

Exploring the Roles of *Oranda-tsūji* (Japanese-Dutch Interpreters) in Linguistic and Cultural Exchange in Edo-Period Japan

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1. Introduction

During the Edo period (1603–1868), the *Oranda-tsūji*, or Japanese-Dutch interpreters, held a distinctive and influential role. They were not just translators but also played a pivotal role in fostering cultural understanding between Japanese and Dutch traders. Their duties were multifaceted, extending beyond language mediation to include the critical role of dispute resolution, oversight of trade agreements, and support of the Dutch trading post's operations. Despite their considerable contributions to intercultural exchange, the significance of their role has been frequently marginalized or overlooked. Scholarly attention to the cultural impact of the *Oranda-tsūji* remains limited, as they are often criticized for perceived deficiencies in language proficiency and are seldom accorded the recognition their achievements warrant. They are frequently marginalized as mere “intermediaries” that are not worth mentioning.

To achieve a more nuanced understanding of the *Oranda-tsūji*, exploring their roles in facilitating linguistic and cultural exchange is essential. Accordingly, this paper begins by offering a comprehensive overview of the historical and social context surrounding the *Oranda-tsūji*, highlighting the development of their linguistic and cultural mediation skills. The subsequent analysis delves deeper into their specific contributions, emphasizing the critical evaluation of how the *Oranda-tsūji* functioned as intermediaries in language and culture exchange between the Japanese and Dutch. By exploring these dimensions, the paper not only sheds light on the *Oranda-tsūji*'s role but also the broader significance of their work in facilitating linguistic and cultural exchange during the Edo-Period Japan.

2. Brief Overview of the Context of *Oranda-tsūji*

2.1 Japanese-Dutch relationship in the Edo period

It is crucial to grasp the historical context of Japanese-Dutch relations to discuss the role of *Oranda-tsūji* during the Edo period. In the early 17th century, there was a growing concern in

the Tokugawa shogunate that Christianity was becoming a threat due to the religious conversions promoted by the Portuguese. Consequently, the shogunate banned Christianity, leading to the persecution and expulsion of Catholic missionaries.

A significant event occurred in 1637 with the outbreak of the Shimabara Rebellion in Nagasaki, Kyushu. This insurrection involved approximately 37,000 peasants and samurai who rose against the shogunate's authority, driven by grievances over heavy taxation and religious persecution. During the conflict, the Dutch provided naval support to the shogunate, ultimately suppressing the rebellion in 1638. The aftermath saw the implementation of severe measures, including the complete banishment and expulsion of the Portuguese from Japan.

By contrast, the Dutch, having demonstrated loyalty to the shogunate, were permitted to continue trading under the condition that they refrain from conducting Christian missionary activities in Japan. This unique arrangement positioned the Dutch as the sole Western traders in Japan, a status that profoundly influenced Dutch–Japanese relations throughout the Edo period.

Once the Portuguese departed in 1641, the shogunal administration relocated the Dutch trading house from Hirado in northwestern Nagasaki to Dejima, a small artificial island previously occupied by the Portuguese. Several *tsūji* families who accompanied the Dutch traders to Hirado moved to Nagasaki. The relocation of *tsūji* significantly reshaped their role because after moving to Dejima, they were assigned as official interpreters and local government officers. Arano (1993) notes that these interpreters, who previously served as agents and spokespersons for the Dutch, now bore significant responsibilities within the local government. This new role elevated their status compared to Dutch traders and transformed their function in the Dutch-Japanese trade dynamic.

2.2 The guild system of *Oranda-tsūji*

Under the administration of the town of Nagasaki, the *Oranda-tsūji* interpreters were organized into a formal guild system. Approximately 20 to 25 families were designated as official *tsūji* families, entrusted with the role of interpreters. These families held and transmitted the *tsūji* stocks within their lineage throughout the Edo period. The inheritance of *tsūji* stocks was not merely a tradition but a vital mechanism ensuring the continuity and preservation of the family's status and responsibilities within the guild.

