



A Study on the Chinese Translation Strategies of Natsume Soseki's *The Grass Pillow*

—Based on a Comparison of Cui Wanqiu's and Feng Zikai's Translations

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Abstract. Cui Wanqiu and Feng Zikai, both modern Chinese writers, translated Natsume Soseki's *The Grass Pillow*, but their perspectives differed. Cui Wanqiu's translations of *The Grass Pillow* embody Natsume Soseki's literary philosophy of "leisurely observation." Having spent nine years in Japan, Cui Wanqiu's exposure to Japanese literature and interactions with members of the Japanese literary circle gave him a deep understanding of Japanese literature and culture, resulting in a faithful translation that frequently incorporates original Japanese words. Feng Zikai's profound knowledge of Chinese literature, on the other hand, led to a highly subjective translation of *The Grass Pillow*, reflecting his own Chinese literary concepts and philosophical understanding, while also striving to make Japanese literary allusions accessible and understandable.

Keywords: Grass Pillow; Feng Zikai; Cui Wanqiu; Natsume Soseki; Mono no aware; Chinese philosophy

1 Introduction

Natsume Soseki, one of the most representative writers of modern Japan (Meiji and Taisho eras), had his literary works translated by various translators in China. *The Grass Pillow*, an early work, had two versions during the Republican era, one by Cui Wanqiu and the other by Feng Zikai. In 1929, the Shanghai Zhenshanmei Bookstore published Cui Wanqiu's translation of *The Grass Pillow*, a representative work of Natsume Soseki's "leisurely literature." During the Republican era, Xie Liuyi, a scholar of Japanese literature, strongly recommended Cui Wanqiu's translation in his work *The Grass Pillow: A Taste of Literature* (in *Tea Talks*): "I recommend that anyone aspiring to literature should read it." In 1930 alone, two pirated editions appeared, one from the Shanghai "Meili Bookstore" and the other from the Shanghai "Huali Bookstore," both attributed to Guo Moruo as the translator. However, Guo Moruo did not translate *The Grass Pillow*; these two pirated editions merely "borrowed" his name. (*The Translation and Introduction of Soseki's Literature in

China*). This indicates that the translation of *The Grass Pillow* was very popular at the time. As the first modern Chinese translator of *The Grass Pillow*, Cui Wanqiu's experience with Japanese literature shaped his unique understanding of the novel.

Feng Zikai, a writer in modern Chinese literature, also translated *The Grass Pillow* in 1958, based on his experience learning Japanese and his love for Natsume Soseki's works, and titled it *The Lodging*. Both translations are reinterpretations of the original work. Why did they both translate *The Grass Pillow*, and what are the similarities and differences between their translations? The following analysis compares and contrasts the two translations from three aspects.

2 Introduction to Natsume Soseki's *The Grass Pillow*

2.1 Introduction to Natsume Soseki's *The Grass Pillow*

Published in September 1906 (Meiji 39) in *Shin Shosetsu*, *The Grass Pillow* recounts a painter's travel experiences and his exploration of the creative philosophy of "leisurely observation."

Regarding the creative philosophy of *The Grass Pillow*, Soseki explained: "Ordinary novels center on the development of events. At this point, the author must stand in a third-person position, observing the progress of events from the sidelines. But *The Grass Pillow* is the opposite; the characters in the story remain still, while the observer is constantly moving. Therefore, those who believe that only the development of events constitutes a novel may not understand *The Grass Pillow*... If *The Grass Pillow* fails to convey this aesthetic feeling entirely to the reader, it is a failure; if it can convey some aesthetic feeling to the reader, then it can be said to be..." A successful work. [1] The observer appears as a painter, constantly experiencing different people and events, abandoning linear narrative development, choosing only fragments of characters' words as the subject of expression, choosing psychological time as the benchmark, unfolding without delving into the internal descriptions of events, showcasing a kind of beauty of distance.

Regarding the concept of leisure, Natsume Soseki also mentioned in the preface to Takahama Kyoko's short story collection *Chicken Head*, "The world is vast. In this vast world, there are various ways of living. To enjoy those different ways of living spontaneously and according to circumstances is leisure. Observation is also leisure. Savoring is also leisure. With this leisure, the events that occur and the emotions towards those events become the vibrant life of humanity. It has both descriptive value and reading value. It can also become a novel." [2] This sense of detachment is built upon his philosophy of life. He believes that one can view the world in a non-immersive way, stepping outside one's role in life and observing from an outsider's perspective, creating a sense of distance from human development. Literary creation also employs an observer's perspective, where the observer does not participate in events but simply observes their changes. This kind of thinking is comprehensive and devoid of emotional fluctuation. It means setting aside the life lessons that literature might offer, whether revealing or praising human nature, discarding all human-related emotions and rationalities, and pursuing the intuitive

beauty of things and events—that is, viewing things without self-interest and the resulting pleasure. This feeling forms the basis of his sense of detachment.

