

# Bridging Geographical Concepts Between Contexts: Reflections on Language Translation and Knowledge

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## Abstract

This article calls for critical attention to the role of language in knowledge production for the advancement of geographical scholarship in East Asia. This article reviews recent debates on the epistemology of geographical knowledge and reflects on some issues that arise from the practice of translation in this discipline. Geographical concepts are often translated and interpreted differently in different linguistic and socio-spatial contexts, and how these concepts can be translated between various contexts may be key to open up the possibilities of theorizing from East Asia. In response to these debates, this article suggests alternative ways of doing translation which underscore dialogues and mutual understanding.

## Keywords

language translation; knowledge; concepts; epistemology

## Introduction

In this article, my goal is to reflect on the relevance of translation between languages to knowledge production in geography<sup>1</sup>. I argue that, instead of considering translation as a unidirectional practice, it is important to recognize translation as a multi-directional and relational practice, which has the potential to expand the possibilities for knowledge mobility and for dialogues between different places. Drawing on the experience of East Asian geography, I examine and reflect on some issues that arise from translation in this discipline.

Then, in response to recent scholarly discussions, I also suggest alternative ways of doing translation which underscore dialogues and mutual understanding. Translation as a bridging means can help to connect concepts from various contexts.

I became interested in this topic during a research stay in Japan in 2023, where I explored the multiple meanings embedded in geographical concepts as well as the history of Japanese geographical scholarship. I discovered that Japanese geographers translated various works from other languages to shape their own

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I refer specifically to translation between languages, distinct from how the term is used in Science and Technology Studies (STS) or Actor-Network Theory (ANT), though such approaches may inform the study of language translation.



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geographical writings from the late nineteenth century onward. This period also witnessed a broader movement of scientific knowledge in all academic disciplines from the so-called Western world, influencing not only intellectual activities but also wider social transformations in East Asia. Within this context, I focused on the institutionalization of geography as an academic discipline in East Asia and discovered many intriguing aspects of how geographical knowledge was translated. These findings led me to reflect more deeply on questions of translation, knowledge, and the identity of geographers, recognizing translation as an integral part of the process of producing geographical knowledge.

### **Language in the epistemology of geographical knowledge**

Language translation has played a key role in the history of modern geographical scholarship in East Asia. The translation of geography textbooks from foreign languages, beyond merely English, facilitated the establishment and growth of the discipline at modern universities in the early twentieth century in Taiwan (Chiang and Jou 2006), Korea (Baik 2006), and Japan (Yamada 2007). In Japan, for example, different phases of geographical scholarship were closely tied to the topics and types of translated materials, as well as to the motivations of the translators, many of whom were geographers themselves<sup>2</sup>. While this historical trajectory may suffer from postcolonial critiques of academic imperialism, East Asian geographers' critical reflections on so-called "imported scholarship" have alternatively pointed to an understanding of

their self-representation and intertextuality (Mori 2009; Shimazu et al. 2012). It can also be suggested that translation remains a continuous academic practice to present day. In Japan, translation activities remain central to a particular type of university course, that is the reading classes devoted to the close reading of significant or classical works, mainly in foreign languages.

It is important to place an emphasis on the critical role of language in mediating geographical knowledge within specific socio-spatial contexts. Critical debates in Anglophone geography have problematized language. For Blomley (2008), language serves as both a medium of communication and a means of thinking, and the issue of linguistic hegemony in Anglophone geography is significant for critical geography which aspires to intellectualism, solidarity, reflexivity, and the analysis of power. As Robinson (2023) discusses, the norms of which language to use and where to publish research have long defined what constitutes "international" knowledge, limiting the scope for theoretical conversations. The current knowledge production activities prioritize the use of English. While reflections on language and knowledge emerged earlier in Latin America with the development of decolonial approaches, as well as in the Anglophone world, East Asian geography has only recently begun to engage seriously with these issues.

