

It is difficult not to adopt a pessimistic tone when looking back on the days of the economic bubble of the 1980s. This trait is particularly pronounced among people like me who are engaged in the job of reporting on the moves of Japanese society from the cultural side. Any number of negative phrases such as “relativization of values,” “loss of norms,” “survival of the fittest” and the like come to mind.

But I must hasten to add that we should correctly value the positive cultural heritage the bubble period produced. Its most typical example is the phenomenal outpouring of literary translations.

In the 1980s, contemporary literary works of the world, particularly American literature, flowed into Japan, while the



Photo: Kyodo News

Writer Haruki Murakami poses with the Franz Kafka Prize and a bronze statuette in Prague in 2006, calling his book “*Kafka on the Shore*” for which it was awarded “a kind of homage” to him.

The front runner in the Japanese translation world is Haruki Murakami, a leading novelist whose works are widely read throughout the world. He translated a numerous number of contemporary American novels while writing his own novels in great numbers, as if he were returning the favor given him by modern American literature on the basis of which his talent developed.

Murakami reproduced the masterpieces of such writers as J. D. Salinger, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Chandler and Raymond Carver in the best Japanese of the 21st century. He even translated the lyrics of the Beach Boys’ “*God Only Knows*,” a famous tune produced and composed by Brian Wilson, as if he had more

Tidbits of Translation Culture

By Masakazu HOSODA

publication of various magazines and books was planned and young translators fluent in foreign languages debuted in large numbers.

Japanese youths of the bubble period were lucky enough to have opportunities to read, in high-quality Japanese, important literary works from the European, Asian and Latin cultural spheres, with the majority being originally written in English.

This is not my dogmatic assertion and can be underlined by the fact that ordinary bookworms can instantly rattle off a list of translators who made their name in those days: Motoyuki Shibata and Yoshiaki Sato of American literature; Mitsuyoshi Numano and Ikuo Kameyama of Russian literature, Shohei Chujo of French literature and Shozo Fujii in Chinese literature, for example. In the entertainment sector, too, European and American mysteries as well as the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s songs were made available in elaborate translations.

In this connection, I would like to emphasize that the quality of translations continues to improve steadily to this day from the 1990s, a period dubbed “the lost decade” that produced new phrases like a social divide in the wake of the burst of the economic bubble.

energy to spare. Japanese youths these days buy anything carrying Murakami’s name, even a pack of tissue paper. It would not be wide of the mark to say that thanks to his talent and influence, Japanese youths can read American novels such as “*The Catcher in the Rye*” and “*The Great Gatsby*” more extensively than their American counterparts.

The translation mania is not limited to Murakami. Ikuo Kameyama, president of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, achieved great success in his bold attempt to translate Dostoyevsky’s “*The Brothers Karamazov*” and get it published in a paperback edition. A translated script of Chekhov’s “*The Seagull*” recently announced by linguistic genius Mitsuyoshi Numano was immediately adopted for stage performance, which will star up-and-coming young actor Tatsuya Fujiwara who is so popular that he is certain to draw a packed audience.

I would like to add that most of the main works by the winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature in recent years have been translated into Japanese. A world of literary works translated into Japanese is in a way a cultural perversion. In fact, however, they can be counted among a few treasures produced by the bubble period.

13

Masakazu Hosoda is chief editor, the Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.