

Early-Modern Japanese Thought in Western Languages

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1. In two centuries of Western study on early-modern Japanese thought since Isaac Titsingh the writings of many thinkers were translated. Of almost every prominent thinker and even many not very prominent thinkers we have texts in translations, although there are some well known thinkers of whose writings we have not, for instance, Fujiwara Seika or Yamazaki Ansai. But when we compare the amount of translations to what has been done by Japanese scholars with Western thinkers, the amount appears very small. — Translation work has an ethical dimension. I should like to mention only two aspects, which are often not taken into account in early-modern Japanese thought studies.

One is that a student learns how extremely difficult it is to reconstruct thought in the language of a different culture and different historical period, not leaving out even the most difficult words and passages. Only those who once tried to do so and who tried successfully so are qualified to write on Japanese thought *as Japanologists*. Often the author of a study at the first glance seems to “read” with ease the old texts, but the few quotations which he dares to offer his readers in his mother tongue show clearly that he or she is far away from an adequate textual understanding. Those who want to read rather fluently are inclined to omit passages which the translator struggles day by day to decipher. In order to understand with a certain degree of fluency we would have to know at least the central Chinese classics, the *Book of Documents*, *The Books of Songs*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Spring and Harvest Annals*, *The Commentary of Tso*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Book of Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, *The Book of Meant Hsün-tzu*, *Han Fei-tzu* etc. and vast parts of the *Twenty-Four Chinese Dynasty Histories* at least as well as the authors, whom we are trying to understand. But of course no scholar in the West ever had this background knowledge of traditional scholarship available.¹

The second ethical component: If possible a scholar should not present or analyze a thinker before the thinker has got the right to speak to the public. If a thinker is not known to the public by his own writings but gets only the chance to utter in little quotations which a modern scholar finds “meaningful” or simple enough to read fluently in the original, the thinker is deprived of an essential right. As for Western thinkers, this principle seems to be generally accepted. Japanese or Western scholars who write about a Western author can rely on a fairly well informed reader, who is able to control to a high degree the validity of statements made in the analysis, because he knows the language of the original or can use

existing translations of the thinker's works.

Although there exists a considerable number of translations, one must admit that their quality is debatable in too many cases. Another difficulty is that many translations are not easily accessible. It might be a good idea to establish a series for the publication of translations, a *Thesaurus of Japanese Thought*, which should be considered a purely academic institution. Many translations of works of Japanese thinkers suffer from the fact that they are written for a presumed "general" reader. Of course every Japanese text must be made understandable for a reader with no knowledge of Chinese or Japanese, but it must fulfil high standards of academic translation. Abundant footnotes for the explanation of the translation should be possible. Also representative translations of the past should be published, for instance, the excellent translations done by the Jesuit Heinrich Dumoulin with writings of Kamo no Mabuchi in the 1940s and 1950s.

2. Scholars who try to understand texts historically must ask for the history of concepts. Research in Western theology and philosophy was always accompanied by research on concepts and words. For early-modern Japanese history we have little or often no systematic knowledge about the historical development of central concepts like "Heaven", "Principle", "The Absolute" etc. In Western scholarship there are, for instance, Joachim Ritter's & al. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (1971ss) or Otto Brunner's & al. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1979-92), which are necessary tools for every scholar interested in the history of thought in the West or even the history of Western thought in Japan. In a conversation on this subject a famous Japanese colleague once uttered, when told about Ritter etc. that the situation in Japan could not be so bad, as there existed works like Morohashi Tetsuji's *Great Chinese-Japanese Dictionary* or the *Great Dictionary of the Japanese Language* of Shôakkan Publishing Company. The answer clearly showed that what I consider as one of the disadvantages of Japanese thought studies is not seen to be a problem by most of its protagonists in Japan. On the other hand there are scholars who show how the situation could be improved. Sagara Tôru wrote an introduction into the history of some central concepts of Japanese early-modern Confucianism. Minamoto Ryôen acted as the editor of a substantial collection of research essays on the concept of kami resp. shin resp. shen in various streams of Chinese and Japanese thought. He gave also hints to conceptual history writing by his studies on "practical learning". I suggest to compile a list of books and articles about the history of Japanese concepts.

3. Communication is not only a problem between Japanese and non-Japanese scholars. The Nihon Shisô Shi Konwa Kai, verbally the "Association for Familiar Talk about the History of Japanese Thought", certainly is a useful organisation for many Japanese thought scholars, but not for the majority of them. It is interesting to see that many Japanese specialists refuse to become members and participate in the annual meetings. As for foreign scholars there are at present about sixty researchers specializing in early-modern Japanese thought at universities in the USA and Canada, Europe and Oceania — and there may be at present more than two or three hundred foreign specialists of Japanese thought for all periods

of thought history — but there is only *one* foreign member in the Association for Familiar Talk. As the members of the Association apparently are not interested in changing its provincial status, it would be helpful to have an international *Association for Japanese Thought*. Such an association should for principal, intellectual and social reasons not be established in Japan.

