

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Homo Translator: Traditions in Translation

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An international conference on translation was held at the NIRC on 4–5 July 2019, which included talks by scholars from Europe, South America, and Japan. The conference consisted of three sessions of two presenters each as well as an opening lecture. Discussion addressed the challenges of translating religious texts across cultures and religious traditions.

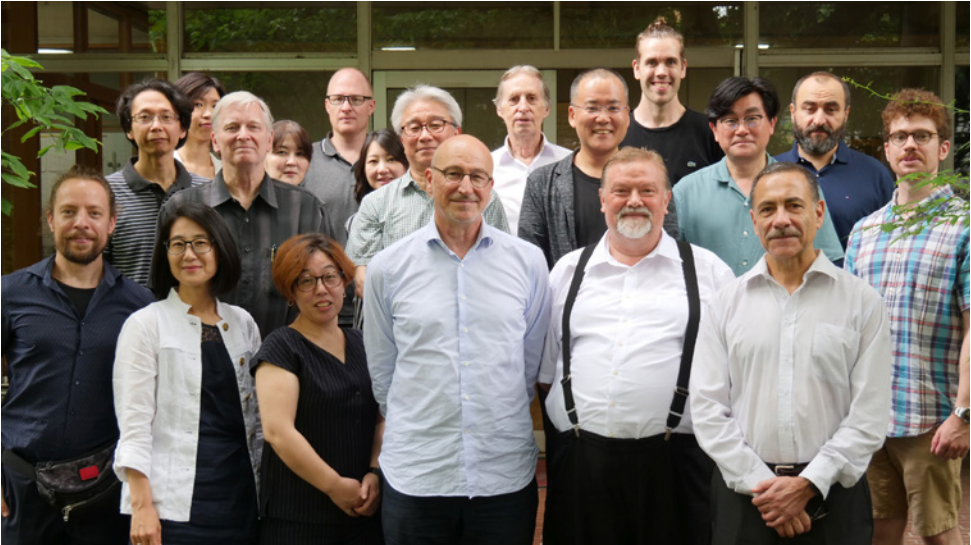
LAST SUMMER the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture hosted the fourth stage of a research project for promoting the internationalization of Nanzan University. This stage consisted of an international conference on translation. “*Homo Translator: Traditions in Translation*” brought together seven professional translators from Germany, Italy, Chile, Korea, and Japan whose specialties included classical Chinese texts, ethics, theory, and popular religious literature. Presentations were organized into three sessions based on the speakers’ respective approaches toward translation: philosophy of translation, translation in theory, and translation in practice.

The opening session began with remarks from Seung Chul Kim (Director, NIRC). The “role of *homo translator*,” Kim exclaimed, plays “an important part in what it means to be human in an increasingly interreligious and intercultural world.” The conference was designed as a forum for reflecting on the translator as mediator between religions and cultures, and Kim offered three examples of how translation achieves this lofty task. First, noting the example of code-breakers during World War II, he suggested that translation is a process of deciphering in which the translator transports hidden meaning into a recognizable visual medium. Second, it is a process of demythifying. Much like the theologian interpreting ancient words of scripture for a modern audience, the translator transforms these words into familiar language. Third, translation creates a dialogue with tradition by providing a bridge between voices from the past and present. Kim’s tripartite explanation of translation set the tone for discussions throughout the conference.

Following Director Kim's opening statements, Zbigniew Wesołowski (Monumenta Serica Institute, Germany) delivered the lecture "Hermeneutics of Understanding the Confucian Idea of Truth: Junzi 君子 as a Truth-bearer according to *Lunyu* 論語." The talk centered on the question of whether the notion of Truth can be translated across religious and philosophical traditions. The epistemological definition of Truth has primarily been premised on Aristotelian categories. In the *Lunyu*, however, the idea of Truth "was based on the category of conformity," rather than as a "property of being or a being." In the classical Chinese context, the Truth was determined through the rectification of names, which prioritized adherence to tradition. Wesołowski suggested that for the Confucian tradition knowledge "flows from the Heavenly order..., and its implementation leads to social harmony." In other words, the notion of Truth in the *Lunyu* is based on sociology, not epistemology. Therefore, the translator must consider this context of the Confucian idea of Truth in order to accurately reproduce it in a modern cultural milieu. For this reason, translation is inherently a hermeneutical process.

The second session of the conference centered on the topic of philosophy of translation. The first speaker, Adriano Fabris (Università di Pisa, Italy), addressed the connection between ethics and translation in his talk "Ethics of Translation: A Relational Perspective." Fabris defined the "act of translation" as the way in which we enact the relationships we are involved in." Translation has many levels. It is not merely the process of transcribing words from one language into another, but requires translators to have an in-depth knowledge of the cultures, histories, and societies they are connecting. The success of a translation depends on the ability of the translator to transmit the relational nature of the text across cultural and temporal boundaries. The ethics of translation, therefore, hinges on whether "it does or does not subscribe to that relational nature that makes human beings unique."

