
Special Symposium for the Global Studies in Japanese Cultures Program (JCulP)
“Globalizing Japanese Culture”

Japanese Literature in English Translation

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The Global Studies in Japanese Cultures Program (JCulP) was inaugurated in Waseda University’s School of Culture, Media and Society in April 2017 as an English-based undergraduate degree program that brings together Japanese and overseas students to learn about various aspects of Japanese culture in English. The program takes a “transcultural” approach to nurture perspectives of Japan from the outside, and encourages students to take an interdisciplinary approach to Japanese culture by studying subjects such as literature, history, art, philosophy, film, and popular culture. Welcoming students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the program aims to explore and reexamine Japanese culture in all its diversity from multiple and global perspectives.

For today’s symposium commemorating the inauguration of JCulP, I would like to give a talk on the topic of “Japanese Literature in English Translation” under the umbrella title of “Globalizing Japanese Culture.” When I was teaching Japanese literature in English to American undergraduate and graduate students at Florida International University in Miami from 2012 to 2016, I felt that the biggest challenge of teaching Japanese literature outside of Japan was to find works in translation. While classics such as *The Tale of Genji* have been translated numerous times and continue to be an inspiring endeavor to aspiring and esteemed translators, a great percentage of what gets published in Japan remains untranslated. As a result, works with existing translations fill the library shelves and bookstores, and are taught repeatedly in high school and college classrooms, creating a canon of “Japanese literature” that may look somewhat different from the original context. Of course, what becomes valued as literature changes over time and with readership, which is interesting in its own way, but problems arise when certain voices become harder to access such as those belonging to women and minorities. The act of translation is thus crucial not only for introducing new works and authors to international readers, but also for keeping alive the diversity of “Japanese literature” within the ever-expanding framework of world literature.

With this background in mind, I would like to discuss the topic of “Japanese Literature in English Translation” in the following three sections:

1. The Global Situation of Translation Through Data Analysis
2. Translation of Japanese Literature: 1950s to 1990s
3. The Publishing World Since the 1990s: Post-Murakami Haruki

Through the talk, I will shed light on the current situation of translation around the world, and trace how translation of Japanese literature has evolved through the second half of the 20th century to the present. By addressing some of the efforts and challenges that translators, editors, and agents face today, I hope to emphasize the continued importance of translation to diversify and push the boundaries of world literature and culture.

1. The Global Situation of Translation Through Data Analysis

First, let us consider the current global state of translation through data analysis. I’d like to turn your attention to the internet database “Global Language Network,” which is a project by the MIT Media Lab Macro Connections

* This essay was first delivered as a talk in Japanese for the Special Symposium, and subsequently appeared in *Tagen bunka* (Transcultural Studies, Vol.7, 2017). We’d like to thank Yung-Hsiang Kao for preparing the first draft of the English translation for this publication.

group in collaboration with Aix-Marseille Université, Northeastern MoBS, and Harvard University.

The following chart (Figure 1), taken from the website, analyzes and visually displays the “centrality” of each language (also called the “Global Influence of Language”), using data of translated works around the world from 2000 onwards. Each language is marked with a circle, and the relationship between the languages can be understood at a glance.

