

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

**Band:** 51 (1997)

**Heft:** 1: Diversity, change, fluidity : Japanese perspectives

**Artikel:** The ferry boat and the passenger, or : the loneliness of the long-distance translator

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147325>

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# THE FERRY BOAT AND THE PASSENGER, OR: THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG-DISTANCE TRANSLATOR

Christoph Langemann, Zurich

I am a ferry boat.  
You're my passenger.

You tread on me with muddy feet.  
I cross the river, hugging you in my arms.

When you are in my arms,  
I do not care  
Whether the river is deep, shallow or rapid.

If you do not come,  
I wait for you from morning till night,  
Exposed to winds and wet with snow or rain.

Once you reach the other bank,  
You go away without looking back.  
But I know you will come back some day.  
So I grow old, waiting for you day and night.

I am a ferry boat  
You're my passenger<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The Mechanism of Translation

For many people the idea of *knowing* a language is merely a question of technical ability that can be answered by a simple “yes” or “no”. I am often admired for the “command” I allegedly have of Chinese, Japanese and Korean. I do admit that I have spent many years trying to communicate in these languages. However, I hesitate to state bluntly that I *know* Japanese, for example. The process of learning a language never ends, and it is densely entwined with the history of one’s personal life. Moreover, in day to day conversation I am bombarded with all kinds of questions about

1 Poem with the title “The Ferry Boat and the Passenger” from the collection “Love’s silence” (*Nim ūi ch’immuk*, 1926) by HAN Yong-un (1879-1944); quoted from *Best Loved Poems of Korea: Selected for Foreigners*, translated by Koh, Chang-soo. Seoul and New Jersey: Hollym, 1984, p. 70.

the cultures of East Asia – as though it were possible for me to make objective statements from a higher standpoint about anything from lacquer combs to the psychological peculiarities of Asian people. When I do not immediately give a clear-cut answer, perhaps because the matter involves complex communication problems that I have learnt to respect, my interlocuters tend to say in a rather accusing and offhand way: “So you don’t *know* Japanese, after all!” And then they proceed to tell me all about Asia!

Much like national cultures, languages are seen by many people, even by intellectual and highly educated persons, as curiously impersonal, unchanging and homogenous entities that are completely separate from each other – and the speaker. They are there to be *mastered*. In consequence the act of translation is often taken to be a purely mechanistic process, in which the translator, an admittedly skilful but not very creative professional, chooses words in the new language that correspond exactly to the original. The translated text, for instance a literary work, is assumed to be absolutely congruent with the original. If a translator shows doubt or hesitation, she must be lacking in competence.

## 2. The Translation is Confused with the Original

Especially in the area of literary translation this mechanistic attitude leads to the effacement of the translator in the reader’s mind. Translated books are quoted and reviewed under the name of the original author. The translator is lucky if her name is even mentioned. Very rarely the quality of a translation is commented on, or criticised, in book reviews, although translating is eminently important in the world of publishing today (a large proportion of the books published in German are translations from the English, for example). Only very rarely does public attention focus on the act of translating, as when Dostoevsky’s famous novel, so far known in German under the title of *Schuld und Sühne* (“Sin and Atonement”) was retranslated under the heading of *Verbrechen und Strafe*<sup>2</sup> (“Crime and Punishment”). The translator, who is responsible for the text the readers actually have before them, usually gets overlooked. Nevertheless, the

2 DOSTOJEVSKIJ, Fjodor: *Verbrechen und Strafe*, trans. Svetlana Geier. Zürich: Ammann, 1994.

quality of the translation is able to influence the success a book or an author has in another language. Gore Vidal for example, whose work was not well received in the German-speaking area due to sloppy renderings of his novels, had to have his two books *Myra* and *Myron* retranslated into German at his own cost<sup>3</sup>.

Naturally, the translators are frustrated. "I am merely regarded as a mouthpiece. Someone says something into it, and on the other side the same comes out in another language!" a colleague who has published many literary translations sarcastically remarked. He has no basic problems with his work – it is creative and allows fascinating insights into questions of culture, literature and language. He is merely complaining that it is not acknowledged. Editors pay negligible fees for translations (the well-paid translation in the world of business and finance is the exception). They sometimes do not pay at all or suddenly cancel projects without notice. They treat translators much like authors and forget that the translators are not trying to publish their own work, but are sacrificing their creativity in another person's name.

### 3. The Humble Servant Creates a Communicative Environment

The job of the translator demands self-effacement much like that of the "ferry boat" in the poem quoted above. In the case of East Asian languages, the situation is worsened by the high complexity of the intercultural communication process the translator is involved in and by the longer time she needs to complete a text, as well as by the ignorance and disinterest of many editors concerning non-European cultures. The translator between East Asian and Western languages moves in an intercultural sphere, only half of which is usually known to the people she deals with. To translate involves a cultural transfer like any other form of inter- and intra-cultural communication.

Translation, be it "literary" or not, is a form of communication. It is not only a transference of meaning, but a reenactment, a dialogue with the original words, an adventure, the outcome of which is uncertain and in which the recipient can participate. The translator is basically indistin-

3 See FRITZ, Peter S.: "Forderungen und Anforderungen." In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 22nd/23rd, No 68, p. 66.

guishable from a reader, and in this role is confronted with her texts as a whole person. It is my suspicion that translating is not valued highly in our society precisely because of its communicative, intuitive, mediating function. As such it can be compared to the work of a housewife, a nurse, a flight attendant and so on. It has no measurable product. Incidentally, many translators are women.

#### 4. Literature as Translation – Culture as Translation

A translator has to interpret a text, find a sense in it and transfer this to a new cultural context, that is, explain it. This is a highly complex procedure.

Recently, beginning in the area of cultural anthropology, there has been a discussion about a new and wider definition of the process of translation, centering around the concepts of “culture as text” and “culture as translation”. A way to a new evaluation of translation is pointed out by Bachmann-Medick in two anthologies devoted to these two concepts<sup>4</sup>. According to the essays collected there, culture can be viewed as a “text”, a selection of patterns which the individual can choose from and interpret. The patterns are never wholly manifest on the concrete level. They have to be individually interpreted, or “translated”. Bachmann-Medick is interested in combining literary science and ethnography to a new whole. She postulates that literature experts should “recontextualize” literary texts in the culture that produced them, i.e. they should view the texts as ethnographic documents of a culture or society. Anthropologists, on the other hand, should realize that objective information on “foreign” cultures does not exist – that all information is transported by linguistic and semantic processes, by “texts”, and is therefore “literary” to a certain degree. In a kind of circular process which for me is characteristic for the act of translation, the anthropologist becomes aware of the role of her subjectivity, creativity, personal background, aesthetic concepts etc. before returning to “objectivity”, whereas the literature expert realizes that the books she discusses have a social, political, historical situation as well as an aesthe-

4 BACHMANN-MEDICK Doris, ed.: *Kultur als Text: die anthropologische Wende in der Literaturwissenschaft*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1996 and BACHMANN-MEDICK, Doris, ed.: *Übersetzung als Repräsentation fremder Kulturen*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt 1997.

tic, personal one. Bachmann-Medick emphasizes that all information about a culture, including one's own, is a kind of translation of "culture as text". In writing a book, an author translates her own culture for her audience.

