

The Publishing Environment for Translations of Japanese Fiction in English

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The Publishing Environment for Translations of Japanese Fiction in English

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From the perspective of the general public at least, the greatest obstacle faced by translators of modern Japanese literature into English—intrepid dreamers all—is understanding Japanese language and culture well enough to accurately and hopefully artistically convey a meaningful literary work across the language abyss. The ability to do this successfully is generally considered contingent upon long years of language study and a certain period of residence in Japan, in the refined atmosphere of Kyoto for certain works and in the back alleys of Kabukicho for others. In short, in the public imagination, it is simply a matter of whether or not the translator has the ability, persistence, and perhaps the financial wherewithal to sit down and grind out hundreds of pages of translation.

But the perils of taking a work from the original Japanese into published English extend to what we might call the translation publishing environment, involving editors, publishers, critics, academics, the economy, bureaucrats and readers. In this paper I would like to touch on the various factors of that environment that affect the translator's ability to get his or her efforts into print. A major stimulus for selecting this topic is the excellent article by Edward Fowler in the Winter 1992 *Journal of Japanese Studies* titled "Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures: On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction." Supported in part by a grant from the Japan Foundation, Fowler conducted research in Japan and the United States between 1988 and 1990 on the state of the literature translation publication business. Simply put, my motivation is to find out what—if anything—has changed in the last decade and a half.

One thing that has not changed is that while there are large numbers of freelance translators from English to Japanese who are able to make some semblance of a living even while residing in one of the major metropolises of Japan, there are relatively few freelancers who can support themselves

by translating literature, especially from Japanese to English.

Therefore it is often scholars in the field of Japanese literature—with a day job—who take on the work of translating, in addition to their other duties. And this they often do without hopes of academic recognition, because translation is often not always judged to fit within the parameters of “original research.” In order to claim at least some credit for their efforts, therefore, the academic will produce a critical essay to accompany the work. That, in turn, means that the finished product is likely to be published by a university press, for few commercial presses will tolerate more than a minimum of footnotes, introductions and other academic paraphernalia. And because there is little money for publicizing these translations, the translations may end up in runs of less than two thousand—in hardcover—with no plans to issue a cheaper paperback version that might attract other readers.

A somewhat newer element in the process, at least in the opinion of some, is that the real gems of Japanese literature have been done, and the new generation of Japanese writers does not stand as tall as the earlier generation. There is obviously room for debate on this point, but it is true that the majority of the major candidates for the canon have been done at least once.

And having been done once—by a translator of whatever talent and by a publisher of whatever echelon—strongly discourages a second outing. While Japanese readers are rediscovering *Catcher in the Rye* thanks to the recent translation by Murakami Haruki 村上春樹, it would be hard to think of similar cases in reverse of a Japanese author being placed in the spotlight again, with the memorable exceptions of the recent efforts of Royall Tyler and Jay Rubin.

Since Fowler’s study, there have been several changes in the publishing scene. First is the collapse of the Japanese economy, and with it a decline in the number of English readers seeking to understand Japan’s success. (It would seem that the “deeply felt desire” to learn about Japanese culture dried up Japan’s weight on the world stage diminished.) The second change has been in the support system for translations of Japanese literature.

The Japan Foundation, of course, continues a three decade-long

program of subsidizing publication of translations in various languages—including since 2001 a concentrated effort to make Japanese literature available in Russian—and has to date supported over 900 translations. The drawback here is that funding is likely to amount to no more than 10% of production costs, and the application process is extremely time-consuming. Publishers are said to give considerable thought to whether the paperwork is worth the effort. A second Japan Foundation program, set up in 1988 and devoted to subsidizing as much as 80% of production costs, had another drawback—it was earmarked for a list of some sixty-five works, many of which were obscure, out of print even in Japanese, and would have a very small audience in any foreign language.

There are new players in the subsidizing arena. One is the Association for 100 Japanese Books (*Nihon no Hyaku-satsu Hon'yaku no Kai* 日本の百冊翻訳の会), a non-profit organization founded in 1992 which facilitates the translation and publication of Japanese books in other languages. The association raises funds from individuals and corporations to support individual titles in literature as well as non-fiction, social science and the arts. Applicants for support are not the individual translators but publishers who already have a commitment from a qualified translator. The catch for the translator is that the work should already be completed or be in progress at the time of the application.

