

**SWEET MUSIC FROM A STRANGE COUNTRY:
JAPANESE WOMEN POETS AS “OTHER”**

*Bern Mulvey
Iwate University*

“The word I see most often in connection with contemporary Japanese women’s poetry is *yureteiru*, shaking. The poetry is not unstable and certainly not indifferent, just shaking – in flux and reaching for a landing point, however impermanent.”

Malinda Markham¹

One peculiarity of the Japanese language is the clear demarcation between active and passive, transitive and intransitive. In English, for example, a house can *shake* from an earthquake and a person’s actions or words can *shake* the very foundations of a society – i.e., though the relationships denoted between *actor* and *acted upon* in these sentences are different, the verb (including spelling) is the same. In Japanese, however, only *yusuburu* can suggest the latter usage, making Markham’s choice (in the quoted text above) of the term *yureteiru* particularly suggestive. *Yureteiru* is always without an object, and at least implies the acted upon, the influenced, the recipient of another’s actions or words.

Markham’s observations about Japanese poetry – particularly the poetry written by women – partake in a long critical tradition. For a variety of reasons, researchers (both Western and Eastern) have consistently sought to characterize the Japanese in general, and Japanese women in particular, as anything but “active,” anything but aggressive, dynamic, confrontational, or forceful. On the contrary, Matsumoto, Reischauer, Sakaiya, Smith,² among many others, have described the Japanese as indirect, discrete,

¹ Malinda Markham, “To Translate the Shaking: Contemporary Japanese Women’s Poetry (and Coaxing it into English),” *Antioch Review* 62/1 (2004): 6.

² Michihiro Matsumoto, *The Unspoken Way* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1988); Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1977); Taichi Sakaiya, *What is Japan? Contradictions and Transformations* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993); and Patrick Smith, *Japan: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

consensus-building and non-confrontational. As seen in critical observations by Henderson, Jackson, Miner, Okakura, Rimer, and Tanizaki, this depiction extends to literature as well, for Japan has long served as a kind of anti-West – the antithesis of a society ostensibly too logic- and profit-driven for its own good. Pepper speaks for many of these writers when he comments on the Japanese artistic sense:

Where the Japanese seek suggestiveness, the Westerners resort to statement. Where the Japanese revel in irregularity, the Westerners seek regularity. And similarly with simplicity versus complexity, and perishability versus permanence.³

His description is one of not just aesthetic distance but diametric opposition, something repeated again and again in the literature. Sometimes the results of this cultural and artistic stereotyping have been unintentionally amusing, such as when Johnson and Dillon go so far as to advise Western job-seekers not to make “eye contact” during job interviews to avoid appearing “aggressive.”⁴ However, as Ma also has noted, “Western stereotypes of Japanese women remain firmly entrenched in print, broadcast, and film media”;⁵ moreover, academic commentary in this vein too often serves to reinforce various ongoing and destructive stereotypes, such as the Western idea that “Japanese women are still little more than compliant, doll-like objects of fantasy.”⁶

Given the critical consensus, it may seem counterintuitive that I hope to offer a “Japanese” challenge to what I see as the “othering” in its literature. As the translated poems discussed below suggest, the narrow institutional focus on a single aesthetic overlooks the flowering of alternative poetic styles in Japan after 1890; more importantly, it ignores the powerful –

³ Stephen Pepper, “On Donald Keene’s ‘Japanese Aesthetics,’” *Philosophy East and West* 19/2 (1969): 323.

⁴ Wayne Johnson and Ken Dillon, “Job Hunting in Japan: The Resume and Interview,” *The Language Teacher* 20/11 (1996): 27-30. The second in a 3-part article series ostensibly explaining the “Japanese mind” to job seekers – suffice it to say their advice should be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, the third installment in the series may perhaps be the most singular example of “othering” in the history of job search literature.

⁵ Karen Ma, *The Modern Madame Butterfly* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1996), p. 22.

⁶ Ma, *The Modern Madame Butterfly*, p. 17.

indeed, confrontational – themes and dynamic, forceful language that have been a mark of poetry by Japanese women for much of the last century.

Here, a distinction must be made between traditions involving “structure” (including form and vocabulary requirements) and “aesthetic” (the often culturally specific “meta-artistic” beliefs which inform decisions about tone, theme, narrative method, etc.). Several writers⁷ have noted the variety of structural conventions extant in modern Japanese verse. Until the Meiji period, Japanese poetry was almost invariably written in one of the tradition of forms (chiefly *tanka* and *haiku*), featuring alternating 5-7 syllable patterns and the required seasonal 季語 references and other examples of so-called “poetic” language 雅語. Donald Keene provides several humorous examples of writer adherence to these rigid conventions, concluding, “It would be hard to conceive of an English poet writing in 1850, with no intention of fraud, verses which might have antedated Chaucer, but in the Japan of the nineteenth century the language of the *tanka* was with few exceptions a thousand years old.”⁸ Beginning in the mid-Meiji period, however, and intensifying after a series of essays⁹ by Kawaji Ryuko (referred to by Ooka as the “originator of Japanese colloquial verse” 口語詩の創始者),¹⁰ these language and structural requirements increasingly came under attack from a younger generation of writers who felt the traditional constraints to be, among other things, crippling to writer creativity. Keene, whose various translations and critical commentary have long made him the