Book Translations

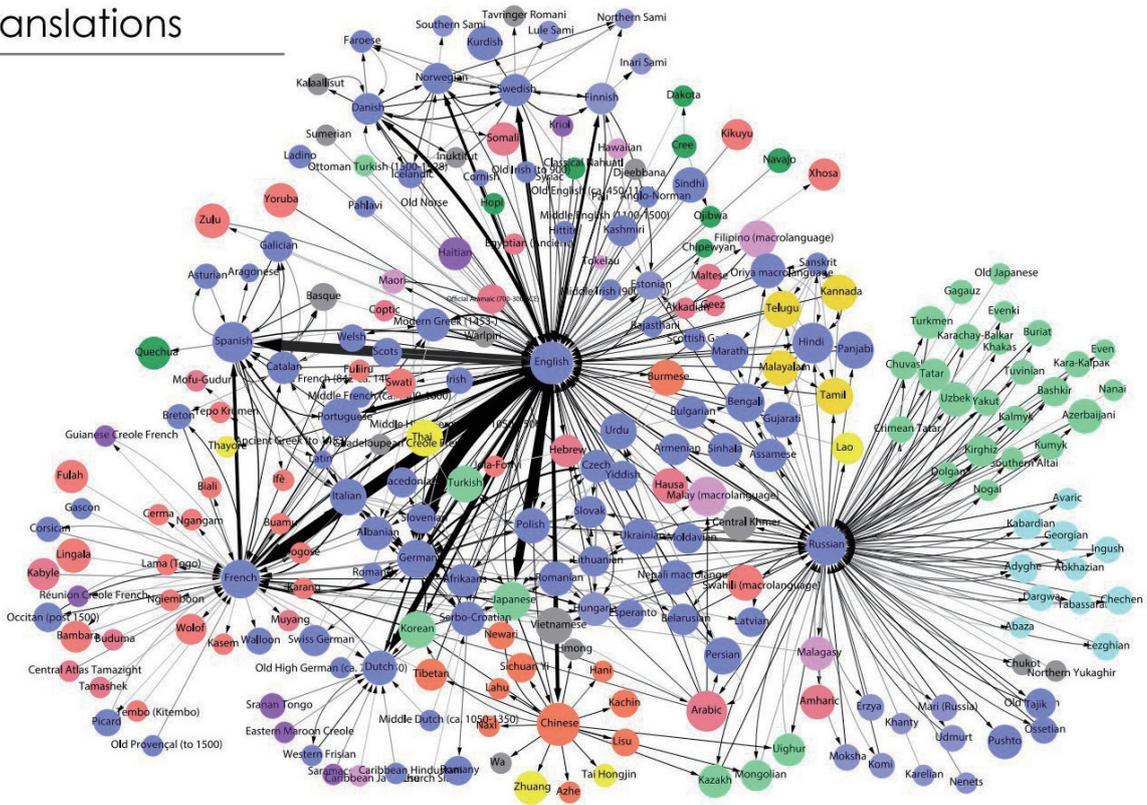


Figure 1. Global Language Network: <http://language.media.mit.edu/visualizations/books>

This mechanism of “centrality” is quantified through various factors—the number of native and non-native speakers of a language, how many languages a given language is connected to via translation, its position vis-à-vis the central language, and so on. The first thing to notice is that English occupies the absolute central position, with strong ties to French, German, Spanish, and Japanese. Russian also has strong ties with English, but with a large orbit of its own. Chinese, which has the greatest number of speakers in the world, is positioned in the periphery in this chart because of its relative independence from the center. As seen from the Russian and Chinese examples, this chart also suggests that if the economic power of a country shifts significantly, the global hub language may also change, altering the entire picture.

If you select a language as a “Focus Language,” as shown in Figure 2, you can see the relationship of languages centered around the selected language. When you choose “Japanese,” for example, you can see that the relationships with English, Chinese, French, and Korean are particularly strong.

In addition, you can click on “Rankings” to see how the languages rank based on numerical data. Figure 3 shows that Japanese is positioned as the seventh language in the world in terms of “centrality.” What’s interesting here is that the number of books translated into Japanese from other languages (“Translations to”) is about five times more than the number of books translated from Japanese to other languages (“Translations from”), while the other countries show a more balanced ratio. Only Spanish is similar to Japanese, with about four times more in the “Translations to” column. Latin is the opposite, for obvious reasons—it’s rather surprising that there are so many books translated into Latin. As you can see, comparing the data highlights the characteristic for each language. While Japan often prides itself on being a “translation power” (*hon'yaku taikoku*) for having a high number of translated

