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Adventures in Translation

Challenges Encountered by a Foreign Author Trying Her Best to Render the Title of Her Novel about Yuzuru Hanyū (羽生結弦) into Japanese

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It all started when I wanted to craft a beautiful hashtag in Japanese to best convey the title of my new book—*Yuzuru. Il volo del samurai* (Yuzuru. The Flight of the Samurai), published in Italy on February 3, 2026, by noted European publisher Giunti—to my many Japanese readers. A book, born out of the utmost respect and admiration for figure skating legend, artist, author and philosopher Yuzuru Hanyū—whom I had interviewed in 2024 as part of my series on Japanese philosophy for Italy's leading daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*—and written with the utmost care, with the help of an army of Japanese translators who, over the years, have translated his interviews with trusted and reputable sources. A book written with young adult audiences in mind in the style of a young adult novel that I hope readers of all ages will be able to appreciate.

A short digression. People who don't know much about literary genres might wonder why I wrote my book in the style of a novel, albeit extremely faithful to first-hand sources. As a novelist and literary author, I knew that a novel was the best medium to convey Hanyū-san's extraordinary life, which goes so much beyond his records. The way he was able to give hope to his people after "3.11", to give them a voice, to be a light for them, his quadruple Axel quest, the years of blood, sweat and tears it required. This, as I recently pointed out in a lecture at the University of Pavia, Italy, on the meaning of life in Japanese philosophy as seen through Yuzuru Hanyū, Dai Ajari RyōJun Shionuma, and philosopher Masahiro Morioka, is the stuff of literature. I knew there was a story there that needed to be

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told in a way no straight-up sports biography could ever do. In other words, I tried to do what J.R. Moehringer did with Andre Agassi's book *Open*: not just a sports memoir, but a coming-of-age novel as well, focusing on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist. At the heart of my book, permeated with Japanese philosophy, is the story of how Hanyū-san became a symbol of hope for Japan and beyond. As a Westerner, I also hope this book will help fill a gap in the awareness and understanding of Hanyū-san's legacy in the Western world.

Interest in the book has been tremendous, and starting March 11, a very significant date, the book will be available in Japan as well (through Magazine Mart), which made choosing the best Japanese title for my book suddenly more pressing and important.

The issue was: what are the linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by a non-Japanese author wishing to best translate the title of her book, and more specifically the word "samurai", which in my book doesn't refer to an actual samurai, but rather to a set of values that Hanyū-san embodies?

I quickly realized this was no easy task.

You see, whereas in English or Italian what we mean by "samurai" is, though stereotypical to a degree, also more immediate, in Japanese there are a great many nuances, and I knew the kanji for "samurai"「侍」, though the most obvious choice for some, would not be the best one for me.

So, how did I go about it?

First of all, I double-checked all my translations with an advanced version of ChatGPT ("Chat-kun", as I call it, although we don't interact much, frankly, because I find it way too stubborn). At first, it suggested the katakana for "samurai", which I considered but ultimately didn't agree with, because I thought it might reflect a Hollywood-style take on the word "samurai" that is entirely absent from my book. ChatGPT then suggested 「侍」 as a "more natural Japanese word".

I told Chat-kun that I'd get back to it.

Keep in mind that in the book, I never really call Hanyū-san a "samurai", but rather a "warrior", and that the word "samurai" only appears three times in my novel: in the title of the book, as mentioned above, because it's more immediate for general audiences such as mine than the broader term "warrior"; in the title of Chapter VII ("Like a samurai"), where I recount the grueling years leading up to the Beijing 2022 Olympics and the making of Hanyū-san's last free competitive program, *Heaven and Earth—Ten to Chi To* (天と地と), inspired by Kenshin

Uesugi, one of the most powerful daimyō of the Sengoku period, whose values and destiny Hanyū-san aligned himself with in that program which would eventually feature his quadruple Axel; and at the beginning of Chapter VIII ("The Art of War"), set on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, where I briefly bring up the etymology of the word "samurai" to note how Hanyū-san continued to serve his country and the Japanese Skating Federation.

Later, taking the time to discuss the issue with a friend and longtime Hanyū-san's admirer, we wondered whether the kanji for "shi"「士」(etymology 1: a man who is esteemed or learned; a gentleman; a samurai / warrior) would not be a better word than「侍」—one that also "elevates". Perhaps adding the furigana for clarity, she suggested, since「士」, a broad term with various meanings, is not the conventional reading of "samurai" (the Japanese use 漢字「士」very often, but not many read it as "samurai"). Furthermore, etymologically,「侍」means "one who serves at one's side", a servant, a retainer: in other words, "one who serves a nobleman". And although the Japanese verb "to serve" is mentioned in the book (see above), the word "samurai", as intended in my novel, conveys something more noble. Last, "shi"「士」is a character that seems to have a special meaning to Hanyū-san, and without trying to appear overly flattering, I believe that in a discussion on translation that is also a discussion on the translation of the title of a book about one specific person, this should have some bearing.

