

TranNet 通信  
世界の出版翻訳事情

**Meredith McKinney**



"Why did you decide to become a Japanese translator?" is something I'm often asked. What can I say? In my experience, you end up doing the things you do in life through a crazy combination of chance, circumstance, and maybe somewhere along the way a few casual choices. But a question needs an answer, and here's the answer I give:

When I left high school, I had to decide what to study at university. I loved literature, particularly poetry, but I knew that I could never make a living from reading and writing. Why not learn a language, and translate literature? What should I learn? At the time I was asking myself these questions, I was reading a book about haiku, and I found them fascinating. And so simple! Surely I could translate things like this without too much trouble? Why not study Japanese? And so I did.

In fact, when I left university after studying Japanese for 4 years I had no plan about what to do — I think I did briefly toy with the idea of being a translator, but it certainly was never a clear goal the way it is in my story. I just knew I wanted to live in Japan, so that's what I did. The rest happened the way life happens: chance, circumstance, and casual choices. And a love of literature. Maybe that's the key ingredient in this story.

Living and working in Japan, I continued to read Japanese literature in my spare time, and one day I came across a writer who fascinated me — Furui Yoshikichi. He was so weird and compelling that I needed to really grasp what he wrote, not just read it superficially, and I decided that the best way to do that was to try translating it into English. That was the beginning of what quickly became a habit. My first attempts at translation were shamefully bad, but it wasn't long before I began to understand that simply translating a sentence literally is just the first step on the long, long mountain climb towards translating well. I'm still climbing.

I was lucky enough to become a translator in a time before you needed official training and qualifications to do such things. This is probably just prejudice; I'm sure in fact I would have learned a lot of valuable things from studying translation skills. But for myself, I feel that my way of translating is something that has evolved naturally, through experience and thought and personal taste, and perhaps it

wouldn't feel so much my own if I had gained it via rules and tuition. Literary translation is essentially a kind of literary writing, and a true writer writes out of who they are, not out of how they believe a writer should write.

My translating evolved naturally together with my reading tastes. The first book I published was a collection of short stories by Furui Yoshikichi (*Ravine and Other Stories*), and it was the result of a chance decision to send a few stories to Stone Bridge Press just to see if they were interested. They were! The book won a translation prize, and suddenly it occurred to me that perhaps I really could become a translator. I filed the idea away in the back of my mind and got on with my busy life. Meanwhile, my reading in Japanese literature was taking me backwards — first Basho (those haiku again!), then the 12th century poet Saigyō, who Basho worshipped. I was teaching myself classical Japanese in order to read these early poets, and of course playing with translating them because that's the way I read the things I love most. I sniffed around in bookshops, and one day I found a little book called *Saigyō Monogatari* (The Tale of Saigyō). The language was fairly simple, the poems were lovely, and when I finished translating it I thought, "Hmm, that's actually quite nice, why don't I try to publish it?" Luck was with me again, and the first publisher I tried accepted it.

Life took over again, but a few years later another chance came my way, and this time it put me on the road to being a full-time literary translator. By great good fortune, I was offered the job of doing a new translation of one of the great classics for Penguin Classics, *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no Soshi*). It took me years, and taught me great courage, since I had to produce something that would stand up to the Ivan Morris translation that I had always admired. I couldn't look at his translation until I'd finished, for fear of being influenced and/or depressed, and in fact I've never made more than a passing comparison of my translation with his. I've done a number of re-translations of the classics since then — *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa*), *Hojoki*, and Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* and *Kusamakura*. In every case, I admired the previous translation, and the only way I could proceed was by putting it in a cupboard and never sneaking a glance. Great works deserve many translations; each one is a different refraction of the original through an individual translator's sensibility. For the translator, it's an immense privilege to be given the chance to grow through spending intimate time with a wonderful writer and a powerful work.

Spending intimate time with a writer and a work is exactly what translating is all about, for me. I think my early instinct to use it as a way of reading was a true one; it's really the very best way of reading I know. In fact, when I read something in either language that really attracts me, my thoughts hover over the question of how it might be translated, just as a way of savouring the sentences and the language. It's a kind of obsessive game my mind plays, probably because I spend so much time doing it. In the act of translating you get your mental fingers deep inside the sentence structure, the words, the textures, the rhythms, all the choices that you sense the writer made to produce what's on the page, and the reasons for those choices. You taste them and play with them and try to feel a way to do it all in another language. Sometimes what you're translating is written as straightforward meaning, and then it's easy. But if the writer is good, and if you're a sensitive reader,

the task becomes about so much more than meaning. Meanings are the easy part, the rest is the real challenge. It's also the real pleasure when you feel you've got it right, and the real sorrow when you're forced to recognise how much is lost.

I've published eleven translated books now, and with each one I've learned things. Some have been contemporary novels, a few have been works I would not have chosen to translate — if you translate for a living, you often have to take the work that comes your way. But although I sometimes wish I could edit or rewrite things I translate, or simply skip a sentence or a scene that just doesn't come across in English for one reason or another (generally cultural), I've never regretted any novel I've worked on. Like meeting new people, you always learn something, and you're always a little more extended as a translator by what you do.

And what of haiku, those "simple" little poems that first attracted me to the idea of translating Japanese? When I finally tried translating them myself, of course I realised just how impossible that task is. They slip like water through your fingers, and generally all that's left is the dead silt of the words themselves, or so it seems to me. Even if it manages to read like a poem in English, that poem is not the haiku that inspired it. It's like pinning butterflies. The life, the creature itself, is absent.

Have I given up, then? Well, yes and no. In fact, I've recently found myself sneaking very quietly up on them again from behind, almost without realising it. I've long been intrigued by that long tradition of travel writing that lies behind Basho's famous *Narrow Road to the Deep North (Oku no Hosomichi)*, or however you choose to translate that title. Between translation jobs, I've been playing around with a book that introduces that tradition and offers samples of earlier poetic travel journals, some of which are in their way as good and as moving as Basho's, I believe. These earlier writers wrote tanka rather than haiku (also next to impossible to translate), but the selection culminates in Basho himself and someday soon I'm going to be faced with translating at least a few of those haiku. It's a daunting thought, and I'm prepared for failure. But perhaps there is, as it were, poetic justice in finally facing the impossibility of the task I so glibly imagined for myself way back when I first began.

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Meredith McKinney is an Australian translator of classical and modern Japanese literature. She lived in Japan for around 20 years, and since returning to Australia she has been a full-time literary translator. She is currently working on her twelfth book, a collection of classical Japanese travel writing called, *Travels with a Writing Brush*, which is due out from Penguin Classics in 2019.

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