Within this guild structure, the family business was typically passed down to the first-born sons of the *tsūji* families, who were expected to master the requisite languages. The training of future interpreters began in early childhood, often under the tutelage of grandfathers, fathers, or uncles who were already skilled in the language. In cases where a family lacked a suitable heir, a

talented boy from another family or a relative would be adopted to continue the family business, adhering to the same rigorous instruction line.

During the Edo period, the *Oranda-tsūji* were appointed by the local government to various positions. Harada (2003) notes that in the early Edo period, there were initially only three official positions: *ōtsūji* (大通詞, senior interpreter), *kotsūji* (小通詞, junior interpreter), and *keiko-tsūji* (稽古通詞, apprentice interpreter). However, as time progressed, the responsibilities of the interpreters became increasingly diverse and complex, necessitating the system's expansion to include additional roles. This expansion reflects the adaptability and evolution of the *tsūji* guild system.

From the original position of *ōtsūji*, new positions were created, including the role of *tsūji metsuke* (通詞目付), an inspector appointed by the shogunate to oversee both the Dutch traders and *tsūji*. The *tsūji metsuke* ensured that the Dutch complied with shogunate regulations and prevented the *Oranda-tsūji* from exerting independent control over the Dutch. Additionally, three new positions were added under the *kotsūji*, further diversifying the hierarchy within the *tsūji* system.

Furthermore, the high-ranking positions of *ōtsūji* and *kotsūji* were not merely occupational roles but regarded as social statuses equivalent to those of the samurai. By contrast, other *tsūji* positions were considered to belong to the townspeople class. This differentiation in social status within the *tsūji* guild system was not arbitrary but determined by the level of authority and responsibility inherent in each role. This period exemplifies the adaptability of government officials, who assumed new roles and responsibilities in response to the evolving needs of the time.

2.3 *Oranda-tsūji's* tasks

The primary tasks of *tsūji* included translating official documents and interpreting negotiations between the Nagasaki magistrate and the Dutch trading house (Tanaka, 2015). In addition, they undertook a wide range of trading-related tasks. For instance, upon the arrival of Dutch ships at Nagasaki port, the *tsūji* were responsible for providing instructions for the unloading of cargo. They were also tasked with inspecting the unloaded contents to identify any prohibited items, such as those related to Christianity. The other duty of the *tsūji* was to monitor the Dutch population. The *tsūji* members were required to supervise (or spy on) the Dutch people constantly.

It should be added that in those days, Dutch ships were not just vessels of trade goods but also carriers of the latest Western culture and information from around the world. The *Oranda-tsūji* played a vital role in swiftly acquiring this information from the Dutch, translating it into Japanese, and compiling it into a document. This document, known as the *Oranda Fūsetsugaki* (オランダ風説書 The Dutch Book of Rumors) (Matsukata 2007, 2010, 2012), was then submitted to the

shogunate, thereby enriching the Japanese understanding of the world beyond their shores.

The highly skilled *tsūji* in Nagasaki were exceedingly occupied with all these assigned tasks. Torii (2001) states that their responsibilities also encompassed attending to numerous visitors to Dejima and addressing various inquiries. Despite their already demanding daily routines, these interpreters continued to pursue their studies in addition to their work obligations.

3. *Oranda-tsūji* and Language Skills

3.1 Difficulties

The primary responsibility of the Dutch interpreters was to function as linguistic mediators, a role requiring the acquisition of advanced language skills. This task proved particularly challenging during this period. Several factors contributed to these difficulties. In the early Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate began implementing strict restrictions on trade and overseas travel for Japanese citizens as part of their isolationist policies. Before this, Japanese citizens could leave and reenter the country, creating more opportunities for interaction with foreigners.

