

# UNIQUE OR UNIVERSAL?

Japan and Its Contribution to World Civilization

100

Years of Japanese Studies  
at the University of Warsaw

Scientific editors

Beata Kubiak Ho-Chi, Jędrzej Greń

Volume 2



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## | Notes on Contributors

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**Matthew Königsberg (PhD)** studied Japanese Studies at the University of Virginia (USA) and the University of Hamburg in Germany. He took his PhD at the University of Tübingen and has held academic positions at the University of Hamburg, Washington University (St. Louis), and Freie Universität Berlin. He conducts research on teaching Japanese language and on modern and pre-modern Japanese literature. His publications (in German) deal with the literature of the Korean minority in Japan and literary realism in the works of Ozaki Kōyō.

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**Agata Bice** is a PhD student at the University of Warsaw's Faculty of Oriental Studies, where she is currently researching translation and circulation of Japanese literature. She studied as an exchange student at Kobe University and was a Japan's Ministry of Education research student at the University of Tokyo. She has translated Matsuda Aoko's collection of short stories *Sutakkingu kanō* [*Stackable*] into Polish.

**Anna Zalewska (PhD)** is an assistant professor of Japanese Studies in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw; between 2010–2013 she was also an assistant professor at the Japanese Language & Culture Center of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. She graduated from the Japanese Studies Department of the University of Warsaw and also studied at Gakugei University in Tokyo (1991–1992), Hokkaido University in Sapporo (1996–1997), and Kyoto University (PhD course, 1999–2004). She specializes in Japanese classical literature and traditional culture (such as calligraphy and the way of tea) and does Polish translations of Japanese *tanka* poetry (e.g., *Ogura hyakunin isshu*) and modern Japanese literature (e.g., by Kawakami Hiromi and others).

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**Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska (PhD)** is currently a lecturer at the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw and Development Division Director at Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejów. She specializes in *nō* theater theory and translation. She is a former diplomat and author of books on Japanese *nō* theater, translations of *nō* drama, and Zeami Motokiyo treatises. As a dramatist, she has written *nō* plays on Chopin (*Chōritsushi/Piano Tuner*, 2009) and on the loss of life during disasters (*Chinkon/Repose of Souls*, 2012) which were staged in Poland and in Japan. The premiere of *Chinkon/Repose of Souls* in 2014 was attended by Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress. She is also active as a theater director: *Umiowanie/DeadWalkLove* for the Song of the Goat Theater (2015), *Dziady-Remiks/Ach czegoż potrzeba dla duszy* [*Ah, What it Takes for the Soul*] for the Theatre Olympics in Wrocław 2016, and *Dziady/Forefathers' Eve/Soreisai* independent group, staged in Warsaw (2018), Tokyo and Kyoto (2019), and in Szczecin (2019).

**Iga Rutkowska (PhD)** is an assistant professor at the Chair of Japanese Studies, University of Warsaw. She graduated in Japanese Studies and Cultural Anthropology (University of Warsaw) as well as Theater Studies (Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw). Her academic interests focus primarily on traditional Japanese performing arts in relation to cultural context, religion, literature, and art. She is the author of numerous publications on Japanese culture, with a particular focus on theater. Her book *Boska obecność. O względności tekstu i rytuału w teatrze kabuki* [*Divine Presence. On the Relativity of Text and Ritual in Kabuki Theater*] (2015), based on her doctoral thesis, is a monograph about the phenomenon of amateur kabuki.

**Hiranoi Chieko** is a professor in the Faculty of Sustainability Studies at Hosei University in Japan, teaching courses on comparative theater and regional theater in Japan. Her research interests include: British theater, Japanese theater, regional theater, theater festivals, and dramatic methods applied to education. Her recent publications include *Dramatizations of a Historical Motif – A Comparative Perspective on ‘Tomomori’s Death’* (2020) and *Modern Dramatizations of Togitatsu no Utare – A Contrastive Analysis of the Noda Version of Kabuki and Kimura Kinka’s Adaptations* (2020). She has organized educational events such as drama workshops incorporating the Suzuki Training Method, the Methodology of Hirata Oriza, and Improvisation.

**Sean O’Reilly (PhD)** is a graduate of Harvard University’s History and East Asian Languages doctoral program with a secondary field in Film and Visual Studies. His research, which began with a Fulbright Scholarship to Japan in 2012, concerns the ways Japanese history is reinvented in film and popular culture. Publications include *Re-viewing the Past. The Uses of History in the Cinema of Imperial Japan* (2018). As Associate Professor of Japan Studies at Akita International University, where he has lived and taught since 2015, he offers courses on the history, popular culture, and cinema of Japan.

**dr hab. Beata Kubiak Ho-Chi** is a professor at the Chair of Japanese Studies, University of Warsaw. She has published extensively on Japanese literature, aesthetics, art, performing arts, the works of Mishima Yukio, and *bunraku* puppet theater, as well as human-animal relations in Japan. The list of books she has authored includes: *Mishima Yukio. Estetyka klasyczna w prozie i dramacie 1941–1960* [*Mishima Yukio. Classical Aesthetics in Prose and Drama 1941–1960*] (2004), *Estetyka i sztuka japońska* [*Japanese Aesthetics and Arts*] (2009), *Tragizm w japońskim teatrze lalkowym bunraku* [*Tragedy in Japanese Bunraku Puppet Theater*] (2011). She has also edited and co-edited books on Japanese culture, such as: *Japonia okresu Meiji. Od tradycji ku nowoczesności* [*Japan of the Meiji Period. From Tradition to Modernity*] (2006), *Dwa filary japońskiej kultury. Literatura i sztuki performatywne* [*Two Pillars of Japanese Culture. Literature and Performing Arts*] (2014), *Zwierzęta w kulturze japońskiej* [*Animals in Japanese Culture*] (2018).

**Jędrzej Greń (PhD)** graduated in Japanese Studies and in History from the University of Warsaw, where he also received his PhD in Literature. Employed as an assistant professor at the Chair of Japanese Studies, University of Warsaw, he researches medieval and early modern history of Japan, with a special interest in merchant-warrior relations and the earliest contacts between Japan and Europe. He is the author of books and articles on the subject, e.g.: *Japońskie miasto przyzamkowe – rozwój, struktura i rola w urbanizacji Japonii (1576–1700)* [*Japanese Castle-Town – Development, Structure, and Role in the Urbanization of Japan (1576–1700)*] (2013); *Anglicy w Japonii (1600–1623)* [*The English in Japan (1600–1623)*] (2014); *Srebro i herbata. Japońskie elity kupieckie Hakaty i Sakai w relacjach z wojownikami w drugiej połowie XVI w.* [*Silver and Tea. Japanese Merchant Elites of Hakata and Sakai and Their Relations with Warriors in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century*] (2020); “Letters of Japanese Merchants (1550–1600)” (in: *Distant Symbols and Close Signs. Japanese Studies in Central Europe 2013*, ed. M. Tirala, M. Morita, Prague 2013) and “Relations with Warriors and Their Meaning as Depicted in Sources Related to Shimai Sōshitsu (1539–1615)” (in: *Hikaku Nihongaku Kyōiku Kenkyū Sentā Kenkyū Nenpō*, Tokyo 2020).



# | Introduction

**Beata Kubiak Ho-Chi, Jędrzej Greń**

The texts contained in this volume constitute the second part of the publication *Unique or Universal? Japan and its Contribution to World Civilization*. They were presented at the international conference under the same title, organized by the Chair of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw on October 23–25, 2019. The conference, held to commemorate the 100 years of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw and to celebrate the centenary of establishing diplomatic relations between Poland and Japan, has been described in detail in the Introduction to the first volume of this publication.<sup>1</sup>

This second volume consists of two parts. Part I: *Literature and Language* begins with a chapter by Katarzyna Sonnenberg-Musiał, who examines selected short stories by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and the tension between the historical and the universal as expressed by this master of Taishō period literature. The author demonstrates that although Akutagawa, who drew extensively from Western literature, may have believed in its universality, the antithetical structure of some of his works can be hard to understand for readers from other cultural circles.

In the second chapter, Inoue Takashi discusses relationships between the unique and the universal in the works of another famous Japanese writer – novelist and playwright Mishima Yukio. The author analyzes several of Mishima's early novels as well as his masterpiece, the tetralogy

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<sup>1</sup> See B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, J. Greń, "Introduction," [in:] *Unique or Universal? Japan and Its Contribution to World Civilization. 100 Years of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw*, eds. B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, J. Greń, vol. 1, University of Warsaw Press, Warsaw 2023, pp. 15–20.



*The Sea of Fertility*, which he considers the writer's most unique yet universal work.

Next, Matthew Königsberg examines whether Mizumura Minae's novel *Shishōsetsu from left to right* does indeed belong to the unique Japanese genre of *shishōsetsu* or 'I-novels,' or whether it rather represents an example of realist, postmodernist literature.

Representing research on classical Japanese literature, the text by Iwona Kordzińska-Nawrocka offers a reconstruction of the literary portrait of Kiritsubo in *The Tale of Genji* as an illustration of the aesthetic concept of *mono no aware*.

Agata Bice in her chapter describes the steadily-growing popularity of Japanese literature in the West. She focuses on translations into English, presenting related statistical data and examining the question of uniqueness and universality of Japanese literature which, undoubtedly, is gaining its global audience.

Anna Zalewska's paper focuses on Japanese poetry. She discusses the works of an early twentieth-century Japanese poet Yosano Akiko, who was often criticized by fellow poets and literary critics for her 'scandalous' language. The author of the chapter examines Yosano's language and the peculiarity of the versification she used.

Last but not least, the first part of the volume introduces a chapter by Arkadiusz Jabłoński, who investigates the nominal elements of the Japanese language, which are often neglected in the grammatical descriptions of the language.

Part II: *Theater and Film* consists of subsequent four chapters. The eighth chapter, by Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska, introduces the issue of the often-neglected works of contemporary *nō* texts (*shinsakunō*), which refers to plays written from the beginning of Meiji Era until today. The author examines how the format of *nō* offers ways of expression of appeasement and reconciliation which may be universally needed.

In the ninth chapter, Iga Rutkowska discusses one of the most famous kabuki plays – *Kanadehon chūshingura* [*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*] – to shed new light on the uniqueness of Japanese culture juxtaposed with the universal value emerging from the play.

Hiranoi Chieko in the tenth chapter examines how *nō* theater influenced Kurosawa Akira in his adaptations of Shakespearean plays. The famous director used various artistic tools which have originated in *nō* and which made his movies unique in the world-universal context of adaptations of the Bard's oeuvre.

The eleventh chapter by Sean O'Reilly focuses on depictions of food-related artistic visions of time travel and continuity in recent Japanese cinema. The author dubs the phenomenon "culinary continuity" and examines the use of unique Japanese flavors not only as a means to attract audiences to cinemas, but also as a tool for reimagining and de-villainizing the country's history.

The concepts of 'unique' and 'universal' have served in this publication as a starting point for reflecting on Japanese culture and how it intermingles with other cultures. We hope that the papers included in both volumes have shown explicitly that numerous areas of Japanese culture constitute a great and inseparable part of our contemporary transcultural world.



# Part I

## Literature and Language



# The Art of Retelling and the Universality of Literature. The Case of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke

Katarzyna Sonnenberg-Musiał\*

## Introduction: Is beauty independent of time and space?

The question of whether beauty is defined and appreciated universally or whether it is rather culture-specific, depending on time and place, has long been addressed in the arts. It is also the main theme of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's (Fig. 1) short story entitled *Noroma ningyō* [*Noroma Puppets*] (1916), which was published at the time his other, more famous works were also created, such as *Hana* [*The Nose*], *Imogayu* [*Yam Grue*], and *Hankechi* [*The Handkerchief*].<sup>1</sup>

Akutagawa's reflection in *Noroma ningyō* revolves around a quotation taken from Anatole France's *Le jardin d'Épicure* (originally published in 1894 and translated into English as *The Garden of Epicurus* in 1908).<sup>2</sup> The words quoted are as follows:

As I cannot conceive beauty independent of time and space, I only begin to take pleasure in works of the imagination when I discover their connection with life; it is the point of junction between the two that fascinates me. The coarse pottery ware of Hissarlik has made me love the Iliad more, and I can

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to dr Aleksandra Szczechla for bringing *Noroma ningyō* to my attention. See R. Akutagawa, "Noroma ningyō," [in:] *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū* [*Collected Works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*], vol. 1, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1995, pp. 217–222.

<sup>2</sup> A. France, *Le jardin d'Épicure*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1903. See also A. France, *The Garden of Epicurus*, trans. A. Allinson, John Lane, London 1908.

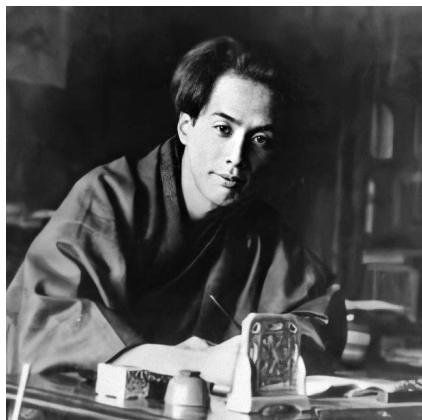


Figure 1. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke working on one of his novels in Tokyo. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

better appreciate the *Divine Comedy* for what I know of Florentine life in the Thirteenth Century.<sup>3</sup>

As is commonly known, Anatole France was an artist of great importance to Akutagawa, who began his career as a writer translating (from English) *Balthasar* and publishing it in *Shinshichō* [*New Thought Tides*], a university literary journal. He also referred to France's other works in his own writings, including *Noroma ningyō* and *Tabako to akuma* [*Tobacco and the Devil*] (1917). France's influence can be detected both in Akutagawa's view of human nature and in his style.<sup>4</sup> In *The Garden of Epicurus* quoted above, France also uses Goethe's phrase that "the only durable works are works of circumstance," suggesting that, in fact, all artistic creation may be referred to as "works of circumstance," since "we cannot understand them nor love them with an intelligent love, unless we know the place, time, and circumstances of their origin."<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Akutagawa's question of whether art may be universally appreciated is not triggered by his reading of the works of Homer, Dante, or Goethe. It appears as a response to his contact with *noroma ningyō*, puppets developed in the early Edo period (1603–1868) in Japan, tradition-

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<sup>3</sup> A. France, *The Garden*, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup> Sh. Nakamura, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke no sekai* [*The World of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*], Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 2015, p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> A. France, *The Garden*, 92.

ally manipulated by one person and usually accompanied by a *sekkyō-bushi* narrative.<sup>6</sup> Is this art still understandable and appreciated in Akutagawa's times? Are his own works going to be understood by generations to come? The belief that there is life in art that can transcend the boundaries of time and space is necessary for an artist to continue his work. However, is it possible to transmit the life of art to further generations, or is it merely wishful thinking? What makes art universal? Such questions are embedded into Akutagawa's short story. They also seem to be present, even if not expressed directly, in his other writings.

In this article I would like to reflect on how Akutagawa's drawing from other literary works, which is so characteristic of his technique, may also be an expression of his belief in the universal power of artistic creation.

## Archetypal power of literature

Akutagawa, an "extremely self-conscious man" who "never failed to criticize the artist within himself, usually with unforgiving scrutiny," is known for his use of existing materials, with *Konjaku monogatari* [*Tales of Now and Then*] (early twelfth century) and *Uji shūi monogatari* [*A Collection of Tales from Uji*] (early thirteenth century) as his frequent sources of inspiration.<sup>7</sup> It is also well-acknowledged that a great number of Akutagawa's stories is to a lesser or greater extent indebted to other sources – Chinese, Indian, and Western, including "the Bible, Caxton, Swift, Defoe, Goethe, Poe, Bierce, Browning, Butler, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, as well as Flaubert, Régnier, Mérimée, Loti, Strindberg, France, Synge, and others."<sup>8</sup> Donald Keene mentions that Akutagawa has been likened to "a mosaicist, piecing together fresh masterpieces out of the materials gleaned from many books," and he adds: "Sometimes the list of 'sources'

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<sup>6</sup> B.E. Thornbury, "Puppets on Strings and Actors on Floats. Japan's Traditional Performing Arts in a Festival Setting," *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 1992, no. 26(2), pp. 181–192. *Sekkyō bushi* (sometimes translated as 'sermon ballad') is a narrative form, originally related to Buddhism, and often performed with music.

<sup>7</sup> M. Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1976, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> B. Yu, *Akutagawa. An Introduction*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1972, p. 21.



for a single story, as uncovered by diligent scholars, is so extensive that one can only marvel that any author could fuse together so many disparate elements."<sup>9</sup> The already existing tales or stories are, however, used by Akutagawa as the basis for an in-depth analysis of human nature, as his short stories – to quote Mizuta Lippit – “do not usually deal with human reality directly, but with materials which have already been fictionalized.”<sup>10</sup>

Akutagawa's famous *Kumo no ito* [*The Spider's Thread*], considered an example of a children's tale or *märchen*, may be one example of this tendency.<sup>11</sup> It is also a vivid illustration of the meandering transition of literary images and ideas in literature. The story was first published in 1918 in the first volume of *Akai Tori* [*Red Bird*], a children's literary magazine, and quite well received. It is a short narrative featuring Buddha Shakyamuni and a man named Kandata, a robber, killer, and arsonist, the former strolling by the Lotus Pond in Paradise, the latter writhing in hellish pain underneath. The story begins when Shakyamuni puts down a spider's web in an attempt to save Kandata, an evil man who, nonetheless, once refrained from killing a spider. The attempt is unsuccessful as the thread breaks when Kandata tries to prevent others from using it as a way of escaping from Hell.<sup>12</sup>

Akutagawa's story has long been read in relation to the third chapter of Book VII of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), where Grushenka tells Alyosha a story of “An Onion,” about a wicked peasant woman who dies and is plunged by the angels into a lake of fire.<sup>13</sup> Her guardian angel testifies, however, that once she gave an onion to a beggar, and this single good deed is used to help her by holding out an onion

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<sup>9</sup> D. Keene, *Dawn to the West. Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, Columbia University Press, New York 1984, p. 565.

