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# Japanese Literature in Translation From a Viewpoint of Comparative Culture

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## Introduction

This report is a reflection of an upper division course in Japanese literature taught in the Fall semester of 2001 at Miyazaki International College (MIC). Until this time, the course had been taught in Japanese. In order to better align the course with the rest of MIC's curriculum and its educational philosophy, the course was offered for the first time in English, with the participation of an English native speaker colleague. My reflections as the instructor of the course offered in this new format will be described in this paper.

## The Move to Change

At MIC the Japanese Literature course has been offered at junior and senior levels for several years. The course aims at investigating representative works of particular authors in the history of modern Japanese literature, such as Mori Ogai. While all the other courses at MIC are taught in English with the exception of Japanese Expression and some education courses, the Japanese Literature course had been conducted in Japanese because the instructor considered it more appropriate to teach Japanese literature in Japanese, using original Japanese texts. The instructor had been well aware, however, of the fact that the course, when taught in Japanese, did not fit well with MIC's educational philosophy and general curriculum. Therefore, the new format of teaching the course in English was proposed.

In order to better understand the need to offer the Japanese literature course in English, it is necessary to have a brief overview of MIC's educational goals. According to MIC's 2002 College Bulletin, "the fundamental purpose of MIC is to develop international citizens conversant in Japanese and foreign cultures and fluent in English." This can be interpreted to mean that any effort to enhance student proficiency of the English language will be appreciated and esteemed, and that it would be ideal if the course could be taught in English when it would not impair the activities in the class.

As a professor of this course, who is well aware of the educational mission of MIC, I have been thinking of ways in which the Japanese Literature course could be successfully taught in English. One of my attempts was to use English translations of *Abe Ichizoku* by Mori Ogai in the Fall of 2000 together with the original Japanese text in order to develop students' understanding of Western interpretation of the story. This was partially successful in developing the students' ability to read text and helping them gain a deeper understanding of meanings behind the translated text. As a class, we tried to understand the rationale of the words or phrases selected in the translated text, closely comparing them with the original text. It was a good exercise. It became obvious to us, however, that the deeper we scrutinized the

meaning of a sentence or a word in the text, either in English or in Japanese, the more our knowledge of the language (both/either Japanese and/or English) is challenged. In my case, it felt natural for me to rely more on the Japanese original text than its translation because of my lack of command of the English language.

In the Fall semester of 2001, a native English-speaking teacher, Amanda Bradley, participated in the course. As a result, the features of the course changed considerably both in appearance and in depth. The course was taught totally in English with English translation, although the Japanese original text was also provided. By describing this experience of teaching the course with an English native speaker present, I would like to draw a possible future design of the course as a way to further develop the Japanese Literature course at MIC.

## Major Advantages

The following are the major advantages of teaching the Japanese Literature course in English, using an English translation with its Japanese original, at MIC:

- (1) It enables Japanese learners to read an original text more carefully.
- (2) It provides an opportunity to think about Japanese culture from an external perspective.
- (3) It enables Japanese learners to see and consider how western culture understands Japanese culture and why it understands Japanese culture in such a way.
- (4) It provides an opportunity for Japanese students to train themselves to communicate in English about what they have learned in Japanese about modern Japanese literature

## Careful Reading

It is always important to read a text carefully in literary research. *Careful reading* refers to at least two things. One is concerning the content and ideas of a text, and the other one is regarding the expression by which the content and ideas are embodied in the text. Let us consider some examples. In terms of content of the text, the dates and places of birth of some characters, the names of books or of articles etc., usually are fixed and are not related to one another. However, in a literary text, we often see that these dates, places of birth, and titles are indeed intertwined quite tightly. A name of a place could suggest something more than the mere name. This is even more so with the name and descriptions of a character, behavior, and thoughts. In reading a literary text, it can be concluded that careful consideration should be duly paid to elements of expression, words, sentences, and the manner in which a character is described. In such a case the expression and content cannot be detached one from the other and, in order for the reading to be thorough, understanding of the expression has to be considered at the same time as understanding of the content. Here care in reading needs to span from the expression to the content, and contrariwise as well.

It is often understood that a translated text is an example of forced detachment of content and expression, even though in actuality these two elements cannot be considered as two separate entities. It would enrich our reading if we could successfully trace the (probably long) intellectual journey of a translator as s/he tried to find a suitable expression for his or her translation. We should reflect

on the meaning of a translated word or a sentence, with its Japanese original in hand, by asking questions such as “why did the translator use this word here,” or “why did s/he choose this sentence structure?” This reflective process not only enriches our reading, but also animates our discussion regarding semantic understanding of words as well as deepening our cultural understanding, because it requires readers to have a deeper understanding of the translated text, to say nothing of the original Japanese text. Thus, reading a text with its translation would be beneficial even in a Japanese Literature course. Next, some examples of this teaching approach will be displayed for illustration

## Our Findings in the Fall of 2001

In the Fall semester of 2001 we read *Yasui Fujin* by Mori Ogai. This is a historical fiction dealing with Yasui Sokken, a great Confucius scholar in the late Edo period. He was born in Kiyotake where MIC is located. His wife, Sayo, according to the story, devoted herself selflessly to her husband.