There is a considerable number of academic journals publishing contributions to Japanese thought or special streams of Japanese thought in Japanese and Western languages. But there is no central journal publishing informations on Japanese thought studies for Japanese and foreign researchers. There should exist an international *Journal of Japanese Thought*, which serves as a central organ for the improvement of Japanese and foreign research on Japanese thought, not as a journal for the publication of already published Japanese research efforts in English, as done in *Acta Asiatica* etc. The journal should be a pure academic organ for the great number of scholars all over the world who are engaging in the study of Japanese thought. It should follow the spirit of frank criticism of Anesaki Masaharu² and the philological solidity of Pater Dumoulin. The common language should be English.

4. It is not sufficient to publish translations of texts or results of research. Western scholars have been doing this for two centuries with no little results, but with no or little success outside the circles of Oriental studies. Japan scholars are often said to suffer from a specific lack of intellectual distance, which could be gained from the perspectives of non-Japanese viewpoints and with the tools of transcultural theories. There are almost no cases when scholars interpreted early-modern Japanese thinkers from the perspective of non-Japanese thinkers, for instance, Sorai in the light of Hobbes or Hobbes in the light of Sorai. Of course Sorai has been labelled the “Japanese Hobbes”. But I know not one attempt at a systematic comparison of both thinkers or even only a general essayistic discussion of Sorai by Hobbes or Hobbes by Sorai.

It is true that systematic comparison in the field of Japanese thought is not yet even in its infancy. But this is a rather general problem of transcultural studies. Distance is always a specific distance, a relative distance. The Japan scholar's genuine method is the chance to make speak his object itself and to analyze it by using intra-textual categories, the words of the thinker, which he transfers as verbally as possible, with as little interpretation as possible into his own language. The “Way of Heaven” (*tendô/tentô*) is never the “cosmic rule” or something like that, but simply the “Way of Heaven”. Metaphors must not be violated. A British scholar once put it in his words, when he criticized an author writing on the National School for his “abstruse” vocabulary and style, which were in contrast to Motoori Norinaga, who “strove to express his thoughts using a fundamentally simple language”. “It would seem”, he said, “to do the *kokugakusha* scant service to be discussed in a language which is so far from their spirit.”³

This sounds good. But it may be questionable whether the conclusion is wise. What matters is precedence. There are many different ways to report and analyze what Motoori or any other thinker said. Any language of analysis is allowed to be even extremely far from

what the British scholar calls the "spirit" of the analyzed object. But before this can be done, the thinker must be given the right to be reported and perceived in a language, whether it be an artificial form of English, Arabian or Hindi, as near as possible to his own, so that all who cannot read Japanese are informed about the data of the original as completely as possible. One would violate the rights of the thinker if one applied categories of one's own school of thought right from the beginning. Analyses from various distances outside of a given text can be done after the public has been offered the chance of verification by procuring the necessary data. After this has been achieved, even the most "abstruse" positions are possible or even desirable, because experiments are urgently needed in order to make something out of the heritage, which has been handed down to us. Little comes out of mere cultural conservation. But no creativity without true conservation.

I mentioned that never before even one single prominent non-Japanese thinker discussed the ideas of a prominent early-modern Japanese thinker. This international solitude of Japanese thinkers does, by the way, not confine to early-modern Japan, the same can be said about modern thinkers. We have, for instance, nearly two hundred articles and monographies in Western languages about Nishida Kitarō among them many translations of his writings, which by the way is less than one percent of the whole production on Nishida, but we have not even one substantial statement of a prominent non-Japanese philosopher on Nishida Kitāf within eight decades after the publication of *Studies of Good*, five decades after the first translation of *Intelligible World*, *Coincidentia Oppositorum*, etc. The only statements came from the circles of Japan specialists. What would we say, if Hegel was discussed only by specialists of Prussian culture and thought, and if more than ninety-nine percent of these specialists came from Prussia? I am convinced that present-day thinkers — philosophers, ethnologists, theologians etc. — who know little or nothing about the history of Japanese thought but who are asked to read texts of Japanese thinkers in excellent translations can productively discuss these texts from the respective distances of their world-views in ways which are of interest. This would be a form of symposion, which we had not before in the Japanese — non-Japanese cultural relations. Thinkers must not be left enshrined in their home cultures.

Notes

- 1 Modern Japanese scholars are of course not in a position principally different. They also would have to study the classics and many other source thoroughly to be able to wholly understand texts full of allusions and quotations, which they do not know much better than the foreign translator. So they also have to "translate" although have not the chance to translate into a different mother tongue. Once Professor Ishida Ichirō (formerly Tōhoku University, Sendai) made this clear in a conversation when he said, that modern Japanese thought historians had "difficulties to read". He meant not only, that they had difficulties in reading original manuscripts with their individual styles of hand-writing, but also that many of them did not take the time to look for the meaning of the original contexts of the quotations and allusions. When he came to Europe he saw young students who — with their little knowledge of modern Japanese and elementary knowledge of old Chinese and Japanese — translated

ancient Japanese sources word by word always the Harvard-Yenching Index and other tools by their side to find all the classical allusions. Such an intensive process of translation he said was “true reading”. Afterwards Ishida translated Jien’s *Gukan shô* together with Delmer M. Brown as an exercise in “reading”.

- 2 Cf. his review of Armstrong’s *Light from the East* in *The Harvard Theological Review* 8 (1915), 563-71.
- 3 Charles Dunn, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1980), 404.