⁷ Mitsuhiro Kaneko, “Dai San Kou Kaisetsu” [Editor’s Notes to Book Three], *Nihonjin shijin zenshū*, ed. Mitsuhiro Kaneko (Tokyo: Sōgen bunko, 1953); and Makoto Ooka, *Tōji no kakei: nihon gendaishi no ayumi (Fukkoku shinpan)* [The Family Tree of a Libertine: Steps toward a Modern Japanese Poetry (New Revised Edition)], 2nd edition (Tokyo: Shichōsha, 2004).

⁸ Donald Keene, *Appreciations of Japanese Culture* (New York: Kodansha International, 1981), p. 132.

⁹ Ryuko Kawaji, *Jiyuushi no riron to kōka* [The Theory and Impact of Free Verse] (Tokyo: Waseda bungaku, 1917), pp. 50-58; and Ryuko Kawaji, “Shinritsukaku: Waga (Shi)” [New Rules: Our Own (Poetry)] in *Nihon shijin zenkan* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1925), pp. 2-4.

¹⁰ Ooka, *Tōji no kakei*, p. 18. Note, however, that Kawaji himself makes no such assertion; on the contrary, Kawaji acknowledges (1917, 50) that the debate preceded his essay “by nearly ten years” 興つてから約十年, at least implying recognition of Yasano’s achievements as well.

preeminent source in English on Japanese literature, has repeatedly¹¹ acknowledged the wide range of influences and poetic structures/forms in Japan after 1890. (That representative poems from these alternative voices so rarely make an appearance in his anthologies is a different issue, leading – unfairly in my opinion – to his often being cited¹² in support of assertions of a single “Japanese” aesthetic.) Ooka also has written extensively on the proliferation of these nontraditional poetic forms and movements; as he demonstrates, a number of Japanese poets (e.g., Hagiwara Sakutarō, Miyoshi Tatsuji, Takamura Kotarō and Kaneko Mitsuharu), influenced partly by overseas writers and partly by their own desires to add “emotional verisimilitude” 実感的真實性, “confessional” 自己主張 and “revelatory” 顯在的 elements to their work, created new free verse forms devoid of the rigid syllabic, rhythmic and stilted language requirements of the traditional forms. Interestingly enough, Ooka’s study of the rise of this Japanese colloquial free verse 口語自由体 was prompted at least in part by what he sees as the “slight” of Keene’s (and other Western writers) omission of them.¹³ Again, while some of Ooka’s criticisms vis-à-vis Keene seem unjustified, his comments underline the prevalence and impact of these Japanese free-verse writers, not to mention the very real paucity of attempts to showcase their work in English.

Critical consensus vis-à-vis the so-called “Japanese aesthetic,” on the other hand, has been nearly monolithic; indirectness and understatement, the idea that complete revelation in art is equivalent to sterility and must be avoided, have long dominated the discussion. Tanizaki, for instance, argues that shadows – i.e., the absence of revelation – have traditionally played an important role in Japanese art and architecture, in the same way that pauses – i.e., the absence of conversation – continue to be a crucial element in inter-Japanese communication.¹⁴ Nishida equates the aesthetic experience with achieving a state of “muga” 無我 or “selflessness,” writing that “この真理は吾人が己を離れ能く物と一致して得たる所のもの” [For true art

¹¹ Donald Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1957).

¹² In Ooka, *Tōji no kakei*; and Pepper, “On Donald Keene’s ‘Japanese Aesthetics.’”

¹³ Ooka, *Tōji no kakei*, pp. 34-36.

¹⁴ Jun’ichiro Tanizaki, “In Praise of Shadows,” in *Aesthetics*, eds. S. Feagin and P. Maynard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 62-66. Note that the Japanese original appeared in two parts published in 1933-1934.

is that place where we can attain separation from ourselves].¹⁵ According to Nishida, art is an “absolute background,” a place of “nothingness” wherein one’s consciousness, divested of self, can expand infinitely. Rimer echoes Nishida’s ideas regarding the nature and usage of this “place,” observing that “The intent of Japanese literature is to provide the reader with a means to develop himself.”¹⁶ Finally, Okakura argues that the mark of the true artist is knowing how to create this place, especially where to stop, when and where to leave a work incomplete. For artists must avoid at all times both “completion” and “repetition,” seeking through intentional ambiguity of thought and/or incompleteness of action to allow “each guest in imagination to complete the total effect in relation to himself.”¹⁷ Hence, so-called flaws (by Western standards, at least) are not only allowed but encouraged because of the emotional responses they can instigate. Such imperfections, Okakura writes, are what trigger the imaginative responses so crucial to aesthetic appreciation, for they allow participants the freedom to fancy, elevating in their imaginations the artist’s efforts to the level of art – for “true beauty can be discovered only by one who mentally completed the incomplete.”¹⁸

