

# EVALUATING HISTORICAL VIEWS ON TRANSLATION: A CASE STUDY OF MOTOKI RYŌEI, EARLY JAPANESE THEORIST

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## Abstract

The first part of this paper revisits the rationale for examining historical views on translation and offers examples of questions that can help researchers—particularly those new to the study of translation history—contextualize and evaluate historical writings on translation. The second part applies some of these questions to a study of the relatively unknown writings of Motoki Ryōei, an eighteenth-century Japanese translator of European scientific works, in an indirect attempt to demonstrate how such questions, although best combined with a more holistic framework, can help researchers delve beyond the obvious historical facts.

## Resumen

En la primera parte de este trabajo se revisan los fundamentos para examinar las perspectivas históricas sobre la traducción y se ofrecen ejemplos de interrogantes que pueden ayudar a investigadores —particularmente a aquellos recientemente iniciados en el estudio de la historia de la traducción— a evaluar y contextualizar los escritos históricos sobre la traducción. En la segunda parte del trabajo se emplean algunos de estos interrogantes para estudiar los escritos, relativamente desconocidos, de Motoki Ryōei (un traductor japonés del siglo XVIII que se dedicó a obras científicas europeas) en un intento indirecto de demostrar cómo esos interrogantes, aunque mejor combinados con un marco más integral, pueden ayudar a los investigadores a profundizar en sus estudios más allá de los hechos históricos evidentes.

**Keywords:** Evaluating historical writings. Japanese translation history. Motoki Ryōei.

**Palabras clave:** Evaluación de escritos históricos. Historia de la traducción japonesa. Motoki Ryōei.

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## 1. The relevance of studying historical views on translation

Translation historiography involves studying not just historical practices, but also past notions of translation. Examining these older understandings, however, carries certain risks. On the one hand, for instance, lies the possibility of uncritical respect for the ideas of past writers, shrouded as they are in the mists (and possibly myths) of time. On the other hand, the often-embryonic nature of these ideas can cast them in a primitive light from the perspective of contemporary Translation Studies. Even works published just a few decades ago can today seem dated and rather rudimentary given more recent developments, particularly the shift from the linguistic turn to the cultural turn, so how much more so for works written centuries ago? Are the writings of early ‘theorists’—if indeed they merit that name—mere historical curiosities to be dismissed as outmoded speculation? Or are any of their conceptions and perceptions of enduring interest? And if historical ideas do matter, how can we best unearth these insights and relate them to the context in which they evolved and to subsequent ideas and practices? These questions are magnified when we consider historical writings from beyond Europe. Although the contribution of early European writers such as Cicero and St. Jerome is widely acknowledged, there has been less interest in exploring the ideas of past writers elsewhere in the world, which can seem remote from the concerns of contemporary Translation Studies, still struggling as it is to outgrow its Eurocentric origins.<sup>1</sup> Here I explore methods for evaluating (which includes valuing) incipient notions of translation, illustrating this with a case study of

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1. One notable exception is Martha Cheung’s *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation* (2006), which has indeed engendered considerable interest, arguably as much for its impressive scholarship, methodology and comprehensiveness as because of readers’ inherent interest in ancient Chinese ideas on translation. Cheung has done exemplary work not only in identifying and translating ancient Chinese texts that bear on translation and language, but also in the methods used to make these extracts meaningful to readers who are temporally, geographically and culturally remote from the originals.

the views of a relatively unknown figure from Japanese translation history, the eighteenth-century translator Motoki Ryōei.<sup>2</sup>

Most readers of this special issue on translation history are presumably already persuaded of the importance of understanding historical views on translation. Yet that is not necessarily the case for everyone in the field of Translation Studies. Students come to my doctoral class on Histories of Translation with a solid background in contemporary Translation Studies and an interest in contributing to ‘cutting-edge’ research, so an initial challenge is to demonstrate to them the value and relevance of studying ‘old’ ideas. Surprisingly, some of the standard anthologies on translation history fail to make a strong case for this. André Lefevere’s sourcebook merely argues that:

knowledge of the tradition, the genealogy of our thinking, helps us to focus not just on problems concerning translation as such, but also on ways in which the study of translation can be made productive for cultural studies in general. (Lefevere 1992: xiv).

His focus on “texts that should provide the essential background for current thinking about the translation of literature” (xiii) potentially overlooks texts whose importance was limited to their own time and works relevant to non-literary translation. The rationale for Weissbort and Eysteinsson’s anthology seems to lie in demonstrating how translation history “challenges canonical literary history” (2006: 4). Although a worthy goal, this is only one aspect of why translation history warrants study in its own right within Translation Studies. Schulte and Biguenet (1992: 1) rightly stress the need for contextualization, since translation theories “were not born ex nihilo”, but they provide no other justification for their survey of theories since Dryden. The main rationale behind Douglas Robinson’s *Western Translation Theory: From Herodotus to Nietzsche* (1997) seems to have been to ensure greater comprehensiveness than earlier anthologies. It is not until the closing paragraph of the preface that we find a more intrinsic justification, although it focuses on the act of anthologizing rather than the grounds for studying translation history:

the history of translation theory is at once far more complex and diverse and far more dialogically intertwined than is commonly thought. Translation theory does change significantly over the centuries, at once shaped by and helping shape specific historical contingencies and local ideological needs; but translation theorists are also all reading each other, arguing with each other, misreading each other in their attempts to make sense of what they’re doing and why, and of how both they and their work fit into larger social and

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2. Japanese names are written here in Japanese order, with the family name first. The characters for Ryōei are sometimes read as Yoshinaga.

aesthetic contexts. One of the benefits of reading widely in the history of translation theory, indeed in any intellectual history, is that it helps us do the same. (Robinson 1997: xx)

Robinson does raise the important question of whether anthologies should be confined to works that bear directly on translation (ibid.: xviii), and he explains his reasons for going beyond that traditional narrow focus.

