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Producing Korean literature (KLit) for export

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Abstract

How does art from what have been culturally peripheral countries that were not former colonies of Western powers scale shift or find its way to the global center? What can the Korean case tell us about the circulation of contemporary literature in a “small language?” The scholarly literature offers many answers to these questions: the role of intermediaries, the power dynamics within the world system of translation, the topographies of literary circulation, and a range of other political, cultural, economic, and social factors. We propose that the Korean case sheds new light on these discussions in several important ways loosely subsumed under the umbrella of infrastructures—the platforms, passageways, containers, and gates that organize the writing, reading, publishing, and marketing of the literature. We see three kinds of infrastructures as catalysts of Korean literary success including infrastructures of export and promotion, infrastructures of discovery and consecration, and infrastructures of connection and vernacularization.

Keywords: Korea, Literature, Publishing, Vernacularization, Infrastructure, Culture, Scale shifting

Introduction

It is a national non-secret that Korea has had its eyes on the Nobel Prize for years. Ever since the Japanese author Kawabata Yasunari won this prestigious award in 1968, the country’s competitive juices have been flowing and Korea has been building an extensive infrastructure to help achieve its national goal (Yun 2012). In 2016, these efforts to champion its literature got a boost when Han Kang won the International Man Booker Prize for her novel, *The Vegetarian*. That same year, Cho Nam-Joo published *Kim Ji-Young, born 1982*, that would go on to become an international bestseller and be made into a film in 2019.

Figure 1 shows the increase in total literary translations subsidized by the Literary Translation Institute (LTI) of Korea from 2001 to 2009. According to LTI, during that period, the number of languages Korean works was translated into increased three-fold (from 8 in 2001 to 27 in 2019) and the number of translated titles grew tenfold (from 14 in 2001 to 151 in 2019). In addition to government support, corporations and non-profit organizations such as the Daesan Foundation have also been key players in promoting the translation of Korean works. Since 2010, the Foundation reports, the range of the target languages that Korean books have been translated into has

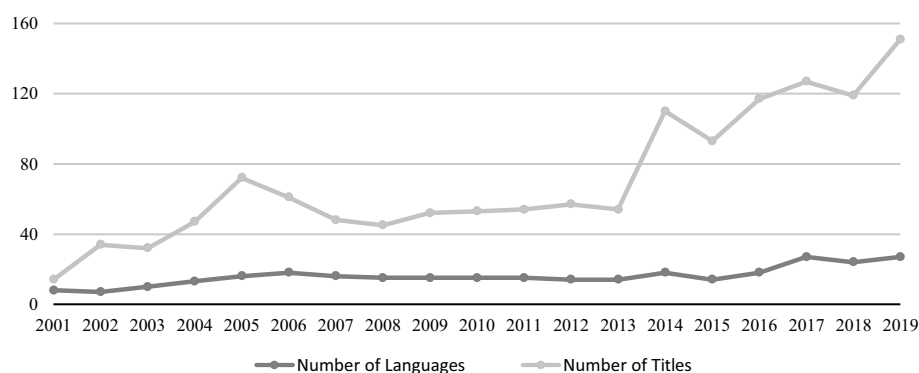


Fig. 1 Number of languages and titles translated by LTI through 2019. Source: Literature Translation Institute of Korea (2020a)

broaden significantly, moving beyond English, French, German, and Spanish to other languages including Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Italian, Persian, etc. (Daesan Foundation 2022).

There has also been a rise in interest and demand for Korean literature in translation. In 2021, approximately 160 articles in major media such as TIME, The New York Times, The Guardian and other literary journals and radio programs positively reviewed Korean literary works, (Kim 2021). Even more importantly, over the past five years, the sales of Korean literary works have been rising steadily. Among them, Cho Nam-Joo's *Kim Ji-Young, born 1982*, sold more than 300,000 copies in ten different languages and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* sold more than 160,000 copies in thirteen different languages. Jeong Yu-Jeong's *Good Son* was translated into nine languages and sold more than 20,000 copies in Brazil while Kim Young-Ha's *Diary of a Murderer: And Other Stories* sold more than 10,000 copies in Germany (Lee 2022).

In addition, *The Vegetarian* was not the only Korean work to win a prestigious literary prize. *The Hole* by Pyun Hye-Young won the Shirley Jackson Award in the USA, *The Autobiography of Death* by Kim Hyesoon won the 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize in Canada, *At Dusk* by Hwang Sok-yong was awarded the 2018 Emile Guimet Prize for Asian Literature in France, and *Hysteria* by Kim Yideum received the 2020 Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize and the 2020 National Translation Award in the USA. *The Vegetarian* also received the 2019 San Clemente Award from Spain. Recently, *The Disaster Tourist* by Yun Ko-eun was named the 2021 winner of the Crime Fiction in Translation Dagger category, awarded by the Crime Writers' Association of England. These awards indicate a high level of acceptance of Korean literature across a spectrum of genres ranging from literary fiction to science fiction and thrillers.

What explains the global rise of Korean literature? It is written in what Pascale Casanova called "a small language" without long-standing colonial ties to the West. Its authors differ from writers working in French or Spanish whose books, if they are lucky, travel to the literary centers of power along long-established, former colonial cultural-linguistic routes. How does art from what have been culturally peripheral countries that were not former colonies of Western powers scale shift or gain prominence in traditional cultural centers? What can the Korean case tell us about contemporary literature circulation in a "small language?"

The scholarly literature offers answers to questions on several related topics: the role of intermediaries, the power dynamics within the world system of translation, the topographies of literary circulation, and a range of other political, cultural, economic, and social factors. We propose that scale shifting can best be understood by analytically integrating these factors under the conceptual umbrella of infrastructures—be they of writing, reading, publishing, or the marketing of the literature. We argue that Korean literature scaled up and gained international prominence thanks to three types of infrastructures: infrastructures of export and promotion, of discovery and consecration, and of connection and vernacularization. These infrastructures enabled Korean literature's circulation while also directing it down particular paths.

Literature review

The extent to which a literary work circulates depends upon its ability to move within and beyond the different scales of the global literary world. We call this scale shifting (Levitt 2020a; Sievers and Levitt 2020). Writers and their works scale up when they circulate successfully to countries of higher power and prestige within or beyond their geographic or cultural trans-region. These countries may be proximate, in a cultural and geographic sense, or far away. Writers and their works scale out when they circulate horizontally between positions of more or less equal power either by being translated into another national language in a plurilingual nation or by circulating to a neighboring country of similar power (Lionnette and Shih 2005; Arnold 2020).

Pascale Casanova's (2005) now classic account of the World Republic of Letters is, in many ways, about the conditions that make scale shifting possible. While Casanova wrote primarily about Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she offers insight into literary circulation within and beyond former colonial and other dominated spaces. Language is a tool of power and, therefore, a form of literary control, creating a "condition of literary dependency" (Casanova 2005: p. 115). The literary balance of power reflects patterns of political domination. Even after independence, these major literary centers maintain a sort of "literary protectorate." But not all dependencies are alike. "Each one is dependent in a specific way" (Casanova 2005: p. 83). How, then, do relations of power and prestige work in other parts of the world to shape literary circulation? What about countries that are not former colonies of the West?

Korea figures only in passing in Casanova's account. According to Hwang (2010: p. 50), Casanova's model does not consider instances where the national language is a tool of liberation from a non-European language, such as the case of Korean from Classical Chinese. Casanova also does not take into account that there is a World Republic of Letters unconnected to Europe. Almost as an aside, she discusses Korean writing as an example of the politicization or nationalization of the literature—something that is characteristic of peripheral literary spaces. "For Casanova," writes Hwang, "Korean literature is reduced to an example of a 'small literature' that, as a literature created to serve the cause of the nation and a people, occupies a dominated position in the international literary order." Her account, argues Hwang, overlooks how complex geopolitics and histories challenge simple binaries such as East and West or dominant versus dominated. We must look empirically at how national

literature is created and positioned over time vis-à-vis its other national, regional, and global cultural counterparts.