However, as such interactions became increasingly prohibited, the opportunities for Japanese people to communicate directly with Westerners significantly decreased. By 1639, Japanese citizens were entirely prohibited from leaving the country, with the exception of those who were expelled, and those who left were never permitted to return. These restrictions had a detrimental impact on interpreters and translators, as their duties required advanced language proficiency. Consequently, they were deprived of the necessary exposure and opportunities to develop these skills.

To further complicate the situation, the shogunate and local government demonstrated indifference to supporting the Dutch interpreters. Therefore, the interpreters had little option but to rely on their resources for language acquisition. They pursued their studies with the assistance of their families and members of the *tsūji* guild.

According to Joby (2021:49), in the 17th century, Dutch classes for junior interpreters were held in chambers of the *tsūji-nakama* (通詞仲間 interpreters guild). The students were trained by their Japanese seniors without the input of the Dutch. Their Dutch learning method was primarily based on rote learning of phrases, which their senior interpreters often used. Little attention was paid to the structural features of the language, such as grammar and syntax, as these aspects were unknown to them. Besides, their pronunciation must have sounded like Japanese, making it difficult for the Dutch to comprehend. Although this is the best they could do under the circumstances, it is far from the perfect way to learn the language.

Goodman (2014:36) suggests that the interpreters' deficiencies in Dutch language proficiency,

mainly due to the unavailability of essential resources such as grammar books and dictionaries, likely contributed to the belief that they could not read Dutch. Various entries in the Dagregister¹ evidence this. For instance, in 1672, interpreters struggled to read documents submitted to the magistrate by the Dutch, necessitating assistance for reading and translation. In 1693, the names of apprentice interpreters were recorded along with criticisms of their abilities, reflecting the Dutch merchants' significant dissatisfaction with their language skills, as they heavily depended on them in Japan.

Above all, it should be added that the position of *Oranda-tsūji* was often inherited within families for centuries. They were hired not for their language skills but due to their family background. Consequently, *Oranda-tsūji*, who did not possess the necessary aptitude and competence, struggled to provide high-caliber translations.

3.2 Signs of improvement

However, in the 18th century, the *Oranda-tsūji*'s language skills gradually showed signs of improvement. There are several reasons behind this; one was the local government's official examination to boost their language skills. According to Katagiri (2016:26), in 1796, an examination of translation was carried out for low-class Dutch and Chinese interpreters. Since then, the examination has been conducted yearly to monitor the language skills of interpreters. The interpreters were pushed to study seriously for the examination, and their language skills improved accordingly.

Another significant factor that enhanced the *Oranda-tsūji*'s language proficiency was the directive issued by the Nagasaki magistrate's office. This mandate required young *tsūji* students to regularly commute to Dejima to receive direct instruction from members of the Dutch trading house, thereby learning the language from native Dutch speakers. This consistent and close interaction with native speakers became critical to their language acquisition, offering them a unique and invaluable learning opportunity.

Compiling the Dutch-Japanese dictionary also marked a significant milestone in enhancing the interpreters' language skills. Between 1811 and 1817, Hendrick Doeff (1777~1835)² created a Japanese-Dutch dictionary based on the Halma lexicon (1708), a Dutch-French dictionary. This work became known as the Nagasaki or Doeff-Halma Dictionary. Doeff mentioned collaborating with eleven Nagasaki interpreters to improve their language proficiency.

After Doeff left Nagasaki, his work continued for several years with the assistance of his successor, Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779-1853), and the dictionary was finally completed in 1833. With the help of this dictionary, the interpreters would perform day-to-day tasks translating various

official documents, letters, and notes received from the Dutch trading post into Japanese.

4. Linguistic and Cultural Mediation

4.1 The concept of mediation

Thus far, I have provided an overview of the roles of *Oranda-tsūji* as translators and interpreters during the Edo period. To better understand their function in facilitating linguistic and cultural exchanges, it is essential to examine the concept of mediation within the broader context of interpreting and translation. Baraldi and Gavioli (2015: 247) observe that the significance of mediation only became widely recognized in most Western countries with the rise of interest in community interpreting, or public service interpreting, well into the 1990s.

