

## Reflections on Translation Studies and North American Japanese Studies, in Honor of Nakagawa Shigemi

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In my own work, I have found it important at all times to approach translation as simultaneously a matter of theory and as a practice. The reasons for this are first of all historical. I am interested, not only in the translation of *literary* texts, but of *theory and cultural criticism* produced in East Asia since the late nineteenth century. These texts are a rich repository of resources for the critique of modernity; we should be engaged in actually translating them. Secondly, I see the practice of translation as theoretical because the translator, always forced to choose among multiple words in the target language that can never be the equivalent of the original, is brought by translation into a necessarily self-reflexive relationship to language and meaning. Finally, I would like to think, with Gayatri Spivak, that (and I quote here) “one of the ways of getting around the confines of one’s identity, as one produces expository prose, is to work on someone else’s text, in the same way that one works with a language that belongs to many others...It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self.”<sup>1)</sup> In other words, even one’s *own* or “native” language is a language that belongs to many other languages. The act of translating the foreign text, then, is a form of *miming* that relationship to alterity that exists even in relation to one’s own language, and is so doing amplifies and intensifies our sense of that relationship of alterity. Spivak, in the same 1993 essay composed while she was translating Mahasweta Devi’s texts, also describes translation as a relationship of “intimacy.” While in our own writing we have the option of circumlocution--- of skipping or dodging around difficult problems--- the translator must deal with the “original” text in its entirety. The translator never escapes the sense of “owing” something to the text (a certain debt to be discharged, as many theorists have noted), even though perfect reciprocity will never be attained. I will come back to some of this later.

While theories of translation have existed for centuries, the comparative efflorescence of Translation Studies in the Euro-American academy over the past two decades has been attributed by some to the heightened awareness of linguistic diversity brought about by globalization and the accompanying proliferation of multilingual, multicultural environments. But it is probably also fair to say that the prominence of translation studies has closely followed the emergence and consolidation of the discourse of post-colonial theory. On the one hand, translation studies has turned to the harsh policies whereby many colonial powers imposed their own languages on colonized peoples, leading to a weakening and even extinction of local languages as a result. Tejaswini Niranjana’s study of colonial India shows how the British

wrested from local scholars even the authority to translate, producing instead their own (British) translations of classical texts, translations that conveyed subtly altered images of traditional culture.<sup>2)</sup>

But it is also true that, as efforts of literary scholars to address and dismantle the cultural asymmetries that are one legacy of colonialism have progressed, the task of redefining the status of the translation from derivative or secondary text to that of the “autonomous text,” to use Lawrence Venuti’s words, has proceeded in tandem. The significance of this for re-envisioning so-called “non-Western” modernities cannot be denied. It allows us to acknowledge a vast labor that has taken place at diverse sites of modernization that has until recently been rendered, on the whole, invisible. This was not only because of the secondary status assigned to the translator (and translating society), but because of modernity’s emphasis on rationalization and transparency. In modernity “meaning” is seen as flowing undisturbed through the medium of language, language imagined instrumentally. Renewed attention to theories of translation that radically negated the communicative nature of language (like that of Walter Benjamin, forged in the context of European modernism), has freed up for scholarly consideration the materiality of local languages and their aesthetic richness.

It is not that the status of translation theory, or any other discourse of critical theory now influential in the North American academy, has been free from controversy in Japanese Studies or in Japan. Conservative intellectuals continue to dismiss “theory” as an ill-fitting “Western import,” falling back on the very notions of cultural purity translation theory has abandoned. This despite the obvious fact that the Japanese text, whether premodern or modern, is already the product of complex histories of circulation and exchange. Conservative critics do not see that translation theory offers a more flexible way of looking at situations of inter-cultural exchange that avoids the pitfalls of retreat to a reactionary nationalism. Translation theory’s rejection of the hierarchy between original and copy is based on a rigorous deconstruction of the very concept of the origin that is not only structural but also *temporal*. As Samuel Weber proposes, in post-structuralist translation theory, all the activity of human signification inevitably positions us toward the past. Just as language is a matter of substitution and deferral, it is impossible for us to be immediately present at any beginning or origin; we experience it partially, and as a trace. “Each signified is always *in the process* of signifying...Signifying is the after-effect of a heterogeneity that can never be actualized.”<sup>3)</sup> For this reason, Weber notes, “here we see the self as a respondent. The one who recognizes is in the position of one who responds, rather than initiates.” Thus Derrida can speak of translation as a “strange debt,” asserting at one point that “nothing is more serious than translation.”<sup>4)</sup> Belatedness, in this view, is a basic condition of human signification, rather than a temporality assigned to the late modernizing non-West.

