

East Asian Philosophy and the Case against Perfect Translations

James W. HEISIG

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the readership of East Asian philosophical texts has come to include more and more academics with professional training in the Western philosophical tradition. The reasons for and against venturing into that largely unfamiliar territory cover a wide spectrum from outright refusal to rethink the borders of Western philosophy proper, to a hasty and wholesale leveling of the field. Meantime, the number of cautious readers, skeptical of the extremes but aware that the ground has shifted under their feet, is growing. Surprisingly, the importance of this emerging audience has yet to dawn on enough translators of East Asian philosophy, most of whom remain satisfied with meeting the expectations of their fellow scholars in the field and do not give serious consideration to how their translations are received by philosophers coming to the texts from a completely different background. The time has come to stir dissatisfaction among their ranks.

As the number of individual philosophers interested in Asian philosophies increases, it is only natural to expect that the academic establishment will follow suit. For now, the dominant sentiment seems to be that however high the arguments against identifying philosophy with the heritage that traces its origins to the ancient Greeks are stacked up, the idea of tearing down the walls to broaden the forum

is foolhardy. Whatever positive effects the embarrassment of riches might bring, they are just as certain to lower the standards of critical thinking. Popularizers scurrying back and forth along the buffet line to fill their plates with ideas from anywhere and everywhere could soon become the vanguard of “progressive” thought and the defenders of traditional methods discarded as remnants of the “colonial” past.

The hyperbole, as is so often the case, is especially appealing to those who rely on conventional bias and rumor for their assessment of foreign modes of thought. Cooler heads will recognize that the dialogue between Western and East Asian philosophies has a long and respectable tradition all its own, on both sides of the divide; that it has never entered into the best minds in that dialogue to dissolve their differences in some kind of bland, transcultural stew; and that the dialogue only succeeds where the full weight of critical inquiry is brought to bear on the texts and conversations that make it up.

Granted such serious dialogue has attracted little attention in Western academia, there are clear indications that things have changed dramatically in recent years. The sheer number of publications, journals, academic associations, and doctoral theses straddling philosophical traditions East and West is one thing. One might well expect this wave of enthusiasm to recede with time and be absorbed back into the dominant currents of thought, were it not for a parallel change taking place in the structure of the very societies where the philosophical academies are based. What was formerly a minority enterprise undertaken by a small number of intellectual migrants working in an academic subculture, the dialogue among philosophies has been swept up into the emerging idea of a broadly based multicultural society for which scholarship and education will have to redefine themselves. Finding a place for other modes of thought and bodies of texts in the curriculum and in philosophical discourse is not a minor accommodation for which all that is required is the humility and discipline to be guided into new and unfamiliar territory. It is a disruption of anarchic proportions, an entry into homelessness where everything is frontier

territory and there is no longer a homeland to return to. It is not a question of one traditional authority challenging another. It is a fragmentation of received authority itself and the principles that sustain it.

The idea of a multi-philosophical culture in which individual traditions sustain themselves in concert with each other is the antithesis of the varieties of monolithic philosophical culture against which the West's commitment to plurality has risen in defiance again and again throughout its history. But the challenge it poses is graver still, cutting to the very the roots of that defiance to expose a latent parochialism. Once this has come to light, any deliberate attempt to keep East Asian philosophy at arm's length from the Western philosophical tradition is bound to prove shortsighted. The decision to hold off until the ground has settled and things have returned to normal may make sound economic or political sense for the moment, but it is without a leg in reality to stand on.

While all this is taking shape slowly in the background, those engaged professionally in the foreground of Western philosophy have other, more immediate and practical reasons for caution when it comes to wading into Asian philosophical texts. Those who feel most keenly the lack of a proper textual and historical framework for placing particular texts they wish to read are likely to find that surveys and overviews only intensify the problem. It is as if one were being asked to read a text at face value, suspending the many suspicions that such a position entails. The base languages and the worldviews they encode are unknown and have had little visible impact on the modes of philosophical argument and expression to which one is accustomed. There seems no choice to but to bracket the very range of primary questions that a philosophical training prepares one to ask.

The grounds for such caution are real enough and can hardly be dismissed as simple bias. But it is the emotional reaction to the uneasiness that poses the greater barrier and, unacknowledged, infects the whole venture. The simple fact is, one is being asked to become a novice all over again, to encounter a body of thought with what amounts

to intellectual innocence. Rather than risk making make a mockery of one's previous education and career, even alone and in private, it is easier to cast these concerns aside and begin at once to read and judge as if properly equipped to do so. A second naiveté, reached through the difficult labors of detachment from one's hidden biases, is one thing. But returning to a first naiveté is almost an affront to one's intelligence. In some sense, the mind that is open for want of learning is better prepared to face the otherness of Asian philosophy than the mind that overflows with knowledge. *Philosophically*, this comes as no surprise. Practically, it frightens away the very minds that one wishes most to find a way into the dialogue.