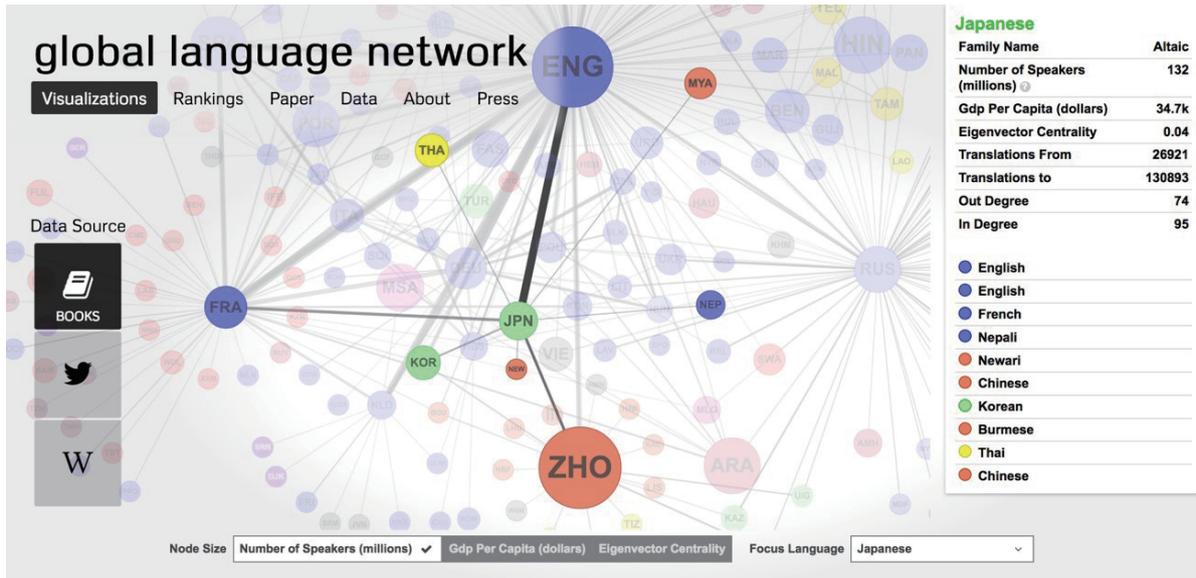


Figure 2. Global Language Network: <http://language.media.mit.edu/visualizations/books>

