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GOOD READS RATHER THAN 'JAPAN-SPECIFIC'

Vertical takes Japanese novels to U.S.

By MIKIKO SUGITA

Staff writer

In major book stores in New York, London or Moscow, it is not rare to find translations of "The Tale of Genji," Sosuke Natsume's novel "Bo-chan," Kobo Abe's "The Box Man" and many of Haruki Murakami's works.

But most Japanese books translated into English are either literary classics or introductions to Japan's traditional culture targeted at a limited circle of Japanophiles.

Now a unique publisher has come along, specializing in translating the best contemporary Japanese books. Vertical Inc. believes that many Japanese books will have wide appeal in North America, in much the same way as Japanese animation and video games.

New York-based Vertical was founded in 1999 by Hiroki Sakai, a former editor with a major Japanese business daily, with the aim of marketing Japanese popular fiction in North America — an idea chided by many as crazy.

So far, Vertical has put 18 titles on the U.S. market, all translations of Japanese authors. These include "Buddha," by the late cartoonist Tetsuka Osamu, "Ring," written by horror meister Koji Suzuki, and "Twinkle Twinkle," by woman writer Kaori Ekuini, who recently won the esteemed Naoki Award for literature.

Its publications are winning acclaim among both Japan experts and the general audience. And some of them are selling well.

For instance, Vertical did a second printing for "Ring" after selling out its first print run of 10,000 copies. The original novel in Japanese was turned into a psycho-horror film, and became an instant box-office hit when it was re-



Ioannis Mentzas

lease in January 1998. It's Hollywood remake was a blockbuster in Japan and the United States as well.

Ioannis Mentzas, editorial director of Vertical, said he wants "Vertical to bring popular Japanese works to the mainstream American market."

Following are excerpts of his remarks in a recent interview:

Question: What made you interested in Japan?

Answer: Actually, I am not American. My nationality is Greek. My mother is Japanese, and I was born and raised in Japan. Since I lived in Japan for the first 18 years of my life, it is only natural that I should be interested in and familiar with Japanese culture and society.

Q: Vertical was founded in New York, not in Japan. What are your goals?

A: What I want Vertical to achieve is to bring popular Japanese works to the mainstream American market.

This has already happened in the field of video games; if only a tenth of that could be done for books, I would consider our project a success.

It is important to us that we are a commercial publisher (rather than a nonprofit cul-



SHOWN ABOVE are some of the books published by Vertical Inc., and its advertisement on the front page of industry magazine Publishers Weekly. JAPAN TIMES PHOTO

tural organization); the commercial approach forces us to try hard to maximize our readership.

Q: How do you reach your potential audience to maximize your readership?

A: We're careful to characterize our titles as "good reads" in their respective genres, as opposed to being Japanese in origin. We emphasize that the works will appeal to readers whether or not they're interested in Japan, so long as they like this or that type of book (i.e. genre).

We work closely with the sales reps of our distributor, National Book Network (NBN), to make sure that our books are marketed according to our vision.

In order to attain visibility outside traditional Japanophilic circles, we have advertised aggressively in venues that aren't Japan-specific.

This includes Publishers Weekly, the general trade magazine. Magazines for horror fans and for SF/fantasy fans are another place we like to advertise.

Q: Who could be the readers of your publications?

A: Of course, we aren't indifferent to readers who are interested in Japanese culture, but we feel that other publishers have been serving them quite well.

We're trying to do something different. And whether we emphasize it or not, the Japanese origin of our works will not fail to attract those readers.

I believe a work has to be structurally well-worked out to make it in the U.S.

A novel should have some sort of plot, and some character development, for instance. A lot of Japanese literature tends to be essayistic, and although I love such works, they don't really stand a chance with most U.S. readers. We at Vertical want to reach audiences that aren't necessarily lovers of things Japanese. Anyone who reads regularly is a potential customer.

Q: What genre will you develop in your business?

A: What I mean by "entertainment" is first and foremost "genre fiction." (In Japanese, the mark of a "genre" is the suffix "-mono," as in

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Vertical brings contemporary Japanese novels to U.S.

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"SF-mono," "jidai-mono," and "ren'ai-mono.")

In general, the notion of "genre" (horror, SF, romance, detective story, etc.) is crucial in our attempts to reach a wider audience.

A committed fan of a genre has read all the best works of the kind and is constantly hoping for something new that's good.

The fact that a work is foreign in origin isn't off-putting for such a reader, especially if the work is touted to be excellent, satisfying the requirements of the genre.

A fan of horror fiction, for

instance, who has read most of Stephen King, etc., and has been searching in vain for something good, is quite willing to try out overseas fare. That reader is much more likely to buy a Japanese horror novel than, say, a U.S. detective novel.

Q: Who are the translators of Vertical's books?

A: Most of our translators are American graduate students who are studying Japanese literature.

They are not hard to find or recruit because I myself was in grad school here and have the necessary connections, especially in the Ivy League.

Emi Shimokawa (who translated "Twinkle Twinkle" and "Ashes" by Kenzo Kitakata) is a Japanese-American at Harvard. Glynne Walley (who translated "Ring" and "Outlet" by Randy Taguchi) is also at Harvard.

Some of the other translators are at Columbia University, another big center of Far Eastern studies.

We do have nonstudent translators, too, and in those cases, we are usually contacted by them.

Q: What makes for high quality in translating literary works from Japanese to English?

A: A good translation has to be, first of all, reasonably accurate. Unfortunately this can't be taken for granted. For us, it's particularly important that the translation also be very readable, since ours are entertainment titles.

Q: What are your plans for the near future?

A: This spring, we'll be publishing novels by Takahashi Genichiro, Higashino Keigo, Sasaki Joh and Haitani Kenjiro.

We'll also be continuing with the serial titles we've been publishing by Koji Suzuki, Kaoru Kurimoto and Tezuka Osamu.

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