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Author(s)	Huang, Xiaolong
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How to Interpret Historical Terms of Medieval Japanese History in Foreign Languages

Huang Xiaolong*

Abstract

The topic of this article is the translation or interpretation of medieval Japanese historical terms into foreign languages, specifically Chinese and English.

The author is a researcher of medieval Japanese history, and her research focuses on Buddhist temples in regional society in late medieval Japan. A part of her work in this project is to conduct trial classes on Japanese history with international students. In 2017, the author gave a lecture in Japanese on religious powers and wars in medieval Japan to Vietnamese students, at Vietnam National University in Hanoi. In 2019, as a guest lecturer in Professor Kayoko Fujita's class at Ritsumeikan University this semester, the author lectured on Buddhist history of pre-modern Japan in English to international students.

These teaching experiences inspired the author to reconsider the approaches to translating and interpreting historical terms into English, and what differences occur when translating or interpreting the same terms into Chinese. The author writes the majority of her research articles in Japanese and Chinese, and she conducts translations of medieval Japanese history books written by Japanese and British scholars. These intellectual endeavors involve constant contemplation of the most appropriate ways to describe historical terms unique to Japan in Chinese and English. This is an extremely important issue because it is closely connected with the global dissemination of Japanese history studies.

First, the author will briefly introduce the current teaching situation regarding medieval Japanese in China, using Fudan University as an example. Second, she will share her findings through her experiences teaching medieval Japanese and translating/interpreting medieval Japanese historical materials. Third, she will conclude the features of the dissemination of medieval Japanese history studies, focusing on the differences between China and the United States.

Keywords: Medieval Japanese History, Historical Terms, English/Chinese Translation, Global Dissemination

Introduction

The topic of this article is the translation or interpretation of medieval Japanese historical terms into foreign languages, specifically Chinese and English.

The author is a researcher of medieval Japanese history, and her research focuses on Buddhist temples in regional society in late medieval Japan. A part of her work in this project is to conduct trial classes on Japanese history with international students. In 2017, the author gave a lecture in Japanese on religious powers and wars in medieval Japan to Vietnamese students, at Vietnam National University in Hanoi. In 2019, as a guest lecturer in Professor Kayoko Fujita's class at Ritsumeikan University this semester, the author lectured on Buddhist history of pre-modern Japan in English to international students.

* Project Researcher, University of Tokyo

These teaching experiences inspired the author to reconsider the approaches to translating and interpreting historical terms into English, and what differences occur when translating or interpreting the same terms into Chinese. The author writes the majority of her research articles in Japanese and Chinese, and she conducts translations of medieval Japanese history books written by Japanese and British scholars. These intellectual endeavors involve constant contemplation of the most appropriate ways to describe historical terms unique to Japan in Chinese and English. This is an extremely important issue because it is closely connected with the global dissemination of Japanese history studies.

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1. The Current Teaching Situation of Medieval Japanese History in China: The Case of Fudan University

The author conducted a questionnaire for Professor Qian Jingyi, a faculty member in the Department of History at Fudan University. Professor Qian is the first Chinese scholar to obtain a PhD in medieval Japanese history in Japan, and the first Chinese scholar to publish her monograph in Japan. She has been working at Fudan University since 2012. The general circumstances regarding medieval Japanese history education at the Department of History at Fudan University are described in the following:

The Department of History has three faculty members whose research field is Japanese history. Since Chinese universities have no seminar system, we will not know students' research field until their fourth year. Based on patterns from recent years, two or three students choose Japanese history as the theme of their B.A. thesis each year. Only two have written about medieval Japanese history in their B.A. thesis since 2012. Classes are conducted in Chinese. Reference materials include general Japanese history, general medieval Japanese history by Chinese scholars, and published translations of books by Japanese scholars. Since there are still very few books on medieval Japanese history in Chinese (including the published translations), instructors must refer to the works by Japanese scholars as much as possible to convey the most recent and cutting-edge studies to students.

Take teaching about Japanese estates as an example. Professor Qian finds it extremely difficult to explain what estates are to students because there are too many unique historical terms involved. Thus, she sets several specific themes in her classes and refers to both dictionaries and resources available on the Internet when preparing for classes.