A second—potentially major—player is the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, which in April 2002 launched the Japanese Literature Publishing Project (JLPP) to promote the translation of literary works into English and other languages. The JLPP appointed a committee of five members, who make up the first annual list (2002-2003) of works of three categories: period fiction, modern classics and contemporary fiction. The five members of the first committee are novelists Shimada Masahiko 島田雅彦, Tanabe Seiko 田辺聖子 and Hiraiwa Yumie 平岩弓枝, literary critic and Keio University professor Fukuda Kazuya 福田和也, and University of California professor John Nathan. While the list includes so-called “pure literature” it also includes mysteries, historical fiction and more popular literature, and in a few cases some consideration would seem to have been given to selecting works that would actually appeal to readers. The addition of works that are outside the traditional categories of “classic”

or “pure literature” is certainly a change to be complimented.

The project was promoted at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2002 and the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in March 2003, in other words covering both the commercial publishing world and the academic world. The second list (2003-2004) is due to appear in autumn 2004, and reports are that it will reflect a wider range of views including those of booksellers, translators, editors and publishers. The Agency’s plan is to buy up two thousand of each published translation to donate to universities, libraries and other research institutions around the world, and then allow the publishers to sell the remaining copies through normal channels on a commercial basis.

Next let us consider the commercial publishers of Japanese literature in translation. Traditional publishers include Grove Press, Kodansha International and Tuttle, but in the past few years mainstream publishers like Harcourt Brace and the relatively new Stone Bridge Press have brought a few translations out. Perhaps the most unusual new entry is Vertical Incorporated, based in New York, which has just last year begun putting out what is considered in Japan *taishū bungaku* (popular literature). To date, they have brought into print works by Kurimoto Kaoru 栗本薫, Kitakata Kenzō 北方謙三, Ekuni Kaori 江國香織, Suzuki Kōji 鈴木光司, and Yamada Taichi 山田太一. Vertical’s stated purpose is to bring entertaining books into English. “Until now...most Japanese books translated into English have been either literary classics or introductions to traditional culture meant for a limited circle of Japanophiles. Vertical publishes exciting titles that require no prior knowledge of Japanese culture and are not intended primarily to familiarize readers with it; we choose good reads with universal themes.” Indicative of Vertical’s different approach is that each of their books is packaged in a highly stylized cover which would attract attention in any bookstore, and at first glance no one would guess that the author was Japanese or that the work is a translation.

At approximately the time Fowler’s article appeared, the Japanese economy was just beginning to head down the long slope, and this of course affected the publication of translations. Companies were no longer flush with cash to use in sponsoring cultural projects like publications of translations, and on the other end, there was a decline in the number of

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English speakers who turned to Japanese literature as a means of finding out why Japan was an economic giant, because Japan's stature was declining at least in economic terms.

A brief look at the effect of economics on translation reveals several unexpected problems. One is that because the potential market for a translation is strictly limited, the translation rights fees charged by Japanese publishers can be daunting. To pay what a Japanese publisher thinks is a reasonable fee, then to pay a translator to do the work and to market the book in a basically uninterested market deters many publishers from even thinking of putting out a translation.

Another problem resulting from cost-consciousness is the tendency of publishers in smaller markets to reduce costs of translating the original Japanese by having a translation made from an existing translation of the Japanese. It is, for example, much less expensive to "translate" a Japanese book from English into French than directly from Japanese into French because there are more qualified translators. This shortcut is of course fraught with dangers. For example, in the case of Kawabata's *Snow Country*, the Japanese term *oshiire* was translated into English as "small room" with little damage, but when the English in turn was translated into Indonesian, the second translator used the word for "toilet".

There are related legal problems that certainly deter translators. I know of one case where an English translation of a complete novel was sent to an agent in search of a publisher. Somehow or other, the manuscript found its way into the hands of a third-language translator who used it to create a translation into a third language which was published before the English translation saw the light of day, and it was published with no indication at all that it was based on the English and not on the original Japanese novel.