3 Cui Wanqiu and Modern Japanese Literature

3.1 Cui Wanqiu and Modern Japanese Literature

Cui Wanqiu studied in Japan for nine years from 1924 to 1933, majoring in literature and history. He had close contact with the Japanese literary circle and had a deep understanding of Japanese culture. He was closely associated with Mushanokōji Saneatsu, a representative figure of the Shirakaba school, and also translated Hayashi Fumiko's **The Wanderer's Tale**. He translated Natsume Soseki's **The Grass Pillow** and **Sanshiro**, and also had contact with Natsume Soseki's wife, Natsume Kyoko, and son-in-law, Matsuoka Yuzuru. His acquaintance with different writers in the Japanese literary circle deepened his understanding of Japanese literature. "He had contact with people from all walks of life in the Japanese literary world, breaking the Tokugawa Shogunate's isolationist policies, absorbing advanced Western science, technology, culture, and political ideas, and deeply researching the development of industry and commerce for national prosperity and strength." [3]

According to Cui Wanqiu, Natsume Soseki was "a man well-versed in Japanese, Chinese, and Western literature. A person with such a broad knowledge of both East and West would compare and contrast Eastern and Western literature... He possessed a profound foundation in Chinese literature, a deep understanding of Zen, a mastery of Japanese short poems and haiku, and a grasp of the essence of Western literature." (Preface to **The Grass Pillow**, translated by Cui Wanqiu).

Cui Wanqiu believes that Natsume Soseki's **The Grass Pillow** emerged during the Meiji period, a time of literary ideals incompatible with, and even contrary to, the prevailing trends in Japanese literature. Naturalism depicts human society, a basic portrayal of the human condition, placing the author in the perspective of an experiencer during the unfolding events, a perspective that experiences the events firsthand. It emphasizes human feelings, depicting the emotional connections that arise between people in human society. Its focus is on the living units of human society, emphasizing objective description. "Originally, it adhered to the principles of naturalism; its creative attitude was firmly committed to objective description, and its core value was 'truth.' Its strength lay in its vivid descriptions, striving to elucidate the inner lives of characters and the meaning of events in life. It avoided technical techniques in its depiction, paying great attention to the selection of materials. The ugliness of human nature, the gloom of the lower classes, all became excellent material. Thus, the sickness of the world at the end of the century, the neurasthenia of the times, and all the sexual phenomena related to those people were specifically depicted." "The Grass Pillow was a beautiful decoration at the beginning of the September 1980 issue of **New Shojo**." [4] "It is evident that Cui Wanqiu approved of Natsume Soseki's 'leisurely view.' However, Cui Wanqiu also pointed out that the **Kusamakura** (Grass Pillow) does not represent his entire literary philosophy, but rather he proposed a mode of literary expression. In a letter dated the 16th to his

student, Suzuki Miekichi, he wrote: 'To live beautifully, that is, the so-called poet's life—what fraction of life's meaning does that truly represent? I cannot know, but I think it is still extremely rare. Therefore, a protagonist like the one in *Kusamakura* is unacceptable. That is fine, but to survive in today's world, to develop one's strengths, one must, in any case, follow Ibsen.' The translation of *Kusamakura* was partly due to personal connections (Cui Wanqiu knew Natsume Soseki's wife and children; it was at a gathering of Japanese literary circles that Cui Wanqiu planned to translate *Kusamakura*). Therefore, in Cui Wanqiu's view, Natsume Soseki's works oscillate between realism and romanticism. They contain both imagination beyond the world of human relationships and an undeniable concern for real-world issues."

3.2 The aesthetics of *mono no aware* in Cui's translation

"But as far as possible, we must observe humanity from the same vantage point. That fellow Bashō (a Japanese haiku poet, Matsuo Tosei, from Koga Takuchi, who died while traveling in Osaka) wrote haiku about a horse urinating on his pillow as an elegant affair. From now on, I also want to see everyone I encounter—ordinary people, merchants, village officials, old men, old women—as things depicted as embellishments of nature. Naturally, they are different from the figures in paintings; they will freely assume various postures."