Furthermore, critical acknowledgments of the nature and extent of contributions by women writers to the development of modern Japanese verse, including both structural and aesthetic changes, remain extremely rare. Ironically, Ooka’s own book is symbolic of this oversight. In an exhaustive 300-page study discussing nearly one hundred Japanese poets writing over a period of eighty years, women authors make their debut on page 271. Moreover, outside of one brief excerpt from a poem by Tomioka Taeko,

¹⁵ Kitaro Nishida, *Bi no Setsumei* [An Explanation of Beauty] (1900), http://www.geocities.co.jp/CollegeLife-Cafe/4055/kitaro_nishida/binosetumei_ht.htm.

¹⁶ J. Thomas Rimer, *A Reader’s Guide to Japanese Literature*, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1988), p. 14. See also K. Iwaki, “Nishida Kitarou and Art,” in *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); and Michael Marra, “Introduction,” in *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Kakuzo Okakura, “The Tea Room,” in *Aesthetics*, eds. S. Feagin & P. Maynard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 61; note that the original appeared in 1906 as *The Book of Tea*.

¹⁸ Okakura, “The Tea Room,” p. 60.

Ooka includes no verse from a female poet, nor any discussion of their aesthetic ideals or methods. Instead, in a single sentence on page 273, he merely lists the names of eighteen of the most important women authors of the era. While he does then praise them collectively for their ostensibly “sunny” 向日的 writing styles and positive, “constructive” 建設的 themes, he also asks repeatedly and dismissively asks, “Has any female poet in modern Japanese letters achieved a transcendental moment in their poems where the reader is transported beyond the page into a state of rapture?” 詩の中で忘我の恍惚境に陶醉する瞬間を生みだしている女性の詩人は、我々の現代詩の中にいるだろう。¹⁹ Ooka’s answer, repeated several times through page 276 (where he concludes his discussion of them), is “no.”

Standing in direct contrast to the above, however, are the following poems, themselves but a sampling of the large number of similar poems written and published by Japanese women over the last one hundred years. The first is by Yosano Akiko. Written and published at the height of Japan’s 1904-5 war with Russia, the poem accordingly predates both Okakura’s famous treatise²⁰ on the so-called “Japanese aesthetic” and the publication of “自由詩の理論と効果” [The Theory and Impact of Free Verse],²¹ Kawaji’s seminal essay calling for the development of an indigenous free verse utilizing colloquial language. It remains perhaps the most widely anthologized poem by a woman writer in Japan today:

Love, You Must Not Go To Your Death

Ah, younger brother, I cry for you,
do not go to your death.
Born the youngest though you were,
you can still surpass our father in mercy,
though he makes you grab the sword,
though he teaches you to kill,
as if you had been raised 24 years
only to kill and to die.
Even among the shopkeepers of Sakai
our old shop is one of honor,

¹⁹ Ooka, *Tōji no kakei*, p. 274.

²⁰ Okakura, “The Tea Room.”

²¹ Kawaji, *Jiyuushi no riron to kōka*.

and so you, love, born to carry on our father's name,
 you must not go to your death.
 Whether Port Arthur's fortress is razed
 or not what does it matter?
 You must see this we are shopkeepers
 it is not our way.

Love, you must not go to your death.
 The emperor, he does not
 cross the sea to fight,
 to spill the blood of others,
 to die like a beast on a trail.
 All die for an emperor's praise
 who if truly worthy
 would not force death on others.

Ah, younger brother, you must not go
 to war and to your own death.
 Autumn passes, will our father outlive
 the season's change? And our mother,
 who saw you off in grief,
 in agony, calling to you,
 can she protect our house? In the midst
 of the emperor's so-called peace,
 your mother's hair turns white.

In the shadow of store curtains, she bends down and cries,
 your new wife, so frail and young,
 do not forget her, think about her.
 Think about this young girl,
 torn from your side after only 10 months.
 In this world, she has only you,
 who else is she to rely on?
 My love, you must not go to your death.²²

²² Cited from Akiko Yosano, *Kimi shi ni tamau koto nakare* [Love, You Must Not Go To Your Death], ed. Sachihiko Kitagawa (Tokyo: Iwasaki shoten, 1997), pp. 8-10. Note that, unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