Sapiro (2016) identifies four broad sets of political, economic, cultural, and social factors, which work together to explain literary circulation. We build upon her work and propose that scale shifting can best be understood by analytically integrating these factors under the conceptual umbrella of infrastructures. Larkin (2013) defines infrastructures as the platforms, passageways, containers, and gates that enable people, knowledge, power, and ideas to circulate. They are “material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space”. They are the physical networks through which goods, ideas, waste, power, people, and finance are trafficked (Larkin 2013: p. 327).

We find Xiang and Lindquist’s (2014) use of infrastructures to understand contemporary international migration particularly generative. “Migration infrastructures,” they write, “are the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014: p. S124). These migration infrastructures include five dimensions: the commercial dimension (recruitment intermediaries), the regulatory dimension (state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training and other purposes), the technological dimension (communication and transport), the humanitarian dimension (NGOs and international organizations), and the social dimension (migrant networks). While these are not distinct domains, they do operate according to “distinct logics.” In each dimension, “the leading actors, the driving forces, the central strategies and rationalities, and the defining modus operandi differ,” colliding and contradicting one another in ways that both enable and constrain movement (Xiang and Lindquist 2014: p. S124). Here, we identify three kinds of infrastructures that influence the scope and direction of scale shifting.

The process of vernacularization is the extraction of ideas, trends, and practices from the global cultural field and their translation into ideas and practices that resonate with local values and practices. Vernacularization is about communication. It goes beyond simple transmission and translation to make something comprehensible, appropriate, and useful (Merry 2006; Levitt and Merry 2009). It is also about aspirations and goals. In the Korean case, vernacularizers are not just creating new platforms that increase literary circulation. They also change how international prominence is imagined and the platforms and pathways through which it can be achieved. Each step involves meaning making and remaking, whether it be the identity of the vernacularizer herself or the role of the institutions she works from (Jijon 2019, Levitt 2021). The process of vernacularization varies by positionality—the social embeddedness of the actors doing the vernacularizing and the status of the institutions and cities that they work from in the global cultural hierarchy (Levitt 2020b). The individual’s social status, as well as the cultural ranking of the institutions and localities, affects the kinds of ideas and practices that the vernacularizer is exposed to, adopts, and generates. Finally, and most importantly, this is not a one-way process. Vernacularizers make global ideas, styles, and tropes legible to local audiences, but they also articulate and disseminate local references, styles, and themes so that global audiences can grasp them. In fact, over time, they often become generators of new ideas and practices that circulate and are then vernacularized by others.

Our research reveals three kinds of infrastructure that not only aided the scaling up of Korean literature to greater international prominence, but also directed its circulation to specific destinations along particular paths.

1. Infrastructure of export and promotion—The Korean state built impressive machinery from scratch to enhance the translation, dissemination, and promotion of its literature around the world. By doing so, the government transformed what had been a nationally oriented publishing industry and market into an international one. State support of literary production is just one piece of a comprehensive plan to use culture to enhance the nation's political and economic position. Private corporations, small businesses, and foundations all contribute to Korea's race to the global top.
2. Infrastructure of discovery and consecration—There was already a unique set of mechanisms for identifying and anointing new authors in place that ensured a steady pipeline of literary production, consecration, and advancement. These build upon a long-standing reverence for intellectuals and cultural producers who are held in high esteem. They include contests, curated volumes, and book prizes.
3. Infrastructures of connection and vernacularization—In the Korean case, cultural intermediaries do not only adjudicate taste and function as gatekeepers. They also act as vernacularizers making Korean literature legible, useful, and accessible to outsiders by creating the social and institutional ties that enable its circulation. They aid circulation by transforming physical books and their content to make them more understandable and appealing to broad audiences.

Below, we briefly discuss the ways in which political, economic, and sociocultural factors historically manifested themselves through the infrastructures of literary circulation thereby laying the foundations for its contemporary scale shifting.

Historical and contextual influences on scale shifting

Political factors

Politics and ideology block or enable the circulation of literary texts (Sapiro 2016). According to Shim (2021a: 6), previous studies have applied the binary of “strong government/weak cultural autonomy” and “weak government/strong cultural autonomy” in theorizing the relationship between the state and literary translation (Casonava 2005, Sapiro 2016; Ducournau 2015). This research characterizes authoritarian states as deploying literature and translating it to achieve their political and ideological goals. In contrast, liberal-democratic regimes often support literary translation so that small-sized publishers have a better chance of succeeding in the market (Shim 2021a: p. 4).

The land and people that is known as contemporary South Korea has deep intellectual and cultural roots and a long history of literary production that is strongly entangled with politics. Developing largely outside the Western literary orbit, Korean literary production formed part of a regional, cultural-linguistic system that included Japan and China. Elites actively engaged in writing before and during the Chosun Dynasty. In fact, to pass the qualifying exam for government employment, candidates needed to demonstrate that they had achieved scholarly mastery by demonstrating philosophical thinking and by writing poems—an early infrastructure of consecration. Poetry required a

“high level of skill and sophistication, which were considered the evidence of philosophical balance, a capacity to practice politics” (Kim and Kim 1973: p. 52). Although King Sejong invented *Hangeul*, the characters used to write in Korean, in 1443, cultural and intellectual works were still written mostly in Chinese characters during this period.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Korean literary field developed, in part, through a unique infrastructure of import and export—retranslations of Japanese-language and translations of Western classics such as works by Goethe, Tolstoy, and others (Park 2009). These served as touchstones that allowed Korean writers to establish that they too were engaged in legitimate, intellectual pursuits. Translations of a few works by Chinese and Japanese writers such as Lu Xun (鲁迅) and Natsume Sōseki also gained popularity (Park 2012). These developments produced specific infrastructures of connection. They did not, however, give rise to a regional literary identity. The national literary field took shape in isolation, driven by writing in what the world saw as a minor language, despite its rich intellectual tradition and the high-esteem bestowed upon its authors.

In the early years after the founding of modern, independent Korea, the literature was written in service of patriotism and nation building, whereby literary orientations, whether pure or political, were seen as contributing to Korea’s modernization (Choung 2016; Park 2012). This was followed, during the years of military rule, by a period of “people’s literature” that challenged the hierarchical political and social system and advocated for increased political freedom. What we see now, in this current era of economic prosperity and democracy, is the literature as a tool for economic and geopolitical advancement. Indeed, the themes Korean literature addresses are more universal and, therefore, more likely to appeal to international audiences than in the past.

The institutional foundations of a regional literature are still weak. For example, cultural exchanges between China, Korea, and Japan began relatively recently; the import of Japanese popular culture was legally forbidden until 1998. Diplomatic relations between Korean and China only began in 1992. Korea has often turned its back on invitations to participate in regionalization efforts because of its continuing mistrust of and historical animosity toward its neighbors. The emergence of more regional cultural production was not only hampered by language barriers but also by the fact that contemporary literature was written within the context of a nation-under-construction. This context accentuated cultural, political, and economic distinctiveness, which has important consequences for the breadth and frequency of literary circulation. It set Korea apart from other peripheral countries whose literature circulates primarily within a cultural-linguistic region (i.e., Argentine literature traveling first and foremost to other Spanish speaking countries).

Economic factors

Literary circulation also depends on strong and far-reaching publishing, distribution, and translation networks. Sapiro (2016) describes a print market that is organized around two types of frontiers: a cultural/linguistic frontier and a political frontier. Unequal political and economic power strongly affects how easy it is to transcend legal boundaries. British publishers, for example, see their former colonies as their primary international market, with economic and legal transactions eased by institutional and

cultural similarities. French book publishers often look to readers in the Francophone world as their target audiences (Levitt 2020a, b).