The rather obvious next question was: "shi" or "bushi" (「士」or「武士」)? That is, Hanyū-san as a more generic "warrior" or as a someone who embodies the integrity and resolve of "bushidō", the way and spirit of the samurai, if you will? In modern popular usage, the terms "bushi" and "samurai" are often loosely used in English to refer to any soldier or warrior during Japan's feudal age, prior to the Meiji period. Only in historical and academic contexts, these terms are used more specifically: "bushi" for a professional warrior, and "samurai" for a hereditary social class.

When I talked with Professor Morioka about the challenge I had undertaken, he noted that this is a very complex subject in Japanese culture and language. And pointed to the heated discussions between academics over the supposed differences between「士」and「武士」. For example, Kanno Kakumyō, a scholar specializing in ethics and Japanese intellectual history, argues that「士」and「武士」are completely different, and that while「士」is a bureaucrat influenced by Chinese Confucianism,「武士」is a warrior employed to kill

people on a battlefield. So much so, he says, that「武士」are often criticized by「士」as "barbarious warriors". What is more, Kanno argues that the whole concept of bushidō was manufactured in the Meiji period by Japanese diplomat Inazō Nitobe (1862-1933) in his famous book "Bushido. The Soul of Japan", published in English in New York in 1899 and subsequently translated into Japanese, which gained popularity in Western countries and created their (our) image of the samurai.

As the author of one of the earliest nonfiction books on the recent cultural phenomenon known as cancel culture (*Scorrettissimi* [The Most Politically Incorrect. Cancel Culture in America], published by Laterza in 2022 and listed as one of the best books of 2023 in Spain), a subject that I covered for almost ten years in *Corriere della Sera*'s weekly literary supplement *La Lettura*, changing sensitivities and legitimate academic revisionism are very important to me, and I think they should not be overlooked in a discussion of this sort. In other words, Kanno's argument was one that I couldn't ignore.

Not that everyone agrees, of course.

I then spoke with my Japanese friend and professional translator Minori Shimizu, a descendant of samurai, who translated my *Corriere della Sera* interview with Hanyū-san in 2024 and a couple of other interviews in my series, most notably with Dai Ajari RyōJun Shionuma, founder of Jigenji's Temple in Akiu, Sendai, whose memoir of his Sennichi Kaihōgyō *Kozō no Kokoro* (2008) I'm bringing to Italy as his editor for Vallardi, a publisher specializing in Japanese Buddhism, among other subjects.

After mentioning that Japanese book titles often stray from the original versions—see「赤毛のアン」for *Anne of Green Gables* or「若草物語」for *Little Women*—, Ms. Shimizu emphasized that, to a Japanese reader, "bushi" and "samurai" are strikingly different, both from each other and from any interpretation we might attach to them in the West, much like words such as "harakiri" or "kamikaze".

She then suggested what I thought was a beautiful expression:「武士の魂」(the samurai's soul/spirit; 魂 = soul in Japanese), rather than「侍の魂」.

«What in the West is intended by "samurai", that is, a set of values», Ms. Shimizu told me, «is really the word "bushi", not "samurai". A word, "bushi", already in use around the year 900 AD, and which appears in historical records as early as 721 AD, whereas "samurai" starts circulating much later (Edo period, 1603-1868)».

Meanwhile, Paolo Calvetti, Professor of Japanese language and literature at Università Ca' Foscari in Venezia and visiting professor at Waseda University, who masterfully translated my interview with aikidō sensei Hiroshi Tada, pointed out that, on social media, Japanese readers, in keeping with the exotic-sounding character of the Italian title of my novel, were already translating it as「羽生結弦―サムライの飛翔」, with the word "samurai" written in katakana, and that to him this would be the most sensible choice. «Even more so when considering the pernicious rhetoric that comes to mind nowadays when talking about Japanese males», he said.

The katakana was also suggested by another Japanese friend who emphasized that the word "samurai" in my book doesn't refer to an actual samurai. «It's the samurai temperament that Westerners imagine», she said, «and I think the katakana expresses this clearly. Of course, there's nothing wrong with「侍」, and it saves on characters» (not a small matter when writing kanji, as you know). «So, while semantically I think「士」is better, since「侍」is more commonly used than「士」in kanji, I feel that the katakana more accurately expresses the meaning of "samurai" as used in your original book title».

Most importantly, perhaps, I reflected, the katakana would have muffled a fear that, as a scholar of cancel culture and a foreign author writing about a Japanese person, was always in the back of my mind through all this: the issue, amply discussed in my 2022 study, of cultural appropriation.

While I continued to ponder, another Japanese friend, Izumi Suzuki, a professional translator in the US, had a different opinion:

«It's been said for some time», she told me, «that even though Hanyū-kun can look so gender-free, his inner self has always had that "samurai spirit" (「侍魂」samurai damashii = soul). The Japanese use this expression with the utmost respect, having a clear idea of how a「侍」should be: loyal to his lord, selfless, one that pours all his heart and passion in what he does, that is ready to die for a great cause. Whenever the Japanese think of the samurai, it is always with the kanji「侍」, never in hiragana or katakana. Historically, the kanji was only used by men, and kanji itself, to Japanese people, has a connotation of manliness attached to it. We could argue that「武士」has the same meaning and connotation as「侍」. However, in this case, I believe that one Chinese character is simpler and more powerful».