For Bachmann-Medick, travel diaries and descriptions of foreign cultures are typical translations that say more about the author than the described subject. The description of a foreign culture is firmly situated in the culture of the author. As an example of such "translations of culture", I would like to mention *L'empire des signes* by Roland Barthes, an example of the typical tendency to aesthetically stylize Japan<sup>5</sup>. Descriptions of "foreign" cultures are a subtle form of colonialism, as the concepts and evaluations of the writer are implicitly imposed on the other culture. Sometimes openness and prejudice towards the described culture are juxtaposed in one single text<sup>6</sup>. Literary translations also often function in this one-sided way. Foreign culture is used to define "western" domination. According to Bachmann-Medick, such mechanisms can be exposed by an analysis of translations and comparison with the original. An ideal case would be the examination of a translation by a representative of the culture the original work is situated in. In this way, the translation can be retranslated, "handed back" to the original culture. Bachmann-Medick emphasizes the fact that translations are literary works situated in a realm between the cultures. In this space a complicated interplay takes place when works that are "translations" of culture themselves are translated. I would like to cite the example of *Kusamakura* by Natsume Sōseki (1906)<sup>7</sup>. Sōseki's work is a complex translation, into which elements of Western culture and Western concepts as well as certain Japanese and Chinese elements are integrated to form a new aesthetic construct. A similar example is *Futon* by Tayama Katai (examined in this publication in an essay by

5 Discussed in POLLACK, David: *Reading against Culture: Ideology and Narrative in the Japanese Novel*. Ithaca and London: Cornell U.P., 1987, pp. 12-14: "A Paradigm: Kipling and Barthes in the Empire of Signs."

6 For instance in the letters French Jesuit missionaries sent home during the second half of the 18th century; see: VOIRET, Jean-Pierre, ed.: *Gespräch mit dem Kaiser: Auserlesene Stücke aus den "Erbaulichen und seltsamen Briefen" der Jesuitenmissionare aus dem Reich der Mitte*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1996.

7 Translated into English as *The Three-Cornered World* by Edwin MCCLELLAN or Alan TURNEY, depending on which information in the book you follow (*sic*). London: Arena, 1984.

Barbara Yoshida-Krafft), in which quotations and adaptations from Western literature are used to explore new forms of expression in Japanese fiction. For Japanese readers, the Western elements are foreign. When books such as *Kusamakura* or *Futon* are translated, however, the Japanese elements become foreign.

## 5. Financial and Other Problems

To return to the point made earlier, I would like to cite an example from my own experience to show how not only the literary translator's contribution to the international transfer often gets overlooked. In the catalogue of a certain exhibition there are two long articles on the subject of the costumes of the *nō* theatre by Japanese experts, which I was asked to translate into German. The Japanese texts I received had been specially written for the occasion, but they consisted of formless, badly documented enumerations of historical anecdotes, unconnected details, poetic symbols etc. that were completely unsuitable for an exhibition catalogue in the Western sense. Rather, they seemed to be aesthetic compositions presumably designed to influence (Japanese?) readers to feel harmonious empathy with the subject. The European art lover, however, expects objective information. The text must give the reader the impression that she is being educated, that she knows more than before visiting the exhibition. As most factual information, such as dyeing and weaving processes, the use of the costumes in the plays etc. was contained only fragmentarily in the texts, I had to do complicated research to find out more about the subject and had to rewrite large parts of the articles completely. It was not possible to make a word for word translation of the originals and add an explanatory commentary, as would perhaps have been the best solution, for such critical work does not lie in the scope of a simple exhibition catalogue. The articles were published under the name of the original authors; my name was only barely mentioned in the *impressum* as one translator among many. Naturally I received a payment, but I doubt if my hourly wage was as high as that of the person employed to polish the glass cases in the museum.

## 6. Translation in the Academic World

One would assume a solution to this situation could be found in academic circles. Translations could be supported by universities as academic work, as a basis for further research. However, in reality that is rarely the case. When I told my professor of Korean studies I intended to do literary translations, she said: "That will be your academic death!" And she was right. Although a large part of the work of experts in Chinese, Japanese and Korean studies consists of translating – the material studied usually involves written or spoken words, and in other cases (art, economics, sociology) secondary literature in Asian languages has to be consulted – the process of translation and the change the material undergoes through translation is hardly ever consciously integrated into the research. Are the personal, intuitive, creative, subjective and organic elements of all verbal expression, including literary texts, feared by an academic establishment that clings to the irrational idea that human studies can be objective? Translating involves many levels of the personality. It raises cultural, creative and even emotional questions that transcend the text, but nevertheless influence it. The intuitive aspect is important. Each expression, each passage involves new decisions. A friend, a sinologist, once asked me: "According to which theory do you translate?" I had to admit I had none – I am no theorist and would not be translating if I were one. My theory changes according to the passage I am working on. There are theories of translation, of course. However, *translation theorists, like their colleagues in the other so-called human sciences, like to talk about texts, intertextualities, structures of correspondance, and the like – all hypostatized abstractions. But the reality of translation and all human communication is people.*<sup>8</sup>

## 7. Literary Translation: an Example

It goes without saying that the mechanistic and segregating attitude towards various forms of translation does not lead to good texts. There is no incentive to produce excellent work, and as a result many translations,

8 ROBINSON, Douglas: *The Translators Turn*. Baltimore, 1991, p. 21. Quoted in: BACHMANN-MEDICK, Doris, ed.: *Übersetzung als Repräsentation fremder Kulturen. Op. cit.*, p. 1.

both in academic studies and of literary works, are dilettante and sloppy. It seems that many translators from Asia and the West do not reflect on the complicated intercultural *betwixt and between* they are moving in and in which many traps such as cultural stereotypes, unconsciously held preconceptions, blind spots of knowledge and so on lie waiting. Through a new evaluation of for instance “literary” translation as one of many forms of “cultural” translation, a new consciousness of these problems could be awakened. This means, of course, that translators of any kind have the responsibility of questioning cultural stereotypes and cultural identity.

The main concern of this publication is Japan. However, Japan seen as an isolated culture is one of the stereotypes that have a history of their own, both in Japan and the West. Many processes and phenomena in Japan are similar to or connected with those in other countries. Moreover, the problems of translation are not confined to Japan. So I have decided to include other countries such as China and Korea when necessary, although most of what is said applies to Japan.

To demonstrate in what ways unreflected translation can produce bad results, I will cite some passages from a book I was recently asked to review. The novel is *Land* by Park Kyong-ni from the 1980s<sup>9</sup>, translated from the Korean by Agnita Tennant, who incidentally was born half Korean<sup>10</sup>. The disappointing quality of her translation once more proves the sad truth that fluency in a language, the nationality belonging to it and love of its culture do not automatically guarantee an excellent literary translation. The novel itself, the description of incidents in a village in 1897 with a strong tendency to social stereotypes, reminds me personally of the works of Rosamunde Pilcher.

However, the context a work is written and published in must be examined before any judgement is pronounced, and questions have to be asked, such as, for instance, does censorship exist. Unfortunately no information is given in the book, apart from a short introduction (1 1/2 pages) that contains sentences such as: ... *it is the great national novel – the work that embodies the many elements that make up the Korea and the*

9 The exact year the original Korean version of this first volume (?) of *Land* was published in is not given in the translation.

10 PARK, Kyong-ni [PAK, Kyōng-ni]: *Land (T’ogi)*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International/Unesco Publishing, 1996.

*Koreans of today* (no page number). The form in which a literary translation is presented, its preface and explanatory notes for example, play an important role in the process of understanding a translation. I am disappointed to observe that an independent institution such as UNESCO, by which *Land* is recommended, helps to perpetuate a stereotype nationalism (the translation is also supported by the Republic of Korea), and moreover takes no notice of the professional quality of a translation it embellishes with its name. This does not help to make countries such as Korea better known to a Western public. It is too naive to rely on a general sense of understanding among humans where literature is concerned. What will Western readers think of Korean nationality when they are confronted with sentences such as the following?