Clarifying the merits, issues and methods of the historical endeavour can help us evaluate past writings on translation and their position in the broader flow of translation history within and beyond a particular culture. It is instructive to be aware of the social and philosophical origins of our discipline and our direct and indirect debt to previous thinkers, as this helps us understand why our intellectual milieu has evolved into its current form. Some of the main reasons for studying translation history, then, can be summed up as follows:

To contextualize the past:

1. To contextualize past practices, ideas, problems and solutions in terms of culture, power and material processes and “as functioning in multiple interrelated systems rather than as a conglomerate of disparate elements” (Chan 2002: 62). Relevant here, for example, are the linguistic, literary, artistic, economic, political, ideological, religious and translation systems.
2. To highlight the variety of earlier conceptions of translation and to “clarify the points at which significant changes” occurred (Koerner 1989: 51)—and why.
3. To account for and integrate intercultural aspects (Pym 1998: 16). Pym regards the “ideal history” as one that “concerns the movement of people and texts” (ibid.: 18).

To contextualize the present:

1. To know “the origin of the general assumptions, methods, and theories [...] as well as their limitations” (Koerner 1989: 46). For instance, “it makes us better aware of the Eurocentric basis of contemporary translation theory” (Lambert 1993: 21).
2. To understand “how the present is constantly shaped by the past”—and “how the present shapes our understanding of the past” (Marra 2011: xiii).
3. To “distinguish true advances in the field from variations on the same theme, and [...] thereby reduce the [...] frequency of (re-)discoveries

of phenomena which have been known to many in the past under different names” (Koerner 1989: 46).

4. To foster, “together with the consciousness of the relative truth of any particular methodology or theory, the avoidance of excessive claims” (Koerner 1989: 46).

To contextualize the future:

1. To envision our work in new ways and “extend our frames of reference and our range of conceivable alternatives” (Pym 1998: 115).  
Considering questions of the past

pushes translators past narrow conceptions of the field to expanding insights into what translation has been historically (in the Middle Ages translators often wrote their own glosses or commentaries and built them *into* their translations), what it is today (radical adaptations, interpretive imitations, propagandistic refocusing), and what it might be in some imaginable future. (Robinson 1997: 122)

What we should *not* expect, however, is *predictive* statements about the future course of translation theory or practice.

2. Conversely, to “limit future alternatives, and make choices or defenses easier” (Snyder 1999: 675).
3. To provide input for policymakers in the field of language, culture and translation. For instance, massive machine translation will increase “recognizably translational language”, but this need not be so alarming for anyone aware that European philosophy and science worked with literalist translation techniques for many centuries, developing quite successful ways of reading and using recognizably translational language (Pym 1998: 16).

One risk in tracing the continuum of ideas on translation, however, is retrospectively imposing a teleological perspective whereby earlier ideas are perceived as ineluctably leading up to contemporary views. This can overlook ideas that did not gain ground—even though the reasons for such failure can be as illuminating as those for the success of other views, and such failures are not necessarily attributable to flaws in the ideas themselves, but can be the result of external factors such as the status or interaction of the people presenting competing views.

## 2. Sample questions for evaluating historical writing on translation

One problem is the dearth or fragmentary nature of primary sources revealing the views of early thinkers on translation. Yet once historical writings of a putatively (albeit not always primarily) theoretical nature have been identified, how does the translation historian go about analyzing and evaluating them and fitting them into a broader framework? Given the fact that past views on translation were usually not formulated as explicit or full-blown theories, how do we reconstruct and interpret them? One focus of this special issue of *MonTI* is the didactics of translation history. In the spirit of providing aspiring translation historians with some guidance in conducting the necessary close reading, below are some *sample* questions that might prompt deeper reflection. In the next section of the paper this approach is applied to a case study from Japan.

1. Where was the text written (e.g., within or outside the intellectual centre; at a religious, political or educational institution), and how might this have shaped the views therein?
2. When was the text written and published? What might a gap between these dates signify? Or did the text circulate only in manuscript form? Why were sufficiently lengthy texts not published in book form if the technology was available? How might the temporal setting have shaped the writer's position on translation?
3. Did the writer aim at a popular or elite audience? Or was the text never intended for public consumption but just for a patron, for instance? How might such factors have affected the views and how they were presented (e.g., in a popularizing manner)?
4. How might the writer's personal background and social status (e.g., authoritative or marginal position; independent scholar or salaried translator) have influenced his theory and praxis of translation?<sup>3</sup>
5. Did the writer consider translation to be a proper object of reflection and criticism in the first place? Was theorizing a major component of his translation activities, or just a minor element in a broader scholarly project? Did translation loom large in the discourse of the time, or was the discourse on translation isolated from other areas of

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3. The male pronoun is used throughout here because most writers on translation in the past have been men and because this is less clumsy than neutral workarounds. It is, of course, not intended in any way to slight the contribution of women translators and thinkers.

writing and philosophical inquiry? Did the writer make connections (unexpected or otherwise) between translation issues and the broader cultural and intellectual contexts of the time (e.g., aesthetic theory, Westernization)?

6. What was the probable reason for writing the text (e.g., as a defense for contravening established norms or as an argument for an innovative approach)? What was the writer's point?
7. What premises, values and beliefs (worldviews) informed the writer's approach? For instance, were there any religious, ethical or nationalistic underpinnings? How were these manifested?
8. How did the writer primarily regard translation—e.g., largely as a matter of practical linguistic problems and techniques or as a literary activity (e.g., aimed at polishing the translator's skills as a writer of original works, or at rejuvenating the target culture's literature)? Or did he perceive translation as a scholarly or theory-driven endeavour and delve more deeply into its hermeneutic nature? Did he see theory and practice as complementary or antithetical? Did his conception of translation differ significantly from how it has been perceived at other times in that culture or elsewhere? Did the writer purport to represent a complete theory, or did he focus on a particular concept or method? Did that narrow focus deepen or distort his understanding? Did he accord a greater or lesser role to certain aspects of translation than his contemporaries or than is usual nowadays?
9. On what earlier sources did the writer (or idea) draw? Did he reference or engage in a dialogue with previous thinkers or his contemporaries? What existing norms or ideas was the writer contesting, and why? Did he misinterpret or distort earlier views in any way? Are intellectual connections or allegiances to other theorists acknowledged or concealed? How much overlap was there in the problems they addressed and in their thinking? What were the ongoing threads connecting earlier and later ideas, or did the writer inject discontinuity into the discourse? Did personal connections with other theorists play any role?
10. In turn, did the writer's ideas meet with consensus, near-consensus, disagreement or outright opposition, or were they largely ignored? On what grounds? Did translators (or theorists) who drew attention to their work provoke "uneasiness, even open hostility" (Robinson 1997: xviii)? Did the writer address any criticisms?



