



Photo: Tomo Kimura

Japanese-English translator
KIMURA Tomo

A Japanese-English Manga Translator Describes the Challenges and Fun of Her Work

We interviewed KIMURA Tomo, a translator of Japanese shōjo manga (comics written for girls and young women) including *NANA* and *Black Butler*, about what makes the work challenging, as well as fun and interesting aspects of translating the unique Japanese form into English.

(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)



The popular *Black Butler* series has a total worldwide circulation² of 35 million copies. At left is the Japanese edition, at right the English translation.



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KIMURA Tomo, an active translator of Japanese manga comics into English, began her career with the translation of *Full Moon o Sagashite* (Japanese title: *Full Moon wo Sagashite*¹), released by US publisher VIZ Media in 2004. Since then, she has translated over 300 volumes of manga into English. While she had prior experience translating in corporate settings, she did have some uncertainty when she first began working with manga, she says.

“When I was translating documents like software specifications, the work required accuracy and certainty. With manga translation, potential interpretations tend to vary so widely that 10 translators might come up with 10 different translations for the same expression. The need to consider which wording is the most fitting for the particular work is what sets manga translation apart and what makes it so challenging.”

Her specialty, shōjo manga — comics written primarily for an audience of girls and young women — tends to feature particularly nuanced descriptions of emotional states. Finding just the right expressions in English requires her to consider the options very carefully.

“For example, there are a number of first-person pronouns male characters might use in Japanese — *watashi*, *ore*, *boku* — and each one reveals something about their personality. In English, though, they all turn into ‘I.’ That means I need to work with the nuances of the wording in other ways with expressions different characters seem like they would use, expressing their individual natures and identities through the dialogue as a whole.”

She says that it’s also challenging to find ways of translating unique Japanese expressions into English.

“Distinctions between honorific language, humble speech, polite expressions and so on that are typi-



A scene conveying the nuances of the butler’s original Japanese speech in English. (From *Black Butler*, vol. 32, pg. 112)

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Kakuriyo: Bed & Breakfast for Spirits. At upper is the Japanese edition, at lower the English translation. The manga is based on a best-selling novel series with over 2.5 million copies sold in Japan.

cal of Japanese are not found in English. That was one aspect that made translating the dialogue in *Black Butler* (Japanese title: *Kuroshitsuji*)³ challenging. There is also the fact that the work is set in 19th-century England. To convey the right atmosphere, I incorporated expressions and modes of speech from the time that are no longer in use today.”

Japanese manga also makes wide use of richly varied onomatopoeia – words that imitate various sounds – that bring vividly expressive feelings to the work. English, however, seems to have much more limited options for

these kinds of imitative effects.

“The translation of *Kakuriyo: Bed & Breakfast for Spirits* (Japanese: *Kakuriyo no Yadomeshi: Ayakashi Oyado ni Yomeiri Shimasu*),⁴ which I am working on right now, features a wide range of scenes showing foods being prepared. In it, the sound of rice-rinsing is expressed as ‘shaka shaka’ in the original Japanese. Finding the right translation gave me trouble, as there is really no equivalent in English. My solution was to take the vowels from the word ‘shake’ and make it ‘SHK SHK’ to give it a suitably manga-like look. I try to come up with inventive approaches like this, finding or making up words with sounds that more closely resemble the original Japanese.”

KIMURA is also very careful to translate in ways that help readers understand Japanese culture and customs that appear in the manga works. When translating ingredients unique to Japanese cuisine, she will choose words that make it easy to picture the shape or appearance of the foods, using wordings like “daikon radish” rather than simply “daikon,” for instance.



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In the English translation, “SHK SHK” expresses the sound of shaking and stirring during rice-rinsing, taking the vowels from the word “shake” to give it a suitably manga-like look. (From *Kakuriyo: Bed & Breakfast for Spirits*, vol. 1, pg. 154)

“One of the things that makes Japanese manga so appealing has got to be the wide range of genres it covers. I want to keep challenging myself to carefully convey to readers the unique charms of each individual work I translate, from among all the colorful diversity of manga I do.”

1. Japanese version: *Full Moon wo Sagashite*. (Story and art by TANEMURA Arina.) Published by SHUEISHA Inc., 2002.
2. Total number of copies in circulation worldwide of comic series by single author.
3. *Black Butler*: published by Yen Press. The Japanese version (story and art by TOBOSO Yana) is a

popular manga series that has been published by SQUARE ENIX since 2007.
4. Published by VIZ Media. Japanese version: *Kakuriyo no Yadomeshi: Ayakashi Oyado ni Yomeiri Shimasu* (art by IOKA Waco, based on novel series by YUMA Midori, character design by Laruha) that has been published by KADOKAWA since 2016.