

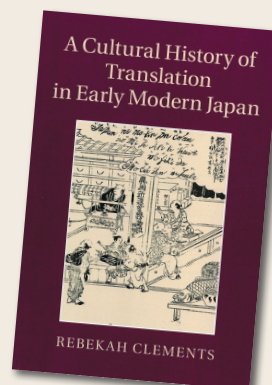
BOOK REVIEW

A Cultural History of Translation in Early Modern Japan

By Rebekah Clements

Cambridge University Press, 2015
xii + 275 pages.

Reviewed by Gouranga PRADHAN



Although “translation”—in its multitude of meanings—always remains a defining aspect of Japan’s cultural history, the field of “translation studies” in Japan has yet to receive adequate attention. This is especially true for research covering the early modern era. There is undoubtedly a growing body of related works in the areas of the historiography of textual circulation, characteristics of readership, reception, and canon formation of specific texts in premodern Japan. However, until now we did not have a book-length study that could provide a comprehensive treatment of translation practices covering the whole Tokugawa era. It is in light of this that Rebekah Clements’s *A Cultural History of Translation in Early Modern Japan* is a crucial piece of research that will go a long way to fill the void in this field.

Clements’s book starts with an introductory chapter in which she defines the term “translation” for the current study, before explaining her primary objectives: to inquire into what was translated (and what was not), what drove translation practices, and what translation strategies were adopted by Tokugawa translators. She rejects the monolithic Western definition of translation, and instead proposes a loose interpretation of the term in order to accommodate the numerous textual practices adopted by Tokugawa scholars, which involved some form of semantic transference. Japanese translation practice thus goes beyond the usual Western notion of faithful and accurate reproductions from a source to target language, and Clements’s study covers various Japanese practices: translation from foreign languages such as Dutch and English, vernacular reproductions from classical Japanese texts, and Japanese renditions of Sinitic texts through the *kundoku* mechanism. The first chapter serves as a background from which the subsequent three chapters are developed. Here, she discusses the socioeconomic and technological transformations that unfolded during the early Tokugawa era, such as urbanization, the rising literacy level, and progress in the commercial print industry. All of these promoted multilingualism, and gave rise to cultural productions through translation. The following three chapters provide an exhaustive treatment of translation within three disparate linguistic traditions: classical Japanese, Sinitic, and Western works respectively. These form the main body of research in this book. The penultimate chapter sheds light on the phase of “crisis translation” experienced during the late Tokugawa period, triggered by the growing threat from Western powers.

The cultural history of translation in Japan predates the Meiji era, as convincingly presented by Clements, contrary to the popular perception that translation in Japan started after the end of the so-called “isolation” of the nation. This is indeed one of the most resilient myths associated with Japan. The country’s active translational trade relationship through Nagasaki for the duration of the period is further proof that Japan was never completely isolated in the way that scholars once claimed. Clements refrains from explicitly mentioning the “modernization of Japan,” but the discussions in various chapters make quite clear her view that Japanese modernity did not start *ab initio* with the Meiji revolution. The groundwork was in fact laid, at least partially, during the Tokugawa era. The transnational textual circulation network and the vibrant cultural production during the so-called period of “isolation” were among the factors that contributed to the transformations brought about in the Meiji era.

However, the vast scope of this study is both its strength and weakness. Clements states that her approach is to go beyond the compartmental studies conducted hitherto within individual disciplinary boundaries, in order to tell the “long story of translation in Japanese history” (p. 5). Certainly, her choice of a “macroscopic perspective” and the simultaneous treatment of works belonging to three linguistic traditions within a two-and-a-half-century timeframe readily “fills a lacuna that for too long has been the elephant in the scholarly room,” as the blurb on the back cover of the book states. Some scholars, nevertheless, might find this methodology lacking, for nowhere does she discuss individual case studies. The scope of her endeavor is also confusing. Clements mentions that the works she considered include “linguistically distinct source-target languages” as well as “tertiary language,” the translation of which “leave[s] the majority of the storyline or substantive content intact” (p. 15). Why then does she not include “commentaries” designed to aid navigation through complex content? For commentary, just like *kundoku*, helps in the comprehension of complex content without tampering with the source. Is it merely space constraints or the loose nature of the definition of “translation” in the Japanese context (for commentaries in a strict sense do not conform to any of the three translation categories offered by Roman Jakobson) that explain the omission of such works? Regardless, it seems clear that a universal definition of “translation” that applies across time and cultures does not exist. We need to explore further what constitutes “translation in the Japanese context.”

One of the objectives of this study is to understand the likely selection criteria of Tokugawa scholars when choosing works for translation into vernacular Japanese. Aside from the commercial aspect, Clements claims that the “linguistic and conceptual complexity” of specific works like *Genji Monogatari* and *Ise Monogatari* could be one of those potential factors when selecting which work to translate (pp. 53–55). However, if complexity was a concern, then why were so many commentaries of works like the *Essays in Idleness*—as the author has discussed (p. 92)—produced during the Tokugawa era, with no attempt at translation? Is it plausible that the work’s relative complexity for its Tokugawa readership could be a reason behind these numerous commentaries, which were produced to help navigation through complex subjects? Or was it the “canonized” status—like the Sinitic canons discussed in chapter three—of these works that prevented scholars from tampering with the source material? Yet another possibility could be that the specific religious connotation associated with individual works dissuaded Tokugawa scholars from studying them. For instance, there was a trend among disparate schools

during this time to appropriate classical Japanese works in the line of their own school's ideologies. While Kokugaku intellectuals—who were in constant search of some “authentic Japanese” culture—found works like the *Kojiki* and *Genji monogatari* worthy of scholarship, Confucian scholars on the other hand were busy finding concealed Sinitic elements in works like the *Essays in Idleness* and *Hōjōki*. We need more research on the reasons why some texts were translated, while others were not. We can anyway look forward to the publication of more research from Clements in the near future, which will hopefully tackle the contentious issue of the unidirectional nature of text circulation into Japan from abroad.

As usual with surveys, Clements' book mostly relies on secondary sources for developing its arguments. It thus comes with the usual limitations associated with such works. However, its survey nature is precisely what helps in providing a broad view of translation practices in the Tokugawa era, for which Clements deserves the highest commendation. The book includes an exhaustive bibliography and is extensively annotated, and will surely be of immense help to scholars. This work will certainly serve as the foundation for future scholarship in the field.