11. Did this writer's ideas play a minor or pivotal role in the discourse of the time? What form of intervention did they represent? What were the conceptual and/or methodological debates revolving around this topic? Were they sufficiently significant to form the foundation for later debates (and if so, how did the issues or discourse change over time), or did they fall by the wayside? Was the idea reworked, misunderstood or intentionally distorted by later thinkers? By whom, how and for what reasons? How did this shape contemporary ideas? Were there any external factors that prevented these notions or practices from gaining traction?
12. Did the writer fail or refuse to address certain aspects or dismiss them as irrelevant? Are there any errors, omissions (silences), biases or pre-conceptions, and how can these be interpreted?
13. What linguistic techniques did the writer advocate?
14. Did the writer discuss the relationship or interaction between translation theory and practice on the one hand and other forms of cognitive activity on the other hand (e.g., understanding; perception; imagination and mental images; memory; decision-making and problem-solving; categories of logic; speech; language; reading; explanation; original writing and creativity)? Did he discuss or advocate particular cognitive strategies (e.g., inspiration, induction or deduction, reduction, inferencing, awareness, reasoning, free association, abstraction, interpretation, replacement by a simpler alternative, checking for internal consistency)?
15. How did the writer support his argument? What kind of evidence did he use?
16. How nuanced, profound, eloquent or philosophically rich was a particular conception? How adequate was it in its day in terms of the actual constraints under which translators worked and in terms of perception? Does history show that ideas on translation have become more sophisticated over time?
17. Did individual theorists or schools of thought develop their own distinctive terms relating to translation? As Renier (1989: 8) has argued, we need to "break the code which makes reading the primary sources so difficult and perilous" so as to "understand the meaning given to them by their authors." This can be done by identifying "technical terms with a specific meaning" and the position of that meaning within the broader "system of notions". Renier (*ibid.*: 3) emphasizes the importance of semantics—e.g., the changing meaning of words

(many of which are “technical terms whose meaning is essential to the comprehension of the statement”) and how scholars have differently interpreted one and the same statement. Did the writer define his terms, either in essence or against existing terms or concepts? Did he exemplify their meaning? What does the preferred terminology reveal about thinking on translation? What were the underlying assumptions and associations? Were there any evaluatively loaded terms? How much terminological overlap or interchangeability existed? Were there variant terms for the same phenomenon, or was the same term used by different writers to refer to different concepts? Were attempts made to harmonize or reconcile different concepts and terms, and if so, in what way and were they successful? Did these terms gain currency and contribute to the basic vocabulary of translation in that society? Did they encompass a broader or narrower range than what is today understood in relation to various aspects of translation, or did they blur or transcend contemporary distinctions? When, why and how did their semantic range shift?

18. How can historical concepts of translation be best conveyed to contemporary readers—e.g., through transliteration, an ‘equivalent’, thick translation, or a combination of methods, depending on the context? For instance, Renner (1989: 9) chose to retain the original foreign (Latin) terms so as “to reflect the mentality of the time and preserve the precision of thought”, rather than using contemporary terms that would require readers “to shift back and forth from antiquity to modernity.”
19. Did the writer present an implicit or explicit typology and hierarchy of translation methods or concepts, or reject or have no interest in classification? What grounds for contrast were used? Were these classifying principles simple or complex? Was a particular taxonomy a polemical reaction to existing schemes? Did the categories subsume ones in an earlier model (the theorist’s or someone else’s) or did the writer add new distinctions, and what concerns led to these changes? Was the classification presented as exhaustive? How lasting was it? Were there common organizing principles over time? Did the very practice of classification lose or gain popularity over time?
20. Was the writer interested in fundamental explanatory principles or more empiricist accounts of translation? What kinds of explanation did he advocate (e.g., mechanistic, deductive, functional, teleological or psychological explanation)?

21. What social circumstances informed the writer's approach and what was the social role or significance of his ideas? Did he link translation to extratextual issues such as the role of translation in society and modernization and the relationship between translation and social institutions? What role did power and ideology play in his thinking or practice?
22. How did the writer perceive the role and status of the translator?
23. Was the discourse on translation conceptually gendered? Was translation regarded as an endeavour particularly suited or unsuited to either gender? On what grounds—e.g., biological, moral, intellectual, class- or education-related? Were female voices included in or excluded from the discourse, or did women of that society and time show no particular interest in translation? Did they raise concerns specific to their status as women translators or theorists?
24. Did the writer use any metaphors to make sense of translation or to create associations with related activities? What fresh perspectives did these metaphors reveal?
25. In what form were past ideas presented (e.g., translator's prefaces, letters about their work, memoranda, oral or printed debates, formal and systematic theories or treatises)?
26. Was there a contradiction between what theorists said and their actual translations or the application of these concepts?
27. Was there an increasing differentiation into various theoretical schools or branches?
28. How has early thought on translation been portrayed in later works? Do primary sources contradict such depictions, raising questions about secondary accounts and underlining the need for more research using primary sources? Or do later works reveal implications and significance overlooked in the past?
29. Do particular ideas and debates originating in the past have enduring intellectual significance and impact? Are the views of earlier writers instructive—even if only in a cautionary manner? Do they offer new (or forgotten) ways of looking at translation phenomena that might challenge contemporary assumptions? Is there continuity or discontinuity? What might be gained by juxtaposing a reading of these early texts with contemporary accounts?
30. What alternative ways of thinking might have been blocked? Can we productively apply a counterfactual ('what if') approach so as to imagine a different course of thinking on translation?