For a better understanding of what mediation means, Pöchhacker (2008:10), referencing Webster's Dictionary (1986), identifies three primary interpretations of the term "mediation":

1. Intervention between conflicting parties or viewpoints to promote reconciliation, settlement, compromise, or understanding.
2. The function or activity of an intermediary means or instrumentality of transmission.
3. The involvement of a third power, invited or accepted by other powers, to mediate disputes between them.

Of these interpretations, the second—referring to mediation as a means of transmission—provides the foundational framework for understanding the relationship between translation and mediation.

Baraldi and Gavioli (2015) argue that the interpreter's role becomes increasingly complex when adopting the function of a mediator, owing to mediation's multifaceted nature. Mediation spans multiple dimensions, including linguistic and cultural aspects encompassing intercultural, cognitive, and contractual mediation. The latter involves facilitating communication, managing conflicts, and navigating power dynamics. This paper will primarily focus on the linguistic and cultural mediation conducted by the *Oranda-tsūji*, analyzing how they fulfilled these roles during the Edo period.

Although the *Oranda-tsūji* were crucial intermediaries between the Japanese and the Dutch, their importance is often overlooked or deliberately downplayed in academic discourse. One possible explanation for this neglect may be that their interactions with the Dutch were predominantly limited to facilitating routine, everyday transactions. However, as Lung (2011:105) argues, in theorizing interpreting, the seemingly mundane and sometimes mechanical nature of language mediation should not be dismissed or trivialized merely because it appears ordinary.

While Lung's discussion pertains to the role of interpreters in Early Imperial China, the function of interpreters as officials bears certain similarities in the Japanese context.

4.2 The interpreter as a cultural mediator

Although the linguistic proficiency of the *Oranda-tsūji* is frequently documented in various historical sources, their function as cultural mediators between Japan and the Dutch has received comparatively little attention. What, then, is the role of a cultural mediator? A cultural mediator facilitates communication, fosters understanding, and promotes collaboration between individuals or groups from distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This role involves interpreting and conveying each cultural group's expressions, intentions, perceptions, and expectations to ensure a balanced and harmonious exchange.

To effectively fulfill these duties, the mediator must deeply understand and engage with both cultures, achieving a genuinely bicultural competency. As Taft (1981:73) asserts, a cultural mediator must develop a specialized skill set in both cultures, encompassing the following attributes.

Knowledge about society: history, folklore, traditions, customs, values, prohibitions; the natural environment and its importance; neighboring people, important people in the society, and so on

Communication skills: written, spoken, non-verbal

Technical skills: skills required for the mediator role, such as computer literacy and appropriate dress

Social skills: knowledge of rules that govern social relations and emotional competence; for example, the appropriate level of self-control

(summarized by the author)

In the case of the *Oranda-tsūji*, there are occasional references to individual interpreters who effectively fulfilled their role as cultural mediators. A prominent example is Yoshio Kōzaemon (吉雄幸左衛門, 1724–1800), one of the most esteemed *Oranda-tsūji* of his era, who epitomized this mediatory function. Yoshio leveraged his considerable wealth over decades as a high-ranking *tsūji* and his expertise in Western-style medicine to assert his role as a cultural intermediary. He

constructed a Western-style residence in Nagasaki, furnished with imported Dutch furniture and enhanced with a garden featuring exotic foreign plants, demonstrating his extensive knowledge of Western culture. His residence emerged as a significant local landmark. Furthermore, Yoshio hosted Dutch New Year celebrations according to the Western calendar, further solidifying his position as a cultural mediator (Tanaka, 2023).

He is also notable for his role in importing rare and valuable books from Western countries. At the time, such works were prohibitively expensive and accessible only to a few, such as wealthy feudal lords. However, as an *Oranda-tsūji*, Yoshio was granted special permission to procure these texts, enabling him to amass a substantial collection of imported books and textbooks. These treasured volumes were prominently displayed to visitors at his residence, underscoring his deep engagement with Western knowledge and culture.

