

Comics Soar as New Korean Wave

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Korean comic books are making inroads overseas. The domestic market for comics is not that good. Foreign works, mostly Japanese, account for more than 80 percent of the market, according to industry figures. This would be less of an evil if the market itself was growing, but it is steadily shrinking year by year.

Though the situation looks bleak, growth in the export of Korean comic books is raising hopes. According to an industry white paper, exports of comics have grown from a mere US\$240,000 in 1999 to US\$1.9 million in 2004 and then US\$3.26 million in 2006. In addition, while Korean comics were sold mainly to Japan and a few other Asian countries in the past, they are now grabbing readers in the United States, Europe and Southeast Asia.

"Until recently Korean comics were largely regarded as poor cousins of the Japanese ones, but they are now growing in popularity thanks to the authors' individuality," says a representative from Editions S.E.E.B.D., the publishing company that has introduced Korean comics to France.

Comics Version of TV Drama Leads the Way

"Palace Story" (Goong, Seoul Cultural Publishers) by Park So-hee was also a hit when dramatized for TV. While the overseas success of the drama series, titled "Princess Hours," is anticipated, the comic book series has already become popular in its own right, leading the Korean wave in comics, or manhwa.

"Palace Story" is popular not only in Asian countries such as China, Japan and Hong Kong, but also in France and Italy. It has racked up sales of over 110,000 and 80,000 copies in Taiwan and Vietnam respectively, and its release in the United States is planned for early 2007.

"Chonchu" by Kim Sung-jae and "Yureka" by Son Hee-joon and Kim Youn-gyeong (Haksan Publishing Ltd.) have been enthusiastically received both inside and outside Korea. Winner of the 2003 Korean Cartoonists Association Award, "Chonchu" was released the same year in France, where 15 volumes have been published so far. Local readers have fallen for the tough drawings and tragic story, so much so that over 20,000 copies of the first volume have been published.

As for "Yureka," the most popular serial carried in the comic magazine "Chance," the number of copies published so far in France tops 15,000. It is acclaimed for its colorful characters and its setting in a computer game.

Park Hee-jeong's "Hotel Africa" and "Fever" (Seoul Cultural Publishers) are so popular in French-speaking countries that the author has held autograph sessions in France and Switzerland. Her elegant drawings and story-telling style have gained her a strong following.

On the strength of the French edition's success, plans are being made to publish an English edition in early 2007 for release in the United States and other English-speaking countries. Park's next series, "Martin and John," and the short work, "Too Long," will also be released in both French and English.

Online Versions Spread Popularity

The rage for Korean comics is not limited to comic books; they are becoming popular online at the same time. The Internet comics site www.ecomix.co.kr is exploring the American online market.

Ecomix has established a separate American site, www.netcomics.com, and is offering 30 titles (some 80 volumes in total). The cost for reading one volume is only US\$1 so the number of visitors is growing. On average the site attracts 2,000-3,000 people per day. Ecomix expects the number will rise five-fold within the next year.

Ecomix's strong point is that it offers a new series simultaneously to both Korean and foreign readers. Some of the site's most sought out titles are "Almost Highly Classified" by Kim Jin-tae, "June" by Lee Young-ran and "100% Perfect Girl" by Wann.

Daewon C.I. also has a good export record and is now considering simultaneous publication in Korean and other languages and offering titles online as they unfold. The company's major titles include "Arcana" by Lee So-yeong and "The President's Daughter" by Lim Ju-yeon.

"Exports were first limited in area and mostly dependent on foreign agencies," says Kim Nam-ho, international licensing manager at Daewon C.I. "Recently, however, we've been concluding contracts on our own in America and Europe and profits have improved greatly."

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