

Japanese visual narrative in translation

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Abstract

This article deals with the translation of autobiographical essay manga into English. In particular, the article aims to shed light on the strategies employed in translation to ‘perform authenticity,’ in order to preserve the referential pact that autobiographical works seek to establish with their readers.

The first part of the article deals with the definition of comics, graphic novels, and essay manga. After that, the case study of an essay manga recently translated into English is analysed, in order to describe and explain the strategies employed to convey a sense of authenticity to the target readers.

Keywords : Essay manga, graphic novels, manga in translation

Introduction

According to the translation theorist Klaus Kaindl, a significant factor influencing the translation of comics is the role and prestige that a visual culture may assign to the medium of comics. In some countries, comics were not initially granted social acceptance, and were said to have a bad influence on young people (Kaindl 1999, 272). As a consequence, “comics have also been the object of explicit institutional censorship or preventive self-censorship by publishers and translators, regardless of the political orientation and government of any one country” (Zanettin 2020, 76). This is also true for manga in translation.

As Casey Brienza explained, US manga publishers may feel pressured to censor depictions of sex, religion, drug and alcohol use, and depictions of prejudice such as racism and homophobia (Brienza 2016, 122). Manga intended for younger audiences like *shōnen* and *shōjo* manga that contain depictions of potentially problematic representations are routinely censored in the process of translation in order to produce target texts that may be considered appropriate for younger American readers. These processes may involve, for example, the redrawing of sexually suggestive images and text, or their complete omission. But what about manga works that are intended for a mature audience? How do publishers and translators deal with these issues? In this article, I will examine the translation of a type of autobiographical manga known as ‘essay manga’ in order to shed light on how manga for mature audiences are translated into English. In the first part of the

article, a definition of manga and comics will be introduced. After that, the article will explain the theoretical framework adopted for analysis, and finally it will introduce a case study of an essay manga in translation, followed by a discussion of the findings and some concluding remarks.

Manga, comics, and graphic novels.

In Japan, the general term for comics is manga (漫画; lit. 'whimsical pictures'). As Kinko Ito noted, the definition of manga also includes the broader sense of 'a picture drawn in a simple and witty manner,' for example in the case of political cartoons, syndicated panels and gag manga (Ito 2010, 9), which is perhaps closer to the meaning of 'cartooning' in English. According to Ito, when Japanese people refer to manga, they often mean 'story manga', unless otherwise noted by the speaker (Ito 2010, 9). Ito further argued that story manga as a category tends to deal with serious themes with social, psychological, and political implications (among many others), and in this sense it may be closer to the anglophone conceptualisation of graphic novels.

This is to say that story manga are not always humorous or targeted chiefly to children. In Japan, manga are generally first published in periodicals intended for specific age and gender categories such as *kodomo* (children), *shōnen* (boys), *shōjo* (girls), *seinen* (mature men) and *josei* (mature women) (Ingulsrud and Allen 2009, 3). These categories may not necessarily correspond to the actual age and gender of readers, but serve more as an indication of the content and complexity of the stories contained in these magazines.

In addition to all the above, within the medium of manga it is also possible to draw a distinction between serialised story manga originally published in weekly or monthly manga magazines and other types of visual narratives published in standalone book format. An example of such narratives alternative publications are 'tōjisha manga', defined by Yoshiko Okuyama as autobiographical graphic memoirs that deal with the topic of mental health (Okuyama 2022). In her work, Okuyama also describes the broader category of 'essay manga', defined as the Japanese equivalent of western autobiographical comics that serves as a general category to label tōjisha manga titles (Okuyama 2022, 77).