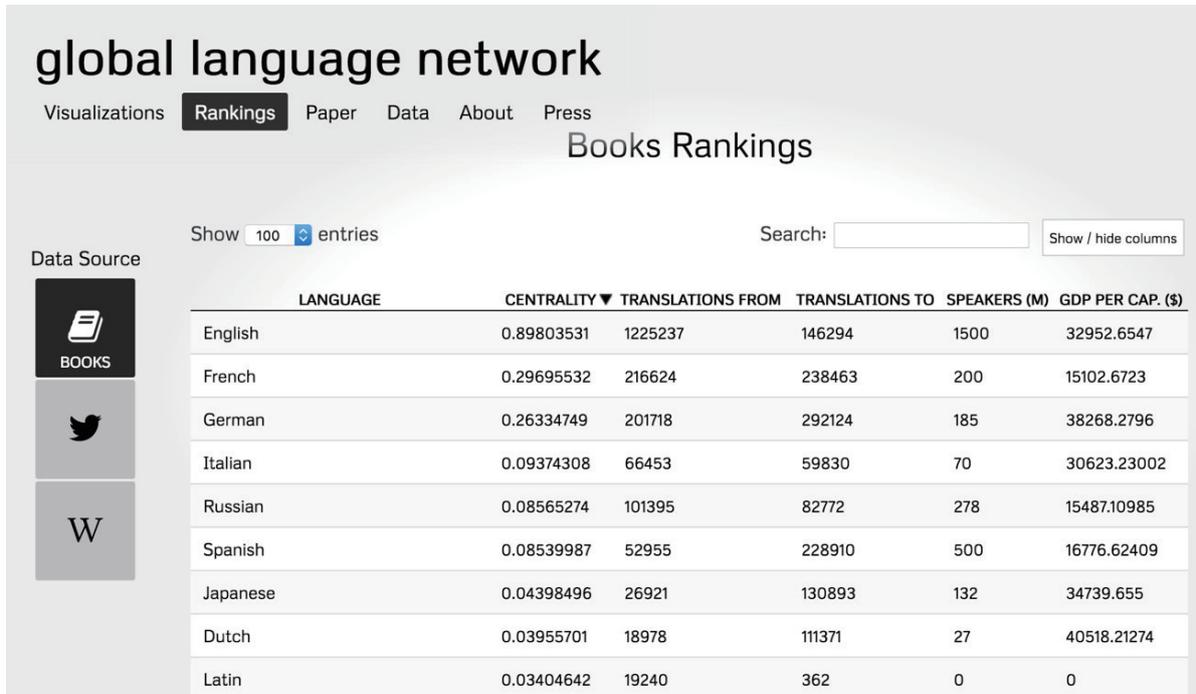


Figure 3. Global Language Network: <http://language.media.mit.edu/rankings/books>

works into Japanese, it is sobering to note that the number of books translated from Japanese to other languages is much lower than the other way around.⁽¹⁾

Next, let us look specifically at the United States as a representative English-speaking country. According to the website “Three Percent: A Resource for International Literature at the University of Rochester,” translated works are estimated to consist of only 3% of the total number of books published in the U.S. When it comes to literary works such as fiction and poetry, the number goes down to 0.7%. Among these, only a select few are featured in the mainstream media or find their way to the bookshelves in bookstores.

(1) For a detailed analysis of the data, please see the following paper linked on the website (<http://language.media.mit.edu/paper>). Ronen S, et al. “Links that speak: The global language network and its association with global fame.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2014), 10.1073/pnas.1410931111. www.pnas.org/content/111/52/E5616.full.pdf.

Figure 4 shows the ranking of translated books by language and by region in the United States (based on data from 2008 to 2017):

Ranking by Language (2008-2017)			Ranking by Country (2008-2017)		
Language	Titles	Percent	Country	Titles	Percent
French	833	16.82%	France	571	11.53%
Spanish	689	13.92%	Germany	382	7.72%
German	551	11.13%	Spain	283	5.72%
Italian	292	5.90%	Italy	281	5.68%
Arabic	230	4.65%	Japan	225	4.54%
Japanese	224	4.52%	Sweden	203	4.10%
Swedish	208	4.20%	Russia	179	3.62%
Russian	187	3.78%	China	159	3.21%
Chinese	171	3.45%	Argentina	142	2.87%

* Three Percent: A Resource for International Literature at the University of Rochester

Figure 4. Data from Three Percent: A Resource for International Literature at the University of Rochester
<http://www.rochester.edu/college/translation/threepersent/>

As you can see in these charts, Japan is among the top ten countries whose books are translated into English. Based on language, Japanese is ranked sixth in the world and is first among Asian languages. While the market is small for translated books in the U.S., the charts reveal that Japan is doing relatively well in terms of global literary presence.

2. Translation of Japanese Literature: 1950s to 1990s

Next, I want to look back at the history of translation of Japanese literature. In the article “Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures: On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction” (1991),⁽²⁾ Edward Fowler writes that Japanese literature, particularly modern fiction, began to be actively translated into English in the 1950s. Beginning with the publication of Osaragi Jirō’s *Homecoming* (Kikyō, 1949; tr. Brewster Horwitz; tr.1955) and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s *Some Prefer Nettles* (Tade kū mushi, 1929; tr. Edward G. Seidensticker; tr.1955) by Knopf in 1955, other major publishers such as Grove Press and New Directions also began to release Japanese novels and anthologies in translation. Here is a list of translations from this period introduced in Fowler’s article:⁽³⁾

< Knopf >

- Kawabata Yasunari, *Snow Country* (Yukiguni, 1948; tr. Edward G. Seidensticker; tr.1956)
- Yoshikawa Eiji, *The Heike Story* (Shin Heike monogatari, 1951-57; tr. Fuki Wooyenaka Uramatsu; tr.1956)
- Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, *The Makioka Sisters* (Sasameyuki, 1948; tr. Edward G. Seidensticker; tr.1957)
- Ōoka Shōhei, *Fires on the Plain* (Nobi, 1952; tr. Ivan Morris; tr.1957)
- Mishima Yukio, *Five Modern Noh Plays* (Kindai nōgaku shū, 1956; tr. Donald Keene; tr.1957)
- Mishima Yukio, *The Sound of Waves* (Shiosai, 1954; tr. Meredith Weatherby; tr.1957)
- Kawabata Yasunari, *Thousand Cranes* (Senbazuru, 1952; tr. Edward G. Seidensticker; tr.1959)
- Mishima Yukio, *Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (Kinkaku-ji, 1956; tr. Ivan Morris; tr.1959)