I thought it made sense, at this point, to speak with a Chinese-American researcher friend whose interest in the use and misuse of Chinese characters,

though bordering on obsession sometimes, often produces wonderful insights. Aligning herself with Kanno Kakumyō, she told me about the history of Japanese militarism and the role played by both the aforementioned Nitobe Inazō and philosopher Tetsujirō Inoue (1855–1944), an educator known for introducing Western philosophy in Japan.

«Nitobe's book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* selectively synthesized samurai ideals with Western ethical concepts, shaping the foundation of global perceptions of bushidō. But it was not a historical account. In Japan, Nitobe's work was criticized for simplification and romanticization. At about the same time, Inoue played a pivotal role in the domestic systematization of bushidō, transforming samurai ethics into codified virtues for education and civic morality (loyalty, self-discipline, honor). Both Nitobe and Inoue contributed to the mythology and misperception that bushidō is ancient and timeless, while it is really a modern concept. This said, the real problem with bushidō lies not so much in its historical existence, but in how its invocation almost invariably serves to exonerate acts of violence».

Then came her most interesting argument, and the most relevant to my quest for "the best Japanese title":

«In other words», she added, «bushidō is less a description of medieval behavior than a language device: it moralizes obedience, valorizes sacrifice, and removes the right to refuse. When mobilized, it transforms individual choice into a perceived moral obligation. The moment we categorize Hanyū's resolve as "bushidō" we stop describing what he actually does. Instead, we turn a living ethical struggle into a cultural shorthand—one that feels familiar and flattering but is in fact historically loaded. Semantic betrayal occurs when a word survives history but its ethical constraints do not. Hanyū-san is an authentic「士」, not the made-up term "bushi". What he embodies exceeds a role-based ethic (that is, one grounded in loyalty to a system or an inherited script). Hanyū represents something different: a personal ethic, grounded in loyalty to an internal truth. By labeling this as "bushidō" we do not elevate his achievement. We inadvertently diminish his agency. We overlook his actual practices: meticulous training, self-set standards, and personal responsibility. Hanyu's virtues predate and transcend bushidō, belonging instead to universal human ethical effort. Bushidō frames virtue through adherence to prescribed roles: Hanyu's excellence emerges from choosing his own standards. To describe Hanyū as a figure of bushidō is to flatten a complex, personal ethic into a borrowed historical narrative. Respectful as it

may seem, it simplifies and misrepresents the very qualities that make him remarkable».

Though I don't know enough about Japanese history to agree with all the points my friend made in an absorbing discussion that went on for a couple of days, I certainly do agree with the points she made about Hanyū-san.

What is more, something else was abundantly clear to me, by then, from my investigation: sensitivities differ, and at a time of legitimate academic revisionism in Japan, they cannot be ignored. A character that to one is the most noble, to another might come across as tricky and controversial. And who was I, a foreigner, to use one or the other, thus risking, which is worse than cultural appropriation, offending my readers and perhaps even Hanyū-san along with them?

That is why, in the end, I decided to forgo both「侍」and「武」and go with『羽生結弦 士の魂』(Yuzuru Hanyū, The Soul of a Warrior) for the title of my book in Japanese. Using Hanyū-san's full name because in Japanese it's more common than just using his first name, as we would do in the West for a young adult novel.

I was done. Almost.

Last, I tried to draw some conclusions with a researcher friend who shares my interest in the inner workings of language.

«Trying to find the "best translation"» she observed, «is like trying to draw a tesseract, with language existing and yet moving through a specific time and space, while being used by groups and individuals who keep constructing, deconstructing, reconstructing meaning and the world that is being grasped through words. In choosing the "best" translation for the title of your book there is therefore the issue of "otherness", with language being a proxy for a culture we don't belong to but which we try to grasp through imperfect language and our own personal, social, and cultural backgrounds that try to fill in the blanks the best they can. Even more complex, we use these translations to try to access a culture that is ever changing, just as its language. And, when talking about Japan, we—the "other"—tend to see their traditions as fixed, immutable. However, just as Hanyū-san said in his "Poem" from his 2024/25 Echoes of Life tour, that the "present walks as if stepping on future shadow", we could say that language is our imperfect device to grasp the present, observe the past, and try to talk about an unknown future though inevitably influenced by the meanings that exist in our "now". The quest for the best translation for the title of your book is a question not only about what character, word or expression might best represent the subject

of your story (Hanyū-san), but also about who is telling the story (you), and to what extent the storyteller can become part and speak from within the subject's culture, or instead acknowledge her otherness and make it visible».

So, what do you think? Do you like the title I chose?

As an analytical person, the thought process is almost as important to me as the result. So, I hope this was of some interest to you, albeit written by a non-Japanese, non-academic author, and I would love to hear your thoughts about it.

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