And yet I am not so interested here in presenting translation theory as the latest stage in a progressive history of Japanese literary studies. I do not wish to discuss it as an “ascendant paradigm,” that is, and certainly not as a *transcendent* one, in the Japanese sense of a *chōkoku*

or some kind of methodological overcoming. Both translation and colonialism are deeply embedded in Japanese modernity and inseparable from its contradictions. Translation Studies in the Japanese case, therefore, must not only address, but acknowledge itself to be entangled in, those contradictions. Many of these contradictions are related to Japan's dual status historically, as a belated, non-Western modernizer that was also a twentieth-century East Asian imperial power. While the U.S. Occupation had initially invested significant energy in prosecuting Japan's war crimes in the Tokyo Trials of 1948, the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty that ended the Occupation secured Japan's partnership in a key military alliance in the Pacific, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. The United States now refurbished Japan's image as the model of a successful East Asian democracy. (As many will remember, the model of Japan was invoked during the early days of the American invasion of Iraq.) East Asian area studies, which had its formative period in the Cold War era, accordingly elaborated conceptions of Japan's deep-seated cultural differences from Communist China.

These were described in Area Studies as the essential differences that made possible Japan's largely "violence-free" transition to modernity---violence-free, so long as Japanese colonialism could be relegated to the status of a minor adventure occurring far beyond the boundaries of Japan proper. With the end of the Cold War and rise to economic power of Korea, China, and other East Asian societies, however, Japan has inevitably been called to account for this repressed history. Territorial disputes over islands in the East China and Japan Sea, and the struggle to win compensation from the Japanese government for former "comfort women" have their roots in the policies of imperial Japan. In the face of these developments, the Japanese government continues to turn away, disavowing responsibility for past actions. With rising nationalism, the incidence of threats and hate speech directed toward resident Koreans (*zainichi*) descended from formerly colonized subjects of Japanese empire have become a shocking and regular feature of Japanese public life. As Hyon Joo Yoo astutely observes in a recent book on *East Asian Cinema at the Crossroads*, Japanese national subjects are facing a crisis, a "break-down in meaning-making that has caused the Symbolic order to flounder." The period following the end of the Cold War has seen the demise of Japan's ability to "claim a Western modernity where the binary was first and foremost between Japan, as the modern Western subject, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the rest of Asia as the un-modern Other of the West." <sup>5)</sup>

"Nothing is more serious than translation." As I have said, the interface of translation theory and post-colonial theory in Japanese Studies must allow us to negotiate, not transcend, the aporias and contradictions that mark the relationship between contemporary Japan and its colonial legacies. How does one argue for an irreparable belatedness, or alienation of the human subject from language (as I have above), while at the same time protesting the injustice of policies whereby a colonized population is deprived of the right to freely communicate in the "mother tongue," or local language? It is the same *aporia* Jane Hiddleston attributes to Derrida's own turn to the post-colonial in works like *Monolingualism of the Other...* an *aporia*

between the need to address damaging effects of colonialism in a “universalizing language” while paying attention to “the very singularities that colonial culture oppresses, and that resist theorization in general terms.”<sup>6)</sup>

Another aporia. How does one argue that young Japanese, with no direct experience of colonialism and the Pacific War, bear an ethical responsibility to take up the cause of compensation for victims of colonial violence and war crimes? Working from translation theory’s attention to the impossibility of equivalence, we need to see movement from language to language, as well as from past to present, as requiring an act of *poiesis*. When Derrida speaks of the seriousness of translation, he is of course speaking of translation in a broader, more philosophical sense than simply the translation of specific texts. If the human subject is fundamentally in a condition of being a *respondent* to language, then translation can be understood as a structure, even a “contract” (a term he also uses, linking the present and the past). We can understand the nature of that contract better by taking into account the paradoxical aspect of language: the existence of language in general has always concurred with the existence of a *plurality* of different languages. There is no linguistic purity; we can never go back to a time when only one language, the first language, existed. We can now understand why Derrida speaks of the structure of translation as both a “demand” and a “debt” for the translator. The language we inherit at birth must be open to translation, have the “ability” (*barkeit*) to be translated. It “demands” translation. (Analogously, in the Derridean schema, in order to be writing, writing must be able to be repeated and read, even if no one were ever to read it.) And yet, as we who translate know, one never finds equivalence between one word and another in a different language in translation. Although the original is incomplete and calls out for translation, there will never be equivalence, or sameness, but rather difference and discontinuity between the two. Translation thus becomes the work of responding to the “demand” of the text, or to the past, by negotiating difference and discontinuity. This is why for Benjamin translation is associated with not only “life” but also “death.” Translation is not a continuous extension of sameness, but literally a “sur-vival,” a “life” after a certain kind of “death.”