As Joby (2021) noted, Yoshio functioned as a critical figure in the circulation of Dutch books in Japan. In an era when Japan remained largely closed to the West, Yoshio likely stood out as one of the few cultural mediators and disseminators of Western knowledge. Nevertheless, this may represent an exceptional case, as it is likely that most *Oranda-tsūji* of the period could not fulfill such a role as cultural intermediaries to the extent that Yoshio did.

5. *Oranda-tsūji's* Contribution

5.1 Contribution to the development of *Rangaku*³

Rangaku, or Dutch Studies, refers broadly to the European knowledge, culture, and technology transmitted to Japan via the Netherlands during the Edo period. The Japanese acquired Western scholarship primarily through books imported from the Netherlands. The emergence of Dutch Studies occurred during the reign of the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (徳川吉宗 1684-1751), who imported Western horses on several occasions and invited a German-born equestrian master to study Western-style horsemanship and veterinary medicine. Imamura Gen'emon (Hideo) (今村源右衛門 英生) (1671-1736), one of the *Oranda-tsūji* known for his exceptional linguistic abilities, was tasked with establishing the stable and interpreting discussions on equine therapy and breeding techniques. His contributions to Dutch Studies were significant, yet such achievements were rare, as attaining advanced language skills during that era was extraordinarily challenging (Katagiri, 1995).

Goodman, an expert in East Asian history, argued that the interpreters prioritized language study over systematic scholarly pursuits (2014:37). Due to their frequent interactions with the Dutch as local officials, the *Oranda-tsūji* gained a certain proficiency in the Dutch language. In some cases, they exceeded their prescribed duties and acquired a quasi-scholarly understanding

of Western knowledge. Although the surviving records of their early work are incomplete, notable advancements in Western style “medicine” and “astronomy” can be observed, which later became foundational to *Rangaku*.

The contributions of the early *Oranda-tsūji*, pioneers in medicine, are of considerable significance. In the mid-17th century, Western medicine gradually gained acceptance among some members of the *Oranda-tsūji*. They frequently accompanied Dutch physicians during medical procedures and were in high demand as intermediaries when the Dutch doctors traveled to Edo to pay tribute to the *Shogun*. Through close observation, some interpreters learned what they termed *kōmō geka* (紅毛外科 red-haired style surgery). A fundamental principle imparted through their teachings was the practical importance of Western medical practices, which contrasted with the predominant Chinese medical traditions of the time.

Another developed field of *Rangaku*, astronomy, was introduced through Dutch texts in 1720; the prohibition of books was relaxed to allow the importation of books not related to Christianity by Tokugawa Yoshimune. Some of the most esteemed translations of astronomy texts were carried out in Nagasaki by the members of *Oranda-tsūji*. The works of Motoki Yoshinaga (Ryouei) (本木良永 1735-1794) and (a former *tsūji*) Shizuki Tadao (志築忠雄 1760-1806) were exceptionally well-known in the second half of the 18th century. Motoki introduced Japan to the heliocentric theory of Copernicus.

Research in these fields advanced rapidly through the translation of such works. Consequently, the origins of the Dutch Studies movement can be traced back to these *Oranda-tsūji*, whose involvement with Western knowledge contributed significantly to its evolution.

5.2 Contribution to the diplomatic field

Although the role of *Oranda-tsūji* differed from that of present-day diplomats, this does not mean that they did not contribute to diplomacy at all. Japan closed its doors to Western countries and severely restricted its interactions with other Western countries until the end of the Edo period. However, it was certainly not indifferent to global affairs. Tokugawa shogunate tried to obtain information through several channels.