<sup>10</sup> N. Mizuta Lippit, *Reality and Fiction in Modern Japanese Literature*, M.E. Sharpe, White Plains, NY 1980, pp. 39–54.

<sup>11</sup> M. Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> R. Akutagawa, “Kumo no ito,” [in:] R. Akutagawa, *Gendai Nihon bungaku taikai* [*Collection of Contemporary Japanese Literature*], vol. 43, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1977, pp. 64–66.

<sup>13</sup> B. Yu, *Akutagawa*, pp. 25–26. See also D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 565.

in the lake.<sup>14</sup> There are clear parallels between the old folk tale retold by Dostoyevsky in his famous novel and Akutagawa's *Kumo no ito*: the wicked protagonists are given their last chance to escape from hellfire based on their own deeds: the peasant woman is given an onion leaf, Kandata – a spider's thread. Both protagonists, however, are consumed with envy and egoism, which leads to their final demise – the onion leaf breaks as does the spider's thread.

Read in parallel, the two stories pose a question also asked by Bert O. States, who, following Jean Starobinski, inquires: "What is then that persists? What is an archetype?" to which he answers that an archetype is "the ghost of a former form, endlessly migratory, infinitely tolerant of new content, ever fresh, ever archaic."<sup>15</sup> There is both repetitiveness and freshness involved, as the old blends with the new and certain elements and structures wander from one text to another. The migration of archetypes may not be fully conscious, as is the case with the readers' response to it. In the case of Akutagawa, however, the use of existing materials is often a conscious decision which may be related to how he read and appreciated archetypal stories both in Japanese and non-Japanese literatures.

The case of *Kumo no ito* is further complicated by the existence of *Karma. A Story of Buddhist Ethics* by Paul Carus, whose first version was translated into Russian by Leo Tolstoy around 1894. From Russian, the story *Karma* was translated into French as *Imitations*, and published under Tolstoy's name, as was the abbreviated German translation.<sup>16</sup> Five years after the publication of the Russian translation, Suzuki Daisetsu translated *Karma* into Japanese, and Akutagawa is commonly believed to have known the story.<sup>17</sup> He uses the plot almost without changing it,

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<sup>14</sup> F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett, New York Modern Library, New York 1900, pp. 423–425.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by B.O. States, "The Persistence of the Archetype," *Critical Inquiry* 1980, no. 7(2), pp. 333–334.

<sup>16</sup> See "Publisher's Advertisement," in P. Carus, *Karma. A Story of Buddhist Ethics*, Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago 1917, pp. iii–vi.

<sup>17</sup> K. Shōno, "Kumo no ito no zaigen o megutte" ["Reflecting on the Sources of *Kumo no ito*"], *Jinbunka Kyōiku Kenkyū* 1981, no. 8, p. 32.

but artistically alters the structure, and his Buddha is far more tranquil as compared to Carus's story.<sup>18</sup>

The migration of *Kumo no ito* poses various questions regarding the nature of creativity and the status of authorship. Here, however, I would rather like to focus on the universal popularity of Kandata's story, which is aptly described in Tolstoy's introduction to his translation of Carus's *Karma* (which was then retranslated into English):

I read this fairy tale to children, and they liked it. Among the adults, after reading it, it always rises [*sic*] talks about the most important matters of life. And it seems to me that this is a very good recommendation.<sup>19</sup>

Tolstoy noticed in Carus's story something universally appealing to readers or listeners, which made him translate it into Russian. Akutagawa must have had a similar impression. With his eye for universal tales, he chose and rewrote what remains attractive to children and adults alike until today.

## Universality questioned

By referring to already existing materials, Akutagawa not only highlights their universal quality, often shedding new light on their understanding, but also questions their meanings. An interesting commentary on the problem of universal appeal of ideas may be found in Akutagawa's other well-known short story entitled *Hankechi* [*The Handkerchief*] (1916).<sup>20</sup> The story revolves around one incident in Professor Hasegawa Kinzō's life,

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<sup>18</sup> Beongcheon Yu focuses only on the comparison of Akutagawa's story and Dostoyevsky's "An Onion," without referring to Paul Carus. Hence, he may highlight the alterations: "So completely recast, 'Spider thread' as it stands leaves almost no trace of the original. By juxtaposing both versions we may sufficiently understand what Akutagawa meant by his union with the materials." B. Yu, *Akutagawa*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> See L. Tolstoy, *Karma*, n.p., 1902 (Internet Archive, 2017), p. 2. [https://archive.org/details/Karma\\_LevTolstoy/page/n1/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/Karma_LevTolstoy/page/n1/mode/2up); accessed: 12.12.2020.

<sup>20</sup> R. Akutagawa, "Hankechi," [in:] R. Akutagawa, *Gendai Nihon bungaku taikai* [*Collection of Contemporary Japanese Literature*], vol. 43, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1977, pp. 28–32.

namely his encounter with a mother of one of his students, Nishiyama Ken'ichirō, who comes to visit him. The incident is embedded in the narrator's reflections on Hasegawa's understanding of human behavior and cultural patterns. The readers are presented with what may be described as "a highly satirical picture of what really goes on in the mind of an internationally known philosopher and moralist."<sup>21</sup>

The narrative opens and closes with Hasegawa sitting on a veranda and reading August Strindberg's essay on dramatic techniques (Akutagawa gives the title: *Dramaturgie*).<sup>22</sup> The narrator comments on how Hasegawa takes the trouble to read works outside of his research area – by Strindberg, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, or Wilde – only because they are popular with his students. This may be interpreted as a characteristic of a zealous educator, but it may also be read as an example of the character's mannerism, his attempt to pose in front of everybody (including himself) as a self-sacrificing teacher. In fact, Hasegawa is reading – be it absent-mindedly, as he has no real interest in drama – Strindberg's passage on mannerism, which he will so eagerly apply to analyzing his guest's behavior. It is nonetheless equally legitimate to look at his own demeanor in the light of Strindberg's passage.

Hasegawa's inclination to mannerisms is hinted at in a number of instances, especially in the passage which describes his dreams of becoming "a bridge spanning East and West," which would facilitate "mutual understanding between the European-American peoples and the Japanese people."<sup>23</sup> In order to build this understanding, Hasegawa brings up the notion of *bushidō*, as he believes that "its essence might well be identified with the Christian spirit of the peoples of Europe and America."<sup>24</sup> At this point, it is impossible not to see a parallel between Hasegawa and Nitobe Inazō, the author of *Bushido. The Soul of Japan* (1899), a book originally written in English and intended as a bridge between Japan and the West. Nitobe explains, first and foremost to his non-Japanese readers, that *bushidō* may be regarded as the basis of

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<sup>21</sup> M. Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, p. 127.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A. Strindberg, *Dramaturgie*, trans. E. Schering, Müller, Munich 1920.

<sup>23</sup> R. Akutagawa, "Handkerchief," [in:] R. Akutagawa, *The Beautiful and the Grotesque*, trans. T. Kojima, J. McVittie, Liveright, New York 1964, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> R. Akutagawa, "Handkerchief," p. 144.

ethical behavior in Japan and compares it to European chivalry deeply rooted in Christian values. He insists that *bushidō* may disappear, but its essence will continue to influence Japanese conduct:

Bushido as an independent code of ethics may vanish, but its power will not perish from the earth; its schools of martial prowess or civic honor may be demolished, but its glory will survive their ruins. Like its symbolic flower, after it is blown to the four winds, it will still bless mankind with the perfume with which it will enrich life.<sup>25</sup>

In the Preface to *Bushido. The Soul of Japan*, Nitobe mentions his American wife's questions about Japanese customs as "the direct inception of this little book."<sup>26</sup> Hasegawa also has an American wife who appears in his musings on the relationship between Japan and the West:

The Professor, while studying abroad, had married in America; so his wife was, as you might suspect, American. But she loved Japan and the Japanese hardly less than *he* did. Especially was she an admirer of the finely wrought objects of Japanese arts-and-crafts. Accordingly, it was safe to surmise that the Gifu lantern, suspended on the veranda, did not so much represent the Professor's taste but rather was an expression of his wife's enjoyment of the things of Japan... Whenever he put down his book, the Professor thought of his wife and the Gifu lantern and the Japanese civilization as represented by that paper lantern.<sup>27</sup>

Hasegawa's American wife is shown as an element in his worldview, proof that harmonious cohabitation of Japanese and Western values is both possible and quite pleasant. She is a splendid picture of how Japanese art may be universally appealing.

However, *The Handkerchief* is hardly a testimony to amicable communication between cultures. On the contrary, it questions the oversimplifications and hasty conclusions such communication often involves. These questions arise with Hasegawa's reaction to Nishiyama's mother, who

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<sup>25</sup> I. Nitobe, *Bushido. The Soul of Japan; An Exposition of Japanese Thought*, Leeds & Biddle, Philadelphia 1900, p. 127.

<sup>26</sup> I. Nitobe, *Bushido*, p. v.

<sup>27</sup> R. Akutagawa, "Handkerchief," p. 142.

speaks about her son's premature death with a serene, even smiling face while under the table her hands are trembling, tightly grasping a handkerchief. Hasegawa is at first bewildered by what he considers an unnatural calmness, which he juxtaposes with – to his taste – the excessive weeping of Wilhelm I's subjects after his death. Then, to his surprise, he notices the woman's hands tearing the handkerchief, which pleases him as an expression of *bushidō*. When he later reflects upon the gesture, however, he happens to encounter Strindberg's words on mannerism of a so-called "dual performance" or "double dealings."<sup>28</sup> His composure and complacency is "shattered by this unpleasant denial of the stoical action that had so impressed him." He is thus left without any reliable interpretation of the woman's behavior, with his eyes cast on the Gifu lantern, as if hoping that it would restore his peace and harmony. As Keene says, "Akutagawa's cynicism was here directed at the high-minded professor whose ideals are so easily challenged."<sup>29</sup> But there is also Akutagawa's skepticism here towards any act of hasty conclusion or complacent thought that other people are to be interpreted easily.

## One event, two perspectives

Another question in the discussion around the universality of experience is raised by Akutagawa's *Butōkai* [*The Ball*] (1919), which revolves around Akiko's reminiscences about how she danced with a French naval officer as a young, seventeen-year-old woman. It is possible to see the story as "a poetic evocation of a so-called Rokumeikan era – gay, fresh and dreaming of a brave new world."<sup>30</sup> The cultural space in *Butōkai*

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<sup>28</sup> A. Strindberg, "Memorandum to the Members of the Intimate Theatre (1908)," [in:] *The Strindberg Reader. A Selection of Writings of August Strindberg*, trans. A. Paulson, Phaedra, New York 1968, p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 569.

<sup>30</sup> B. Yu, *Akutagawa*, p. 54. See also D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 54. Rokumeikan, or Deer Cry Pavilion, was a Western-style building in Hibiya, designed by Josiah Conder and meant to impress foreign visitors with its modern atmosphere. The 1880s in Japan are even sometimes referred to as the "Rokumeikan era" due to the numerous diplomatic gatherings and balls which were held in the building. It is also the setting of the famous play *Rokumeikan* (1956) by Mishima Yukio.

is "marked by intoxication and mixing of cultures."<sup>31</sup> In addition, Akutagawa might have dissociated himself from "the extreme adulation of the West of the early Meiji," viewing it as "picturesque" and describing it "with almost the same sense of distance as in his accounts of sixteenth-century Nagasaki."<sup>32</sup>

Akutagawa created a fictitious image responding to what is found in Pierre Loti's *Un bal à Yeddo* included in his *Japoneries d'automne* (1889), a piece dedicated to Madame Alphonse Daudet. Loti's work opens with an invitation to Rokumeikan:

Le ministre des affaires étrangères et la comtesse Sodeska ont l'honneur de vous prier de venir passer la soirée au Rokou-Meïkan, à l'occasion de la naissance de S. M. l'Empereur. On dansera.<sup>33</sup>

The ball is to commemorate the Emperor's birthday in 1886. Loti, accused of Orientalism in the modern times, notices to his surprise that the surroundings of Rokumeikan look very Western:

Ici, c'est une autre surprise. Est-ce que nous arrivons à Londres, ou à Melbourne, ou à New-York? Autour de la gare se dressent de hautes maisons en brique, d'une laideur américaine. Des alignements de becs de gaz laissent deviner au loin de longues rues bien droites. L'air froid est tout rayé de fils télégraphiques et, dans diverses directions, des tramways partent avec des bruits connus de timbres et de sifflets.<sup>34</sup>

Here, he mentions the houses of brick and telegraph wires that are signs of Japan's rapid Westernization. Furthermore, Loti's opinion on Rokumeikan (Fig. 2) is rather unflattering – the building reminds him of a casino in some run-down European town. Inside, what immediately attracts the guests' attention are the chrysanthemums, impressive in size and colors: white, yellow, and pink. Equally intriguing are the red and green Chinese banners with dragons.

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31 S.M. Lippit, "The Disintegrating Machinery of the Modern. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's Late Writings," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 1999, no. 58(1), p. 45.

32 D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 570.

33 P. Loti, *Japoneries d'automne*, Calmann-Levy, Paris 1889, p. 77.

34 P. Loti, *Japoneries*, p. 79.

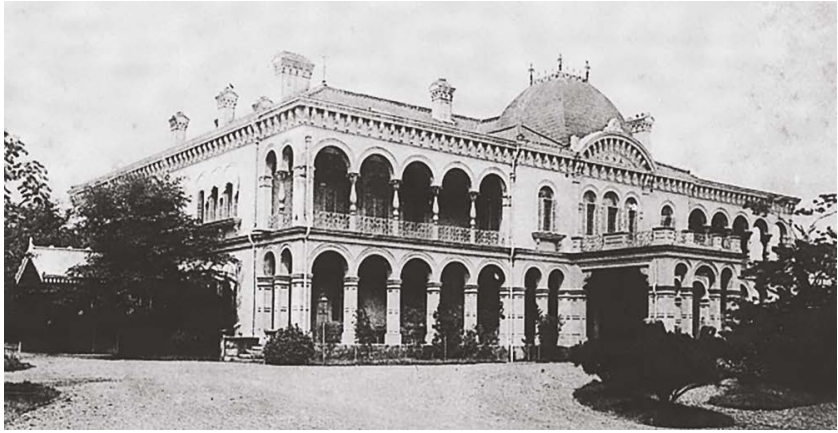


Figure 2. Rokumeikan at its completion (built in 1883, demolished in 1940).  
Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

In his account, Loti focuses on decorations and on Japanese women attending the event. He does not mention any names and explores his own visions of female beauty. At one point, he notices a woman who – dressed in Western clothes – looks to him slightly provincial. In response to this image, he creates another one:

Vraiment elle est tout à fait habillée comme une jeune fille à marier de notre pays (un peu provinciale, il est vrai, de Carpentras ou de Landerneau) et elle sait manger proprement les glaces avec une cuiller, du bout de ses doigts bien gantés. — Tout à l'heure pourtant, en rentrant chez elle, dans quelque maison à châssis de papier, elle va, comme toutes les autres femmes, quitter son corset en pointe, prendre une robe brodée de cigognes ou d'autres oiseaux quelconques, s'accroupir par terre, dire une prière shintoïste ou bouddhiste, et souper avec du riz dans des bols, à l'aide de baguettes...<sup>35</sup>

Loti, with his inclination to adjust what he sees to what he expects of Japanese culture as he understands it, imagines how the woman returns home, takes her Western clothes off, and puts on an embroidered kimono before starting to eat the rice from a bowl with her chopsticks.

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<sup>35</sup> P. Loti, *Japoneries*, p. 102.



In *Butōkai*, Akutagawa presents another perspective on the event – juxtaposing it with Loti's. He creates the account of Akiko, a seventeen-year-old Japanese woman who is excited to be attending her first ball. There are passages in the story which correspond directly to Loti's account. Akiko also focuses on the beautiful chrysanthemums in the ballroom. She notices the dresses and accessories worn by women that evening. She is captivated by the imperial crest and the Chinese banners. She even imagines how she, as a Japanese woman, may be perceived by a French naval officer:

Akiko was aware that the French officer in front of her was observing her every movement with great attention. It proved how he, a foreigner unaccustomed to living in Japan, was fascinated with her lively dance. Could this beautiful lady truly live like a doll in a house made of paper and bamboo? And use long metal chopsticks to pluck rice grains from a bowl the size of a palm, with bluish flowers painted on it? Such questions must have returned to him a number of times, bringing with them a warm smile.<sup>36</sup>

Akiko is well aware of the oriental image the French officer has of Japan and Japanese women. Her reaction is that of genteel amusement. In both texts, it is stated that “amused and proud at the same time,”<sup>37</sup> she embraces the foreignness of her dance partner – noticing his gallant manners and strange Japanese accent. Loti, on his part, is also charmed by his “little dancing partner,” although in his record she is unable to understand what he says:

Devant l'air un peu moqueur de la dame qui me regarde approcher, me défilant de mon japonais détestable, je fais ma demande en français très pur. Elle ne comprend pas, naturellement.<sup>38</sup>

Both Loti and Akiko thus share their thoughts on how they are misunderstood and misconstrued. Nonetheless, they both enjoy the night, dancing to Johann Strauss II's *The Blue Danube Waltz*.

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<sup>36</sup> R. Akutagawa, “Butōkai,” [in:] R. Akutagawa, *Gendai Nihon bungaku taikai* [*Collection of Contemporary Japanese Literature*], vol. 43, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1977, p. 128. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>37</sup> R. Akutagawa, “Butōkai,” p. 128.

<sup>38</sup> P. Loti, *Japoneries*, p. 98.

