

Going Beyond English to Better See the World

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Many US analysts of foreign affairs—whether writing in the Intelligence Community, at a newspaper, in a university or at a think tank—see things beyond our shores in a dim light, their view obscured by an opaque bubble arising from dependence on English-language information sources and a paucity of translated material: According to one authoritative estimate, only 3 percent of all books published in the United States are translated works.^a

Access to foreign sources in foreign languages would break that bubble and yield many insights not discoverable in English-language works. These will often include what might be considered foreign intelligence (FI) as well as counterintelligence (CI) insights. Some media reports published abroad in vernacular languages even reveal US intelligence details that might be secret in the United States but not overseas. US CI analysts need to know of them.

The problem is that many analysts cannot conduct research in relevant foreign sources. The near absence of translated publications from US publishers prevents them from finding such sources on the shelves of even the best bookstores. What can be done? A start would be for employers to make language a key hiring qualification. Universities would restore earlier language requirements and orient classes for future analysts. Increasing government support for student acquisition of language and area knowledge would help, as would funding projects to further develop computer-assisted translation (CAT), speech-to-text, and other relevant technologies.

Using foreign-language material in analyzing foreign affairs applies to countries and issues around the world. To tackle such a broad topic, I will use examples of North Korean material. After all, if conducting research in foreign languages aids in analyzing secretive North Korea, arguably the world's greatest analytical challenge, then it should be useful in general.^b

Novel Insights

Columbia University Press opened a window onto the Democratic People's Republic of Korea last year in publishing an English translation of a popular North Korean novel. *Friend*, the story of a judge looking into the circumstances behind a woman's petition for divorce, sheds light on society in the DPRK.^c What we read is not a piece of revolutionary propaganda but a conservative Korean tale, largely focused on the judge's paternal concern for the couple's son if he grants the divorce. Didactic yet nuanced, approved by the censors, yet much read in North Korea—as well as seen in its adaptation to a television series—the novel offers us a view of a country that we perceive only dimly.^d

Fictional literature can also provide paths to understanding foreign affairs. Fiction may even reveal truths little seen in formal government documents or state media. As Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles put it over a half century ago, “Even a novel or play may contain useful information about the state of a nation.”^e

a. *Three Percent*, <https://www.rochester.edu/college/translation/threeppercent/about/>. *Three Percent* is a blog site of the University of Rochester's translation project launched in 2007. It established a database of translated works compiled by volunteer readers that spans the years 2008 to the present. That database is now maintained on the *Publisher's Weekly* website at <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/translation/home/index.html>.

b. Korean words in this article are rendered according to the standard McCune-Reischauer system, minus the diacritical marks.

c. Paek Nam-nyong, *Friend: A Novel from North Korea*, translated by Immanuel Kim (Columbia University Press, 2020).

d. See Paek's interview with his translator in Immanuel Kim, “The Interview: Life of North Korean Author Paek Nam-nyong,” *The Journal of Korean Studies*, 21:1 (2016): 245–57.

e. Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence* (Harper & Row, 1963), 55. In US popular culture, this idea is found in the work of “Condor,” codename for Robert Redford's character in *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). In the film, Condor works at a covert site, the American Lit-

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.

Friend is far from the only North Korean novel that shows us aspects of that nation's history, society or politics. The following are a few examples:

- *Changgom* [Long Sword] features a hero who operates against intelligence organs of Imperial Japan in the Second World War and against the United States in the Korean War. The author includes many actual individuals, events, organizations, and intelligence techniques in his story.^a
- *Unmyong* [Destiny] recounts Pyongyang's history in the Cold War as a center of global revolution. The novel depicts Kim Il Sung in the 1960s contending with Moscow's efforts to use the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) to stymie his nation's development, conferring as an equal with Chinese counterparts, and standing in solidarity with Cuba. Meanwhile, in the skies over Vietnam, pilot Choe Pong-ho shoots down US military aircraft. The author gives us Pyongyang's view of its place in the socialist camp in that era.^b
- *Taeyang Changa* [A Song in Praise of the Sun] is the story of the establishment of the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chosen Soren, also known as Chongryon), under the leadership of Han Tok-su, to organize Koreans living in hardship in postwar Japan. The author shows the DPRK's relationship to Korean compatriots in Japan and the competing organizations there that swear loyalty to either Pyongyang or Seoul.^c

