Comparing Chinese and English Translations of Japanese Text
Through Two Notable Pieces of Japanese Literature

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INTRODUCTION

In order to gain some insight into the differences between Chinese and English translations of Japanese text, two notable pieces of Japanese literature, *Izu no Odoriko* (The Dancing Girl of Izu; abbreviated Izu) and *Norwegian Wood* (NW), are selected as the subjects of this research. The former is a short story written by **Yasunari Kawabata**, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968; the latter is a novel by arguably the most well-known Japanese writer in the contemporary world, **Haruki Murakami**. The aim is to **gather the available versions of translations as well as the original text**, and **compare specific passages from each version** that can reflect the overall quality of the translation.

Movie posters of Izu no Odoriko (1963) and Norwegian Wood (2010).

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

WHAT IS A GOOD TRANSLATION? In the case of literature, the requirement is more complicated than simply **accuracy**; it also requires **clarity**, **naturalness**, **preserving the mood of the author,** and being **culturally appropriate for the target audience**, etc. (Zart).

JAPANESE/日本語
- **Japonic** language family
- **Influence of Chinese** in vocab, written form, and pronunciation
- Direct import of **European vocab**
- Conjugations for past, negative, **passive**, potential, and volitional forms; adjective conjugations
- Complex **honorifics** system (pronouns, conjugations, verbs)
- Subject - object - verb

ENGLISH
- **West Germanic** language family
- Many vocab influenced by other **Germanic & Romance** langs (esp. French)
- Non-tonal like Japanese
- **Latin script**
- Conjugations for past & perfect tenses, **1st/2nd/3rd person**
- Minimal to no honorifics
- Subject - verb - object

CHINESE/中文
- **Sino-Tibetan** language family
- Fundamentally different from Japanese despite their connections
- Tonal language (5 tones)
- Chinese characters
- **No conjugations for verbs**; add words/particles instead
- Minimal honorifics
- Subject - verb - object

THE TRANSLATORS

J. Martin Holman (English translator of Izu; 1957-)
- Ph.D. in Japanese literature from UC Berkeley
- Lived in Japan for 10 years; taught Jap lit
- Research focused on mid-20th century works, esp. Yasushi Inoue & Yasunari Kawabata

Jay Rubin (English translator of NW; 1941-)
- Ph. D. in Japanese lit from U of Chicago; taught Japanese at U of Washington and Harvard
- "Getting whatever I get out of the Japanese text – the images, the rhythms – then do the best I can to write the English in such a way that I'm conveying what I'm getting out of the Japanese"

Shaohua Lin/林少华 (Chinese translator of Izu and NW; 1952-)
- M.A. in Jap lit from Jilin U; taught in Nagasaki U for 3 years
- Most well-known Murakami translator in simplified Chinese
- Response to disapproval from Prof Fujii: "Preserving the mood shows greater loyalty to the original work" (Chinanews)

Ming-chu Lai/賴明珠 (Chinese translator of NW; 1947-)
- Degree in agricultural econ from Chung Hsing U and horticulture from Chiba U
- Earliest and most well-known Murakami translator in traditional Chinese; stay as loyal as possible to the original

Weiqu Ye/叶渭渠 (Chinese translator of Izu; 1929-2010)
- Chinese Vietnamese; majored in Japanese at Peking University
- Visiting professor at Waseda, Gakushin, & Ritsumeikan U

Although there are many existing studies about either Japanese-English or Japanese-Chinese translation, little has been done in the comparison between the two. By comparing English and Chinese translations, this resea-rch attempts to bring attention to what is lost in the content that readers of either language can access. Personally, I can also learn how to produce good translations through studying prominent translators' works.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

CATEGORIZATION – a few categories of text were established based on the major components of each story (i.e. "**scenery**," "**appearance**," "**action**,")
- Then, specific passages that fall under each category are selected from each story and used as subjects of this research.
- The categorization could vary from text to text due to the nature of each story.

AWKWARD SPOTS – where the translation sounds **highly unnatural** or **deviates significantly from original text** (in other words, either lack in flow or accuracy)
- These "problematic" passages might shed light on certain difficulties in the translating process.
- The way these difficulties are approached could determine the quality of a translation.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Sample Passage Analysis from *Norwegian Wood* (all passages are analyzed in similar fashion)
Corresponding texts are highlighted with the same color; "awkward spots" are underlined.

Japanese:
ふと気が付いた時、直子の話は既に終わっていた。言葉の切れ端が、もぎ取られたような格好で空中に浮かんでいた。正確に言えば彼女の話は終わったわけではなかった。どこかでふっと消えてしまったのだ。彼女はなんとか話続けようとしたが、そこにはもう何もなかった。何かが損なわれてしまったのだ。あるいはそれを損なったのは僕かもしれなかった。僕が言ったことがやっと彼女の耳に届き、時間をかけて理解され、そのせいで彼女を喋らせ続けていたエネルギーのようなものが損なわれてしまったのかもしれない。(Murakami, 83)

English:
Before I knew it, she had stopped talking. The ragged end of the last word she spoke seemed to float in the air, where it had been torn off. She had not actually finished what she was saying. Her words had simply evaporated. She had been trying to go on, but had come up against nothing. Something was gone now, and I was probably the one who had destroyed it. My words might have finally reached her, taken their time to be understood, and obliterated whatever energy it was that had kept her talking so long. (Rubin, 39)

Chinese (version 1):
蓦地察觉到时，话已戛然而止。中断的话茬儿，像被拧掉的什么物体浮在空中。准确说来，她的话并未结束，而是突然消失到什么地方了。本来她还想努力再说下去，但话已经无影无踪。是被破坏掉了，说不定破坏者就是我。我刚才的话终于传进了她的耳朵，好半天才被她理解，从而破坏掉了促使她继续说话的类似动力的东西。(Lin, 46)

Chinese (version 2):
一留神時，直子的話已經結束。話語的碎片，好像是被扯斷了似地浮在空中。正確地說，她的話並沒有結束，只是不知道在什麼地方突然消失掉了。她似乎努力繼續說下去。但那裡已經什麼也沒有了。有什麼損壞了。也許破壞那個的是我。也許我說的話終於傳進她耳朵里，花了點時間她瞭解了，因此使得讓她繼續說的能量似的東西被破壞了。(Lai, 58)

- Translating to English tends to require more **reordering and combining of sentences** than Chinese does.
- Chinese v1 sacrifices some literal accuracy for better flow of text; relatively plain and colloquial Japanese phrases are translated with **embellishments**, i.e. idioms (成语/chengyu), making the tone stiffer and more refined/poetic.
- Chinese v2 takes a **strictly literal** approach. Vocabulary (kanji), phrasing, sentence breaks, and even grammar, are preserved to the greatest extent. The high accuracy comes at the cost of awkward word choice and poor flow.
- The subtle meaning of the particle **"しまった (shimatta)"** is not, and probably cannot, be smoothly translated into either language. The subtle **hint of disappointment** in しまった is lost almost all the time.
- The **absence of subject** in Japanese sentences is more readily preserved in Chinese than in English translation.
- The abundant use of **passive form** of verbs in Japanese seems to be better preserved in English translation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / REFERENCES

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