The aesthetic contraventions here should be readily apparent. Certainly, there is no “intentional ambiguity of thought”; Yosano’s poem, written during the Russo-Japanese war, is unabashedly clear in its message: a poignant attack against both this war and the impulse to war. Repetition serves as an important rhetorical conceit. The refrain, “My love, you must not go to your death” both opens and closes this poem, serving as both a structuring device and as a sort of moral chorus, a direct appeal to her brother not to participate. The symmetrical structure, combined with the unambiguous revelation of the poem’s intent, obviously limits the spectrum of plausible reader interpretations, seemingly negating the poem’s ability to satisfy Nishida’s requirement that art stand as a “place of nothingness.” However, the clearest violation of the aesthetic appears in stanza three, with its overt criticism of the emperor. There is nothing of Tanizaki’s ideas of “silence” or “shadow” here; in lines such as “The emperor, he does not/cross the sea to fight,” Yosano baldly accuses the emperor of the twin crimes of hypocrisy and insincerity.²³ Her criticism continues in the fourth stanza with the ironic reference to “the Emperor’s peace”; in a stratagem used by certain countries even today, the Japanese government had justified its invasion of Russia as necessary to “preserving peace,” an idea Yosano strongly rejects. That this poem appeared before the publication of Okakura’s influential treatise demonstrates the presence of alternative voices and styles in Japan even at that time, ones which did not fit comfortably under his definition of a single, so-called “Japanese” aesthetic.

The language/structural innovations are more difficult to represent – let alone discuss – in English. That the poem is neither tanka nor haiku is established, if nothing else, by its length. However, while the innovations of her “new style” were extremely controversial at the time of first publication, the impact in English is lessened by differences between the languages themselves.²⁴ Standard Japanese is unaccented and has exactly five vowel

²³ See Vera Mackie, “Motherhood and Pacifism in Japan 1900-1937,” *Hecate* 14/2 (1988): 28-49 for a discussion of the media criticism which greeted this poem’s publication, including calls for “the nation’s punishment.”

²⁴ See Janine Beichman, *Embracing the Firebrand: Yosano Akiko and the Birth of the Female Voice in Modern Japanese Poetry* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002) for an extensive discussion of the Japanese critical reception – e.g., pp. 181-185.

sounds; the sound system, moreover, is expressed through the main syllabaries in terms of syllables rather than isolated vowels or consonants. Accordingly, alliteration in the Western sense is not valued (or really understood), and a stressed rhythm impossible. Instead, as mentioned above, Japanese poets have traditionally used so-called poetic language to establish context and mood, and alternating syllable “units” – chiefly groupings of 5/7 syllables – to create a “rhythm” pleasing to the Japanese ear. Yosano keeps to the syllabic count – e.g., 親は刃を / にぎらせて / 人を殺せと / 教えしや (oya wa katana wo/nigirasete/hito wo korose to/oshieshiya) – although her chosen vocabulary, subject matter, and artistic presentation are decidedly nontraditional.

Almost as forthright and confrontational is this second poem by Yosano, published in 1910 yet eerily prophetic of the horrible war that would begin less than thirty years later:

A CERTAIN COUNTRY

A country that takes joy only in rigidity,
 in ritual, yet how rash,
 how enslaved by whim.
 Like impatient China
 a self-absorbed and short-sighted country,
 a country lacking the resources of America
 yet obsessed with becoming America.
 A country incapable of questioning,
 its men too stooped by fatalism.
 A country which congratulates itself,
 which repeats without thought,
Ban-Banzai ²⁵

Interestingly enough, the practice for many years in both Japan and in the West has been to characterize Yosano as merely a “woman writer”²⁶ or a

²⁵ Yosano, *Kimi shi ni tamau koto*, p. 11.

²⁶ Mokichi Saito, *Meiji taishō tanka shi* [A History of Meiji and Taishō Tanka] (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1950), p. 83; the explicit and implicit sexism in Saito’s statements are effectively skewered by Beichman (e.g., pp. 3-5, 109, 177).

writer of “romantic” verse.²⁷ As recently as 1980, Yoshida Sei’ichi, the influential scholar of modern Japanese literature, argued that Yosano was a romantic poet “whose central subject matter was love and who therefore wrote all her best poetry in youth.”²⁸ However, Beichman’s own study, examining Yosano’s poetry prior to 1904, demonstrates convincingly that even her early work went well beyond this stereotype. In the second poem above, Yosano’s theme and images are both directly articulated and transparently critical, though her target this time is not limited to government policy. Instead, she disparages the “fatalistic” Japanese national ethos, especially the acquiescence of its citizens, without whose support no government could long stay in power. Accordingly, the poem is an additional example of a non-tanka, non-haiku poem without seasonal references and other examples of poetic language, one taking on a challenging, even confrontational, theme. Given the enduring popularity of both poems (the former was even made into a song), it seems clear that a large Japanese reading audience existed – and exists – for work written to this aesthetic.

Ibaragi Noriko, winner of the Yomiuri Shinbun Prize for literature and, until her death in 2006, arguably Japan’s preeminent living female poet, similarly breaks from traditional Japanese poetic conventions.