1. ... *he had entered the house, where, in the court yard [sic] of the sarang, pink blossoms of suksanwha [sic; the word probably is suksanhwa] were blooming...* (p. 84).

In translations of texts from East Asia, words that have no exact counterpart in English are often left in the original, transcribed phonetically. In the case of Tennant's translation, no list of the many expressions she leaves in the original Korean is added, and the transcription follows a non-standard system, so it is often impossible even for people who know a little Korean to look up the words. The Korean expressions, which possibly are supposed to give the text local colour, produce a nonsensical effect that leads readers to lay down the book before they have reached the end at page 617.<sup>11</sup>

Here I would like to point to a blind spot of many literary translations: botany. The disinterest of the translator towards this subject becomes evident when for instance, as is often the case, the Japanese *yamabuki* is translated as "yellow rose" (it is *Kerria japonica*, which is not a rose), or the art of painting orchids is rendered as "painting irises". The subject of plants in East Asian literature is complex and important, as usually not only the plant itself is meant, but also its multiple cultural and poetic connotations (e.g. pear blossom for melancholy beauty in a woman, often

11 In HUIYA-KIRSCHNEREIT, Irmela: "Von der Übersetzbarkeit japanischer Literatur." In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 29/30th September, No 226, 1990, pp. 65-66 the practice of leaving expressions in the transcribed original and of verbally transferring idiomatic expressions (see below) is also criticised.

associated with rain). This is the case also in many modern texts such as *Land*. However, this does not mean that the exact botanical species can be ignored, and to do so is a sign of disrespect towards the original, in which the reference is exact.

2. “Anyway, it’s ‘Stroking the genitals of a dead son.’ At this stage, what does it matter whether he had any education or not.” (p. 69.)

Sayings translated word for word often have a comical effect presumably not intended by the original. In the English version, the exact meaning of the idiomatic expression is unclear. In the case of Korean (not so much Chinese or Japanese), sexual and scatological explicitness that is normal can produce an embarrassing effect in the translation.

3. “Once upon a time, a crockery seller stayed overnight at the house of the Prime Minister.” (p. 70.)

The choice of the modern expression *Prime Minister* for a high dignitary in the Confucian state of the nineteenth century is unsuitable.

4. The Harvest Moon Festival of the eighth lunar month – doesn’t it have something of the translucent and frosty pathos of the finest hemp? How can a festival associated with the moon, which crosses the river of darkness like a shadow of death, be regarded as a symbol of abundance? As it hangs coolly over the ridge of the mountain the twigs of trees cast lacy shadows and a young widow clad in white silk walks the night road alone. Isn’t the harvest moon of the eighth month perhaps a festival that celebrates the closing of a sorrowful life, that resembles the pathos of hemp, revealing the art of renunciation to all living things, and especially to the poor? [...] After this festival, bountiful and boisterous, yet desolate and sad, like fine hemp [...],... over the mossy monument of a virtuous widow, [...] the cold wind will blow. (p. 4)

Poetic descriptions based on culturally connotated motifs do not automatically function in translation. The quoted passage has nothing to do with “reality” in the text. It is an associative list of stereotype images designed to communicate a certain emotion. The Western recipient, however, probably does not associate any specific feeling with the repeated evocation of “fine hemp”, for example. I imagine many readers of the English version to be rather muddled by such passages.

## 8. Does my Translation Convey the Meaning Intended by the Author?

These examples suffice to show that to translate means more than to transfer the meaning from one language to another. The translator must make a number of intellectual, aesthetic and emotional decisions. A translation is never finished. It is a suggestion about what a text could mean.

I quoted passages from *Land* here because it is a translation into English. My own translations from East Asian languages into German cannot be presented here. However, I have encountered similar problems. When translating *Kusamakura* by Natsume Sōseki<sup>12</sup>, the book mentioned above, for example, I transferred large passages of the text from the Japanese equivalent of the present tense to the past tense in German (the French version<sup>13</sup> sticks to the present tense). This has to do with the function of the German translation as a novel, a literary genre that traditionally does not use the present tense over long stretches, as this makes it tiresome to read (modern authors sometimes nevertheless employ this technique). Incidentally, I have observed that both translators and editors publishing translations often follow literary and linguistic conventions that have become all but obsolete, such as ideas about the structure of a novel or a poem that have been transcended by modernity at least since 1900.

During my work with *Kusamakura*, I was confronted with questions such as: how to interpret poetic inexactitude and diffuseness to make the text comprehensible (is it comprehensible to the average Japanese?). I had to decide when to explain phenomena when the original just mentions them, and when to add a footnote. I wrote a lengthy commentary. However, the unpleasant sensation remains that I have written a new book, and that Sōseki's text conveys meanings quite different to the ones I translated. Doubt is an important, although disquieting, element of translation.

12 NATSUME, Sōseki: *Das Graskissenbuch*. Berlin: edition q, 1996.

13 NATSUME Sōseki: *Oreiller d'herbes*. Traduit du japonais par René DE CECCATTY et Ryōji NAKAMURA. Paris: Editions Rivages, 1987.

## 9. «Sense and Sensibility»

While many problems of translation are consistent in various languages, there are also specific problems that have to do with the language a text is translated into, as well as the one it is translated from.<sup>14</sup>

However, the translator does not only have to contend with varying linguistic forms, cultural conventions also have a strong influence on her work. These are often followed unconsciously. It is important in the context of this publication that conventions are seen as representations, images, that help people in the business of giving a meaning to their lives, and not as unchangeable realities. Nevertheless, some of them remain surprisingly constant behind the fluidity, change and diversity of daily life. They are often confused with “nature”, which is an image itself, and there is a great resistance to their being questioned. A translation is only successful, however, when the differing conventions on various levels are made conscious as mechanisms that can, but need not take place, and do so in a variety of ways. To manage this, a translator has to find a balance between empathy and adaptation both to her own culture and the translated one, and a sceptical distance to both – a difficult challenge, which, to quote the title of a Jane Austen novel, combines *Sense and Sensibility*. In translation, unreflected admiration has just as negative an influence as dislike.

Incidentally, the paradoxical combination of mutually exclusive opposites such as the “empathy and sceptical distance” mentioned above seems to be typical for the process of translation. The dilemma arises because of the stereotype tendency towards polarization and dichotomy in Euro-American culture symbolized by the Greek gods Apollo and

14 The addition of gender for example can alter the character of a text completely. In two poems by HAN Yong-un for example (the author of the ferry-boat poem quoted above), translated by Marion EGGERT, the mysterious *nim* (a diffuse “beloved” that can be Buddha, Christ, a lover or anything else the reader wishes, as the poet emphasises in the introduction to his collection *Nim ūi ch’immuk*, “The Silence of the Beloved”) is rendered as “die Geliebte” – a distinctly female lover. See EGGERT, Marion, ed.: *Wind und Gras: Moderne koreanische Lyrik*, München: Rohr, 1991, pp. 15-16; and HAN, Yong-un: *Nim ūi ch’immuk*. Sōul: Sam Chung Dang (Sam Joong Dang), “Best Books” 6, p. 8: “Kun mal.”

Dionysos<sup>15</sup>, the separate worlds of the body and the spirit, of thinking and feeling, of object and subject, of the outside view and the inside view, of manipulation and passivity. My personal suggestion is to solve this dilemma by seeing translation as a circular movement similar to that described above, in which the opposing positions, for instance empathy and rational analysis, the subjective stance of a literature lover or poet and the objective distance of a literary critic, Japanologist, anthropologist etc<sup>16</sup> are alternatiuely taken until a new, completer view is reached.

