

Long Term Residence and the Inside View

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These days, almost every non-Japanese who specializes in Japanese studies spends a certain amount of time in Japan. Numerous high school, college, and graduate programs encourage foreigners to study in situ, as do government and private scholarships. Few follow the example of the early twentieth-century British translator Arthur Waley, who claimed he did not want to travel to Japan for fear of being disappointed in the reality. For some the visit to Japan provides the kernel of interest that later takes root; for others it supplements years of study. Occasionally the foreigner simply never leaves.

Firsthand experience of the objects lies at the core of doing art history. We all remember the amazement of coming across an object known only through reproductions and suddenly seeing, really seeing, the delicacy of the colors, the impact of the brush strokes, or the grace of sculptural curves. Again, how different it is to see a bowl behind glass and to drink tea from it, to turn it in the hand, to feel its weight, texture, and curves. Then there is the magical moment when we somehow catch a vision beyond the object into its making. The easiest route to such insight is total immersion, where experience by experience one is led to better understanding. If, however, this proves unfeasible, well-directed study, long-distance research, and periodic visits provide another route to the same goal. Happenstance, private needs, and personality decide the path of each individual.

Obviously a resident of Japan has a more tactile, immediate interaction with works of art in their original context than does the scholar working abroad through books and museum pieces. As every piece of art is a creation of a given time and circumstance, the deeper the understanding of the culture around the work, the better the ability to see it as it was intended. The statue in the temple surrounded by incense and flowers, banners and implements, worshipers and the intoning of sutras

is categorically separate from the statue, however well displayed, in a museum. Yet the latter, particularly for an art historian in or out of Japan, has its merits. It can be viewed from many sides, studied, and compared with like pieces from different places or time periods. Both approaches are essential: the broad cultural context and the objective, analytic study.

Obviously, again, living in Japan means access to people involved in using, preserving, studying, and making the objects under study. Their attitudes, approaches, information, knowledge, and techniques add layers of understanding less available to someone not residing in Japan. In particular, the resident has the opportunity to participate over an extended time in learning to do and to make, that is, to experience firsthand involvement in the creative or religious process. The attitudes imbibed subliminally from such experiences form, perhaps, the groundwork for the greatest difference between resident and non-resident scholars. Quite simply, residency in Japan potentially deepens cultural understanding, but is not the only road to understanding.

Many Japanese scholars have questioned how much of a contribution foreigners can make to Japanese scholarship. Without a doubt even the long-term foreign resident starts out with a linguistic and cultural disadvantage compared with his/her Japanese colleagues. To overcome this requires focused motivation and persistence. Conversely, the outsider might have a greater freedom of approach.

Japanese themselves have generally given two standard reasons to listen to foreign opinions on their art: first that the foreigner by very virtue of being culturally outside can provide fresh insight and new views (this is particularly evident in Japanese attitudes toward Meiji-period foreign scholars), and second that Western methodology may have a universality that can put Japanese art history on a global stage. In addition, Japanese often view the translation of their scholarship into a foreign language as important in aiding the dissemination of awareness of Japanese art and the ideas it encompasses.

On their own side, many foreigners have often lamented the narrow approach of some Japanese scholarship, even while acknowledging their own indebtedness to it. These mutually disparaging evaluations stem, I believe, from differing approaches where the fundamental questions asked differ and the very definition of what comprises scholarship may

differ. Among foreigners, the long-term resident is more likely to honor, or even emulate, the Japanese approach.