### 3. Motoki Ryōei, pioneering scientific translator

Let us now move on to a figure from Japanese history whose work as a translator is known in certain scientific circles but whose thinking on translation has received far less attention, even among scholars of Japanese translation. My original purpose in examining this early practitioner-theorist was not so much to highlight his actual ideas as to use the analysis to demonstrate how questions such as those outlined above can elicit deeper and broader implications than the facts alone might indicate. Unfortunately, space constraints allow only a presentation of the outcome, not a walk-through exposition of how the sample questions above were used to guide the analysis of Motoki Ryōei's writings. Suffice it to say that working through these questions (not all of which proved germane in his particular case) helped reveal connections and relevancies not readily apparent at first.

Motoki (1735–94) was a third-generation *tsūji*. This term refers to the hereditary official translators/interpreters in Nagasaki, the only place where Europeans (in fact, just the Dutch) were permitted to visit and reside during Japan's years of national isolation from the 1630s until 1853. The *tsūji* were involved in the day-to-day linguistic mediations related to the Dutch presence and trade, and their bilingual skills and the knowledge acquired in the course of their contacts with the Dutch gave them influence in certain circles beyond that commensurate with their relatively low official status. Some of the more scholarly inclined *tsūji* translated European scientific works that contained knowledge much sought by the Japanese, and Motoki was one of this small subset. All the texts he translated—mainly works on geography and astronomy—were for official use, not ones he chose on his own initiative. This helps explain why he has often been regarded as 'just' a *tsūji*, not a scholar, even though he devoted himself to understanding and elucidating the newly imported and technically advanced information. Given the state of Japanese knowledge of European science and languages at the time, his achievements as a scholar and translator should not be underestimated.

In 1774 Motoki translated part of *Tweevoudigh onderwijs van de hemelsche en aerdsche globen*, a Dutch version of Willem Johan Blaeu's Latin commentary on the solar system, without even the benefit of having studied basic texts on astronomy. His translation, *Tenchi nikyū yōhō* (The use of celestial and terrestrial globes), represented the start of modern astronomy in Japan. Blaeu's text introduced the Copernican theory, but Motoki chose not to translate this potentially controversial part that represented a complete change from existing thought, instead merely touching on what he called the heliocentric theory. As was the norm among *tsūji*, he added comments and used Chinese

characters phonetically to transcribe certain Dutch terms. He also came up with some quite colloquial renditions, such as *kōmei no magari* (the bending of light) for ‘light refraction’. At the end of his preface Motoki wrote that

[...] understanding this was beyond my shallow knowledge. It is impossible to find a proper translation [*seiyaku*] no matter how many words one might use. In understanding this book I adhered to neither Japanese nor Chinese writing, instead following the Dutch meaning exclusively, and I used a mixture of one-to-one equivalents [*seiyaku*], translation of the intended meaning [*giyaku*], transcription [*kasha*] and abridgement [*ryakubun*]. Otherwise it would be difficult to understand the meaning of works from that land, since their language and our language are not the same. (My translation; see also Vande Walle 2001: 134)

This passage is repeated, with slight variations, in the supplement to a work Motoki translated two decades later, and it is discussed below in connection with that work. Vande Walle (2001: 134) concludes that this passage “already shows a sophisticated approach to the problem of translation.” To put it in context, we should note that Motoki “once stated [in *Shinsei*; see below] that since there had never been a professional translation of a Dutch work in Japan, his predecessors were skeptical about the possibility of even literal translation and were reluctant to attempt it” (Nakayama 1972: 160). This is indicative of the challenges Motoki faced—although in fact there had already been a tiny handful of translations of European works. In closing his preface, Motoki acknowledged that he consulted his friend Matsu Kiminori about the Chinese equivalents for Dutch terms and asked him to revise the wording. Although Motoki had the usual ability of an official in his position to read and write Chinese, which was the most prestigious form of writing in early modern Japan, he lacked the knowledge to make the fine distinctions necessary to match up Dutch and Chinese sounds and meanings.<sup>4</sup>

### *Wage reigen*

In 1793 Motoki completed his relay translation of George Adam’s textbook for navigators, *Treatise Describing and Explaining the Construction and Use of New Celestial and Terrestrial Globes*, via Jacob Ploos’ Dutch rendition. He titled this *Seijutsu hongen taiyō kyūri ryōkai shinsei tenchi nikyū yōhōki* (The basis of astronomy, newly edited and illustrated, on the use of celestial and terrestrial

4. In *Wage reigen* (see below) Motoki mentions that he consulted the Chinese *tsūji* Ishizaki Jirōzaemon about Chinese sounds so that he could assign appropriate characters to represent Dutch sounds. He also states that Dutch phonemes are difficult even for an interpreter unless one has learned directly from the Dutch.

globes according to the heliocentric system [Nakayama 1972: 160]; abbreviated here as *Shinsei*). The Dutch version had been obtained by the influential feudal lord Matsudaira Sadanobu, who ordered Motoki to translate it. This time he did not omit the account of the Copernican system.

There are two extant versions of *Shinsei*,<sup>5</sup> only one of which includes the *Wage reigen* (Examples of Dutch-Japanese translation [De Groot 2005: 36]) supplement in the final volume, but this is where Motoki discussed some of the phonological and grammatical differences between Dutch and Japanese and, more importantly for our purposes, his translation methods. Although a fair amount has been written about Motoki's contribution to the birth of astronomy in Japan, there has been very little discussion of his views on translation. The main exception is some works by Sugimoto Tsutomu, a historian of the Japanese language (not translation), which briefly mention *Wage reigen*. Hence rather than being taken up or even distorted by later Japanese writers on translation, Motoki's treatise (as distinct from his methods) has been largely overlooked. About the only treatment in English seems to be a few pages in Vande Walle (2001), focusing predominantly on the phonological aspects. Yet although *Wage reigen* seems rudimentary from a contemporary perspective, it is noteworthy as one of the earliest discussions of translation in Japan and for its identification of different translation techniques.