Essay manga differ from regular story manga in significant ways. According to Okuyama, essay manga are "comics based on the author's daily occurrences and real-life experiences". Okuyama describes essay manga as "casual readings of serious social issues" such as "interracial marriage, dieting, language learning, personal finance, and parenting to medical treatment of serious illnesses such as depression" (Okuyama 2022, 77). Unlike conventional story manga where information is conveyed through speeches and actions, essay manga tend to rely on first-person narration, and can be considered as part of a popular genre of Japanese self-narratives that includes diaries, essay, and novels, but expressed in the form of comics (Okuyama 2022, 78)

Performed authenticity

For the purpose of this article, I want to draw attention to the relationship that essay manga authors seek to establish with their readers. Writing about autobiographical comics, Elisabeth El Refaje explained that the definition of autobiography depends on a 'referential pact,' a tacit understanding between author and reader which commits the former to a "sincere effort to be a truthful as possible" (Lejeune's 1989 in El Refaje 2012, 17). El Refaje argues that while comics allow a plurality of pictorial embodiments (El Refaje 2012, 52) and that, generally speaking, readers have no way of knowing if the events depicted in autobiographical comics really happened in the way the author described them, we can still observe powerful cultural conventions governing the construction and interpretation of works labelled as autobiographical (El Refaje 2012, 137).

This is to say that readers expect some kind of "special relationship" between an autobiographical narrative and the life it purports to represent, which El Refaje described in terms of "performed authenticity" (ibid.). In practice, we could say that authenticity is performed through various devices and techniques, similar to genre convention. What, then, are the genre conventions through which authenticity is performed in essay manga?

Okuyama describes some of the characteristics of essay manga as a genre: 1) they often make use of handwritten background text placed outside of speech balloons; 2) the distinction between the main character's speech and the author's narration is often blurry; and 3) characters are drawn simply and comically (Okuyama 2022, 84). In other words, in essay manga the author is portrayed as the protagonist of the story, and the story is understood to be based on the author's own real life. To reinforce the impression of authorial presence, first-person narrative is often presented in the form of handwritten background text; finally, characters (including the author) are drawn in a simple, undemanding style, with flat bodies and simple faces, in contrast to the elaborate designs typical of story manga. According to Okuyama, taken as whole, all these conventions aim to produce an effect of friendliness and closeness in order to appeal to readers who may not necessarily want to read regular story manga, while also potentially attracting authors who may not regularly draw manga (Okuyama 2022, 89).

Having explained the idea of performed authenticity in essay manga, in the next section I would like to illustrate how this concept can also influence the translation of these kind of texts. As we have seen, essay manga can be said to draw on a certain special relationship between the text and the reader, a 'referential pact' based on the tacit understanding that the events depicted in the story are truthful, and that they correspond to the author's lived experience. In light of this referential pact, how does the autobiographical nature of essay manga affect the way they are translated?

Theoretical framework

In order to describe what happens in the process of manga translation, here I will draw from functionalist theories of translation, as explained by the translation scholar Christiane Nord. In short, Nord proposed a typology of 'documentary' and 'instrumental' translation processes based on the intended function of the translated text. According to Nord, in documentary translations certain aspects of the source text are reproduced for the target culture readers, "who are conscious of 'observing' a communicative situation in which they are not a part" (Nord 2005, 80). Nord argues that forms of documentary translation may be used in the translation of ancient texts, in Bible translation, or in translations from distant cultures to show the structural features of one language by means of another (Nord 2018, 46-47) and in literal, philological, or 'exoticizing' translations that aim to preserve the local colour of the source text (Nord 2005, 81).

Conversely, Nord explained, an instrumental translation serves as an "independent message-transmitting instrument" (Nord 2005, 81), meaning that "it is intended to fulfil a communicative purpose without the receiver being aware of reading...a text which, in a different form, was used before in a different communicative action (ibid.). In other words, this is a situation in which the intended recipients read the translated text as if it were a text written in their own language (Munday 2016, 131) such as translation of instruction manuals or tourist information texts. In these situations, readers would ideally not even notice (or be interested in) the fact that they are reading a translation (Nord 2018, 48).

The decision to adopt documentary or instrumental forms of translation may be motivated by a number of considerations. As discussed above, in the field of comics in translation one influential factor is the role and prestige that a particular visual culture assign to comics. According to Cristopher Murray (2023) in the US and Britain, the term 'comics' generally denotes a periodical for children often intended for younger readers, sold in newsstands, and containing advertising pages, competitions, puzzles, and so on.

