
Ideological Transformation through Translation

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Literary translations are sites of aesthetic, cultural, and ideological exchange between cultures. Translators have been and continue to be responsible for the exchange and manipulation of huge areas of thought. In this paper I examine the ideological manipulation of a Japanese literary text through translation and the motivation for such manipulation.

Two-hundred years ago Friedrich Schleiermacher argued in his oft-cited essay “Methoden des Übersetzens” that translated literature stimulates target language cultures to grow and therefore benefit from source language cultures. This observation has been reiterated a number of times since. In perhaps the most cited essay on the subject of translation during the last quarter century, “The Task of the Translator,” written eighty years ago, Walter Benjamin develops this theme. I note the continued mention of cultural influence through translation because it is a fundamental and profound phenomenon that transcends any one school of translation or literary theory. Forty years ago, Horst Frenz asserted that because of translation “many of the literary achievements of one country have found a hearing and even become ‘naturalized’ in other countries. Their people have been able to share the experiences and emotions expressed in foreign works, and men of letters have been stimulated and even profoundly influenced by them” (72). In 2000 Donald Richie took the torch and once again underlined the importance of translation as an essential component of cultural enrichment among nations. And here I cite Richie to both emphasize the continued recognition of the relationship between translation and cultural exchange and because he has been one of the players at center stage in the dissemination of Japanese culture throughout the English speaking world for the past half century: “... without translations all of us would understand much less. Whole areas of thought would remain unknown, whole lives would lie undiscovered. The literary translator not only delivers us full fragments of culture but brings a close analysis of language to bear on cross-cultural literary questions in a way central to knowledge itself” (Richie 3). The point these observers have been making is that we do not live in isolation and that translation is necessary for linguistic and cultural development in the modern era. This fact has been noted by literary specialists, social critics, philosophers, and the like, but the scope and importance of translation becomes apparent to any lay person who considers the issue.

Yes, translation plays an active role in fostering the growth and appreciation of literatures, languages, and cultures among nations, as many scholars have noted, but as Bassnett cautions, “... the translator, who takes a text and transposes it into another culture,

needs to consider carefully the ideological implications of that transposition” (*Translation Studies* xv). The translator necessarily promotes, actively or tacitly, ideological, aesthetic, and cultural values. That is, the translator cannot absolutely avoid transforming (changing, modifying) source texts to some degree, thereby promoting certain values—because the translator is, whatever else s/he might be, a reader, a textual interpreter. One interprets comparatively more actively or tacitly; the translator is of the active sort. The translator in particular, therefore, must be constantly attentive to potential ideological transformations, both in choice of text selection and translation approach.

Put plainly, translators have been, and continue to be, responsible for the exchange and manipulation of huge areas of thought. Ordinary readers, as well as professional readers, should therefore disdain, distrust, admire, and scrutinize their activity as much as they do that of any educator, politico, writer, captain of industry, scientist, or clergyman.

Here I attempt to explicate a concrete example of the manipulation of a text through translation. I owe this example to S. Harrison Watson’s critical analysis of Edward Seidensticker’s translation of Kawabata Yasunari’s short story *Izu no odoriko* (1925; “Izu Dancer,” 1954). The rewriting of this text is significant because as Japan’s first of two Nobel Prize winners for literature, Kawabata is at the heart of the canon of contemporary Japanese letters and his works in translation are also at the heart of the Japanese canon in the West. And Seidensticker’s translations constitute a significant portion of all available Japanese literary works in English translation. In particular, I also take this example because, as Watson argues, Seidensticker’s translation represents a salient example of the rewriting of a source text through translation, and done in such a manner as to contribute a subtle yet important weapon to the arsenal of American Cold War liberal democratic propaganda and imperialism. I should mention here that it is somewhat ironic that Seidensticker would contribute to the transformation of a work, ideological or otherwise, and however inadvertently, since he is a consummately careful translator, committed to accuracy and faithfulness:

The Italians call the translator a betrayer or a traitor [*traditore*].¹ I don’t think of translators as that. I think of them as counterfeiters. Now, a successful counterfeiter must imitate, he must reproduce every detail of his original to the best of his ability, not changing anything. If he is counterfeiting a one-dollar bill, he reproduces George Washington’s warts. He does not prettify. To prettify a one-dollar to make George a handsomer boy on his one-dollar bill than he is on the original one-dollar bill, makes for a bad counterfeiter. (Seidensticker 22)