Loti's tone tends to be more judgmental than Akiko's. In the closing passage, he insists on having no ill intention, as his record was meant to present a faithful picture of a reality that has been changing so dynamically. He even believes that his account may be amusing for the Japanese themselves: "*Dans ce pays qui se transforme si prodigieusement vite, cela amusera peut-être aussi des Japonais eux-mêmes, quand quelques années auront passé.*"<sup>39</sup> Akutagawa's *Butōkai* may be read as a response to this comment, describing Akiko's amusement but also complementing the one-sided view of Loti's account. The second part of *Butōkai* focuses on Akiko, now Mrs. H., around 1919, years after she attended the ball at Rokumeikan. When asked about the name of the French officer, she answers: "Julien Viaud," and when her interlocutor points out that it is none other than the famous writer Pierre Loti, she denies the identification firmly: "No, his name is not Pierre Loti. It is Julien Viaud."<sup>40</sup> These words may be read as a commentary to Loti's record, which was not so much a truthful picture but rather a kind of artistic creation. Akiko's words also stress the importance of her own recollection, as she is not interested in identifying her young French naval officer, the foreigner in the Rokumeikan ballroom, as anyone other than Julien Viaud. For Keene, this is a splendid example of how Akutagawa treated the past: "[H]is aim was always poetic truth, rather than historical accuracy."<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion: The question of universality revisited

The final scene of the ball described in *Butōkai* focuses on fireworks. Both Akiko and Julien Viaud watch them with a dose of nostalgia, when Viaud suddenly voices his opinion: "I was reflecting on the fireworks. The fireworks that resemble our life."<sup>42</sup> The Japanese character for 'life' (生) is given a reading as the French 'vie' (ヴイ), and Keene notices that Akutagawa frequently used the image of fireworks as a metaphor for human life.<sup>43</sup> It may also be considered a metaphor for Akutagawa's artistic cre-

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<sup>39</sup> P. Loti, *Japoneries*, p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> R. Akutagawa, "Butōkai," p. 130.

<sup>41</sup> D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 571.

<sup>42</sup> R. Akutagawa, "Butōkai," p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 571.

ation. For him, literature was an art that transmitted life (*seimei* 生命) through words – their meanings, their sounds, and their shapes.<sup>44</sup> The life in literature needed to be given a form.

In this light, Akutagawa's repetitive use of already existing materials in an attempt to grasp and transmit the life enclosed within them may also be regarded as an expression of his belief in the universal appeal of literature. Undoubtedly, he had a great sense of what to look for. He recognized archetypal patterns in stories and explored them, often enriching them with "modern psychological reality."<sup>45</sup> *Kumo no ito* is one example of a new form given to a story with the archetypal power to migrate endlessly regardless of cultural boundaries. What touched Tolstoy when he translated Carus's *Karma* also inspired Akutagawa and has been appealing to readers in and outside Japan for more than a century. Similarly, the story of "An Onion" embodied in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is still read and reinterpreted all over the world.

However, the problem of Akutagawa's anxiety expressed in *Noroma ningyō* with regards to the question of universality of art cannot be resolved so easily. In *Butōkai* and in *Hankechi*, for example, Akutagawa juxtaposes different perspectives and sensibilities which challenge even the possibility of universal appeal of certain phenomena. Akiko, who refuses to accept those historical facts which may ruin her poetic vision, is a mirror image of Pierre Loti, who also uses facts to the advantage of his own fantasy. Similarly, Professor Hasegawa manipulates reality to be able to sustain his coherent, simplified vision of the world. He argues that Christianity and *bushidō* have a common essence, and thus transcend cultural boundaries. However, his very understanding of the two realities is put into question, as is his grasp of the works of Strindberg.

In this manner, it is possible to argue that Akutagawa explores archetypes in literature in the search of its universal quality. However, he simultaneously questions the possibility of a common understanding in his works by means of changing the narrative perspective or using an antithetical structure. In this way, he brings the fireworks of literary

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<sup>44</sup> See M. Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, p. 111.

<sup>45</sup> N. Mizuta Lippit, *Reality and Fiction*, pp. 39–54.

themes and motifs back to life and lets them fly again, but he never allows his readers to forget about the limitations of both the fireworks and the viewers themselves.

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## Abstract

### ***The Art of Retelling and the Universality of Literature. The Case of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke***

As illustrated by *Noroma ningyō* [*Noroma Puppets*] (1916), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke was very much aware of the tension between the historical and the universal as far as the reception of art is concerned. The article focuses on three of his short stories: *Kumo no ito* [*The Spider's Thread*] (1918), *Hankechi* [*The Handkerchief*] (1916), and *Butōkai* [*The Ball*] (1919) in relation to the question of how he responded to this tension. It argues that while the use of archetypal themes and motifs may illustrate Akutagawa's belief in the universality of literature, his playing with perspectives and the antithetical structure of some of his works simultaneously question the possibility of a common understanding between different readers across cultures.

**Keywords:** Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, universality of literature, *Kumo no ito*, *Hankechi*, *Butōkai*

## Unique or Universal? The Case of Mishima Yukio

Inoue Takashi\*

Nowadays, many Japanese novelists – for example, Tawada Yōko, Murakami Haruki, or Kawakami Hiromi – write their novels with the intention of making them accessible and enjoyable not only to the Japanese audience but also to global readers. In their creative processes, certain sparks or conflicts, or rather, in some cases, intricately intertwined secret relationships arise between uniqueness, which can be called traditional or national, and universality, which should appeal to any person beyond any kind of border.

In my opinion, in the history of modern Japanese literature it was Mishima Yukio (Fig. 3) who was the very first to be completely aware of this issue. This was due to his mind's propensity to concomitantly focus both on the internal (himself) and on the external (the world at large) element. Moreover, certain historical circumstances in Japan and in the world had also undoubtedly reinforced this tendency of his.

In the Taishō era (1912–1926), the most recent Western contemporary arts were introduced to Japan one after another in a quick succession, and this cultural landscape still persisted at the beginning of the Shōwa period (1926–1989). It influenced Mishima's literary interests in his childhood. Specifically, Mishima took to Raymond Radiguet and many other Western literary figures such as Oscar Wilde, Rainer Maria Rilke, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce, all of whom captured his heart. However, not much later the situation in Japan changed significantly. It was the beginning of the militarism era. Even though beforehand young Japa-

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Figure 3. Mishima Yukio, 1953.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

nese people had tended to enjoy Western literature and thought, from that point on they shifted their interests to reading more classical works of Japanese literature. Under this nationalist *Zeitgeist*, Mishima also began reading and writing in the classical style. In fact, already during his school years, some teachers<sup>1</sup> of Japanese literature discovered Mishima's extraordinary literary talent and introduced him to the depths of Japan's classical literary world. Nonetheless, Mishima did not completely abandon his interest in Western literature.

*Hanazakari no mori* [*The Forest in Full Bloom*] was the first novel which was published not under his real name but under his pen name, in *Bungei Bunka* in 1941, when he was 16 years old. It was a well-crafted amalgam of the traditional Japanese literary world and the modern Western literary method. For example, the structure of *Hanazakari no mori* was influenced by the Proustian theme of memory. Following the Proustian method, Mishima crafted a narrator floating between dream and reality, immersing himself into both his own past and the lives of his ancestors.

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, Shimizu Fumio, who was a specialist in Japanese classic literature, was strongly impressed by Mishima's excellent ability, and introduced him to the literary magazine *Bungei Bunka*.



Interestingly, however, both the readers and the narrator are taken into the 'court literature of the Heian period,' which has been revived in the modern age, *before* they are aware of it, and ultimately their spirits are revived there, too. From a different vantage point, this would mean that if Proustian literature is *truly* universal, it should include *some* uniquely localized literary characteristics. On the other hand, if Japanese court literature is uniquely authentic and indigenous, it should also include some universality beyond space and time. The young novelist Mishima Yukio already noticed this interesting paradoxical truth.

It was after the war that Mishima put this idea into words in a totally unprecedented and amazing way. His first remarkable work was *Kamen no kokuhaku* [*Confessions of a Mask*]. It was published in 1949 and constituted a declaration of Mishima's fresh start in the post-war era. Here we can find a different type of an amalgam of Proustian characteristics and Japanese uniqueness. In this case, the expressive style adopted by Mishima seems more complex, especially for an inexperienced reader who might get lost, whilst an advanced reader may enjoy the many twists and turns – a reading experience similar to navigating a labyrinth. For example, here is a passage from the beginning of the novel:

*Nagai aida, watashi wa jibun ga umareta toki no kōkei o mita koto ga aru to iihatte ita.*<sup>2</sup>

Meredith Weatherby translated this sentence into English in 1958:

"For many years I claimed I could remember things seen at the time of my own birth."<sup>3</sup>

This English version was then translated into French by Renée Villoteau in 1971; however, a new excellent French translation by Dominique Palmé was published in 2019. Based directly on the original Japanese version, it is a more significant translation through which we can approach and

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<sup>2</sup> Y. Mishima, "Kamen no kokuhaku" ["Confessions of a Mask"], [in:] *Ketteiban, Mishima Yukio zenshū* [*Definitive Edition of the Complete Collection of Mishima Yukio Works*], vol. 1, Shinchōsha, Tokyo 2000, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, trans. M. Weatherby, New Directions, New York 1958, p. 1.

appreciate the essence of *Confessions of a Mask*. The beginning of this new French translation reads as follows:

*Longtemps, j'ai soutenu que j'avais tout vu de la scène de ma naissance.*<sup>4</sup>

This line reminds us of the first line of *À la recherche du temps perdu*:

*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.*<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Mishima referred to Proust when he wrote *Confessions of a Mask*, but the methodology he employed here was quite paradoxical and completely different from the one he used to write *Hanazakari no mori*. As J. Keith Vincent pointed out, the contrast between Mishima and Proust in *Confessions of a Mask* is indeed very striking.<sup>6</sup> In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, fantasy is mixed with reality, which means that the narrator is floating between subconsciousness and consciousness. Using this style of narration was widely recognized to have been ahead of its time during the early twentieth century. On the other hand, in *Confessions of a Mask*, the fantasy which appears as reality is orchestrated by the narrator, and this means that nothing is unknown to him. In other words, the narrator is conscious of absolutely everything. In this way, by imitating Proust and his cutting-edge style of early twentieth-century literature, Mishima presented a paradoxically different type of worldview.

In my opinion, this new worldview is as follows. Man's view of the world changed dramatically after the horrific events of WWII, such as what unfolded at Auschwitz and the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Prior to these tragedies, mankind could recognize goodness, beauty, and spiritual values in the subconscious state of the mind. However, upon witnessing these actions, man realized that this kind of subconsciousness could no longer exist. These startling realities changed humanity's worldviews. Therefore, the narrator can orchestrate his fan-

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<sup>4</sup> Y. Mishima, *Confessions d'un masque*, trans. D. Palmé, Gallimard, Paris 2019, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> M. Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Gallimard, Paris 1987, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> J.K. Vincent, *Two-Timing Modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA–London 2012, p. 188.

tasy, but the fact that he is controlled by destiny remains. This is my interpretation of the *Confessions of a Mask*'s first line.

At the same time, Mishima presented another point of view – one which ironically challenges the genre of *shishōsetsu*, uniquely labeled in modern Japanese literature. In *shishōsetsu*, the protagonist represents the author's thoughts, sentiments, and experiences. At first glance, this appears to be applicable to *Confessions of a Mask*, but a closer and more careful reading makes it clear that there is an essential difference between *shishōsetsu* and *Confessions of a Mask*. Generally speaking, “*shishōsetsu* often seems to be at pains to present events from a temporal viewpoint that coincides as closely as possible with the time narrated events.”<sup>7</sup> But in *Confessions of a Mask*, the protagonist's thoughts, sentiments, and experiences are seen from afar and analyzed from the transcendental perspective of a protagonist situated beyond the time and space of when and where these events occurred. Alternatively, the protagonist already had the transcendental perspective at the time of those events occurring. This means that *Confessions of a Mask* exhibits a critical perspective of the *shishōsetsu* genre. In this amazing, twisted way, Mishima critically relativized Proustian universality and the uniqueness of *shishōsetsu*.

Another literary achievement by Mishima is *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* [*Kinkakuji*]. This novel's plot was based on a real incident. In 1950, during the occupation of Japan, a young monk set fire to the temple where he had practiced Buddhist austerities. This setting brings to light some aspects of Buddhist thought in Japan. For this reason, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* is often regarded as a unique novel which could have been written only in the context of Buddhist culture in Japan. In one way, this is true. However, the real uniqueness of this novel is not yet apparent at this point. I will take up this issue in the later part of this paper.

Incidentally, this novel is also regarded to be an unexpected but proper successor to modernist Western novels in the vein of Balzac's *La*

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<sup>7</sup> B. Mito Reed, “Chikamatsu Shuko. An Inquiry into Narrative Modes in Modern Japanese Fiction,” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 1988, no. 14, p. 60.

*Comédie humaine*. In his masterpiece, Balzac intended to describe and depict the entire society formed after the French Revolution. Flaubert tried to achieve a similar goal in his more carefully carved and poetically condensed form – *Madame Bovary* – in which he represented the vulgar society of the Second Empire. Describing the entirety of a given society is one of the basic principles of modernist novels. Mishima also deployed his *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* as a mirror that was meant to reflect Japan's society after the catastrophic defeat of World War II.

I would like to elaborate on this point. The peace treaty ending WWII was signed in San Francisco in September 1951, and Japan officially returned to the international community as an independent nation which officially renounced war in its Constitution. In fact, it was a mere ploy designed by the United States and motivated by Japan's geopolitical position at the beginning of the Cold War. US forces remained stationed in a "peaceful" Japan long after its independence, and Japan was forced to play the role of a puppet, or a *Trojan horse*, against the communist bloc, even though, unlike other nations, it was unwilling to recognize its own reality. In this way, the occupation continued, and "peaceful" Japan, as an independent nation, was fabricated from a web of lies. Returning to the case of setting fire to the Golden Pavilion – the young monk's background, which led him to set fire to the temple, was the epitome of the contradictory post-war Japan, thus the arson attack was meant as a criticism of this complicated situation. Let us look at the scene where the protagonist abuses a prostitute who serviced the American soldiers. A drunken soldier orders the protagonist to stomp on the prostitute's abdomen as a form of abortion. The soldier's attitude towards the protagonist is very benevolent, so he obeys this order like a faithful slave and receives two cartons of American cigarettes as a reward. What is the implication of this scene?

It is very clear that the relation between the protagonist and the US soldier is a metaphor of the relations between post-war Japan and the United States. Post-war Japan effectively lost its sovereignty. In fact, the country was just a puppet state and, on top of that, it tried to release its frustrations by fulfilling its manipulator's desires with too much enthusiasm. Mishima described this inconvenient truth by using the scene featuring a US soldier, in which both the protagonist and the prostitute were vic-

tims. He also enveloped the theme in some splendidly sculpted literary expressions. In this way, Mishima managed to succeed in implementing the basic principles of modernist novels – all that in the Far East's island country, something not originally anticipated by Balzac or Flaubert.

This is what constitutes the true uniqueness of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* – and, importantly, this uniqueness has now become universal. Because, in today's world, the validity of what has been considered modern ideas, e.g., sovereignty, human rights, equality, et cetera, is becoming more or less questionable. Is it not possible that, just like the status of post-war Japan as a sovereign nation, these ideas might be merely social products fabricated from a web of lies? We are currently facing this very question.

Finally, Mishima's ambitious efforts bore fruit in the form of a masterpiece which was an enormous landmark in the history of world literature – *The Sea of Fertility* [*Hōjō no umi*]. This novel is a tetralogy whose protagonists are interconnected by a cycle of reincarnations. In each of the four volumes, a different protagonist transmigrates from one to the next. Additionally, there is another character throughout the series – Mr. Honda, a close friend of the first volume's protagonist, Kiyoaki. Mr. Honda is not a reincarnation but rather a witness of several reincarnations from the beginning of the story. But at the end of the novel, the reality of the reincarnation's story is revealed by Buddhist abbess Satoko, a former lover of Kiyoaki. She says to Honda that she had never known Kiyoaki before. She suggests that the whole story of the reincarnations was just a delusion of the witness, the “old Honda.” Honda is astounded and frightened by Satoko's calm and lucid sermon, but at the same time it is also a shocking and unacceptable revelation for the readers, who up until this point believed, as a matter of course, that the characters actually exist in the narrative. How should we interpret this ending of Mishima's masterpiece? Was Satoko intentionally lying to make Honda discard the worldly desires? Or did she successfully push her memory of Kiyoaki to the back of her mind because her impossible love for him was too painful to retain?

Both readings are inadequate. We need to understand that what Satoko denied was neither just *her* memory nor just *her* experience. Rather, Mishima made her play a significant role in rejecting the world itself,

including herself and all the characters, which the readers had been immersed in getting to know during their reading journey. As a result, the “old Honda,” as well as the reader, is forced to erase *all* the memory that was the foundation of her existence, and so cannot help but to be taken towards nihilism. The last scene of *The Sea of Fertility* is a description of a garden at the convent administrated by Satoko:

It was a bright, quiet garden, without striking features. Like a rosary rubbed between the hands, the shrilling of cicadas held sway.

There was no other sound. The garden was empty, he had come, thought Honda, to a place that had no memories, nothing.<sup>8</sup>

In my view, this scene in *The Sea of Fertility* is an example of a kind of “ontological metafiction,” where the author, Mishima, self-consciously suspends his own narrative. This ending gives the readers who have read the whole tetralogy a historical and philosophical awareness regarding the function of memories. What kind of role does memory play for us? For Marcel Proust, it had a mystical power. At the end of his long novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the power of memory encouraged and revived the spirits of the readers and the narrator. As I mentioned above, in *Hanazakari no mori*, the narrator (and Mishima) followed this Proustian method. But as *Confessions of a Mask* has already suggested, this function of memories was a “lucky” occurrence which could not be allowed anymore. After World War II, we were prohibited from naively relying on memories, because traumatic events, like the Holocaust and the atomic bombings, had affected or distorted their nature. Moreover, after Mishima's death, deadly tragedies have repeatedly occurred in Japan and across the world: massive earthquakes, tsunamis, terrorist attacks, nuclear power plant accidents, and so on. Of course, it is obvi-

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<sup>8</sup> Y. Mishima, *The Decay of the Angel* [The fourth volume of *The Sea of Fertility*], trans. E.G. Seidensticker, Vintage International, New York 1990, p. 236. In the original version: “Kore to itte kikō no nai, kanga na, akaruku hiraita oniwa de aru. Juzu o kuru yō na semi no koe ga koko o ryō shite iru. Sono hoka ni wa nani hitotsu oto tote naku, jakumaku o kiwamete iru. Kono niwa ni wa nani mo nai. Kioku mo nakereba, nani mo nai tokoro e, jibun wa kite shimatta to Honda wa omotta.” See Y. Mishima, “Tennin gosui,” [in:] *Ketteiban, Mishima Yukio zenshū* [Definitive Edition of the Complete Collection of Mishima Yukio Works], vol. 14, Shinchōsha, Tokyo 2002, pp. 647–648.

ous that there is a difference between man-made events and natural disasters. However, the effects of the latter depend on social or political systems, and similarly, the effects of the former depend on natural conditions. They are so closely intertwined and connected that we cannot easily separate them.