#### 10. The Contribution of Feministic Philosophy

A similar circular movement is suggested by so-called postmodern feminism<sup>17</sup>, which presents ideas I find useful for defining a new position for the translator. The starting point of the theory is the fact that post-modern deconstruction resulted in a questioning of all general assumptions and a reduction of everything to perspective. The human subject itself was deconstructed, and after this identity changed according to the context of communication. Language was seen as nothing but a series of impersonal “language-games”. According to Schmuckli, this “androcentric” (male) academic view disregards the (female) person. But paradoxically, deconstruction also emphasizes the individual situation. Individuals must reflect the relativity, but also the uniqueness and incomparability of their own personal perspective. They can consciously subject themselves to changes and participate in varying “language-games” to further their own goals. Among the discriminated, the idea of perspective has led to a further differentiation, such as when black women question the values white

15 PAGLIA, Camille: *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New Haven: Yale University, 1990, p. 8.

16 See LIU, James Y.: *The Interlingual Critic – Interpreting Chinese Poetry*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U.P., 1982, p. 37, where a “poet-translator” and a “critic-translator” are distinguished.

17 See SCHMUCKLI, Lisa: *Differenzen und Dissonanzen: Zugänge zu feministischen Erkenntnistheorien in der Postmoderne*. Königstein: Ulrike Helmer Verlag, 1996.

feminists unreflectedly postulate<sup>18</sup>. Through deconstruction and reduction of all “general truths”, even of “reality”, to perspective, individuals are thrown back on themselves. Thus the context, the place, the physical presence, the body of the reading, thinking, writing person becomes an important part in the process of interpretation. My own personal emotional and bodily reaction to the book I am reading, for instance, must no longer be suppressed, for if it is, it will emerge in another form in my interpretation. The same applies to translation: My choice of what I translate (if I have it), subtle nuances of language etc. perhaps tell as much, or more, about myself, my ideology, my perspective than about the work I am translating.

To invent an over-simplified example, how would a woman be able to translate a text that manifests a chauvinistic attitude objectively without feeling physically unwell, and thus not producing good work? Such questions are difficult, and they are best met by an openminded and reflecting attitude. If I realize I feel bad when translating a text, I can work at placing my finger on the ideological mechanism. I can then reflect on my own perspective and in this way am capable of producing a better translation, which, when finished, is open to my own criticism, among others. After this procedure, the text can be “recontextualized” in its own social and historical setting, and the perspective of the author can be examined without confusing it with personal matters of the recipient.

## 11. The Aesthetic and Ideology

The problem in translating any kind of text is closely connected to the issue of the relationship of aesthetics and ideology. Forms of aesthetic expression are often used as vehicles for the abstract idea of cultural or group identity. The group can be a social stratum, a religion, an intellectual or artistic movement, or a nation. Cultural identity as a construction always has an aesthetic component, because like certain forms of aesthetics it is an unchanging, a-historical ideal, a kind of immutable counterworld or blueprint seen behind the muddling chaos of daily life. It is offered by a

18 See PRODOLLIET, Simone: “Das Gemeinsame und das Trennende: zur Kritik Schwarzer Feministinnen am weissen Feminismus.” In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13/14th May, No 110, 1995.

society to its members as an aid to self-representation, or a new one can be constructed if these members are not content with what is offered. All aesthetic expressions can be said to have an ideological component, as all aesthetic processes involve cultural self-representation of some kind and can never be viewed separately from social conventions and structures. The aesthetic is one of the means by which ideology is articulated at the human level and made knowable, speakable, palpable<sup>19</sup>.

It is very difficult to eliminate the aesthetic aspect even from the social sciences, including those in which culture is analyzed. The texts in which cultural expression is described are themselves a manifestation of aesthetic ideals, and these can differ in varying contexts, which means that even so-called factual texts do not always function in translation. The important thing when translating such texts is to consciously accept this fact.

On the other hand, aesthetic acts, such as “literary” texts, are often considered to be completely independent from political and social matters. However, when artefacts or actions that are seen as purely aesthetic are placed into a cultural or historical context other than their own, it quickly becomes evident that to function properly they need to be based on social conventions which do not belong to their consciously perceived structure. They are not automatically beautiful in themselves. Aesthetic value has to do with the perception of the producer and the recipient, who communicate via a text, an object or an action. This becomes a problem when art forms – or literature – are transferred internationally, that is, “exported” or “translated”. The pleasing order that the producer imposes on his object is perhaps understood quite differently by her recipient. Aesthetic evaluation is a cultural convention; as such it is connected with ideology.

## 12. The Autonomous Artist

It could be viewed as the job of the “new” translator to expose such cultural mechanisms. One of the social conventions that exerts an over-riding influence on translating literature, and on reading it, for example, is

19 POLLACK, David: *op. cit.*, p. 94. See also chapter 4: “Ideology, Aesthetics, Science,” and p. 90 for definitions of ideology.

the usually unreflected concept of the aesthetic convention<sup>20</sup>. Often, the translator is powerless towards the overwhelming functioning of this convention in her audience – the book market and the readers' expectations conspire to produce a different effect from the one intended by the original work. Sometimes the translator cooperates in this conspiracy, sometimes the adaptation to the new cultural context takes place automatically.

The aesthetic convention is not the same everywhere in the so-called West, but it has many similarities in all countries there. It can be characterised by the construction of the persona of the autonomous artist, who creates a new model universe for his fellow humans, his *public*. The work of the autonomous artist is basically received individually, impersonally and in isolation. The autonomous artist as a model started to develop in the Renaissance period, but it has its effect up to today, although it has been questioned by postmodern thinking. It is evident that the model of the autonomous artist did not function in non-westernized sinocentric culture, just as the concept of the *public* was not interpreted in the same way as in the West. Through the colonialistic dominance of Western modern culture, which sees itself as universal, hybrid forms of this convention have evolved in non-European countries. In the case of literature, the functioning of the aesthetic convention can be best examined with respect to the two conventional forms of the novel and the poem. These, as the whole of "literature", are defined differently in varying cultural, historical and social settings<sup>21</sup>.

### 13. The Novel and the Poem

The novel<sup>22</sup> in Japan for instance is a genre which has its own history. The question may legitimately be asked if famous examples of early "novels"

20 This expression is used in SCHMIDT, Siegfried: *Grundriss der empirischen Literaturwissenschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 103 f.

21 See SCHAMONI, Wolfgang: "Literature and Modernization in Japan: The Changing Geography of Literary Genres." *The Richard Storry Memorial Lecture No 4*, Oxford: St. Anthony's College, 1992.

22 See WALKER, Janet A.: "On the Applicability of the Term 'Novel' to Modern Non-Western Long Fiction." In: *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988). Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University. See also: LA-

such as *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, 11th century) can really be described by this name. Perhaps Chinese “novels” from the Ming and Qing periods, such as *Hong Lou Meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber, 1791), are nearer to the Euro-American concept. However, prior to the introduction of the Western concept of the novel there was an analogous form, the *xiao shuo*, Japanese *shōsetsu*, which partly obeyed different rules than the Western novel. In Japan since 1868 (Meiji Restoration) there has been a constant dialogue of the *shōsetsu* with the Western concept of the novel. The modern Japanese novel, similar to that of other non-European countries, is a hybrid genre, standing between the cultures. It is itself a “translation” in a certain sense. However, Japanese novels, or rather *shōsetsu*, have characteristics that frustrate the reader expecting either a purely Western novel or a “traditional” exotic tale. A modern *shōsetsu* consists of short prose pieces (usually first published separately in literary magazines) loosely combined in a book. Plot is not of first importance, and a good plot has no artistic prestige. The *shōsetsu* has a strong lyrical tendency and can often be read as poetic prose. Through the publication of such texts, translated as “novels”, the expectations of the public are frustrated.

