

Korean Comics in the U.S.

by Kat Avila



When I walked into the exhibit hall at San Diego's [Comic-Con International](#) (July 22-25), I saw the Korea Culture & Content Agency (KOCCA) booth. Sponsored by the Ministry of Culture & Tourism, the booth was promoting *manhwa* (Korean comics), which U.S. graphic novel publishers have started to translate. Convention attendees could thumb through the many *manhwa* on display in their original language and pick up a free translated sampler.

I met Seong-Sik Park, KOCCA's comics industry team manager, and Nam Ho Kim, the international licensing manager for Korea's leading comic book publisher Daiwon. Seungmok Seo, the CEO for content library Neodesk, provided information about Korea's leading cartoonist agency Grimynet (their artist management brochure contains stunning artwork in all styles).

Nam Ho Kim spoke at length about Daiwon and *manhwa*; Sun-Young Moon of the Consulate General's Korean Cultural Center translated. Kim hadn't read much *manhwa* before his present position with Daiwon where he has been for the past nine years. His job is to import manga (Japanese comics) to Korea and to export *manhwa* to outside markets.

Daiwon is more than just a comics publisher. This global entertainment enterprise, known officially as Daiwon C&A Holdings Co., Ltd., was established in 1973. By 1977, it was working cooperatively with Toei Animation in Japan. Presently, the business of Daiwon encompasses domestic and foreign animation production (for Disney and Japanese animators); film, DVD, and video production; an animation satellite broadcasting channel; characters, comics, toys, and games (trading card, hand-held, game software); and online entertainment content and solutions. Daiwon has a monopoly in Korea on Nintendo game software.

Daiwon publishes 100 comic titles a month in Korea. Its bestselling titles have been writer Keuk-Jin Jeon and artist Jae-Hyun Yang's *The Ruler of the Land* and Jae-Won Lim's *The Boss* respectively. These titles have been released in the U.S. by ADV Manga. In the U.S. market, Myong-Jin Lee's *Ragnarok* published by TOKYOPOP has been the leading bestseller for *manhwa* (not to be confused with Sakura Kinoshita's popular *manga* *The Mythical Detective Loki Ragnarok*). Overseas Comics, an online bookseller, reports *King of Hell*, *Demon Diary*, and *Priest* as its bestsellers.

Southeast Asia is Daiwon's largest market, so marketing efforts have been focused on North America and Europe, with ongoing negotiations in Brazil and Mexico. The U.S. market has been easier to penetrate with comics for young women, a demographic traditionally underserved by the U.S. comic industry.

In general, the drawing styles in *manhwa* are similar to those found in *manga* because Koreans have grown up with and studied *manga*. But Paul Morrissey, an editor at TOKYOPOP, noted, "Koreans are more open to playing with the medium a little bit, whereas the Japanese are very reverential about their *manga*."

Because *manhwa* are read left to right as in the West, U.S. publishers do not have to duplicate a right-to-left orientation as they do for *manga* to accommodate the artwork layout. Dialogue balloons are more horizontal since Korean Hangul can be read and written horizontally.

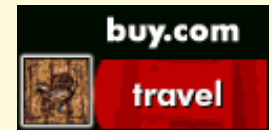
When you compare original copies, *sun-jung manhwa* (ladies' comics) are printed on larger-



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sized B5 paper (folded) and *so-nyun manhwa* (guys' comics) on B6 paper (folded).



There is stricter censorship in Korea than in Japan. You won't see as much "fan service" or skin in *manhwa*. Of course, this might not be as apparent in the U.S. where releases have gone through the sieves of U.S. publishers, such as what licenses are bought.

Lesser-quality graphics, perhaps imperceptible to non-artists, exist in translations since U.S. publishers work from scanned copies of the originals. Seungmok Seo said the system is now changing.

Seo also pointed out how a popular *manga* will predictably become an *anime*, but a *manhwa* will be turned into a TV drama or live action movie since not much animation appears on Korean TV. I wondered aloud if these divergent paths affected comic book writers in either country in any way, such as the way they tell stories or the types of stories they tell.

Though Korea's *manhwa* system developed later, the *manga* and *manhwa* industries can now be considered equal competitors, like "different brands of the same product," noted Kim. In the end, the main result for U.S. consumers is an enhanced comic culture embracing a wider demographic of readers. That's good news for all of us comic fans.

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