

Talking of Cultural Relations between Europe and Japan

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This year, 2012, marks the 150th birth anniversary of Mori Ōgai. To commemorate this event, a new memorial library will be inaugurated in Tokyo in the forthcoming November, and an international symposium will be arranged by Mori Ōgai Society in Tokyo in this connection. Similar symposia were also held in Berlin by Humboldt University.

I mention Mori Ōgai not only because he was an incarnation of the cultural relations between Europe and Japan during Japan's rapid modernization but also because his life and authorship have been a source of inspiration and encouragement for me as a scholar. I have published articles and books on Mori Ōgai, as he was a translator not only of literature but also of culture.

About half of Mori Ōgai's literary production consists of translations of European literature, including Scandinavian, but his translation should rather be called a creative mistranslation or manipulation as he eagerly tried to recast the original work in order to make it readable and comprehensible in the Japanese context.

By examining Mori Ōgai's authorship, especially his works of translation, I have cultivated and developed my method of reading, which has led to a theory of mistranslation. Every translation is a result of interpretation and is always biased linguistically and culturally; we cannot translate otherwise. Moreover, interpretation cannot be avoided. As Wolfgang Iser says, "We interpret; therefore we are."¹

We are constantly interpreting, translating, and, therefore, often misunderstanding. While such misunderstanding is only natural, we should be aware of it and try to attain better understanding.

I cannot remember exactly when, but I began to use this theory of mistranslation in my study of *The Cultural Relations between Denmark and Japan*. Before me, owing to the obvious language barrier, nobody could describe the historical process of the two countries' relations. I have now published Book 1, in Danish as well as in Japanese,² covering the period from 1600 to 1873; the second book covering the following period until 1903 is forthcoming.

Now, please allow me to give you a short introduction to my study:

¹ Wolfgang Iser. *The Range of Interpretation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 1.

² Yoichi Nagashima. *De dansk-japanske kulturelle forbindelser 1600–1873* (The Cultural Relations between Denmark and Japan 1600–1873). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, University of Copenhagen, 2003. Nagashima Yōichi 長島要一. *Nihon Denmāku bunka kōryūshi 1600–1873* 日本・デンマーク文化交流史 1600–1873. Kanagawa: Tōkai Daigaku Shuppankai, 2007.

Analyses in Book 1 were mostly empirical, as the main purpose of the book was to map and present relevant documents in both Danish and Japanese. By closely reading them, I have precisely depicted how the Danes and the Japanese have accumulated their knowledge of each other through the ages in this book. I have regarded culture as a “text,” and I have described how the Danes and the Japanese have “read,” “interpreted,” and “(mis)understood” each other’s texts. Their reciprocal “readings” of each other’s culture had to necessarily go through “translation,” first of literature in foreign languages, and then literature in their own language, which inevitably was under the influence of both the first and second “translation.” As every translation by definition is mistranslation, since no equivalence is possible and many variants can appear, the process gradually became complex and complicated. As a result, I have disclosed that cultural “(mis)translation” has a certain pattern of development.

When one observes or reads about foreign culture, one sees—as when one reads a book—only what one wants to see. As a reader, one’s perspective is limited, and one should have the ability to see what is to be seen. However, when one has certain knowledge of the text, one observes or reads that text more purposefully or arbitrarily so that one sees only what one prefers to see. One begins to choose and cite the aspects of the text that one wants to read. The choice is not necessarily a conscious manipulation but often an unconscious act. During the next stage, when observing or reading the text, one sees what he or she is expected to see. The way to read the text is regulated by the reader’s cultural background. In addition, the reading takes place in a collective setting, and there, a myth is formed about the text so that one no longer questions the common reception of the text.

The observation or reading of a foreign culture includes reflection, and when one describes it, one is inevitably confronted with one’s own cultural background through the language to be used for that purpose. Thus, the foreign culture functions here as a mirror. By looking at it, one sees a mirror image of oneself, and if one is attentive, one can simultaneously look into one’s own culture. An exact rendering of this reflection, however, cannot be realized in writing or by other means. When one sees oneself in a mirror, for example, the mirror image one sees differs from the reality. At this point, manipulation takes place, where the up-down relation is accurately reflected, while the right-left relation is always laterally reversed. The mirror image can never be identical to what one sees in the same way a translation cannot be faithful to the original. There can only be mistranslation. Hence, a translation is equivalent to an illusion.

These numerous mistranslations in cultural contexts, however, are intense human actions, and they constitute the very core of cultural contacts. Not only observation and experience of each other’s culture but also imagination of what the foreign culture consists is required to build relations between the two cultures. These are mental or intellectual acts. To hear or read about a foreign culture is also an experience that can form the foundation for one’s take on the foreign culture, and this influences one’s relation to his or her own culture, too. These invisible relations are fertile soil for the germination of a myth, both for the Danes and the Japanese.

In my books, I have focused on the “actors” in the cultural relations between Denmark and

Japan and have tried to show how the observer of a foreign culture produces an unconsciously manipulated and reversed picture of it, and that the same observer forgets or is ignorant of the simple fact that he or she has inevitably been observed by those he or she has been observing. It sounds quite banal; nonetheless, it is true and quite significant. There exist many accounts of both countries—the Danish accounts of Japan and the Japanese accounts of Denmark—but these accounts, especially the old ones, have often been (and still are) uncontested without being critically commented on, simply because the reliability of the accounts was never verified. In my books, I have shed light on some mutual observations in connection with the same event, and I have examined and found those materials, which have hitherto been unknown to the Danish and the Japanese readers, respectively, and constructed them so that one can have a three-dimensional picture of the event. I have pointed out that observers themselves have been observed, and that observers' observations—not to mention their actions—have prompted a reaction in the form of a "re-observation," which has now produced an alternative version of the event. Besides, I have disclosed the conscious or unconscious manipulation that the observer has committed, and in so doing, I have also relativized such observations as well as the resultant descriptions. One should not approve any description about a foreign culture before one has examined it carefully and has read about it closely, especially when the describer cannot understand the language in question. My critical comments in this regard have also been directed to those researchers who uncritically have used and still use such materials both in Denmark and in Japan.

I'll stop my mini-keynote talk here by emphasizing the importance of being aware that our research is inevitably carried out as a cultural translation, consciously or unconsciously, and that our observation of any kind should be met with re-observation in order to authenticate our study of the relations between Europe and Japan.

Niels Bohr, the famous Danish quantum physicist, died in 1962, fifty years ago. His institute embodied the Copenhagen Spirit based on free research, free discussion, informal communication, and equality in cooperation. Researchers from many different countries worked joyfully as though they were playing games and enjoyed their stay in Copenhagen. As I am a great admirer of Niels Bohr and the Copenhagen Spirit, I suggest that we work together today in the same spirit.