An experience I had some years back might clarify some of the differences. In producing a book on a collection of noh costumes in an American museum, the U.S. curator and the Japanese scholar disagreed fundamentally on what comprised the research, i.e. scholarly contribution, related to the costumes. For the Japanese, the name of each costume type defined it in terms of material, weave, and patterning technique, as well as use. A *karaori*, for instance, is woven of silk with a ground weave in twill and supplementary float patterns done in many-colored glossed silk. The weft pattern looks similar to embroidery, but is actually woven. The monotony inherent in the repetition of pattern units is diffused by such things as varying the colors used to render the motifs. Another noh costume, the *nuihaku*, is a soft silk garment decorated first with stenciled patterns in gold or silver foil and then with colorful embroidery. Both these garments are tailored in *kosode* style, similar to the modern kimono, and are primarily worn for female roles. A *hitatare*, in contrast, is made of hemp, patterned with paste-resist dye techniques, and worn for daimyo and samurai roles.

In light of the precision of such definitions, the Japanese scholar felt that catalogue entries should name the type of garment—*karaori*, *nuihaku*, *hitatare*, etc.—and then identify the pattern motifs, for it is the latter that distinguish one *karaori* or *nuihaku* from another *karaori* or *nuihaku*. His catalogue descriptions elucidated the motifs and suggested their appropriateness for given noh plays. His approach follows the standard Japanese method. Unthinkingly I, too, accepted this method as obvious. The only problem I foresaw was that the foreign reader would need to be supplied with a detailed definition for each costume type. So when doing the book, I wrote an extensive introductory definition to each genre of costume.

The American curator, however, found the Japanese entry names and the subsequent descriptions redundant. In addition, she argued, the entries lacked fundamental information. As a textile historian, she felt that the material, weave structure, thread count, colors, and techniques defined the piece. The motifs were obvious from the photograph and need not be stipulated. She proceeded to do a very thorough analysis of

each textile and actually found far more variation than expected. Her approach, which treated the Japanese textiles in the same manner as textiles from anywhere else in the world, provided a minute technical definition, but failed, from the Japanese scholar's point of view, to capture the essence of the individual garments.

In the end we included both types of definitions and allowed the reader to read what s/he found meaningful. Lessons had to be learned on both sides. The American curator, had she been a Japan scholar as well as a textile scholar, may not have been so critical of the redundancy of the Japanese definitions. She would have read into the descriptions of the motifs cultural implications that fitted into a larger framework of art history and literary reference. To the lists of plays, her cultural reserve would have supplied plot summaries and character roles. As author/translator I tried to supplement the text with such background information within the limitations of space and fidelity to the original intent of the Japanese author.

On the other hand, her technical analysis provides an example of an approach to textile study that young Japanese curators today are finding increasingly important to learn. This is particularly true as the necessity to view Japanese textiles within a pan-Asian context becomes more obvious. For instance, as new artifacts are unearthed in China, the correlations between Japanese textiles and those in neighboring countries become clearer. Although the eighth-century Shōsō-in remains a major repository of Tang-dynasty fabrics, the provenance of these becomes clearer as textiles are unearthed in China. New excavations are providing an ever more precise picture of chronology and geographic distribution, which in turn informs a reinterpretation of the Shōsō-in textiles. A precise system of textile description is necessary to accurately establish cross influences. While the Western scholars are, perhaps, the most assiduous in developing analytic systems, recently Chinese scholars have also contributed approaches adapted to their own needs. To benefit from such research, the Japanese scholars can no longer rest content with their native definitions, but find themselves looking both east and west.

Textiles, unlike sculpture and painting, have long been regarded as a craft, or as best a minor art, and until recently, have not been a major focus of research particularly in the West. On this score, the Japanese have

the great advantage of having traditionally placed textiles on a high level of importance: from ancient times through the nineteenth century thread and cloth were paid as tax, as compensation for work, and as a reward for excellence. New Year's presents, votive donations, and prayers for the dead could all take the form of textiles. Textiles accounted for a portion of dowries and family holdings. The value placed on textiles, beyond that of fashionable clothing, meant that records related to their production, distribution, and use dating back to the eighth and ninth century still exist.

As I mentioned above, my role in the production of this noh costume catalogue was, in addition to writing my own sections, to translate the Japanese contributions. My translations included adding some background material, which may or may not be an appropriate license. So I would like to turn now to translation: its relation to the diffusion of international understanding for Japanese art and to the work of the researcher.

