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## Book Review: Kumiko Torikai. Voices of the Invisible Presence: Diplomatic Interpreters in post-World War II Japan.

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## Book Review

**Kumiko Torikai. *Voices of the Invisible Presence: Diplomatic Interpreters in post-World War II Japan*.** Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009, 197 pp. ISBN 978-90-272-2427-9.

**Reviewed by Kayoko Takeda**

This book explores the “making” of interpreters and the issues concerning the role of interpreters by drawing on the author’s interviews of five pioneer interpreters who mainly worked in the diplomatic arena in post-World War II Japan: Nishiyama Sen, Sohma Yukika, Muramatsu Masumi, Kunihiro Masao and Komatsu Tatsuya. The fascinating life stories of these venerable interpreters cover a variety of topics including their backgrounds (focusing on how they acquired or learned English and Japanese), the circumstances under which they became interpreters, the perceptions they had of their role as interpreters, especially in the diplomatic context, and their views on what constitutes good interpreting and on the classic argument of whether interpreters are made or born.

Chapter 1 introduces the aim of the book as making the invisible presence of interpreters visible by presenting the living memories of five prominent interpreters who led the way in diplomatic interpreting in post-war Japan. The rationale for using oral history as a method is presented in clear language, describing the interview method used for the research in detail. The author’s position as the interviewer is explained in context, and the profile of the interpreters are briefly introduced.

Chapter 2 offers an overview of the history of interpreting/translation in Japan, from the time of Nagasaki *tsuji* onward. This account is perhaps much fuller than any other English texts on the subject and should certainly become a reliable reference for the research into the history of interpreters in Japan. The inclusion of a series of important and intriguing historical incidents involving issues of interpreting and translation makes the chapter a page-turner and an inspiring source for further discussions.

The actual content of the interviews is presented from Chapters 3 to 5, applying Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and practice, respectively. The best efforts are made to preserve the

style and tone, in their English translation, of the engaging stories told by these highly intelligent and eloquent people. Culturally-bound expressions such as “*tanka o kiru*”, “*keren*” and “*kakeai manzai*” are dealt with admirably, and the text reads very well throughout the chapters. These stories can also be presented for a study of the social, political and economic developments of postwar Japan. Those who are interested in Japan’s postwar foreign relations and economic expansion may be appreciative of the fascinating behind-the-scene stories they offer. It reveals various activities of the U.S. occupation forces, the recovery and growth of the Japanese economy, Japan’s foreign policy, especially with the United States, and the personalities of some renowned Japanese statesmen from refreshing viewpoints of people who were actually there. The detailed examination of former Prime Minister Nakasone’s “unsinkable aircraft carrier” episode may be of special interest. The description of wartime English education in Japan is also enlightening and dispels the common belief that English was not taught in Japan during the war.

Chapter 6 attempts to analyze the findings from the interviews, especially the role of interpreters by applying the Interpreter Interpersonal Role Inventory proposed by Angelelli (2004). It also draws on models and concepts developed in the field of intercultural communication in order to address issues of language and culture. Angelelli’s Inventory was devised mainly for comparing conference, court and medical interpreters in North America, and it is not a proven model in terms of its applicability to other types of analyses. This book’s effort to employ this model in the analysis of a limited number of samples with such diverse characteristics seems to show some of the model’s limits. Also, issues of language and culture are so grand and far-reaching that they may well be presented in another study more extensively.

In the final chapter, perspectives for future studies are offered based on the discussions in the previous chapters. The three questions it poses concern the pursuit of the “standard” role of interpreters, interpreters’ internalization of norms, and the issues of interpreters’ identity. The author proposes the metaphoric use of *kurogo* (stagehands in Japanese traditional theater) in addressing these questions. Some features of *kurogo* can certainly be linked with the role of interpreters – an invisible, yet visible being, appreciating the primary player’s task, and helping him to achieve the task. However, it may differ in the sense that *kurogo* generally does not facilitate interactions between two players.

There are two strong virtues in this book: one concerns the research methodology, and the other concerns the new information on the “making” and the role of interpreters. Firstly, this

book explains the methodology of using oral history for interpreting research in detail. The author is keenly aware of potential problems with this approach and is careful in presenting and analyzing the stories of her protagonists. Such carefulness is observed in the extensive references to outside sources to corroborate the interviewees' remarks. Anyone who uses interview in their research should be encouraged to read thoroughly the whole section of the research method in this book.

Secondly, this book provides a great deal of information on the development of interpreting as a profession in Japan and on the social, political, economic and cultural factors that influenced this development. As one of the few English texts on the history of interpreting and translation in Japan, this book is expected to play a vital role in communicating the research conducted on and in Japan in the field of Translation and Interpreting Studies. In the midst of calling for the "de-Westernization" of the field, this is a timely and welcome addition to the increasing body of works originating in non-Western regions. The detailed account of how these pioneers became professional interpreters should provide useful insights especially for those who are studying "natural" interpreters, and the aptitude and training of interpreters.

One of the goals for researchers is to uncover the hidden and the unknown, and provide new data, contributing to the sum of knowledge in their field. It is especially important to encourage researchers to give voices to people who are invisible, forgotten or deprived of a forum in which to speak. This book succeeds in these regards, and the author's endeavor to shine the spotlight on interpreters who are generally discouraged from speaking about their work should be commended highly.

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#### **About the author:**

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