The poem also causes complex problems in translation. The term is Western and is used to describe very differing literary forms in East Asia<sup>23</sup>. To speak of Japanese poetry, for example, leads to a Western colonialisation of the aesthetic convention: historical and stylistic differences are simply ignored. Furthermore, the translated texts are read in a Western context, as “poems”. This means that the metaphoric level is understood to be inherent in the text, and the text is received as an isolated and original work of art. This concept goes back only to the eighteenth century in the West, and Medieval and Baroque poetry have much in common with literature in Asia<sup>24</sup>. It is hard to avoid the mechanism of the Western

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YOUN, Mary N.: *Travels of a Genre: The Modern Novel and Ideology*. Princeton N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1990.

23 See LANGEMANN, Christoph: “Versuch über die ostasiatische Lyrik.” In: *Asiatische Studien*, XLVIII. 4. Bern: Peter Lang, 1994.

24 Ibid, p. 1155-56.

poetic convention, and in consequence certain scholars have postulated that East Asian poetic texts should be explained rather than translated<sup>25</sup>.

A further problem arises through the sudden emergence of modernity in East Asian countries. The modern poem, *shintaiishi* in Japanese, is a hybrid genre similar to the modern novel. In reading and translating such literature, even more than when working with older texts, a circular movement as described above must be completed between the search for the “different” and for the “same”. Modern poems are a dialogue with Western poetic concepts, but they also retain East Asian, that is basically Confucian, ideas of what it means to compose (not to write!) poetry.

Perhaps poetry is the area in which most havoc is wreaked by translation. By quoting a single *haiku*, for example, without explaining its relationship to the complex canon of *haiku* poetry, a false idea of originality is produced. *Haiku*, as other forms of poetry in Japan, are ritualized and playful dialogues of a poet with the conventions of a group. The originality in them lies perhaps more in the way something is said than in what is said<sup>26</sup>. *Haiku* especially are hardly composed or presented in isolation.

When translators in the West render East Asian poetry, they often either cling slavishly to the form, e.g. the count of syllables, which has no meaning in the West, or they use Western poetic forms, which sometimes produces comic results<sup>27</sup>. To quote an example, the *tanka* of *Hyakunin isshū* (A Hundred Poems by a Hundred Poets; 13th century) have been

25 BILLETTER, Jean-François: “La poésie chinoise et la réalité.” In: *Extrême Orient—Extrême Occident*. February 1986.

26 KONISHI Jin’ichi: “The Genesis of the Kokinshū Style,” trans. by Helen C. McCULLOUGH. In: *HJOAS* 38 (1978), pp. 61-170. P. 166 uses this formulation in connection with the *tanka*.

27 HIIYA-KIRSCHNEREIT: *op. cit.*, describes how expectations of Western readers often produce over-pathetic translations where the original is rather simple: “Conventional expectations of western readers said that Japanese literature had to be poetically subtle and aesthetic, and that it had to confirm our image of Japan. The choice of authors translated usually also followed this cliché. In consequence the image of these authors are now adapted to our expectations.” (P. 65; my translation). She also quotes some amusing examples in German.

translated into English verse more than once. William N. Porter<sup>28</sup> for instance translates the famous poem by Ono no Komachi (No. 9) as follows:

The blossom's tint is washed away  
 By heavy showers of rain;  
 My charms which once I prized so much,  
 Are also on the wane, —  
 Both bloomed, alas! in vain.

The Victorian quaintness can of course be excused by the fact that the translation was first published in 1909<sup>29</sup>. However, up to today, few editors or translators seem to ponder the form they present their translations in. When I cooperated in a translation of *Ochikubo monogatari*<sup>30</sup>, for example, which incidentally is a “novel” that contains “poetry”, I had many discussions with the editor about the presentation of the *tanka*. He insisted that they be presented as five-liners analogously to their original syllable structure of 5-7-5-7-7. This is common practice, and he said: “But a *tanka* has five lines, doesn't it?” Little did he care about all the changes that took place in the translation such as the elimination of many poetic conceits (such as double meanings, punning etc.). Furthermore, the poems were actually presented in two lines (*kami no ku*, the “top”, and *shimo no ku*, the “bottom” half of the poem) in the Japanese texts we were working with. The amount of linguistic material in the verses seemed to me to be exactly suited to a German four-liner, and we successfully rendered the *tanka* as such. A fifth line would have meant false asymmetry and the addition of redundant material. A (culturally valueless) clinging to syllable numbers would have further restricted our verbal freedom (plus engendering the danger of adding words such as “Oh”, “Ah”, “indeed” etc.). This does not mean that our four-liners are prose translations; wherever possible we strove to produce a pleasant rhythm and sound.

28 *A Hundred Verses from Old Japan*, trans. William S. PORTER. Tōkyō: Tuttle, 1979.

29 London: The Clarendon Press.

30 *Die Geschichte der verehrten Ochikubo*, translated by Christoph LANGEMANN and Verena WERNER. Zürich: Manesse, 1994.

## 14. The Different and the Same

Artificial divisions, so-called *cuts*, such as the characterization of a text as a “novel” or a “poem”, are a great hindrance to translation. The separation and isolation of cultural elements that have “fluidity” between them, and the polarisation of certain parts of culture as “different” and “other”, when inside one pole greater diversity is to be found than between the poles, are patterns often met by persons who try to mediate between the countries of East Asia and of Europe and North America. One of the concepts commonly used to make such divisions is the idea of national cultural identity. It is especially problematic in the case of Japan. Through the description of forms of cultural expression as “Japanese”, they are falsely connotated as “different” and as homogenous among themselves.

National and cultural identity is a complex construction, not a natural reality. It is important to recognize the artificiality of structures and symbols (among others language) that reinforce the nation-state<sup>31</sup>. In the case of Japan, one could legitimately postulate that because Japan as a nation was only founded in 1868 the notion of “Japanese culture” or “Japanese literature” possibly did not even exist among many of the residents of the archipelago prior to this date.<sup>32</sup> Any cultural process taking place in Japan among the Japanese could be seen as the culture of Japan, of course, and then “translated” for foreigners. But the new tendencies of globalization are not to be overlooked. People move from one place to another, travel, do business and marry partners in far-away countries. The mass-media are internationally present. A confrontation of cultural values ensues, and new forms of cultural expression are continually forged. The works of Salman Rushdie<sup>33</sup> are a good example for such processes. They are situated somewhere between Bombay, Pakistan and Britain, and contain a cultural mixture that is unique and at

31 See BEFU Harumi, ed.: *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia, Representation and Identity*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993, and the review of that book by Stefan TANAKA in: *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No 2. May 1994, p. 505.

32 TANAKA: *op. cit.*, p. 506.

33 See LOTZ, Rainer: “Schreiben zwischen den Kulturen: zur Erzähltechnik von Salman Rushdies *Midnight's Children*.” In: BACHMANN-MEDICK, ed.: *Übersetzung als Repräsentation fremder Kulturen*. *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

the same time typical for our age. In this sense it is no longer possible to speak of Japanese culture by only looking at Japan. This makes the idea of what it means to translate Japanese more complicated. For instance, does novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, who lives in Britain and publishes in English, belong to Japanese or British culture? And how “Japanese” is Yōko Tawada, who writes both in Japanese and in German? And how about the animation picture of *Heidi*, the well-known story by the Swiss author Johanna Spyri, produced in Japan some years ago and successfully shown on Swiss television? It is interesting to reflect that the Rousseauist tale of the unspoilt, natural child from the country coming to the decadent, overrefined city is popular in countries as far apart as Switzerland and Japan. Needless to say, the alpine life described in *Heidi* mirrors the romantic imagination of a city dweller rather than reality. Does a Japanese translator of the story realize the complex relationship of *Heidi* to the real life it intends to portray?