While Korea is not part of a larger, cultural-linguistic region, it abides by international conventions like the Berne convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic works.¹ When Korean writers and publishers first dreamt of exporting their work, they had to create the necessary infrastructure to connect them to international partnerships and protocols from scratch. Before that, there was a large enough domestic market to sustain a healthy publishing ecology, and authors rarely set their sights on having their work known abroad. There were neither a significant number of vernacularizers to drive that forward nor the necessary infrastructures of export and promotion with which to do so. It was not until 1988, when Korea Hosted the World Olympic Games, that the country began opening up to the world.

Today, four principal publishers dominate the production of Korean literary fiction. These include relative newcomer Munhak Tongne, Ch'angjak kwa Pip'yang Sa, or Ch'angbi for short, Minum Sa (the People's Voice Publishing Company) and Munhak kwa Chisong Sa (Literature and Intellect Publishing Company), familiarly called Munji. They work independently, as national conglomerates without ties to international publishing giants elsewhere. Whereas independent publishers in Latin America depend upon partnerships with large global companies like Penguin Random House or Planeta to circulate their books in the Spanish-speaking world (Levitt and Saferstein 2022), to date, the few Korean publishers who have achieved international circulation have done so on their own. They achieve financial viability through a mix of activities including importing and translating works into Korean as well as publishing works which they hope will be translated out of Korean by international publishers. Each publisher publishes classical as well as contemporary works, thus contributing to the process of consolidating something called "national literature."

The books these companies publish must be translated to circulate globally. Heilbron (1999) nests the politics of translation within a world system. While the cultural world system is not the mirror image of its geopolitical twin, it does have its own centers, semi-peripheries and peripheries (Heilbron 1999: p. 434). The position that a particular language occupies within this system strongly affects the number of works translated out of it. As of 2000, six out of every ten book translations were originally written in English followed by German and French which each occupy about ten percent of the world market. Russian, Spanish, Italian, and Swedish each account for between one and three percent of all the translated works (Heilbron 2020). "All languages with a share of less than one percent of the world market," writes Heilbron (1999: p. 434), "occupy a peripheral position in the international translation system." In addition to Korean, these include Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and Portuguese. While they are all spoken by a large population, they still occupy a literarily marginal place. The role of states in bolstering translation and visibility (or their infrastructures of export and promotion) is particularly important. In fact, in the Dutch and Israeli cases, the government agencies responsible for representing and marketing national literature have evolved from a primarily

¹ The Convention requires publishers to buy distribution or translation rights for books from their original publisher or literary agents until the copyright expires.

cultural diplomatic role to one of a literary advertising agent, providing subsidies and other kinds of support (Heilbron and Sapiro 2018).

This is also the case in Korea. The state has put in place a systematic infrastructure of creation, export, and promotion of all forms of Korean culture. These state efforts are supported by private sector actors who also see themselves as part of the plan to gain geopolitical prominence. Particularly since the mid-1990s, the liberal government has invested aggressively in cultural industries under the banner of the Hallyu or *Korean wave*, combining the neoliberal commodification of culture with its nationalist championing. Much of the research on the rise of the Korean wave focuses on popular culture and the media (Huat and Iwabuchi 2008; Kim 2013; Lee 2019). The state, however, supports a wide range of cultural endeavors from high- to low-brow and a set of laws related to cultural production that mandate the state's responsibility to promote Korean culture abroad. Both the public and private actors create and fund the infrastructure of production, translation, and book promotion that heightens the visibility of national literature. They actively promote the circulation of Korean arts in prestigious cultural venues such as biennales, film festivals, and literary contests. They aim to achieve symbolic as well as economic profits as exemplified by the term, KLit, which was coined by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (Shim 2021a). Not everyone agrees with these efforts. Critics decry the state's neoliberal investments in its cultural industries as too overtly profit oriented (Jin 2014; Kwon and Kim 2014).

Social and cultural factors

Scale shifting is embedded in power relations between social groups. These relations of unequal power influence all scales of the global literary field.

One set of tensions is between countries. Sapiro (2016: p. 91), for example, sees shifts in the prominence of national and international literature. As postcolonial writers became more widely recognized, the place of authors anointed as "national" was challenged. "Whereas national, and consequently international literary authorities tended to promote 'national' authors—those who had been rooted for more than two generations in a country, resided in the cultural centers, and were from the middle and upper classes," she wrote, "a growing interest in writers formerly relegated to the margins because of their geographic or ethnic origins came to the fore around 1992." While Korea was ruled under a tributary system by China and colonized by Japan rather than by the West, the country has benefitted from the rise in interest in world literature, which happily coincided with the country's growing aspirations for greater prominence on the world stage.

Another set of power dynamics is between individuals. Cultural intermediaries are generally defined as the actors who mediate between production and consumption, or as middlemen or gatekeepers in the organization and distribution of cultural goods (Pareschi 2015; Hesmondhalgh 2006). Santoro (2003) wrote about elites who introduced publishers to new authors. Childress (2012) described how acquisition editors use market data to expand their role as tastemakers, while Franssen and Kuipers (2013) traced how cultural intermediaries decide what translation rights to acquire.

We see these individuals as vernacularizers and identify two types that are influential in the scale shifting of any kind of national culture. The first type of vernacularizers are members of the transnational cultural and academic class—the gatekeepers of the global

art and academic worlds. While many of these individuals are products of the Global North, increasing numbers, while born in the Global South, study, work, and live outside it (Levitt 2020a). Because they move from place to place, and carry the new tools they acquire from one place to another, they homogenize practices. Curating and editing, to name a few, become more and more similar as these people move from place to place and carry an increasingly comparable toolkit with them (Levitt 2015, 2020b).

The second particularly important subset of transnational professionals come from the national diaspora. They are the ethnic-national scholars, literary critics, and editors who now live and work outside their countries of origin but still maintain strong personal and professional attachments to it or are open to overtures on the part of sending governments to do so. These individuals, and the infrastructures of connection and vernacularization they create, strongly affect the breadth and depth of literary circulation.

Both groups play a crucial role in making cultural production of all kinds, be it art, literature, or music, visible, understandable, and valuable, but they do so from somewhat different positions and with unique goals in mind. The vernacularizer who is not part of the national diaspora does not have a nationalistic agenda vis-a-vis cultural globalization. They are more autonomous, but they do not benefit from the resources dedicated to cultural promotion and export that governments may provide. The vernacularizer who is a co-ethnic is sometimes willingly enlisted and other times co-opted into the national project. They may benefit from these additional state resources but be constrained in their artistic and curatorial choices.

Most of the scholarship on literary scale shifting is based on studies of works written in English or in other European languages. The infrastructure for grabbing attention and exploiting it is well established. In the Korean case, the world was an unknown oyster. As writer Jungkuk Kim put it, “The dream of getting translated and having your work circulate internationally is relatively recent. Before that, it never would have occurred to us” (Interview January 2018).

That is why vernacularizers are so important. They build bridges and translate between multiple cultures to insert Korean literature more fully into the global literary world and to bring that world into Korea.

We also see vernacularization processes at work in the shifting themes and forms that characterize literature produced in Korean. To gain world fame, writes Weinberg (2016: p. 74), a work “must get rid of many of its particularities that make it legible within a certain tradition but that need to be left out when entering another reading tradition and aspiring to fulfill market demands” (See also Walkowitz 2015). Writers, editors, critics, and agents shape literary production such that it speaks to themes and is written in styles that are accessible to broad audiences. Translations also play a pedagogical role in upscale markets (Sapiro 2016). “The belief that literature can inform us about the culture and mores of a country, which also underlies the teaching of foreign languages and civilization in France as in other places,” writes Sapiro (2016: p. 90) “helps explain the rise of translations from certain peripheral languages.”