Matsuo Bashō was a famous Japanese haiku poet. His style approached the state of nature without dwelling on human interests, similar to Natsume Soseki's philosophy of leisurely living. Through the creative philosophy of Basho, the painter expresses his artistic concept and his own ideas: separating humanity from self-interest and placing humanity within the vast world of nature. On the one hand, self-interest appears extremely insignificant; on the other hand, compared to the vastness of nature, humanity's insignificance reveals a sense of powerlessness. This is perhaps the essence of the "*mono no aware*" (the pathos of things) found in Japanese culture.

"Spring breeze, only the sound of horse bells in my ears... The groom's song crosses the spring rain of Suzuka (Mount Suzuka)... After the cherry blossom festival, on the horse, a new bride." This prose poem exhibits the distinct characteristics of Japanese haiku, expressing a state of mind through seemingly fragmented language, much like the Japanese aesthetic of "*mono no aware*." The sound of horses, cherry blossoms, and the bride awaiting her wedding—the beauty of the cherry blossoms is like the beauty of the bride, but both are fleeting.

4 Chinese Philosophy in Feng Zikai's Translation of "The Lodging"

4.1 Feng Zikai and Natsume Soseki

Feng Zikai, a modern Chinese painter and essayist, studied Japanese during his time at a primary normal school. In the spring of 1921, he went to Japan to study. He greatly admired Natsume Soseki and mentioned Soseki's views in several of his

works. In his essay "My Experience of Diligent Study," Feng Zikai wrote, "The works of Stevenson and Natsume Soseki are my favorites to read and study." [6] His admiration for Soseki is evident. Japanese scholar Yoshikawa Kōjirō praised Feng Zikai as the most artist-like Chinese artist, but Feng Zikai replied, "Please don't put that high hat on my head; instead, bestow it upon your Natsume Soseki and Takehisa Yumeji..." [7] Feng Zikai viewed Natsume Soseki not only as a writer but also as an artist, and he held him in high esteem. This fondness for a writer inevitably includes aspects that resonate with one's own interests; Feng Zikai's affection for Natsume Soseki reflects his approval of Soseki's worldview. Feng Zikai, reflecting on Natsume Soseki's philosophy of life, also gained insights through his own experiences. He wrote, "When Natsume Soseki was thirty, he said: 'Man is born knowing the benefits of life; at twenty-five, he knows that where there is light, there is also darkness; and at thirty, he knows even more that where there is much light, there is also much darkness; where joy is intense, sorrow is also heavy.' I now deeply resonate with these words; sometimes I feel that the characteristics of thirty are not just this, but more uniquely, the experiential understanding of death." [8] Feng Zikai's "Autumn" adds his own insights to Natsume Soseki's words, acknowledging the inspiration the writer's writing provided for him and for his own life. [9] Regarding modern civilization, Feng Zikai expressed in his essay "Qitang": "Things that represent 20th-century civilization like trains are probably gone. Hundreds of people are crammed into the same boxes and pulled abruptly, without mercy... Things that disregard individuality like trains are no longer available." [10] He both laughed at Mr. Natsume's stubbornness and understood his feelings. In the 20th century, there were probably no more people who valued individuality so highly and disliked material civilization so much. There was one: myself, who shared the same sentiments.

Therefore, Natsume Soseki influenced Feng Zikai's understanding of the world—a skepticism and displeasure with modern civilization, questioning how modernization eroded humanity and homogenized people, which he felt was incompatible with individuality. As a painter, Feng Zikai highly agreed with Natsume Soseki's artistic views. "Thoughts may not be written down, yet resounding echoes arise from the heart; paintings may not be applied to an easel, yet vibrant colors reflect the heart's eye. If one can observe the world in this way, capturing the pure and beautiful image of a turbid world within the mirror of one's mind, that is enough. [11] Thus, though the silent poet utters no words, and the colorless painter leaves no canvas, if they can observe life in this way, if they can be freed from afflictions, if they can enter and exit the realm of purity, establishing this clear and bright realm, if they can sweep away the shackles of self-interest and desire—this is happiness compared to the son of gold, the emperor of ten thousand chariots, or a favored child. The points here—'freed from afflictions,' 'enter and exit the realm of purity,' 'establish this clear and bright realm,' and 'sweep away self-interest and desire'—are all unique realms reached by the 'artistic heart.' The sublime and surreal nature of art lies precisely in this." (From *New Art*) [12] Feng Zikai's artistic views were also expressed through Natsume Soseki's writings.

