
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ideological Reframing in 1973 Chinese Translations of Kobayashi Takiji

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the political and social context of the period influenced the Chinese translations of Kobayashi Takiji's *Numajiri Village*, *The Absentee Landlord*, and *The Crab Cannery Ship*, published by the People's Literature Publishing House in 1973. The translators' afterwords emphasize Kobayashi's participation in the revolutionary movement and his contribution to proletarian literature, guiding readers' interpretation of the works. The translations largely preserve the content of the originals, while making class relations more explicit through political vocabulary. In *The Crab Cannery Ship* in particular, political agents are added, expressions of resistance are recast as political slogans, and sexual descriptions are omitted or mitigated. The ideological reframing found in the three translations does not amount to a complete rewriting. It selectively strengthens or weakens particular meanings while retaining the basic content of the original works.

KEYWORDS

Kobayashi Takiji; Literary translation; Ideological reframing; Proletarian literature; Translation strategies

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1. Introduction

In China between 1966 and 1976, the translation and publication of foreign literature were subject to strong political and institutional constraints, and very few translations were published for general readership (Zha & Xie, 2007). The officially regulated literary sphere nevertheless existed alongside less formal and sometimes unofficial reading practices (Henningsen, 2021). Under these conditions, the People's Literature Publishing House published three works by Kobayashi Takiji in 1973. Li Dechun's translation of *Numajiri Village* appeared in May, followed in October by Li Mang's *The Absentee Landlord* and Ye Weiqu's *The Crab Cannery Ship* (Kobayashi, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c). The publication of three books by the same author within a single year suggests that Kobayashi's writings occupied a special position in China at the time.

Kobayashi's works had already been introduced to China by 1930. When Pan Nianzhi's translation of *The Crab Cannery Ship* was published, Xia Yan, writing under the pseudonym Ruoqin, regarded it as an important achievement of Japanese proletarian literature. An unsigned publication notice in *Wenyi Yanjiu*, a journal edited by Lu Xun, offered a similar assessment (Ruoqin, 1930; "Publication Notice," 1930). During the 1950s, works such as *The Crab Cannery Ship*, *Life of a Party Member*, and *The Absentee Landlord* were translated one after another, creating what might be called a "Kobayashi Takiji boom" in China (Wang, 2001). In selecting foreign literature at the time, considerable importance was attached to whether a work was considered "excellent" or "progressive." Such judgments were closely connected with socialist ideology and a realist view of literature (Zha, 2001). Kobayashi's depictions of capitalist exploitation and the resistance of workers and peasants made his works particularly compatible with these criteria for translation and publication.

The 1973 publications also coincided with the seventieth anniversary of Kobayashi's birth and the fortieth anniversary of his death. On March 11 of that year, *People's Daily* published an article introducing his life and involvement in the revolutionary movement, with emphasis on his political and literary achievements (*People's Daily*, 1973). The translator's afterword to

Numajiri Village, published about two months later, states that the work was translated to commemorate Kobayashi. The afterword to *The Crab Cannery Ship* similarly expresses the hope that the new translation would allow Chinese readers to learn from Kobayashi and the Japanese people (Kobayashi, 1973a, 1973c). The three translations introduced his literary works while also presenting his image as a writer and the meaning of his works anew within the political context of 1973.

Previous studies have examined the translation and reception of Kobayashi's works in China, the selection of foreign literature from the 1950s to the 1970s, and the additions and omissions found in Chinese translations of Japanese literature published during this period (Ma, 2013; Wang, 2001; Zha, 2001). However, there remains room to consider the three works published by the same press in 1973 as a single publishing phenomenon and to compare both their translators' afterwords and main texts. This approach makes it possible to examine differences among the three translations as well as the tendencies they share.