GIRL’S MARCH

I like bullying boys.
I really like making them whine.
Just today, I knocked Jirou about the head in school.
He said *Ouch* and ran away, tail between his legs.

A hard-headed boy, Jirou
put a dent in my lunch box....

Pa says I mean Father the Doctor says
girls shouldn’t race about, act wild.
Inside each of our bodies is a special room,
so we must go quietly, softly.

Where’s my room, do you think?

²⁷ Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, p. 152.

²⁸ Beichman, *Embracing the Firebrand*, p. 4.

Tonight, I'll look for it....

Grandma's pissed Ms. Dried Plum
tells me girls who don't eat all their fish get kicked out,
they don't last three days as brides before they're returned.
Eat everything but the head and the tail, she says.

Well, I'm not marrying
so you can keep your darn fish bones!

The old baker started yelling,
Women and socks have gotten tough! Women and socks!
The women behind the counter were laughing at him.
Of course women have become strong—there's a reason for it.

I, too, am going to be a strong woman.
Tomorrow, who should I make cry?²⁹

This poem deviates from the Japanese aesthetic in a number of important ways. Lines such as “I like bullying boys/I really like making them whine” and “Well, I’m not marrying/so you can keep your darn fish bones!” are certainly difficult to reconcile with Tanizaki’s assertion that Japanese “prefer the soft voice, the understatement,”³⁰ not to mention seem to be devoid of the kind of ambiguity of meaning advocated by Okakura. The revelation implicit in the ending declaration – “I, too, am going to be a strong woman” – is another apparent violation, both in its directness and completeness. Indeed, the assertion’s outspokenness would appear to negate its ability to serve as the proper backdrop for the reader’s imagination, at least as delineated by Nishida, Okakura, and Tanizaki. However, even more than these apparent violations, the most interesting thing about this poem is its initial date of publication: 1958.³¹ This would, of course, place the poem after the appearance of the Tanizaki article and before Henderson and

²⁹ Cited from Noriko Ibaragi, *Onna no kotoba* [Women’s Words] (Tokyo: Dōwaya, 1994), pp. 28-30.

³⁰ Tanizaki, “In Praise of Shadows,” p. 63.

³¹ It first appeared in a poetry collection entitled *Mienai Haitatsufu* [The Invisible Delivery Husband] (Tokyo: Iizuka shoten, 1958).

Miner,³² again seemingly belying their claims to describing a current, uniform Japanese aesthetic.

Ibaragi's word and structural choices are also similarly nontraditional, even "Western," making her (among other things) an enjoyable, and comparatively easy, subject for English translation. This poem, as is usual with Ibaragi, is neither a tanka nor a haiku, not to mention eschews a regular 5-7 syllabic pattern. As is also typical, the playful use of colloquial language – e.g., "I really like making them whine" 男の子をキイキイいわせるのは大好き, "put a dent in my lunch box" べんとう箱がへっこんだ and "Tonight, I'll look for it" 今夜探検してみよう – belies the subversiveness of her overall theme: not just the existence of female strength, not just that it should be admired if found, but that those difficult times demanded strong women. Early post-war Japan, with its continuing social conservatism, abject poverty, high unemployment, and widespread civil unrest, makes an interesting historical backdrop for this defiant assertion of equality.

As demonstrated by the Yosano poems as well, women writers have traditionally been some of the harshest, most confrontational opponents of Japanese domestic and foreign policy. In the following poem, Ibaragi's self-effacing humor and simplicity of both style and language again serve to underscore a complex, confrontational message.

WHEN I WAS MY MOST BEAUTIFUL

When I was my most beautiful
City after city came tumbling down
I could see blue sky
From the most surprising places

When I was my most beautiful
so many I knew died
in factories, on the seas, on nameless islands
there was nobody left to talk to

When I was my most beautiful

³² Harold Henderson, *Haiku in English* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1967); Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

I received no gentle gifts
 the boys knew only how to salute
 their lovely eyes remaining with me after they all left

When I was my most beautiful
 my head was empty
 my heart filled with stubbornness
 but my arms and legs glistened like chestnuts

When I was my most beautiful
 my country lost the war
 can you believe the stupidity?
 My blouse sleeves rolled up, I walked around the abject city

When I was my most beautiful
 the streets flooded with the sound of jazz
 I became dizzy with it, like the taste of my first cigarette,
 this sweet music from a strange country

When I was my most beautiful
 I was so unhappy
 I was so confused
 I was so very lonely

So I've decided to live a very long time
 After all, the Frenchman Rouault
 painted his most beautiful works in his old age
 right?³³

Here, Ibaragi's use of form and a simple colloquial vocabulary contribute to the poem's twin evocations of extreme personal isolation and cultural dislocation. Structurally, the poem is divided into eight stanzas of four lines; the lines are unpunctuated and of widely varying length (including the monosyllabic last line), with no set pattern of repeating syllable pairings. Lacking seasonal references and other examples of poetic language, this poem is also devoid of the traditional, ostensibly "Japanese" markers for delineating setting, time, narrative progression and structural cohesion. Instead, the poem is held together by its use of repetition, including the