Edward Fowler reported in his article on the visit in 1988 of five publishing company executives from the United States at the invitation of the Japan Foundation. The foundation's purpose was of course to interest American publishers in bringing out more books on Japan, and in particular, more translations from the Japanese. A similar entourage of eight executives was invited in 2000. Among the participants was Morgan Entrekin, publisher of what is now Grove/Atlantic, Inc.

Entrekin comments in a report on the visit that Grove/Atlantic continues its strong commitment to publishing literature in translation, some 8 or 10 out of an annual 60 new titles, and almost all of these are financially supported by the press. In other words, only a few are funded by cultural organizations or institutions. He comments that publishing works in translation has always been tough in the U.S., partly because American publishers are rarely bilingual. In other words, they cannot read works in languages other than English. "One significant way cultural institutions and government organizations could stimulate interest in Japanese literature and encourage a wider readership would be to assist publishers and authors in supplying sample English translations of books for the international marketplace."¹

He makes another quite valid point that it is hard enough for publishers to get worthy American titles onto store bookshelves, so it is doubly hard to get translated works onto the shelves. Being strongly provincial and self-centered in its worldview, America is not easily opened to new perspectives and new contexts in literature, and building a readership takes time. One area where progress is possible is in universities, where translations can be assigned as textbooks for classes hence exposing young adults to new writers. This of course is more easily done when the books are paperbacks, which in turn means a commercial publishing house probably needs to be involved.

Actually a lot of what I have described so far falls within the category of technical problems. We have skirted the real issue which is that ultimately the factor determining whether a work is translated or not is whether there is a perceived readership. Fowler at the beginning of the 1990s argued that "the great strides in translation made in the 1950s may have actually hindered later efforts at having Japanese fiction reach a still wider public.

"Instrumental in constructing the postwar image of Japan in America—an exoticized, aestheticized, and quintessentially foreign land quite antithetical to its prewar image of a bellicose and imminently threatening power—the great postwar translations seem to diverge all too

¹ Morgan Entrekin, *Japanese Book News* (Number 33) Spring 2001.

widely from the reality of contemporary Japan, to say nothing of contemporary American sensibilities. And this divergence has manifested itself...in the feeling that Japanese literature cannot speak to American readers.”² He mentions specifically how the translations of Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima became the standard by which all other writers were subsequently judge by reviewers, even into the 1980s.

Fowler’s point is well taken, for it seems that the distance between the Japanese experience and the American experience remains great, despite outward appearances. But then again, if a company like Vertical succeeds in getting an American reader to pick up a good read that does not require pre-knowledge of Japanese culture and that can stand on its own as a story, the view of readers will gradually change—as is already the case with Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana 吉本ばなな.

And if Japanese writers produce works that portray characters that the American reader can identify with in settings that American readers do not have to struggle to comprehend, that will also change the perception of Japanese literature as belonging to another world. (Take for example Yamada Eimi’s 山田詠美 “Payday!” which is set in South Carolina, with some mention of Manhattan, and whose characters are black and white Americans. There is not a single Japanese in the cast, and there is no specifically “Japanese” point of view. The only Asian restaurant mentioned is Chinese.)

Now that such works are being produced, if they can find their way into bookstores where English-language readers can find them, the point that Fowler has raised may no longer be a factor. It remains to be seen whether a large contingent of Japanese novelists have the will or the ability to produce works that in translation tell either an entertaining story or a story of some universal meaning. Can enough Japanese writers produce works that are “good books” and not primarily “Japanese books”? This may be the key to selling on the English-language market, that is, selling a Japanese writer on the international market who just happens to be Japanese.

In conclusion, I believe that whether Japanese literature in

² Fowler 1992, p. 3.

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translation—like Japanese anime and manga—can reach a broader audience in the English-speaking world will depend on a combination of all of the mentioned factors, i.e., not just continued but increased support from foundations of expanded lists of candidate volumes, continued efforts by semi-altruistic translators to polish their skills in order bring the best possible quality translations to the public, new approaches in publishing to getting Japanese works into the bookstores at reasonable prices, and finally presenting works to readers that they want to read, not that they should read or that are limited to providing so-called insights into Japanese culture. I do believe that brought to water, the English-reading public will drink. The question is how much.

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