

Survey of Translations of Children's and YA Literature from Chinese, Japanese and Korean

David Jacobson

*David Jacobson is editorial consultant at [Chin Music Press](#) and author of [Are You an Echo?: The Lost Poetry of Misuzu Kaneko](#). He will be on the panel "[Asian American Experiences in Children's Books](#)" (with Uma Krishnaswami, Philip Lee and Linda Sue Park) the [12th IBBY Regional Conference](#), at the University of Washington, Seattle, 19-22 October 2017.
Contact: davej@chinmusicpress.com*

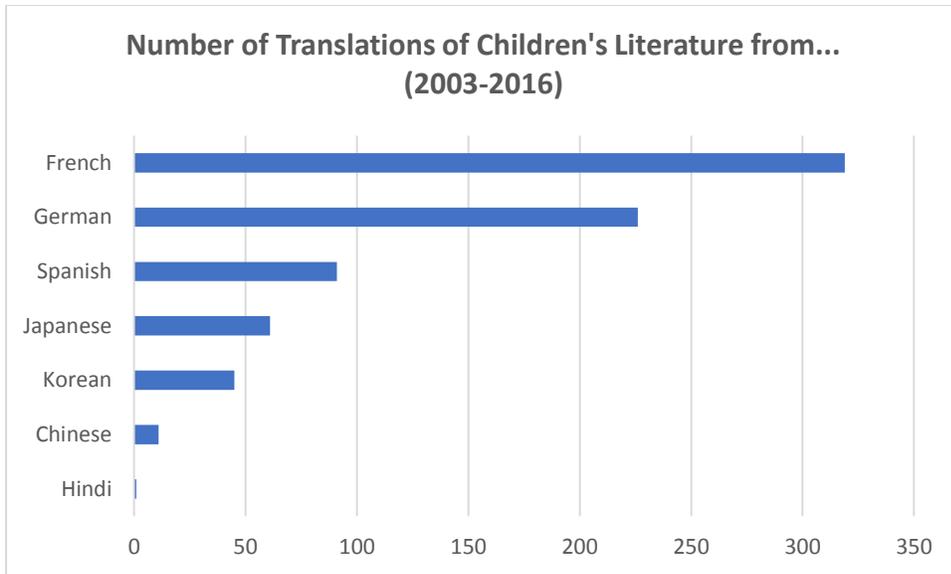
Earlier this year, I picked up a copy of Cao Wenxuan's *Bronze and Sunflower*, intrigued by a superlative [review](#) penned by children's librarian Betsy Bird. I was surprised to learn from the review that this was the only title of Cao's published in the US, despite his being "arguably the most famous Chinese author for children in the world."

Were there really so few translations of children's literature from China? I wondered. As a Japanese specialist, I was aware that there was a big gap between the number of US books translated into Japanese vis-à-vis the number of Japanese books we translate into English. But the Chinese case shocked me. Was the gap in translations from Asia really that big?

I decided to investigate the numbers myself. My first stop was the [Cooperative Children's Book Center \(CCBC\)](#) at the University of Wisconsin, which publishes annual diversity statistics for children's literature. Of the 44,700 titles they catalogued between 2003 and 2016, only 2,557, or 5.72%, were about Asia and Asian-Americans or by Asians and Asian-Americans ([see this link for my tabulations](#)). But this overstates the number of books with Asia or Asian-America as the subject matter, because 786, or 62% of the titles written by Asians and Asian-Americans don't have to do with Asia or Asia-America.

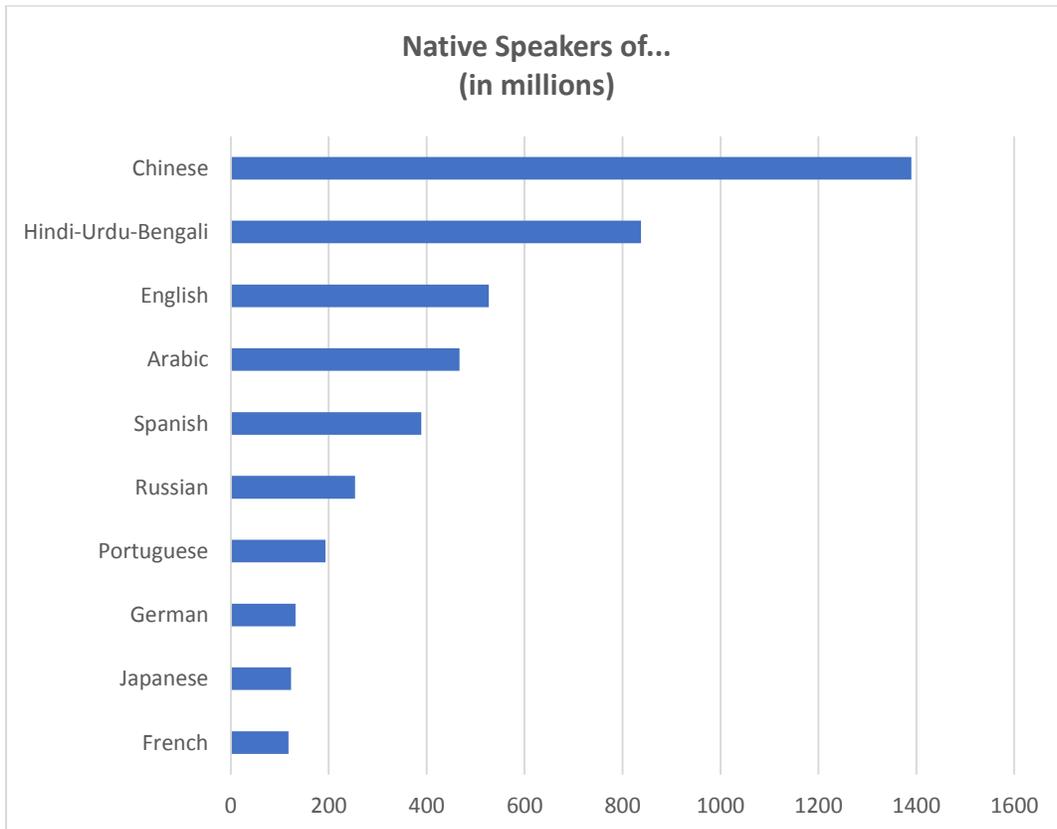
The CCBC also counts translations (see my tabulations). [Their data reveals that only about 2.6% of the titles they received during the](#) same period were translations. That's even lower than the 3% threshold, which is said to be the percentage of translations published in the United States.