³³ Ibaragi, *Onna no kotoba*, pp. 48-51.

haunting refrain “when I was my most beautiful” わたしが一番きれいだったとき, though seen syntactically within several stanzas (especially the penultimate) as well. Moreover, each stanza serves as a distinct semantic unit, each articulating a separate “point” in a similar rhetorical pattern (when I was young – this happened – with this result), which anticipates the turn (i.e., the ending declaration) in the final stanza as well. Indeed, it could be argued that the ostensibly “Western” conventions of line/syntax repetition and semantic completion used throughout this poem are intrinsic to the delineation of its overall message, mirroring in a sense the war’s cultural, artistic, and social disruptions – the resulting voids only partially ameliorated by surrender to the tempting seductions of the “conquering” culture. For instance, like the devastated yet now jazz-filled streets it describes, the poem’s free form and colloquial wording are a veneer of Western influence both “sweet” and “dizzying,” with the “right” ね of that final line hopeful, but not certain, of the redemption it seems to offer.

While preparing this paper, I came across *Other Side River*, an excellent 1995 anthology of poetry by Japanese women.³⁴ Overall, I have nothing but praise for its translations; however, our one poem of overlap is “When I Was My Most Beautiful,” and interestingly enough, here I do have a minor, though important, quibble with one line in the fifth stanza. Their translation of that stanza’s third line – “how could all that have happened?” – is much tamer than my “can you believe the stupidity.” I feel, though, that the Japanese そんな馬鹿なことってあるものか better supports my rendition, with the very informal grammar, and particularly the term 馬鹿 (stupid, fool, idiot), underlining the shock – and anger – the populace felt upon discovering their many wartime sacrifices had been in vain. In other words, Ibaragi is not just reminiscing but commenting, and her commentary conveys in direct language, both here and elsewhere, sorrow, shock and anger at all that had been lost.

Best selling poet “Tawara Machi” (her pen name) also habitually violates the Japanese aesthetic. In her influential 1989 book *Sarada Kinnenbi* [The Anniversary of Salad], for instance, she uses the tanka form to narrate the course of a failed romantic relationship, with each tanka depicting a particular stage (e.g., her realization of love, doubt, and finally loss) in that relationship. Here is a small sampling:

³⁴ Leza Lowitz and Miyuki Aoyama, eds., *Other Side River: Free Verse* (New York: Stonebridge Press, 1995).

Suddenly, I'm aware that all
the clothes I'm trying on have
your favorite flower pattern.

The falling rain
and just like that I want
your lips.

Believing no promises, you play
in sand where waves cannot reach,
building nothing.

I try James Dean poses
outside in a jacket
musky with you.

I realized I'd given up on you
while wearing a hemp skirt, drinking
the first 'ice coffee' of summer.

It was there we said
goodbye. Like an exit interview,
that evening.³⁵

While devoid of the biting political/social commentary that characterizes the work of Ibaragi and Yosano, Tawara Machi's poems share with these authors a similar stylistic virtuosity. These are not the tanka of Fujiwara, Emperor Go-Toba, or even Ryōkan; seasonal references are blurred or omitted, and Nature itself is a mere backdrop for an intensely personal, human drama. Indeed, the colloquial language, the directness of the images, not to mention the coherent narrative of a failed relationship depicted in the collection, mark departures both from the tanka form itself and from the Japanese aesthetic discussed above. From the bold declaration of "and just like that I want/your lips" 落ちてきた雨を見上げてそのままの形でふいに、唇が欲し to the audacity of her referring to a final discussion with her lover as an "exit interview" もうそこにサヨナラという語があつて—

³⁵ Tawara Machi, *Sarada kinnenbi* [The Anniversary of Salad] (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1989), pp. 15, 18, 33, 83, 122, 180.

問一答式の夕暮れ, Tawara Machi is forthright, unabashedly assertive, and even confrontational; the success of the book (over two million copies sold, by far the most successful poetry collection in modern Japanese history) again demonstrates the extensive market in Japan for work with such qualities.

Other Side River contains examples of poems by Japanese women that appear similarly to violate the conventions of the Japanese aesthetic. Here, for instance, are the ending stanzas (the full poem is quite long) from “Harakiri,” Hiromi Ito’s devastating indictment of “bushidō,” the so-called Japanese “way of the warrior,” mentality that had played (and continues to play in some political circles) such a tragic role in modern Japanese history.