As Fig. 1 shows, there is a small but healthy group of Korean authors whose work circulates globally and who have risen to international prominence in a relatively short time. They stand on the backs of a first generation of authors who wrote realistic, patriotic works to help build an independent nation that could be clearly distinguished from

North Korea. As Korea underwent its rapid transformation from a poor, isolated nation to a modern economic powerhouse, its literature shifted in focus and form. Writers began to tell stories of the interior, emotional everyday lives of individuals, particularly women, that could evoke empathy and compassion from readers. As Korea opened up to the world, more and more authors and publishers set their sights beyond the nation to the international market—a goal aided by the rising popularity of Korea's other cultural exports. The themes these literary works addressed, such as gender inequality and domestic violence, appealed to readers across the globe.

In sum, our analysis builds upon prior explanations of scale shifting by clarifying the role of infrastructure. The different scales of the transnational literary world are, in part, constituted by infrastructures—the nuts and bolts of the institutions of consecration, publication, translation, critique, and marketing, and their connections to one another. They rely on and use knowledge, skills, and vernacularizers with their own dispositions and stakes in the game. Because an increasing number of these vernacularizers have studied or worked abroad, they use their knowledge of the West to open up and import new pathways and passages of circulation and build bridges between Korea and other nations. This also helps them advise writers to take up new themes that make their works more accessible and appealing to international readers.

Methods

Some findings presented in this article are part of a larger research project on the cultural inequality pipeline that begins with the barriers to entry and circulation faced by artists and writers in the Global South and extends through to what gets taught in art history and comparative literature classrooms throughout the world. The three cases in this study are Argentina, Lebanon, and South Korea. Between January and March 2018, Levitt conducted 91 interviews with artists and writers, publishers, gallerists, critics, and academics working in the art and literary fields in Korea. These individuals were identified using a snowball sample. We began with centrally placed cultural intermediaries and vernacularizers—directors of the key institutions in the literary field (i.e., authors, the four publishers we mentioned above, the Literary and Translation Institute of Korea (LTI)—which we discuss in greater detail below—critics, and prominent academics who produce and study Korean literature). Our discussions touched on a range of topics including the individuals, institutions, technologies, and pathways that constitute the overarching infrastructure of literary production and circulation. About one-third of these interviews were conducted in English and the remaining two-thirds took place in Korean with a translator. All were recorded, transcribed, and coded manually to identify the constituent elements of the infrastructures in place and the economic, political, and sociocultural factors that shape them. An additional 16 interviews have since been conducted by Zoom. In a separate project, Shim, a poet and sociologist reviewed literature on the history of Korean literature and conducted research on LTI which was incorporated into our joint analysis.² He reviewed the agency's annual reports to track changes in productivity and funding priorities. While, taken together, these two projects allow us

² In fact, Shim was interviewed four times for Levitt's research and is quoted here as a respondent.

to construct a comprehensive account of the infrastructures in place driving forward the circulation of Korean literature in translation, this is not an evaluation study. We do not directly assess how effective these measures are.

To understand which languages Korean novels have been translated into we first compiled a list of authors based on the following sources, (1) the Translation Database at Publisher's Weekly—an online database that tracks book translations published in the USA—and (2) recommendations from scholars working in the field. We then pared these down to include just modern and contemporary writers of fiction and short stories, ultimately arriving at a list of 43 authors who are considered critical and commercial successes in the Korean literary field. Some, but not all, of these authors received support from the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI).

Next, we used two databases from LTI to identify general trends in funding and in the translation and publication of books. The first database was the List of Translated Titles, located in the LTI Korea translation program's archive. The texts in this database only included translations that were published with support from the LTI. We also used the Digital Library of Korean Literature, compiled by LTI. The Digital Library includes bibliographies of Korean literature since the fund's establishment in 1996. As of 2011, the database was updated to integrate Korean translations found on the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Index (Index Translationum) which has tracked citations of translations since 1979. Therefore, this gives us the best possible comprehensive accounting of translations supported by the government and other sources.³ In this way, we compiled the most comprehensive information on the translation of the 43 modern and contemporary authors we identified as most prominent in and outside of Korea. These data are summarized in Table 1.

Building upon Heilbron (1999), we grouped our list into primary European languages (including French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese); secondary European languages (including Polish, Catalan, and Dutch); and non-European languages. As Table 1 indicates, several Korean authors have been translated into numerous languages including authors Eun Keekyung (13), Han Kang (26), Hwang Sok-Yong (21), Kim Young-Ha (18), Kyung-Sook Shin (26), and Yi Mon-Yoi (20). The majority of these translations are of modern and contemporary works. These data are consistent with the data presented in Fig. 1. From 2001 to 2019, the total number of contemporary works translated reached 1086 compared to 123 translations of classics (Shim 2021a: p. 8). They also underscore just how much the global book market is the target of these translation efforts because international publishers favor contemporary over historical works from Asia.

Interestingly in the Korean case, some of these writers have been translated into primary and secondary European languages as well as into Non-European languages, particularly Chinese and Japanese. This stands in sharp contrast to our research on Argentine and Lebanese writers who rarely circulate outside the European linguistic orbit (Levitt and Saferstein 2022, Levitt 2019). Because of Korea's location and East

³ <https://library.ltikorea.or.kr/>. Some of the translations in the Digital Library of Korean Literature are sample translations rather than fully published texts. According to Sooyum Kim, an Assistant Manager at LTI, these translations are book proposals that do not always result in the translation of the full book (Zoom interview, June 2019).

Table 1 Number of translations of works by major writers, 2019

Author Information		LTI		Languages of Published Translations				Notes
Romanized Name	Hangul Name	# of LTI Translations	Sample Translations	Total Languages	Primary European	Secondary European	Non-European	Prizes
Bae Sukh	배수익	9	6	5	3	1	1	
Bang Hyun-seok	방현석	0	-	3	1	0	2	
Chae Man-Sik	채만식	0	-	7	4	0	3	
Cheon Myeong-kwan	전명관	9	5	8	2	2	4	
Choe Yun	최윤	3	-	5	4	0	1	
Choi In-hun	최인훈	9	-	8	4	1	3	Hyundae Munhak / Park Kyong-ni
Eun Heekyung	은희경	21	-	13	5	4	4	
Han Kang	한강	41	-	28	6	13	7	Man Booker International
Han Yujo	한유조	2	-	2	2	0	0	
Hwang Sok-yong	황석영	38	-	21	5	10	6	Daesan
Hwang Sun-won	황순원	10	-	12	4	5	3	
Hyun Ki Young	원기영	1	1	3	2	0	1	Manhae
Jang Eun-jin	장은진	1	-	1	1	0	0	
Jeon Sungtae	전성태	2	-	3	2	0	1	
Jo Jung-Rae	조성래	10	-	4	3	0	1	
Jung Chan	정찬	1	7	1	1	0	0	Dong-in
Jung Mi-kyung	정미경	2	-	3	1	1	1	
Jung Yeonhi	정연희	0	-	2	1	0	1	
Jung Young Moon	정영문	9	2	4	3	0	1	
Jung-Myung Lee	이정명	2	4	6	4	0	2	
Kang Kyung-ae	강경애	3	-	6	2	1	3	
Kang Young-sook	강영숙	1	5	2	1	0	1	
Kim In-Suk	김인숙	2	-	4	2	0	2	Daesan / Dong-in
Kim Joo-Young	김주영	13	-	9	4	3	2	Daesan
Kim Jung-hyuk	김중혁	10	3	6	3	1	2	
Kim Kyung-uk	김경욱	4	11	6	4	0	2	
Kim Namcheon	김남천	2	-	3	2	1	0	
Kim Sagwa / Apple K	김성래	3	6	3	3	0	0	
Kim Won-il	김원일	7	-	9	4	1	4	
Kim Yi-deum	김이듬	1	-	1	1	0	0	
Kim Young-Ha	김영하	30	-	18	6	6	6	Hyundae Munhak
Kyung-ran Jo	조경란	4	-	10	5	2	3	
Kyung-sook Shin	신경숙	17	-	26	6	11	9	Hyundae Munhak / Man Asian
Lee Kiho	이기호	4	7	2	1	0	1	
Oh Jung-Hee	오정희	6	-	14	4	7	3	
Park Min-pyu	박민규	11	4	7	4	1	2	
Park Wansuh	박완서	18	-	14	4	6	4	Hyundae Munhak
Pyun Hye Young	원혜영	10	5	6	3	1	2	Hyundae Munhak
Seo Hajin	서하진	1	-	1	1	0	0	
Song Sokze	성석제	5	8	4	3	0	1	
Yi Chong-Jun	이창준	11	-	11	5	2	4	Daesan
Yi Kwang-su	이광수	6	1	6	2	1	3	
Yi Mun-yul	이문열	21	-	20	5	9	6	