Reading the literature of North Korea gives us access to DPRK narratives written for the public, ranging from high politics to everyday life. Knowing such narratives is helpful for anyone conducting analysis—whether intelligence analyst, journalist, university professor or think-tanker—in regard to North Korea. Reading North Korean fiction not only gives us a “feel” for DPRK politics and society; it can even teach us basic facts. For example, it was in reading *Unmyong* that I learned that Pyongyang had sent pilots to fly combat missions in the Vietnam War.^d

The publication of *Friend* is thus a welcome development but also a troubling one, both for its novelty and for its late appearance. *Friend* is the first and only DPRK novel published in the United States.^e The dearth of translations should not be seen as a reflection of the lack of material. Although I have never come across hard statistics for the number of novels published in Pyongyang over the years, the output must be considerable. In the literature section of the DPRK information portal Uriminzokkiri alone there are links to at least a thousand novels and stories for adults, young readers, and children.^f

Considering that Pyongyang has been a major concern in US policy and intelligence circles since the outbreak of the Korean War seven decades ago, it is regrettable that the translated novel should be alone in the United States. Troubling, too, is the time that it took to appear in English. Pyongyang's Literature and Art Publishing House published the story over 30 years ago.^g In France, a prominent publishing house beat the US publisher to press by nine years.^h

erary Historical Society, which monitors and exploits open sources in various languages for their potential intelligence value. Condor's report on a translated novel linked to a rogue CIA operation leads to the murder of his society colleagues and his own flight from danger.

a. Hong Tong-sik. *Changgom* [Long Sword]. Vol. 1 (Pyongyang: Kumsong Youth Publishing House, 2005) and Vol. 2 (2006). For my review of the novel, see *Changgom* [Long Sword], *Studies in Intelligence* 54, No. 4 (2010).

b. Chong Ki-chong. *Unmyong* [Destiny] (Pyongyang: Literature and Art Publishing House, 2012).

c. Nam Tae-hyon. *Taeyang Changa* [A Song in Praise of the Sun] (Pyongyang: Literature and Art Publishing House, 2006).

d. Hanoi and Pyongyang confirmed only in 2000 that DPRK pilots had fought in Vietnam. See Merle Pribbenow. “North Korean Pilots in the Skies over Vietnam” (Wilson Center, December 5, 2011). Accessible via www.wilsoncenter.org.

e. Previously, three DPRK short stories and an excerpt from the famous novel *Hwangjini* appeared in an anthology of “enemy” literature: Alane Mason, Dedi Felman, and Samantha Schnee, eds., *Literature from the “Axis of Evil:” Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and other Enemy Nations* (The New Press, 2006). The 2017 publication in the United States of *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea* (Grove Press), purportedly penned by an anonymous DPRK author and smuggled outside the country, does not count as 1) the stories were never published in Pyongyang and 2) neither the identity of the author nor the origin of the stories can be verified.

f. <http://www.uriminzokkiri.com>.

g. Paek Nam-nyong. *Pot* (Pyongyang: Literature and Art Publishing House, 1988).

h. Baek Nam-ryong, trans, Patrick Maurus and Yang Jung-Hee, *Des amis*, (Actes Sud, 2011) That the novelist's name (백남룡) should appear in two European-language translations in two different variations of the standard McCune-Reischauer transliteration system points to

Open Sources and Ground Truth

We can profitably read Pyongyang sources, whether fiction, propaganda or science, for insights into North Korea. Such open sources can help us answer that basic intelligence question, expressed so memorably by Paul Newman in the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*: who are those guys? North Korean novels and movies give insights into DPRK social conditions. Editorials of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) organ *Rodong Sinmun* signal the party's politics by word, emphasis, and other aspects of propaganda. Pyongyang's output of scientific literature and news suggests the capabilities and possible directions of DPRK civilian and dual-use R&D. We can read the body of the report to follow the research and study the endnotes to understand the domestic and foreign scientific literature to which the authors have access.^a In short, we can gain ground truth from direct access to primary sources—whether a popular novel, a party newspaper, or a science paper. This is, of course, the work of open-source analysts in CIA, but their work rarely reaches the public.