This paper examines how *Numajiri Village*, *The Absentee Landlord*, and *The Crab Cannery Ship* were translated in China in the early 1970s and how their meanings were reframed. The analysis considers the circumstances surrounding their publication for general readership, the representations of Kobayashi and his works in the translators' afterwords, and the additions, omissions, paraphrases, and political vocabulary found through comparison of the Japanese and Chinese texts. The three translations generally preserve the content of the original works. At the same time, some expressions were added to clarify class relations, while certain descriptions that did not fit the publishing environment of the period were removed. This paper uses the term "ideological reframing" to describe this coexistence of fidelity to the original and adaptation to the contemporary reception environment.

2. Literature Review

Studies of Kobayashi Takiji's works in China have mainly focused on their reception and translation history. Wang (2001) reviews the translation of Japanese literature in China since the 1930s and discusses the introduction of Kobayashi's works and their intensive translation and publication during the 1950s. Le (2010) also examines the reception of Japanese left-wing literature in China, drawing on publishing materials and catalogues of donated books. According to Wang (2014), the reception of Japanese literature, particularly proletarian literature, continued from the 1980s onward. A recent English-language overview similarly places the translation and study of Japanese literature within the changing institutional and political conditions of twentieth-century China (Xiong & Gao, 2024). However, discussions of Kobayashi tend to focus on *The Crab Cannery Ship*, and few studies have compared multiple translations, including *Numajiri Village* and *The Absentee Landlord*.

Regarding the relationship between the translation of foreign literature and ideology, Zha (2001) points out that standards such as "excellence" and "progressiveness" guided the selection of works for translation in China from the 1950s to the 1970s. Zha and Xie (2007) also trace how the choice of works and forms of publication changed according to political and cultural circumstances. These studies are useful for understanding the background to the publication of Kobayashi's works in 1973. However, the reasons why these works were selected and the ways in which they were actually rendered into Chinese need to be examined separately.

Lefevere (1992) views translation as a form of rewriting and argues that ideology, poetics, and patronage influence this process. More recent research has also shown that translators' prefaces and afterwords may reveal how political and social conditions shape the interpretation of a translated work (Amirdabbaghian & Shangeetha, 2020). From this perspective, analysis cannot be limited to vocabulary, omissions, and explanatory additions within the main text. Prefaces and translators' afterwords can also be examined as texts that guide the reading of a work. Ma (2013), meanwhile, compares Chinese translations of Japanese literature published in the early 1970s with their Japanese source texts and considers how the political and social environment influenced additions, omissions, and paraphrases. Her discussion of the omission and mitigation of sexual expressions is particularly relevant to the textual analysis in this paper.

Previous studies have provided important insights into the reception of Kobayashi's works and the selection of works for translation. However, few have treated the three works published by the same press in 1973 as a single publishing case. This paper reads the translators' afterwords alongside the main texts and examines both the tendencies shared by the three

translations and the differences among them. Rather than focusing exclusively on overt political modifications, it considers how meaning was adjusted even in passages that remain relatively faithful to the original.

3. Research Materials

This study examines Li Dechun's translation of *Numajiri Village*, Li Mang's translation of *The Absentee Landlord*, and Ye Weiqu's translation of *The Crab Cannery Ship*, all published by the People's Literature Publishing House in 1973 (Kobayashi, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c). The three books were published for general readership by the same press in the same year, and each contains a translator's afterword. This paper compares them as part of a related translation and publishing project.

For the textual comparison, this study uses *Numajiri Village* (Kobayashi, 1964), included in the Aoki Shoten collection *Life of a party member, people of the district, and Numajiri Village*. It also uses *The Crab Cannery Ship* and *The Absentee Landlord* from a 1974 printing of *The crab cannery ship, the absentee landlord, and storm warning*, a volume first published by Aoki Shoten as part of the Aoki Bunko series in 1953 (Kobayashi, 1974). The Chinese translations do not identify their source editions, making it impossible to determine which Japanese editions were used. However, the 1964 Aoki Shoten volume and earlier printings of the Aoki Bunko volume were already in circulation before 1973 and may have served as source texts.

