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PHILOSOPHER LA TRADUCTION / PHILOSOPHIZING TRANSLATION

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FRONTIERS OF JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY 9

**Philosopher la traduction**  
*Philosophizing Translation*

sous la direction de

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NANZAN



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## Preface

The ninth volume of *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* bears the bilingual title *Philosopher la traduction/Philosophizing translation*, reflecting not only the content but also the fact that all the essays except for the first were composed in a foreign language. This was more a matter of happenstance than design. In this sense, one might consider it an exercise in “translating while thinking.” The range of questions raised in the process gives the contributions an added dimension often overlooked when thinking in one’s native language.

If, as I believe, philosophy by its very nature entails a fundamental “translatedness” (that is, if translating is essential to philosophizing), Japanese philosophy has much to gain from taking a closer look at the question of translation. In addition to opening up new perspectives on the role and meaning of translation itself, it can help us probe more deeply into fundamental problems of Japanese philosophy. It was with this in mind that the present collection was conceived and realized as an intercultural collaboration.

By way of introduction I should like to lay out a preliminary sketch of the relationship between philosophy and translation, further details of which can be found in my own contribution to the volume.

Discourse on translation is by and large taken to mean an examination of translations of particular texts and a critique of their effectiveness. But it is much more than that. Needless to say, discourse on translation questions the translation of technical terms for accuracy and fidelity to the ingenuity of the original. Put differently, the aim is

to uncover the coincidences and failures of coincidence in the modes of thought and expression of the translator and the original author. In fact, one can never reach a definitive and “correct” interpretation grounded in translation theory. It is rather an open-ended, in-depth process of self-reflection provisionally verbalized into discourse. We may call this process “philosophizing translation.”

Since previous volumes of *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* have contained contributions in multiple languages, the series seemed well suited to the present collection. Through the kindness of the general editor, Professor Heisig, we have been able to see the project through to completion. Set against the background of philosophical studies around the world, Japanese philosophy may still seem a relatively minor field, but it is one that has grown increasingly active over the past several years. This is largely due to the dissemination of research in English both through conferences and publications. Japanese scholars in the field do well to welcome the serious attention that non-Japanese scholars, especially those of the younger generation, have given to the thought of their predecessors. At the same time, as Mathias Obert points out, there is cause for concern that so much of the scholarly communication has been restricted to English. However unassailable the dominance of English in practical and theoretical realms, there is no reason for non-English speaking scholars have to resign themselves to the idea that “if is not written in English, it cannot be widely read.” In fact, this very idea deserves to be included in the discourse on translation. Hence the bilingual title of this collection.

The publication of this volume was made possible two consecutive projects funded by “Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research” from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science: “Japanese-French Joint Research Aiming at the Publication of a Book on the Modern Philosophy of Japan” (Research Category C:23520040), and “Japanese Philosophy Investigated from the Viewpoint of Translation: The Interrelationship of Language and Thought between Japan and East Asia, Japan and the West” (Research Category B:26284003). Of the eight



essays published here, three are written in French (Mathias Obert, Huang Ya-Hsien, and Kotajima Yōsuke) based on papers presented at a the Francophone workshop on “L’Histoire de la traduction en Asie de l’Est” held in 2012 at Meisei University, Tokyo. Two articles in English were first presented at a panel on “Philosophy in Japan: Present and Future” organized for the 23<sup>rd</sup> World Congress of Philosophy held in 2013 in Athens. New contributions from James. W. Heisig, Kimoto Mari, and the editor round out the collection.

The essays gathered together in these pages focus on questions of translation as they related to East Asian history and culture. The idea of focusing on “East Asia” originated from the Meisei University workshop, which provided an ideal forum for scholars in translation studies, literature and philosophy from German, Italy, Japan, Korea, Russia, and Taiwan. Obviously not all the presentations made it into this volume, but the impact of those discussions was invaluable.

Each of the contributors takes up the question of “philosophizing translation” or the “philosophy of translation” from a different perspective. The book opens with Heisig’s reflections on the translation of East Asian philosophy. He admonishes us to regard the most fundamental issue of philosophizing translation by renouncing what he calls “perfect translation.” He notes a transition from the dominance of Western philosophy over East Asian philosophy to a greater philosophical pluralism in the West. His goal is to promote serious dialogue founded on a “multi-philosophical culture” within an East-West philosophical community. Here translation functions as a philosophical device, a kind of “antiphony” that mediates between the original and the translated text. His proposal of a broader philosophical community is underscored by a severe criticism of translation as currently practiced, namely, one which overestimates the translator’s fidelity to the original and hence encourages esoteric and clumsy renditions. In this connection he contrasts two ways of translation: “thin translation” and “thick translation.” The former is characterized by the translator’s minimal interference in the original, resulting in a text so thin that

it is translucent to the underlying original but which is considered a reliable and “perfect” translation for scholarly purposes. In contrast, the latter is deliberately incomplete in order to invite communication with readers through whom the translation pursues its completion. The stance “against perfect translation” implies that thicker translation invites participation in the search for understanding that prompted the original. In so doing, Heisig suggests rethinking the idea of “untranslatability” and re-questioning the role of philosophy in a wider world.