There is not much point in issuing general, high-handed admonitions to academic philosophers to be "open-minded" towards philosophies other than their own. Still, when we review the reception of East Asian philosophies in the West, it is hard to ignore the evidence of closed-mindedness in the one profession that singles it out as the original sin. The question is how to promote the de-privatization of philosophy and restore it to a public space where its meaning and content can be negotiated by a plurality of traditions. There is no longer any question of whether this will happen, only how and with what preparation.

Although the issue has been framed as a crisis in Western philosophy, it could as well have been directed at East Asian academicians who have erected institutional walls around their specializations as high as anything to be found in the Western world. The details may differ, but the patterns of resistance to the changes that have already begun are all too similar. With that in mind, I would like to suggest one way in which the transition to a broader and truer plurality in philosophical thinking can be stimulated: the exoneration of philosophical translation from the dominant norms of excellence.

My focus here remains fixed on the way East Asian philosophy is being presented to the West in translation. I will not consider here how much of what follows below to say has to do with world clas-

sics, scriptures, or literary masterpieces. I am interested in the general mass of translations that are feeding philosophical discourse on Asian thinking around the world. For some time now, I have had the sense that an important aspect of the translator's work—where philosophy is concerned, the most important aspect—has been sacrificed time and again, and with increasing regularity, to the ruling canons of academic excellence.

Karl Jaspers once remarked that “the ultimate source of philosophy is the will to authentic communication.... All its other aims are rooted finally in communication: awareness of being, illumination through love, attainment of peace” (JASPERS 1951, 26–7). Although philosophies are often referred to as “teachings” uncovering reality as it is, are better characterized as “conversations” in which reality discloses itself. The stream of words and ideas into which individuals step in and out, the dialogue, is the life blood of philosophy. Unless what has been seen and felt and harmonized is not communicated intelligibly, there is no philosophy. The Japanese philosopher Kōyama Iwao described the philosophical task as an “antiphonal” discourse of call and response, which he considered the inexhaustibly intelligible source of all reasonableness (KŌYAMA 1976, 94–9). The restoration of antiphony, I would like to suggest, extends to the conversation between the context of the original text and the context of the translated text. The reader to whom the original text is indecipherable has access to that conversation only through the vernacular of the translation, whose ability to communicate is the final norm for excellence in translation.

I am convinced that much more is gained in the presentation of Asian philosophies in Western languages than is lost, and that, on balance, it is better to err on the side of readable, widely accessible translation than on the side of a meticulous, esoteric rendering. The addiction to the opinions of a small but critical readership of specialists in the field is nearly epidemic among translators of philosophical texts, and for this, there is no known rational cure. One can only stand by and watch the same irony play itself out again and again as obscurity

of thinking and inadequate skill at expression are projected onto the insistence that the original text is responsible for the clumsiness of the translation. This kind of failure is understandable enough, but it should become more and more inexcusable as time goes by. For that to happen, *we need to take a posture of critical suspicion towards all claims that communication should suffer in the name of fidelity to the text.*

Let us begin by drawing a distinction in scholarly translations between the thick and the thin. By a *thin translation*, I mean a largely literal rendition, faithful to the original phrase by phrase, consistent in its translation of terms, often annotated to indicate obscure allusions, and resigned to forfeiting literary style of the original for the sake of the meanings and ambiguities of the words themselves, even where this involves a certain clumsiness in syntax, the introduction of neologisms or foreign words, the insertion of bracketed remarks, or an unnatural flow in style. For the translated text to introduce nuances of meaning not present in the original is as much a fault as is the mistranslation of a term or the misreading of a grammatical construct. How perfectly the translation is executed depends also on the knowledge and skill of the translator. The ideal translation, therefore, is one in which interference by the translator and by the medium of translation is so thin as to be all but transparent, and the accuracy of the equivalences of such a high standard as to render it translucent of the underlying original. Even if such perfection were possible, the translation would be of little use to those who can read the text fluently in the original, except perhaps to save them the time when they need to cite it in translation. But for those to whom the original is closed off, it is the best they can hope for; and for those who read the original with difficulty, its thinness enables them to navigate their way quickly to the parts they want to check in the original. In any case, the *thinner* and *more perfect* the translation, the more it is considered reliable for “scholarly” purposes.