The analysis consists of two stages: an examination of the translators' afterwords and a comparison of the Japanese and Chinese texts. First, the study examines how Kobayashi's background, political position, and the themes of the individual works are explained in the afterwords. It then compares the vocabulary and evaluations shared by the three books to identify how Kobayashi and his works were presented in 1973. Next, the Japanese source texts and Chinese translations are compared at the sentence and paragraph levels. The main differences are classified as paraphrases, explanatory or political additions, omissions, and shifts arising from the interpretation of context. Changes in word order and the use of natural Chinese expressions that do not substantially alter the meaning are treated separately as ordinary translational adjustments.

In this paper, "ideological reframing" refers to translational choices that bring the representation of characters, class relations, and political conflicts closer to the interpretive framework used in China in the early 1970s. The analysis considers whether political meanings absent from the original have been added, whether particular expressions have been omitted or mitigated, and whether the interpretations presented in the afterwords are also reflected in the main texts. It also distinguishes tendencies shared by the three works from choices found only in individual translations. Since many passages in the three translations preserve the content of the original works, not every difference is treated as a political modification. The analysis focuses on where explanations, emphases, and omissions occur and how they influence the reading of the works.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Publication Context and the Presentation of Kobayashi Takiji

The three translations published in 1973 share several features in their design and structure. All were published for general readership by the People's Literature Publishing House and include a portrait photograph of Kobayashi Takiji and a translator's afterword. Given their publication dates and similar formats, the three books can be viewed as a coordinated publishing project marking the seventieth anniversary of Kobayashi's birth and the fortieth anniversary of his death.

The afterword to *Numajiri Village* mentions both anniversaries and explains that this was the first Chinese translation of the work (Kobayashi, 1973a, p. 101). A similar explanation appears in *The Crab Cannery Ship*. Its afterword expresses the hope that the new translation would allow Chinese readers to learn from Kobayashi and the Japanese people (Kobayashi, 1973c, pp. 115–118).

The three afterwords introduce Kobayashi's poor family background, his participation in workers' and peasants' movements, his membership in the Japanese Communist Party, and his killing at the hands of the police in almost the same order. His literary activities are also evaluated in connection with his political involvement. The afterword to *Numajiri Village* states that he "为日本革命和日本的无产阶级文学作了很大的贡献" (made a major contribution to the Japanese revolution and Japanese proletarian literature) (Kobayashi, 1973a, pp. 101–102). In *The Absentee Landlord*, his life is described as "短暂而伟大" (short but

great) (Kobayashi, 1973b, p. 150). The afterword to *The Crab Cannery Ship* emphasizes that he produced “富有战斗性的革命文艺作品” (militant works of revolutionary literature) (Kobayashi, 1973c, pp. 115–116).

These afterwords do more than provide historical background. They also guide the reader’s interpretation of the works from the outset. Kobayashi is introduced as a writer involved in the revolutionary movement, while the three works are presented as literature depicting capitalist exploitation and class conflict. This interpretive framework, established before the main texts begin, can be regarded as part of their ideological reframing.

4.2 Reframing Rural Class Relations in *Numajiri Village*

Li Dechun’s translation of *Numajiri Village* generally preserves the plot and character relationships of the original, with few substantial omissions. Some word choices, however, make the class positions of the characters more explicit in Chinese.

The Japanese expression “病人様” (his honour the invalid) (Kobayashi, 1964, p. 8) is rendered as “病号老爷” (his lordship the Invalid) in the Chinese translation (Kobayashi, 1973a, p. 4). The term “老爷” (lordship) was commonly associated with landlords, officials, and other men in positions of authority in the old society. Its addition gives the irony of the Japanese expression a clearer class implication.

“ダラ幹” (a corrupt union official), is translated as “蜕化分子” (degenerate element) (Kobayashi, 1964, pp. 28, 40–41; 1973a, pp. 27, 41). The Chinese expression does not depart substantially from the original meaning. However, it replaces a colloquial abbreviation with a term that classifies the individual according to a political identity.