As an alternative to the juvenile understanding of comics intended for younger audiences, the English term 'graphic novel' is used to refer to a type of comics that is published as a complete story, rather than a periodical. According to Murray, graphic novels are longer narratives intended for a mature audience, published in a standalone book format, and sold in bookstores, often dealing with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork. It should be noted here however that the distinction between 'juvenile' comics and 'serious' graphic novels can be controversial, and that no such distinction is required in continental Europe or in Japan, because in countries like Italy, France and Japan "the acceptance of comics as an art form and a literary mode is unproblematic" (Murray 2023).

While mainstream *shōnen* and *shōjo* manga are usually translated for an audience of younger readers, here the focus is on works that are intended for a mature audience. In the next section, I will present the case study of a Japanese essay manga published in English as a complete story in a

standalone book format typical of graphic novels. Different elements of the source and target texts (title, reading direction, use of translation notes, etc.) will be compared following the functionalist typology of translation processes described above, with the aim of describing how these elements were adapted during the process of translation.

Case study: *My lesbian experience with loneliness*

『さびしすぎてレズ風俗に行きましたレポ』(hepburn: Sabishisugite Rezu Fūzoku ni Ikimashita Repo, lit., "A Report on Being So Lonely That I Went to a Lesbian Sex Service") is an essay manga by Nagata Kabi, originally published in Japan on the art website Pixiv and later published as a single volume by East Press in 2016. It was published in English in 2017 by Seven Seas Entertainment, an American manga publisher based in Los Angeles, with the title *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*.

This work recounts the author's life, in particular the ten-year period after she graduated from high school and her debut as manga artist. After dropping out of university, struggling with anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, Nagata begins to distance herself emotionally from social interactions. Nagata illustrates her story in great detail, including details into her struggle to find and keep a job, her self-harming behaviour, her eating disorders, her personal hygiene, and her relationship with her family members.

The author also explains how she came to the decision to hire a lesbian escort. After much reflection, Nagata comes to recognise her unhealthy obsession with her mother's body and starts to wonder if that may be a sign of her attraction towards women. Determined to find out more about her sexual orientation, she finally decides to book an appointment with a female escort agency. The manga begins with the encounter between Nagata a female escort, and then goes back to recount her life leading up that point, and ends a little later with the author insights on what she has learned from her experience.

Sabishisugite Rezu Fūzoku ni Ikimashita Repo clearly displays the genre conventions of essay manga described by Okuyama. It deals with serious themes of mental health, self-harm, and loneliness, but in a humorous and casual way. The characters are drawn simply and in a cute style, and the author establishes a referential pact with the readers by explicitly presenting herself as the person depicted in the manga (see Figure 1 below). The story is mainly narrated in first-person, with extensive use of handwritten text inserted in the background.



Figure 1 : Nagata Kabi 2017, 121

About translation

In the following section I will describe some of the main features of the English translation of *Sabishisugite Rezu Fūzoku ni Ikimashita Repo*. To begin with, the Japanese title could be said to anticipate the events depicted in the manga, with an emphasis on the 'factual report' aspect of the work. In other words, the Japanese title could be read as a truthful account of the events and reasons that led the author to hire a lesbian escort. The English title (*My lesbian experience with loneliness*) in contrast seems to emphasise the 'lesbian experience' element of the work. This may have been a strategic decision on the part of the publisher and the translator, in order perhaps to better market the work to foreign readers potentially interested in queer narratives.

In terms of content, the English edition of the manga does not omit or change any of the potentially problematic depictions present in the Japanese original. The manga includes raw depictions of Nagata cutting herself, her eating disorders, low-self-esteem, and her issues with her parents. Some illustrations even prompted a reviewer to warn readers about potential triggers for "self-harm, anorexia and bingeing, depression, and possibly suicidal thoughts" (Helen 2017). The manga also depicts the protagonist's sexual encounters in simple but explicit drawings. Furthermore, Nagata also presents the escorts she hired as exceptionally patient and kind toward her, and the manga has been praised for the dignity and agency of its representation of sex workers (Skelly 2017).