For a translation to reach perfection is for it to become a “standard” enshrined just below the original as a gateway to the author’s meaning. I am reminded of Jorge Luis Borges’s fanciful and complex tale of a

certain Pierre Menard who set out to reconstruct Cervantes' *Quixote* into the alien tongue of modern prose. Hindered by scruples over the influence of the intervening events of history, which include the publication and study of *Quixote* itself, he devoted himself to mastering seventeenth-century Castilian to create a text for our times. Thousands of pages of manuscript, draft after draft, were torn up until Menard ended up reproducing the original word for word. But although the two texts were verbally identically, Borges lavishes ironic praise on Menard's version as "almost infinitely richer." The underlying idea is repeated in a later parable Borges entitled "On Rigor in Science," which tells of a certain kingdom's addiction to making perfect maps that came to an end only when it had produced a map the size of the territory itself, which was good for nothing but to be cast away in the desert where its ruins are inhabited by beasts and beggars (BORGES 1954).

If the perfection of the thin translation is elusive and asymptotic, the completion of a *thick translation* is not. Its aim is to express the content of the original in a syntax, idiom, and fluency of prose that makes it at once intelligible and satisfying to the linguistic tastes of the translator, and appealing to the native reader of the language of translation. The thickening of the translation begins where dictionaries and reference works reach their limits. The translator breathes in the text, holds it, and then breathes it out so that the words frozen stiff on the printed page can melt into a vernacular that flows naturally for the reader. Like a good editor, the translator is not bound by the syntax and idioms of the author but aims at improving the original or, in the case of a masterly written text, making it at least plausible in translation. Lapses of logical connection are restored, wordiness is tightened, rigidity is loosened up. Sound and rhythm replace the tiresome, heavy plod of what has been carelessly written or what would appear to be carelessly written if presented in a thinner, more literal rendition. The result is not a finished product because the thick translation is not aiming at perfection.

The thick translation, therefore, rather aims at a *completion* for

which perfection is an obstacle. German does a better job of expressing the difference. *Vollständigkeit* means a state of being finished, perfected, at the end of its development; *Vollkommenheit* means that everything that should be there *is* there, that the picture is complete for development to begin in earnest. In short, thickening a translation brings it to life, transforming a text into a conversation awaiting a response. I am not talking about mere felicity of phrasing, at which some translators are better than others. I am talking about an engagement of two distinct contexts of thinking. The ideal translation in this sense is one that is thickened enough to make it interesting enough to the linguistic context of the original to prompt a second look at the original and a response to the translated interpretation. A translation that makes the uninitiated reader feel so inferior to the text as to forego criticizing it is fairly easy. A translation that invites the reader to read on and to learn is by far the more difficult task.

To give an example, I recall Joseph Kitagawa of the University of Chicago discussing with us how he considered the English translations of Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness* and Tanabe Hajime's *Philosophy of Metanoetics* often to be clearer and more interesting than the original Japanese. As a native Japanese familiar with the original, he was not unaware of the nuances of meaning and subtext that would by and large be lost on those not educated in Japanese intellectual history. He knew what was lost in translation. At the same time, he realized that there are things that had been found in the English version that were only dimly there, if they were indeed there at all, in the original. The text had been thickened to draw connections and conclusions that English style required and to introduce ambiguity where the Japanese was straightforward and univocal. To the native reader of English, the translations read as if written originally in English, but to achieve this, a heavy editorial hand was needed. Probably most scholars who have labored at presenting Asian philosophy in an intelligible philosophical vernacular know of similar cases. In the preparation of our *Sourcebook* in Japanese philosophy (HEISIG et al.), it was not possible for the

editors to thicken the translations as often as we might have liked. In the end, we had to bow to the conventional conscience in which the majority of our collaborators were formed.

In any case, the two books I referred to are examples of texts that have not only made the text available to those who do not read Japanese but have gone on to stimulate Japanese readers into a second look at the text in the light of how it has been received in the West. This goes far beyond the usual pedantry of “correcting” errors of translation to obliging a second look at the text. The content is transformed from a finished text to an ongoing conversation, in which oversights and divergences of understanding are as important as coincidence with the intentions of the author’s own language. What the original text loses in authority it gains in liveliness. It is transformed from philosophical thoughts to philosophical thinking. The aim of this communication is not to retain the purity and innocence of an original text at all costs, but to engage the original in conversation, faithful to its meaning if not always to its idiom.

