



list

Books from Korea

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Special Section

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In Praise of Translators

Throughout the world, numerous PR teams are actively seeking the best possible brands for their countries and cultures. Both Korea and my own country, the Czech Republic, are no exceptions. But is this really something that can so swiftly and easily be changed as these wizards of spin want? What really makes for a “good branding” of countries, nations, and their people? Is it the economic success of their leading companies and their iconic products in a world now ruled by technology and celebrity, or is it something else?

Being somewhat old-fashioned, I still feel that a country's brand is not determined primarily by the strength of its economy, but by the power of its culture. In the longer term it is a country's culture that makes it visible. Film, drama, visual arts, music, and literature all play the vital role in promoting a lasting positive image of any country. The first four, due to modern technologies, are now crossing international borders and social boundaries more swiftly than before. Yet with literature, possibly the most influential in the long run, this has not proven that easy. Walking along the bookshelves in any good bookshop, it looks like the winners in this battle for influence and image are English-speaking writers. It is the same in Seoul, Prague, or anywhere else in Africa or Latin America. Very few authors writing in languages other than English have succeeded in creating a really worldwide audience.

That is why every country should praise “their” prose and poetry translators. Largely unsung, these professionals are the real ambassadors of their often adopted countries. It is they who spend months or even years trying to interpret the writers' original intent from one culture to the other. They are really at the forefront of a fight for the knowledge and good image of their countries. Without them, a better understanding of any country would be stifled and incomplete.

It is particularly important for “smaller” countries. Not much would be known about Korea in the Czech Republic and vice versa, if it were not for such avid translators. They provide the first direct insights into the cultures and lives of other nations. It was Kim Woo-jin, a famous Korean playwright, who translated the drama *R. U. R.* by Karel Čapek in 1925. This influential play was one of the first translations of modern Western theatre into Korean and it has undoubtedly influenced ideas of the Czech Republic in Korea. The same happened among Czech readers. Korea remained largely unknown until the 1930s, when the leading Czech translator Zdeněk Vančura found a copy of *Grass Roof* by Younghill Kang. A high quality translation as well as a captivating book design by Toyen, the leading Czech artist of the time, made this work, and Korea in general, well-known throughout the country. The five editions of Kang's story put Korea firmly on the cultural map for most Czechs.

The success should surely be credited to translators. Increasingly, interest in things Korean allowed the very first Czech Koreanist, Alois Pultr, to convince another publisher to publish in 1947 a Czech translation of the then new Korean novel—*Daeha* by Kim Nam-cheon. Although it had less of a following than Kang's story, it was nevertheless a historical moment—the very first modern Korean novel ever translated into any European language.

Such exchange between Czech and Korean cultures into the minds of the other would never have happened without the painstaking work of the translators. Sadly their efforts are now almost forgotten. Yet both our countries and their unique cultures need such promoters. Hopefully they are here even now—new generations of Koreanists and Bohemists working at universities in both our countries and elsewhere. We are honored to have such Czech translators as Vladimír Pucek, Miriam Löwensteinová, and Ivana M. Gruberová, who have brought into the Czech language the wonderful works of Ko Un, Han Mal-suk, Kim Sat-gat, or Kim Man-jung to mention but a few. Czech writers such as Karel Čapek, Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, Jaroslav Seifert, and Václav Havel are indebted to their Korean translators—Kim Kyuchin, Kwon Jae-il, and Kim Kyung-Ock. These, and others not mentioned, are the real heroes of national and cultural promotion. It is they, not the media spin doctors, who should be praised.

By Jaroslav Olša, Jr.

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