Every such dreadful experience is much too awful for us to keep as a reliable memory. It is natural that we want to ignore or forget it. But no matter how hard it is to retain the memories, excluding them from our minds will cause us to lose the roots of our existence and to fall into nihilism. In addition, if we consider it carefully, we should recognize that repressing former memories might cause the next tragedy and eventually and unavoidably take us towards nothingness. Look at today's uninhabited districts which remain under lockdown or quarantine regime either because of receiving dangerous levels of radioactive contamination or due to the deadly pandemic. Look at cities in ruins due to missile attacks. That is the reality that we have to face at present. The descriptions of *The Sea of Fertility's* last part predicted this reality half a century ago. Mishima foresaw these universal crises of our age. It is ironic, but that is why nowadays *The Sea of Fertility* is one of the most critical pieces of world literature with a marker of universality.

How was Mishima able to achieve this? The key is the strategy he extracted from the traditional, unique resources of literary classics in Japan. For example, as he was writing the last part of *The Sea of Fertility*, he referred to and relied on *The Tale of Genji* and Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi* [*Narrow Road to the Interior*] (1702).

In particular, Mishima's manner of quoting *The Tale of Genji* is incredibly surprising. In the last scene of the narrative, a letter from one of her lovers reaches Ukifune, who survived an attempted suicide (caused by her being entangled in a love triangle). Ukifune refuses to receive the letter, saying that she doesn't know the sender and so the post must have been misdelivered. Referring to this famous ending of *The Tale of Genji*, Mishima wrote a scene in which Satoko rejects the whole narrative of *The Sea of Fertility*. But Mishima changed the implications of the scene from a traditional aesthetic expression of sadness and difficulties experienced by people in love to an extraordinary expression of complete onto-

logical extinction in our modern age. It was Mishima who changed the original meaning, but he owed his extraordinary description of today's nihilism to Japanese literary classics.

As for the description of the nunnery's garden, it is modeled after *Oku no hosomichi*. In the famous essay by Basho, we find the following sentences:

*Kishi o meguri, iwa o haite, bukkaku o haishi, kakei jakumaku to shite kokoro sumiyuku nomi oboyu.*

*Shizukasa ya iwa ni shimiiru semi no koe.*<sup>9</sup>

Going around the shore, the rocks and the Buddhist temple to worship, I had a lucid and pure mind surrounded with the beautiful and silent view.

How silent ...

"Cries" of cicadas, stuck in the rock,  
purified in nothingness.<sup>10</sup>

It is argued that Basho's deep mourning for Sen-gin, a young master who was served by Basho but died very young, was hidden in this haiku. When Basho wrote, however, "I had a lucid and pure mind surrounded with the beautiful and silent view," a spiritual miracle turned his deep mourning into a peaceful state of mind. But here, Mishima, too, changed this famous description into an extraordinary expression of ontological nihilism in our modern age.

In actuality, we are no longer fully living our lives but merely surviving from day to day, and we apparently have no way of dealing with this nihilistic end to our civilization. However, Mishima successfully described our predicament in a way we had been unable to before, and he did so with the aid of the unique literary classics of Japan.

Unfortunately, I believe that nowadays Japan is becoming more and more pitifully insular. But in *The Sea of Fertility*, Mishima's literary mind

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<sup>9</sup> B. Matsuo, "Oku no hosomichi" ["Narrow Road to the Interior"], [in:] *Matsuo Bashō shū* [Collected Works of Matsuo Bashō]. *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zen-shū* [The Complete Works of Japanese Classical Literature], New Edition, vol. 2, Shōgakusan, Tokyo 1997, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> My translation.



confronted the coming crises which would affect Japan and the world head-on by means of delving deeply into the unique literary tradition in an outstanding way.

Finally, I would like to emphasize as the most important matter for today's readers across the world that reading *The Sea of Fertility*, as well as facing human reality, doesn't mean that the sense of nihilism will be doubled. After finishing work on his tetralogy, Mishima committed suicide, but he was not killed by nihilism. On the contrary, by killing himself, Mishima left us with a mission to advance a solution. If we read the tetralogy with true understanding, we can take the first vital step towards solving the problem – a step different from suicide. Because no matter how nihilistic the end of *The Sea of Fertility* might be, Mishima's extraordinary literary creativity which informed the ending of his work can certainly encourage us to go ahead. We have two options: either to blindly surrender to today's nihilistic situation while wearing blinkers or to confront reality head-on and try to find the best way of living meaningfully. Both choices will be getting more challenging as we move ahead, but everything depends on the path we decide to take.

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## Abstract

### *Unique or Universal? The Case of Mishima Yukio*

Amidst uniqueness and universality there tend to arise sparks, conflicts, and intricately intertwined secret relationships. Taking up four Mishima Yukio novels – *The Forest in Full Bloom* (*Hanazakari no mori*), *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no kokuhaku*), *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkakuji*), and *The Sea of Fertility* (*Hōjō no umi*), I substantiate this theory while also referring to works by other authors. *The Sea of Fertility* is the most unique and, simultaneously, the most universal of the discussed works, as it contains many diametric oppositions and predicts the nihilistic reality of our world nowadays. However, at the same time, it also encourages us to find the best way of living our life meaningfully.

**Keywords:** Mishima Yukio, *The Sea of Fertility*, Marcel Proust, *La Comédie humaine*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Tale of Genji*, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, *shishōsetsu*, nihilism

# Mizumura Minae's Novel *Shishōsetsu from left to right* (1995): *Shishōsetsu* or Realism?

Matthew Königsberg\*

The novel *Shishōsetsu from left to right* by Mizumura Minae does the reader the “favor” of explicitly stating the genre of the work in its title, namely *shishōsetsu* or “I-novel.” Readers of Mizumura’s works will recognize the strategy of incorporating genre designations in titles and/or subtitles, as – for instance – in *Haha no isan* [*Inheritance from Mother*], which bears the subtitle *Shinbun shōsetsu* or “Newspaper novel.” These references serve paradoxically to warn the reader not to expect what the author would appear to be promising. In the case of the *shishōsetsu*, she is ostensibly writing in the genre of modern Japanese literature *par excellence*. The remainder of her title, however – “from left to right” – is in a foreign language and would seem to indicate that she is doing no such thing at all, and the subtitle of the novel, *Nihon kindai bungaku* – “Modern Japanese literature,” only reinforces this impression. In this paper, I will analyze this example of *shishōsetsu* and consider whether it really is a *shishōsetsu*, and thus a representative of a unique genre of Japanese literature, or whether it is, in fact, closer to the universal genre of realist novel.

## *Shishōsetsu from left to right* as a *shishōsetsu*

Fifteen years after publishing *Shishōsetsu from left to right*, Mizumura authored an article titled *Senchimentaru jānī 2, aruiwa “Zoku shishōsetsu from left to right”* [*Sentimental Journey 2, or, Shishōsetsu from left to right Continued*] in which she wrote the following about her novel:

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*Shishōsetsu* depicts with some fictional elements the twenty years that I – having been taken to New York at the age of twelve and thereafter dreaming of the day when I would return to Japan – lived in America. It is a story told through long telephone calls between two sisters who have passed the age of thirty in a foreign country and describes – starting with the memory of arriving at a hotel in Manhattan in the midst of the bustling Christmas season – how I would come home from school at a time when I hardly understood English and would read old Japanese books over and over, how – while I was stubbornly clinging to the Japanese language – my older sister was at least superficially “Americanizing,” how, eventually, our father fell ill, our mother found a new lover, and thus the family fell to pieces. It finally ends with the protagonist = I deciding to leave her older sister behind alone in Manhattan with her two cats and to return to Japan.<sup>1</sup>

With “the protagonist = I” Mizumura operates squarely within the boundaries of the *shishōsetsu*, with “some fictional elements” she does not. As if to make amends, at several junctures in *Senchimentaru jānī 2* Mizumura “corrects” her *shishōsetsu* with passages like “she [= the school friend Iris] does not appear in *Shishōsetsu*”<sup>2</sup> or “I did not write this in *Shishōsetsu*,” referring, in this case, to the fact that her sister had already become seriously ill before Mizumura decided to return to Japan<sup>3</sup> – a detail which, by the way, has relevance for the novel itself, as it helps to explain why “Minae” in the novel has the feeling that by returning to Japan she is abandoning her sister. An article by Kōno Shion in the best tradition of *shishōsetsu* detective work identifies the two professors appearing in the novel, “*Daikyōju*” (Great Professor) and “Big Mac,” as Paul de Man and Edwin McClellan, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Mizumura, “Senchimentaru jānī 2, aruiwa ‘Zoku shishōsetsu from left to right’” [“Sentimental Journey 2, or, *Shishōsetsu from left to right* Continued”], *Shinchō* 2020, no. 117(1), p. 93. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> M. Mizumura, “Senchimentaru jānī 2,” p. 294.

<sup>3</sup> M. Mizumura, “Senchimentaru jānī 2,” p. 295.

<sup>4</sup> Sh. Kōno, “‘Nihongo o erabitoru’ koto no kanōsei, fukugengoshugi kara yomu Mizumura Minae *Shishōsetsu from left to right*” [“The Possibility of ‘Choosing Japanese’. Reading Mizumura Minae’s *Shishōsetsu from left to right* under the Aspect of Multilingualism”], *Kindai Nihon Bungaku/Modern Japanese Literary Studies* 2020, no. 102, pp. 77, 81. I am grateful to Prof. Kōno for providing me with both his article and with “Senchimentaru jānī 2.”

Initially, similarly to other readers, I treated *Shishōsetsu from left to right* as an autobiographical account. I only called this approach into question after reading the first few pages of *Haha no isan*, a later novel by Mizumura Minae. This novel is fictional; it does not claim to be a *shishōsetsu* or to otherwise mirror the life of the author. In addition, it has as subtext the story of *Konjiki yasha* [*The Demon Gold*] by Ozaki Kōyō, an author whose writings predate *shishōsetsu* altogether.<sup>5</sup> And yet, in this novel there are also two sisters, the younger Mitsuki, who is the protagonist, and her older sister Natsuki. In *Haha no isan*, the roles are somewhat reversed, for example Natsuki is considerably richer than Mitsuki.<sup>6</sup> Yet certain parallels remain: Natsuki is the more rebellious of the two sisters and is in conflict with their mother.<sup>7</sup> She also has two cats (as well as a husband, a son, and a daughter, unlike Nanae).<sup>8</sup> I thus began to wonder whether perhaps the “Nanae” of *Shishōsetsu from left to right* might also be a fictional construct – for instance, whether Mizumura Minae might have invented an older sister who attempts to assimilate to American life in contrast to herself. This suspicion of mine was dispelled after my encounter with Mizumura’s *Senchimentaru jānī* 2.

While I am convinced for the time being of the authenticity of the story, the time structure of *Shishōsetsu* is very complex and stands at odds with Hijiya-Kirschner’s definition of the genre:

Events are related chronologically, corresponding to the order in which they actually happened. Incidents from the remote past, such as childhood experiences, only may be alluded to in association with the present described in the work – they cannot be treated as the main theme because they are too far removed from the author’s present.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On this point, cf. M. Königsberg, “The Novel *Haha no isan* by Mizumura Minae and the Meiji Writer Ozaki Kōyō,” *Silva Iaponicarum* Summer/Autumn/Winter/Spring 2018/2019, no. 56/57/58/59, pp. 185–202.

<sup>6</sup> M. Mizumura, *Haha no isan*, *Shinbun shōsetsu* [*Inheritance from Mother. A Newspaper Novel*], Chūō Kōronsha, Tokyo 2012, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> M. Mizumura, *Haha no isan*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> M. Mizumura, *Haha no isan*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> I. Hijiya-Kirschner, *Rituals of Self-Revelation. Shishōsetsu as Literary Genre and Socio-Cultural Phenomenon*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 182.

Far from being arranged chronologically, the events in *Shishōsetsu from left to right* are presented in a complex structure, although, superficially, the actual “event” of the novel is a series of telephone conversations conducted on one particular day (“Friday, Dec. 13, 19xx.”) between the two sisters Minae and Nanae. Not only are these conversations recounted in chronological order but also an exact time is given for each one. The first one takes place in the morning, when Nanae calls Minae uncharacteristically for her early in the morning at 9:45 a.m., to remind Minae that it is the twentieth anniversary of their having left Japan (page 14). The second one begins at noon of the same day (page 62). This time, it is Minae who calls. She feels an obligation to inform Nanae of her decision to return to Japan, “to confront her with the inevitable.” This conversation ends at an undetermined time later (page 149); it seems to have been of considerable length, as Minae comments: “Looks like we are going to telephone the entire day.” Still, by the end of this long conversation, Minae has still not managed to tell Nanae her news, although she does mention she is thinking of writing a novel in Japanese. She calls back at seven, but Nanae is not home (page 337). Nanae then calls back at eight. Minae proposes to call her back at 8:45 p.m. (after Nanae has taken off her coat and fed her cats), which she then does (page 361). In the course of this conversation, Minae hints at her decision to return to Japan. This telephone conversation ends at 9:15 p.m. and Minae comments: “This was supposed to be the last telephone call of the day” (page 379). It turns out not to be: Nanae calls one last time and, having understood her sister’s decision, begins by saying: “It’s OK – go back to Japan” (page 381).

At odds with this linear temporal order is the diary which Minae writes on the evening of Dec. 13. The novel begins by directly quoting from the diary:

“Friday. December 13, 19XX

“Twenty years since our—”

“Our exile? No. That sounds too ordinary. How about “the Exile”? No... “The Exodus”? Oh yes, “the Exodus”! Yes, let the word be “Exodus.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu from left to right, Kindai Nihon bungaku [Modern Japanese Literary Studies]*, Shinchōsha, Tokyo 1995, p. 3. All punctuation (quotation marks) as well as variations in script have been retained.

The end of this quote from the diary is marked off with a decorative element, placed prominently beneath the last line. The text of the diary then continues in various short passages which are distributed throughout the novel and are marked off with similar decorative elements.<sup>11</sup> The final quote from the diary, on page 379, begins with the first two lines quoted at the beginning of the novel. A dotted line indicates that some text – presumably the portions of the diary which are quoted in linear order throughout the novel – has been omitted. Minae continues writing the diary until the last call from Nanae interrupts her. Thus, this *shishōsetsu* – which *qua* genre is an account of personal life – is interrupted, commented on, and temporally subverted by a second autobiographical genre concerning the same day but written after the events of the day have already taken place.

As this overview of the structure of the novel shows, telephone conversations account for a large portion of *Shishōsetsu from left to right*. In his discussion of duration, Genette points to four different “basic forms of narrative movement” – ellipsis, descriptive pause, scene, and summary. He defines these four elements in quasi-mathematical terms by situating the “story time” (abbreviated to ST) in relation to “narrative time” (abbreviated to NT). ST is the amount of time that a given sequence actually takes (or would take) transposed to “real life,” and NT is the time allotted to it in the narrative. Genette quickly passes over – as atypical or non-canonical – the equation  $NT > ST$ , where – theoretically – a sequence takes longer in the telling than it does in postulated actuality. Should such sequences exist, then “the lengthening of the text does not arise from a real expansion of the time period, but from various extensions (memory-elicited analepses).”<sup>12</sup>

The first two telephone conversations in *Shishōsetsu from left to right* are, however, a good example of  $NT > ST$ . The lines of dialogue presented in direct discourse are set off by long lines, as in French novels; juxtaposed in between are “various extensions” of the type that Genette is speaking about. The first conversation, for instance, goes on for twenty-five

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<sup>11</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, pp. 59–60, 300, 379.

<sup>12</sup> G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. J.E. Lewin, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1980, pp. 94–95.

pages (one page is occupied by a black-and-white photograph – more will be said about these photographs later); during large parts of the sequence, the conversation itself pauses, and Mizumura fills the reader in on Nanae's past. This is done via "extensions" triggered by Nanae's remarks. In the first case, Nanae jokes about not having won in the lottery, whereupon Minae thinks to herself that in America a person with Nanae's educational background normally would not buy a lottery ticket at all.<sup>13</sup> The digression introducing Henryk, Nanae's boyfriend, also begins with an anecdote by Nanae. Having been thrown out of the house by her mother, lonely Nanae went to see the Disney movie *The Lady and the Tramp*. There she met Henryk: "Can you believe we actually met at the movie, *Lady and the Tramp*? Me, such a lady, and him, you know what he's like..."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the reader knows that Nanae has little money and a boyfriend of a lower social status than herself.

It can be argued that the exposition to *shishōsetsu* is over with the end of the second telephone conversation. The conversations themselves as well as the frequent flashbacks offer an example of what Meir Sternberg calls a "distribution of exposition." Sternberg explains: "Apart from the variety of functions that the distribution of exposition may fulfill – creation of curiosity, suspense, and surprise; control of distance and credibility; semantic processing and thematic development; perspectival tension and adjustment; emphasis of problematic points; shifts in patterning and significance; or structural linkage (sequential or spatial) – it always achieves an additional effect. Discontinuous communication makes – simply by virtue of its discontinuity, if not for other reasons – for better and pleasanter assimilation of information."<sup>15</sup> For a *shishōsetsu* to even have something like an exposition goes against the grain, as is sharply thrown into focus in Kume Masao's famous essay *Junbungaku yogisetsu* [*Pure Literature as Hobby*], where Kume uses the word *tsukurimono* ('fabrication') to characterize and denigrate Balzac's fictionality.