We must be beware of the problem of linguistic privilege created by the global dominance of English as the hegemonic language of knowledge-related activities (Müller 2021; Ren 2022). English is not only about grammar; it is also about language as a social practice and a way of thinking that

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<sup>2</sup> An unpublished manuscript of journal-article length entitled "Translating human geography into and from Japan: Language, knowledge, and territory," elaborating on the role of translation in the five phases of the trajectory of Japanese geography, is available upon request from the author.

constitutes a body politics of knowledge. Recent works problematize language as both a navigator of possibilities and interactions (Ren 2022; Zhao 2020) and a manifestation of hegemony and privilege (Müller 2021). They represent two interrelated approaches: the first looks for ways to develop dialogues that are concerned with comparative geographies; the other is concerned with the location of the discipline of geography as centered on so-called the West, the Global North, the former colonial powers, the English-speaking regions, etc. Language shapes academic conventions in a given place. Original research or intellectual development in each place may be less known outside that territory due to language barriers.

Knowledge is created as it circulates through texts and ideas, which are modified and reinterpreted through translation (Fall 2012). Fall wrote about the works of Claude Raffestin, a French-speaking geographer in Switzerland. Fall discussed how and where Raffestin's works were written, thought about, used, ignored or translated into many different languages, including Japanese, but rarely English. Fall emphasized the importance of paying attention to the spaces and contexts of geographical works, especially when drawing ideas from foreign thinkers.

### **Translation of geographical concepts**

Concepts in geographical knowledge are being translated. Conventionally, translation is understood as a process of merely seeking equivalent meanings of words between source and target languages (Figure 1). However, there is a need to go beyond this conventional understanding. Müller (2007) highlights that geographers frequently need to handle sources and materials in foreign languages, urging us to consider the politics of translation and the agency of the translating geographers. This critical awareness is also important when examining the translation of geographical concepts.

Geographical concepts are often translated and interpreted differently in various socio-spatial contexts. The concepts of territoriality and territory, for example, have already been defined and understood differently by Anglophone and Francophone geographers (Delaney 2005; Klauser 2012; Raffestin 1977, 1986; Sack 1986), not to mention how it is decolonized in Latin America (Halvorsen 2019). When East Asian geographers translated these works into their respective languages (Raffestin 1996a [1977], 1996b [1986]; Delaney 2017 [2005]; Yamazaki 2022), they synthesized these foreign works with their own regional experiences and languages, which further led to different conceptualizations in their academic praxis.

Clarifying the meanings and contexts of the concepts we use in academic discourse is important for advancing geographical explanations. Geographers in Asia have already alerted us of the danger of overlooking the differences in the meanings and contexts of the concepts being translated (Gao and Cartier 2024; Raju 2004; Shin et al. 2016; Tang 2014, 2021; Zhao 2020). For instance, Tang (2014, 2021) criticizes the random appropriation and indigenization of different concepts. Raju (2004) also discussed the uncritical adoption of Western categories in the context of India.

The concept in the source language is influenced by the intellectual and socio-spatial contexts from which it emerged. When translating this concept into the target language, many factors come into play (Figure 2). For example, the translators' identities, funding, and the institutional setting of the translation project are all influential factors. Translators may have their own motivations and are sometimes influenced by local politics because they often seek knowledge relevant to their societies (for example, Hsu 2020). The outcome of the translation process affects research and teaching, which may subsequently impact policy and practice within the target society. For East Asian geographers, this process has often been