And so we note that by and large Seidensticker does translate accurately. He is a good counterfeiter. In his translation of *Izu no odoriko* Seidensticker most often gets the words right (that is, the ones he translates). He also faithfully carries over important subtleties, such as hints of romance and the more obvious yet more complex coming of age subtext. He does not, though, faithfully carry over a third prominent and ideologically significant subtext—one which Watson argues is substantially transformed, creatively abused in the translation. As a result, “readers are restricted to what appears to be a story of love between a schoolboy and a dancing girl . . .” (Watson 321). Again, I believe this should not be attributed to the linguistic deficiency on the part of the translator, as he is one of the English speaking world’s most adept and versatile translators of Japanese literature, nor to the fact that the particular language in the original (combination of linguistic units, etc.) which conveys this subtext in question is inordinately abstruse or inextricably bound to the Japanese mind, though Kawabata can be

tantalizingly elusive and ambiguous for translators and other readers. However, Kawabata is not inordinately abstruse or ambiguous here; that is, the material in the original which constitutes the subtext in question is comparatively straight forward. Anyway, Seidensticker is an able translator who has proven himself capable of capturing such ambiguities and nuances elsewhere in the text. I would like to add here that as a rule I greatly admire and enjoy Seidensticker's many translations and his contribution to Western understanding of Japan and Japanese literature. The point is that I am not (nor Watson, I believe) criticizing his entire corpus of translations, but his treatment of this particular work.

Watson claims that in the original the hero is presented by Kawabata as a poster child of Neo-Confucianism (*shushigaku*), a network of beliefs which promoted unbending loyalty to the family, nation, and emperor, and which had become a basic part of elementary school curriculum by the turn of the twentieth century. Watson claims that *Izu no odoriko* can be "understood as an early attempt by Kawabata to secure the existence and reproduction of ideas he felt were the essence of Japan" (Watson 313–14). The notion of intense loyalty in the Neo-Confucian ideals was combined with the belief in the divine character of the Japanese imperial institution in order to justify the acquisition of a colonial empire, an ideological construct that led to the Japanese involvement in WW II.

Seidensticker's transformation consists of taming, when not totally expurgating, this aggressive Neo-Confucian aspect of the story. He accomplishes this by transforming the young, unnamed hero from an exemplar of altruism, moral vitality, and loyalty into a thin-skinned passivist, who by extension symbolizes a passive Japan in need of American management in the post war, Cold War period.

Early in the story, as the hero is getting started on his quest for self-identity, Seidensticker renders him as a "misanthrope," as one who learns to accept kindness from others, rather than in the original where he achieves self-recognition after he gives kindness to others: "Giving is what seems natural, not—as Seidensticker gives the reader—receiving" (Watson 316). The word in question *koji* should clearly and unambiguously be translated as "orphan" in English, not "misanthrope," a reasonable option for other Japanese words (*ningengirai-no-hito* "hater of man," *kosaigirai-no-hito* "one who hates human society"). And neither does the context want to charge this lexical item with such an interpretation. The choice therefore seems all the more a deliberate rewriting of the text.

The transformation of the hero takes place for the most part, however, in what is not translated, rather than how it is translated. That is, major portions of two scenes significant to the rite-of-passage subtext do not appear in the Seidensticker translation: "... there is, in fact, quite a bit of ideological significance inseparably interwoven with the initiatory nature of the story, and when major points along the initiatory sequence are cut out by the translator, it is impossible for the reader to reconstruct the political import of the work" (Watson 311). The Neo-Confucianism of the hero's growth is most obvious in the two sections Seidensticker left out, totaling approximately 400 words.² In the first expurgated scene, as the young hero is just beginning his quest for self-recognition, he encounters "an old man white ... bloated as a drowned corpse ... sitting cross-legged by the fire." Our hero does nothing for him, feels no empathy for him, displays no Neo-confucian values: "I stared at this apparition, which I could not think of as a living creature." In the second expurgated scene, after the hero has negotiated his quest for self-recognition, he encounters a destitute old woman who has been charged with

the care of her three young grandchildren, whose parents have recently died. Some miners who had been working with her son implore the hero: "Could you see this old woman to Tokyo? She's a very sad case." To which he retells, "I happily said I would do what I could." He becomes a giver, a source of inspiration, displaying empathy, consideration, and magnanimity.