Source: Digital Library of Korean Literature, Literature Translation Institute of Korea

Asia's incipient regional institutional infrastructure, Korean literary works have the potential to achieve a truly global reach that extends beyond the USA and Europe.

The Korean context

Prior to the early 1900s, most “Korean” literature was written using Chinese characters. A few important exceptions include *The Nine Cloud Dream* and *Chunhyangjeon*, written in the seventeenth century, which became enormously popular across the region. In the early twentieth century, as the Chosun Dynasty modernized under the influence of Japan and the West, *Hangeul* (Korean written characters) was more widely adopted, paving the way for common people to read newspapers and novels. New elite groups, looking to challenge social hierarchies, saw this use of *Hangeul* as part of their enlightenment project. Writing novels, most of which were serialized in newspapers, functioned as a means to disseminate political discourses driven by nationalist ambitions (Shim 1997). During the Japanese occupation, the use of *Hangeul* to express nationalist sentiments grew even stronger as a reaction against colonial rule. Newspapers and literary magazines allowed an expanding group of intellectuals and writers to enter the public sphere through the small-scale literary market, although the market still catered primarily to educated readers (Jung 2017; Shim 2021a).

After liberation in 1945 and following the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the infrastructures of literary production and dissemination developed even further, with respect to the market, criticism, and scholarship. Still, only the educated class could afford to purchase books. The authoritarian regime, which took over the country by coup d'état in 1961, pushed economic and cultural development. As a result, Korea experienced a

remarkable period of economic growth, driven by the modernizing vision of President Chong Hee Park. Successive autocratic Presidents such as Young Sam Kim and Dae Jung Kim single-mindedly pursued economic development, gradually linking the country's economic growth to its national project of globalization. In this context, the cultural economy thrived, with particular growth in the publishing industry. *Footsteps of South Korea Seen through Statistics* (1995, as cited in Chang 1999: p. 33) reports a dramatic increase in new publications from 1618 in 1960 to 29,564 in 1994. According to *The Global Publishing Industry in 2018*, a report by the International Publishers Association, on a global scale, Korea's trade book revenue ranks among the top five countries in the world. The total revenue from trade book sales in Korea was \$1372 (USD million) compared to \$16,189 (USD million) in the USA and \$2128 (USD million) in France.

Increasingly loud and well-organized calls for democracy accompanied Korea's dramatic economic transition. Great transformations took place after the country's political liberalization in 1987 and after Korea hosted the Olympics in Seoul in 1988. The country opened itself up to the world and more actively went out into it. Cultural producers, with support from the state, began to see culture as a potential export. Just as cars and electronics could be engines of economic growth, so could music and television programs. Until then, few Koreans had passports or traveled abroad. It was the rising prominence of the *Hallyu*, LTI Director of the English language program, Boohan Yun, told us, that set the country's sights higher. "From the Korean wave, we have gained confidence that we are not just a small country on the far side of Asia but that we can compete on world stage" (Interview 2018).

What explains contemporary scale shifting?

The political, economic, and sociocultural factors we outline above give rise to and strongly influence the character of the infrastructures that drive scale shifting forward now. We discuss each in turn.

The state and private sector infrastructures of export and promotion

Since the early 1970s, the Korean government used cultural policies to solidify national identity through programs such as the Culture and Arts Promotion Act (1972) and the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation (1973). The government also launched an ambitious, although never-fully realized plan, to build public institutions in support of theater, traditional music, and visual arts that would foster patriotism and nationalism through arts and culture. While literary activities were confined to a small group of writers, some of whom actively criticized the regime, these authors still believed that the literature must contribute to nation building and modernization (Choung 2016). As Kim and Kim (1973: p. 234) argue, after liberation, "the task of writers was to revitalize the Korean language that had been moribund under colonial rule and provide art that would help this chaotic society free itself from enduring colonial influences." Writing that reflected this political consciousness achieved legitimacy in the eyes of the reading public.

While the policies put in place in the 1970s foreshadowed this outward focus, it was not until the 2000s that the government took concrete steps to put Korea more prominently on the global cultural map. Indeed, when the Korean drama, "Winter Sonata" achieved huge commercial success in Japan, it became the first case of the Korean Wave.

At the same time, the government initiated “The On-line Digital Contents Industry Promotion Act” (2002) to facilitate culture industry growth. The Literature and Translation Institute is part and parcel of broad international cultural promotion efforts including the Korean Cultural Centers (founded in 1971), Korea Foundation (founded in 1991), the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation (founded in 1973), and Korea Arts Management Service (founded in 2006). Each of these institutions aim to support and showcase aspects of Korean culture abroad by organizing art exhibitions, festivals, book readings, etc.—in short, using culture as a form of diplomacy and soft power. Initially, the Culture and Arts Foundation explicitly promoted Korean literature abroad through translation. The creation of the Korean Translation Award in 1993 and the Korean Literature Translation Fund in 1996 aided these prior efforts. The activities were merged in 2001 into the newly created Literature and Translation Institute (LTI).

These efforts reinforced the idea of literature as a “product” and opened up opportunities for writers to achieve wider recognition depending on the scale and scope of the circulation of their works. The “Literature Promotion Act,” passed in 2014, institutionalized many of the efforts we describe below. The law emphasizes the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to promote Korean literature abroad and designates the LTI as the key agency in charge of this mission (Shim 2021a).

Korea is not alone in its government support of literary production and export. What is unique here is the sheer magnitude of the resources devoted to the cause. With its 2019 annual budget of approximately seven billion KRW (about \$6,500,000 USD), Korea far outranks other governments with respect to spending on promoting literature. Its ample budget allows it to pursue its goals on multiple fronts (Rao 2016; Shim 2021a). Twenty-seven percent of the state’s budget supports translations, while 19% supports the translation academy, which trains Korean and non-Korean translators to translate Korean literary works into a wide range of languages. Additional programs include the Seoul International Writers’ Festival, a platform for international literary exchange; *Korean Literature Now*, LTI’s own literary magazine; and the LTI Translation Awards for individuals and organizations that make substantial contributions to the field.

According to Lee (2019: p. 61), the government’s cultural initiatives can be understood through the conceptual lens of “a new patron state.” The government promotes cultural freedom at the same time that it actively intervenes in the cultural sector. In contrast to some Western countries, like the USA, where support for arts and culture comes primarily from the private sector or, more recently, some European countries, where the cultural sector depends on private–public partnerships (Borin 2017), the Korean state is committed to democratization and development. As such, the policy content is not always consistent or cohesive although the overarching goal of promoting culture globally always stands firm (Lee 2019). This is true for LTI. Rather than setting overarching goals that everyone must follow, the organization encourages literary agents and professionals to advance their own agendas to achieve its most important objective—attracting more international readers (Shim 2021a).

