

Landscape in modern Japanese literature and the impact of translations

Noriko Thunman

Department of Oriental and African Languages
Göteborg University

Noriko.Thunman@japan.gu.se

1. Nature in Japanese literature

Landscape became for the first time, wrote Karatani (1993: 23), the theme of a literary text in Kunikida Doppo's (1871-1908) "Musashino Plane" (Musashino).

This does not mean that natural scenery never appeared in literary works before "Musashino Plane". In Japanese literature, and especially in classic poetry *waka*, we can find various motifs of nature such as plum- and cherry blossoms, pine trees, autumn leaves and many other things. Nature was an important component of poetry, and certain kinds of flowers, birds and trees etc. constituted poetic codes, suitable for certain situations to convey special feelings and reflections. However, this does not mean that nature itself was interesting for the poets of the classical time as the object of objective observation.

Plum blossoms sung in a poem had never been depicted concretely and realistically with all their individual shapes and colors, but, rather, they had appeared as the concept of plum blossoms whose fragrance, for instance, would tell the presence of a lover. Things in nature were interwoven in a system of poetic codes to form poetic convention. The poet did never cast his eyes on nature for the sake of itself.

Landscape was interesting, mainly because it had been sung by other poets in a long poetic tradition. We can remember, for instance, Matsuo Basho and his *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North) in which he rendered places and things he visited on his journey in the northern part of the country. He visited them, because they were well-known in classic poems, *waka*, and he wanted to see them by himself. To visit these places and things such as a rock was for Basho an act of confirming his position as a poet in a long line of Japanese poetic tradition, and of recognizing himself as belonging to the

tradition.

Thus, when he was in Matsushima, on the eastern coast in the north and famous for its beautiful small islands, the text shows that his first reflection was literary: Matsushima was certainly no less beautiful than the famous Chinese lakes, Dotei and Seiko. Matsushima was a privileged place because it had been sung previously in poetry, and it evoked the images of Chinese lakes which were also literary privileged places.

Karatani Kojin discussed the phenomenon in his *Origins of modern Japanese literature* (1993, Japanese orig. 1980), taking Japanese landscape painting (*sansuiga*) as an example:

As Usami Keiji has suggested, medieval European painting and landscape painting share something in common that differentiates them from modern landscape painting. In both, *place* is conceived of in transcendental terms. For a brush painter to depict a pine grove meant to depict the concept (that which is signified by) “pine grove,” not an existing pine grove. This transcendental vision of space had to be overturned before painters could see existing pine groves as their subjects. This is when modern perspective appears. Or more accurately, what we call modern perspective had already emerged at some point before this in the form of a perspectival inversion (Karatani 1993: 27).

I will return later to the “perspective inversion” Karatani spoke of here to examine what kind of inversion he meant.

2. Nature in modern Japanese literature

Kunikida Doppo’s “Musashino Plane” which is according to Karatani the first modern work to depict nature in modern Japanese literature, is a short sketch of the Musashino plane around Tokyo.¹

In the opening part the protagonist “I” tells that the Musashino plane had been a well-known theme in painting and poetry, and that he wished to see it with his own eyes whether the area was still worth visiting. However, this does not mean that the protagonist takes uncritically the artistic value of the plane for granted. He is aware of the fact that he would never know how beautiful the plane was in former times, because he actually had never been there at that time.

¹ The work is included in *Kunikida Doppo Zenshu*, vol 2 (1978: 65-86). The first part of “Musashinoi” was published on January 10th 1898 in the magazine *Kokumin no Tomo*, and the rest on February 10th the same year. The title was then “Ima no Musashino”, but later changed to “Musashino”, and as such the work came to be known (idem: 546).

His main interest is not to confirm his position in artistic tradition, as was the case of Basho, but rather to see himself if Musashino was still beautiful. One may say that his attitude resembles more that of a scientist who verifies the fact through observation.

In the later part of the work, the author defines the area which belongs reasonably to Musashino.² Here, too, the protagonist is defining the object of his investigation in a rational manner.