Another significant omission in Seidensticker's translation (corrected in the post Cold War Oxford anthology) is the failure to translate something as seemingly innocent as the title of a book. For reasons of maintaining the rhythm of the translation, such an omission may be justifiable; that is, if it were little more than an awkward title of an inconsequential or non-existent text, then given the rhythm of the translation, omission might only serve the purpose of maintaining the stylistic flow. But this book is significant, in which case the title should be brought into the translation—either through brief elaboration after its (first) mention in the body of the text or in a footnote. As Watson notes, *Atlantic* editorial policy discouraged footnotes; therefore, Seidensticker should have gone with the former option. Let's say, though, that even this option was unavailable for the *Atlantic* edition; are we then to assume that these options were also not available for the Tuttle edition, which has propagated this translation (read, transformation) for a quarter century?

Seidensticker translates the book in question *Mito kômon manyûki* (*The Adventures of the Lord of Mito*) as a "storyteller's collection." The fictional hero of the book was based upon Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628–1700), the second *daimyô* (lord) of the Mito domain (capital of today's Ibaraki Prefecture, central Honshû) and grandson of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616. *Sei tai shôgun*—"barbarian subduing generalissimo." Ieyasu established the Tokugawa Shogunate, a dynasty ruled by him and his descendants for more than two and a half centuries (1603–1867. The popular image of Mitsukuni as an ideal feudal ruler was reinforced in *The Adventures of the Lord of Mito*. The real Mitsukuni, elevated to mythological stature in large part through this book, founded the Historical Research Institute (*Shôkôkan*) in Mito, which came to promote the concept of *kokutai* ("body of the nation") with the emperor at the top of the nation's hierarchial structure, was a driving force behind the writing of the moralistic *History of Great Japan* (*Dai nihon shi*, 397 volumes, completed 1906), and exerted great influence on the dissemination of Neo-Confucianism and nationalist ideology.

The significance of this seemingly minor point (i.e., the transformation of a particular book into a generic book) is brought to light if we consider other examples. What if (in another story by another writer) *Mein Kampf*, *The Bible*, or *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, were translated as "an autobiography," "a prayer book," and "a public document?"

Seidensticker was not a rogue revisionist committed to rewriting Japanese history for the purpose of promoting Japan as a malleable, non-aggressive, obedient trading partner with the U.S. No, he had the support of the CIA.³ Actually, the CIA and the Ford Foundation, a private, nonprofit corporation established by Henry and Edsel Ford in 1936, which through its international division aimed to "promote progress in developing countries". "... The Ford Foundation was the tax-exempt cream of the vast Ford fortune with assets totalling over \$3 billion by the late 1950s" (Saunders 139). The Ford Foundation was active in many international projects during the Cold War period and was associated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which together supported the publication of Seidensticker's translation of

Izu no odoriko in cooperation with the *Atlantic* editorial staff (*Perspective of Japan: An Atlantic Supplement, The Atlantic Monthly*, 1955) and a non-profit corporation established by the Ford Foundation in 1952, Intercultural Publications Inc.—“It’s board was packed with cultural Cold Warriors” (Saunders 140).

In her recent book *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, Saunders draws a chilling, meticulously-researched picture of the colossal program of cultural propaganda, created and sustained by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a thinly veiled arm of the CIA, dissolved in 1967 amid the revelations of its funding by the CIA. “At its peak, the Congress for Cultural Freedom had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over twenty prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned a news and features service, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances [translations ... ran to hundreds of titles (22)]. Its mission was to nudge the intelligentsia of western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a view more accommodating of ‘the American way’” (Saunders 1). “Whether they liked it or not, whether they knew it or not, there were few writers, poets, artists, historians, scientists or critics in post-war Europe whose names were not in some way linked to this covert enterprise” (Saunders 2). “The use of philanthropic foundations was the most convenient way to pass large sums of money to Agency projects without alerting the recipients to their source” (Saunders 34). The Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie foundations were considered the best kind of funding cover. “At times, it seemed as if the Ford Foundation was simply an extension of government in the area of international cultural propaganda” (Saunders 139).

It is interesting to note that Seidensticker was one of the editors for the *Atlantic* supplement. Watson concludes: “... the evidence of context—the cited foundation aims ... the nature of the neighboring material in the supplement—suggests that cuts were made to perform an ideological transformation on the original” (Watson 319).