The resulting infrastructure includes a streamlined set of pathways for pursuing projects meant for export (Shim 2021a). There are several possible routes. The first is to apply for support to work on one of the many classical and contemporary works on the list of books that LTI wants to see translated. The list reflects the agency’s sometimes

competing priorities. Some books appear to be chosen for their “Koreanness,” while others are chosen because the experts on the selection panel believe they will appeal to international readers. As Shim writes (2021a: p. 10), “The contentions surrounding the selection of literary works for translation were based not simply on who best represents Korean literature but on whose expertise is best suited for the claim of universalism in Korean literature within the global literary field.”

A second pathway is traversed when a national or international writer, translator, or publisher recommends a Korean text they believe to be worthy and capable of circulating worldwide. These include professors of Korean literature living outside the country who want to bring a particular work into their curriculum. The individual submits a formal proposal, which explains the book’s value and appeal, a sample translation, and a publishing plan. These proposals then undergo a three-step review: First, foreign evaluators, who are generally publishers or editors working overseas, evaluate the translation samples based on accuracy and writing proficiency. Next, Korean experts evaluate its literary merits, and then, a third editorial and advisory committee decide whether to publish the translation. According to LTI’s Boohan Yun, source and target-language experts make selections based on “the quality of translation and whether this literature is a good representation of Korean literature in the past or the present and whether readers overseas will respond to it” (interview January 2019). As of 2018, he said, LTI supported the translation of 1600 translations and 1300 publications. Most books are published in English, German, Japanese, or Chinese, targeting Anglo European as well as Asian markets that are large enough to garner commercial and critical success. Usually LTI subsidizes about 50 percent of the publication costs up to \$5000. “Acceptability,” writes Shim (2021a: p. 11) “along with readability and accuracy at a textual level, is one of the main review criteria in LTI’s funding program. Acceptability serves as a sort of practical proxy for universalism in that it can at least help translations reach audiences beyond the boundary of source cultures.”

LTI also functions like an agent. Staff members attend the Frankfurt and Guadalajara Book Fairs aiming to secure publishing and translation contracts for the writers they represent. They sometimes invite potential publishers to Korea. For example, LTI invited Deep Vellum, a non-profit, independent publisher based in Dallas, Texas, which describes itself as “translating the world’s best fiction into English for American audiences.” LTI views its efforts as successful when the translations it supports are well received. Just as publishers evaluate their annual performance, LTI publishes reports each year measuring sales, media coverage, and literary prizes.

LTI is joined by other institutions in its efforts. As we have already mentioned, while the state is a central force behind positioning Korean literature abroad, its efforts form part of a larger infrastructure that also includes private foundations, literary agents, and urban planners. The Daesan Foundation, a philanthropic organization created by the Kyobo insurance company, actively contributes to the cause. When asked to describe the rationale for this program, Mr. Kwak, its Director, echoed many of the motivations we mentioned above. Korea is at the far East side of the world. Like Japan and China, as Mr. Kwak explained, Korea wants to move closer to the center and “demolish imperialistic ideas of cultural exchange.” Korea was forced to accept western cultural products and now it wants to even the score. World literature should not just include works written

or translated into English. It should encompass non-European languages as well. Each year, the Foundation supports the translation of approximately 15–20 titles. The majority are contemporary works by living and international writers, many of whom are translators and editors interested in introducing new literature to their origin countries (Visit Seoulnet 2020).

The Daesan Foundation supports the Seoul International Writers Festival in collaboration with LTI—an example of one of several public–private partnerships that aggressively promote Korean literature abroad. First started in 2006, its goal is “to increase readers’ opportunities to enjoy literature and to create a venue in Seoul for mutual communication between Korean literature and world literature.” Once the Literature Promotion Act passed, the festival became an annual rather than biannual event and its budget significantly increased. A total of 217 local and foreign writers from 54 countries had participated in the festival as of 2019. Many participants come from outside the West, reflecting a commitment on the part of its organizers to foster South–South exchange.

These policies are implemented in the context of larger efforts to transform Seoul into an international financial capital and design hub. The up-scaling of Seoul and the up-scaling of Korean cultural production are part and parcel of the same vision. That is, to attract the transnational corporations and professionals who staff them to live and work in the city, Seoul must offer the cultural experiences these expatriates expect from global cities—museums, concerts, literary events, etc. Former Mayor Oh, who served between 2006 and 2011, prioritized transforming Seoul into a design center. In his eyes, “this would be synonymous with establishing Seoul as a global city.” These efforts would also attract more tourists. Oh’s vision, according to Lee (2013: p. 75) “took advantage of current trends such as Hallyu. He even tried to connect Seoul directly to the Korean Wave by recruiting internationally renowned singer and actor Rain to represent Seoul as a goodwill ambassador.” A 2010 survey of the world’s most competitive cities ranked Seoul in ninth place, reflecting an impressive rise during Oh’s time in office (Garcia 2010).

The government’s use of Korean literature to achieve economic and cultural diplomatic goals is not surprising. “KLit” is just the next cultural product the country is deploying toward this end. But most of our interview respondents felt there was something more behind these efforts—a sort of national sense of inferiority, trauma, and shame that is addressed and, hopefully, assuaged when Korea scores well in the cultural race to the top. “The Korean people think we are neglected,” said Prof. Young-Jun Lee, a former Editor-in-Chief at Minum Sa, “We spent a long time as a colonized and secondary nation and then after that we felt dominated by Western culture. Our own culture was never fully respected or recognized. We lost our clothing—we all wear western dress. In the US, Chinese and Indian people had their own festivals while Koreans did not. There is a sense of loss, a need of place and a need to be recognized.” (Interview, January 2018).

Any kind of competition or ranking becomes the arena for pursuing greater recognition and praise. “This is about status competition,” said Prof. Bo-Seon Shim, “we are like the middle class looking upward.” One of the first important Korean novels, *Hyuleui Loo* written by Lee Yin Jik in 1906, is about a poor, struggling, young woman. Her parents were killed during the war between China and Japan. She meets a man sailing to the USA and she goes with him. In the USA, she transforms herself into a strong, independent, successful woman who eventually returns home to build a strong Korea. “This tells

you everything,” Shim said. “Part of our identity is that we are surrounded by strong enemies and we have to compete with them. One way to compete is through art.” It is not so much about winning but about being in the race, an idea that is deeply institutionalized in the infrastructures of governance and intellectual life.

The infrastructures of discovery and consecration

Another factor in the scaling up of Korean literature is the country’s unique infrastructure for the discovery and consecration of emerging writers. The entry procedure to recruit new talent is called Deungdan (meaning entering the literary world), a system in place since the 1920s. It began under colonial rule when writers and intellectuals competed to secure higher social positions using symbolic capital (Shim 2021b). The Deungdan system is unique in that it functions as a ritualized public event, a rite of passage, attracting numerous aspirants and consecrating literature as a valuable asset for promoting national culture.

Every year, newspapers and literary magazines host contests to identify talented new poets and short story authors. From a career perspective, winning does not guarantee publication but it is an important first step. In fact, many Korean novelists and poets got their start by winning short story contests. Once they receive their prize, publishers and literary journals often contact them about featuring their work. The literary system, therefore, has many well-established, symbolic, and literal gates through which to enter, making it easy for aspirants to know where to begin.