National culture is far more difficult to crystallize out than one may at first think, and the ensuing cultural mixture is the field the translator moves in, producing “translations” of cultural manifestations that are intercultural “translations” themselves. To cite an example on the Japanese side, film-producer Kurosawa Akira was greatly influenced in his work by the film theory of Sergej Eisenstein, who for his part received important inspirations from Japanese aesthetic forms such as the *haiku* and *kabuki*.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Kurosawa adapted the plots of Shakespeare plays in his movies, for instance *Macbeth* in *Kumonosujo* (The Spider’s Web Castle), 1957. When these films, which are far more popular in the West than in Japan, are screened under the title of “The Japanese Film”, such fascinating cultural cross-influences tend to get overlooked, and stereotype, static cultural differences are falsely cemented.

#### 15. The “Untranslatable Japanese Essence”

During my work as a translator of East Asian literature, I have noticed how strongly our views of a country and its culture are influenced by preconceptions and ideas we have amassed during our personal life-

34 Information received in a lecture by Professor LEE Sang-kyong (I Sang-gyōng), Vienna, on Feb. 3rd, 1997, in Zürich University.

history, by images of our own and other realities which are often unconsciously biased, and also by the images the “others” project as self-representations. When studying “foreign”, “other” cultures we are confronted with materials (poems, novels, pictures, music, decorative items etc.) presented to us as typical either by the “natives” or by our fellow compatriots. The first step in judging such materials in my opinion is to bear in mind the questions: Why is a certain item presented? Is this all the possible information, or just a selection? What is the background situation of a certain process of communication? To cite just one example, literature experts in East Asia traditionally tend to construct canons of excellent and typical works. The Westerner can legitimately question whether she wants to follow the categories of evaluation suggested by such canonized lists or not. In this way, she can hopefully get nearer to a more differentiated understanding both of her own and the other culture. This is only possible, however, if she takes a critical, even if loving and tolerant stance.

Ideology is contained in the idea that a culture has an unchangeable aesthetic, emotional or moral essence, which is present in all its manifestations and which is thought to be incomprehensible to an outsider. I have often been told by Japanese or Koreans that their literature is “untranslatable”<sup>35</sup>. A young Japanese scholar who spoke at a congress<sup>36</sup> about translations of works by Natsume Sōseki into German knew no better than to present as a result of his research that in the translations the *Nihonteki* quality, or “Japaneseness”, was lost.

35 HIIYA-KIRSCHNEREIT: *op. cit.*, makes a similar statement: “The idea of ‘resistance to translation’ [initially developed by western scholars] is repeated by Japanese native speakers, often even by scholars, that is, authorities who seem especially entitled to do so, who declare that the subtleties and the real quality, the literariness, the essence of a Japanese text gets lost in translation.” (P. 66; my translation). She emphasizes that Japanese, like any other language, is basically “translatable” (*ibid.*).

36 10. Deutschsprachiger Japanologentag, München, 1996. TOKUNAGA, Mitsuhiro: “Abhandlung zum übersetzten Text *Der Tor aus Tokio* von Sōseki Natsume.” (Jap.)

## 16. The Image of National Culture

The image of national culture as presented in translated literature, for example, is influenced on the one hand by the ideology of the economically and politically powerful on the exporting side, who have control of both the financial means and the communicative channels. On the other hand, demands on the receiving side also influence the selection of material used for self-representation. The book market determines the choice of texts translated, and the impression that one gains of Japanese literature through reading translations in a certain language can differ completely from that gained through reading Japanese. The demands of the book market also influence the form of presentation and to a certain extent even the language used. Unfortunately, an unpleasant interplay between eurocentrism and exoticism takes place. On the one hand, literature from various settings is lumped together under the title of "Japanese literature", and historical and social differences are disregarded both in the selection and the design of the books. For example, an *ukiyo-e* print of a *geisha* with a *shamisen* from the Edo period (1600-1868) is used as title-illustration for the English version of *Ochikubo monogatari*<sup>37</sup>, a text from the aristocratic circles of about 960 AD, and the front of an anthology of post-war Japanese poetry translated into German<sup>38</sup> is decorated with the photo of an antique *nō* mask of the *okina* type (old man). On the other hand, works are preferred that comply with Western ideas, as when *Ochikubo monogatari*, which has a plot easily understood by Westerners, was chosen to be translated into German by Manesse Verlag, Zurich<sup>39</sup>, in preference over works in the genre of poetic diary which perhaps are more typically Japanese but have no exact Western counterpart. The tendency to publish anthologies of East Asian poetry, in which the poems are presented for their exotic, unusual effect, but are nevertheless placed in a Western context by singling each one out as an isolated work, is another example of this process. The habit of the Western public to unreflectedly expect, and therefore to exploit, the

37 *The Tale of the Lady Ochikubo*, translated by Wilfried WHITEHOUSE and Eizo YANAGISAWA. London: Arena, 1985.

38 KLOPFENSTEIN, Eduard and OUWEHAND, Cornelius, eds.: *Mensch auf der Brücke: Zeitgenössische Lyrik aus Japan*. Frankfurt: Insel, 1989.

39 *op. cit.*

exotic, the “different”, sometimes produces absurd effects. At a reading in the city of Winterthur, Switzerland, by the Chinese poet Bei Dao, who has been persecuted by the government of the People’s Republic of China for his poetry and has lived in exile since 1989, a woman remarked: “This poetry is just like Western poetry. It is not typically Chinese. Why should it interest us?” In a similar manner, a friend of mine who had read my German translation of the novel *Sanshirō* (1908) by Natsume Sōseki went as far as to say: “It is not Japanese at all. Why is it worth reading? It is merely a bad copy of a Western novel.” On the other hand, people quickly lose interest when an Asian art-object or text does not directly appeal to their Western-educated senses, and I often hear remarks such as: “This is so foreign. I will never understand it. It has nothing to do with my world!”

### 17. The Image of the Exotic

The cliché of Japan created in the West has two aspects: The exotic, beautiful, refined, orderly, dainty, mysterious side (which is gratefully adopted by the Japanese themselves) and the absurd and fearful aspect, in which the Japanese are jabbering robots all looking alike and moving in a spastic, senseless way.<sup>40</sup> In presenting exotic clichés of non-European countries the mass-media and the world of advertising are the leaders, although in the book-market similar images also abound. The translator who wishes to expose these clichés often has to fight against her own editors.

The Japanese themselves like to exploit their exotic image. Japanese goods are often advertised by referring to eastern techniques of aesthetic self-perfection, such as the martial arts or Zen Buddhism, to impart a mysterious aura to basically soulless technological products. To quote an example, not long ago the car Toyota *Supra* was advertised in the West by showing it standing in the middle of a raked sand-garden of the *Ryōanji* type, with the calligraphic character *kan* (“perfect, finished”) and a pseudo-philosophical text added.<sup>41</sup>

40 See LITTLEWOOD, Ian: *The Idea of Japan – Western Images, Western Myths*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1996.

41 LITTLEWOOD: *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Clichés of cultural identity are not only exploited by advertising, which could be described as a form of cultural translation that is not reflected on critically. There is also a grey zone of state-propagated cultural events and of activities sponsored by firms to promote their country (these activities include translations). In both cases ideology is implied by the selection of the material. It is my personal disappointment that intellectuals both in the West and in Japan hardly ever realize how open to ideological manipulation the situation is and seldom question information exchanged between the two. On both sides, there seems to be no genuine interest in finding out more about how the “other ones” really are, that is, in making a more differentiated translation.