One possible logistical reason for the neglect of *Wage reigen* (in addition to the challenges of reading old Japanese) is the difficulty of accessing the full text. Sugimoto (1967: 7) notes that the manuscript in the Waseda University library does not include certain passages contained in the collation commented on by Saigusa (1936). During my recent brief trip to Japan the Saigusa collation was temporarily unavailable at the National Diet Library and not held at a major prefectural library I visited, so the only version of *Wage reigen* I have seen is the Waseda version.<sup>6</sup> This does not contain some portions quoted in secondary sources, indicating its incompleteness (as suggested by Sugimoto). In a less-than-ideal attempt to supplement the Waseda version with the Saigusa collation, I have had recourse to some excerpts quoted in the secondary literature, but it is possible that other passages that appear in neither the Waseda version nor secondary sources might be of interest from the viewpoint of translation history.

5. One at the Town Hall in Nagasaki and one in Naikaku bunko (the Cabinet Library), with this latter version lacking the *Wage reigen* discussed here.

6. A digital reproduction is available at [http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/ho10/ho10\\_02383/ho10\\_02383.html](http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/ho10/ho10_02383/ho10_02383.html).

Perhaps the first lesson here is that writing relevant to translation theory can be found in unexpected places. Not all proto-theoretical texts have theorizing as their main focus, despite containing theoretical elements. Rather than appearing in connection with works on religious or literary translation, as has often been the case with theoretical writings, *Wage reigen* was a supplement to a work on astronomy for navigators. To give another example, the more well-known remarks in the preface to the famous translation *Kaitai shinsho* (1774) appeared in the context of a work on anatomy. Fortunately, Japanese scholars (often in the history of science or language, rather than translation studies) have done considerable research on Edo-period translations of European texts, which were almost without exception non-religious and non-literary texts, and in the process they have uncovered proto-theoretical writings about translation. Historians of translation need to keep in mind that ideas relevant to translation can be found in works on language, grammar, rhetoric, literature, philosophy, religion and even more distant fields, as was the case here.

Motoki starts *Wage reigen* by emphasizing that written Dutch represents the everyday spoken language of the Dutch people, indicating his awareness of the major gap between written and spoken Japanese at that time. He goes on to state that there are only twenty-six letters in the Dutch alphabet, and he presents the different forms (uppercase and lowercase printed forms, and handwritten forms) as well as the numerals and their Roman and Arabic forms. He also provides equivalents for the days of the week and the names of some planets, but devotes most of the discussion to Dutch phonology.<sup>7</sup> Motoki and his colleagues clearly faced a steep learning curve in understanding even the basics of Dutch—a very different endeavour from accessing the meaning of Chinese texts via the familiar technique of *kanbun kundoku* (literally, a Japanese reading of Chinese texts) that had been used for centuries with Chinese texts instead of ‘prototypical’ translation (see Wakabayashi 1998). Like *kanbun kundoku*, however, the translation of Dutch as outlined by Motoki retained a largely linguistic rather than semantic orientation, although it was not as form-focused as the approach of his contemporary, the well-known translator Maeno Ryōtaku (1723–1803), who advocated marking up Dutch texts with symbols as aids to decoding the meaning. *Wage reigen*

7. See Vande Walle (2001: 136–40) for a discussion of the phonological aspects. Motoki also had a major influence on the evolution of Dutch language studies in the capital Edo. Scholars there had been unable to understand Dutch verb conjugations, but Motoki was well aware of how these worked, and his observations (and the writings of his students and their students) helped construct a proper understanding of Dutch grammar.

was underpinned by Motoki's concern to bridge what he perceived as a vast gap between Dutch and Japanese, so his attention was focused narrowly on the basic but major linguistic challenges of deciphering Dutch and coming up with Japanese equivalents for unfamiliar words and scientific concepts. In what is in places a virtual repetition of what he wrote in the preface to *Tenchi nikyū yōhō*, Motoki commented on his approach as follows (quoted in Sugimoto 1983: 49; my translation):

Looking back, I am keenly aware that translation is a very difficult task beyond my meagre abilities, so no doubt there are some parts that are accurately translated and some that are not, as well as some errors in *giyaku* [conveying the intended meaning]. I was unable to provide appropriate equivalents for everything. Even if one infers the meaning of each word and understands the overall gist, the lack of an appropriate expression means that discrepancies inevitably arise [between the original text and the translation].<sup>8</sup> When it comes to considering the contextually based meaning of Dutch expressions, it is impossible to find a proper translation [*seiyaku*] no matter how many words one might use. In understanding this book I adhered to neither Japanese nor Chinese writing, instead following the Dutch meaning exclusively, and I used one-to-one equivalents [*seiyaku*] or translation of the intended meaning [*giyaku*] or transcription [*kasha*] and sometimes I abridged or refined one or two sentences. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand the meaning of works from that land, since their language and our language are not the same. [...] I hope that some knowledgeable translator will make revisions after me.

Here Motoki names three main techniques, which he does not define, either in essence or against existing terms (the English translation above necessarily provides greater clarity than his text). Elsewhere, however, he does cite examples that help clarify what he meant by these techniques. This range of techniques represents a more diverse and flexible orientation than an across-the-board approach (while overlooking other potentially useful techniques).