Pyongyang from the Periphery and Beyond

We also enhance our understanding of North Korea by looking to the periphery. China and Russia border North Korea. Japan lies a short distance across the Sea of Japan. These three countries all provide windows to North Korea.^b All three have long had extensive ties with the DPRK. All possess abundant open sources with information to help answer that question: who are those guys? Examples:

- Xinhua (New China News Agency) journalist Du Baiyu arrived in Pyongyang in March 2012, one in a long line of reporters assigned there since China's official news agency opened its Pyongyang office in 1949. Not long before her departure in July 2014, she published her impressions of life and work in Pyongyang in the book *Wo de Pingrang gushi* [My Pyongyang Story] and the photograph collection *Chaoxian yinxiang* [Korean Images].^c In addition to writing of her duties as a reporter and auxiliary member of the Chinese embassy, Du described outings with Korean and foreign friends. One memorable scene in the book is her visit to the Friendship Bar in Pyongyang's diplomatic quarter, where she heard songs from America's Backstreet Boys and Taiwan's Teresa Teng playing from the speakers.^d The city is beautiful in her eyes and the people are friendly to her. Her perspective stands in stark contrast to the dark image commonly found in US media.^e
- The Chosen Soren in Tokyo published in 2012 *Chosen: Miryoku no tabi* [DPR Korea: Charming Travel], arguably the world's best travel guide to North Korea. As with Robert Willoughby's worthy guide, the Japanese-language book includes color photographs and descriptions of major tourist sites in Pyongyang and around the country. The Chosen Soren publication also features an impressive "Pyongyang Gourmet Guide," with photos and information on city restaurants and their cuisine, as well as a detailed map of downtown Pyongyang and a layout of the Pyongyang's flagship Koryo Hotel.

the challenge of writing Korean names in English. That the novel's title (벗), a single noun, should appear in English in the singular and in French in the plural suggests just how difficult Korean is to translate into Western languages.

a. Pouring over Pyongyang science journals should put to rest the lazy notion of North Korea as a "hermit kingdom" cut off from the world. The endnotes of Pyongyang science articles cite US, Chinese, and other foreign scientific literature, including the papers some of the scientists wrote while studying abroad, showing a scientific establishment connected to the world. A DPRK website of Pyongyang's flagship Kim Il Sung University, (www.ryongnamsan.edu.kp) includes a collection of science journals for anyone interested in such DPRK science articles and their foreign endnotes.

b. The peripheral approach is valid beyond open sources. In signals intelligence and human intelligence, for example, Imperial Japan found natural intelligence partners in the nations along the periphery of the Soviet Union. In the Second World War, the Japanese military attache in Sweden cooperated with Finnish counterparts and gathered intelligence from sources around the Baltic to track Soviet moves. See Onodera Yuriko, *Barutokai no hotori ni te: Bukan no tsuma no Daitoa Senso* [On the Shores of the Baltic Sea: The Greater East Asia War as Experienced by the Wife of a Military Attache] (Kyodo Tsushinsha, 1985).

c. Du Yubai, *Wo de Pingrang gushi* (Huaxia Publishing House, 2014) and *Chaoxian yinxiang* (People's Daily Publishing House, 2014).

d. Ibid., 25.

e. Many Chinese travelers are positively impressed with North Korea. One such person, a Beijing art journal editor, found the DPRK's quiet and beauty a nostalgic reminder of China before its opening to the world at the end of the 1970s. Sha Hui, *38° Bandaoxing* [Peninsular Travel on Both Sides of the 38th Parallel] (China Youth Publishing House, 2010).

- Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, President Vladimir Putin's representative in the Russian Far East, rode the rails with the late DPRK leader Kim Jong Il to Moscow and his 2001 summit meeting with Putin. Pulikovskiy then wrote an account of his trip and his traveling companion; the book is a rare source of information on the father of Pyongyang's present leader.^a

Beyond North Korea's periphery lie other sources of information. Pyongyang has long maintained relations with many countries, expanding its ties since the Cold War's end from the socialist and non-aligned camps to countries in the West. Germany is a particularly interesting case. Pyongyang had a long history of engagement with East Berlin, built in part on the German Democratic Republic's contribution to the country's reconstruction after the Korean War's battlefield hostilities ended. Since Germany's unification, Pyongyang has responded to Berlin's policy of engagement by engaging in cultural, economic, and scientific exchanges. German institutes frequently send individuals and delegations to North Korea for everything from classical music education to international business seminars. Korean musicians, scientists, and political delegations have gone to Germany numerous times to play in concerts, engage in scientific research and development, or develop political relations.^b Lying well beyond the periphery, Germany has served as North Korea's window on the West. Accordingly, there is a large volume of German material—books, newspaper articles, institute websites, and science papers—related to the DPRK. Information also exists elsewhere in Europe, as well as Africa, Asia, and Latin America in such languages as Arabic, French, Persian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