The Japanese expressions “反動になる” (to become reactionary) and “反動どもの懷” (the embrace of the reactionaries) are translated respectively as “变成反动派” (to join the reactionary camp) and “反动派的怀抱” (the embrace of the reactionary camp) (Kobayashi, 1964, pp. 45, 82; 1973a, pp. 47, 92). Both translations correspond to the original and do not necessarily introduce a new political meaning. By rendering “反動” as “反动派,” however, the Chinese translation identifies the opposing side more clearly as a political group. The story itself is not rewritten in *Numajiri Village*. Its main characteristic lies in the use of political vocabulary familiar in China at the time to make the class conflict already present in the original more explicit.

4.3 Reframing Landlord–Tenant Conflict in *The Absentee Landlord*

Li Mang’s translation of *The Absentee Landlord* also conveys the conditions of rural society, the relationship between landlords and tenant farmers, and peasant resistance relatively faithfully. In passages related to political action, “仕事” (work) is translated as “劳动” (labour), “謀叛” (rebellion) as “造反” (revolt), and “不穩分子” (subversive element) as “捣乱分子” (troublemaking element) (Kobayashi, 1974, pp. 107, 192, 204; 1973b, pp. 1, 100, 114). These choices do not depart substantially from the meanings of the original, but they overlap with political expressions widely used in China at the time.

In a scene where women support the tenant dispute, the Japanese text reads:

「女は女同志」 その方からも結束を固めていた。(Kobayashi, 1974, p. 212)

(“Women should stand together.” They were also strengthening their solidarity in this way.)

The Chinese translation renders the sentence as follows:

“妇女同妇女团结”，从这方面来加强团结。(Kobayashi, 1973b, p. 124)

(“Women unite with women,” in this way, they strengthened their unity.)

The expression “女は女同志” refers to women who share the same position. In the Chinese translation, “团结” (unity) is used twice, bringing the collective solidarity supporting the tenant dispute to the foreground. In another scene, the Japanese

sentence “「女は女同志」奥様にお願いをしよう” (“Women should stand together.” Let us appeal to the mistress of the house) is translated as “‘妇女同情妇女’去求求太太” (“Women sympathize with women.” Let us appeal to the mistress of the house) (Kobayashi, 1974, p. 225; 1973b, pp. 139–140). The use of “团结” (unity) and “同情” (sympathize) for the same Japanese expression suggests that Li specified its meaning according to the immediate context rather than mechanically applying a single political term.

Some expressions suggesting bodily or sexual matters are retained in *The Absentee Landlord*. The translation does not contain omissions as extensive as those in *The Crab Cannery Ship*, discussed below. This difference suggests that the treatment of such expressions depended partly on the content of each work and the translator’s judgment.

4.4 Political Intensification in *The Crab Cannery Ship*

Among the three works, the differences between the Japanese text and the Chinese translation are most apparent in Ye Wei-qu’s translation of *The Crab Cannery Ship*. Even so, the plot, character relationships, and central themes of the original are preserved. The main differences involve the identification of political agents, explanatory additions, and the omission of sexual expressions.

4.4.1 Explicitation and the Identification of Capitalist

When supplying subjects omitted from the Japanese text, the translator sometimes chooses “资本家” (capitalist). In a scene where the labour union attempts to place organizers among fishermen aboard crab cannery ships bound for Kamchatka, the Japanese text reads:

函館の労働組合は蟹工船、カムサツカ行の漁夫のなかに組織者を入れることに死物狂いになっていた。青森、秋田の組合などとも連絡をとって。——それを何より恐れていた。(Kobayashi, 1974, p. 14)

(The Hakodate labour union was making desperate efforts to place organizers among the fishermen bound for Kamchatka on the crab cannery ships. It was also in contact with the unions in Aomori and Akita. This was what they feared most.)