I now want to turn to a specific translation project I have been involved with to suggest how translation as practice and theory may contribute to our thinking about politics and culture in contemporary Japan. Together with Rebecca Jennison of Seika University, and graduate students at Cornell and Seika, I have translated the collection of essays 残傷の音 (*Zanshō no Oto*) edited by the Korean poet and philosopher Lee Chonghwa (李静和) and published by Iwanami Shoten in 2009. (The book has been published in English as *Lee, Still Hear the Wound*, translation edited by Rebecca Jennison and Brett de Bary, by the Cornell East Asia Series in 2015). Simply put, the book is a collaboration in which literary scholars and critics responded to presentations of work by video makers, sculptors, and performance artists dealing with questions of post-colonial memory and politics. As we launched work on the project, we realized we needed to translate another text, since many of the artists alluded to it in

interviews. This was the book entitled つぶやきの政治思想: 求められるまなざし、悲しみへの、そして秘められたものへ (A Politics of Murmuring : Towards a Gaze That Can Take in Sorrow and What Was Hidden, 1998) also written by Lee, and containing “response” essays to Lee’s writing by the *Zainichi* author, Kim Sokbom (金石範), and the literary critic Ukai Satoshi (鵜飼哲).

Let me briefly note the political and cultural situation within which Lee’s book appeared. The essays, “Politics of the Murmur” was first published in the Japanese journal 思想 in June, 1997. This was the year in which the first two volumes of Fujioka Nobukatsu’s revisionist text, 教科書に教えられない歴史 (History Not Taught in Textbooks) became a best-seller, topping over 100,000 copies in sales. This year also saw the establishment of *Atarashii Kyokasho o Tsukurukai* (Orthodox History Group). As is well-known, these historical revisionists felt particular urgency about the depiction in middle and high school textbooks of the military “comfort women” system, about which it had been possible to maintain official silence until the first Korean and Filipina women came forward with their testimonies in 1991-92.<sup>7)</sup> Also a backdrop to the publication of Lee’s book was a growing demand, after the overthrow of South Korea’s military government in 1987, to break the silence surrounding the so-called 4.3 Massacres on Jeju Island in 1948. Local groups began their activities after 1987, while a national Truth Commission to investigate the Jeju deaths (said by some to be of 80,000 islanders out of a total population of 300,000) was set up in 1999. This backdrop gains pertinence in light of the fact that Lee herself grew up in Jeju Island, and that Jeju Island historically has been the birthplace of the majority of *zainichi*, or descendants of *zainichi* now living in Japan. As an intervention into a political and ideological conflict, rooted in colonial legacies, whose ramifications have only increased in severity to the present day, how might we look at Lee’s essays and the responses to them from the perspective of translation?

I have spoken of the practice of translation as a theoretical practice, and of translation more broadly as having to do with the relation between past and present, life and death.... a relation we might call indebtedness. Unlike the great majority of writings on the “comfort women” question that were written in the 1990’s and continue to be written today, Lee’s book does not directly address the issue of restitution or compensation for the former “comfort women.” Rather, as the *tsubuyaki* or “murmurings” suggest, her essay focuses entirely on the problem of testimony (証言). Her argument resembles that in Shoshana Felman’s book, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 2002), a book that examines the gaps, silences, and “expressionless” moments in testimony of Holocaust survivors at the Eichmann trials (a book heavily indebted to Walter Benjamin’s ideas on translation). We might say Lee’s book examines the act of speaking itself as a process of translation, one we are made more sharply aware of when we witness the painful efforts of survivors of trauma to tell their stories. At the same time Lee’s writing engages the specificity of the twentieth century Japanese-Korean relationship by drawing modern Korean poetry in to the very organization of her text. The incorporation of poetic diction in and of itself calls attention to the problematic of translation. For in the case of poetry we are especially aware of



the “pent-up signifying” or excess that the text always carries along, in the words of Samuel Weber I referred to above. And yet Lee also gives great emphasis in this essay to the matter of the *response* to testimony, to the respondent or respondents who are often thought to occupy the position of 対日本, toward which the testimony is directed. 「わからないこと。わかってはならないこと。。。それを語る私に、聞く我々に、居心地悪さを残す」。She writes on the first page of the book. What is in question, though, here seems to be matter of a relationality or shared space. Why would this be more important to Lee than even the question of compensation?