Here I would like to cite a real-world example of how to leverage sources in multiple languages from

many countries to improve research on the DPRK. In Washington, DC, the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars has taken such an approach. In its Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) and the North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP), the Wilson Center has been acquiring declassified diplomatic telegrams and other primary documents released by the major players in the Cold War, translating them, and depositing them on line for anyone to read. It also posts the works of scholars who draw on this material to write analytical papers on Cold War history and North Korea.^c

Relatively Little Information on American Bookshelves

Mining the abundant open sources around the world for information on North Korea would give us much more information to use in analysis, but we should not simply hope that US publishers will one day publish more North Korean novels or other primary sources of information.^d This sets the United States apart from the world's other major publishing industries. I have often experienced a sense of amazement, followed by one of bewilderment, at the sight of all the translated nonfiction works on the shelves and tables of bookstores in Taipei or Tokyo, then wondered why even books from elsewhere in the Anglosphere are relatively rare in US bookstores.^e My oddest such experience was seeing the memoir of Charles Jenkins – the US Army defector who spent nearly 40 years in Pyongyang before finally leaving in 2004 – appear in the United States in 2008, three years after the Japanese translation had hit the shelves in Japan. Moreover, the Japanese version not only appeared earlier

a. Konstantin Pulikovskiy. *Vostochnoy ekspress: Po Rossii s Kim Chen Irom* [Orient Express: Across Russia with Kim Jong Il] (Gorodets, 2002).

b. German conductor Alexander Leibreich taught music as a visiting professor in Pyongyang in 2003. For his account of working there, see "Pjöngjang singt. Deutschland sing mit" in Christoph Moeskes, ed., *Nordkorea: Einblicke ein rätselhaftes Land* [North Korea: Insights into an Enigmatic Country] (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2004).

c. The Center's Digital Archive (<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/>) is an OSINT treasure trove.

d. Worth noting is that North Korea has published more American literature than the other way around. I do not know Pyongyang's total output of American literature in authorized translations, but in Stanford University's library catalog there are at least two: Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, as well as such world classics as Homer's *Iliad*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Hugo's *Les Misérables* (<https://searchworks.stanford.edu>, accessed 21 January 2021).

e. On DPRK topics, the Japanese have translated many works on the DPRK written by American authors, including Barbara Demick (*Nothing to Envy*), David Halberstam (*The Coldest War*), and Bradley Martin (*Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*). Apart from Wada Haruki (*The Korean War: An International History*), I am unaware of any other of the countless Japanese authors on North Korea being published in English in the United States.

but came out better edited and featuring a useful timeline of events not found in the US book.^a

Breaking Through the English Bubble To See North Korea

There are several reasons why we need to break through the bubble and leverage foreign languages to understand North Korea.

- First, North Korea produces relative little in English and much of what it does is incomplete. For example, only some of Pyongyang's scientific and technical journals include English abstracts. Even with abstracts, Korean is needed to read the details.
- Second, Pyongyang's English publications are intended for foreign audiences and are not simple translations of the Korean media published for domestic audiences. The *Pyongyang Times*, for example, is not the English version of the *Rodong Sinmun* and cannot serve as the basis for media analysis. For that matter, Seoul's output in English does not necessarily reflect what the authorities there are publishing in Korean on the North.
- Third, only an original text is authoritative. All translations are suspect. Some are unintentionally ridiculous.^b At a minimum, Pyongyang's English media require inspection against the original before use. For example, a British editor working in Pyongyang witnessed his Korean colleagues arguing whether or not Marshal Kim Jong Il's proclamation on 13 March 1993—a time of escalating military tension with Washington—of a *chunjonsi sangtae* should be translated as “a state of semi-war” or something else. If arguments over the correct English translation are possible for

Pyongyang editors, suggesting the possibility for misleading choices or outright errors, the same must be true for translations published in Seoul, Washington or elsewhere.^c One can readily imagine the pitfalls of attempting to analyze shifts in DPRK propaganda via translated texts alone.^d

- Fourth, unique and useful information is found in languages other than Korean and English. This is particularly so for the Korean Peninsula's “peripheral” languages: Chinese, Japanese, and Russian.^e

Despite these reasons for using foreign languages in analyzing foreign affairs, significant barriers stand in our way:

- First, we lack incentives to learn other languages. We have grown accustomed to the world speaking English.^f We often do not need to master a foreign language, even for jobs analyzing foreign affairs.^g
- Second, since the campus upheavals of the late 1960s, most colleges and universities no longer require students to study a foreign language. Worse, many have been cutting languages in recent years as the result of declining demand and budget pressures.
- Third, few analysts are literate in more than a single foreign language, leaving them unable to exploit useful peripheral languages to a given issue in foreign affairs.

