Translation has become a keyword triggering reconsideration of assumptions and interpretations of various cultural phenomena in the field of literary and cultural studies. Yet, despite the increasing awareness of translation’s formative role, translated literature is still habitually considered derivative of source texts, that is, not as original as the original. The set of legal regimes surrounding contemporary copyright is one instantiation of this belief and testament to its dominance. In our reading of foreign literature, the work of the translator is often overlooked, and it would hardly seem apropos to include translations of foreign works in the canon of a given nation’s literary history. But the formative period of modern literature in East Asia, around the turn of the twentieth century, offers us a different view of translation. During this time, translation was considered a creative and authentic activity that stood alongside other forms of prose writing, both fiction and nonfiction. For most leading East Asian intellectuals of the day, translation was a critical mode of influence on both literary and social discourses. Translation’s Forgotten History investigates the meanings and functions that translation generated for modern national literatures during this formative period, thereby reconsidering literature as part of a dynamic process of negotiating foreign and local values. Translation was not a supplement to national literature but the kernel of it. Through examination of Korean intellectuals’ translation and appropriation of Russian prose in the early twentieth century, I aim to highlight translation as a radical and ineradicable part—not merely a catalyst or complement—of the formation of modern national literature,
and thus to begin rethinking the way modern literature developed in Korea and East Asia. Although national canons are often founded on amnesia regarding their process of formation, framing literature from the beginning as a process rather than an entity allows a more complex and accurate understanding of national literature formation in East Asia, and may also provide a model relevant to the situation of world literature today.

This book re-addresses the role of translation in the formation of a modern literature by examining how colonial Koreans appropriated Russian literature, through the medium of Japanese relay translations, while in the process of building their own modern literature in the early twentieth century. Translation has been integral to the formation of most modern literatures, and Korean literature is no exception. Writers appropriated foreign literatures to build a new vernacular language and used foreign literatures and literary figures as a vehicle for creating a new public role for the writer. Within this project, Russian literature had particular importance as an example of a socially engaged literature under an authoritarian regime; it was the most translated of any foreign literature in early twentieth-century Korea, and was one of the most influential literatures in other East Asian countries also.

Korean translations, however, took place through the mediation of Japanese language and culture. Most Korean writers first read Russian literature in an encounter structured by the colonial relationship between Korea and Japan (1910–45). Since only a few Korean intellectuals could translate Russian literature directly from Russian and Japanese translations of Russian literature were in a number of cases already available, Koreans mostly translated and adapted Japanese versions. Thus, Japanese selection of what and how to translate from Russian literature prefigured Korean reception to a significant extent. Through close historical and textual analysis of works that traveled from Russian through Japanese to Korean, I argue that translation was an active and creative form of intellectual work by which colonized intellectuals engaged with their sociopolitical situation, and that Koreans’ use of Russian literature formed part of an intellectual community around East Asia, a community that is most prominently visible in a shared use of Russian realist literature in the process of developing a socially committed literature of their own.

Despite the fact that translation was an indispensable element of and process in the formation of both the concept (or consciousness) and the
substance of national literature, the process itself has been diminished and forgotten—or intentionally erased by history writing that portrays national literature as an autonomously developed outcome. In post-liberation Korea, Korean scholars engaged, from the 1970s to the early 1990s, in overt and covert debates as to whether modern Korean literature was transplanted or developed autonomously, and whether premodern and modern Korean literatures are continuous or discontinuous. The theory of autonomous development, which emphasizes an internal logic in the development of modern Korean literature was revitalized in the early 1990s during the debate on the true starting point of modern Korean literature—a debate whose central aim was to find the germ of modern literature within traditional literature that had not been affected by colonization.

This nationalist approach can be understood as a meaningful, if not inevitable, part of the process by which national literatures that have experienced (semi-)colonization can recover some sense of cultural sovereignty. But the problem is that in pursuing these arguments, Korean scholars have tended to minimize the impact of foreign literatures, Japan’s mediation, and, as a corollary, translation itself, because they assume that literary influence is symptomatic of an immature literature and, by extension, of a weak nation. Concomitantly, this approach has prevented scholars from confronting their colonial legacies and those legacies’ impacts on their own ways of conducting research. In the 2000s, however, Korean studies scholars in both Korea and the United States began to pay serious attention to the issue of translation in modern Korean society. The topic has become a valuable line of inquiry among a number of groups of scholars trying to understand the fundamental characteristics of modern Korea. As a pioneering study of the significant relationship between Russian and Korean literature, Translation’s Forgotten History seeks to account for the meaning and function of translation in modern Korean literature during the process of its formation.

This volume also provides a broader East Asian perspective from which to understand the formation of modern literatures. Both China’s May Fourth writers and modern Korean writers relied on Japanese translations of Russian literature. They were deeply affected by an image of Russian literature as a socially engaged body of work—an image that was initially formed in the Japanese literary world—and one that differed markedly from the initial reception of Russian literature in Europe,
which emphasized the familiarity of its Victorian style. Thus framed, Russian literature had a unique impact on East Asian intellectuals, who were searching for new models for literature and new ideas about the social role of the writer at a time of immense change. Whether they were writing in a colony (Korea), a semi-colony (China), or an imperialist state (Japan), these writers struggled to present a new vision to their societies; not only in Korea and China but also in Japan, Russian literature was embraced most strongly by anti-imperialist intellectuals. Japanese anti-war writers around the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) and proletarian writers in the 1920s and 1930s habitually referred to Russia’s nineteenth-century realists. This suggests that Russian literature became one element in a form of anti-imperial cosmopolitanism in East Asia in the early twentieth century. In light of the relationships that cohered through Russian literature, *Translation’s Forgotten History* thus increases our understanding of a shared literary experience and sensibility in East Asia, which referred to Russia as a significant other in the formation of its own modern literatures.

Beyond Asian literature, this book contributes to the field of translation studies and to studies of (colonial) mediation as well. Translation studies seeks to place significant emphasis on target cultures by rethinking translation as rewriting and refraction rather than reflection or imitation. My research adds a fuller understanding of the relations between translation and the formation of national literature by arguing that the creative force of translation was gradually effaced from literary history as a necessary part of national literature becoming the dominant mode of understanding. It is also relevant to studies of mediation, which in my own study takes the form of relay translations and mediated cultural transmission between Russia and Korea.

While accommodating understandings made possible by previous scholarship, this book thus aims to go beyond the paradigm of national literature yet still find a place for agency and the importance of local meaning through a focus on the constructive process that translation entails. I hope that *Translation’s Forgotten History* will also contribute broadly to humanities scholarship by serving as a valuable point of departure for comprehensive studies of the global formation of modern literature, the travel of cultural capital, and colonial studies, and that, in wider terms, it will contribute to such fields as the history of writing and authorship.