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<sup>13</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 25. Here again as in all other quotes from the novel the exact typography and punctuation is reproduced.

<sup>15</sup> M. Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1978, p. 172.



What Kume is basically saying is that a “real” *shishōsetsu* author should neither invent nor structure anything.<sup>16</sup>

In sharp contrast to this, both within and in between the telephone conversations, Mizumura presents information her readers need to know. After the first telephone conversation is over, there follows a flashback to the time surrounding the “exodus” (pages 40–49) which throws into focus the breaking of ties with Japan. The next sequence describes Minae and Nanae’s first visit back to Japan, roughly eight years after the exodus (49–52), and shows how foreign their “home” has become in the meantime. There then follows a description of Minae’s encounter with an old school friend who has cracked under the pressure of her studies (55–57). As a result of this meeting, Minae resolves to finally take the oral exams for her PhD and calls the department to set a date (58), a sequence which moves the plot forward. The second telephone call begins with Nanae telling Minae about an acquaintance, a music student named Kanae, who has chosen to return to Japan and is very happy there (64–88). I am inclined to consider this character to be an invention, primarily because of her first name, which utilizes the Chinese character “nae” present in both “Minae” and “Nanae.” She is also important for the characterization of both sisters: in contrast to Kanae, Nanae admits her own failure and unhappiness. What is more, the motif of the return to Japan – which is what Kanae has done – is the driving force for the entirety of *Shishōsetsu from left to right*. Minae begins to touch on the subject with Nanae (89–94), admitting for the first time that she is depressed and may not complete her thesis. Instead, she wants to write a novel and to do it in Japanese, thus this sequence also drives the plot forward. Before the second telephone call ends on page 149, two very significant scenes have been presented, showing why Minae may aspire to becoming a writer in Japanese. One shows her reading Higuchi Ichiyō under her desk in junior high school (96–98). The other depicts Minae as a high school student, reading her way through the *Nihon kin-*

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<sup>16</sup> Kume’s essay was published in *Bungei Shunjū* (April 1935). The passage is quoted in H. Kobayashi, “Watakushi shōsetsu ron” [“On the I-Novel”], [in:] *Shintei Kobayashi Hideo zenshū* [Collected Works of Kobayashi Hideo, Revised Edition], vol. 3, Shinchōsha, Tokyo 1978, p. 120. Volume 3 is titled *Watakushi shōsetsu ron* and the colophon gives the correct contemporary reading for the term, namely “*watakushi shōsetsu*” and not “*shishōsetsu*.”

*dai bungaku zenshū* [Complete Collection of Modern Japanese Literature] in a deserted house located in a suburb of New York (108–109), while her parents are both at work and Nanae is off at college.

This shift in the direction of a classical realist novel becomes manifest after the second long telephone call ends on page 147. By this time, the reader accepts Mizumura's *tsukurimono*-function as a matter of course: the author orders and presents her material in a way intended to give her reader necessary information and to build suspense. More importantly, and very uncharacteristically for a “real” *shishōsetsu*, the novel has a theme – the theme of isolation and loneliness in America. After a gap in the text, there is a shift in focus away from the subjectivity of the narrator and towards another theme: “America is the land of opportunity.” It appears prominently in its own line on page 149. This is a different sort of usage of the English language to the one that has been seen in the novel up until now, and it is to the question of language that I would like to turn next.

### *Shishōsetsu from left to right* as a bilingual or polylingual novel

The intermingling of English and Japanese in the text of the novel is perhaps its most striking feature. Accordingly, a number of articles and reviews deal with the way in which Mizumura incorporates Western languages in her oeuvre. On the other hand, as Kōno points out while discussing a quote by Tawada Yōkō, the question of the language in which one should create is a fundamental and basic one. It also poses problems in literatures which remain within one mother tongue.<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin expresses it thus:

Even when speaking of alien things, the poet speaks in his own language. To shed light on an alien world, he never resorts to an alien language, even though it might be more adequate to that world. Whereas the writer of prose, by contrast [...] attempts to talk about even his own world in an alien language (for example, in the nonliterary language of the teller of tales, or the

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<sup>17</sup> Sh. Kōno, “‘Nihongo o erabitoru’ koto no kanōsei,” p. 72.

representative of a specific socio-ideological group), he often measures his own world by alien linguistic standards.<sup>18</sup>

Sternberg's article *Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis* offers a theoretical basis for dealing (not only) with *Shishōsetsu from left to right* as a polylingual text. Sternberg describes three modes of representing speech in text:

*Referential restriction* consists in confining the scope of the represented world to the limits of a single, linguistically uniform community whose speech-patterns correspond to those of the implied audience, sometimes to the extent of excluding interdialectal as well as interlingual tensions, as in the novels of Jane Austen. *Vehicular matching*, on the other hand, far from avoiding linguistic diversity or conflict, accepts them as a matter of course, as a fact of life and a factor of communication, and sometimes even deliberately seeks them out. [...] The recourse to the *homogenizing convention*, finally, retains the freedom of reference while dismissing the resultant variations in the language presumably spoken by the characters as an irrelevant, if not distracting, representational factor. Alice does not find it strange to hear the White Rabbit muttering to itself in English, and there is indeed no reason why she should.<sup>19</sup>

The dialogues in *Shishōsetsu from left to right* are an obvious example of vehicular matching, as when – to give just one example – Nanae explains to Minae that “Germaine Monteil” is a luxury cosmetic: “You don’t know? My God, you really are out of touch with the trifles of life. *Keshōhin yo. Takai no. Kotchi ja depāto de utteru.*”<sup>20</sup> Thus, at least in the dialogues, such intermingling of English and Japanese (with the occasional smattering of French, as when Nanae responds to a remark of Minae’s with “*C’est pas vrai*”<sup>21</sup>) can be considered mimetic. This is the way the two sisters actually talk after twenty years in the US. As if to reinforce this,

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<sup>18</sup> M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” [in:] *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. M. Holquist, C. Emerson, University of Texas Press, Austin 1981, p. 287.

<sup>19</sup> M. Sternberg, “Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis,” *Poetics Today* 1981, no. 2(1), pp. 223–224.

<sup>20</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 91.

Minae at certain intervals characterizes the way the two sisters implement their two languages:

Nanae used about ten times as much English in our conversations as I did. And she used a lot of rough language – and not only because she had many friends with whom she spoke English [...] it was also because she liked to play the tough babe by pouring on the bad language.<sup>22</sup>

At one point, Nanae makes a remark in Japanese, to which Minae replies in English, only to comment directly afterwards: “It was unusual for me to answer in English.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, as Minae points out in this passage, after twenty years in the US the sisters are no longer at home in (spoken) Japanese, either:

Since Japanese had recently become a language that we almost exclusively spoke with each other, we were less and less certain to what extent it was still correct Japanese and from what point it started to be a language that the two of us had invented. For instance, we had thought that it was our own made-up word to call a microwave a ‘chin.’ One day Nanae was surprised to discover, as she told us, that it was also a word used by Japanese from Japan.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, I feel that Sternberg’s model provides a good explanation for the use of English in the dialogues. On the other hand, a notion useful for explaining the use of English in the narrative portions of the text may be the concept of “*realeme*” advanced by another scholar of the Tel Aviv School, Itamar Even-Zohar. He thus defines the term:

It is therefore apparent that while “items of reality” (such as persons and natural phenomena, voices and furniture, gestures and faces) may be “there” in the outside world, in terms of reference to them in a verbal utterance they constitute items of *cultural* repertory, the repertory of realia or, in short – for the sake of both convenience and transparency – *realemes*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 35. “Chin” is an onomatopoeia for the sound the bell on the microwave makes.

<sup>25</sup> I. Even-Zohar, “Constraints of Realeme Insertability in Narrative,” *Poetics Today* 1980, no. 1(3), p. 67. Italics in the original.

Thus, when inserting references to the “items of reality” which are “there” in the outside world of the US, Mizumura Minae is justified to retain the English terms, as her text is polylingual. Examples can be found on almost every page, words like “lasagna,”<sup>26</sup> “pool,” or “darts.”<sup>27</sup>

While these *realemes* can be considered neutral, some – such as the aforementioned slogan “America is the land of opportunity,” repeated twice – can only be read as an ironic comment.<sup>28</sup> For the lonely, homesick Minae, America is not the land of opportunity but the land of isolation. Sentences such as “Columbus discovered America in 1492”<sup>29</sup> or the first line of the “Pledge of Allegiance” (“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.”),<sup>30</sup> on the other hand, point to the indoctrination in America’s schools, which before the election of Donald Trump one might have considered harmless. Eventually, these jingoistic tones fade out, and the vocabulary (and photo captions) in English belonging to the semantic field of “loneliness” become more and more prominent. For example, after Minae has called Nanae at seven in the evening only to find her not at home, she looks out at the snow and the darkness and thinks: “I had the feeling that tonight, the snow and the darkness would continue on and on. What kind of loneliness was this? Was it possible to feel this kind of loneliness in Japan?” She goes on to fantasize about the lonely lives of the old ladies who often, by mistake, dial her number first thing in the morning – Minae’s telephone number is close to the number for the Social Security services.<sup>31</sup> Yet it is not only the old people who are lonely in America, but virtually everyone. Minae thinks about her friend Sarah Bloom. She remembers having been invited to a party in Sarah’s small New York apartment, where the hostess was surrounded by more or less successful artists, scholars, and critics. And yet, at one point Sarah revealed herself to be as lonely as the old women imagined by Minae: “I feel so lonely – so

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<sup>26</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 206. I just noticed that the word is spelled incorrectly as “lasagna” instead of “lasagne.”

<sup>27</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 207.

<sup>28</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, pp. 149, 176.

<sup>29</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 152.

<sup>30</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 155.

<sup>31</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, pp. 339–340.

desolate. I can't stop crying."<sup>32</sup> The theme of loneliness is additionally underscored in Mizumura's novel by black-and-white photographs in which a single human being is never to be seen. Towards the end of the novel, there are three stark shots of buildings in New York City with the following captions: "so lonely" (page 343), "so desolate" (345), and *haikyo* ('ruin') (348). It is to these photographs and other "non-mimetic" elements that I wish to turn in closing.

While a photograph in itself would seem to be the epitome of mimesis, that is, of "showing" instead of "telling," such ploys go beyond the boundaries of realist literature, where, as Jonathan Culler describes it: "The reader is supposed to pass through the language of the text to a reality that he recognizes and to which it refers."<sup>33</sup> Brian McHale discusses textual strategies of postmodernist literature that subvert the process of "passing through the language of a text" by "hesitat[ing] between the representation of a world and the anti-representational foregrounding of language *for its own sake*."<sup>34</sup> The narrator's quasi holding up of a photo is one example of an "anti-representational strategy"; another is "shaped typography."<sup>35</sup> In *Shishōsetsu from left to right*, a striking example of this is the passage quoted from Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's *Buyōkai* [*The Ball*], which is arranged on the page in curves reminiscent of a waltz.<sup>36</sup> And while the use of an English word can have a mimetic effect by connecting the text to the English-language reality being portrayed, there are cases in *Shishōsetsu from left to right* where the opposite is true: when the English word is there for the sake of English and interrupts the flow of reading, as when Mizumura writes: "[...] all talk of returning to Japan retreated, and finally our life in America stretched on endlessly like the *corn fields* of the Midwest."<sup>37</sup> The only English word on the double page 44–45 is the compound noun "corn fields"; one could even suspect that it is there only so that it is impossible to open the book to a double page *without* finding an English word (as is, indeed, the case). The simile does not even make sense in the context of the book: Minae and Nanae are

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<sup>32</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 344.

<sup>33</sup> J. Culler, *Flaubert. The Uses of Uncertainty*, Paul Elek, London 1977, pp. 80–81.

<sup>34</sup> B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, London 1989, p. 83.

<sup>35</sup> B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, pp. 184–190.

<sup>36</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, pp. 273–275.

<sup>37</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 45.

both the purest “East Coast snobs” imaginable – at one point, Nanae mocks the very idea of living in California<sup>38</sup> – such that it is hard to imagine them ever having seen an actual Midwest corn field.

## Conclusion: Universal

I would like to end on a personal note: I was first introduced to Mizumura Minae's *Shishōsetsu from left to right* by the writer Tawada Yōkō. Tawada recommended Mizumura's novel to me – I assume – because I am American and roughly the same age as Mizumura herself. Like Mizumura, I grew up on the East Coast of the US. As the child of a Jewish mother who had fled Nazi Germany, I was an outsider in the small Southern town in which we lived. Reading Mizumura's novel brought back to me very vividly what that had felt like, since Mizumura was also an outsider and describes her experiences as an Asian child in a white suburban school system. As a result, while presenting the paper in Warsaw at the *Unique or Universal? Japan and Its Contribution to the World Civilization* conference, I became very emotional and had to interrupt my talk before I could continue. I think it is a hallmark of great literature to be able to move its readers. This *Shishōsetsu from left to right* did and does for me, and therefore I rank it among other books which have done the same for me, regardless of their original language or tradition. To my way of thinking, *Shishōsetsu from left to right* belongs together with them, with *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and *An American Tragedy*. It is truly universal.

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<sup>38</sup> M. Mizumura, *Shishōsetsu*, p. 261.

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## Abstract

### ***Mizumura Minae's Novel Shishōsetsu from left to right (1995): Shishōsetsu or Realism?***

The paper discusses *Shishōsetsu from left to right* (1995), Mizumura Minae's *shishōsetsu* or 'I-novel.' Taking a closer look at the book – which through its very title purports to belong to a specific and unique Japanese genre – the paper poses the question of whether Mizumura's work is indeed an 'I-novel' and thus unique to Japan, or whether it would be more accurate to classify it as an example of realist literature. The question is approached by first "verifying" the autobiographical information given in the novel and then by comparing the time structure of the work to that of conventional *shishōsetsu*. It is shown that the work diverges from conventional 'I-novels' in the way that the narrator presents the material. In addition, the work is shown to have a theme, namely, loneliness in American society. Finally, in dealing with the polylingual text, the question is raised as to what extent the use of English is mimetic, or if it is possibly – along with photos and other 'non-mimetic' devices in the novel – at times more akin to techniques of postmodernist literature.

**Keywords:** Mizumura Minae, polylingualism, bilingualism, *shishōsetsu*, literary realism, postmodernist literature

# *Mono no Aware* ('Pathos of Things') and the Literary Portrait of Kiritsubo in *The Tale of Genji*<sup>1</sup>

Iwona Kordzińska-Nawrocka\*

"Which of the chapters do you think is the best and the most moving?"

"How could there be a chapter superior to 'Kiritsubo?' From its opening words, 'In a certain reign...', down to Genji's coming-of-age ceremony, an intimately sad mood permeates this chapter as regards tone and content."

*Mumyōzōshi*<sup>2</sup>

The main topic of this text is the reconstruction of a literary portrait<sup>3</sup> of Kiritsubo, one of the female characters in *The Tale of Genji*, written in 1008

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<sup>2</sup> M. Marra, "*Mumyōzōshi*. Introduction and Translation," *Monumenta Nipponica* 1984, no. 39(2), p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> A literary portrait is a description of a fictional character that is an organized compositional entity, depicting his or her characteristics and external and internal states. It refers to both indirect description (through the character's thoughts, confession, action, speech, and dialogue) and direct description (explicit characterization of physical and spiritual features, description of passions and pursuits). For more, see H. Markiewicz, "Postać literacka i jej badanie" ["The Study of a Literary Character"], [in:] *Autor – podmiot literacki – bohater. Z dziejów form artystycznych w literaturze polskiej* [Author – Literary Subject – Protagonist. From the History of Artistic Forms in Polish Literature], ed. A. Martuszevska, J. Sławiński, PAN, Warszawa 1983, pp. 68–80; L. Varotsi, *Conceptualisation and Exposition. A Theory of Character Construction*, Routledge, New York 2019, chap. 1, 7–39.

by Murasaki Shikibu.<sup>4</sup> *The Tale of Genji* belongs to the genre of fictional court romances (*tsukuri monogatari*) and is considered the world's first psychological novel. Although Kiritsubo (Fig. 4) is not a central figure to the work's plot, she is an important episodic character as the mother of the title character, Prince Genji. The literary construction of her portrait was influenced by one of the most important Japanese beauty categories in general, and in the Heian period (794–1185) in particular, namely *mono no aware* ('pathos of things'), manifested primarily at the level of delineation of Kiritsubo's appearance (prosopography), personality, habits, and behaviors.

### The beauty of *mono no aware* and idealization of Kiritsubo's portrait

In the construction of literary portraits, not only of Kiritsubo but also many other female characters, we can see an influence of the aesthetic category representing the Japanese beauty, namely *aware*, or more broadly, *mono no aware* ('pathos of things'). The category itself has been, and continues to be, a subject of analyses from different points of view by many scholars, but here I would like to limit myself primarily to its role in the selection of plot schemes and the way the characters are presented and constructed.

Akiyama Ken defines the concept of *mono no aware* as a special state or emotional mood caused by grief over the separation or death of loved ones; by the feeling of love, which is the basis of family relations between parents and children or husband and wife.<sup>5</sup> It is also a state which accompanies emotion caused by beautiful poetry or music, as well as by admiration for the beauty of nature and its changes. *Mono no aware* indicates a broadly understood emotionality and sensitivity – the ability to respond to aesthetic and emotional stimuli, yet not to all of them, because only certain situations and objects can evoke this feeling.

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<sup>4</sup> Murasaki Shikibu (dates of birth and death unknown) – one of the greatest poets and writers of the Heian period, author of *Genji monogatari* [*The Tale of Genji*] and *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* [*The Diary of Lady Murasaki*].

<sup>5</sup> K. Akiyama, *Nihon koten bungaku daijiten* [*The Great Dictionary of Classical Japanese Literature*], Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1983, p. 24.