Fortunately, there are solutions to these problems:

- Employers should require a working proficiency in relevant foreign languages. Employers making clear that

a. See my review essay on the two books: “An American Deserter and the Shortcomings of the US Publishing Industry,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 26:5 (2011): 730–36.

b. The title of the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) translated report on catfish farming is needlessly comical: “Great Men and Catfish Breeding” (<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1590658309-972508213/great-men-and-catfish-breeding/> accessed May 30, 2020). The original title is the straightforward *메기양어가 전하는 인민사랑* [Love for the People Conveyed by Catfish Breeding] (<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1590646615-867355081/메기양어가-전하는-인민사랑/>, accessed May 30, 2020).

c. Michael Harrold, *Comrades and Strangers: Behind the Closed Doors of North Korea* (John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 355.

d. For an insightful article, see Maureen Cote, “Translation Error and Political Misinterpretation,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1983: 11–19.

e. This holds true for reference works as well. After the DPRK's *Cho-Yong Taesajon* (New Korean–English Dictionary) (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002), my favorite Korean dictionary is Japan's *Chosengo Jiten* (Korean–Japanese Dictionary) (Shogakukan, 1993). As evidence of the English bubble, no US publisher offers a serious Korean dictionary.

f. Robert McCrum, *Globish: How English Became the World's Language* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2011).

g. The *New York Times*, seeking last year to hire a Russian correspondent, listed “fluency in Russian” as merely “preferred,” the only one of eight qualifications so described. See https://nytimes.wd5.myworkdayjobs.com/en-US/INYT/job/Moscow-Russia/Russia-Correspondent_REQ-008536 (accessed January 25, 2021).

they require, rather than simply prefer, job applicants to know a relevant foreign language would provide a powerful incentive to acquiring a second language. Aspiring American analysts of Korean politics should learn Korean. American correspondents sent to Moscow should be fluent and literate in Russian.

- Colleges and universities should restore the language requirements eliminated after the 1960s.^a They should also expand their language offerings to include more courses related to such fields as economics, military affairs, and politics for students whose primary interest lies elsewhere than in literature. Government and private interests should offer more scholarships and tailor them to future employment as analysts.
- The public and private sectors should ramp up projects to develop increasingly accurate and sophisticated computer-aided translation (CAT), speech-to-text software, and other desktop technologies that would enable individual analysts to exploit multiple foreign languages. Whether the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects (IARPA), Google or some combination of such public and private bodies, there exist organizations capable of developing such products. Analysts proficient in Korean are better equipped to analyze Pyongyang matters than those who know only English. Analysts proficient in Korean with access to

CAT and other technologies to exploit Chinese, Japanese, and Russian sources on North Korea would be even better able to do their work.

Pyongyang and the Rest of the World beyond the Bubble

Working from inside the bubble makes it harder to see North Korea. Relying on English sources alone leaves us vulnerable to missing both the details and the big picture. Depending on foreign organizations or liaison partners for information leaves us open to deception and manipulation. Those who rely on government reports or newspaper articles built largely or entirely on government briefings in Seoul or defector interviews brokered by the South Korean government or its auxiliaries risk flying blind. A historical analogy would be that of a British journalist writing stories on the administration of President Abraham Lincoln from Richmond on the basis of Confederate press briefings and tales told by Northern defectors dependent on Southern hospitality for their livelihood.

Finally, what goes for North Korea goes for the rest of the world. My argument is that if those of us seeking to understand Pyongyang can strike gold in mining open sources in one or more foreign languages, then the same should be true for other countries. Let us do more to apply foreign languages to key issues in foreign affairs.



The author: Stephen Mercado is a retired Open Source Enterprise officer who continues to delight in reading in foreign languages.

a. A report of the Modern Language Association (MLA) shows that the rate of modern language enrollment per 100 students in US colleges and universities between 1960 and 2016 had peaked in 1965 and fallen to less than half that level in 2016. See <https://www.mla.org/content/download/110154/2406932/2016-Enrollments-Final-Report.pdf> (accessed January 25, 2021).