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Lightning in a Bottle: A Case Study of Publishing Literary Translation

Reviewed by Hera Chan

Yoko Tawada's unfinished texts

I used to think all language came from my mother. Appended were the love songs of Teresa Teng and social songs of Sam Hui, as footnotes enframing her timbre in English. Only later did I learn of the phrase 'mother tongue', the gravitas of origin stories, MTV, and context. In San Francisco, my Cantonese went from 'native' to a refusal to speak to one with an American accent—my voice keeping no secrets about where I've been. Writer Yoko Tawada said that for Japanese, it is not only produced in Japan, but in remote places like overseas language schools. As part of *Translating the Future*, a conference organized for The Graduate Center at the City University of New York from May 12 to September 25, 2020, *Lightning in a Bottle: A Case Study of Publishing Literary Translation* is an online conversation between Tawada; Margaret Mitsutani, her Japanese to English translator; Susan Bernofsky, her German to English translator; Barbara Epler and Jeffrey Yang of New Directions Publishing; Rivka Galchen, avid reader and writer for *The New Yorker*; and moderator Stephen Snyder.

Born in Japan and now living in Germany, Tawada is known for her fictional works that embark on never-ending processes of translation. During this conversation, Tawada describes what she means when she calls herself an exophonic writer: 'I am free from how the Japanese language should be, or how the German language should be.' Nothing can be located and everything is foreign. Spoken phrases are taken precisely in the context of the listener, to what they hear as outsiders to the language. Her characters remain complicit and committed to the situation. For Tawada, her texts cannot be complete without being translated. 'The voice of the text says: Translate me! Translate me!'

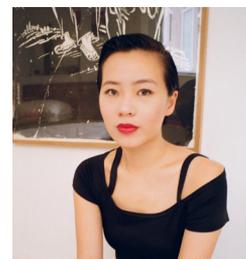
The Zoom conference stitched in each person, visually mapping out their relations to each other and chronicling



the process of how a book goes transnational. The speakers span four countries. I watched from yet another. My first encounter with Tawada's work was with *The Naked Eye* (2004), in which a girl from Communist Vietnam is brought to Germany to rally the troops. She gets abducted, ultimately ends up in Paris, and becomes enamoured with the image of Catherine Deneuve. The narrator says to the cinema screen, 'the only woman in the world was you, and so I did not exist.' Each of the 13 chapters is named after a Deneuve film, and the scenography of the films entangles with the facts of her life. At the time of reading, I had not seen a single one of these films. After reading, I only watched films with Catherine for one month, one to two films per day.

Tawada's dealings with language end up with characters taking things literally. If corn has ears, can they listen? Which leads me to taking things personally. In the conversation, Tawada described the usual definition of a bad translation into Japanese, which is when Japanese readers can feel the foreign in the syntax, the grammar, the word choice. This makes her want to write texts that are 'bad translations'. In her experience, translators like impossible texts, for perhaps the resistance is inherent in language. Her words arrive unrestrained, as borderless. This may feel relevant to the current pandemic. Written in the wake of 311 or the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster, her book *The Emissary* (2018) describes a future Japan that

has brought back Edo-era isolationist policies. The youth are frail and have no memory of having bone strength while the elderly care for them, heartbroken at what their descendants do not know they don't have. Foreign literature is illegal, as are world maps. Futurity has been grounded, yet the characters still arrive at their desired destination. Tawada once mused whether languages with no direct word translations for concepts had no use for those concepts. Across the world, it seems we are at a lost for words to pinpoint our new reality. If I were to follow Tawada, I would guess that this reality exists only to be found in our stores of second-hand languages.



Hera Chan is not to be confused with Miss Hong Kong 2019. Currently, she is participating in the De Appel Curatorial Programme in Amsterdam. Formerly, she was associate curator of public programmes at Tai Kwun Contemporary and researcher at the SEACHINA Institute for socially engaged art practices in contemporary China.