Figure 4. Utagawa Kunisada, *Kiritsubo*, 1858. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

The very concept of *mono no aware* consists of two words. The first word, *mono*, indicates the environment, all attributes of the material and emotional world. The second word, *aware*, originally meant an exclamatory expression (ah!, oh!) denoting a reaction to a deeply felt emotion and elation under the influence of various external stimuli. It could therefore express pain, astonishment, but also admiration, delight, joy, and even horror or suffering. Hisamatsu Sen'ichi, based on the rich prose material of the Heian period, notes that:

This “aware” defines many kinds of beauty, which will be expressed in the following five terms: beauty of emotion, beauty of harmony, beauty of elegance, beauty of sentiment and of pathos. It is needless to say that “aware” is more emotional than objectivistic.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of *mono no aware* was first used in *Tosa nikki* [*Tosa Diary*] (935) by Ki no Tsurayuki. In the Heian period, *mono no aware* functioned primarily at the level of everyday life of the court aristocracy, characterized by a far-reaching aestheticization. It found expression in the form of a specific philosophy of beauty and refined culture. Motoori Norinaga, who as the first researcher of Japanese traditional culture noticed a clear connection between *mono no aware* and the specific sensitivity and emotionality of the ancient Japanese, claimed that:

To know *mono no aware* is to discern the power and essence, not just of the moon and the cherry blossoms, but of every single thing existing in this world, and to be stirred by each of them, so as to rejoice at happy occasions, to be charmed by what one should consider charming, to be saddened by sad occurrences, and to love what should be loved. Therefore, people who know *mono no aware* have a heart; those who do not are heartless.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> S. Hisamatsu, “Sense of Beauty in *The Tale of Genji*,” [in:] *Murasaki Shikibu. The Greatest Lady Writer in Japanese Literature*, ed. S. Hisamatsu, Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, Tokyo 1970, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> N. Motoori, “On *mono no aware*,” [in:] *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga. A Hermeneutical Journey*, trans. M.F. Marra, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2007, p. 185.

Hisamatsu emphasizes that *mono no aware* “maintains its original nature for ages both in medieval and modern times.”<sup>8</sup>

In a way, *mono no aware* was transferred from everyday life to the field of literature, influencing the form of composition and structure of works as well as the construction of characters. Thus, based on Hisamatsu Sen'ichi's concept, it can be said that *mono no aware* represents the “five realms of feeling.” These are *kandōbi* (beauty of emotion), *chōwabi* (beauty of harmony), *yūbi* (beauty of elegance), *hiaibi* (beauty of sentiment), and *mujō* (beauty of pathos). The first sphere of feelings – “the beauty of emotion” – is a broadly understood human sensitivity to the surrounding environment, which is perceived through the prism of beauty. In the construction of a protagonist or another character, the object of admiration is often the external appearance, that is, beauty and manner of dress, but also behavior, talents, and character traits. In her novel, Murasaki Shikibu gives great importance to the form in which the characters express their thoughts and feelings – all descriptions are maintained in a delicate, subtle tone, which is to indirectly indicate their own sensitivity and emotionality.

“The beauty of harmony,” the second of the spheres mentioned, complements the first in a way, for all human qualities that can become an object of aesthetic experience should be perfectly matched. It was harmony that was perceived as a kind of beauty, and it was especially the harmony of the beauty of body and soul, which the classical Greek writers called *kalokagathos*. Beautiful women, such as Kiritsubo, Fujitsubo – Genji's stepmother – or Murasaki no Ue – his beloved, were portrayed with a special emphasis on their physical beauty, the beauty of their hair, their taste and style, their artistic skills and talents, their knowledge of etiquette, and all those elements harmonized with the beauty of their soul, that is, their sensitivity, understanding, and patience. The ideal of female beauty was contained within the beauty of harmony.

The third sphere of feelings is “the beauty of elegance,” which is a compositional element of all the spheres mentioned above and, at the same time, the quintessence of the whole aesthetics of the Heian period. It

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<sup>8</sup> S. Hisamatsu, “Sense of Beauty in *The Tale of Genji*,” p. 7.



is connected to the second important aesthetic category of this period, *miyabi*, which indicates courtly elegance and refinement. The original meaning of this word is associated with the capital Heiankyō and its culture. Consequently, *miyabi* became an antonym to the words 'provincial,' 'rural' (*hinabi*, *satobi*), and, as Aoki Takako points out, reflected the court life that "in the intervals between official duties was full of refined entertainments and refined elegance."<sup>9</sup> In the prevailing pursuit of beauty, entertainment and everyday activities also had to bring people closer to the ideal of beauty, which is why descriptions of painting, poetry, and fragrance competitions, musical concerts, dance shows, and poetry creation were characterized by and imbued with refined elegance. *Miyabi*, like *mono no aware*, may have interacted on two compositional dimensions of the work, namely the structural level and the very construction of the literary character.

The fourth and the fifth realms of *mono no aware* – "the beauty of sentiment" and "the beauty of pathos" – are special kinds of emotions associated with feelings of grief, despair, and compassion for other people. This approach to the world was influenced by Buddhism and the idea of *mujō* – "passing of time, the ephemerality of life and a belief in the illusory nature of all phenomena."<sup>10</sup> Several scenes and episodes, such as the scene of Kiritsubo's death, her parting with the Emperor, and descriptions of the Emperor's loneliness, are imbued with the atmosphere of beautiful sadness.

## Kiritsubo and her participation in the plot of the novel

It is difficult today to answer unequivocally whether Kiritsubo is an authentic or a fictional character. Her mental construction and her fate indicate that she was not abstracted from the real world in which Murasaki Shikibu lived. It is likely that Kiritsubo's prototype was not one person but many people whom the writer knew or had heard of. It could also have been the Chinese aristocrat Yang Guifei (719–756) (Fig. 5), whose

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<sup>9</sup> T. Aoki, "Miyabi" ["Courtly Elegance"], [in:] *Nihon bungaku ni okeru bi no kōzō* [*The Construct of Beauty in Japanese Literature*], Yūsankaku, Tokyo 1976, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> "mujō," [in:] *Nipponica* [*Japanese Encyclopedia* Nipponica], Shōgakukan, Tokyo n.d., Casio EX-Word, XD-X4900.



Figure 5. Yang Guifei by Uemura Shōen, 1922, Shōhaku Art Museum, Nara. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

fate and story were widely known among the Heian aristocratic society thanks to the work of the Chinese poet Bai Yui (772–846) entitled *Chang hen ge* [*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*].

Kiritsubo, like her Chinese counterpart, was beautiful and quickly became the Emperor's favorite concubine. And just like her, she was killed because of the hatred and hostility shown to her by the other ladies of the court. However, while the central theme of Bai Yui's poem is the Emperor's grief and suffering after the death of his beloved, in Murasaki Shikibu's work Kiritsubo is an episodic character, and after her death her place in the Emperor's heart is taken by his new beloved, Fujitsubo, who bears a striking resemblance to her predecessor.

Murasaki Shikibu begins the presentation of Kiritsubo's literary portrait by characterizing her background and the rank she held. Rank was the most important thing for the court society of the time, as the whole career at the imperial court depended on the position determined by the rank one held, as well as on the support of an influential patron. The writer clearly emphasizes at the very beginning that:



In whose reign was it that a woman of rather undistinguished lineage captured the heart of the emperor and enjoyed his favour above all other imperial wives and concubines? Certain consorts, whose high noble status gave them a sense of vain entitlement, despised and reviled her as an unworthy upstart from the very moment she began her service. Ladies of lower rank were even more vexed, for they knew His majesty would never bestow the same degree of affection and attention on them. As a result, the mere presence of this woman at morning rites or evening ceremonies seemed to provoke hostile reactions among her rivals, and the anxiety she suffered as a consequence of these ever-increasing displays of jealousy was such a heavy burden that gradually her health began to fail.<sup>11</sup>

What, then, was the reason for such a low position of Kiritsubo?

The woman's father had risen to the third rank as a Major Counselor before he died. Her mother, the principal wife of her father, was a woman of old-fashioned upbringing and character who was well trained in the customs and rituals of the court. Thus, the reputation of her house was considered in no way inferior and did not suffer by comparison with the brilliance of the highest nobility. Unfortunately, her family had no patrons who could provide political support, and after her father's death there was no one she could rely on. In the end, she found herself at the mercy of events and with uncertain prospects.<sup>12</sup>

The early death of her father, who held only the third rank, further weakened her family. Kiritsubo had no one to support her and grant her authority and a strong position in the imperial court. Her rank, which was too low for an emperor's wife, would become the main cause of her being hated by those around her and, ultimately, hounded to death by the other ladies of the court.

Kiritsubo's involvement in the book's plot is relatively minor: she only appears in the first chapter, which is entitled *Kiritsubo* [*Paulownia Tree*], after the name of its heroine. We can distinguish two layers of content

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<sup>11</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. D. Washburn, W.W. Norton & Company, New York–London 2016, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, pp. 3–4.

related to her participation in the plot, namely the object and subject layers. The subject layer is the background against which the protagonist's fate plays out. Kiritsubo is placed in a situation over which she has no control, and her only reaction is to try and leave the court, that is, to run away. The subject layer, on the other hand, is Kiritsubo's emotional picture – her suffering and dilemmas delineating three distinct periods in her life: the beginning of her relationship with the Emperor, the birth of her son, and her death. The first period concerns Kiritsubo's arrival at court, her acquaintance with the Emperor, and the formation of a love intrigue. Kiritsubo, as Murasaki Shikibu points out, came to court following the wishes of her mother, who, remaining faithful to her promise to her late husband, wanted to make her daughter a lady of the court. Kiritsubo immediately became an object of interest on the part of the Emperor, which the writer describes as follows:

Certainly her reputation was flawless, and she comported herself with noble dignity, but because His Majesty obsessively kept her near him, willfully demanding that they not be separated, she had to be in attendance at all formal court performances or elegant entertainments. There were times when she would spend the night with him and they be obliged to continue in service the following day. Consequently, as one might expect, other courtiers came to look down on her not only as a person of no significance, but also as a woman who lacked any sense of propriety.<sup>13</sup>

This interest of the Emperor, excessive from the point of view of the other ladies of the court, caused Kiritsubo much trouble, provoking jealousy and hatred from those around her.

The second stage of her life concerns the birth of her son, Prince Genji. Kiritsubo became the mother of the Emperor's son, and thus her position at court should have been strengthened – she even received the title of Miyasundokoro, given to mothers of imperial children. However, this only increased the hatred of those around her, which started to take the form of outright aggression. Kiritsubo's health began to decline, she became less and less resistant to attacks, and increasingly weaker – both mentally and physically.

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<sup>13</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 4.

The third stage of her life concerns her death. There is no direct description of Kiritsubo's death in the work. The author replaces it with an account of the Emperor's own experiences, as he spends the night of his beloved's death alone, thinking about her:

His heart was full and he could not sleep as he impatiently waited for the short summer night to end. The messenger he sent had barely had time to get to the woman's home and return with the news of her condition, yet His Majesty was assailed by a sense of dark foreboding.

As it turned out, when the messenger arrived at the woman's residence, he found the family distraught and weeping. "She passed away after midnight," they informed him. The messenger returned to the palace in a state of shock. The Emperor, stunned and shaken by the news, was so upset that he shut himself away from the rest of the court.<sup>14</sup>

Kiritsubo fades from the story stage of the novel while leaving her legend behind. As the heroine of this legend, she continues to reappear in the work in the memories and thoughts of those around her: the ladies of the court, the Emperor, her mother, and her son – Prince Genji. This is a legend of a beautiful but weak woman who was oppressed by those around her, a legend of a daughter whose death her mother couldn't come to terms with, and finally a legend of a mother – mysterious and beautiful, who was not remembered by her son. The fate of Kiritsubo presented here is approximated by the author in a rather vague manner, in the space of only the first four pages of the book.

## The physical appearance and mental portrait of Kiritsubo

The first more detailed description of Kiritsubo's appearance is found in the form of indirect characterization expressed in the Emperor's internal monologue. Kiritsubo meets the Emperor and asks him to let her leave the court and return to her family home. He looks at her and states:

The woman's face, with its lambent beauty conveying that air of grace so precious to him, was now thin and wasted. She had tasted the sorrows of

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<sup>14</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 6.

the world to the full, but as she slipped in and out of consciousness, she could not convey to him even those feelings that might have been put into words.<sup>15</sup>

The next elements of her description appear only after her death, conveyed in the opinions about her expressed by the ladies of the court.

They recalled her graceful appearance, her beautiful face, her kind disposition and gentle nature.<sup>16</sup>

Many of the descriptions are internal monologues of the Emperor. Usually, memories of Kiritsubo come to his mind in certain situations, as they are always triggered by some special stimulus that makes him think of his beloved woman. One of these is a beautiful moonlit night. The Emperor recalls:

He had always arranged for some form of entertainment with music and poetry on just spectacular evenings as this. He conjured phantom images of playing the koto together with his love and recalled the special feeling and artistry of her performance. He remembered her way of speaking, so seemingly natural and unforced, and her looks and bearing, so superior to the others.<sup>17</sup>

Another stimulus is the portrait of the famous Yang Guifei. Looking at this portrait, the Emperor recalls the verses of the “Song of Everlasting Sorrow.” The poem tells how Emperor Xuanzong (685–762), gazing at the willows and lotus flowers in the palace garden, finds the beauty of his beloved. The Emperor, reflecting on these verses, tries, like his predecessor, to find the beauty of his beloved in the beauty of nature.

Recalling how Emperor Xuanzong had dispatched a Taoist summoner to search for the spirit of Yang Guefei, the Emperor thought, *If only this ornamental hair comb proved that the messenger had indeed visited the residence of my deceased love.* But he knew these were idle thoughts.

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<sup>15</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 8.

*Had I sent a Taoist summoner  
To seek the spirit of my beloved  
Might he have discovered where she went*

There was a portrait of Yang Guefei among the illustrations of the *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. A skilled artist had executed it, but there are limits to the powers of a brush, and the warm glow of real-life beauty was lacking. The lotus flowers of the Taiye Pond and the willow trees of the Weiyang Palace – truly these were apt metaphors for her beauty! And her Tang-style attire was unquestionably vivacious. But when he wistfully conjured up the sweet familiarity of his own lover, he could come up with no image that adequately expressed her beauty – no flower's hue, no bird's cry.<sup>18</sup>

We have an image of a woman who resembles the ideal, but her description is schematic and general. The writer does not provide Kiritsubo with any specific features. The description is filled with adjectives such as *utsukushi* – 'beautiful, lovely,' *medetashi* – 'wonderful,' *natsukashi* – 'gentle and longing.'<sup>19</sup> The name label itself also plays a descriptive role, as the name Kiritsubo is a word for the paulownia tree bearing delicate, drooping purple flowers that symbolize the heroine's simultaneous charm and fragility.

The ideal outer image is matched with the ideal inner image. In the first chapter there appears one general opinion about Kiritsubo expressed by the ladies of the court in the context of her funeral, which has caused a stir at court. The ladies think of her with deep sympathy:

Yes, the display of affection bestowed on her by His Majesty had been unseemly, but now even the higher-ranking ladies fondly recalled her compassion and gentle character – memories that brought to mind an old verse most appropriate for that moment: "When she was with me, I resented her playful spirit, but now that she's gone, I yearn for her."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>19</sup> M. Shikibu, *Genji monogatari*, Shōgakukan, Tokyo 1974, chap. 1, 98, 101, 103.

<sup>20</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 7.

Again, similar to the external descriptions, we are dealing here with a vague and idealized image. Her character is described with such words as the so-called adjective verb *nadarakanari* – ‘gentle, peaceful,’ the adjectives *meyasushi* – ‘decent, fair,’ and *nikumigatashi* – ‘not knowing hatred,’<sup>21</sup> which in a way glorifies her character. Other traits are hinted at indirectly through descriptions of the character’s behavior and actions. The behavioral sphere is not presented in much detail, but it can be inferred that Kiritsubo was an obedient person loyal to the Emperor, as evidenced by her absolute submission to his orders. Kiritsubo, despite her extremely difficult situation at the court and her progressive illness, patiently waited for the Emperor’s permission to leave the palace. She was perhaps too sensitive and delicate, and even in the face of aggressive attacks she was unable to arouse in herself the will to fight. The more she was attacked, the more she closed herself off, and escaping into illness became her only form of defense.

The external and internal portrayal of Kiritsubo is constructed slowly with the use of contextualization in depicting her individual beauty and character traits. The author creates a plot context in which the heroine’s qualities are revealed. Such a plot context could be the scene of the meeting with the Emperor just before their separation, as well as introducing the scene taking place on a beautiful moonlit night, or the one in which the Emperor is admiring a portrait of the beautiful Yang Guifei. This diligence on the part of the writer in choosing a background that corresponds in tone and mood to the description of Kiritsubo’s beauty and personality is related to the influence of the realm of “beauty of emotion” and “beauty of elegance” of *mono no aware*.

Kiritsubo is thus presented as an ideally beautiful and good woman, but her description is extremely general and devoid of individualizing external and internal features. Tanizaki Jun’ichirō points out that old artists wrote about beauty as a certain universalistic idea that did not serve to identify characters but contained synthetic information about their conformity to a certain pattern as a unique and unchangeable value (*yuitsu*

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<sup>21</sup> M. Shikibu, *Genji monogatari*, p. 101.

*fuhen*).<sup>22</sup> Yuhara Miyoko, on the other hand, emphasizes in this context that “the way of depicting physical and spiritual beauty of literary characters living in an atmosphere of elegance and sentimental emotion is a manifestation of faith in the hidden power of beauty and refined aesthetic experiences.”<sup>23</sup>

External beauty is harmoniously balanced with the internal beauty of the character, as the dominant features of her personality are kindness, forbearance, and sensitivity.

