Introduction: Seven Japanese Studies on the Modern Sino-Japanese Lexicon

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Recent years have witnessed the publication of new and important studies in the fields of history, literature, and linguistics concerned with the origins of the modern Chinese language. These works have, to differing degrees, noted the role played by the formation of modern neologisms in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities in Meiji Japan, roughly a generation earlier than they appeared in China, and, especially in the work of Federico Masini, also emphasized the much earlier role of missionary translators in China in coining terminology.1 Studies to date have tended to paint with a wide brush and categorized in large swaths whole categories of Chinese expressions (e.g., those originally from classical Chinese relexified in Meiji Japan, those newly coined in Meiji Japan, the vocabulary of physics, and the like). There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such an approach, though it differs significantly from that of the essays translated in this volume.

I have long maintained that every single newly minted term has its own distinctive story, and while broad summary analyses of the above sort certainly have their place and are often valuable, we will not be able to say anything really meaningful overall until we have amassed numerous (at least, many, many more) individual stories of this sort and then turn once again to the compilation of more comprehensive surveys. Lost in the rush to either generalize about or, worse, theorize the emergence of a broad new vocabulary in “modern” China is the extraordinary wealth of differing stories, cultural riches, and fascinating details that bring language to life.

Of course, it is much easier to make such a claim than it is to carry out the nitty-gritty, often grueling work required, and it lacks the apparent panache or luster of a glistening theoretical contribution. Happily, though, a number of Japanese scholars have begun this time-consuming, extremely difficult, but ultimately essential work. I have translated in the seven essays that comprise this volume from the work of three such Japanese scholars. They have traced the background—often going back many centuries, indeed as far back as antiquity in certain cases—leading to the emergence of new terminology in contemporary use. As I have come to understand the process by which contemporary terms in use came to prominence, there was a kind of contestation among a number of competing terms preceding the emergence of winners, the ultimate victors in the linguistic social Darwinian struggle—namely, the words that are still with us today. Unlike that life-and-death struggle, however, language lives as long as there are living speakers, and as such the struggle continues.

Saitō Tsuyoshi 齋藤毅 (1913–1977) was a pioneer in this labor-intensive field of research. I have included two of the essays from his extraordinary book, Meiji no kotoba, bunmei kaika to Nihongo 明治のことば、文明開化と日本語 (Meiji terms, civilization and enlightenment and the Japanese language), originally published in 1977. These two pieces concern the origins of the two complementary terms, “individual” (C. *geren*, J. *kojin* 個人) and “society” (C. *shehui*, J. *shakai* 社會). Most contemporary readers may find it hard to imagine a world in which these “concepts” were ever effectively absent. We, more or less, tend to think of both as fairly concrete entities, only somewhat more abstract than cyberspace or the surface of the moon—that is, things we know exist but have never experienced the tactile sensation of touching with our hands. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, as Saitō demonstrates, only the interaction with the West and its writings brought the abstraction of “society” to reality and endorsed that of the “individual” in a positive sense. And, the process of coming to *shehui/shakai* and *geren/kojin* was by no means straightforward, as Saitō makes all too clear. The Chinese scholar Sun Jiang 孫江 has most recently continued the discussion of this term in his book, Yazhou gai-nian shi yanjiu 亚洲概念史研究 (Studies in the history of Asian concepts), with a chapter devoted to the topic.  


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2 (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2013); the chapter is nicely titled “‘Shehui’ jinru Zhongguo” 社会进入中国 (“Society” enters China).