

NURTURING TALENTED TRANSLATORS TO SPREAD JAPANESE LITERATURE WORLDWIDE

Japanese writing is known to have a singular presence in the literary world. Commissioner for Cultural Affairs Ryohei Miyata speaks about the measures his agency has been taking to disseminate and showcase Japanese literature internationally.

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You are a graduate of the Tokyo University of the Arts and have been its dean for nearly ten years, and have also produced many works as a professional goldsmith. As a creator, what are your views about Japanese literature?

The more the threads of a story unwind, the more strongly I am drawn into another world. It is almost like a condensed treasure box. While reading, we also need to pay attention to the words that come before, after and in between the lines to understand.



Ryohei Miyata, Commissioner for Cultural Affairs



I believe these are the features that make Japanese literature rare within the writing world.

Those elements also make it extremely challenging to translate Japanese literature into other languages without losing its essence. In 2002, the Agency for Cultural Affairs therefore began the Japanese Literature Publishing Project. Works from the post-Meiji Period to modern times were selected and translated into English, French, German, Russian and Indonesian. By 2015, nearly 180 titles had been translated and published. These books were not only sold in various countries, they were also donated to libraries and universities. Among those many titles were some works that were not well known in Japan but became popular overseas and have since been reevaluated here at home. The publishing project ended in 2016, but now there are translation competitions, workshops, symposiums and discussions held to discover and nurture talented translators for modern Japanese literature.

What are the results of this project so far?

Three translation contests have been held since

2011. Japanese literature has gained prominence around the world due to the works of the “triangle” formed by the artist who writes, the readers overseas, and the translator that connects the two. Registration for the fourth competition will take place between June and July of 2019.

The languages for translation will be English or Russian, and are separated into two categories, fiction and critiques/essays, both with two samples as tests. For instance, in the criticism and essay category, there is a work by Tan Onuma that has a tricky line about droplets of rain falling on pear blossoms in the spring. It is not an easy translation, because it is necessary to take the story into consideration while incorporating the dedication and life the author has poured into it. It is vital for the translator to understand and pick up on the nuances. This is the first time we are including Russian translations, and I look forward to many fantastic works.

In 2018, as part of the cultural projects for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, we began the International Festival of Literature TOKYO. We introduced various international and Japanese literary works and the charms of different types of content derived from these works in a distinctive manner. Our goal is to showcase all sorts of art derived from Japanese literature. We hope to transform this event into a forum for sharing information about the value of Japanese literature to the world, and to revitalize both readers and publishers in Japan.

Have any pieces of Japanese literature left a particularly lasting impression on you?

Junji Kinoshita’s play *Yuzuru* (Twilight Crane). This was based on a folktale from my hometown of Sado in Niigata Prefecture. To dramatize this story in our hometown, my father, mother and brothers all worked together to put on a performance, asked locals to act in the play, and took care of all the acting, background sets and costumes. I was only four years old then, but I still clearly remember the silhouette of the crane on the loom against the *shoji* doors. Japanese masterpieces have been made into stage adaptations, live action films and anime. We are doing our best to ensure that more such works are created. 📖