< Grove Press >

- Two anthologies of Japanese literature (ed. Donald Keene; 1955)
- Natsume Sōseki, *Kokoro* (Kokoro, 1914; tr. Edwin McClellan; tr.1957)

(2) Fowler, Edward. “Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures: On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction.” *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 18, No.1 (Winter, 1991), pp.1-44.

(3) Ibid, p.7.

< New Directions >

- Dazai Osamu, *The Setting Sun* (Shayō, 1947; tr. Donald Keene; tr.1956)
- Dazai Osamu, *No Longer Human* (Ningen shikkaku, 1948; tr. Donald Keene; tr.1958)
- Mishima Yukio, *Confessions of a Mask* (Kamen no kokuhaku, 1949; tr. Meredith Weatherby; tr.1958)

The book covers from this period including the titles above reveal the stereotypical images of Japan that circulated in postwar America (* Images omitted from this paper due to copyright). They are images of geisha, kabuki, Shinto torii, samurai, and ukiyo-e, most of which have nothing to do with the contents of the books themselves. For example, the cover of Tanizaki's *Some Prefer Nettles* features a dandy Western-style man and a half-naked geisha-like Japanese woman in front of a torii gate, which resembles a poster for a James Bond 007 film more than the novel. Although, in a way, one could argue that it is a very fitting cover considering Tanizaki's own deliberate cultural exoticism...

Fowler argues that the translations of modern Japanese fiction in the 1950s served to erase the prewar memory of imperial Japan and bring forth a new image that was exotic, aesthetic, and feminine, all of which conveniently coincided with the postwar position of Japan as an ally of the United States. At the same time, the translations and scholarship from this period came to establish a very limited image of Japanese literature and culture as aesthetic and traditional, which hindered novels and other arts that dealt with contemporary themes.

Reflecting on the list of translated works from the 1950s to the 1960s, Fowler identifies the authors Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Kawabata Yasunari, and Mishima Yukio as "The Big Three." In fact, all three authors were under consideration in the 1960s for the Nobel Prize in Literature, which Kawabata ultimately won in 1968, the year that marked the 100th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration. It was the greatest achievement for an Asian writer since India's Rabindranath Tagore, who won the same prize in 1913. Fowler continues that "The Big Three" was later updated to Abe Kōbō, Endō Shusaku, and Ōe Kenzaburō. Ōe also won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1994, but similarly to Kawabata (or perhaps to a greater degree), Ōe's works never gained a wide readership overseas except among scholars. Personally, I think Abe Kōbō might be read the most widely in the group.

What is notable here is the absence of Natsume Sōseki from the list. Although Sōseki is such a canonical figure in Japan that he has been featured on a national bank note, Sōseki has not gained wide readership overseas compared to other authors such as Tanizaki and Mishima. Part of the reason may be that Sōseki constantly depicted modern intellectuals that grappled with Western culture rather than to promote an aesthetic view of the so-called "traditional Japan." In recent years, Sōseki has been gaining momentum among overseas researchers and new translations of his novels have been published, resulting in a kind of belated Sōseki boom. Furthermore, it is notable that there are no female authors in these lists, which is regrettable to a women's literature researcher like myself. Why aren't great female authors like Higuchi Ichiyō, Hayashi Fumiko, or Kōda Aya more widely read? One explanation may be in the low number of female translators. Although there is an increasing number of women writers and translators in recent decades, gender continues to be a crucial issue when considering the state of translation and the reception of Japanese literature abroad.