And as sketches proceed, it shows that the protagonist's pride lay in the fact that he actually discovered a new kind of beauty of woods in the Musashino plane:

In former times it is said that Musashino was famous for its unique beauty of an endless plane, but Musashino today is nothing but woods ... Japanese did not seem to have known until today the beauty of oaks and other deciduous trees. As for woods, it has principally been pine groves that were valued in Japanese literature and art, and we cannot find in poems a scene like someone listening to the sound of autumn rains, deep in the forest of oaks (Kunikida 1974: 4).

The plane of Musashino is observed and described. What the protagonist perceives during his walks on the plane is rendered in rich details which are only possible when based on careful observation.

We can recognize a similar attitude toward reality in Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), too, who was Kunikida's contemporary. Shiki advocated 'sketching' as a new method of writing short poems, *haiku*, in the beginning of the twentieth century. His effort lay in meeting reality as it is, in depriving reality literary and artistic heritages to discover it anew with the help of his own senses and intellect.

Kunikida is also performing his own journey of discovering a new landscape of the Musashino plane in his work. It is precisely in this sense that Karatani meant that landscape appeared for the first time in Japanese literature as literary subject. It is for the first time the landscape was objectified in front of a man.

People living there, ordinary people such as a farmer and an old woman, were also depicted as a part of landscape. Yanagida (1875-1962), a well-known anthropologist, is said to have been the first to discover ordinary people, and that the discovery was the starting point of his modern anthropological research (see

² According to his definition, the Musashino plain stretches to the east from the suburbs of Tokyo to Kameido and Senju, and to the west to Tachikawa. There is not much to be called Musashino on the north and south sides of Tokyo because of the topography.

Karatani 1993: 32). Kunikida seems to have found himself at a similar position. He expressed his sympathy for common people in many of his works such as “Unforgettable People” (Wasureenu Hitobito) and “Uncle Gen” (Genoji).

3. Perspective inversion

According to Karatani, the perspective inversion necessary to discover landscape was modernity in the sense that the artist discovered interiority, that is to say an inner man in himself. A poet had to discover his inner self to be able to meet nature as distinctly existing outside himself as an interesting object of observation.

Kunikida, as many of his contemporary literary men, started his intellectual life at a time when intellectual continuity was no longer as perspicuous as before the Meiji restoration of the mid-nineteenth century. Kunikida studied Chinese classics in his youth, but it was rather Emerson, Wordsworth and Turgenev, among others, that he regarded as his literary and intellectual brothers. Rousseau’s ideas seem to permeate his understanding of society and man, as it did also for many others in the late nineteenth and in the beginning of the twentieth century in Japan. Kunikida was a man of the new Era, and his favorite subjects at school were English and mathematics, both modern subjects representing new knowledges.

The man Kunikida took part of the new ideas of the new Era, but ideas are to be expressed in words. Expression presupposes the inner self that urges to be expressed. To have something to be expressed and to put it in language seems so natural today that we have forgotten difficulties the writers of the Meiji period had in finding literary language at the dawn of modern literature at the turn of the former century.

The inversion Karatani spoke of is a discovery, or rather becoming of this individual site in a person. His inner self was a reality for Kunikida. From that position, he could meet other people and nature. It seems that people were for him a part of landscape, existing outside himself, but in relation with himself when they cross his way. He observed curiously the fates of others and wrote about them, as he did when depicting the nature of the Musashino plane. He was scientific in the sense that he was open to the disinterested observation of reality, but he was also romantic in the sense that he aspired strongly to ideal.

4. Norms

In literature, linguistic outfit is essential. A modern man’s discovery of interiority needs to be expressed in language. We can see in many writers of the

early Meiji period how difficult it was to find modern linguistic garments.

In Kunikida's case, and for coming into being of "Musashino Plane", we can see a direct connection with Futabatei Shimei's (1864-1909) translation of "Rendez-Vous" (Svidanie/Aibiki) by Turgenev. Parts of Futabatei's translation are quoted lengthily in "Musashino Plane".