The meaning of *seiyaku* in the passage above is ambiguous. The literal meaning of the Chinese characters is 'proper' or 'correct' translation, giving this an evaluatively loaded sense, and in the first occurrence this seems to be the most appropriate rendition, as the subsequent phrase "no matter how many words one might use" precludes the other interpretation. In the second instance, however, *seiyaku* is clearly used in a narrower sense contrasting with the other two techniques. We know that other writers of the time used *seiyaku*

8. Horiuchi (2003: 164) translates this sentence as follows: "The meaning of the words there being like that, the meaning of words here should be like this. That is the way we think about the meaning of words and, though we can grasp the general meaning, we cannot avoid the discrepancy for lack of corresponding terms."



in the sense of borrowing an existing Chinese word that was a one-to-one equivalent or close match for a European word,<sup>9</sup> and that fits with the examples Motoki cites. Determining whether he equated this practice with ‘proper translation’ (so that, by implication, the other techniques were regarded as inferior) would require further evidence.

The second technique, *giyaku* (literally, ‘translating the meaning’), involved using a contextually based rendition when no one-to-one equivalent was available. More specifically, Motoki used *giyaku* in the sense of coining a new term if necessary so as to convey the intended contextual meaning. As an example, he mentions how he translated *vast staren* (fixed star) as the newly coined *kōsei*, literally ‘constant star’. Inferring the meaning on the basis of the context was particularly challenging with abstract concepts (e.g., love or knowledge). Motoki (quoted in Sugimoto 1967: 50) explains why he did *giyaku*:

When translating Dutch into Japanese, even if I understood the meaning of each concrete expression on the basis of its form, when it came to abstract expressions there was no basis on which to learn them [...]. I corrected places that did not make sense and supplemented places that lacked a name and form, and for the rest I just hope that someone knowledgeable will make revisions. (My translation)

As Montgomery (2000: 229) comments,

Many of the terms [...] were so utterly foreign as to have no easy counterpart in Chinese or Japanese. They did not merely have to be invented; they had to be conceived. Yet, they also had to be inserted into the larger linguistic frame of the time. Their success, in a sense, depended on their acting as a mediating substance posed halfway between two very different cultural-intellectual systems.

Motoki’s third technique, *kasha*, involved the transcription of European loanwords by using Chinese characters purely for their sound—e.g., writing the proper name ‘Kepler’ as 欠甫歷耳 (pronounced *Kepureru*). Surprisingly from a modern-day perspective, Motoki regarded representing Dutch sounds in the katakana phonetic syllabary as more difficult than transcription in Chinese characters, which he believed ensured a more accurate representation because of the greater range of sounds possible through their sheer number and the four tones (Sugimoto 1983: 44).

9. For example, Maeno Ryōtaku explained that *seiyaku* referred to cases such as translating *bekwaam* (able or capable) as 宜 or 適 (whereas rendering this as 応得 based on the context constituted *giyaku*).

Thus Motoki's three key techniques were respectively underpinned by the potential to borrow a Chinese word, coin a Sino-Japanese word or use Chinese characters phonetically. This reliance on the lexicon and writing system of another culture speaks volumes about the linguistic situation in eighteenth-century Japan and how Chinese vocabulary and orthography were an indispensable part of the Japanese language by that time. Arguably, however, the ability to use existing Chinese equivalents, which were regarded as more prestigious, hindered the search for alternative and possibly more appropriate indigenous equivalents, although Motoki did use some quite colloquial renditions.

Motoki's discussion of translation remained predominantly praxis-oriented and barely went beyond this classification of methods. Further research on his translations is necessary to determine which of these techniques he favoured and whether there was any contradiction between the methods he advocated and his actual translations. In an instance of humility (or false modesty), Motoki admitted that he lacked the knowledge necessary to translate *Shinsei* and had undertaken the project only because ordered to do so. This illustrates Motoki's healthy awareness of his limitations, which were the outcome of the rudimentary level of linguistic and terminological knowledge, translation skills and scientific knowledge at the time. Nevertheless, he clearly had pedagogical goals in mind in *Wage reigen* and the works he translated. Very few Japanese at that time knew the alphabet, so his emphasis was on providing help for others studying Dutch or taking up translation, and his intended readership was the small audience of scholars who would have access to his works. As a translator of non-literary texts in this early stage in the introduction of European languages, Motoki regarded translation primarily as a linguistic operation between two very different languages, and *Wage reigen* was one of several Edo-period texts that laid out the basics of the Dutch language with varying degrees of detail and accuracy, forming the foundation for more refined understanding later. Although the technique of *giyaku* or contextually based equivalents went beyond a purely linguistic level, the sheer difficulty of coming to grips with the basic aspects of the Dutch language (not to mention the scholarly and technical content of the texts being translated) meant there was little leeway for interest in aesthetic matters, translation as a hermeneutical operation, or more fundamental semantic or cognitive issues. Motoki's judgment and decision-making were nevertheless evident, for instance, in the omission of information about the Copernican theory from *Tenchi nikyū yōhō* and his addition of comments. Along with *giyaku*, this indicates that his approach was not purely linguistic or mechanistic. His

comments about the difficulty of conveying abstract concepts likewise indicate a deeper awareness.

Motoki's approach was not morally or nationalistically motivated, although a desire to help Japan 'catch up' with the more advanced scientific knowledge of the West lay behind the commissioning of his translations. He did not explicitly address the social significance of translation or of his views, yet the very act of translating European scientific texts during Japan's national isolation was informed by an awareness of the need for the scientific knowledge available in the West—as long as this was not linked with the banned religion of Christianity. The omission of the part in Blaeu's text that linked Copernicanism to God's creation presumably stemmed at least as much from the prevailing ideological climate (specifically, the views of his patron) as from Motoki's personal beliefs. Japan's belated position vis-à-vis European nations informed virtually all Edo-period translations and resulted in the subsequent Meiji period in a close link between translation and Westernization.

Although Motoki obviously considered translation as meriting reflection, theorizing was not a major component of his scholarly work. Nor did he make connections between translation and other areas of writing or philosophical inquiry, even though its connection with language and scientific knowledge was clearly at the forefront of his concerns. Although translation played a vital (albeit circumscribed) role in Edo society, it was not yet a major focus of the intellectual discourse, unlike in the ensuing Meiji period. Edo-period translators of Dutch were more interested in basic and practical linguistic problems than theoretical matters (although the relationship between the Japanese and Chinese languages led Ogyū Sorai to raise fundamentally important philosophical issues relevant to the conceptualization of translation) (see Wakabayashi 2005).