One of the most critical channels was the Dutch. The information that arrived with Dutch ships was precious for the Tokugawa shogunate. As mentioned, the *Oranda-tsūji* rapidly translated and compiled the received information into Japanese for the “Dutch Book of Rumors,” subsequently presented to the shogunate, enhancing Japan’s understanding of global affairs. The content of the “Dutch Book of Rumors” extended beyond developments in Catholic countries, encompassing political and diplomatic events across Europe and Asia. The Tokugawa shogunate

cross-referenced the information provided by the Dutch with that from Chinese and other foreign sources, using it as a foundation for diplomatic decision-making.

In “The Dutch Special News Reports to Japan” (1848) (*Betsudan Fūsetsugaki* 別段風説書) translated by the *Oranda-tsūji*, a copy of a letter was added to the report. It was sent to the chief retainer (*karou* 家老) from a Satsuma domain clansman, who was then dispatched to Nagasaki. He explained that he had received the information from the *Oranda-tsūji*. An excerpt of the letter he received is given below (Fūsetsugaki Kenkyūkai, 2019:300) :

別紙和蘭人風説書御出入通詞西檣林林方ヨリ極内差出申候、右ケ条ノ内ニ琉球滞在ノ異国人ヲ琉人共殺害致候趣之風説専ラ異国ニテ取沙汰有之趣ニテ、風説之事故取止メ候事ニ者無之旨ニ者御座候得共、当時柄 — 公辺ニモ異国一件分テ御心配中之御故

The attached information to *The Dutch Special News Reports to Japan* was submitted secretly by Nishi and Narabayashi, the official interpreters. One of the points mentioned is a rumor that the people of Ryukyu had killed foreigners staying in Ryukyu, which is being widely discussed abroad. Although it is acknowledged that there is no reason to suppress such rumors, given the current situation and the fact that even the authorities are troubled by issues concerning foreign matters, it is necessary to consider the matter seriously.

(translated and summarized by the author)

Oranda-tsūji Nishi and Narabayashi stress the necessity of exercising caution, emphasizing that the issue has already escalated into a diplomatic concern at several foreign outposts. The rarity of attaching such a letter to news reports indicates that the sender recognized the need for diplomatic attention to the matter.

To sum up, at the beginning of the Edo period, the shogunate designated the *Oranda-tsūji* as conduits of foreign information and language and excluded them from political decision-making. However, by the late Edo period, when foreign ships frequently arrived on Japan’s shores demanding the opening of ports, the shogunate began to seek more information from the *Oranda-tsūji*, and they relayed what they had learned from the Dutch. This highlights the *Oranda-tsūji*’s role in providing diplomatic guidance, drawing on their expertise and experience as mediators.

6. Assessments of *Oranda-tsūji*

6.1 Critical reviews

So far, I have touched upon several aspects of *Oranda-tsūji*'s contribution during the Edo period, illustrating their important role in facilitating communication between Japan and foreign entities. However, despite their importance, they have frequently been criticized, particularly regarding their perceived deficiencies in linguistic proficiency and scholarly aptitude. This chapter will present an overview of some critiques within historical scholarship to explore the underlying reasons for these assessments.

To begin with, in general, academic evaluations of the historical role of *Oranda-tsūji* tend to be unflattering. For instance, Donald Keene, a distinguished scholar, historian, educator, and translator of Japanese literature, described the “Nagasaki interpreters” as follows (1969:11) :

Their abilities, of course, varied from man to man, but on the whole, their achievements were not impressive. We possess a kind of report card for the 1693 interpreters: “Barely know any Dutch at all”; “Because he is either stupid or lazy, he knows only the slightest amount of Dutch in spite of the fact that he has been studying for years.”

Here, Keene is indicating the low language skills of *Oranda-tsūji* based on the documents written by the Dutch merchants. However, he also wrote as follows:

... it must be said that the problems confronting the interpreters were enormous. They had no dictionaries save rough-and-ready lists of words and phrases, no grammars, and no competent teachers.