It is difficult to remember without having the norms of the time in mind how new the language of Futabatei's translation might have been for the readers at the time of publication. One way to see the norms of the time is to see other literary texts of the time. Futabatei's own novel *Drifting Clouds* (*Ukigumo*), 1887-1889, is interesting in this respect. His *Drifting Clouds* is regarded as a forerunner of the modern novel, but its language, especially in the first part, lies close to that of popular seventeenth and eighteenth century literature, *gesaku*. The prose in *Drifting Clouds* is rhythmical, in many places in traditional five and seven moras, and we can find many pans (*kakekotoba*) and some pillow words, all of them strengthening affinities to the *gesaku*-style.

We can also find Chinese diction such as parallelism, together with many Sino-Japanese words (*kango*). When we compare the style of *Drifting Clouds* with his translations of Turgenev's short stories from the same period, the differences of language is apparent.³

We can also find a similar kind of *gesaku* and Chinese diction in the works of Saganoya Omuro, a contemporary of Futabatei, and also in other travel literature at the time. In travel literature until then, the objects of interest were only famous, and thus privileged places. And landscape emerged mostly through visual perception. Reading it was almost like looking at a landscape painting. Sino-Japanese compounds were highly charged of poetic value, and they had been the necessary constituents of esthetic travel literature until then.

Despite many novelties especially in later parts of *Drifting Clouds*, we can see that Futabatei had, when he composed original texts himself, a great difficulty in liberating himself from traditional rhythm of five and seven moras and from traditional rhetorical apparatus.

5. Futabatei's translation strategy

The language of Futabatei's translation, "Rendez-Vous", lies quite close to the literary language of today and gives a distinctively modern flavour. This is because, I think, Futabatei's Japanese in "Rendez-Vous" has Russian structure as axiom.

Toury (1980) saw two extreme poles in translation strategy, namely acceptability and adequacy. The former is to produce a text that lies as closely as

³ Regarding the style of *Drifting Clouds*, see Komori Yoichi (1988).

possible to the norms of the target language and culture, and the latter a strategy to follow as closely as possible the original text. When acceptability is pursued carelessly, a translation may be fluent, but risks to lose all that which are foreign and alien to the target language and culture. When adequacy is exercised to the extreme, then a translator would follow the original wording literally, even syntax, and the result would be an unreadable text. Each translator chooses his strategy in between the two extreme poles, depending on the function of translated texts.

Futabatei's choice seems to have been rather in favor of adequacy, that is to say to follow the original as closely as possible, but not to the degree to make a text incomprehensible. He wrote about his own strategy in the article "Criterion of My Translations" (*Yo ga Honyaku no Hyojun*), 1906. He explained:

I believed it important to render the rhythm of the original. So I tried to keep each comma and period in original sentences, and if there were three commas and one period in the original, I tried to have three commas and one period in the translated version (Futabatei 1971: 108).

This means that he tried to have same measure and pause in Japanese sentence as in the original.

Not only pauses which may be said the rhythm of a sentence but also 'each word' must be rendered very carefully, wrote Futabatei. We can see that his strategy was to give a priority to the pole of truthfulness to the original, that is to say adequacy. He stressed also the importance of understanding each writer's style and ideas thoroughly and said; "Strictly speaking, you should live with the author and become one with him and his ideas, and, then, you are able to render faithfully his poetic ideas." (idem: 109) It is clear that he acknowledged the importance of faithfulness to the original in both formal and idealistic senses. However, his demand of adequacy went never so far to risk the understandability of a text.

We can assume that it was Russian originals that gave Futabatei a new liberty in writing. Because his strategy was to follow the originals as closely as possible, not only linguistic and formal features, but also as for what was told, he could write a new kind of prose that startled his contemporaries, such as Kunikida, with their innovative freshness. What was new in his translations was the structure of Russian language which changed the rhythm of the text in Japanese, and the translations introduced also new analogies and metaphors, foreign to Japanese tradition.