The latter half of the session consisted of a presentation by Jorge Martinez Barrera (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile) entitled "What Do We Translate When We Translate?" In his talk, Barrera described translation as a form of revelation. As the biblical story of the Tower of Babel and its Sumerian antecedent illustrate, the multitude of human languages were the result of a divine intervention intended to disperse human beings and hinder their collective activities. Writing was invented to overcome this barrier, which, along with its accomplice translation, became an indispensable tool for human civilization. The "true mission of translation," Barrera concluded in his recounting of this ancient tale, "is to reveal mutual secrets that peoples and the epochs hide, secrets that contribute so much to their dispersion and hostility." The translator's task, therefore, is to reveal these secrets and dispel hostilities between speaker and interlocutor, author and audience.



Participants of the international conference *Homo Translator: Traditions in Translation*

The conference continued the following day with a third session on translation in theory. Kiyoshi Kawahara (Kansai University, Japan) delivered a talk entitled “An Overview of Translation Studies and Religious Equivalence.” Kawahara focused on the problem of ideology and how the translator plays an active part in the ideologies they translate. The task of the translator is to transmit the metaphor of language from one social context to another. However, the translation also functions as an intervention of ideologies. The challenge for translation theory is to account for the role of the translator—their own social milieu and ideological commitments—in this process. Kawahara applied this critical approach of translation to the study of religion by highlighting Eugene Nida’s theory of religious equivalence. Rather than a philological approach that focuses on lexical equivalence, Nida’s theory encourages translators to identify the underlying metaphors of the text and reconfigure them in order to be comprehensible to the culture of the target language. Ultimately, Kawahara concluded, translation theory aims to reveal the ideologies of the translator and how these ideologies shape the final product of the translation.

Kawahara’s discussion of translating ideology was followed by a presentation from Miki Sato (Sapporo University, Japan) entitled “Translating China and the West: Literary Translation/Adaptation in the late Edo and the early Meiji.” Sato provided a glimpse into the historical process of translating foreign literature—Chinese novels in the Edo period and European literature in the Meiji period—into vernacular Japanese. This process began as simple adaptations of the stories, but as scholars improved their knowledge of foreign languages and the general public became more familiar with the cultures in which these stories originated

so did the demand for more accurate translations. Sato concluded that translations had to maintain a sense of foreignness, while making the stories appealing to their Japanese readers. Therefore, the translator also serves as a guide for their audience to explore new and foreign cultures.

The final session of the conference was held in the afternoon and featured two speakers from the Nanzan Institute. First, in his talk “Reflections on Translating Chinese Tiantai Buddhist Texts,” Paul Swanson (Senior Research Fellow, NIRC) discussed the practical challenges of making Chinese Buddhist texts accessible to a modern audience. As previously hinted at throughout the conference, context is paramount for successfully rendering a text readable in a different language. But, what does it mean to “read” a language that is temporally and linguistically distant from your own? The Chinese language, as Swanson pointed out, is logosyllabic. Thus, the reader can decipher the meaning of a term without necessarily knowing how to pronounce it. The visual nuance of a particular logogram used in Chinese is impossible to perfectly match in a language consisting of phonograms, such as English. When a logogram has multiple meanings, as is often the case, the translator must choose how to best convey these meanings in the target language. Consequently, a text could be translated in multiple ways. Therefore, translators are forced to make practical choices in accordance with the needs of their readers.

The final talk, “Translated Texts, Translated Realities: Reflections on How American Writers Mediate Korean Religious Experience,” came from Haewon Yang (Visiting Research Fellow, NIRC). Over the course of two and half decades as a translator in Christian publishing, Yang has seen firsthand the professionalization of the translation business. Although the translation of Christian popular writing in Korea was initially an endeavor of missionaries, it has since become a profitable market. This increase in demand required improvements in quality. For translators, “quality” means striking a balance between faithfully reproducing the words of the original text, while deftly adapting its religious sentiments to the context of Korean evangelical Christianity. In other words, translations must be accurate, but they also have to sell. The economics of translation requires the translator to make practical decisions when interpreting the words of the author. Regarding the ethics of such decision-making, Yang proposed that translators owe “some level of fidelity” to the author if they expect to earn the trust of their readers. Furthermore, the texts that are selected for translation have political and cultural consequences. Yang noted the example of the progressive turn in Korean evangelicalism that was, in part, due to the translation of works by progressive Christians. Therefore, when translating religious texts, fidelity and the choice of text to be translated are ethical choices that have a lasting impact on the religious views of their audience.

Like any successful conference, “*Homo Translator: Traditions in Translation*” left participants with more questions than answers. As the presentations and discussion outlined above has demonstrated, the utility of a translation strongly depends on the translator’s ability to bridge two dissimilar social contexts. But, what about the aspects of culture that cannot be conveyed through words? How should the translator communicate unspoken meaning from one cultural context to another? After all, the impact of a religious text is often what is left unsaid, rather than the precise wording on the page. Kim closed the conference with a challenge for translators of religious text: “We must,” he proclaimed, “have not only the courage to interpret but the courage to misinterpret as well.” The ancient art of translation is still vital to increasing understanding and improving communication among human beings. Although a daunting task, the *homo translator* must endeavor to bring together disparate peoples and cultures by sharing their traditions, ideas, and religious sentiments.