It is Ukai Satoshi who understands the relationality, or shared space, proposed by Lee as being “a space of translation.” In another of two essays written on Lee’s work, Ukai explicitly brings up the matter of translation in relation to Lee’s words. In this essay, “The Future of an Affect: The Historicity of Shame,” Ukai considers translation from a number of perspectives, so I will just pick up few central points. First, Ukai links translation to affect, the affect of shame, thus extending Lee’s meditation on the relation between testimony and the listener, and shared space. I like this passage in Ukai’s essay, because it is multifaceted and rich, and illustrates very well several insights of Translation Studies. Ukai points out an expression used by Lee in one of her poems that describes the blush on a young woman’s face when her mother refers for the first time to the body of her dead father (who had been held in prison in Korea) in a sexual sense. Lee here speaks of the young woman in the poem’s sense of shame, but uses the expression “haji o hanikamu” (something like to be “shy of shame” or to be “abashed by shame”). Ukai points out that, since “hajirai” and “hanikami” are seen to be nearly synonymous in Japanese, the expression “haji o hanikamu” seems redundant in Japanese usage. Yet he writes, “I find the expression *haji o hanikamu* to be one of the most beautiful expressions in *Tsubuyaki no Seijishiso*,” for him, it is a phrase produced in translation.

But I also want to point out that Ukai’s linking of shame and affect in discussing Lee’s text is itself a product of reading in translation. This is Ukai’s fresh and unexpected reading of Walter Benjamin’s “Task of the Translator.” Referring to Benjamin’s famous passage comparing the original and translation to a fruit and its skin, Ukai proposes reading these images in terms of the affect of shame. Many readers will know the passage in Benjamin: “While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds.”<sup>8)</sup> Ukai comments: “That is, proper language, the “original,” hides the fruit of its meaning in its skin of expression. As if it were ashamed to expose its bare meaning, it resists translation. When we follow this figure, translation is represented as a double operation of exposing the meaning of the original and immediately---simultaneously---covering it with another robe.” Ukai expresses some hesitation about possibly forcing this reading on Benjamin, but writes “Nevertheless, at the very least it seems evident that Benjamin’s famous text consists of a number of insights that could not have been achieved without a deep perception of the translator’s desire and the affect of the words being translated, though it does not touch on them thematically.”

Now that we have considered affect and shame, I want to go back to Lee and the

representation of the body in her text. The phrases “wakaranai koto, wakatte wa naranai koto” at the beginning of *Tsubuyaki no Seijishisō* refer to secrets, hidden things (himerareta mono) that are carried by the person who gives testimony. Some may have been carried for many decades, more than half a lifetime before a decision to reveal them is made, a decision that in itself is surely life changing. As she also notes, some will never be revealed, even after a testimony is made. “Having spoken of these memories means that one’s very life and its position have already been altered. So how, after that, can living be continued?”<sup>9)</sup>

For Lee, life and the body are inseparable as a process of duration, an accumulation of time. For what interrupts bodily duration is only death. This brings the living body into a kind of conflict or contradiction with testimony. Some will think that the pain experienced has been summed up in testimony, that it is now part of the past. But this cannot be so. Jieun Chang, states about the testimonies of survivors of the 1948 massacres in Jeju: “No generalized notion of victimhood can unshake the survivor from...the persistent imprisonment in durational time.”<sup>10)</sup>

So to conclude, for Lee, “*haji o hanikamu*” might be a necessary response to testimony as a form of translation, where language is never transparent. The one who listens to testimony will be left with a certain discomfort (igokochi warusa). But as Ukai suggests, this relationality (or shared space) could be a positive and even hopeful one. Through the acceptance of shame and secrets on both sides, a space may emerge which allows those in it to be “touched” without being subject to a kind of violent desire to render the other completely transparent or the same. Remembering that Benjamin said, “translation touches the original glancingly, like the wind touches the Aeolian harp,” we could call this the “touch” of translation.

## Notes

- 1) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 397.
- 2) Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Posy-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (University of California Press, 1992.)
- 3) Samuel Weber, “The Singularity of Literary Knowledge,” Lecture, Cornell University, February 27, 2014.
- 4) Jacques Derrida, “Des Tours de Babel,” tr. Joseph Graham in *Difference in Translation* ed. by Joseph Graham (Cornell University Press: 1985), pp. 184-186.
- 5) Hyon Joo Yoo, *Cinema at the Crossroads: Nation and the Subject in East Asian Cinema* (Lanham, Maryland and Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books), p. 2.
- 6) Jane Hiddleston, “Derrida, Autobiography, and Post-Coloniality,” in *French Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, October 2005.
- 7) Laura Hein and Mark Selden, “The Lessons of War, Global Power, and Social Change,” in *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States*. Ed., Laura Hein and Mark Selden (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), p. 27.
- 8) Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 76.
- 9) Lee Chonghwa, つぶやきの政治思想：求められるまなざし、悲しみへの、そして秘められたものへ (Tokyo, Seidosha, 1998).
- 10) Jieun Chang, Lecture, Cornell University, February, 2011.

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