I would go so far as to posit that the methods by which a text undergoes transformation through translation may resemble the methods used to censor a text; this would seem to be what was done to *Izu no odoriko* at any rate. To wit, it is no secret that the U.S. Occupation imposed rather strict censorship on Japanese writers for half a decade following the end of the war: “The censorship that the Occupation directed at ‘feudalistic’ and ‘patriotic’ writings during the early days of the Occupation was inspired by fears of a resurgence of Japanese militarism” (Keene. *Dawn to the West* 966–67).⁴ Censorship was nothing new for Japanese writers, though, as they were subject to it during the war; they were often subjected to imprisonment or ideological reorientation known as *tenkō*, if they wrote things that displeased the authorities. But some Japanese editors “complained that the Occupation censorship was even more exasperating than Japanese military censorship had been because it insisted that *all traces of censorship be concealed*. This meant that articles had to be rewritten in full, rather than merely *XXs* for the offending phrases” (Keene. *Dawn to the West* 967; my emphasis). Seidensticker’s translation of *Izu no odoriko* was published not during the Occupation but immediately afterwards, during the height of Cold War paranoia. His version satisfies the unscrupulous U.S. Occupation condition that all traces of censorship be concealed. The offensive material was adroitly removed or reworded, with no traces of such activity to target language readers. He is a careful writer, so that without access to the original,

it is impossible to detect the censorship.

As so many have observed, our most basic cultural institutions—universes of knowledge!—have been and continue to be impacted by the mass of translations that travels throughout the world. So why should the translation of one Japanese short story *Izu no odoriko* make a difference? In short, the answer is that the direction in which the mass of translations travels is almost always in one direction, inside out, center to periphery, West to East. So when a translation is audacious enough to go upstream against the traffic, it stands out and announces itself as the representative of an entire corpus: “I am the archetype of Japanese literature. And this is how Japanese authors think and write. And this is how Japanese people look and behave. And this is what Japanese society is like.” The *Atlantic* version of “Izu Dancer” was Kawabata’s first published work in English translation and one of the very few works of Japanese literature ever published in English translation at that time. By default it became archetypically Japanese: Japanese literature is aesthetically charged and exotic, and the hero is archetypically Japanese—yielding and deferential to American political, economic, and cultural supervision.

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Notes

1. They also call a translator a “translator” (traduttore).
2. The translation first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1954); Tuttle’s first printing of the story (1974) through the 20th printing (1998) use the *Atlantic* version, further promoting and canonizing this version. The omissions and other transformations under discussion have been re-inserted in the version found in the much more recent post-Cold War *Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*. To its credit, several significant mistranslations and a number of less significant mistranslations have been corrected in the *Oxford* anthology.
3. Responding to Watson’s interpretation of the translating and editorial approaches to “Izu no odoriko” (this time embedded in a series of reviews and letters to the editor in *The Japan Times*), Richie comes to Seidensticker’s defense: “Upon reading [Watson’s] letter, I again checked [with Seidensticker]. He said that the cuts were solely for reasons of layout and that the CIA had nothing to do with it. He also invited [Watson] to compare the cut Tuttle version and the complete version in ‘The *Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*,’ and discover that, though *The Atlantic Monthly*’s editing had been badly done, it was not politically suspicious” (Donald Richie. Letter to Editor. “No CIA tryst with *Izu Dancer*.” *Japan Times* 15 October, 2000).
Saunders notes, though, that if the beneficiaries of CIA funds were ignorant of the fact, the argument goes, and if their behaviour was consequently unmodified, then their independence as critical thinkers could not have been affected.
“But official documents relating to the cultural Cold War systematically undermine this myth of altruism. The individuals and institutions subsidized by the CIA were expected to perform as part of a broad campaign of persuasion, of a propaganda war in which ‘propaganda’ was defined as ‘any organized effort or movement to disseminate information or a particular doctrine by means of news, special arguments or appeals designed to influence the thoughts and actions of any given group’” (Saunders 4; source: National Security Council Directive, 10 July 1950, quoted in *Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1976).
4. Ironically, while the CIA and its cultural co-conspirators—the consortium of The Conference for

Cultural Freedom, The Ford Foundation, and Intercultural Publications, Inc.—promoted anticommunist sentiment in Europe (to the extent that they employed former Nazis), they promoted anti-nationalism in Japan, countering not left- but right-wing ideology. "... a programme run by Bill Casey, the future CIA director, called International Refugee Committee in New York ... coordinated the exfiltration of Nazi's from Germany to the States where they were expected to assist the government in its struggle against Communism" (Saunders 132).

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