What's even more striking is where these books come from. Nearly 55% of all translations noted by the CCBC come from just three languages—French (27%), German (19%), and Spanish (8%).



Source: CCBC translation logs

Ironically, that distribution is almost the mirror image of the number of native speakers of those languages.



Source: Washington Post, 2015

The [US Board on Books for Young People \(USBBY\)](#) also keeps track of the number of “international books” coming into the United States. Every five years since 1998, it has published a volume listing the most outstanding of such books. Initially, it defined “international books” to be those that were first published outside the United States, and then republished here. But in 2002, the editor expanded that definition to include books published in the US that are set in other lands, because “for some countries, the only books available were those written by American authors.” Subsequent volumes have retained that definition.

Even though these volumes don’t claim to be comprehensive, the results for Asia are paltry, especially if you only consider translations or books from those countries.

Listings of Asian Titles in USBBY Bibliographies of International Children’s Literature (2005-2014)

	Total listings	# of translations, or titles written by an author living in that country
Japan	36	25
China	35	9
India	33	9
Korea	12	8

Source: USBBY, “Bridges to Understanding” (2011); USBBY, “Reading the World’s Stories” (2016). N.B. “China” includes listings for the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet.

Across the pond, [Literature Across Frontiers](#) monitors translations published in the UK. It notes that literary translations amount to 3% of all books published in the UK, like in the United States. But the focus in the UK is primarily on translations from other European languages. Japanese is the only non-European language among the top 10 translated, with 170 translations between 2000 and 2015, just edging out Portuguese in 10th place. However, this figure includes both adult and children’s literature, the latter of which is estimated at about 15% of total translations across all languages. By contrast, there were 138 total translations from Chinese between 2000 and 2015, 80 from Indian languages, and 24 from Korean.

Still, none of this data seemed to capture what I thought I was aware of in the Japanese children’s literature space. So, with the help of friends in the children’s literature field and Japanese and Chinese translation (most notably Helen Wang, Minjie Chen, Eric Abrahamsen, Avery Fischer Udagawa, Junko Sakoi and Reina Nakano) I decided to see if I could put together a more comprehensive list for children’s literature from Japan, China, and Korea. I decided not to include India because of the number of languages involved and the presence there of a vigorous English-language children’s press.

Using the CCBC translation logs as a base, I added titles collected by [Open Letter Books](#) from a one-time study of children's literature in translation, translations listed on the [Paper Republic](#) database of translations from Chinese, titles listed in the USBBY bibliographies above, and combed through the backlists of publishers who have devoted significant energy to children's literature in translation. I also limited the entries to titles that have been catalogued in Worldcat, and those that are actual translations or first published abroad. I focused on titles published after 2000 and did not include graphic novels or manga.

The results are enlightening ([see attached list](#)). First, there is considerably more children's literature available in translation from East Asia than the CCBC and USBBY surveys suggest. I counted 123 translations from Japanese since 2001, 64 from Chinese since 2005, and 38 from Korean since 2002. What's also striking is the contribution of a handful of publishers who have emphasized literature in translation. Nearly 60% of the Chinese titles came from just three small publishers: Balestier (UK), Starfish Bay (Australia), and Candied Plums (US). Two publishers—Big & Small Publishing (Australia) and Norwood House Press (US)—have made a conspicuous investment in Korean titles. The big exception to this are translations from Japan which are published by a smattering of large and small publishing houses.

I conclude, then, that it is small presses who are doing the bulk of publishing translations from East Asia. That likely explains why so many titles are not picked up by the CCBC, USBBY, and Literature Across Frontiers. The CCBC, for instance, creates its logs from books submitted to it voluntarily by publishers in the US. It says it captures "most" trade books, but I suspect that it misses many titles from small presses who don't submit books.

The other factor to note is the extent to which translation has become global. Children's books from China in translation have been published in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Singapore. Hence, entities like the CCBC and Literature Across Frontiers which base their data mostly on domestic publishers miss a lot of titles.

Fortunately, there are online retailers like Amazon who can send us books from abroad as if they were printed next door—so all these books are available to us. The problem is more informational. Translations are hard to find, especially if they are published by small presses all over the globe. We need a global database to find them. The list I created is intended as an initial effort in that direction. Doubtless I have missed many titles and noted many others incorrectly. I would like to encourage authors, translators, publishers, teachers, librarians, even parents to contact me if you can help improve this list. Ultimately, it would be nice to append links to reviews, and to add titles from other unappreciated literatures from all over the world.

Finally, I should add that in putting the list together, I have discovered that we will soon be able to read a lot more Cao Wenxuan in translation. Archipelago's new "Elsewhere Editions" imprint will publish Cao's *Feather* in November. And the Twinkling Books imprint of New Zealand's Eunoia Publishing Group is in the process of releasing a whole series of Cao titles in English.

It's about time.