## The biographical sketch of Kiritsubo

The biographical sketch of Kiritsubo is painted by Murasaki Shikibu mainly on the plane of her “being among the others.” The author does not introduce any auto-characterization here, and she puts more emphasis on the things happening to the character than on the things happening in her mind. Kiritsubo is shown as a weak and powerless person. The sense of inferiority she feels in relation to the other ladies of the court comes from the low status of her family, the death of her father, and finally, the lack of any influential protector-patron. Even the Emperor himself is unable to provide her with a sense of security at court, and his excessive feelings only provoke the jealousy and disappointment of the other ladies. There is one lady who is particularly hateful to her, Kōkiden. Her status is very much different from that of Kiritsubo. She is a daughter of the Minister of the Right Side and the first wife of the Emperor. She also has the title of Miyasundokoro, and her son is to inherit the throne. Kiritsubo makes Kōkiden feel unsafe and uncertain of the Emperor’s affections towards her.

The Crown Prince had been born three years earlier to the Kōkiden Consort, who was the daughter of the Minister of the Right. As the unquestioned heir to the throne, the boy had many supporters and the courtiers all treated him with the utmost respect and deference. He was, however, no match for the

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<sup>22</sup> J. Tanizaki, *Ren'ai oyobi shikijō* [*Love and Sexual Passion*], vol. 17, Kadokawa Bunko, Tokyo 1959, p. 201.

<sup>23</sup> M. Yuhara, *Genji monogatari no yōshibi* [*The Beauty of Appearance in The Tale of Genji*], Benseisha, Tokyo 1992, p. 158.

radiant beauty of the newborn Prince [Genji]; and even though the Emperor was bound to acknowledge the higher status of his older son and to favour him in public, in private he could not resist treating the younger Prince as his favorite and lavishing attention upon him.<sup>24</sup>

As we can see, Murasaki confirms Kōkiden's high position.

Moreover, because the Emperor treated her with special regard following the birth of his second son, the Kokiden Consort and her supporters grew anxious; they worried about the effect of such an infatuation on the prospects of the Crown Prince and wondered if the younger Prince might not surpass his half brother in favour and usurp his position. The Kokiden consort had been the emperor's first wife. She had arrived at the palace before all the other women, and so His Majesty's feeling of affection for her were in no way ordinary.<sup>25</sup>

Her sense of offended pride does not allow her to be passive. She becomes the initiator of the attacks on Kiritsubo.

The internal portrait of Kiritsubo is completed by the description of the Emperor's attitude towards her. The emotional relationship between the Emperor and Kiritsubo, and above all the fruit of this relationship, the birth of Prince Genji, is explained by the author in metaphysical terms using the concept of karma – destiny (*onchigiri*): “Was she not, then, bound to the Emperor by some deep love from previous lives?”<sup>26</sup> It was inevitable fate, therefore, that brought these two people together. The Emperor loves Kiritsubo and tries to help her, moving her from her remote chamber, where she is exposed to the harassment of those around her, to apartments closer to his bedroom. He eventually allows her to return home and, after her death, gives her the third court rank. In particular, the author devotes much space to describing the Emperor's experiences after the death of his beloved. He withdraws from his surroundings, does not meet with anyone, and stops holding court games and celebrations:

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<sup>24</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 4.



Despite the passage of time, His Majesty was so lost in grief he could find no comfort. He was indifferent to the consorts and ladies-in-waiting who attended him in the evenings and instead passed his days and nights distracted and disconsolate. For all who observed his grief, it was truly an autumn drenched by a dew of tears.<sup>27</sup>

Only Fujitsubo manages to calm his pained heart.

The other person associated with Kiritsubo is her mother – a lonely and unhappy woman. The death of first her husband and then her daughter caused her to become more and more depressed. The scene of the funeral, when the body of the deceased is lying on a pyre ready to be burned, is very telling. After an attack of despair, the mother cannot believe that her daughter is dead.

The late woman's mother rode in a carriage that followed immediately behind the carriage bearing the corpse. Weeping inconsolably, longing to rise to the heavens with her daughter on the smoke from pyre, how sad must she have been when the cortege reached Otagi, where the solemnly grand funeral ceremony was performed.

"Even as I gaze on the empty, lifeless body of my child" the mother said, "I cannot help thinking that she is still alive. So I shall watch as my precious daughter is turned to ash and smoke that I may resign myself to her passing."<sup>28</sup>

The mother is left all alone in the family house. During her meeting with Yugei no Myobu, an imperial emissary, the mother criticizes the atmosphere at court, full of envy and intrigue, which she believes has led to the death of her daughter. Her loneliness is symbolized by the use of the metaphor of *kusa mo takaku nari* ('overgrown grasses'),<sup>29</sup> a keyword that indicates sadness, desolation, and abandonment.

Although it is a bitter fate to live on after the death of my child, I am deeply humbled that a messenger from the Emperor should part the dew on these

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<sup>27</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> M. Shikibu, *Genji monogatari*, p. 103.

overgrown grasses just to make her way to my abode." She found it hard to control her grief.<sup>30</sup>

In her despair, she dies soon after her daughter's death.

We know comparatively little about Genji's relationship with Kiritsubo, who died when the prince was three years old. Therefore, the only thing he knew about her from his nurse and other ladies of the court was that she was beautiful. This surely contributed to some kind of sublime image of her as the unsurpassed model of a woman that the prince sought and attempted to find in his next lovers.

## Concluding remarks

The construction of the literary portrait of Kiritsubo, especially her physical appearance and personality, is dominated by direct and indirect characterization expressed through the thoughts and feelings of other characters. All descriptions are perfectly integrated into the plot of the work and appear most frequently in the form of experiences and feelings of characters associated with Kiritsubo observing her or thinking about her. Moreover, her biographical sketch is permeated with sadness and tragedy, which reflects the beauty of *mono no aware*. Sadness is present in many scenes from the personal life of Kiritsubo, who is portrayed in the background of the court ladies' society revolving around the Emperor. She is shown as an unhappy, lonely, passive, and docile woman, and all her minor and related actions (desire to leave the palace, return home, escape into illness) are determined by one rule – oppression on the part of a hostile, external world which the heroine does not protest against but only submits to. The problem of Kiritsubo's non-acceptance by her surroundings is also connected with the issue of her belonging to the *yoki hito* ('noble-born') category. From the perspective of society as a whole, Kiritsubo is certainly a representative of the hermetically closed court aristocracy, inaccessible to the lower classes. She is distinguished by her position and education, and even by her type of beauty, and like all the characters in the work, she falls into the *yoki hito*

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<sup>30</sup> M. Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, p. 8.

category. But there is another perspective limited to the stratum of the court aristocracy itself. In this respect, it appears that Kiritsubo does not fulfil one of the conditions necessary for belonging to *yoki hito*, namely that she does not have a rank high enough to be the Emperor's wife. This fact discredits her in the eyes of other ladies of the court, which makes her defenseless, and, as such, an easy object of attacks.

The method of character portrayal is also notable for its innovation. Murasaki Shikibu succeeded in presenting the character not from the point of view of an all-knowing narrator, but from the perspective of the character's subjective self and the other characters she describes. A linear structure is also an undeniable achievement, as the author avoided a synthetic description but used fragmented ones, gradually revealing more and more elements related to Kiritsubo's image, and adjusting them to context and plot development.

To sum up, Kiritsubo is in a way an ideal character because she is the ideal of kindness, delicacy, beauty, and vulnerability. As E.M. Forster describes it, she represents a flat character "constructed round a single idea or quality,"<sup>31</sup> which here is the idea of *hiai*bi – the beauty of sorrow constituting one of the levels of *mono no aware*. In Kiritsubo's fate, however, we find not only Japanese, but also universal human content. The idea of fragility of all that is ideally good and beautiful is not limited to Japanese culture only or to Oriental cultures in general. This is probably the reason why the story of Kiritsubo and her figure itself will continue to be a moving one for every reader, regardless of the cultural background to which one belongs.

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<sup>31</sup> E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, RosettaBooks, New York 1927, 2002, p. 48.

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## Abstract

### **Mono no Aware ('Pathos of Things') and the Literary Portrait of Kiritsubo in *The Tale of Genji***

The research purpose of this text is to reconstruct the literary portrait of Kiritsubo, one of the female characters in *The Tale of Genji*, a work in the genre of courtly narratives (*ōchō monogatari*) written by Murasaki Shikibu in 1008. Kiritsubo is an episodic character and her role in the work's plot is limited to the first chapter, which may be why there is relatively little research devoted to her. The construction of Kiritsubo's literary portrait is influenced by *mono no aware* ('pathos of things'), an aesthetic category representing the Japanese world of beauty. The category itself can be analyzed from many different points of view, but here the author has limited her analysis to showing its role in the portrayal and construction of Kiritsubo's character. It was *mono no aware* understood as aesthetic and emotional beauty that enabled Murasaki Shikibu to maintain her descriptions of Kiritsubo while conveying an atmosphere of subtle elegance and contributed to her perception as someone who evoked both awe and compassion.

**Keywords:** Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, *Genji monogatari*, *mono no aware*, Kiritsubo, *monogatari*, literary portrait

# Globalizing Japanese Literature: Translation and Literary Canon Formation in the West

Agata Bice\*

Over the past few decades, the term ‘globalization’ has been steadily gaining popularity and has even become the framework for numerous research theories. It is almost universally accepted nowadays that the “global space” is a place where ideas encounter values. Global literature is a part of this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> For a very long time, readers and researchers alike perceived literature in terms of nations. Yet nowadays we have access to literature from around the world on a scale that one could only dream about five decades ago. There is, however, still a lot of bias in regard to deciding whether any given work has attained global recognition, or, in other words, has become universal. Despite dictionary definitions claiming that ‘global’ means “relating to or involving the entire world,”<sup>2</sup> in practice we still tend to think that a work of literature has not reached global recognition until it has been made available and appreciated in the West.<sup>3</sup> If that is the case, what does globalization mean in terms of Japanese literature? In this paper, I would like to closely examine the current status of

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<sup>1</sup> In the field of literary theory, it is worth mentioning works such as: L. Connel and N. Marsh, *Literature and Globalization. A Reader*, Routledge, London–New York 2011; P. Jay, *Global Matters. The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca–London 2010; S. Gupta, *Globalization and Literature*, Polity, Cambridge 2009.

<sup>2</sup> “global,” [in:] *Merriam-Webster*, n.d. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/global>; accessed: 15.04.2020.

<sup>3</sup> As noticed by Pascale Casanova, in regard to literature, “the global” is not equal to a melting pot, but is organized in a world literary space in which literary acclaim is linked to the acceptance by the world capital of literature (Paris in the past, and English-speaking West nowadays). See P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2007, pp. 11–44.

Japanese literature in the West in terms of quantity as well as quality. I will also try to determine how this status might have been achieved. For this reason, I will retrace the history of book translations of Japanese authors abroad in order to establish how the current canon of Japanese literature in the West was formed. Finally, I will attempt to show that the resulting canon has been shaped by striking a difficult balance between the unique and the universal features of Japanese literature.

## Book translations in numbers

What does it mean for a given work or author to achieve truly global recognition? One easy way to ascertain this would be to look at the number of languages into which the books have been translated. A relatively common marketing technique in publishing is to advertise a book as a best-seller translated into X number of languages. This strategy is not limited to foreign markets – it is sometimes also employed in the work's home country. The fact that foreign audiences are showing interest in a book seems to be an indicator of its intrinsic value. What it does is present the work as an international bestseller even though the mere presence of a translation does not necessarily equate to greater sales or profits. It communicates to the reader that a work is worth his or her attention – it must be, surely, since it was worth the effort of translating it into a foreign language. When talking about such a broad, global appeal, an author who instantly springs to mind is Murakami Haruki. His works have been translated into more than 50 languages. There are also numerous articles, books, and dissertations written about both him and his body of work. His loyal fans around the world eagerly await his new novels; those are then speedily translated into other languages and published within months of the original publication in Japanese. However, Murakami's popularity is a relatively new phenomenon. In 1995 (at a time when six of Murakami's novels and numerous short stories had already been translated into English), a literary news magazine in Japan published a list of the most frequently translated Japanese authors – Murakami's name was not among them.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, according to more recent statistical

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<sup>4</sup> "Top Seven Works of Most Frequently Translated Authors," *Japanese Book News* 1995, no. 10, cover. The graphic on the cover also details the number of

data from Index Translationum – World Bibliography of Translation under the auspices of UNESCO – Murakami Haruki is undoubtedly the most translated Japanese author to date.<sup>5</sup> In the top ten, there are also four manga authors (Toriyama Akira, Takahashi Rumiko, Tezuka Osamu, and Oda Eichirō) who are frequently not taken into account when it comes to researching literary translation from Japanese. Among the other five names one can find two Japanese Nobel Prize laureates in literature: Kawabata Yasunari and Ōe Kenzaburō, as well as other famous writers: Mishima Yukio and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō. The most interesting, however, is the last name on the top ten list – Inoue Yasushi. This writer has been awarded the highest literary accolade in Japan – the Akutagawa Prize – yet he is best known for his historical novels. Only thirteen of his works have been translated into English,<sup>6</sup> and he owes his high spot on the list to his great popularity in France (where over sixty of his works have been translated) and Germany (forty works). This is more of an exception than a rule, however, as most Japanese authors are translated into English first before appearing in other languages. The hegemony of the English language is also unparalleled when we analyze the flow of translations in the opposite direction. According to the statistics from Index Translationum, English is the language that the majority of books are being translated from. When we look at the data, the number of translations from English greatly outnumbers all other source languages. What is interesting, however, is the high position of the Japanese language on the list of top translated languages – both in the case of translations into English and into all the world's languages. Occupying the eighth position on both above-mentioned lists, Japanese is the only non-European language in the top ten. According to Index Translationum's statistics, there has also been a steady increase in the number of translations from Japanese over the past few decades. When looking at the numeri-

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languages into which each author was translated: Kawabata Yasunari (31 languages), Abe Kōbō (26), Mishima Yukio (21), Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (19), Ōe Kenzaburō (16), and Ibuse Masuji (16). What is interesting, the data seems to be very Eurocentric as the creators of the infographic decided to separate the languages into the following categories: Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Northern Europe, Former Soviet Union, and Other.

<sup>5</sup> "Index Translationum," *UNESCO*. <http://www.unesco.org/xtrans>; accessed: 01.10.2019.

<sup>6</sup> This number might be higher today, as the data on Index Translationum in regard to Japan has only been updated up to the year 2009.



cal data, then, we could claim with a certain confidence that Japanese literature is truly global – on a par with works in European languages. However, the quantity of works in translation, despite being useful when researching the general readership of Japanese authors abroad, does not allow for measuring the global appreciation of books coming from Japan. For that purpose, I have decided to analyze literary awards and international prizes.

## Literary awards

Unquestionably, the most famous literary award is the Nobel Prize in Literature. Only two Japanese authors have ever received it: Kawabata Yasunari in 1968 and Ōe Kenzaburō in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Two authors from Japan might not sound like much – Poland, for example, was honored for the fifth time in this category in 2018. France has sixteen laureates, the USA twelve, and the United Kingdom has eleven. However, let us not forget that those are all Western countries speaking Western languages. As of 2020, the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to 117 individuals. Only eight of them were from Asian countries.<sup>8</sup> Seen in this light, two awards for Japan look drastically more significant. Another useful statistic could be the betting odds posted before any Nobel Prize announcement. In 2019, the Nicer Odds<sup>9</sup> portal was indicating that Murakami Haruki had 10 to 1 odds of winning. Tawada Yōko, another author from Japan, was also ranked quite high (20 to 1). The only other writer from Asia was Korean poet Ko Un with the odds of winning 33 to 1.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Some also consider Kazuo Ishiguro – a British laureate from 2017 – to be a winner from Japan, as he was born in Japan to Japanese parents. However, all his books have been written in English. See Ch.-R. Kim, “‘Who’s Kazuo Ishiguro?’ Japan Asks, but Celebrates Nobel Author as Its Own,” *Reuters*, October 10, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nobel-prize-literature-japan-idUSKB-N1CB0FZ>; accessed: 01.10.2019.

<sup>8</sup> “The Nobel Prize in Literature,” *The Official Nobel Prize Website*. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature>; accessed: 10.09.2020.

<sup>9</sup> Nicer Odds is a popular odds aggregation platform which collates odds from a range of different bookmakers. “Nobel Prize in Literature,” *Nicer Odds*. <https://www.nicerodds.co.uk/nobel-prize-in-literature>; accessed: 10.09.2020.

<sup>10</sup> For comparison, the winner for 2018 – Olga Tokarczuk – enjoyed 7 to 1 odds of winning, while popular fantasy author George R. R. Martin supposedly had 250 to 1 odds. “Nobel Prize in Literature,” *Nicer Odds*.

The Nobel Prize in Literature is not the only noteworthy literary prize with a global reach. Another one is the National Book Award – the most prestigious American literary prize.<sup>11</sup> In 2018, the organizers decided to reintroduce the category of Translated Literature – that year the award went to Tawada Yōko for her novel *The Emissary*.<sup>12</sup> A book from Japan won again in 2020 – this time it was Yū Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station*.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, the award went to a book from Hungary, but another Japanese novel – *The Memory Police*<sup>14</sup> by Ogawa Yōko – made it to the shortlist. When looking at the longlist for that year, the Eurocentrism of the award becomes quite clear: out of ten books on the list, the only other non-European language work was a novel translated from Arabic. This seems to suggest that there is a genuine interest in and appreciation for contemporary Japanese literature in the international community of readers and critics.

Statistical data shows that this quite marked popularity of Japanese literature in the West has steadily developed over the past fifteen years. A good example of this process is the history of another big literary award – the International Booker Prize. A Japanese book has never won the Booker Prize, at least not yet. However, in 2020, *The Memory Police* once again was one of the only two books on the longlist that were not written in a European language.<sup>15</sup> More than ten years ago, however, the situation was very different. Between 2007 and 2012, the same foundation was also awarding the Man Asian Literary Prize, limited to authors from Asian countries. In the early days of the prize, not much of the spotlight was being shone on Japanese literature. Japanese works had never won and, in the first three editions of the award, none of them had even made the shortlist. In those years, both the longlist and shortlist were dominated by Chinese authors (during the six years of the prize's existence, writers from China received it three times). No Japanese author

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<sup>11</sup> "National Book Awards Nominees and Winners," *National Book Foundation*. <https://www.nationalbook.org/2019-national-book-awards-longlist-for-translated-literature>; accessed: 15.10.2020.