3. The Publishing World Since the 1990s: Post-Murakami Haruki

Following the publication of Fowler's article in 1991, a certain Japanese writer emerged on the global scene that transformed the position of contemporary Japanese literature in the world. The writer I'm discussing is—you guessed it—Murakami Haruki. These days dubbed "The Only One," Murakami is so popular overseas that he is accepted by the general reader far beyond the framework of "Japan." Rather than being read and discussed in the context of Japanese literature, Murakami is accepted as an immensely popular writer who happens to be Japanese.

Even 18-year-old undergraduates living in Miami, Florida were so touched by Murakami's "Norwegian Wood" that they felt the characters were directly speaking to them, despite the fact that the novel was written 30 years ago on the other side of the globe. In fact, when Googling "Haruki Murakami," words quoted from his novels accompanied by evocative images and photographs overflow on the internet. These quotes represent Murakami's quirky main characters who have trouble adapting to society, and they seem to tap into the loneliness and anxieties of the

current generation while still giving them hope. While much of the content is more Hallmark greeting cards than literature, the existence of these decorative quotes points to Murakami's market value that circulates well beyond the genre of fiction.

If we examine the covers of Murakami's books in English translation, moreover, there are obvious differences from those from the 1950s and 1960s (* Images omitted from this paper due to copyright). Some of Murakami's early covers still retain an exotic and orientalist feel, while the more recent ones are definitively modern and less culturally specific. The book covers designed by Chip Kidd are particularly striking and eye-catching, making you want to buy the book impulsively based on its cover ("*jake-gai*," to use a music industry slang). The covers range from a person's face (especially a woman's face), images of animals, vivid and abstract graphic designs, circular motifs (perhaps the Japanese flag woven in as a subliminal effect), and so on. These book covers offer opportunities for visual analysis that suggest an understanding of who the global readership might be, as well as invite a deeper reading into the novels themselves.

Another evidence of Murakami's global popularity is a famous illustration called "Murakami Bingo" published in *The New York Times Book Review*. The illustration comically depicts recurring themes from Murakami's novels, such as "Mysterious Woman," "Ear Fetish" "Something Vanishing," "Secret Passageway," and "Precocious Teenager." "Cats" seem to be so important that they appear three times. This humorous illustration reveals the underlying assumption that the average intellectual readers of *The New York Times* are in on the joke as Murakami's themes permeate their shared cultural consciousness, regardless of whether they have actually read the novels or not. Furthermore, if you visit the homepage of various American libraries (e.g. Lawrence Public Library located in Lawrence, Kansas), you will often find a recommended books section that says, "If you like Murakami's ... try reading..." You can see the extent to which Murakami is becoming the literary standard among English-speaking readers.

Since the appearance of Murakami Haruki in the 1990s, the translation market for Japanese literature has gone through major changes. Departing from the aesthetic and traditional image of Japan, a wider variety of contemporary writers have been introduced, including women and minorities. Major literary magazines (*The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Paris Review*, *Freeman's*, etc.) have started to actively publish short stories by Japanese authors. While *The New Yorker*, which is said to be a writer's gateway, still presents a high hurdle for Japanese writers (with the exception of Murakami Haruki and Ogawa Yōko), *Granta* has taken the lead in actively introducing Japanese authors in special issues such as *Granta 127: JAPAN* and the most recent online feature, "A Summer of Japanese Literature." In addition, online journals that focus on translation such as *Words Without Borders* and *Asymptote* have played a key role in reaching out to readers all over the world. While print media still has prestige value, the younger generation of writers and translators increasingly seem to prefer online media due to their accessibility and ability to reach large, global audiences through social media.

There is also a number of small literary magazines that feature Japanese writers, though they tend to be inconsistent in the quality of the works and translations as most editors are unable to read Japanese. Among them, *Monkey Business: New Writing from Japan* is a unique literary magazine which specializes in contemporary Japanese literature, and which constantly produces high-quality translations since the two main editors are fluent in Japanese. Unfortunately, *Monkey Business* is no longer in print due to the loss of financial support in 2017, but it is scheduled to continue its online forum from 2018 onwards. This example offers an important lesson that for translated books and literary magazines to survive in the long run, it is crucial to reach a wide readership and to consider the business aspect of economic viability.⁽⁴⁾