Mathias Obert participated in the 2012 Meisei University workshop as a commentator, responding to three presentations on questions regarding translation in China and Taiwan: Anna Ghiglione’s “Les enjeux axiologiques de l’expérience traductive dans la tradition chinoise,” Hirose Reiko’s (professor of Chinese literature at Senshū University, Tokyo) “À travers l’expérience de traduire la sinologie française en japonisme,” and Huang Ya-Hsien’s “Traduire la modernité: Traduction de la philosophie française à Taïwan dans les années 1990.” Obert’s response and commentary are contained within his own original discourse on translation. The main point he stresses is a radical criticism of the globalization of the “human spirit” brought about by modernization along Western lines. On the basis of Wilhelm von Humboldt’s thoughts on language, Obert develops a view of pluralism according to which: “translation essentially contributes to the advent and the foundation of meaning in the human world.” He believes that it is precisely the long history of the human spirit in East Asia, endowed with the energy of linguistic and cultural translation, that supported its modernization. The analysis of the three presentations is followed by his own consideration of the concept of translation in a philosophical context. In a word, he argues that translation can be compared to an actor’s “mimétique” posture in the sense that translators cannot simply assimilate themselves to the original.

In his book *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), Nishida Kitarō argues that the “nation” is “the expression of the communal consciousness” or “a unified personality.” Kazashi Nobuo begins his reflections by ques-

tioning Nishida's understanding of the nation, according to which "the essence of the nation" in Rousseau's political thought is "the individual," exempt from the "contradiction." But Rousseau's idea of contradiction contains both viewpoints of "individual freedom" and "communal consciousness," a fact, we might add, that is often regarded as a source of totalitarian thinking in modern times. Is it enough to say that Nishida simply did not adequately understand Rousseau? Kazashi takes another approach, drawing attention to political views widely held among intellectuals in modern Japan. He takes up the translation of Rousseau's *Du contrat social* into classical Chinese by Nakae Chōmin, well-known as the first translator and a pioneering scholar of Rousseau's thought, in order to examine its relevance to the political scene in Meiji Japan. The focal point of Kazashi's argument is that although Rousseau's comprehension of the key concept of "souveraineté" is marked with contradictions, Nakae nevertheless understood it as a clear assertion of "his promotion of the sovereign rights of citizens" and reflected this view by rearranging or untranslating parts of the original text. With this method of translation Nakae raised philosophical questions regarding *Du contrat social* and tackled the "political struggle" that seemed to him crucial for the future of Japan at the time. Kazashi goes on to demonstrate how re-translations of the book in 1920 and 1954 each reflect the political tendency of their own period.

Raquel Bouso takes up the views of language of Nishitani Keiji and Ueda Shizuteru in an essay entitled with the *double entendre* "Thinking Through Translation." To some extent, her analysis is based on her own experience with translating the works of Nishitani and Ueda into Spanish, where she became aware of what is lost through language and the limitations any given language has to contend with. This realization leads her to Nishitani's questioning of the concept and image and Ueda's questioning of words and silence. Nishitani and Ueda both appreciate that language is not a negative limit on expression and yet cannot exhaustively express the positive potential of real-

ity that wells up from silence. Each of them showed great interest in language as it relates to “ontological thinking” in the Heideggerian sense. The language of poetry and Zen ensure a hidden potentiality that can change “the ineffable into an open-ended speech,” namely the inexhaustible potential for experience to translate feelings into images and emotions into words. Bouso attempts to read the significance of translation in language as an expressive mediation that articulates this kind of creative reality Japanese philosophers often insist on. The practice of translation, Bouso concludes, must be both a “self-cultivation” and a “self-identity” developed through incorporating “the other.”