The English translation preserves the Japanese reading direction (from right-to-left), meaning that it is not 'flipped' or rearranged to accommodate western reading conventions. A note and a diagram were added to the back of the volume, explaining the way manga is read starting from the top right panel. The diagram illustrates this with numbered speech balloons. Furthermore, the English version also includes translation notes inserted at the margin of pages, explaining the meaning of Japanese words retained in the text. For example, on page 5 of the English translation a note explaining the meaning of 'doujinshi' was added. The English translation also retains prices in

Japanese yen, and notes are added at the margin converting the value in US dollars (for example on pages 62 and 108).

The English version replaced Japanese mimetic and onomatopoeic expressions with English equivalents. For example, on page 11, the mimetic expression ヨロヨロ was replaced by the English words 'stagger wobble'. Furthermore, signage and kanji were replaced by English words. For example, on page 15 the katakana sign on a cup of ramen (ラーメン) was replaced by the word 'ramen'. This means that some of the hand-drawn writing and drawings in the original were deleted and replaced with (more or less) equivalent expressions in English.

Finally, the name of the translator, Jocelyne Allen, does not appear on the front cover of the volume. It can be found at the back of the volume, credited at the top, and followed by the name of the people responsible for adaptation, lettering and layout, cover design, proofreading, editing and so on.

Discussion and conclusion

To summarise the above findings, it could be argued that the English translation of *Sabishisugite Rezu Fūzoku ni Ikimashita Repo* presents a mix of documentary and instrumental translation processes. Documentary translation processes include the choice of preserving Japanese reading direction, the preservation of potentially controversial images and content, and the use of footnotes to explain Japanese culture specific references. On the other hand, instrumental translation processes can also be observed, such as the choice of replacing mimetic and onomatopoeic expressions with English equivalents (instead of, say, preserving and explaining them with footnotes), the rewording of the title into English, and the relegation of the translator's name to a relatively small mention at the back of the volume.

The aim of this article was to shed light on the translation of essays manga, proposing the hypothesis that this genre of autobiographical narratives may present significant differences from the way manga intended for younger audiences are translated. To an extent, this seems to be the case. However, the work presented here as a case study could be said to deviate in significant ways from the category of 'documentary' translation as envisaged by Nord (2018).

As explained, it seems that at the pictorial level, documentary translation strategies were favoured, and the translated work does not shy away from presenting potentially disturbing representations to target readers. On the other hand, at the level of written language, a mix of translation strategies can be observed. Some Japanese cultural references are preserved and explained, but features of the Japanese language such as mimetic words are simply replaced by English equivalents. This seems to be rather arbitrary, and it is not clear why some cultural references were worth preserving and explaining, while others were not.

Furthermore, the rewording of the title could be interpreted as a marketing trick to create something more appealing and suggestive for the target readers but also may be seen to diminish

the autobiographical character of the Japanese title. This could explain why the English version credits the Japanese author on the front cover with the words "(true story) by Nagata Kabi", instead of simply presenting the author's name like in the Japanese source text. This is to say that the addition of "true story by" in brackets can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to perform authenticity.

Finally, the relegation of the translator's name to the back of the volume also seems to contradict the documentary function of the translated texts. This is to say, the text is clearly presented as a foreign work, created by a Japanese author. The preservation of Japanese reading direction and the use of translation notes makes this explicit to readers. Yet, the cover of the volume only displays Nagata's name, obscuring the fact that Allen, the translator, is the one responsible for creating the English text.

This omission may point to a wish to present the work as a transparent self-representation, and not something that was mediated by a translator. According to the translator scholar Lawrence Venuti, an important reason behind the effacing of the figure of the translator is the individualistic conception of authorial originality that prevails in British and American cultures (Venuti 2008, 6). In other words, effacing the name of the translator in order to foster the illusion of authorial presence may be understood as another authenticating strategy.

To conclude, this article presented a single case study of an essay manga in translation into English, with the aim of describing the translation strategies observed in light of the autobiographical nature of this work. More research may be needed to draw broader conclusions, perhaps looking at more translations of similar works as well as comparing translations into different languages, in order to better understand the norms that may be at play in this field of cultural production.

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