Interestingly, we found some similarities with classes in the United States. Ethan Segal's recent paper about teaching about Japanese estates (Janet R. Goodwin and Joan R. Piggott 2018) summarizes the three challenges of teaching about estates in the United States. The challenges are that the organization of estates is complex to explain, the multitude of terms used to refer to these individuals is confusing, and students find the estate topic uninteresting.

The commonality between Fudan University and the United States is that historical terms are a considerable barrier to productive teaching.

2. The Author's Firsthand Experiences of Teaching and Translating

(1) Teaching Issue

First, the author will examine what she found while preparing her English lectures for international students. The first point is that teaching the general part of Japanese history requires energy but is not particularly difficult. Almost all significant events can be referred to in published books; we can check important historical terms in the Online Glossary of Japanese Historical Terms created by the Historiographical Institution of the University of Tokyo. For example, you can find interpretations or descriptions “cadastral survey” for 太閤検地 in the glossary.

The most challenging part is talking about a specific topic. This is an effective way to promote active learning, and many international students find digging into specific parts of Japanese history interesting. Nevertheless, it is extremely challenging because you have to prepare all primary sources such as historical documents (*komonjo* 古文書) and traditional paintings, since you have very few chances to find English translations of the primary materials you are using for the class.

One interesting thing the author found is that students from different countries may have different opinions on how to translate/interpret Japanese historical terms. Consider the term “*Nyoin* (女院)”. The author presented two of Sachiko Kawai's translations to the students: *retired queen-consort* and *premier royal lady*. One point of the feedback from the students afterward is as follows: “For terms that are unique to Japan, e.g. *Nyoin*, I would prefer to just learn the Japanese term; the translated English terms are uncommon terms I have never used/seen.” This is anonymous feedback, but we can assume that this is from an Asian student who is not an English native speaker¹. This is interesting, because it illustrates that the ways in which students from different language backgrounds comprehend the Japanese historical terms could be quite different. Chinese characters may be a more effective way to convey historical meanings to Asian students. Nevertheless, we should note that Korean and Vietnamese students may respond differently from Chinese students, because Chinese characters are seldom used in their daily life nowadays.

The author emphasizes that the issue of translation is not merely a problem related to teaching, but also an issue connected to translating and interpreting. In what kinds of situation should we translate literally (直訳) and in what kinds of situation should we paraphrase (意訳) or interpret?

(2) Translating/Interpreting Issues

In this section, the author will demonstrate the actual conditions of translating books on medieval Japanese history written by Japanese scholars and the conditions of translating historical documents in Japan's medieval era into Chinese by introducing some of her more recent works.

When translating historical terms in the books on (medieval) Japanese history, literal translation is a very common approach. Terms like “*kuge* (公家),” which was translated to “court nobility” in English in *The Cambridge History of*

¹ If this student was a native English speaker, he/she would likely say “the translated English terms are uncommon terms I **seldom see**”, instead of “the translated English terms are uncommon terms I have **never used/seen**”.

Japan, can be translated exactly into these two Chinese Characters “公家”. Meanwhile, literal translation can be more complicated for primary materials. Recently, the author was involved in a translation project conducted by a university in China that aims to organize and translate Japanese historical materials related to the Japanese invasions of Korea in the late sixteenth century. Here is an example from a document written by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in Tensho 20 (1592).

Original Material:

一 小者・若党以下、下々迄も可召置候、此方へ小者とも被為雇候之間、俄にハ不可有之候条、前廉其用意肝要候事、

(*Toyotomi Hideyoshi Monzyōshū* Vol.5 , 2019 Document No.4097)

Chinese Interpretation:

应预先招募小者和若党，包括最下层的人。我这里已雇小者，故不可突然要求派遣小者，必须提前自行准备。

As we can see from the Chinese interpretation above, the terms 小者 (*komono*) and 若党 (*wakato*), a kind of retainer, are translated literally, and footnotes or headnotes will be added. The Chinese interpretation will thus seem more concise than using paraphrasing.