Influenced by French scholars writing on the “philosophy of translation,” Uehara Mayuko has devoted herself to unearthing and examining various fundamental questions of Japanese philosophy by situating them against the horizon of translation studies. Following up on earlier work (e.g., in volumes 3 and 7 of *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy*), her focuses on the philosophy of art according to Tanabe Hajime, one of the prominent figures of the Kyoto School. She suggests that Tanabe’s original logic of “self-awakening” (characterized by a dialectical dynamic between the negation of “being,” “nothingness,” and the recovery of “being”) can provide a bridge to French philosophy of translation. In particular she takes up Tanabe’s book on *The Philosophy of Art of Valéry*, in which he examines Paul Valéry’s poetics and *La jeune Parque* as a practice of the creation of symbolist poetry. In the process, Uehara shows, Tanabe unfolds what amounts to his own philosophical discourse on translation. By rereading Tanabe’s critique of Valéry in this way, she tries to draw out his implicit understanding of language and the symbolic. She concludes with a consideration of Tanabe’s overly simplistic distinction between translatable prose and untranslatable poetry.

In her essay Kimoto Mari draws out attention to the question of the richness of human potential as reflected in the thought Emmanuel Lévinas and deepens her reflections by locating the question in the context of his idea of “translation.” What attracts Kimoto’s inter-

est is Lévinas's brief phrase, "All the rest can be translated," which she understands in terms of his argument on translatability and untranslatability. According to Kimoto, his discourse of translation, or theory of language, is never at odds with his ethics. She goes on to examine the question of humanity in the dual context of "ethno-religio-centrism" and the incommensurability and commensurability of "transcendence." Her originality lies precisely in a comparative approach to Lévinasian "transcendence," contrasting his discourse on "transcendence" with Nishida Kitarō's concept of "immanent transcendence" with its moorings in Buddhism and Japanese cultural tradition.

Huang Ya-Hsien uses translation as a means to focus on the background and circumstances of Taiwan's assimilation and diffusion of contemporary French thought in the 1990's, with particular attention to Michel Foucault's philosophy. Huang draws attention to two distinct facets of translation: "the transliteration of a text from one language to another, and the reception of the thought in practical autochthon." The interpretation and criticism of French thinkers like Foucault have played an important role in Taiwan's reflections on modernization. In this sense, "translation" is an integral part of the way modernity is conceptualized in Taiwanese society, which has been relatively isolated from international political scene. In this connection she notes the significance of *Con-temporary*, a Chinese-language Taiwanese journal founded in 1986, which assumed a pivotal role in carrying out this kind of "translation" and providing intellectuals a forum for tackling the problem of modernity, one of the most important issues facing the country since the turn of the twentieth century. *Con-temporary* offered them an outlet for criticizing their own culture and crises it faces through an analysis of Foucault's ideas. In particular, this approach allowed them to inquire radically into "the power and the legitimacy of the foundation of the humanities."

The important contribution of Chinese characters (*kanji*) in the formation of intellectual history in East Asian cultures makes it indispensable to touch on the question in discussing the relationship

between translation and philosophy. Kotajima Yōsuke has been investigating the fundamental problems of Sino-Japanese writing (*kanbun*) from ancient times to the present in Japan, namely, syntax, construction and style, and the relation of *kanbun* to the Japanese language. He argues that the analysis of syntax and construction of *kanbun* brings to light a latent ambivalence in translation: the generation of new interpretations—but also of misinterpretations—by reading Chinese grammar according to the rules of Japanese grammar. As Kotajima shows, we may consider *kanbun* a singular method of translation that adjusts the order of classical Chinese syntax to the demands of Japanese grammatical syntax by means of referential signs that instruct one how to make the necessary mental adjustments without actually having to rewrite the phrases themselves. His meticulous analysis of *kanbun* provides us with a kind of historical path to reconsider the meaning of translation in general. He ends with an appeal for the urgent need to clarify the mechanism of the *kanbun* and to preserve the substantive records of this traditional but vanishing method of expressing thought.

I would note in conclusion that while editing articles in French and English was a pleasure, as foreign languages the task was not without its challenges. To see the process to conclusions would not have been possible without the ongoing encouragement and generous advice I receive from Professor Heisig. For this, I wish to express by sincere and special gratitude to him. I would also like to acknowledge the faithful support I received from Saitō Hitomi, Tanuma Keiko, Ōta Hironobu, Brendan Le Roux, Sylvain Isaac, Leah Kalmanson, and Daniel Burke in correcting manuscripts. Great thanks are also due to Jacynthe Tremblay and Simon Ebersolt for their patient assistance in helping to edit all the articles in French, and to Claudio Bado for attractive design of the cover to this volume.

Uehara Mayuko

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