Many countries also have a long tradition of publishing book series which function as a way to consolidate and consecrate a particular canon for import and export. The Japanese did so as part of their drive to become a modern nation, identifying 100 books to be read by all intellectuals. Korean publishers then imitated this “Great Books” formula in order to establish their own national canon for import and export. Until the 1960s and 1970s, most foreign literature entered the country after being translated into another language. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, for example, was translated into Japanese and then Korean. Things began to change when publishers like Minum Sa put out a 22-volume *Today’s Writers Series* (oneuleui chakka ch’ongseo). The editions they released each year between 1981 and 1986 solidified Korea’s reputation as a producer of contemporary literature and of an entire generation of writers, especially Yi Mun-Yeol (Fulton 2011). It also helped readers grow accustomed to purchasing and consuming curated literary series—a consecrated, selective though definitive vision of a particular literary type or period. Readers were socialized to recognize the whole legitimate body of Korean literature rather than individual works or writers. These initial efforts to canonize literary works, through collaborations between publishers, critics, and writers, were successful enough that other literary actors soon followed suit. They helped consolidate Korean national identity through its literature.

In 1985, Kwan Yang-min (Kwon Youngmin) edited a four-volume anthology of fiction, poetry, and critique, *Forty Years of Post-Liberation Korean Literature* (Haebang hu 40neyoneui munhak) which canonized the “best” Korean literature published since the end of Japanese rule. Its two volumes of fiction then gave birth to one of the first readily available anthologies of post-1945 Korean short fiction in English including *Land of Exile: A Room in the Woods* (Soopsokeui Bang 1986) and a fiction collection edited by

Kang Seok-gyeong, which was Minum Sa's best-selling volume of literary fiction until 1989. The title story in this collection became the centerpiece of the longest-lived volume of modern Korean fiction in English translation to date, *Words of Farewell* (Fulton 2011). Readers outside Korea would be introduced to Korean literature in the same way that Korean readers mastered the national literary canon and were introduced to Western literature: by reading curated series. The infrastructure of import could also be transformed to promote export. These collections acted as maps for curious readers who wanted to find their way into the Korean literary field but were confused or overwhelmed by how to begin. Writer Mythili G. Rao, for example, proclaimed Dalkey's Library of Korean Literatures series an invaluable tool for making Korean literature visible and readily available to the Anglophone market (Rao 2016).

Finally, book publishers often belong to large conglomerates that own other businesses. Because these conglomerates generate other income, it reduces the pressure on their publishing arm to be highly profitable. These companies sometimes own bookstores where they can aggressively market their own products. Indeed, Seoul's transformation into an important global city brought with it a sharp increase in the number of book-selling outlets which double as destinations to socialize, eat, and browse the shelves. Places like *The Book Society*, one of the city's many alternative bookshops, were intentionally created as independent spaces for reading, writing, and discussion. Activities around books, whether reading, shopping, gathering to discuss, or simply being seen, are part of the city's attractive social scene.

Infrastructures of connection and vernacularization

The final set of infrastructures allowing Korea to gain greater international prominence arises from the productive convergence between what Korea has to offer the world and what the world is looking for from Korea. A small, insular group of literary scholars and professionals are deeply invested in the promotion and circulation of Korean literature; many of them make their living teaching or critiquing it. These individuals often act as vernacularizers—they have lived, worked, and studied abroad and can therefore help connect Korea to the world when the country set its sights beyond its borders. They could also help connect Korean literature to the universal themes that would interest global readers.

The globalization of higher education in Korea, which is part of the government's plan to transform Korea into an important geopolitical player, also plays a role in this story. To achieve this goal, the state closely manages and funds the "internationalization" of the university sector. Graduate school abroad is almost a prerequisite for getting an academic position at a Korean university. Thus, large numbers of Korean professors did their graduate work abroad before returning to Korea. They are quite comfortable with Western institutions of higher education, particularly those in the USA.

Many of these scholars maintain strong ties to Korean Studies Institutes at US universities, such as the Institute for Korean Studies (the Yen Ching Institute) at Harvard. These ties give such scholars continued access to and knowledge about the powerful platforms these institutions offer, which are potential tools in the up-scaling of Korean literature. These scholars also gain knowledge about the workings of the international publishing world and how to infiltrate it. Therefore, they also function as vernacularizers.

They make Korea legible to target societies and import ideas about productive platforms that can further Korea's literary visibility.

Prof. Young-Jun Lee, the former Editor-in-Chief at Minum Sa, for example, knew that publishing a short story in an important American magazine like *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* could be the key to unlocking the door to greater circulation. "The secret of success of Murakami," he said, "was that his work was translated into English by a Harvard professor and then published in *The New Yorker*." In 2011, Yi Mun-yol became the first Korean fiction writer to have a story appear in *The New Yorker* ("An Anonymous Island," translated by Heinz Insu Fenkl). So rather than trying to get novels translated and published, Prof. Lee promotes short stories.

Prof. Lee edits the journal *Azalea*, which tries to jumpstart circulation by publishing directly in English, bypassing the need for translation. *Azalea*—a journal of Korean Literature and Culture in English—is published each year by the Korea Institute at Harvard with support from the International Communication Foundation in Seoul. The target audience is not ordinary readers but professors, translators, and researchers who will then learn more about Korean literature and serve as future culture brokers. So far, he claims, the journal has been adopted as a text in more than 10 colleges and approximately 3000 copies are downloaded each year. The publication's success drives home that the curricular needs of US and European universities are also behind the rise of Korean literature.

But what about the issue of content? What types of narratives, about which kinds of themes, and in what styles of packages are Korean books most likely to travel?

According to Bruce Fulton (2011: p. 13): "Literature in modern Korea has, on the whole, been a decidedly serious undertaking, guided by a hierarchical, conservative, and overwhelmingly male literary establishment of scholars and literary critics (often one and the same) who have tended to prize historical consciousness, social relevance, and political correctness in both poetry and prose." Times are changing, however. When he first began reading, Fulton writes, Korean-language books were not particularly user-friendly. The text was laid out from back to front, each page organized from top to bottom and right to left. The book designs did little to attract readers—the title and author's name usually appeared in Chinese and, if there was a cover photo, it featured a black and white stony-faced author at best. Now, he says, more and more books are beautifully designed with colorful, interesting covers that invite readers in. Publishers recognize that consumers want an appealing product and that they can afford to pay for it. Seoul's aspirations to become a design capital spilled over into the design of its literary products.

But how can Korean authors choose themes that will appeal to broad audiences? A unique aspect of the Korean literary field is the clear boundaries that have existed between pure and genre literature. The strong political agendas and aesthetic visions that shaped the national literary field in the 1970s and 1980s placed a high premium on pure literature as opposed to commercial and genre literature. This distinction persists today. "The difference between American and Korean lit is that the Korean mainstream is high literature," Prof. Young-Jun Lee reflected. "Literary fiction is the main thing people read and other genres like mystery, crime, or romance are in the

minority. Korean society has always valued intellect and stressed reading quality literature" (Interview, March 2018).

Thus for books to appeal to international audiences, who are known to prefer popular over literary fiction, publications are written and marketed differently for international versus national readers. Author Jeong Yu-Jeong, for example, said her books were edited and publicized differently in Korea, the UK, and the USA to respond to variations in consumer preferences (interview February 2018). In Korea, her work is considered literary fiction, but outside it is considered psychological crime or thriller fiction (likened to Raymond Chandler and Stephen King). Designers created different covers for her novel, *Good Son*, for each country in which it was published. In the US version, the publisher eliminated the preface and started the book directly with the introduction because editors believed it would bring more American readers in. "They wanted to start," she said, "with the incident where the character is covered in blood." As the commercial market grows, and international interest in KLit rises, more authors may begin to write about themes and in styles that make their work more commercially viable from the outset.

