Why is the translation of Japanese literature important today?

Winning Entries
Leda Roodbaraky (first place)

Until I started Japanese lessons at the age of twelve, my only points of reference for its culture were those that filtered in through television screens and games consoles. I don’t believe it would be an exaggeration to claim that my entire generation grew up against a backdrop of Pokémon stickers and trading cards. Never again have I found such references so effortlessly. Once my interest in Japan began to develop, I actively sought them out – a copy of The Tale of Genji in my sixth form library; a few Murakami novels that appeared now and then in charity shops; a showing of Ponyo at an independent cinema, the original dialogue replaced with chirpy American accents. They were there waiting to be discovered, but none of them simply dropped into my lap the way the Pikachu ‘plushies’ and Pokémon-themed party invitations of my childhood had done. They existed only for those whose eyes were attracted to the foreign name, due to either prior engagement with Japanese culture or an inclination towards the unfamiliar and ‘exotic’.

Of course this last point may be somewhat of an exaggeration. Murakami in particular has enjoyed considerable success in the English-speaking world, though as many Japanophiles will bewail, none of his novels have become household names in the way that Arthur Golden’s Memoirs of a Geisha has. However, while one might from time to time spot a black-clad teenager perusing Norwegian Wood, engaging with Japanese culture remains for the most part a self-conscious act. It is highbrow by association with the foreign, and as such I often avoid taking out a copy of this or that novel in public for fear of appearing pretentious, despite the fact that the text in question might be as sensational as a Dan Brown novel, or adopt a style as irreverent and grotesque as that of Chuck Palahniuk. And for those who have delved deeper into Japanese studies, for whom names like Mishima and Tanizaki are as much a part of the mental furniture as those of Dickens and Hardy, there is an ever-present danger of forgetting that one is looking at the literary scene from a skewed perspective – my mother for example would probably be hard-pressed to name even one Japanese writer.

I was in France when I first realized how unique the English-speaking world is in its resistance to anything foreign. On walking into a book store, I found numerous translations of books I had on my own shelves, and yet I could not recall ever picking up a single French novel without some kind of academic motive. I was amazed – for the first of many such occasions – at the sheer audacity of a society that seemed to take the export of its own cultural heritage as a matter of course, while allowing only a few token works from the outside to slip past its borders. As citizens of an English-speaking nation, we are both uniquely privileged and uniquely cursed: we are able to waltz our way over foreign continents and always find someone to direct us to our hotel or decipher the menu, but we are all too often culturally impoverished - and perhaps worse, unaware of our impoverishment - because of our reluctance to engage with other languages.

The arguments for more literary translation - from all languages, not just Japanese - are well documented: the promotion of greater cultural understanding, the destruction of racial taboos, the creation of a virtual space where artists can play ping-pong with ideas across gulfs in location and language. All of these are valid and important reasons, but unfortunately not compelling to publishers who have to think along financial lines. There exists a formidable barrier then to achieving these goals, and that is the perception of translated literature as obscure and unmarketable. This is particularly the case with novels from Japan and other Asian countries, which have been traditionally framed in Orientalist discourse and as a result are considered to be somehow beyond the scope of our understanding in the absence of considerable and tedious mental effort. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that Japanese literature is the domain of academics and intellectuals, and that since these men and women represent such a small percentage of British society, it is simply not commercially viable to translate.

This assumption however, is misguided to say the least. Japan no longer exists in a cultural vacuum, and British readers would be surprised to find that – place names and culinary references aside – the overall themes are universal. Not to make the awful faux-pas of negating the uniqueness of a foreign culture in order to make it palatable to English readers, but really the so-called ‘Japaneseness’ of modern literature in particular should be seen as the icing on the cake, rather than an obstacle to understanding. With this in mind, the biggest reason for translating Japanese literature today is to overcome this artificial boundary so that the avid readers of Britain and other English-speaking countries can benefit from the import of some exceptionally good books.

