

The West in the East



by Phyllis Chesler

Sometimes, the proverbial bread cast on the waters really does return to you. Yesterday, a new edition of “Women and Madness” in Korean (Hugo) arrived in the mail. It is a hardcover version with an artful, beautiful cover based on Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party.” This is my second book in Korean—“Letters to a Young Feminist” was published there in 2000. My work has also appeared in Japan twice before (“Women and Madness” and “Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M”—and in China (“Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman.”) And, for the first time, “An American Bride in Kabul” is about to be published in Arabic.

To have one’s work cross many oceans is no small thing. To have one’s ideas given a hearing in truly far away places is somewhat magical. It opens unexpected doors. For example, a very literate Korean woman manages a nearby mani-pedi shop. When I brought her a copy of one of my books in Korean her face lit up and she said: “Oh, I know the translator! He was my teacher in college. May I borrow this?”

A Chinese student was vacationing in New York and when we

met she said: "Oh, you're a very famous writer in China." I was shocked. Apparently, my work there had been translated and published without my knowledge—my former agent had not yet been told and had not yet told me.

The best anecdote is this: The Japanese translator of "Women and Madness," Kiyomi Kawano, had founded the first feminist therapy center of Tokyo. Thereafter, in 1990, she invited me to Japan to speak at a conference. And so I went. A delegation met me at the airport but I had not slept for at least a day or two. They had booked a special dinner at a new restaurant in town "which was all the rage." It was a Chinese restaurant! My head nearly fell into the soup—I was that tired. Some time later, and to my total surprise, they gave me a birthday party. The room was filled with a thousand flowers and they had hired a Spanish flamenco guitarist because, they said, they thought that I might be homesick and when they looked at a map they decided that Spain was not that far from New York! Sweet, sweet women.

These are memories that I cherish—and none of these experiences would have happened had I not written my books and had I not had the great good fortune to have had them translated.