As we read this text, we encountered a lot of topics for discussion. One example that would illustrate well the kinds of topics the class was interested in is the term “恬然として” in the original and *noncommittally* in the translation. In order to get overall understanding of the meaning of the word “恬然として,” quoting a definition of the word from a Japanese dictionary would be useful. *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (second edition) (日本国語大辞典 第二版) defines the word as “静かでやすらかなさま。物事にこだわらないでのんびりしたさま。”<sup>1</sup> Since this definition is too general and does not seem to tell us fully the meaning of the word in the text, which we want to know, it is necessary to examine the context in which the word is in its use.

This word appears once in the story as in the underlined italic part on the text below.

お佐代さんは形振に構はず働いてゐる。それでも「岡の小町」と云はれた昔の佛ほどこやらにある。此頃黒木孫右衛門といふ男が仲平に逢ひに来た。素と飢肥外浦の漁師であつたが、物産学に精しいため、わざわざ召し出されて徒士になつたのである。お佐代さんが茶を酌んで出して置いて、勝手へ下がつたのを見て狡獪なやうな、滑稽なやうな顔をして、孫右衛門が仲平に尋ねた。

「先生。只今のは御新造様でござりますか。」

「さやう。妻で。」*恬然として*仲平は答へた。

「はあ。御新造様は学問をなさりましたか。」

「いゝや。学問と云ふ程のことはしてをりませぬ。」

「して見ますと、御新造様の方が先生の学問以上の御見識でござりますな。」

「なぜ。」

「でもあれ程の美人でお出でになつて、先生の夫人におなりなされた所を見ますと。」

仲平は覚えぬ失笑した。そして孫右衛門の無遠慮なやうな世辞を面白がつて、得意の 碁棋の相手をさせて帰した。

<sup>1</sup> The dictionary cites six example sentences. Two of these are from Meiji Era:

一年有半 (1901) <中江兆民> 附録・潔癖 「土溝の水は塞ぎ留められ<略> 微菌の養成傳播に大便宜を与へつつ有るも、恬然たり」

坊っちゃん (1906) <夏目漱石> 六 「仕棲の合はない、論理に欠けた注文をして恬然として居る」

The corresponding part of the English translation to the original in which the word *noncommittally* is used as an equivalent to “恬然として,” is as follows:

Sayo did her housework without any care for her own looks. Still the earlier traces of *Oka no Komachi* remained there to be seen. About this time a man named Kuroki Magoemon came to call on Chuhei. He had formerly been a fisherman in Sotoura of Obi, but because of his detailed knowledge of natural history he had been summoned to Edo to serve under a shogunate Censor. After Sayo served them tea, Magoemon's eyes followed her back to the kitchen, and then with a crafty and humorous look he inquired of Chuhei,

“Sir, is she your wife?”

“Yes, she is,” Chuhei answered noncommittally.

“Indeed. Has your wife been educated?”

“No, not to the degree of a formal education.”

“Then your wife has insight over and above your learning.”

“Oh, how so?”

“Because even though she is such a beautiful woman, she became your wife.”

Chuhei couldn't help smiling a little. Amused at this impolite flattery of Magoemon, he played a game of go with him. Something Chuhei loved to do although he was not a good player, and then saw him off.

In this seemingly trifling scene of conversation between the two characters, one of Chuhei's characteristics is vividly depicted in his manner of responding to Magoemon's questions. Chuhei responds three times to Magoemon's inquiries, and each time his response is short and shows no sentiments. Here the characteristic of the protagonist is quite manifest, and, needless to say, behind the description of this characteristic is Ogai's device to present the protagonist as we see him in the story. In a word, Chuhei is described as laconic and stoic. That the author did not put down anything, except after the first response, to explain Chuhei's sentiment intensifies the impression of this characteristics of the protagonist. Also, it is apparent that the word “恬然として” seen in the short description of how Chuhei made his first answer, is used with an intention to draw an image of the Confucianist with the aforementioned features.

Then the next question of why the scene called the author to use that particular word must be addressed. The answer to this question lies in the conversation that follows. It is a Confucian ideal to know how to regulate yourself and not to be disturbed by the outer world. In this sense, having little desire is recommendable. A famous passage in the *Analects of Confucius* that “Someone who is clever in speech and too smiley is seldom considered a person of Jin” justifies the attitude of Chuhei. Confucianism gives us some tips to understand how he would react when a conversation concerns a women's appearance.