The final sentence is rendered in Chinese as follows:

资本家最害怕的就是这个。(Kobayashi, 1973c, p. 12)

(This was what the capitalist feared most.)

“资本家” is a subject that can be inferred from the context, and its addition does not introduce a different event. It does, however, identify those who fear the organization of workers and makes the conflict between the two sides more direct.

The same tendency appears in a passage where exploitation is justified in the name of developing “national” resources. The translator adds “资本家” as the omitted subject and explains that the profits went into the pockets of the capitalist (Kobayashi, 1974, p. 52; 1973c, p. 52). The Japanese terms “金持” (the rich) and “大金持” (the very rich) are similarly rendered as “资本家” (capitalist) and “大资本家” (major capitalist) (Kobayashi, 1974, pp. 91, 103; 1973c, pp. 97–98, 110).

These choices do not substantially change the class implications of the original. Through the repeated use of “资本家,” however, conflicts between individual wealthy figures and fishermen become easier to read as a broader conflict between capitalists and workers.

4.4.2 The Transformation of Resistance into a Political Slogan

Expressions concerning workers’ resistance also show political explicitation. “叛逆” (rebellion) is translated as “造反” (revolt), “寝がえり者” (turncoat) as “变节分子” (renegade element), “不屈者” (wrongdoer) as “破坏分子” (disruptive element), and “不忠者” (disloyal person) as “叛徒” (traitor) (Kobayashi, 1974, pp. 49, 102; 1973c, pp. 49, 104, 110). These choices do not depart greatly

from the original meanings, but terms such as “分子” (element) and “叛徒” (traitor) present the characters’ actions in the form of political categories.

A more substantial change appears in a scene where the workers summon their companions. The Japanese text reads:

「殺されたくないものは来れ！」 (Kobayashi, 1974, pp. 84–85)

(“Those who do not want to be killed, come!”)

The Chinese translation reads:

“不愿被宰割的人们，联合起来！” (Kobayashi, 1973c, p. 90)

(“Those unwilling to be slaughtered, unite!”)

“来れ” (come) is replaced by “联合起来” (unite), while “殺されたくないもの” (those who do not want to be killed) becomes “不愿被宰割的人们” (those unwilling to be slaughtered). In Chinese, “宰割” can also suggest being controlled, oppressed, or exploited. A call to fellow workers in a particular situation is therefore recast in a form closer to a political slogan encouraging oppressed people to unite.

4.4.3 Explanatory Additions

The Crab Cannery Ship also contains additions that differ in nature from political emphasis.

The Japanese expression “公の立場” (from an official standpoint) is rendered more specifically in Chinese as a reference to the rules of international law. Similarly, the fisherman’s judgment “ひどい事をするものだ” (what a terrible thing to do) is explained in the translation as an act of disrespect toward the emperor (Kobayashi, 1974, pp. 88, 103; 1973c, pp. 94, 111). “S・O・S” is also explained as “紧急求救信号” (an emergency distress signal) and, when it appears again, as “海上轮船遇难的紧急求救信号” (an emergency distress signal used when a ship is in danger at sea) (Kobayashi, 1974, pp. 23, 25; 1973c, pp. 21, 23).

These additions can be understood as forms of explicitation intended to convey the background and implications of the original to Chinese readers. The presence of added information alone is therefore insufficient to classify an instance as ideological reframing.

4.4.4 Omission and Modification of Sexual Expressions

The most substantial omissions in *The Crab Cannery Ship* occur in passages describing the crew members’ sexual desires, same-sex sexual acts, sexual conversations, and their behaviour toward women who came alongside the ship to sell goods. In the Japanese text, the confined nature of life aboard the ship and the crew’s bodily desires are described across several paragraphs. Much of this material does not appear in the Chinese translation (Kobayashi, 1974, pp. 10, 13–14, 42–45, 64, 71).