In addition to historical terms themselves, one sticky problem in translating the historical materials from Japan's medieval era is sentence structure. The first point is the position of the verb. Take a look at the original material. The underlined part means that Hideyoshi ordered the army to recruit retainers in advance. As with modern Japanese, in the Sino-Japanese of medieval Japan, the verb recruit comes last in a sentence. In Chinese interpretation, there can be two solutions. One follows the word order in Chinese, putting the recruit in front of the retainer. The other translation follows the word order in Japanese, which can also be understood by Chinese readers, and at the same time, retaining the features of Japanese medieval materials.

The second difficulty occurs because the subject, object, and case particle are usually omitted in Sino-Japanese. A perfect translation/interpretation might include all these comments as a supplementary explanation, but this kind of work requires an extremely high level of knowledge in the specific field, and that the translator refers to all the latest research related to the materials. However, even among Japanese scholars in the field, there can be arguments concerning how to interpret documents. Hence, the author prefers not to oversupply information. A literal translation is a more accurate approach when translating primary medieval Japanese materials into Chinese.

3. The Transfer of Knowledge Related to (Medieval) Japanese History: A Comparison between China and the United States

In this section, the author examines how (medieval) Japanese history studies have been transferred and disseminated in China and the United States. Note that the author will not discuss works completed by Chinese or American scholars in this article.

One of the most remarkable phenomena in China in recent years is that there has been an increasing number of common

books on Japanese history written by Japanese scholars translated into Chinese. Take the Social Sciences Academic Press (Beijing) for example. It has published about 11 translations² since 2015, covering Japan's entire history, three about the ancient period, four about the medieval period, one about the Edo period, two about the modern period, and one about general history. This publisher will publish more in the coming years and other publishers are also planning to publish translations on Japanese history.

On the other hand, few translations of Japanese scholars' works are available in the United States compared to China. However, the greatest feature of the case of the United States is the collaborative translation projects of historical resources conducted by American and Japanese scholars. One of the most famous cases is the University of Southern California (USC). USC continuously organizes kanbun (Sino-Japanese) workshops and undertakes translation projects for historical sources from pre-modern Japan with the support of Japanese scholars. A recent monograph (Janet R. Goodwin, Joan R. Piggott ed. 2018) on the Japanese estates was published that included contributions from both American and Japanese scholars. This is a work that demonstrates the outcomes of close academic exchanges between scholars at the forefront of these two countries. The information about these works mentioned above can be accessed on their website.

What are the differences between China and the US? In China, trade books by Japanese scholars, including some bestsellers, are introduced by Chinese researchers or others interested in Japanese history. This can be considered part of the trend of introducing the works of humanities in foreign languages by translating the materials into Chinese. However, very few projects have aimed to translate primary Japanese historical materials. In contrast, translating or introducing the primary Japanese historical materials has been positively promoted by a few scholars in the US; it is also extremely significant work in Japan because it is believed that this kind of collaboration contributes to promoting further understanding of Japan by foreign countries.

Conclusion

Studies of medieval Japanese history by Japanese scholars have traditionally tended to adhere to national particularism. However, an increasing number of Japanese scholars are now realizing the importance of the global dissemination of their research achievements and results. Adhering to the hierarchy of among languages in the world (Haneda 2018), the English translation project may still be the trend over the next few decades. This is mainly due to various kinds of academic exchanges and collaborations on medieval Japanese historical materials between Japan and the United States³.

However, the ways of accepting or understanding the meaning of Japanese historical materials in China or Asia can be quite different from that in the English-speaking world, as the author demonstrated in the approaches to translating medieval historical terms in this article.

What is the significance of promoting the research of premodern Japanese historical materials in Asia? What constitutes an effective approach? How big is the hidden power of translating? We must keep considering these issues seriously, because they are closely connected with teaching Japanese medieval/premodern history, as well as disseminating the outcomes of medieval/premodern Japanese history research in a globalizing world, including Asia.

² As of August 2019.

³ In addition to those English projects, Japanese scholars are also taking the initiative in translating historical materials into German.

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