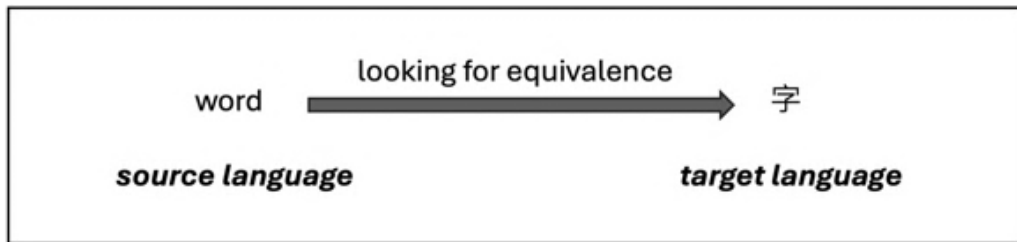


Figure 1: Conventional understanding of translation

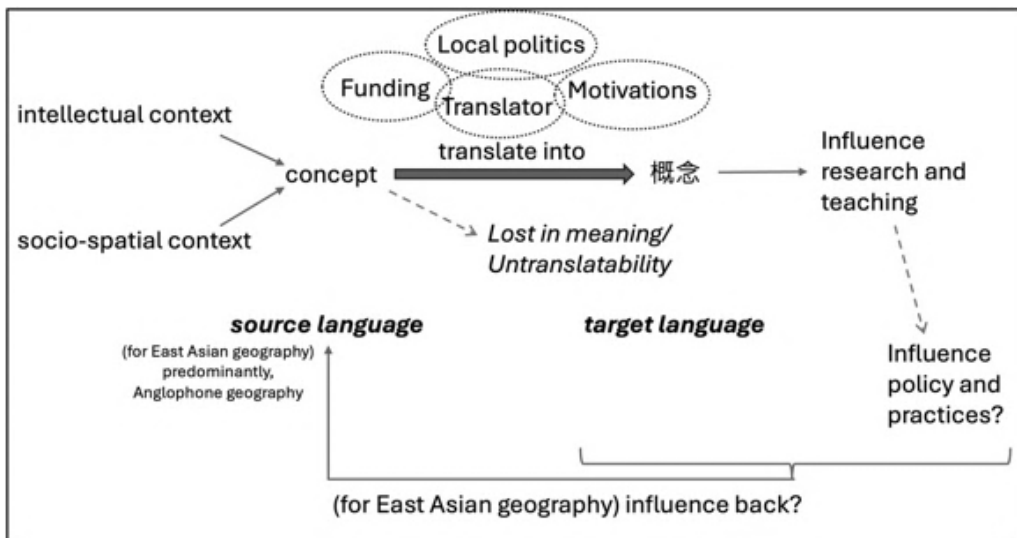


Figure 2: Translation of concepts in geography

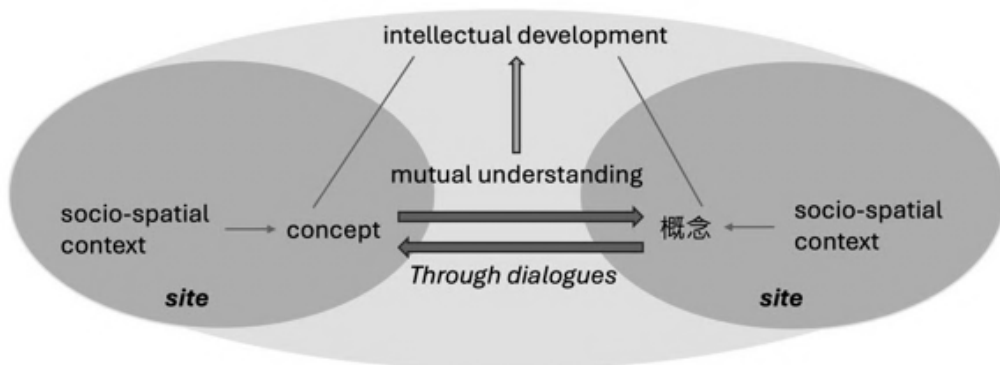


Figure 3: Alternative translation and knowledge production

unidirectional, from the source language to the target language. This raises the question of whether we can influence back the source society.