The problem with so-called Japanese culture is that it is artificially divided into parts, only some of which are considered by Japanese persons or foreigners to have an intimate link with nationality, and therefore to be typical. These alone are thought to be interesting to foreigners, but at the same time assumed to be basically incomprehensible to them. This curious situation, which leads to a reduction and trivialization of indigenous culture when staged internationally, can be connected with two much-quoted categories of communication in Japan: *uchi-soto* (inside-outside) on the one hand and the related *honne-tatemae* (inner feelings vs. outer face) on the other. Japanese (and other East Asian) people perhaps unconsciously present to foreigners an image of their culture different to the one they live among themselves. This image often gives the impression of being an ideal, aesthetic world – how things should be, rather than human reality, which is far from perfect anywhere. This ideal somehow seems to contain much less humour, less chaos and relaxation than actually exist in Japan. It is easy to prove that many of the study books published in Japan for the use of foreigners learning Japanese do not represent the language as it is actually spoken, but a more polite, refined form (the same is the case in China).

When foreign individuals or institutions are interested in a question connected with Japanese culture, they tend to ask a person of Japanese nationality for information and believe the answer to be the only reality, as “a Japanese must know”. The information they get, however, is far more complex than they realize. It is connected with the individual and social situation of the informant and with the general situation in which the communication takes place. Through the foreign interpretation, which is

not conscious of the multiple associations, the information received becomes one-dimensional; it is “the Japanese way of doing/seeing it” rather than “a Japanese way of doing/seeing it”. The public in the West does not want to see this. They wish to “consume” certain aspects of Japan in an unreflecting way. This need is readily catered for by the Japanese themselves, who do not like their construction of cultural identity to be questioned from the outside, either. It is the job of the translator to mediate in this process, to explain, even when neither side wishes to listen.

In doing this she gets caught between two causes: On the one hand she sides with the Japanese in explaining to the West that the exotic and discriminating image people here like to “consume” is not the whole reality, on the other hand, she sides with the West in exposing social mechanisms and clichés that function in Japan, a process the Japanese like to deride as “Japan-bashing”.

#### 18. East or West, Home is Best

Possibly the most important hindrance to communication between Japanese and people of other countries (even in Asia), and thus also to the process of translation, is the East-West-dualism, which pervades all judgement of cultural phenomena and leads to a certain blindness concerning cultural similarities and differences not implied by it. This pattern has to do with the history of both Japan's and Europe's way of integrating contacts with foreign cultures into their own world view. Before the 19th century in Japan, “Japaneseness” was mainly defined in contrast to Chinese cultural influences, of which many strata exist in Japanese culture. Even after centuries of specific adaptation in Japan, such cultural elements were signalled artificially as *kan* or *kara* (“Chinese”), basically “foreign” or “other”, and opposed to *wa* or *yamato* (“Japanese”) – the pure, undiluted Japanese. When after the forced opening of the country in 1854, many elements of so-called Western culture were imported, the culturally inbuilt dichotomy was replaced by an East-West contrast which now ran through the entire culture (the Chinese-Japanese difference slowly melted into the East side). East meant pre-modern, non-westernized or re-orientalized Japan, the still living or revived culture of the past, whereas West meant parts of European, later American culture. The East-West cultural contrast seems simple, but it functions in a highly complex manner, especially

when viewed internationally, that is, on the level at which translation takes place. What seems at first glance to be entirely Eastern may well be a reaction to Western influences or projections, whereas superficially Western objects or processes may be functioning in an Eastern way.

Originally, the East-West contrast was a cliché suggested to the Japanese by foreigners. It was a result of the colonialistic and eurocentric world view: On the one hand there was Europe and European culture, the only “important”, “basic”, “universal” culture, and on the other were the native, undeveloped nations. In the 18th century not much distinction was made between Japan and China (they are often mixed up even today). Both belonged to the “Orient”, an “East” artificially created by Europeans by grouping such different cultures as India, Arabia and China into one undefined mass. Both were the home of dainty gardens with pavilions, porcelain teacups and so on. During the 19th century China was more often seen as the country of ancient philosophy, while Japan was the kingdom of refined aesthetics, fans, lacquerware, kimonos and the recently discovered *ukiyo-e* prints, which were all the fashion. And so it has remained up to today. In many Western minds, the East in contrast to down-to-earth West, from India to Japan, is a realm of beautiful and servile women, unconfined sexuality, unspoilt traditional culture, intact holistic world-views and religious mystique. In the case of Japan, refined psychological and aesthetic techniques are added to the list<sup>42</sup>.

The Western cliché says that, among others, technology, modernity, rationality, individual personality are Western and have to be introduced to ignorant natives, who may be picturesque, fascinating, mysterious or even fearful, but are somehow not to be taken quite seriously. This is a tendency I still find dominant in popular Western images of Japan, that is in “cultural translations”, although in the so-called “post-colonial discourse” intellectual circles both in and outside Japan have been trying for some time to expose the ideological mechanism of the clichés.

It is not possible here to present all the clichés of Japanese culture used in international communication, and with which the translator has to contend, but what springs first to mind is that many elements originally belonged to an elite culture, perhaps to that of provincial members of the Edo-period (1600-1868) *samurai* class. To name but a few, martial arts,

42 See LITTLEWOOD: *op. cit.*

aesthetic pastimes such as ink-painting, tea-ceremony, calligraphy, poetry, flower arranging, Zen Buddhism, *shoin* style architecture, *bonsai* trees and stone garden architecture are forms of this elite culture. They were adapted first to modern urban conditions in Japan (e.g. the *ikebana* exhibition in a department store) and then exported, or “translated”. Besides these forms of culture, there are of course elements from pre-modern urban culture, such as the *geisha* and *kabuki* theatre, and of folklore, such as certain forms of pottery and textile design. The undifferentiated representation of these elements as “Japanese culture” makes social, regional and historical differences practically invisible.

It is interesting to note that the actual, living human being is completely excluded from such clichés. The *geisha* is no more than the kimono she is wearing, the buddhist monk writing with a brush or the peasants with straw hats planting rice are no more than pictures in an ink-painting or a print without a life of their own. And incidentally, travellers to Japan in the 19th century often compared what they saw to ink-paintings, prints and motifs on porcelain they had seen before travelling east. From the earliest documents on, descriptions of life in Japan – “translations” in Bachmann-Medick’s sense – have this picture-like quality. It is disquieting to see that in much information about Japan produced by Japanese and non-Japanese even today this absence of the human element continues. An unnamed journalist describing a trip to Honshū and Shikoku in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*<sup>43</sup> for example manages not to mention a single contact with a living person. For him Japan consists of temples, quaint old town-quarters and ludicrous historical details such as a farting-contest documented on an ink-scroll. Another article published in the same newspaper<sup>44</sup> under the title of *Kaleidos-tokio* is an exotic aesthetic celebration of the city of Tōkyō – the text hardly mentions any of the millions of people who lead their daily lives there. The publication of the Japanese Embassy in Switzerland (*Nachrichten aus Japan*) has a varied selection of pictures of Japanese motifs on its title page: typical dishes, landscapes, temples or modern “high tech” buildings – living individual people are not even shown as chance passers-by. They would only disturb the aesthetic perfection ...

43 25/26th January 1997, No. 20, p. 9.