Let us take a look at other views. Rebekah Clements, a cultural historian of Japan specializing in the Tokugawa period, made the following comment on Nagasaki-based interpreters (2015:155) :

... little of the interpreter output has been studied. There has been a corresponding tendency to dismiss their language abilities as insignificant and to conclude that their contribution to the Dutch studies movement was minimal.

In this comment, like Keene, Clements is focusing on the language ability of the *Oranda-tsūji*. However, she adds explanatory remarks as follows:

... it is, therefore, difficult to properly assess, without a lengthy investigation, whether the lack of primary materials relating to the interpreters reflects the realities of what existed in the first place, the realities of what has survived, or the lack of scholarly interest in discovering such material.

Clement's judgment is focused on whether the *tsūji* contributed to any academic development in the Edo period. She concludes that no impressive scholarly work by the *Oranda-tsūji* has been found so far and that their contribution to Dutch studies is unknown.

Another comment is from Tanaka-van Daalen (2021:28), who takes a similar view, in which she mentions the following:

通詞個別の学習活動についての多くの研究を踏まえ、それぞれの通詞がただの仲介者であったか、それとも学者の域に達していたのか、さらなる検討がこれからの課題になるであろう。

Given the many studies on the learning activities of individual interpreters, future work will examine whether each was merely an intermediary or a scholarly figure.

(translated and underlined by the author)

Tanaka-van Daalen's statement may represent conventional recognition within historical circles; however, from the viewpoint of interpreting and translation scholars, this oversight of intermediaries' crucial role is difficult to overlook.

6.2 Marginalization of linguistic mediators

When analyzing the role of linguistic mediators, it is essential to consider the expectations placed on the *Oranda-tsūji* regarding their linguistic capabilities during that period. If high scholastic achievement had been anticipated, the shogunate might have provided more substantial linguistic and financial support or elevated the *Oranda-tsūji's* social status to that of samurai rather than confining them to the merchant class.

However, as previously discussed, the shogunate's support for these interpreters was minimal, limited to occasional and short-term assistance. Only in the 18th century did more comprehensive support for the *Oranda-tsūji* emerge as the shogunate became increasingly aware of foreign threats. This suggests that the role of linguistic intermediaries remained ambiguous for much of the Edo period, and the *Oranda-tsūji* were not expected to achieve high proficiency levels.

Annick-Horiuchi (2016:273) indicates that translation and translators have historically been marginalized. Translated works are often conflated with their originals, which receive little recognition. Moreover, translators have traditionally been viewed as mere “conduits of knowledge,” lacking individual identity or creative contribution. This contrasts with contemporary perspectives, which recognize linguistic mediation, such as translation and interpreting, as an intellectual endeavor requiring careful consideration and creative imagination.

Before delving into the marginalization of linguistic mediators, it is essential to elucidate the translation practices during the period in question to foster a deeper understanding. The concept of translation during this era diverged significantly from our contemporary understanding. Sugimoto (1983:27) observes that during the Edo period, the term “*wage*” (和解) was commonly employed as the official translation equivalent instead of “*hon’yaku*” (翻訳), a term derived from Chinese. The latter term, “*hon’yaku*,” likely had a more specialized connotation in China, where it was predominantly used to refer to the translation of Sanskrit into Chinese.

Before the adoption of “*wage*,” another term, “*kuchiyawrage*” (口和), was widely used in Japan, which involved paraphrasing complex words into more understandable, uncomplicated Japanese. According to Ooshima (2023: 79), the essence of “*kuchiyawrage*” was not in literal translation but in “the act of explaining something complex” to Japanese readers, reflecting the translator’s intent. Similarly, the concept of “*wage*” centered on interpreting foreign languages into Japanese or clarifying complex sentences and texts. It is important to note that both “*kuchiyawrage*” and “*wage*” differ from the contemporary understanding of translation. In both cases, the translator would modify the author’s interpretation or incorporate hearsay, excerpts from other works, or additional information to construct a coherent “explanation” for the audience.

