four parts, with Park Sang-young involved as screenwriter.

For some readers, the novel's fragmented form came across as naturally "cinematic," which made its move into film and series seem well-suited. Ricky Schneider (Florida) praised its diaristic flow as a glimpse into everyday Korean life, while others, like Vanessa W. (Dallas, TX), characterised it as "a collection of four long stories" (Appendix B). These contrasting views show how the book's structure shaped expectations for adaptation, seen by some as a strength, by others as a flaw. Belton

(U.S.), meanwhile, directly engaged with the drama, describing how he cried watching the first two episodes because of how faithfully they represented the book. For him, the series deepened rather than replaced his reading, and even prompted him to reread the entire novel.

Marketing and paratexts also shaped expectations of adaptation. Julie (unknown) explained that she immediately picked up the book after reading the blurb, which promised “a glittering nighttime of Seoul” and “the joys of queer life.” This framing positioned the novel as already “cinematic,” prompting readers to picture it visually even before the drama or film appeared. Anne-Marie (unknown) added that Seoul itself functioned almost like a character, a perception that aligns with how the adaptations brought out the city visually. These responses suggest that even when readers did not mention adaptations directly, they were influenced by the ways the novel was marketed and framed as a text that could cross into screen language.

Yet it is striking that, despite the global publicity around these releases, very few reviewers in my sample mentioned the film or series directly. Instead, their focus remained on the text itself and Hur’s translation. This silence suggests that readers treated the book as an independent experience, even when its adaptations were widely available. Nevertheless, the yearly distribution of reviews shows a noticeable increase from late 2024 onwards, with readership continuing strongly into 2025 (see Appendix C). While reviewers rarely linked their reading to the adaptations, the timing suggests that the TIFF premiere, the Netflix release, and the TVING series played an indirect role in sustaining international interest.

The adaptations also show how the novel was reshaped for new audiences. With Park involved in the TVING series, extra scenes and conflicts were added, turning the book into screen language. Some Anglophone readers had already noticed its quote-worthy lines and visual style, and on platforms such as BookTok and Bookstagram, readers shared short passages in ways that resembled mini-adaptations. For international audiences, the novel’s multiple versions — book, film, series, and online circulation — offered varied points of entry, positioning it not just as literature but as part of the wider Hallyu cultural economy.

In this sense, the film and series worked less as ways of interpreting the novel than as paratexts that boosted its visibility. They gave international audiences extra entry points into the story, but once readers turned to the book, their focus stayed on the prose and Hur's translation. This shows that even if adaptations help expand reach, it is still the translated print novel that lies at the centre of global reception.

In this chapter I looked at the perspectives of translators, institutions, and readers in shaping how Korean literature travels abroad. The case of *Love in the Big City* shows that translation stays at the centre on book-focused platforms, where readers connect directly with the prose and its cultural details, even as social media and adaptations help to further spread its visibility. On drama or film sites, however, audiences often meet the story only as screen content, without realising it began as a novel. This gap makes clear that different media lead to different kinds of reception, but it also underlines my point that it is the translated book that gives Korean literature its footing internationally, even when adaptations might pull in a broader crowd later. Altogether, the analysis points to the interconnected processes of cultural translation that situate Korean novels within global literary markets.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 Restating the Aim and Research Questions**

This thesis set out to explore why Korean literature has struggled to gain wide recognition abroad, even as other forms of Korean cultural production such as music and television dramas have become global successes. Literature continues to be an unsteady participant in the global pop cultural revolution brought about by Hallyu during the past 20 years. While K-pop and K-dramas spread quickly through digital platforms and visual formats, Korean novels face barriers of translation, cultural specificity, and institutional visibility.

To investigate these issues, this study focused on *Love in the Big City* (2021) by Park Sang-young, translated into English by Anton Hur. By focusing on this novel as a case study, I explored the processes of translation, circulation, and reception that shape how Korean literature travels internationally. Four questions guided this research:

1. How do different forms of circulation, including translation, marketing, and adaptations, shape the international visibility of *Love in the Big City*?
2. How do Anton Hur's translation choices in *Love in the Big City*, for example, maintaining cultural terms, humour, and narrative voice, shape the accessibility and reception of the novel among U.S. readers, particularly in the way Korean queer identity and social nuance are mediated for Anglophone audiences?
3. What do Anglophone readers' responses reveal about the challenges and possibilities of translating Korean literature?
4. Why did *Love in the Big City* gain significant international recognition, and what role did translation, institutions, and online platforms play in its reception within the broader landscape of Korean literature abroad?

### **5.2 Summary of Findings**

Chapter IV engaged with these questions through a close look at *Love in the Big City*, paying attention to the roles of translators, institutions, and readers. What follows here

brings those findings together into a clearer picture of how the novel travelled internationally.

RQ1 (Circulation): The case study shows that circulation works less as a set of separate processes and more as a chain of interconnected links. Translation formed the base: Anton Hur's English version gave the novel legibility for Anglophone readers and made later adaptations possible. Through prizes, blurbs, and marketing, institutions helped set up expectations, frequently describing the novel as "cinematic" and accessible, though this framing did not always fit with its more fragmented and melancholic style. The adaptations, both the TIFF feature film and the TVING series later released on Netflix, expanded visibility to wider audiences but did not replace the book as the main site of literary reception. Circulation therefore appears multimodal, but still anchored in the translated print novel.