Geographers have identified several issues with translating geographical concepts. Drawing on examples from political geography, Sidaway et al. (2004) discussed two such problems: mistranslation and misrecognition. Mistranslation is simply using the wrong words. Misrecognition occurs due to a lack of awareness of historical specificity and assumptions; concepts often carry specific assumptions about the social order (Sidaway et al. 2004). These two types of problems can also be identified in other geography subdisciplines, such as economic geography. Mizuoka (2019: 309) documents that critical concepts of space were mistranslated and misrecognized in the Japanese translation of an economic geography textbook published in the late 1990s. Relating to spatiality, the word “heterogeneity” was mistranslated as “homogeneity.” However, the more serious mistake is misrecognition. Marx’s concept of “mode of production” was “dropped entirely” because the translators, who were not interested in critical geography, were unable to recognize the concept.

Untranslatability can be considered the third problem in translating geographical concepts from the perspective of decolonial geography. Although translation is conventionally understood as finding equivalents, some concepts and ideas simply do not have equivalents in other languages, and their meanings cannot easily be captured in existing knowledge typologies or categories (Jazeel 2016). Untranslatability also complicates the circulation of concepts between English-, French-, and German-speaking geographies (Stock 2024). An academic concept may carry complex, multi-faceted, and contextual meanings (Shin et al. 2016). The scientific literature has already discussed some examples in Asian languages:

- “Development” in Southeast Asia (Rigg 2003): There is no universally accepted language that conveys this concept. The words and their meanings vary greatly depending on the country’s history.
- “State,” “territory,” and “border” in Asia (Sidaway et al. 2004): These terms were not only contextual within the country’s history but also relational, as they were connected to other countries in the region, due to the geopolitics and historical geography.
- “Race” in Japan (Takezawa 2015): This study of Japanese geography textbooks from the early Meiji period reveals how the concept of “race” was introduced to Japan. This influenced not only knowledge activities, but also, in the more consequential way, led to the problem of racial discrimination in contemporary Japan.
- “Nature” in Asia (Droz et al. 2022): There is a diversity of conceptualizations of “nature” in East and Southeast Asia. Each language’s conceptualization is linked to its particular understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment. However, environmental reports and policies at the global level ignore this knowledge and assume a universal understanding of nature.
- “*Shequ*” (社区) in China (Gao and Cartier 2024): Rather than “community” or “neighborhood,” “*shequ*” should be used to describe local areas in China since these English words ignore the spatial and administrative meanings of “*shequ*,” which is part of China’s state administrative hierarchy.

### Alternative translation in geography

Inspired by recent calls to decolonize and decenter knowledge production (Shin 2021), this final section proposes an alternative

translation approach that emphasizes dialogues and highlights the differences in concepts and meanings between languages. This approach echoes Zhao's (2020) "translation turn," which proposes that, rather than seeking equivalence, we should engage in dialogues that recognizes and values the differences between languages.

Scholars influenced by the postcolonial thought have advocated studying and theorizing from the Global East and Asia, small cities, and other research sites. As Ren (2022) suggests, the most important thing is not to provide case studies but to overcome the privilege of thinking and speaking the language of theory. Comparative research should demand more translation, exchange, and collaboration. It is important to understand how a concept originating in a particular context is socially and spatially situated. Through dialogues, mutual understanding can be fostered, which advances the innovative intellectual development about categories or phenomena (Figure 3). For example, Tang et al. (2024) innovatively applied the philosophy of *tongbian*, a philosophy that goes beyond dialectics to underscore non-dualistic ceaseless interaction and continuity, to show the limitations of Western literature in addressing issues related to land, property, and territory. As Tang et al. (2024: 8) suggest, their theorization approach

upholds difference without alienation and contests framings of conjunctural approach as informed by the dialectic between the general, assumed to be the North, to then pose the particular-empirical cases in the South.

They aim to influence the dominant ways of understanding these critical issues.

If geography recognizes the diversity of landscapes and places around the world, then we must also recognize the different words in different languages and contexts that we use to describe and explain these spatial phenomena. The way we translate geographical knowledge influences not only scientific communication

but also how we understand our societies and intervene in various geographical issues.

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