Examining the translated works by the *Oranda-tsūji* reveals that they were often incomplete. Rather than translating the entire text, the translators frequently summarized the material and supplemented it with their explanations to facilitate readers’ understanding. For instance, some of Motoki Yoshinaga’s translations, intended as an explanatory effort for a Japanese audience, exemplify this approach (Ooshima, 2023). Motoki altered the original text’s meaning according to his interpretation, omitted specific passages, and inserted descriptions absent from the source material. Motoki’s method diverged significantly from contemporary translation practices as he did not adhere to word-for-word translation. Some academics highlight this practice as an indication of his lack of expertise and criticize him for his poor translation.

However, his main goal was to share information on unfamiliar topics with his Japanese audience, explicitly following the requests of the Shogunate or other high-ranking officials who had asked for the translation. In this way, he was doing his job as a *tsūji*, and it would not be fair

to criticize him for that, as this was the role linguistic mediators were expected to play at the time. Therefore, it is clear that blaming or sidelining these mediators is unjustified.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I aim to illuminate the broader significance of the *Oranda-tsūji*'s role in facilitating linguistic and cultural exchange during the Edo period in Japan. My analysis reveals that due to the lack of language proficiency, the contributions of the *Oranda-tsūji* were often minimized, disregarded, or undermined by authorities.

This marginalization of linguistic intermediaries is not unique to Tokugawa Japan. As Cáceres-Würsig (2017) argues, state authorities have historically influenced the role and status of linguistic intermediaries. She cites the example of dragomans in Constantinople, who served as diplomatic and commercial translators during the Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic. The *Oranda-tsūji* and the dragomans share some similarities: both were subject to stringent command by the ruling powers. However, the *Oranda-tsūji* guild system was more minor in scale, less organized, and received less state support than the dragomans.

Another aspect worth noting is the critique or marginalization by contemporary scholars. Footitt (2022), an expert in contemporary history, argues that although many interpreting scholars recognize the indispensable role of intermediaries in significant historical events, historians and modern political commentators often omit interpreters from their conventional narratives. It is important to remember that the *Oranda-tsūji* were not academics but local officials with limited formal education. Their primary function was to facilitate trade between Japan and the Dutch. They should not be criticized for lacking scholarly expertise, as this was never their intended role. Even if they possessed such knowledge, they were prudent in concealing it, given the suspicion with which their daily interactions with the Dutch were viewed.

In conclusion, it is imperative to recognize the role of the *Oranda-tsūji* as cultural and linguistic mediators when Japan's doors to the West were tightly closed. Despite the constraints of limited interaction with the Dutch and the lack of formal linguistic resources such as grammar guides, dictionaries, and proficient instructors, the *Oranda-tsūji* made significant contributions. Their work offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics between interpreters and the Western world. Developing methodologies that consider interpreters' and translators' positionality is essential to comprehensively understanding their societal roles. Further research is needed to elucidate their contributions and explore the reasons for their marginalization within Japan's historical narrative.

Notes

1. The Dagregister refers to a detailed daily log or journal by Dutch trading posts and government offices, especially during the 17th and 18th centuries. These records documented daily activities, commercial transactions, correspondence, and other notable events.
2. Hendrick Doeff was the head of a Dutch trading post from 1803 to 1817. During his prolonged residence in Japan, he developed a strong proficiency in the Japanese language and initiated the compilation of a Dutch–Japanese dictionary in 1812. The Shogunate subsequently adopted this endeavor as an official translation project. Although Doeff departed from Japan before its completion, the project continued, culminating in the publication of the Doeff–Halma dictionary in 1833.
3. Rangaku was the study of Western knowledge in Japan during the Edo period, primarily through contact with Dutch traders, despite Japan’s isolation under the so-called isolation policy. Rangaku introduced European advances in science, medicine, and technology, helping modernize Japan, especially in the lead-up to the Meiji Restoration.

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