44 March 1st/2nd 1997, No. 50, p. 77.

The West, as many Japanese see it, on the other hand, is an amorphous mass consisting of the Eiffel Tower, Venice, the castle of Neuschwanstein, French cuisine and Hollywood filmstars. A lot of its components are taken from the conservative canon of middle class education, which also tends to level out historical and social differences in its ideology and to emphasise "essence". While certain elements of Western culture were integrated into Japanese culture ("copied", the Westerners say), this was done in a highly selective and unique way. A Japanese *Mickey Mouse* is quite different from an American one.

Differences on the Western side must also be taken into account. Western, for many modern Japanese, means American. However, many cultural processes in Europe can just as easily be contrasted with their American as with their Japanese counterparts. Perhaps showing up similar phenomena in two cultures could be just as interesting as sticking to the differences. I have noticed, for instance, that, whereas *shoin*-style architecture is most often presented as "typically Japanese", there are rural houses in Japan that hardly differ from farm-houses in Switzerland in areas where wood is used as building material. The needs of everyday rural life lead to some striking similarities, such as the disposition of the kitchen with an earthen floor, the hole for the fire-smoke or the stables for the animals. I was fascinated to learn that in traditional wood-architecture in certain areas of Germany, a measure exists named the *Fach* which is virtually the same in length and function as the "typical Japanese" measure of the *ken* (about 2.15 m).

One possible way for the Western translator to overcome the East-West dualism, in which both sides are mutually projected as unchanging, a-historical, socially undefined and one-dimensional images, is not to present Japan as an isolated culture, but as an area with many cultural ties to the surrounding countries of East Asia. A Westerner who has travelled in China, Japan and Korea (North and/or South) will detect many unexpected similarities, but also some differences between the countries. In this way, especially when the historical perspective (not the mythologised nationalistic version) is included, a more diversified, inclusive and multi-faceted view of what makes up Japanese culture can be reached. Only when international and regional relationships are accepted (they are only natural; no "national culture" is completely isolated), can typical styles, motifs and interpretations be localised and defined.

## 19. Tradition and Avantgarde

In both Japan and the West, Japanese cultural identity is commonly confused with its aesthetic and traditionalistic aspects – an ideologically influenced view. This has been the case since the end of the nineteenth century, when after a first period of intensive “westernization” the Japanese state started to present its “oriental” or “exotic” aspects as typical. The relationship of Japanese culture to tradition is further complicated by the fact that a return to or reconstruction of tradition is a cultural act often combined with an *avantgarde* position<sup>45</sup>. This complex situation still influences the interpretation of indigenous Japanese cultural expression, including literature, both in and outside Japan, and thus also the process of translation. It can be retraced to the position Japanese aesthetics had in the *avantgarde* movement around 1900 both in the East and the West. The movement of *Japonisme* led to a redefinition of “tradition”. *Ukiyo-e* prints, fans and lacquerware for instance were considered as contributions to *avantgarde* aesthetics, although their original cultural function was nothing of the kind. Incidentally, this combination of “Japaneseness” and stylishness has remained hardy up to today. The “cultural translator” must reflect on this process if she does not wish her work to be misunderstood.

*Japonisme* was a unique form of cultural cooperation between East and West in redefining the identity of Japanese culture, and thus itself a form of translation. In Japan, the revival of archaisms and traditionalisms remains an element of *avantgarde* aesthetics up to today. This is evident in the work of pottery and textile artists, for instance, but an especially striking example is *butō*, the modern dance which integrates pseudo-archaic forms of ritual and asceticism as well as a curiously inverse form of the “typically Japanese” aestheticism of the human body, which can be connected to the concept of *kata*, a highly formalistic ideology of education through outward physical discipline and imitation.

Japanese literature from Natsume Sōseki and Nagai Kafū through Tanizaki Jun’ichirō to Kawabata Yasunari and Mishima Yukio must be studied in the context of its functioning as *avantgarde*. Works of these

45 KARATANI Kōjin: “Japan as Museum: Okakura Tenshin and Ernest Fenollosa,” translated by SABU Kohso. In: MUNROE, Alexandra: *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. New York: Abrams, 1994, pp. 33-39.

authors are not best understood by identifying them with tradition<sup>46</sup>, and a latent tendency to conservatism and nationalism must also be seen in this context. It is helpful for the translator to follow Pollack's concept of "Reading against culture"<sup>47</sup> when interpreting them (and others). This means that the author's texts should be clearly separated from his or her culture, as the author is able to interpret his or her culture in an individual way or even help to shape it anew<sup>48</sup>. But at the same time, in one of the circular movements described above, authors must be localized or recontextualized in their culture. This process is important when for instance describing Mishima Yukio's pseudo-fascistic traditionalism as *avantgarde*, i.e. as opposed to official ideas. Incidentally, many Japanese express a strong dislike of Mishima's work at least in conversation with a foreigner, whereas his books have retained a certain popularity in the West.

## 20. Deep and Superficial Meaning

In Japanese art, Japanese literature, or even in Japanese popular songs it is perhaps the superficially skilful, sometimes humourous or ironical combination of conventionalized elements that gives the impression of being "typically Japanese" rather than the over-all structure, the plot, the contents or the "meaning". When such works are interpreted by Europeans, that is, translated, often too much emphasis is given to deep meaning where perhaps none is to be found. On the other hand, Western interpretation remains too superficial where the cultural relationship and complex semantic interweaving of motifs or language is concerned. All irony, humour and innuendo, as for example when a poet uses conventions on purpose, get lost in the cultural transfer, perhaps in both directions, and sometimes even when works from a historically remote period of one's own culture are judged.

46 See YOSHIDA-KRAFFT, Barbara: "Kawabata Yasunari, ein Traditionalist?" In: *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens*, Volume LIII (Jubiläumsband 1873-1973): Tōkyō, 1973.

47 *Op. cit.*, p. 1 ff.

48 POLLACK: *op. cit.*, treats works of the above-mentioned authors and others in this way.

## 21. Can I Love the Text I am Translating?

*The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Translator* is the second part of the title of this essay. I chose it to refer to the fact that the translator of East Asian languages is isolated in two ways. Her work is acknowledged only at the visible level of the texts she produces, and her critical mediating between varying social and cultural spheres is ignored more and more in a world that reduces all information to measurable units. The translator of East Asian languages is also isolated from her colleagues who translate from Western languages, as these often do not comprehend the complex situation she has to contend with in contact with non-European cultures. A love for the translated texts, as that expressed by Edwin McClellan in an article referring to Japanese literature, can help to survive this isolation:

For me, translation of literature has always been a very personal thing, a means of expressing what I deeply felt to be true in another man's writing, an act of emotional commitment and bonding that gave me a sense of fulfilment. [... B]ut for the life of me, I couldn't even begin to pretend that the protagonist of either *Michikusa* or *An'ya-kōro* [two novels] would find new admirers of Japanese manhood among English and American readers, male or female [note the stress on gender, C.L.]. The fact is that I wanted to translate these novels because I could identify with their authors and their heroes in a way that was very special to me, and I felt that perhaps I could recreate in English the poetry I found in [Natsume] Sōseki's and [Naoya] Shiga's [the authors of the above-mentioned novels] language as no one else had done.<sup>49</sup>

However, the critical translator who attempts to shed a more differentiated light on intercultural processes has not even that consolation. It is to be hoped that the idea of change, fluidity and diversity of culture as expressed by the various articles in this publication will lead to a new evaluation and appreciation of the work of the many translators who so far have been mere faceless voices in the process of cultural communication.

49 MC CLELLAN, Edwin: "On translation of Modern Japanese Literature." In: *Japanese Book News*. No 14, Summer 1996. Published by the Japan Foundation, pp. 6-7.