In "Rendez-Vous", we hear from the start an intimate voice of the protagonist "I". The protagonist was sitting in a forest of birches one day and

looked around him, listening: He narrates what he sees, hears and feels in nature around him. Natural scenery such as changing lights and the sounds of wind were depicted in rich descriptive terms. Many adjectives, attributive phrases, adverbs and similes which had hardly been the constituents of a more traditional, literary landscape, are abundantly found in the text. This kind of descriptive many-wordiness seems to have been new, judging from a reviewer's critical remarks; He found the translation too wordy and quoted the passage; "Some drops of the rain fell and passed silently, oddly like a monologue".⁴ The reviewer meant that so many words were unnecessary just to say that the rain fell. We can clearly see that the reviewer was unfamiliar to the act of describing nature as an living wholeness from which each spectator detects what he finds essential. He seems asking for, I think, short sentences with some Sino-Japanese compounds that will give a familiar literary scenery.

All these linguistic appearances were fresh, but it was more fundamentally the question of relationship between nature and the protagonist. The protagonist appears in "Rendez-Vous" as an individual site of perception from where he sees, feels and listens, and also does reflections.

6. The impact of translations

The impact of the translation can be seen, I think, in the differences that exist between diary entries, quoted in the Part 2 of the "Musashino Plane", and other parts of the work. The whole work seems to have been written through his memories, based on his diary entries quoted in Part 2. Diary entries are short and in Sino-Japanese, *kanbun*, style. The entry of September 19th reads:

In the morning, the sky (was) cloudy and the wind (was) dead. Cold fog and cold dew, the songs of insects (were) aloud. The whole world (seemed not have) awakened (Kunikida 1974: 3).⁵

Translated to English, the past tense in English gives the lines a character of narration. It is actually someone who has seen all this and tells it to the reader. Whereas in the original Sino-Japanese version, the tense is present, giving the reader an impression of being told a kind of facts and truths. Besides, Chinese characters and Sino-Japanese style are burdened with conceptualization. The movement of *genbun-itchi* - literally meaning 'to write as one talks' - aimed at

⁴ "To kosame ga shinobiyakani, ayashigeni, shigo suru youni parapara to futte totta". The review is included in *Futabatei Shimei zenshu*, vol 1 (1964: 411-412). The reviewer is Shian Gaishi, and his review was first published in *Kokumin no Tomo*, September 1888.

⁵ "Asa, sora kumori kaze shisu, reimu reiro, chusei shigeshi, tenchi no kokoro nao samenu ga gotoshi".

highlighting the status of speech at the cost of written language. Sino-Japanese style was written language, and as such it constituted an important part of literary language, permeated with literary heritage. Because of this, the reader saw, in the first place, words, and beyond them sceneries already too literary, instead of a real sky and clouds.

In later prose parts of the “Musashino Plane”, we hear clearly the protagonist’s voice who describes and comments his surroundings in detail. The modern self as a site of epistemological center is there, telling us its discoveries and impressions. Landscape is no longer a concept interwoven in a long literary tradition, but is something to be discovered by each man.

Kunikida met for the first time in Futabatei’s translation landscape without Sino-Japanese or classical make-up. It was not a conceptualized landscape but seen by him as it was.⁶

7. Concluding remarks

Translations introduce unfamiliar features into target environments in all levels; a linguistical, stylistical and thematical level. Even new genres can be introduced through translations. Translation activity is, as David Connolly wrote, crucial to the formation of entire literary systems, and translations play a major role in the struggle to change literary systems.

The distance we found between Kunikida’s diary entries and prose parts in “Musashino Plane” was considerably great. In between the two, we could place Futabatei’s translations, especially that of “Rendez-Vous” as a factor that had changed the linguistic and literary norms of the time.

The modern literary language developed in the direction Futabatei pointed to, precociously at the end of the nineteenth century, in his translations. Kunikida’s “Musashino Plane” is a wonderful example of how translations can work on a target language to produce a new text, and thereby new norms.

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⁶ Karatani called this kind of landscape “naked landscape” (*sugao no fukei*).

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