*Wage reigen* does not directly discuss the status of translators, but two factors are pertinent here: (1) Motoki was a *tsūji*—a relatively low government position but one that was of great importance in the Edo period in terms of mediating imported European knowledge, and (2) *Shinsei* was commissioned by a powerful feudal lord, thereby lending the text authority while simultaneously depriving the translator of the initiative in text selection. Motoki himself emerges not as someone who “possesses genius akin to that of the original author” (Tytlar 1791/2006: 194), but as a humble teacher bent on imparting his hard-won knowledge to those following in his footsteps. The picture of the ideal translator that is implicit in *Wage reigen* is someone in command of the mechanics of the source language. In a time when Chinese was the written language of choice for educated Japanese, *Wage reigen* additionally assumes

a sound knowledge of Chinese, but it is noteworthy that there is no mention of skill in written Japanese (which interacted with written Chinese in various ways), except in Motoki's *rejection* of adhering to Japanese and Chinese writing.

### *The broader context*

Let us turn now to the position of Motoki's ideas within the broader Edo-period discourse on translation. *Wage reigen* did not draw on existing views on translation, such as the ideas of Ogyū Sorai in the early eighteenth century or of the Kyoto-born merchant-class scholar Ban Kōkei (1733–1806) in “Yakumon no jō” (On translation), which was written in the same year as *Tenchi nikyū yōhō*. Although surrounded by other *tsūji* in Nagasaki, Motoki was working in somewhat of a theoretical and intellectual vacuum, and it is unclear whether he was even aware of the views of these two earlier writers.<sup>10</sup> Rather than overtly responding to or contesting any existing views of translation, the techniques advocated in *Wage reigen* were an outgrowth of previous practices, although this work made a new contribution in its exposition of Dutch phonology. Moreover, by highlighting the technique of contextually based equivalents, it encouraged the move away from the form-orientation of *kanbun kundoku*.

Sugimoto (1991: 381) has suggested that Motoki's three methods correspond to those mentioned by the scholar Sugita Genpaku (1733–1817) in the preface to *Kaitai shinsho* (which appeared in the same year as Motoki's *Tenchi nikyū yōhō*, where he first mentioned these techniques) and that it is only their terminology that differed. The scholar-translators of *Kaitai shinsho* used three approaches: i.e., borrowing Chinese terms (a technique they called *hon'ya-ku*—the standard term today for ‘translation’; this corresponds in substance to Motoki's *seiyaku*), creating an appropriate Sino-Japanese word in response to the meaning (what they and Motoki called *giyaku*), and transcribing unclear words or concepts in Chinese characters (which they called *chokuyaku*,<sup>11</sup> not *kasha*). Like Motoki, the *Kaitai shinsho* translators used *giyaku* in the sense of made-in-Japan neologisms, but just three years earlier in the appendix to *Oranda yakusen* (An introduction to Dutch translation; 1771/1785) Maeno Ryōtaku had used this term in the sense of a contextually based equivalent,

10. We do know, however, that Motoki's student Nakano Ryūho was familiar with Ogyū Sorai.

11. Today this is the standard term for literal translation.

with no reference to neologisms.<sup>12</sup> It is not clear whether Motoki was unaware of Maeno's broader usage of this term or why he redefined it more narrowly in the same sense as the *Kaitai shinsho* translators (who are widely acknowledged to have been influenced by the *tsūji* and might have emulated Motoki's usage—although they used a different term for transcription). Unawareness of the different meanings attributed to these terms would result in misunderstanding on the part of the historian. The shifting meanings of translation terminology as illustrated above highlight the question of the pros and cons of different approaches to conveying historical concepts of translation on the part of contemporary scholars. Transliteration (more correctly known as transcription in the case of converting the Japanese script to the Roman alphabet) of terms such as *giyaku* is opaque and fails to indicate changes in meaning over time and among different writers, so the use of an 'equivalent' or an explanation (thick translation) is essential, ideally in combination with the transliterated term.

The techniques mentioned by Motoki were part of a methodological lineage of translation, possibly influenced by (but not wholly identical to) the earlier classification in the appendix to Maeno's *Oranda yakusen*. In terms of the history of scientific terminology and translation terminology, the lineage went from Motoki to Nakano Ryūho (aka Shizuki Tadao; 1760–1806), his well-known student who likewise wrote on linguistics and translated works of astronomy, and on to Nakano's student Yoshio Shunzō (1788–1843). In the course of this lineage the approach to translation underwent certain changes. For instance, Nakano added more explanatory commentaries than Motoki. Remarking on the similarities and differences between these two translators, Horiuchi (2003: 164) notes that Nakano had freedom in selecting what to translate and his choice was not dictated by utilitarian considerations. His primary concern was with conveying the general meaning, rather than the words, and he argued that translations should not be difficult to understand. Although Nakano also borrowed quite a few terms from Chinese, unlike Motoki he “absolutely avoided simple phonetic translation into Chinese sound characters. Instead, he invented semantic equivalents whose *kanji* always attempted to offer a clear, precise meaning” (Montgomery 2000: 230). Space does not allow a full tracing of the threads of continuity and discontinuity between Motoki and his predecessors and successors, but doing so would be an important bridging step that would help contextualize their ideas and contributions.

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12. Maeno also mentioned *seiyaku* (in the same sense as Motoki) and *setsui* (annotation).

