Sensitive, with Respect, but without Fear

By *Shoko Asai*

Translated from the German by *Bradley Schmidt*

The greatest *Berührungsangst* – fear of touch, contact, engagement – I have experienced so far as a translator was with my new translation of Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*. The work is also very well known in Japan, and has been translated into Japanese several times by renowned German scholars and translators – for their part, some of these translations have classic status. It was my first new translation of a classic, and I knew that it would be compared with the earlier versions. That put me under pressure. Like a freshman, I looked up almost all the words, just so I wouldn't make a 'mistake'. I was inhibited in my decision-making, less free in shaping the Japanese text. Was I allowed to translate an adjective that had no exact equivalent in Japanese into two or three Japanese words according to my own sense of language, or even convert it into a verb, thus changing the whole sentence structure, which I would have otherwise done if I didn't have inhibitions? What would the many Japanese Tonio fans think? And the many scholars of German literature in Japan who had spent virtually all their lives researching the book?

In Japan, it is a common practice for the translator to write an afterword. There, I explained my position as follows:

> 'When a work written in a language with certain cultural and historical backgrounds is translated into another language with different backgrounds, a new work inevitably emerges that is different from the original in its nuances, its sounds, colours, and smells (regardless of how "true to the original" the translation is). It is the fate of translation. The individuality of the translator is revealed in what one draws from the original and what one does not, and what one adds under certain circumstances. And therein lies the essence, the most beautiful thing of translation. If I add to the existing versions the voice I heard in the original text and tried to translate into Japanese, I can make *Tonio Kröger* richer as a 'Japanese novel'. This is my sincere desire.'

I have had no *Berührungsängste* so far regarding 'cultural appropriation'. As a Japanese person, an Asian, and a woman, I have never felt 'unqualified' in any sense to translate a German book. But I have encountered texts that conveyed a misogyny, even if not explicit, but subliminal, and tried to soften these nuances. Elsewhere, one encounters formulations that seems repulsive in the Japanese context: once, when translating a novel, I came across a comparison that read something like this: 'a surprise overtakes him like a tsunami'. Certainly not an intention of the author, but perhaps a blunder in light of the many victims of the tsunami catastrophe of 2011, which is still very present in Japan. I considered for a long time whether I should translate it literally. But then I left it as it was.

I believe in the imagination and empathy of translators – and readers. After all, that is our work: trying to understand something foreign and bring it into our own cultural context. Sensitively, with respect, but without fear.



Shoko Asai with her author Judith Taschler © author's own

Shoko Asai translates into Japanese and is based in Berlin and Portugal. She is currently translating the book *The Birthday Celebration* [Das Geburtstagsfest] by the Austrian writer Judith Taschler, who is shown in the photo here.

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