No doubt someone will retort that thickening a text distorts it, and that no amount of good conversation can justify inserting and deleting words and ideas in the name of promoting philosophical interchange. There are limits beyond which the thickening becomes a mere coagulation of “inauthentic communication.” More often than not, anachronisms of usage, overlays of alien vocabulary, forced rationalization, and the like are unconscionable. But as difficult as the transition from the thin to the thick is, the only alternative is to allow the importance of *accuracy* to eclipse the importance of *expression* for communicating as much meaning as possible to as large a circle of readers as possible. Reliable, standard translations that no scholar would hesitate to cite are just as often pale, lifeless texts that only the adept can feel comfortable with. It not entirely fair to harp, but so much, so very much, of the philosophical translation done to and from Japanese seems to assume that hiring lexical conventions to assassinate decent prose is perfectly acceptable. Only such an assumption

can account for the sizable body of philosophical translation into foreign languages by Japanese with an insufficient vocabulary and little or no knowledge of the literature of the language they are working with. No amount of grammatical correction can produce natural prose, but, once again, it is the illusion of accuracy that wins out. The disservice done to the communication of philosophical thinking has almost come to be taken for granted.

Heidegger once disclosed in an interview in *Der Spiegel* published the year of his death, that the only languages in which philosophy can be expressed properly are ancient Greek and German (adding that he suspected even the French thought in German when they were philosophizing). After coming upon the passage, I rushed to ridicule it in print. But on further reflection, there is a sense in which Heidegger is correct in spite of himself to insist on the supremacy of German, namely, that *a philosopher should write as if his language were the best way to express philosophical ideas*—including ideas originally expressed in another language. The translator should take the same approach. I fear that many if not most people who write about the philosophies of other cultures and who produce philosophical translations consider their own language inferior and therefore do not hesitate to inflict every sort of disease on it in the name of “precision” and “fidelity” to an ineffable original. Insofar as such sacralizing interferes with philosophy’s commitment to communication through call-and-response, it is sacrilegious.

This does not mean, of course, that the only goal of translating Asian philosophy into Western languages or vice versa is to pamper the literary sensitivities of one’s audience. There is also the matter of loyalty to the philosophical tradition itself. This in itself should be self-evident, but one aspect merits mention here: the sense in which the corpus of translated texts can be said to define a tradition of thought. Aside from a small and not always very influential coterie of specialists, and at least since the high middle ages, philosophical traditions in the West have come to depend on a community of thought that reaches

across linguistic groups. For example, the work that is done on the German Enlightenment by those working primarily from the original texts cannot be separated from the wider circle of those working primarily from translations made into French, English, Italian, Portuguese and other European languages. Not only is a great deal of important, even indispensable work done from translations, much of it has been possible only because of the wider panorama that the translations bring to the original texts.

If Asian languages are not yet part of this circle, a large part of the blame falls on the fixation on thin and literal translations of Western texts that in turn block the call to a creative response. The rare exception aside, my experience has been that Japanese translations of classical Western texts are lacking in the distinctive touch and flavor of the culture for which the translations are being made. As long as they retain their primeval “foreignness” for the Japanese readership, their capacity to spur distinctive contributions to the multilingual forum of Western philosophy is severely limited. On the reverse side of the coin, Western translations of Asian texts, working from within centuries of familiarity with thick, creative translations has produced somewhat better results by way of serious contributions to Asian philosophy made in Western languages. The deeper disparity, however, lies in the failure of Asian philosophy to produce a community of thought for modern Asian philosophies. The amount of material in Japanese philosophy available in Western languages completely overshadows what has been translated into neighboring Asian languages. The side effect of obliging those who wish to work in the field either to learn Japanese or to work through the medium of Western languages is that the construction of such a community is only further postponed. It does not seem right that those most qualified to speak of “modern Asian philosophies” are those with access to Western languages. And as for the translations that do exist in Asian language, it is almost as if there were a tacit agreement to let the Western community of scholars decide what is worth translating.

There is a symbolic story in the Pali canon that seems to suit the situation. Two monks, brahmins by birth, approached the Buddha with the complaint: “Lord, monks of various clans and races are corrupting your words by repeating them in their own dialects. Let us record your teachings in Vedic.” But the Buddha would have none of it. “How can you be so deluded? This will not lead the unconverted to convert but will only drive the converted away.” Instead, he summoned all the monks together and instructed them that his words were not to be set down in Vedic. “Who does so would commit a sin. I authorize you, monks, to learn the Buddha’s words each in his own dialect.”

The thicker the translation, the more the authority of the original is relativized. Though historians of ideas may balk at the loss of “objectivity,” where philosophy’s “will to authentic communication” is concerned, this is just as it should be. If the primary texts of East Asian philosophical works are to stimulate a critical dialogue among Western philosophers, they will need to muster greater number of translators whose facility at interpreting in the vernacular is not afraid to stand up where necessary to the tyrannies of textual exegesis.

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