Lost in Translation?: The Challenges of Rendering Miyamoto Musashi into English

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Abstract:
The written works of legendary swordsman and strategist Miyamoto Musashi hold an important place in the canon of *budo* literature. In the interest of the internationalization of Japanese *budo*, it seems important that these texts be available to as wide a global audience of practitioners as possible. However, given the inherent difficulties of learning the Japanese language, and the particular challenges of older text such as Musashi’s, it also seems important for these texts to be available to international practitioners in readily understandable translations, and since English serves as a de facto *lingua franca* for much of the world, a consideration of the viability of valid and useful translations in this language is a good place to start. The predominant questions regarding the value of such translations can be broken down into the linguistic, the technical, the theoretical, and the stylistic. *Linguistic issues* include the handling of various terminology, and whether to attempt to render specific *budo* related terms into English or to leave them in Japanese and gloss them, as well as basic difficulties such the lack of a singular-plural distinction in Japanese and the necessity for significant interpretation in many cases. *Technical issues* involve the aspects of the texts which deal with specifics of technique, and how to a) determine what actions in fact are being described in the passages in question, and b) how best to elaborate them in English. What physical movements are being indicated, and how specifically are they indicated? *Theoretical issues* revolve around the more abstract or philosophical underpinnings of the texts, which often depend on a conceptual framework for which commonly-understood terms are unavailable in English. Can very abstract concepts such as *kū* or *dō* be rendered adequately in other languages, particularly English, or are they too culturally specific to allow truly appropriate translations? *Stylistic issues* regard such elements as the syntax, tone, and register of the original texts, and questions as to how important it is for translations to accurately reflect these in English, or if this is even really possible. Can a single "best" translation serve a broad readership, or are the purposes of different readerships too divergent for a single translation to accommodate them?

Conclusions
Most linguistic issues in the translation of Musashi’s work can be resolved in English, albeit with a significant degree of explanatory notation. Considering the limited amount of detail and repeated reference to "oral transmission" in the texts, the extent to which any translation can be considered accurate on points of technique is by definition somewhat restricted, although analysis of *kenjutsu* styles claiming to be in Musashi’s lineage does provide some indication of what interpretations are likely to be the most accurate. Theoretical issues prove similarly intractable, but can, like linguistic issues, on the whole be satisfactorily resolved with the use of extensive glossing and explanation. Stylistic issues are by and large a matter of aesthetic preference; while they certainly have an effect on ease of reading, they will vary depending on the purposes of the reader, whether as a *budo* practitioner, a reader interested mainly in the historical or philosophical aspects of the texts, or simply as a casual reader.