Translation is by definition interpretation. The closer the translation is to the original, the better, but closer in what aspect? One translates the words and sentences. One translates the underlying intent of the meaning as grasped from sensing the entirety. One translates the form, particularly when dealing with poetry. So often, though, the translator finds there are no real equivalents for the words, no exact renderings of the grammatical structures. Does one overcome these differences through explanation, approximation, or Romanization? Put another way, how much familiarity with Japan and the subject at hand does one expect of the Western reader? I think the long-term resident doing research into Japanese art is often more comfortable with the Japanese terminology and therefore leans towards leaving terms in Romanized form and adding a glossary. In this approach they reflect the writings of many Japanese scholars who presume their readers have a familiarity with the subject matter. A scholar, however, who teaches an introductory course at a Western university is far more likely to wish technical terms to be translated into an approximate equivalent. After all, a person can learn just so many unfamiliar new words at one time.

In working with various publishers I have found a spectrum of attitudes towards the topic of accuracy of translation. In doing translations for the Shibundō *Nihon no bijutsu* series, translators were encouraged to

“make the books their own.” This implied writing a cover introduction and being free to rearrange and add information. In my case, I went to the author and asked his permission to re-order parts of the book, and the response was most memorable: “Of course, you will have to do this. In Japan we start in the middle of our subject because we do not wish to insult our readers by treating them as if they know nothing, but for an English reader you must begin by defining the terms.”

In sharp contrast to the Shibundō translations were translations I did for bilingual publications with the Japanese text and English translation on facing pages. Due to the layout and the need to correlate text with photographs, word limitation and exact content correspondence took precedence. Under the circumstances, on several occasions, I recommended an extensive glossary referenced to the text. Even this, in some cases, had to be matched entry for entry. The Japanese readers, I was told, would feel cheated if there were terms defined in English that were not in the parallel Japanese glossary. Then, as I translated the Japanese glossary, I found that often there were so many new technical terms in the Japanese glossary entry that I would have to write a glossary to the glossary to make it understandable.

Not all translation, however, is subject to the directives of publishers. Many scholars use translation as an important tool for understanding their topic. Royall Tyler, whose translations of *Noh Dramas* and of *The Tale of Genji* are internationally acclaimed, once said that he felt he did not truly understand a piece of literature until he had translated it. The process of translation involves a direct confrontation with the details of the text and leads to a creative rendering through which the piece becomes one's own. For the art historian as well, translation often serves as a door to understanding. First, many artworks incorporate language: calligraphy is both shape and meaning, paintings often bear inscriptions, and other artworks might contain documents or bear inscriptions. Some display motifs that refer back to poems of famous stories. Then, there are records, diaries, and other writings about the objects. Such primary sources related to the art objects need to be read and put in context in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the artwork. For the foreigner this usually involves translation. Although translation can be done anywhere in the world as long as one has sufficient resource mate-

rials and dictionaries, the resident in Japan has the advantage of “native” help when the text is obscure. It is easy, indeed, to become a little too dependent in this area.

Finally, there is no single element that differentiates the research of the Japanese resident from the non-resident. As I write my mind races to counter examples, and each statement, once made, seems to cry out to be contradicted. I know so many very fine scholars doing original work with great depth of understanding who do not live in Japan. Conversely simple residency in Japan is no guarantee of either accuracy or excellence. Yet in my case none of the work I have done in textiles, theater, or art history would have come to pass without my being in Japan. Every thing I pursue now intellectually began by doing: dyeing, weaving, carving, dancing, drumming, and strumming. Furthermore, being here in Japan means that the wonderful tiny discoveries which make research meaningful find ramification in the physical world about me, and that not far away, someone is there with whom to share the findings and stretch my knowledge.

This article is based on my symposium presentation “Colors, Cloths, and Costumes,” but the content has been considerably altered.