“I know it’s kind of sick,” he said.
 He thinks *bushido* should have cherry blossoms
 He thinks samurai are always
 looking for a place to die.
 I failed to hear
 If his ancestors were samurai.
 He thinks pain will become pleasure
 If he trains himself
 “That’s why I’m training myself now,” he says,
 (masturbating)
 I’m sure it’s extremely exciting
 To commit harakiri facing a woman
 Mr. O says,
 (masturbating)
 samurai
 (masturbating)
 ha ha
 (masturbating)
 cherry blossoms
 (masturbating)
 falling
 (masturbating)
 It’s really kind of kinky.³⁶

³⁶ Hiromi Ito, “Harakiri,” in *Other Side River: Free Verse*, pp. 88-89. Note that this is Lowitz and Aoyama’s translation.

As with the poems described earlier, the contraventions here of the Japanese aesthetic are readily apparent. There are no “silences” in this poem – even masturbation is conducted through a stream of dialogue. From the mocking “I failed to hear/If his ancestors were samurai” to the conceit of having the would-be “samurai” masturbate in his excitement, Ito’s sarcasm is neither subtle nor opaque. On the contrary, her poem seems to represent a direct and extremely lucid criticism of those who would continue to espouse the virtues of an anachronistic “warrior mentality” in a modern industrial society. Furthermore, the ending line appears to violate the aesthetic as well in both the overtness and completeness of its revelation; indeed, “It’s really kind of kinky” deftly skewers her target, suggesting as it does that “bushidō” is ultimately just another deviant sexual obsession.

Still, there are a number of poems written by Japanese women which seem “Japanese” – in the sense that they are indirect, understated, non-narrative driven and open to various interpretations. However, this brings up an important salient point – is this not equally true of some Western poetry in English as well? Ashbery – who once said that in his poems he “attempts to use words abstractly, as an abstract painter uses paint”³⁷ – comes to mind immediately. Also St. John’s “Acadian Lane,” Plath’s “Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows,” Scheele’s “The Gap in the Cedar” – there appear to be a large number of poems in the English language as well where image enjoys precedent over meaning, where the ending revelation is either muted or left seemingly incomplete, stimulating the imagination and inviting a variety of interpretations. Do not these poems also partake of a similar, so-called “Japanese” aesthetic?

Which leads me to this final question: with so many exceptions existing in the Japanese language, not to mention so many Western poems seeming to conform to the aesthetic ideal delineated above, why has an argument been made for there being a uniquely “Japanese” aesthetic? One explanation that has been offered is racism, i.e., the West’s “imperialist tradition” has resulted in an obsession with “essentializing” or “othering” the Orient. Ma, Said, and Susser, among others, have argued that Western researchers frequently minimize (or omit entirely) the historical and cultural complexities of their Oriental subject matter, emphasizing instead

³⁷ Cited in *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, eds. Philip Dacey and David Jauss (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 18.

areas of perceived differences vis-à-vis Western societies. Worse, this assumption of, and fascination with, “difference” ostensibly leads many Western researchers to “create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe,”³⁸ exaggerating (or even inventing) the exotic in an attempt to “polarize the distinction or that the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner becomes more Western.” According to these critics, the end result is too often a false dichotomy where the Orient is reduced to an artificial construct, an “Other” which has less to do with the actual reality than with the “identity of the subject who is gazing at the ‘Other.’”³⁹

This line of reasoning belies the fact that, in the case of Japan, many of the offenders in this myth-building process are Japanese. For instance, in asserting the importance of incompleteness and indirectness in Japanese art, Okakura supports his argument with references to both the semantic origin and modern usage of the Japanese word for “tea ceremony house” (“sukiya” 数寄屋).⁴⁰ These oft-cited assertions: the Chinese characters, taken together, originally translated to mean “abode of fancy;” the Chinese characters used to express this term have changed repeatedly over the years; currently, depending on the characters used, the term “sukiya” can be translated to mean “abode of vacancy” or “abode of the unsymmetrical.”

However, as even Okakura himself must have been aware when he wrote *The Book of Tea*, all three assertions are open to criticism. Here are the original characters and their former [and present] meanings:

數 chant while holding sticks (“shamaness” in Chinese)
 [Now: “count” or “number”]
 寄 seeking protection in a stranger’s house [Now: “draw near,”
 “visit” or “send”]
 屋 a room where, having arrived, one can relax [Now: “house,”
 “shop” or “shopkeeper”]⁴¹

³⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 3.

³⁹ Bernard Susser, “EFL’s Othering of Japan,” *JALT Journal* 20/1 (1998): 52.

⁴⁰ Okakura, “The Tea Room,” p. 56.

⁴¹ Izuru Shinmura, ed., *Kōjien* [Unabridged Japanese Dictionary] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1955); and Kenneth Henshall, *A Guide to Remembering Japanese Characters* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1988).

