

A Bridge Between Worlds: Career-changing experience from ASEM-DUO

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Ten years ago, I wrote a motivation letter for the DUO-Korea Fellowship Programme. I was 21, studying Translation and Interpreting in Barcelona, and completely in love with a language I had only just discovered. I ended that letter with a quote by José Saramago, a Portuguese writer: "Writers create a nation's literature, while translators create universal literature." It felt bold to write that at 21. Looking back now, I think it was the truest thing I've ever put on paper.

I remember the moment I first heard Korean. I was already studying Japanese, already deep into languages, and I thought I knew what it felt like to fall for a new one. But Korean was different, and not in a way I could justify intellectually. My friends thought it was a phase. Maybe I thought so too. It wasn't.

I just knew I had to go to Korea, and ASEM-DUO made it possible. Without the fellowship, a year in Seoul would have been out of reach financially. With it, I packed my bags and landed at Dongguk University in the autumn of 2016, equal parts terrified and thrilled.

Seoul was nothing like studying Korean from Barcelona. Suddenly the language was everywhere: on street signs, in convenience stores, in the rapid-fire conversations happening all around me on the subway. I made mistakes constantly. I got lost. I mispronounced things and made people laugh. I once walked into a coffee shop and accidentally asked for a nosebleed (코피) instead of a coffee (커피). However, slowly, week by week, something clicked. Not just linguistically, but culturally. I started to understand why certain things are said indirectly, why silence in a conversation isn't awkward but intentional. Little things, but the kind that matter enormously when you're translating.

My classes at Dongguk were taught entirely in Korean. The first few weeks I understood perhaps half of what was said. I took notes in a mixture of Korean, Spanish and the occasional despairing question mark. By the second semester, the question marks had mostly disappeared.

I shared a dormitory floor with students from all over Asia, and discovered that living in close quarters with people is the fastest language course there is. We ate together, watched dramas together, argued about which *ramyeon* was the best. My Korean improved fastest in those in-between moments. Not in class, but at two in the morning over a bowl of noodles.

What I tried hardest to avoid was the expat bubble, the comfortable circuit of other foreign students speaking English, eating familiar food, experiencing Korea at a safe distance. I wanted the uncomfortable version. The one where you have to actually figure things out.

I also spent a lot of time in bookshops that year. Korean bookshops are wonderful: enormous, unhurried. I discovered authors I'd never heard of, picked up novels whose covers caught my eye, stumbled across webtoons and essay collections and poetry. I

was building a map of a literary culture, and I couldn't stop. I left Seoul with better Korean, obviously. But more than that, I left with a sense of what Korean literature was trying to do, what it was responding to, what it was carrying. That context doesn't come from a dictionary. It comes from living somewhere long enough to feel its weight.

When I came back to Spain, I knew what I wanted to do. In 2019, I started a Master's in East Asian Studies, specialising in Korean Studies, at the Universidad de Salamanca. I graduated in 2021 with honours and with one of the best grades of my year. I'm proud of that, but honestly, what I remember most from those years is the reading. So much reading. The master's gave me the academic framework I had been missing: the history, the literary criticism, the tools to think rigorously about what I was translating and why. It also gave me time to begin building, slowly, the professional reputation that would eventually open doors.

Those doors opened gradually. The first translations were small. Short texts, nothing that would make headlines. But each one taught me something, and each one led to the next. I learned that literary translation is not something you can rush, and that the best work happens when you give a text the time it deserves. I also learned that Korean-to-Spanish and Korean-to-Catalan translators are few enough that there is real work to be done, real gaps to fill, real readers waiting. That felt like both a responsibility and an opportunity.

And then came the translation work. First small projects, then bigger ones. Novels. Manhwa. Gradually, a career. I had written in my 2016 letter about wanting to translate Korean literature into Spanish and Catalan, and here I was, actually doing it.

The work I'm most proud of is my Catalan translation of *Grass* (*Herba*, in Catalan) by Keum-Suk Gendry Kim, which is a graphic novel based on the real testimony of Lee Ok-sun, a Korean woman who survived sexual slavery during the Japanese occupation. It is a devastating, beautiful, necessary book. Translating it into Catalan was one of the hardest things I've done professionally. The original Korean carries a particular kind of silence in the way Lee Ok-sun tells her story, and finding the equivalent of that silence in Catalan kept me awake more than once. I've also translated Gendry Kim's *The Waiting* (*L'Espera*, in Catalan) and *My Friend Kim Jong-un* (*El meu amic Kim Jong-un*, in Catalan), and I hope to keep bringing her work, and other Korean voices, to Catalan readers.

Catalan matters to me for reasons that feel personal. It's the language I grew up with in Barcelona, a minority language that has had to fight for its survival and continues to do so. There's something that resonates deeply, for me, in the idea of bringing Korean literature, which is another culture that has had to assert its place in the world, into Catalan. Two languages that know what it means to be overlooked. There is something right about Korean stories living in Catalan, two languages that have had to fight to be heard.

I sometimes reread that motivation letter from 2016. The 21-year-old who wrote it was ambitious and a little naïve, and absolutely certain that she wanted to spend her life building bridges between Korean and Spanish-speaking cultures. I find it moving, honestly, to see how directly that path has unfolded. There were moments I wasn't sure it would. But here I am.

The bridge I dreamed about then is the one I walk across every day now, carrying stories from one world to another. And it started, in a very real sense, with ASEM-DUO believing that a student from Barcelona with big plans and a love of Korean was worth the investment. I hope I've made that investment worthwhile.