In recent years, there have been several small presses that have published a series of translations from Japan. An interesting example is UK-based Pushkin Press, whose latest series features a collection of novellas rather than novel-length works. In the U.S., there is a commonly shared understanding that short stories and novellas don't sell well, but in Japan, it is quite the opposite—the "novella" form is an established genre, as evidenced by the presti-

(4) For more on these literary journals and about teaching Japanese literature in English, please see my short essay on Yomiuri Online. Japanese: http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/adv/wol/opinion/culture_170522.html. English: http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/adv/wol/dy/opinion/culture_170605.html.

gious Akutagawa Prize which is exclusively given to short stories and novellas. These shorter forms of fiction are the mainstream especially in the so-called “pure literature” (*junbungaku*) genre, which privileges artistic quality over entertainment value. In 2018, UK-based Strangers Press also published a chapbook series titled *Keshiki: new voices from Japan*. Both the design and the bookbinding of the series are beautifully finished, making themselves distinct from the so-called bestsellers of the mass market. It seems that the British presses are gaining momentum in paving the way for introducing contemporary Japanese literature to the English-speaking world.

With the continued efforts of small presses, literary journals, and translators, the readership of Japanese literature in the English-speaking world is surely increasing. However, the problem remains that Japan is still a minor language, and almost no literary agent in the English-speaking world can read Japanese. While there are rare examples like the author Ogawa Yōko, where an American editor read the French translation and successfully pushed for her work to be published in *The New Yorker*, the reality is that agents and editors must rely on the opinions of individual translators and literary experts on understanding the content of the work, the writer’s position in Japan, the expected readership, the appeal in foreign countries, and so on. Once there is enough interest, a summary of the work and translations of reviews must be prepared in English to serve as a basis for deciding whether to promote the work overseas. If all goes well, agents can sell publishing rights to publishing houses and literary magazines, which then establishes a business transaction. Yet, with the exception of Murakami Haruki, no other Japanese author has thus far achieved the same commercial success. Overseas agents and major publishers are always looking for “The Next Murakami.”⁽⁵⁾

Today, I discussed the topic of “Japanese Literature in English Translation” from historical and contemporary perspectives. Of course, one may question the basic premise of my talk, which is whether English truly occupies the central position as a global language. Whether we agree with the premise or not, however, English remains important in that once an English translation is published, the translated work is likely to be read by readers from other linguistic backgrounds, and further translated into other (especially European) languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian. The literary tastes of English-language readers and the market logic of the English-speaking world thus have a significant influence on the global readership and the makeup of world literature.

I also cannot overemphasize the important role that individual translators play. Last November, I had the chance to participate in a symposium titled “Strong Women, Soft Power Symposium: Towards a Community of Practice in Japanese Literary Translation” (November 18, 2017) in Tokyo, and listened to many inspiring and thought-provoking talks by translators and publishers. There were many stories about the challenges of working as a translator and about the hurdles that come from the peculiarities of the Japanese publishing industry, but I left with the conclusion that despite various obstacles, Japanese literature is slowly but surely being introduced to the world through translations thanks to the hard work of these individuals.

Reading literature in translation is indispensable to broaden one’s view of the world, to engage in cultural exchange, to critically examine one’s own culture, and to understand the world as a multicultural and diverse community. Translation is not just a matter of transferring one language into another—by inserting a different and foreign perspective, there is the potential to expand the interpretation of the work itself and, in some cases, to broaden the scope of the language itself. In fact, the Japanese language (and Japanese literature) has historically developed through the interference of foreign languages, ideas, and works of translation, as has been the case in many other cultures and languages. I would like to end today’s talk with the sincere hope, especially for the young students in the audience, that translation of literature will be recognized as one of the most effective ways to promote cultural understanding and exchange, and to nurture a diverse view of the world that makes us global citizens. Thank you for your attention.

(5) For a thoughtful discussion of translations of contemporary Japanese fiction in relation to larger economic forces of the publishing industry, see Snyder, Stephen. “The Murakami Effect: On the Homogenizing Dangers of Easily Translated Literature.” *Literary Hub*, 4 Jan. 2017, lithub.com/the-murakami-effect/.