As can be seen, except for a slight difference in the shape of the first Chinese character, the standard characters used to represent “sukiya” 数寄屋 appear to have remained almost unchanged for over four hundred years. Also, it is difficult to imagine how this term, whether the characters are taken separately or together, could be construed to mean “abode of fancy,” “abode of vacancy” or “abode of the unsymmetrical.” Indeed, I would argue that the best literal translation of the modern Japanese would be simply “a house where people can gather together.” Now, it should also be noted that “sukiya” has in the past sometimes been shortened to “suki” 数寄, a term which had an additional connotation of “like.” Hence, the term “sukiya” can also be translated as “a gathering place for people who like tea,” a concept certainly intelligible to most Western readers as well.

Okakura may have been motivated by complex, and at times contradictory, desires in articulating his views of a unified, Japan-specific, aesthetic. While symbolism, not to mention an artistic consciousness (see, for instance, Kyorai’s “Conversations with Bashō”⁴²), certainly did exist in Japanese literature prior to encountering the West, no systemic Japanese attempt had been made to codify these often contradictory arguments into a single, coherent aesthetic theory.⁴³ Accordingly, some scholars have argued that many of the seminal articles written on the Japanese aesthetic in the latter half of the Meiji period (1890-1912) were motivated at least partly by a perceived need to define a “national essence,”⁴⁴ to demonstrate artistic and cultural independence (later, superiority) from the West. In an exhaustive study of Okakura’s life and work, for instance, Notehelfer⁴⁵ demonstrates convincingly how his aesthetic arguments were but a part of a much larger agenda, both to promote popular acceptance of an idealized past and to justify the military expansion that had already begun to dominate Japan’s present. According to Okakura, Japan’s artistic sensibilities were the result of

⁴² Donald Keene, trans., “Conversations with Bashō,” in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, eds. Ryusaku Tsunoda and William Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 450-458.

⁴³ Earl Jackson, “The Heresy of Meaning: Japanese Symbolist Poetry,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51/2 (1991): 561-598.

⁴⁴ Conrad Schirokauer, *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 436.

⁴⁵ F. G. Notehelfer, “On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 16/2 (1990): 309-355.

a “remarkable synthesis” of the best of Asian thought, made possible only by the “particular genius of the Japanese race.”⁴⁶ Okakura argued further that these superior sensibilities (i.e., the unique aesthetic he had described) justified Japan’s “mission” to “revive the dormant life of the old Asiatic unity,”⁴⁷ observing as well that “The Chinese War, which revealed our supremacy in Eastern waters, and which has yet drawn us closer than ever in mutual friendship [with China], was a natural outgrowth” of this mission.⁴⁸ As Notehelfer himself concludes:

Here the ambiguity of his upbringing and education, his peculiar need to defend Japan among foreigners, and his romantic adherence to “what should be” instead of “what was” all worked to inhibit a clear expression of the reality in which late Meiji Japan found itself.⁴⁹

In other words, there is ample reason to question the motivations behind, not to mention some of the substance of, Okakura’s foundational work in Japanese aesthetics.

Is there a uniquely Japanese aesthetic? I would argue no – at least, no clear articulation of one has been offered that can encompass the myriad of voices and forms existent in Japanese literature today, let alone one which can delineate a clear and consistent contrast with Western ideals of the aesthetic. Moreover, considering the pace and extent of the changes occurring just in the area of women’s letters, the task of describing such an aesthetic would appear formidable and increasingly so. The translated poems referenced in this paper document the existence of a vibrant, assertive, and even confrontational tradition of poetry by Japanese women, one well received by the public. As alluded to above, the critical and artistic impact, although often unacknowledged (when not completely ignored), has perhaps

⁴⁶ Notehelfer, “On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin”: 331.

⁴⁷ Notehelfer, “On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin”: 335.

⁴⁸ Notehelfer, “On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin”: 341-342. To this, Notehelfer drily responds: “One wonders how any Chinese or Korean, even of the deepest idealistic convictions, could have agreed with Okakura’s evaluation of Japanese foreign policy.”

⁴⁹ Notehelfer, “On Idealism and Realism in the Thought of Okakura Tenshin”: 354.

been even more important. Ooka and others have argued that modern Japanese free verse began with Kawaji, when in fact many of the very innovations he advocates appeared much earlier in Yosano's popular, provocative work. Ninety years later, Tawara Machi similarly revitalizes the Tanka form, making it suddenly modern, "hip," and relevant – indeed, while I have focused on Japanese poetry over the last one hundred years, an argument can be made that this tradition of female literary virtuosity extends back to at least the Heian Period (794 to 1185) and Murasaki Shikibu's groundbreaking *The Tale of Genji*.⁵⁰ Accordingly, it would seem that modern scholarship would be better served by learning to recognize, and to celebrate, the variety of styles and themes in the Japanese literary arts. At the very least, this idea of "shaking" women poets "in flux and reaching for a landing point" would appear, at best, to refer to a very small subset of women writers. In Japanese letters, it is often the women who lead the way, and their work is a far cry from impermanent.

⁵⁰ Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (London: Penguin Books, 1964) argues this at length.