

'Korea is not only about kimchi'



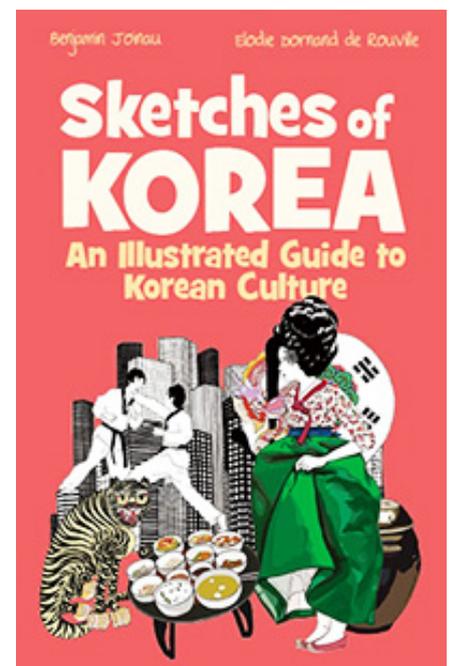
Professor Benjamin Joinau introduces his book, “Sketches of Korea,” at Seoul Selection in Samcheongdong, Seoul, Wednesday. / Courtesy of Seoul Selection

By Kim Jae-heun

Benjamin Joinau, professor of French Language and Literature at Hongik University has published a cultural guide book “Sketches of Korea” to help foreigners understand Korean culture from a non-native perspective.

“Korea is not only about K-pop, Samsung, kimchi or Psy,” said Joinau during an interview with The Korea Times at a cafe in Samcheong-dong, Seoul, Wednesday, following a press conference. “It has more complex and interesting aspects. I hope my book can further expand the curiosity about culture for foreigners.”

Joinau arrived in Korea 20 years ago and tried to learn about the country; but there was no book in French about Korea in 1994. There were only a few English travel guides such as “Lonely Planet” that introduced Korea in “unattractive ways with gloomy pictures” he said.



But he found that Korea was not the country the books described. Joinau was quickly mesmerized by its culture. The professor decided to write a travel guide in French and published it in 1999. “Coree” became his first contribution to the French travel book collection “Le Petit Fute.”

Cover of “Sketches of Korea”
/ Courtesy of Seoul Selection

Still, Joinau felt something was missing about many books published by the Korean government or Korean authors with the purpose of promoting the local culture and tradition.

“Most books written by government institutions or Korean writers show what Koreans think is best about their own country, which is not always right. Foreigners have different points of view.

“Koreans tend to focus too much on traditional aspects, which can make us think Koreans still wear hanbok (Korean traditional clothes) for example,” said Joinau.

The professor felt there was a need for a cultural guide book that expanded on what was described in typical tourist books. He took six years to thoroughly research small details of Korean culture and put them into five categories _ social, cultural, artistic, traditional and spiritual.

“Sketches of Korea provides a detailed explanation from cultural heritage to etiquette in everyday life. Foreigners visiting mokyoktang (Korean sauna) for the first time will make mistakes because they don’t know if they have to wear something or not.”

It was tricky for Joinau to write the book _ checking up on factual aspects of his research was the hardest.

“I had to double or even triple check all the facts. People would tell me different stories and neither Wikipedia nor Naver (a Korean search portal) was absolutely trustworthy. Tradition and customs were changing very fast in Korea too.

“One example is I remember struggling to distinguish the difference between kkotminam (a flower-like handsome man) and hunnam (a charming and attractive men); and whether hunnam meant a better-looking than kkotminam, or more masculine,” he said.

Joinau is considering publishing more books about Korean culture.

“I was lucky to come to Korea 20 years ago, and got to publish a book on Korean culture. Trends change with time and if the book sells well, I want to write a second edition to update the stories,” he added.