I admit there is a selfish element in my desire to see more translation of Japanese literature. I am tired of revealing my field of study and finding myself instantly transformed by association into an object of curiosity. However I would also like to lay claim to a loftier motive, and that is a desire to share a culture and literary tradition that I love with my friends and family, by simply passing them a beautifully translated book which captures the essence of the original text, without the need for tedious academic explanations. The majority of Japanese writers do not belong in an ivory tower, and by consigning them to one we deprive ourselves and our literary culture of a richness and depth that lie right within our grasp.
Alice French (runner-up)

21st January

‘Translation might seem boring, but it is actually the most interesting way to understand a culture.’ That was the opening line of the talk I delivered to students at the local secondary school today. The head of the French department got in touch with me a few months ago to try and persuade me to talk to the older students about my career, but I initially refused. I remember being fifteen, and the last thing I wanted was to sit through a boring lecture by a boring middle-aged woman about her boring job as a translator. However, one morning while sitting in traffic, I suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of duty towards my profession. Translators and interpreters are a dying breed, slowly being made extinct by Google Translate and smartphones. But true translation isn’t about the words; it’s about the meaning, and what can be done with that meaning. A Japanese novel is a window into Japan’s culture for a British reader; it inadvertently educates us about social customs, politics, superstitions and, of course, food and drink. I firmly believe that an avid reader of modern Japanese fiction can be, without speaking a word of the Japanese language, better prepared for a trip to Japan than a fluent Japanese speaker. Language alone does not prepare you for the meals of live squid, the jam-packed metro, or the self-cleaning toilets. However, being able to read the latest Japanese popular novel will give diplomats and tourists alike a valuable glimpse into everyday life in Japan, making their visit far less of a leap into the unknown. This is what I told the students today, and I could tell by their faces that none of them would view translation in the same way again.

3rd February

*The Tale of Genji* is the world’s oldest full-length novel, and yet it shocks me every day how few people have even heard of it. Today I finished translating an abridged version of the story that is going to be used in British primary schools to introduce children to Asian literature. It was one of the most challenging tasks I’ve been faced with recently, because all of the grammar and vocabulary had to be adapted so as to be suitable for children who have just learned to read. However, I took up the challenge gladly because I think it’s fantastic to get children reading foreign stories from such a young age. *The Tale of Genji* is a vital piece of literature, not just because of its age but also because Shikibu was a woman, and for her to write such a highly-acclaimed novel in the 11th century had, and still has, a great deal of cultural, social and political significance. One thousand years ago, the thought of a British woman being fifteen, and the last thing I wanted was to sit through a boring lecture by a boring middle-aged woman about her boring job as a translator. However, one morning while sitting in traffic, I suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of duty towards my profession. Translators and interpreters are a dying breed, slowly being made extinct by Google Translate and smartphones. But true translation isn’t about the words; it’s about the meaning, and what can be done with that meaning. A Japanese novel is a window into Japan’s culture for a British reader; it inadvertently educates us about social customs, politics, superstitions and, of course, food and drink. I firmly believe that an avid reader of modern Japanese fiction can be, without speaking a word of the Japanese language, better prepared for a trip to Japan than a fluent Japanese speaker. Language alone does not prepare you for the meals of live squid, the jam-packed metro, or the self-cleaning toilets. However, being able to read the latest Japanese popular novel will give diplomats and tourists alike a valuable glimpse into everyday life in Japan, making their visit far less of a leap into the unknown. This is what I told the students today, and I could tell by their faces that none of them would view translation in the same way again.

6th February

I read an article in The Economist about Japan’s dispute with China over the Senkaku Islands this morning, and was very disappointed. The author of the article was British and, while he tried his best to explain the situation, it was very clear that he was writing from an outsider’s perspective. The trouble is that attempting to write articles about Asian issues such as this debate is incredibly difficult in the West, because so few of us genuinely understand each side’s point of view. The skills acquired from translating Japanese literature can be used to translate articles, for example from Japan’s *Asahi Shimbun* or China’s *People’s Daily*, allowing us to assess the stance of both nations more accurately. I often feel that we in the West try to assume that we understand global current affairs (many of which do not directly concern us!), when really the only way to properly comprehend why tensions have arisen is to read domestic journalism. Through this, we can determine the opinions and tone of someone who is experiencing the matter first-hand. If tensions surrounding these islands continue, an in-depth understanding of the issue could become crucial, as our government might need to decide whether or not to get involved (although I doubt it will come to this!). Therefore, I plan to spend the rest of the day translating the *Asahi Shim bun*’s latest piece on the Senkaku Islands dispute!