

Editors' introduction : the importance of translating

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Editors' Introduction: The Importance of Translating

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In recent decades, there is a marked tendency to legitimize academic endeavors as contributions to “innovation”, preferably in a form that leads to marketable commodities or otherwise fosters economic growth. This trend has worked to obfuscate an essential aspect of scholarly and scientific work, namely to make and keep accessible what has already been discovered and invented by the human mind. In fact, it should be obvious that “innovation” can only be measured against a standard of already extant knowledge, and that, therefore, the “storage” and “access” functions of scholarship are prerequisites for any meaningful “innovation”. However, academic institutions and funding organizations have been less willing to acknowledge the importance of work that, on first sight, seems to merely reproduce what is already there. Translations, which arguably play a seminal part in making and keeping extant knowledge and ideas accessible, have thus been ranked secondary at best, instead of being considered as genuine scholarly work. Academic employers, publishers and journal editors have prioritized “original research”, and academics have followed suit. Or so one might think when considering the relative scarcity of new translations over and against the number of other research publications.

These tendencies have also affected research on Japan and the field of Japanese Studies. Especially in social science and economic research on Japan, the number of translated books has fallen. This is, of course, also due to the relative loss of importance in view of the economic stagnation since the early 1990s. While Japan was in the 1970s and 1980s *the* non-Western case to study and to understand, other East Asian economies have gained importance. Today, especially China and its possible path to world hegemony is generally regarded as a much more important and interesting case study than Japan. This change has strongly influenced the flow and transfer of knowledge. While even prestigious university presses used to publish translations of original Japanese social science research, such publications have nearly completely disappeared in recent years.

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This may partially also be due to a new generation of Japanese social scientists who are more fluent in English and publish some of their original research in this undisputed lingua franca of contemporary social sciences and economics. Although some publishers, like for example the Trans Pacific Press, have laudably taken up the task in recent years to translate important studies originally published in Japanese, making them available to a worldwide readership without Japanese language knowledge, the large majority of research and findings by Japanese colleagues is still completely lost to non-Japanese speakers.

What might seem even more worrying is the fact that Japanese Studies themselves exhibit signs of moving away from translations. If we take, for example, a look at the share of commented translations published since the second half of the 1960s in *Monumenta Nipponica* and *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, which are without doubt two of the leading academic journals for Japan specialists, with long histories of publication and a large impact on the field, then the drop in the number of translations is significant (see Figure 1). Despite some fluctuations over the decades, the dashed trend line in grey

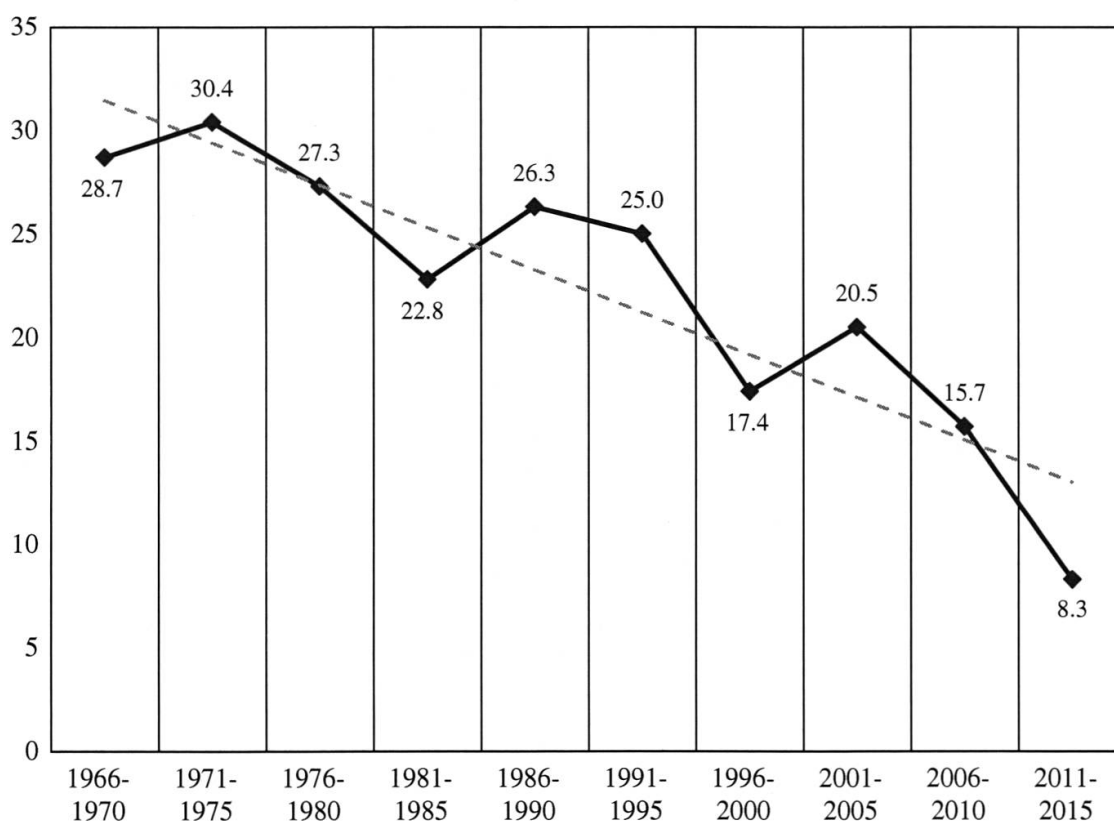


Figure 1: Share of commented translations among published articles in *Monumenta Nipponica* and *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 1966–2015 (in percent).

Source: Own Compilation.

shows a continuous overall decline over the years. Moreover, in the last five-year period, the share of commented translation dropped again and fell to a level of under 10 %.

It is in view of these developments that we put out a call for papers for this issue of *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques*. It was a pleasant surprise to learn from the almost overwhelming response we received that our thoughts seem to be shared by many of our colleagues in Japanese Studies, regardless of their field of specialization. Apparently, many of us feel that translating our sources and seminal parts of the research literature is, to say the least, an indispensable part of the research process. But, we argue, it is more than that: it seems safe to say that the impact of a source or a theoretical approach on the thought of a larger intellectual community is strongly tied to its being present and accessible in the form of a translation in that community's main language. The reasons are most obvious for a language such as Japanese, which is not spoken or read widely abroad. First and foremost, one cannot expect many historians, sociologists or philosophers (to name just three disciplines) in Canada, France, the UK or Switzerland to make the effort of acquiring the Japanese language skills necessary to read literature in that language. Without translation, the evidence, knowledge and insights from Japanese sources and research literature are lost to the larger academic audience, and it will, for reasons of feasibility in research and teaching, have much less impact even within the field of Japanese Studies. If we look beyond the academy proper, this aspect becomes ever more salient. The educated public may be actively interested in broadening their knowledge; but they can hardly be expected to look far beyond what is present in their language of daily communication. It is partly for this reason that we have solicited translations in the national languages of Switzerland as well as in English – but we also believe that, given the restriction any target language imposes on the translation, it is important to have translations in several languages of seminal Japanese source texts. We therefore hope that this journal issue provides a stimulus that will be carried on by other journals, in various languages, and that the field of academic translations from the Japanese may be re-invigorated in the years to come.