RQ2 (Hur's translation choices): Hur's translation worked to balance faithfulness with accessibility. He kept cultural terms like *banchan* and *soju*, but placed them in prose that read smoothly and naturally for Anglophone audiences. His humour—especially queer humour—played an important role here, since readers often mentioned the wit as a highlight of the novel. At the same time, his choices let readers imagine the story unfolding visually, which later fed into its "cinematic" feel.

RQ3 (Reader responses): Goodreads reviews show a mix of connection and resistance. Some readers related strongly to the themes of alienation, intimacy, and queer visibility, and even found meaning in the book's fragmented form. Others, though, reacted with distance or frustration, pointing to cultural references they couldn't connect with or to the episodic style they saw as disjointed. This tension is telling; translation doesn't erase cultural difference, but instead makes that difference part of how the book is received. Many readers described the novel as "cinematic," noting how its style and structure seemed ready-made for the screen, even without referencing any specific adaptation. Still, the increase in reviews after 2024 suggests that the adaptations played a role in keeping interest alive.

RQ4 (Recognition): The international success of *Love in the Big City* can be seen as the result of a whole chain of cultural translation. Hur's work made the novel accessible to

Anglophone readers; institutions like LTI Korea helped with visibility and funding; social media platforms such as BookTok gave it extra entry points; and later adaptations expanded its reach even further. Many other Korean novels don't benefit from this full chain, some are translated but not marketed, while others receive institutional backing but struggle to connect with readers. What makes *Love in the Big City* stand out is that it moved through all these stages, allowing it to circulate much more widely abroad.

### **5.3 Theoretical Contribution**

Two key contributions emerge from this study.

First is the concept of the visual barrier. Korean literature in translation struggles in part because it relies solely on text in a global cultural environment where visual and multimodal media dominate. K-pop and K-dramas overcome barriers of language through performance, image, and sound, while novels must work harder to stimulate imagination. Translation thus becomes not only a linguistic act but also an imaginative one, Hur's ability to create prose that readers could "see" and "hear" was crucial for the novel's circulation.

Second is the chain of cultural translation. Rather than viewing translation, institutions, readers, and adaptations as separate, this thesis shows how they form a connected chain. Visibility abroad depends on each link working together, the translator makes the text accessible, institutions provide funding and legitimacy, readers respond and circulate their impressions online, and adaptations expand the audience. This model helps explain why some novels succeed internationally while others remain overlooked.

### **5.4 Limitations**

This study also has limitations that should be acknowledged. The reception data was drawn primarily from Goodreads, manually coded by the researcher. While this gave me a clearer sense of general patterns in responses, it also left room for counting errors and only offered a partial picture, since readers on other reading platforms such as Amazon, StoryGraph, and Fable were not included.

The focus on Anglophone reception means that this study cannot make claims about how *Love in the Big City* was received in non-English-speaking contexts. Additionally, the thesis relies on a single case study that, while valuable, cannot fully represent the

diversity of Korean literature in translation. Finally, the adaptations are recent, and their long-term effect on readership is not yet clear. These limitations point to areas where further research is needed, particularly with other texts and readerships.

### **5.5 Future Research**

Despite these limitations, this study opens several paths for future research.

Future research could also take a comparative angle. Unlike Korean novels, Japanese and Chinese fiction has already established a steady presence abroad, with figures such as Haruki Murakami and Mo Yan achieving global recognition. Comparing the mechanisms of translation, marketing, and institutional support across these literatures could help shed light on why Korean literature has not followed the same path and explain this imbalance.

A second direction is cross-cultural reception studies. This thesis focused on Anglophone readers, but readers in Europe, Latin America, or Southeast Asia may respond differently to Korean novels. Looking at these contexts would give a wider view of how cultural translation works across different groups of readers.

A third area is longitudinal research. Since the film and drama versions of *Love in the Big City* were only released in 2024, their influence on readership will take years to become clear. Following how reviews and sales develop over time could show whether adaptations help sustain long-term engagement with Korean literature or simply create short bursts of visibility.

### **5.6 Closing Reflection**

In sum, this thesis has shown that the international success of *Love in the Big City* cannot be explained by translation, institutional support, reader reception, or adaptation on their own. What made the difference was how these elements worked together, forming a chain of cultural translation. Adaptations and online circulation may have reached wider audiences, but the translated print novel remained the anchor of its global reception.

Overall, Korean literature still faces obstacles in Western markets, yet *Love in the Big City* shows both the difficulties and the possibilities of cultural translation. It demonstrates how Korean fiction can travel across borders when strong translation, institutional visibility, engaged readers, and cross-media circulation align. At the same time, it suggests that many novels might remain overlooked if even one part of this chain is absent.

Taken together, these findings suggest that translation must be seen as more than the transfer of words. It is a cultural process that brings together authors, translators, institutions, readers, and media industries to shape how stories move globally. *Love in the Big City* shows that even though Korean literature remains underrepresented, it has room to gain more visibility in global markets if the different processes of cultural translation keep developing and broadening.

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