Barbara Zitwer, founder of the Barbara J. Zitwer Agency (BJZ), is one of the few international literary agents on the Korean scene. Zitwer has represented a diverse range of renowned Korean authors, including Han Kang, Kim Un-su, and Shin Kyung-sook. Shin's book, "Please Look After Mom," Zitwer believes, was the first Korean novel to impress international readers, making it onto the New York Times Bestseller list and published in over 30 countries.

Zitwer, like many of our interview respondents, had clear ideas about the magic recipe for enabling Korean literature to travel. Her ideas echo the motivations that initially inspired Korea to compete globally. "I think the historical suffering of the Korean people and the separation of North and South is embedded in all the contemporary literature and that is unique to Korea," Zitwer said in an interview with the Korean Herald. She mentioned Sohn Won-Pyung's book *Almond* as an example. "Many books evoke a sense of 'han'—suffering, strength, longing for what has been lost... I want to add that Korean books are unique also in that many of them have a unique sense of humor—very special-dark humor—hilarious and uniquely Korean" (Zitwer 1995).

Zitwer, like others, believes that, because of Korea's history of colonization and occupation, Korean literature reflects a deep understanding of co-existence and takes up universal human issues and values (ethics). For publisher Gu Minjeong at Munhak Tongne, Korea is a microcosm of what the whole world experienced during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—dictatorship, war, occupation—which is why its literature resonates so widely. But writers also act as vernacularizers—taking on these themes through a distinctly Korean lens and adding local flavor. For example, Korean novels do not shy away from emotion. Characters express strong feelings. They get angry and cry easily and unashamedly. According to Kim Sa-In, the current director of LTI "the source of the strength of Korean literature is the pain and achievement of the past century, which the literature explored fully" (Shin 2019). As more Korean writers are translated, it whets the appetites of emerging writers who, unlike the generation that preceded them, now take it for granted that an international literary

Table 2 Number of foreign publisher grantees from LTI

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
LTI funding for foreign publishers	20	41	68	71	91

Source: Literature Translation Institute of Korea (2020b)

career is possible. They begin to write with international audiences in mind or at least dream big about reaching them. As more books are made into films, Zitwer believes, Korean authors also write thinking of Hollywood and Bollywood.

The current universal theme is feminism. In KLit's recent rise in popularity abroad, female writers stand out in terms of their numbers and achievements (Cho 2020). *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang presents a complex psychological response to domestic violence. *Kim Ji-Young, born 1982*, which has been translated into 18 different languages, is seen as raising awareness about the issue of gender and sexism in Asia (White 2020). These books emerged at the same time that the current #MeToo movement took off in the West. The fierce gender wars underway in Korea is replicated around the world and readers everywhere are anxious to read about it.

Hyoin Seo, at Minum Sa, reported being surprised by Western readers' positive responses to these works. He thought, he said, that Korean women and First World women thought differently but it seems they share many experiences and empathy. The letters he received from editors around the world, he told us, made him realize that feminism and misogyny are universal problems faced by people everywhere. The language in which they are written about doesn't matter. The appeal of these books is that although many people think about these topics, they are often not fully discussed. Male and female readers alike can relate.

But as former LTI Director, Seong-Kon Kim (2018: 275), writes, in order to raise the profile of Korean literature overseas, "three things are imperative: great writers, good translators, and big-name publishers." Efforts supported by the government and private businesses create the infrastructure to support literary circulation, but they cannot sustain it alone over the long haul. The dream is that as more books are translated, more foreign publishers will get to know Korean literature. Indeed, since 2015 when LTI began to make direct grants to foreign publishers, the applications from individuals seeking support who already had contracts with writers and translators increased (Shim 2021a). In fact, as Table 2 shows, the numbers of foreign publishers receiving grants from LTI rose from 20 in 2015 to 91 in 2019 (LTI 2020b).

These efforts also benefit from the dramatic increase in interest in all things Korean across the world, especially among young people. Universities note a rise in foreign students wanting to come to Korea to learn about its language and culture because they have fallen in love with Korean pop music (Kpop) and television dramas. The arrival of more international students coupled with the arrival of immigrant workers diversifies the nation even if it resists redefining itself that way.⁴ These developments eat away at the nation's former insularity. So do the efforts of Korean Cultural Centers in cities

⁴ Immigrant workers from China (some ethnic Koreans) and from Southeast Asians are being allowed into Korea to compensate for its declining workforce due to lower birthrates (Park 2017).

around the world that host Kpop festivals. Each site picks a winner who then comes to Korea to compete for first prize.

Conclusion

Much work on the production and dissemination of world literature is based on the circulation of works written in major or minor European languages. In many cases, this involves literature produced in a former colony that travels through well-worn circulatory routes within a well-established cultural-linguistic region (Levitt 2020a). The Korean case stands in stark contrast. The country does not belong to a cultural or linguistic region. Rather, Korean literary works entered the world literary field through a set of newly created or refashioned infrastructures. The effectiveness of these pathways and platforms does not depend upon an East Asian region, to the extent that one exists, as a way station on the way to the literary center.

We stress the role of three types of infrastructures in enabling the scale shifting of Korean literature. A systematic, purposeful strategy enacted by state and private actors created or enhanced the existing institutions promoting Korean literature abroad. LTI not only financed many translations, it trained the translators needed to carry out this work. Private actors like the Daesan Foundation also supported translation and literary festivals to draw the world's attention to the Korean literary scene. Potential publishers and translators took advantage of the long-standing infrastructure of contests and prizes to identify and sanctify new writers whose work might be suitable for export. A group of vernacularizers, whose experiences of studying and working abroad prepared them to act as intermediaries, also helped build bridges through which literature could travel in and out of Korea.

The long history of mistrust and resentment between Korea and some of its neighbors means that even when state and para-statal actors try to create regional infrastructures, few people embrace them. This is regionalization without identification. Efforts to construct pan-Asian regional identities and gain collective leverage to further political economic interests have been short-lived (Acharya 2010). The limits to regionalization are even deeper and more complicated when it comes to culture given that, for Koreans, cultural liberation signifies independence not only from the West but also from colonial memories of Japanese domination. While books circulate, particularly from Japan to Korea, few of the people we interviewed believe that a regional literary alliance will emerge soon, nor is there a strong infrastructure with which to build it. As a result, when Mr. Jong Sun Yeom of Changbi tried to build an East Asian writers community, his efforts fell flat. Although the publisher organized symposium, invited writers and academics from Japan and China, and launched a publishing series, its efforts failed to create lasting regional allegiances. Therefore, when turning outward, Koreans looked West as the target for its cultural exports. In contrast to the case of Argentina, whose writers benefit from the widely recognized aesthetic and geographic label "Latin American literature," Korea deploys a national strategy, circumventing the region, to become increasingly world renowned. When the government and the press dub the work of Han Kang and Cho Nam-Joo KLit, they promote a national brand over a regional one.

According to Mr. Jong Sun Yeom from Changbi, the state's role is temporary until the publishing world can take off on its own. Japan, he noted, tried opening a publishing house in New York but it failed. According to Heilbron and Sapiro (2007), as the state retreats from its role in cultural promotion, and the private, neoliberal market steps in, foreign publishers and agents go directly to national literary agents and experts for translation and publication. In the Korean case, however, the state, market, and the literary field in general now have highly developed infrastructures with interests, identities, and inertias of their own. The future of the KLit endeavor, whether successful or not, will depend upon the competition and collaboration between all these actors over how to create, disseminate, and sanctify literary works outside the borders of Korea.

Abbreviations

KLit	Korean literature
LTi	Literature and Translation Institute of Korea

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Author contributions

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The data upon which this article is based are not yet publicly available as one author is writing a book upon which they (and many other data) will be based. Once this book is published, the data will be made publicly available through our institutions' libraries.

Declarations

Competing interests

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