4.2 Chinese Philosophy in Feng Zikai's Translation of "The Lodging"

Feng Zikai's profound knowledge of Chinese literature allowed him to infuse his understanding of Chinese philosophy into his translation of *The Grass Pillow*.

Following reason leads to jarring edges; acting on emotion leads to unbridled behavior; acting impulsively leads to constant setbacks. In short, the human world is difficult.

Feng's version translates "reason" as an abstract concept encompassing principles, patterns, and the laws governing the development of things. "Law" – jarring edges – represents following rules and regulations; "emotion" – human feelings, feelings, the part that stirs emotions – represents unbridled behavior, indicating that people act entirely according to their emotions. Feng's version is more abstract, its meaning extending beyond human characteristics to include the relationship between humanity and nature. Translating it as "willpower" represents willpower and strength, and "qi" (vital energy) is a crucial concept in Chinese philosophy. This is one of the important manifestations of the unity of heaven and humanity, that is, humans are formed by gathering the spirit of heaven and earth, thus experiencing a harmonious coexistence with all things in nature. This is related to Feng Zikai's profound knowledge of Chinese literature; he combined *The Grass Pillow* with Chinese culture and incorporated its philosophical concepts.

"Horses sing past Suzuka, spring rain falls, wine is drunk, swallows sing.

...Cherry blossoms bloom on the mountain path, the newlyweds of the Wei family rejoice.

"The girl worries day and night, wondering whether to marry this man or that man. She decides not to marry either, singing: 'The autumn light on the earth is cold, the autumn flowers are pale and faded.'" [5]

Feng Zikai's translation of the haiku into the form of a classical Chinese quatrain retains the essence of classical Chinese culture while weakening the haiku's original flavor. The use of metaphor and allegory in Chinese poetry is evident in this translation, naturally transitioning to human life and imbuing nature with human emotion. In contrast, Japanese haiku, where nature and humanity intertwine, exhibits a scattered, withered beauty. [13]Feng's translation, using the quatrain form, regulates the poetic structure, reducing this fragmented, withered beauty.

Therefore, regardless of nature or human affairs, in places easily inaccessible to the common people, artists can discover countless treasures and obtain supreme gems. This is commonly called beautification. But it is not beautification at all. Brilliant splendor has existed prominently in the phenomenal world since ancient times. It is only because of a veil that the eye sees only fleeting illusions, because of worldly burdens that are unbreakable, because of the tangible weight of honor and disgrace, gain and loss, that one cannot forget the beauty of a train before describing it, just as one cannot appreciate the beauty of a ghost before describing it.

This passage describes the inhuman world; beauty can only be revealed after the inhuman world is discarded. Only when one has eliminated self-interest and gain can one see beauty in things. This aligns with Feng Zikai's aesthetic philosophy: only by

discarding worldly matters in the aimless reality can one achieve a pure way of seeing things, and only then can beauty be created. [14]

5 Summary

Cui Wanqiu and Feng Zikai's different experiences studying in Japan and their varying literary attainments resulted in two distinct translations. Looking at the text as a whole, Cui's version focuses more on the expression of Japanese literature, remaining faithful to the original text. He uses Chinese to express Japanese culture through allusions, legends, and haiku, showcasing the beauty of things (mono no aware) within Japanese culture as much as possible, thus reflecting Natsume Soseki's artistic view of "Yu Yu Guan" (the concept of leisurely living). [15] This presents a foreign culture to Chinese readers, and the difference from Chinese culture makes **The Grass Pillow** more unique for them. Feng Zikai, on the other hand, emphasizes the expression of Chinese culture within the translated Chinese context, combining the concept of leisurely living in the Japanese context with the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi, giving it a stronger Chinese literary flavor. His translation of **The Grass Pillow** is a work of cultural absorption infused with his own ideas. Furthermore, Feng's translation uses language closer to Chinese culture, making it more accessible and easier for Chinese readers to understand.

Lin Shaohua used the term "grass pillow" in his paper, a term not found in Chinese. In Japanese, it means "journey, journey, traveler," and based on the Chinese meaning, it might be translated as a pillow made of grass. Cui's version directly translates it as "grass pillow," which might require Chinese readers to understand another layer of meaning. Feng Zikai, however, interprets it as "traveler's lodging," allowing Chinese readers to grasp the meaning of the article directly from the literal meaning. Therefore, Feng's version is more accessible and easier to understand.

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