Some expressions that remain are also mitigated. The sexual evaluation “とても上手えがったどオ” (she was very good at it) is rendered as “可……” (but she...), with the specific meaning left unstated through an ellipsis (Kobayashi, 1974, p. 10; 1973c, p. 5). Explicit references to the body are replaced by a more general reference to women. Obscene lyrics are also omitted, while a note describes the song as a lewd song popular in the Kanto region toward the end of the Taisho period (Kobayashi, 1974, p. 64; 1973c, p. 67).

This form of reframing differs from the identification of political agents. It weakens bodily and sexual descriptions that may have been considered unsuitable for the publishing environment of the time. Ma (2013) also notes similar omissions and mitigation in Chinese translations of Japanese literature published in the early 1970s. Some comparable expressions are retained in *The Absentee Landlord*, however, suggesting that the criteria for omission were not applied uniformly across the three works.

4.5 Common Patterns and Differences across the Three Translations

The three translations present a shared representation of Kobayashi in their afterwords. His poor family background, participation in the revolutionary movement, contribution to proletarian literature, and killing at the hands of the police are repeatedly described. In this way, three works with different subject matter are connected to Kobayashi's revolutionary life.

The main texts also show a tendency to render the class implications of the originals through political categories familiar to Chinese readers, such as “蜕化分子” (degenerate element), “造反” (revolt), and “资本家” (capitalist). This tendency, however, does not appear in the same form throughout the three translations. In *Numajiri Village* and *The Absentee Landlord*, class relations are clarified mainly through lexical choices. In *The Crab Cannery Ship*, political agents are also added, resistance is recast as a political slogan, and substantial portions of the sexual descriptions are omitted.

Although the three books shared a common publishing purpose, a uniform translation policy was not mechanically applied to their main texts. Institutional constraints shaped the selection of works and the general direction of interpretation, but individual translators still appear to have exercised judgment in making particular paraphrases, additions, and omissions. The three translations retain the basic content of the original works while selectively strengthening or weakening particular meanings. This combination is the main form of ideological reframing identified in this study.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined how the political and social context of the period shaped the translation and presentation of Kobayashi Takiji's *Numajiri Village*, *The Absentee Landlord*, and *The Crab Cannery Ship*, published by the People's Literature Publishing House in 1973. The three works appeared in succession at a time when the publication of foreign literature for general readership was limited. Their publication was related partly to Kobayashi's established reputation in China as a revolutionary writer and to the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of his birth and the fortieth anniversary of his death.

The three translators' afterwords emphasize Kobayashi's participation in the revolutionary movement and his contribution to proletarian literature. They also connect the individual works with capitalist exploitation and the resistance of workers and peasants. The afterwords provide information about the background to publication while guiding Chinese readers toward a particular interpretation. The presentation of Kobayashi as a writer and the political meaning assigned to his works before the main texts begin are features shared by all three translations.

The translations generally preserve the stories and central themes of the original works. At the same time, terms such as “分子” (element), “造反” (revolt), and “资本家” (capitalist) make the characters' political positions and class relations more explicit. This tendency is particularly apparent in *The Crab Cannery Ship*. The addition of “资本家” as an explicit subject and the shift from the Japanese “来れ” (come) to the Chinese “联合起来” (unite) strengthen the sense of collective conflict and resistance. The same translation also contains substantial omissions and instances of mitigation in its sexual descriptions, whereas omissions of this extent are not found in *Numajiri Village* or *The Absentee Landlord*. Even within a shared reception environment, specific translational choices varied according to the work and the translator.

The ideological reframing found in the three Chinese translations did not amount to a wholesale rewriting of the original works. Particular meanings were selectively strengthened or weakened while the basic content remained largely intact. This study could not confirm the translation process, the extent of editorial intervention, or the source editions actually used by the translators. Future comparisons with Chinese translations published in the 1930s, the 1950s, and from the 1980s onward may provide a clearer account of how the translation and evaluation of Kobayashi's works changed across different historical periods.

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