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Japanese Literature Travelling the World

From Banana and Haruki to the Rise of Female Writers

Italy

The main feature of 'Japanese Literature Travelling the World', which explores how Japanese literature is received overseas, begins with Italy. The reception of contemporary Japanese literature in Italy—once a key source of the global Banana Yoshimoto boom—is entering a new phase. It seems that their gentle sensibilities resonate with one another.

In recent years, the presence of Japanese literature in Italy has grown markedly. Beginning with translations in the early 20th century, and following the introduction of authors such as Yasunari Kawabata, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki and Yukio Mishima in the post-war period, Japanese literature was long regarded as a 'specialised field accessible only to a limited readership'. However, over the past thirty years, partly due to the influence of pop culture, the situation has changed dramatically. The number of translated publications has increased dramatically, and Japanese literature is now one of the most widely read non-Anglo-American literatures.

The success of Banana Yoshimoto and Haruki Murakami in the 1990s was decisive; works such as **Kitchen** and **Norwegian Wood** revitalised the image of Japanese literature and attracted a diverse readership. Since then, the number of publications has surged, and in recent years, against a backdrop of rising social anxiety, so-called 'feel-good' works—represented by Toshikazu Kawaguchi's **Before the Coffee Gets Cold** and Genki Kawamura's **If Cats Disappeared from the World**—have enjoyed remarkable popularity in Italy. Furthermore, a strategy of arousing readers' interest by including words such as 'Tokyo', 'cat' and 'bookshop' in titles has been observed, and a tendency for book covers to resemble one another has also been noted.

A particularly noteworthy trend in current reception is the rise of female authors. Sayaka Murata, Mieko Kawakami, Emi Yagi, Aoko Matsuda, [Li Kotomi](#) and Rie Kudan, among others, offer sharp portrayals of themes such as gender, loneliness and a sense of alienation from social norms, striking a strong chord with Italian readers.

The current success of Japanese literature in Italy is also reflected in the fact that not only major publishers but also small and medium-sized publishers are actively publishing Japanese works, and in the increasing number of Japanese authors being invited to literary events, including book fairs. At the same time, there are many instances where works by authors previously published are being retranslated or newly published, and the publication of genres such as mystery and detective fiction remains robust.

The environment surrounding translation has also changed. Agents are extremely active, and in the case of works with bestseller potential or noteworthy authors, 'rights auctions' are held where multiple publishers compete to secure the rights. Furthermore, the number of university students aspiring to become translators is on the rise. Practical translation requires not only linguistic ability but also a deep empathy with and interpretation of the work's world; I feel that higher-quality translations are produced when the subject matter resonates with one's own interests. Translation is not merely a matter of substituting one language for another; it is a creative act that involves listening to the voice of the story, empathising with the characters' emotions, and breathing new life into the work in another language.

However, translators are not always able to translate the works they wish to tackle. As the publishing industry prioritises rapid publication, I am sometimes forced to decline commissions when deadlines are tight or when they clash with existing work. Although AI translation technology is advancing rapidly, it remains difficult to accurately reproduce the emotional nuances and narrative rhythm inherent in literary works. I firmly believe that Japanese literature is so widely read in Italy thanks to the power of the stories themselves and the efforts of translators.

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Anna Specchio teaches Japanese language and literature at the University of Turin. She has produced Italian translations of many works of contemporary Japanese literature, including those by Kazuki Sakuraba and Sayaka Murata, and is also an expert on titles such as 'Sailor Moon'.

(Photo caption)

A view of the stand set up by the Italian publisher Ripocampo at a previous Turin International Book Fair. The stand reflected a deep interest in Japanese literature and featured a design inspired by a torii gate.