I have found no evidence of opposition to Motoki's ideas or practices, but external factors hindered them from gaining broader traction. These included the slowness of communications in Edo Japan, the 'problematic' nature of contacts with the foreign during Japan's national isolation, and the crackdown by Matsudaira Sadanobu, who was keen to gather information about foreign countries but restricted its circulation.<sup>13</sup> Motoki's translations were not published (a far from unusual occurrence at that time when most translations circulated only in manuscript form, if at all) and were "shared with only a limited number of [...] close associates" (Sugimoto & Swain 1989: 314). His comments in *Wage reigen* were in fact never intended for a broad audience, just the small number of scholars and fellow-translators with an interest in learning and translating Dutch. This helps explain the pedagogical tone, as well as his modesty. As distinct from the scientific text to which it was appended, *Wage reigen* seems to have had limited impact in its own time, and today it is barely known even among Japanese scholars of translation.

Although Motoki's terms do not have currency today, all three *methods* continued to be used into the twentieth century, indicating a certain consensus as to their validity. Today, however, the only one of these methods that is still used to any extent is *giyaku*, although that term is not usually used. Contextually based equivalents remain an important part of translation into Japanese, although the narrower sense of *giyaku*—i.e., creating neologisms by combining literal equivalents of foreign morphemes or words into a new Sino-Japanese word—is not a mainstream technique today. Using an existing Chinese equivalent (*seiyaku*) is now unusual, because in the late nineteenth century China lost its cultural authority in Japan (conversely, the Japanese language became a source for translation equivalents in Chinese). Transcribing European words phonetically using Chinese characters (*kasha*) is something that today primarily has only novelty value (e.g., in advertisements for its eye-catching effect). The standard contemporary approach to transcription is katakana—an easy solution despite the imperfect sound representations, but one that lacks the potential to overlay the foreign sounds with a semantic component arising from the meaning of the chosen characters.

Motoki's conceptions and methods of translation were appropriate for the time and circumstances in which he worked, even though *Wage reigen* seems limited from a contemporary perspective and his ideas on translation have

13. Matsudaira regarded Dutch learning and free expression of thought as dangerous, and his promulgation of the Kansei Prohibition of Heterodox Studies in 1790—two years before *Wage reigen*—brought the more liberal foreign policy of the previous two decades to an end (Lukacs 2008: 85).

not had the impact of those of better-known writers in Japan or elsewhere. *Wage reigen* represented progress in those early days of contact with European languages, and it tells us much about the state of the learning of Dutch and of translation at that time. Rather than applying a contemporary lens, it would be fairer to evaluate its relative sophistication in the light of other writings on translation around that time. Although comparison *solely* on the grounds of temporal proximity is methodologically problematic, situating *Wage reigen* against the background of other works on translation written around that time helps contextualize its theoretical ‘sophistication’. We have already mentioned some contemporaneous Japanese works, but let us point out here that it was written just over a century after John Dryden’s 1680 identification of three types of translation (metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation) and two years after Alexander Fraser Tytler’s *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1791). There is even a certain resemblance between *seiyaku* and Dryden’s metaphrase and between *giyaku* and his paraphrase (but none whatsoever between *kasha* and imitation; their omission from these respective taxonomies indicates both schemes’ lack of exhaustiveness). We might hypothesize that classification of translation techniques is a preliminary stage through which writing about translation typically passes on the way to more nuanced thinking. Tytler’s essay, written in reaction to Dryden’s paraphrase and loose translations, contains considerably more extensive theoretical content than *Wage reigen*, illustrating how subsequent writers often refine the work of their predecessors. Unlike Tytler’s three ‘general rules’,<sup>14</sup> Motoki did not present a hierarchical order among the techniques he identified, so readers were not given any guidance as to which was preferable in general or in any specific situation. It should be kept in mind that Dryden and Tytler were able to build on a centuries-long tradition of thinking about translation among European languages, whereas Motoki and other Japanese translators of European languages in his day were working almost *ex nihilo* in linguistic, methodological and theoretical terms because of the disjuncture from the centuries-old method used to access Chinese texts.

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14. Tytler believed that a translation “should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work”, “the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original”, and translations “should have all the ease of original composition” (1791/2006: 190), and he ranked the importance of these “laws” in the order given here, with top priority accorded to sense.

#### 4. Reality check

Although ‘old’ does not necessarily mean dated or irrelevant, it is important not to let a commendable desire to set store by past ideas exaggerate their actual value or to read into earlier writings more than is actually there. This demands honest acknowledgement that past ideas relating to translation were indeed often quite rudimentary in some respects and have since been superseded. Historical views should not be idealized or defended simply because of the patina of antiquity. Earlier thinkers lacked the knowledge of linguistics and the philological and other conceptual tools available to contemporary writers. Yet early conceptions often evolved over time into more refined concepts, and it is well worth studying the roots of these later notions and the specific contexts that gave rise to them as distinct from alternative ideas.

The fact that past writings on translation often seem to have foreshadowed views similar to those expressed in a more eloquent and detailed fashion in later years has led Rener (1989: 2) to warn of the “possible danger inherent in this sameness” and

the soporific effect they have not only on the general reader but also on the scholar. Their repetitious nature generates a feeling of *déjà vu* and thus lulls the reader into disregarding the importance of what the sources actually say.

The questions suggested in the first part of this paper can help break this hypnotic effect by prodding the researcher to delve deeper. These questions are, however, simply example prompts and by no means an exhaustive list of the issues that translation historians do or should consider. Moreover, many such questions will not be relevant or important in a given situation. The reality of this case study of Motoki Ryōei is that it involved a to-and-fro loop whereby the sample questions contributed to a deepening of the analysis, which in turn refined the questions. Consciously considering these and other questions did and can help reveal aspects or issues that might otherwise be overlooked, and this is particularly relevant for newcomers to historical research on translation. Such questions should not, however, act as a straightjacket that narrows rather than deepens the analytical perspective. Experienced translation historians intuitively consider many questions such as—and beyond—those mentioned here without running through a formal ‘checklist’, which could easily devolve into a piecemeal approach lacking a guiding argument. Importantly, historical studies of translation also need a more holistic and complementary underpinning in the form of integrative frameworks such as polysystem theory or Descriptive Translation Studies or approaches drawn from the field of history, such as microhistory or postmodernist historiography.



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