Turning the pages of the same story, readers will find out the author's intention to establish the protagonist with such mental qualifications. When as a boy the hero was confronted by neighbors with humiliation, he discovered that they nicknamed him “monkey” and his handsome elder brother “monkey trainer.” Chuhei stored these discoveries away in the back of his mind and said nothing to anyone.

Description of Chuhei, who had to bear the jibes of his fellow students at Shoheiko, is another example of his character as indicated above. Following this phrase, the translation sketches the protagonist as below.

Chuhei nonetheless remained silent, paid no attention to the unkind comments, and lost himself in his reading. When his friends came to tease him, they found the following verse written on a narrow strip of ornamental paper pasted on the pillar near his seat:

Ima wa ne o  
Shinobu ga oka no  
Hototogisu  
Itsuka kumoi no  
Yoso ni nanoran

Now concealing his song  
In the depths of the forest  
The nightingale  
Will one day in the sky  
Sing out clearly!

When his friends saw this they would say, "That's a pretty high-flying ambition!" and go off laughing, but actually they felt a bit uneasy inside.

In this scene, too, Chuhei is depicted as calm, silent and self-composed. However, here one aspect of the protagonist, which has never been reported before, is described. We should not miss the fact that the protagonist hides his emotion and stays calm, but his intention is retribution against the fellow students in a cunning way that makes them feel uneasy.

I was trying to show a process a student might be asked to follow in order to identify the meaning of a word in the text. Let's put the text aside awhile and think about the word from a different direction. To put some remark familiar to Ogai readers, this word "恬然として" or similar concepts are found scattered in many of his works. Perhaps Ogai might have used the word to express his own Confucian ideal. Although this is another interesting theme, space constraints do not allow me to pursue it in this article. At present, I need to limit my focus to *Yasui Fujin*.

## Examination of the Translation

Evident in the English text cited above, the word *noncommittal* draws an enigmatic image of the protagonist, who leaves to Magoemon judgement of what was incited by Magoemon's somewhat impolite inquiry. This led the class to look closer at the particular choice of this word in the translation.

After investigating the meaning of "恬然として" in depth in Japanese, using a large Japanese language dictionary and taking the context into account, we need to examine what exists behind the translation when it tries to express the meaning and its connotations of the word "恬然として" by using *noncommittally*.

The definition of the word *noncommittal* as "characterized by refusal to commit oneself to a particular view or course of action; (esp. of words and actions) implying neither consent nor dissent," is the one *Oxford English Dictionary* provides us. It furnishes its definition with three example sentences, the second one of which

goes: "It was written in an ordinary business hand, quite characterless and noncommittal" (Hawthorne, 1879).

*Merriam-Webster Online Collegiate Dictionary* gives definition of the word as "giving no clear indication of attitude or feeling" at the entry of *noncommittal*. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines the word as "Refusing commitment to a particular opinion or course of action; not revealing what one feels or thinks." The definition is furnished with the following example sentence by Thomas Pynchon "His face was the color of a freshly baked pork pie and as noncommittal."

Because these definitions and the implications of the examples are not in complete agreement with the definition I quoted above from the Japanese dictionary, it can be concluded, putting aside the possibility of utter misunderstanding of the translator, that the translator did the translation with an effort to figure out what kind of personality is depicted in the text by using this word. This provides our class with a good topic for our discussion of why the translator chose this particular word. This is quite an appropriate topic for the educational environment at MIC, because the students as well as the teachers are required to maintain comparative culture viewpoints in class discussions.

The question of why the word *noncommittal* is used to depict a Confucian scholar leads us to a speculation of the noncommittal attitude of Japanese people that is too often criticized at intercultural gatherings. The fact that this mental quality of being noncommittal is often discussed in Japanese studies courses for non-Japanese students shows a commonly held belief by Westerners about the characteristics of Japanese people. Discussion of such understanding of Japanese people is indeed a very interesting topic for students at MIC, where intercultural understanding and self-reflection are deemed valuable educational goals

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I listed four major benefits of teaching the Japanese literature course in English. Out of these four benefits only the first and third could be addressed in this report. Benefit one is that it enables Japanese learners to read an original text more carefully. I tried to show how to read a word, using a dictionary and the context. It was demonstrated that the reading requires cultural understanding.

The third benefit is that it enables Japanese learners to see and consider how western culture understands Japanese culture and why it understands Japanese culture in such a way. As we see, in order to achieve this goal, students are required to frequently review and compare the Japanese text and the English translation. By so doing students will be surprised to find the difference in meaning of the two texts and that surprise will lead them to read the text more carefully and make them to try to figure out why the western reader interpreted the text as the translated text shows. It is obvious that this also urges them to carefully read the text. So the two activities are reciprocal and enhance each other.

What is more important is that in the attempt to see the reason for the interpretation in the translation, it is expected that comparative culture viewpoints that the students have been acquiring at MIC will help them. Considering all these points, I concluded that the activities I have described in this report are appropriate for the MIC environment.

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