<sup>12</sup> Y. Tawada, *The Emissary*, trans. M. Mitsutani, New Directions, New York 2018.

<sup>13</sup> M. Yū, *Tokyo Ueno Station*, trans. M. Giles, Riverhead Books, New York 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Y. Ogawa, *The Memory Police*, trans. S. Snyder, Pantheon Books, New York 2019.

<sup>15</sup> "International Booker Prize," *Booker Prize Foundation*. <https://thebookerprizes.com>; accessed: 19.11.2020.

ever won, and it was only in later years of the award that more and more Japanese authors (among others: Kawakami Hiromi, Ogawa Yōko, and Yoshimoto Banana) finally started to be recognized by the judging panel; however, the award was discontinued in 2012.<sup>16</sup>

Another award whose judges seem to appreciate Japanese authors is the Best Translated Book Award, inaugurated in 2008 by the Three Percent: A Resource for International Literature at the University of Rochester.<sup>17</sup> In the poetry category, works from Japan have been awarded two times – the other ten laureates were translated from European languages. In the fiction category, Japanese authors have never won, but a glance at the list of the ten finalists from 2020 reveals two novels by Japanese writers (Ogawa Yōko and Tsushima Yūko). Once again, all the other books were originally written in European languages.

It certainly seems, then, that the appreciation for Japanese authors has intensified in the past decade. Women writers especially are gaining more and more attention.<sup>18</sup> A great example is the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation “established in 2017 at the University of Warwick to address the gender imbalance in translated literature and to increase the number of international women’s voices accessible by a British and Irish readership.”<sup>19</sup> In 2019, out of 92 entries in 30 languages, the judging panel chose thirteen titles in ten languages. Next to French, which was represented by three titles, it was Japanese with its two titles (*Convenience Store Woman* by Murata Sayaka and *Picnic in the Storm* by Motoya

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<sup>16</sup> For more detailed information, see “Man Group Press Releases,” *Man Investments*. <https://www.man.com/media>; accessed: 15.04.2020.

<sup>17</sup> “Best Translated Book Awards,” *Three Percent, University of Rochester*. <https://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/category/best-translated-book-awards>; accessed: 15.04.2020.

<sup>18</sup> The popularity of fiction by Japanese women writers might also be influenced by their rise to popularity in their native country. For more information on this literary trend in Japan, see B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, “Współczesna literatura japońska 1980–2010. Pisarze, nurty, tendencje” [“Modern Japanese Literature from 1980 to 2010. Writers, Currents, Trends”], [in:] *Dwa filary japońskiej kultury – literatura i sztuki performatywne* [Two Pillars of Japanese Culture – Literature and the Performing Arts], ed. B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, I. Rutkowska, Japonica, Warszawa 2017, pp. 117–137.

<sup>19</sup> “Warwick Prize for Women in Translation,” *The University of Warwick*. [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/womenintranslation](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/womenintranslation); accessed: 15.04.2020.

Yukiko)<sup>20</sup> that was the most represented language. In 2017, the situation was similar – out of sixteen books on the longlist, the only one<sup>21</sup> originally written in a non-European language was *Record of a Night too Brief*<sup>22</sup> by Japanese author Kawakami Hiromi. The year 2018 also saw one Japanese title on the longlist of fifteen books. The only other non-European language book was Han Kang's *The White Book*<sup>23</sup> from South Korea.

The above-mentioned examples clearly indicate that there is a great deal of recognition for the artistic values of Japanese literature in the West. This feat is even more impressive when one realizes how scant translations from Japanese literature were half a century ago. How have we reached the current situation of dozens of new titles being translated each year?

## The road to globalizing Japanese literature

According to Edward Fowler, the current status of Japanese literature and the popularity of certain Japanese authors in the West is the effect of the canon creation process which began in the 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Even though translations from Japanese into English existed already in the first half of the twentieth century, it was the Second World War that truly changed everything. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States joined the war, the Americans had to quickly train specialists with knowledge of Japanese. When the war ended and the United States needed Japan to become their ally against the Soviet Union, those newly educated specialists became new literary translators from Japanese. Donald Keene, a world-renowned scholar and translator, was one of them. As an

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<sup>20</sup> S. Murata, *Convenience Store Woman*, trans. G. Tapley Takemori, Granta, London 2019; Y. Motoya, *Picnic in the Storm*, trans. A. Yoneda, Corsair, London 2019.

<sup>21</sup> It is true that a book by a Japanese writer – Tawada Yōko – won that year. However, it was translated not from Japanese but from German, since Tawada is an exophonic writer and creates her novels in both Japanese and German.

<sup>22</sup> H. Kawakami, *Record of a Night too Brief*, trans. L. North, Pushkin Prize, London 2017.

<sup>23</sup> K. Han, *The White Book*, trans. D. Smith, Hogarth, London–New York 2019.

<sup>24</sup> E. Fowler, "Rendering Words, Traversing Cultures. On the Art and Politics of Translating Modern Japanese Fiction," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 1992, no. 18(1), p. 6.

editor of Japanese literature anthologies in the mid-1950s and translator of many Japanese novels since, he introduced readers around the world to the most famous books from Japan. It is partially to the early pioneers like him that we owe the current cornucopia of works from Japan. In the 1950s, a new canon of Japanese literature in translation truly emerged. Thanks to the efforts of one specific American publisher – Knopf – the image of Japan in the United States changed from that of a mortal enemy to an exotic land with a fascinating culture. Works by Japanese authors were marketed by publishers with phrases such as: “the charm of the unfamiliar.”<sup>25</sup> Knopf’s strategy worked. They turned the attention of Western readers to contemporary Japanese authors and, rather than publishing a single novel, they tried to give their readers at least a couple of titles from each of them. Seven of the first nine translations by Knopf were of the works of Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima (the so-called Big Three), and it was those three names that gained certain recognition in the West. All three were contenders for the Nobel Prize in Literature in the 1960s and received countless reviews in American media.

However, Fowler says that the same popularity became a problem a few decades later. By that time, American readers had developed a certain image of what Japanese literature was supposed to be, and once again it was becoming difficult to introduce contemporary writers from Japan. A reviewer in *New York Times* mentioned in 1988 that big publishers in America hogged most of the space on the shelves in bookstores and they were leaving translations of works by little-known foreign writers to small presses and university presses with far fewer outlets.<sup>26</sup> Japanese fiction was no exception to this trend, especially as it was among non-Western literature. The Big Three were no longer living authors and, as such, couldn’t be marketed as potential candidates for the Nobel Prize. But the real problem was of a financial nature. Japanese literature was not selling well in the West (with the only exception being France). This led to the slack being picked up by Japanese publishing houses, like Kodansha International, which were mostly supported by comic book market sales through their parent companies. Kodansha, however, lacked distri-

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<sup>25</sup> For detailed information on Knopf publishing strategies refer to: L. Walker, *Unbinding the Japanese Novel in English Translation. The Alfred A. Knopf Program, 1955–1977*, PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> E. Fowler, “Rendering Words,” p. 11.

bution networks in the West and experienced issues with marketing their works abroad. University presses were churning out a steady stream of newly translated fiction, but the prohibitive prices and small number of copies per title meant that they usually were unable to reach the general reader. A shift in sales and renewed interest was not to be seen until the beginning of the twenty-first century. This was the time when publishing houses such as Vertical, Kurodahan Press, and Haikasoru<sup>27</sup> – dedicated solely to bringing works from Japan to Western readers – started to appear. What is interesting is that they focused not only on literary fiction, but also on genre fiction, which was frequently dismissed by literary critics.

Vertical is a publishing house focused on contemporary books from Japan, mostly popular fiction, graphic novels, and nonfiction. What makes this publisher unique is that it was initially created for the fans and by the fans. In its founding statement, Vertical announced that “most Japanese books translated into English have either been literary classics or introductions to traditional culture meant for a limited circle of Japanophiles. Vertical publishes exciting titles that require no prior knowledge of Japanese culture and are not intended to primarily familiarize readers with it; we choose good reads with universal themes.”<sup>28</sup> From this statement we can also get an impression that so much has been translated from Japanese literature into English that readers have started complaining about the lack of variety in the genres offered in official publications. In comparison, fans of Vietnamese or Korean literature are still pleased if anything at all is translated into Western languages. The second one of the publishers mentioned, Kurodahan Press, even though also created by the Westerners, is based in Japan. The motivation for founding it supposedly derived from complaints by the readers of Japanese literature in English regarding the high prices demanded by university presses for their translated works. Kurodahan Press aims to be a company offering affordable editions of Japanese fiction in translation that would be in reach of a general reader. They have also vowed to try and fill the gap in the presence of titles from popular genres such

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<sup>27</sup> To be precise, Haikasoru is a publishing imprint of Viz Media – a company focused on manga and anime distribution in the US.

<sup>28</sup> “Company Profile,” *Vertical*. [https://www.vertical-inc.com/company\\_profile.html](https://www.vertical-inc.com/company_profile.html); accessed: 15.04.2020.

as fantasy or mystery.<sup>29</sup> The third of the publishing houses mentioned above is Haikasoru, which focuses on works of Japanese science fiction. It features “the action of anime and the thoughtfulness of the best speculative fiction and aims to truly be the ‘high castle’ of science fiction and fantasy.”<sup>30</sup> Among the books Haikasoru has published so far one can find not only commercial hits such as *Battle Royale*<sup>31</sup> and *All You Need Is Kill*<sup>32</sup> but also works of the Naoki Prize nominee Hideo Furukawa and the Akutagawa Prize winner Toh EnJoe.

It seems, then, that Japanese literature has somehow managed to bridge the gap between academic interest and commercial, popular recognition. In that achievement it also seems to be quite unique among other Asian nations and literatures. What has caused this crucial change in the market? It is possible that creative marketing and distribution were at least partially responsible for this gradual change. Yet, despite the intrinsic value of Japanese literature lauded by Japanese studies scholars, it is highly improbable that it would enjoy its current levels of popularity if not for the smart and well-thought-out aid it has received from organizations and programs supporting its promotion overseas. For that reason, in the next part of the paper I will focus on initiatives promoting Japanese literary fiction.

## Japanese literature support programs

One of the major support programs for Japanese literature is the Nippon Foundation – a private, non-profit organization established in 1962 by Sasakawa Ryōichi. At the time of its creation, the foundation used gambling revenue in order to aid various humanitarian projects. One of

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<sup>29</sup> “Welcome to Kurodahan Press,” *Kurodahan Press*. <https://www.kurodahan.com/wp/e>; accessed: 15.04.2020.

<sup>30</sup> “What is Haikasoru?,” *Haikasoru*. <https://www.haikasoru.com/about>; accessed: 15.04.2020 (since writing this article, the site has been discontinued – all the content related to the imprint has been moved to the official Viz Media website at [viz.com](http://viz.com)).

<sup>31</sup> K. Takami, *Battle Royale*, trans. Y. Oniji, Viz, San Francisco 2003.

<sup>32</sup> H. Sakurazaka, *All You Need Is Kill*, trans. A.O. Smith, Viz, San Francisco 2016. This book has also become the canvas for the Hollywood blockbuster *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) starring Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt.

their more recent projects was an initiative called *Read Japan*.<sup>33</sup> The aim of this program was to work in partnership with libraries, publishers, authors, and translators in order to make a wide variety of books from Japan available to foreign audiences. They have published a list of one hundred books (26 of them filed under the category: “Arts and Literature”) aiming to aid readers with understanding contemporary Japan. This project, despite its relatively small scale, has helped popularize works of Japanese fiction by making them more available to Western readers.

Another program worth mentioning is the one run by the Suntory Foundation. They offer “overseas publishing assistance” for high-quality translations of books from Japanese into foreign languages, as well as support for the publication of such works overseas.<sup>34</sup> The titles targeted by the Suntory Foundation are in principle academic research, contemporary criticism, and works of fiction which might otherwise be difficult to translate and publish. Every year roughly ten works are chosen to receive the support grant. Certain restrictions exist: already at the application stage, negotiations and agreement on translation/publication by a “reputable publisher” must be guaranteed. Due to such a constraint, the Suntory Foundation turns out to be more of an extra incentive only for the big publishers, as they are the only ones not troubled if the grant deal happens to fall through. The rules also stipulate that a guarantee of high-quality translation and publication must be given, such as a letter of recommendation from a third party or written proof of an arrangement with a reliable publisher. What exactly is a sign of a high-quality translation is not further explained. The rules also point to a clear priority given to English language translation. While the majority of the applications can hope for support of up to 50% of the total cost (up to 1 million yen), in the case of English the allowance can go as high as 2 million yen per work and  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the total costs. Already at the stage of drafting the rules, the founders clearly wanted to ensure that they would only support good quality products, which in turn would offer the chance of sharing Japanese sensitivities and values with a global audience. By working only

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<sup>33</sup> “The Read Japan Program,” *The Nippon Foundation*. <https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en/what/projects/readjapan>; accessed: 15.04.2020.

<sup>34</sup> “Support for Overseas Publications,” *The Suntory Foundation*. <https://www.suntory.com/sfnd/publication>; accessed: 15.04.2020.



with experienced publishing houses, they also ensure that these works will receive a decent marketing campaign led by a competent team. The program has produced about 130 titles so far.<sup>35</sup>

One more way of supporting high-quality translations are translation prizes. An award gives financial support to talented translators, which in turn allows them to pursue further translation projects. One such award is the prize from the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture at Columbia University.<sup>36</sup> The Japan–US Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature awards \$6,000 annually for the best translation of a modern or classical work and is the oldest such prize in the USA. Only American citizens or permanent residents are eligible to enter the running for the prize. However, starting from 2018, the Keene Center has started awarding yet another prize, this one aimed at non-citizens of the USA: the Lindsley and Masao Miyoshi Translation Prize. On top of that, this fund also offers “grants to promising translation-in-progress, subventions for forthcoming publication of especially deserving translations; and, in rare cases, lifetime achievement awards for translators with particularly distinguished careers.”<sup>37</sup> It seems, then, that the Donald Keene Center had realized the need for awarding translators in the initial stages of their careers. This is also done by highlighting on the Center’s webpage current works in progress by young translators as well as projects which are still in need of a publisher. They advertise the work of enthusiasts of the translated texts – the rationale being that a passion for a specific work is a big help in creating a better-quality product.

Another translation prize worth mentioning is the Kyoko Selden Memorial Translation Prize in Japanese Literature, Thought, and Society, awarded once a year by the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University.<sup>38</sup> Since its founding in 2014, this award has aimed at providing

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<sup>35</sup> Out of those, nine have been published in Polish.

<sup>36</sup> “Mission and History,” *Donald Keene Center*. [https://www.keenecenter.org/mission\\_history.html](https://www.keenecenter.org/mission_history.html); accessed: 15.04.2020.

<sup>37</sup> “Translation Prize,” *Donald Keene Center*. [https://www.keenecenter.org/translation\\_prize.html](https://www.keenecenter.org/translation_prize.html); accessed: 15.04.2020.

<sup>38</sup> “Selden Memorial Translation Prize,” *Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University*. <https://asianstudies.cornell.edu/selden-prize/#-the-2020-kyoko-selden-memorial-translation-prize-in-japanese-literature,-thought,-and-society>; accessed: 30.11.2020.

free materials intended for wide dissemination and classroom use. For that reason, the award committee asks for submissions of unpublished translations, and the winning entries are then published online in *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* available in open access.

The third translation competition I would like to mention is the one organized by the Japanese Literature Publishing Project (JLPP), founded in 2002 by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs.<sup>39</sup> The project's core focus since 2015 is on the JLPP International Translation Competition and the JLPP Translation Workshop, both geared towards discovering and fostering emerging translators of contemporary Japanese literature. The first edition of the competition was held in 2010 with English and German chosen as the two target languages for entry translations. The sixth edition of the competition announced for 2021 will be accepting submissions in English and Spanish.<sup>40</sup> From the beginning, this program has been tied to a translation workshop for the prizewinners during which practical guidance on building a career in Japanese translation is offered. As part of the program, emerging translators participate in a master class taught by Japanese authors and their translators, as well as seminars with experienced editors from the publishing industry who offer their guidance on maneuvering the book publishing world. In addition, the JLPP organizers also host regular international translation symposiums and forums, where authors, translators, editors, and scholars of Japanese literature from around the world discuss their work and exchange their views. The whole premise of the JLPP is designed around the idea of aiding and promoting overseas publications of Japanese works abroad. In addition to the above-mentioned competition, in the past the JLPP would also select around ten titles every year to be translated into English and promoted to UK and US publishers. Not only did they pay generous translation fees but they also purchased themselves a sizable number of published copies and donated them to libraries around the world. In other words, the JLPP offered publishers a guarantee of making a sale. This allowed for further language trans-

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<sup>39</sup> "About the JLPP," *Japanese Literature Publishing Project*. <https://www.jlpp.go.jp/index.html>; accessed: 30.10.2020.

<sup>40</sup> Each edition of the competition accepts submissions of translations into English and one other language (so far German, French, Russian, and Spanish). The only exception was the second JLPP with English as its only target language.

lations of literary works that might have otherwise lacked commercial viability and, at the same time, increased the range of texts available to Japanese literature students overseas. Unfortunately, the JLPP lost its funding for new translations in sweeping government cuts in 2010,<sup>41</sup> but the translation competition and workshops are still being held. From its fifth edition, thanks to some additional funding, the Grand Prize winners for each language pair now also receive a one-million-yen cash prize.<sup>42</sup>

Not all projects have been equally successful. An example of a discontinued initiative was the Library of Japan – a project promoted by CULCON (United States–Japan Conference on Cultural and Educational Exchange). The organization is a bi-national panel whose main goal is to “elevate and strengthen the vital cultural and educational foundations of the US–Japan relationship, and to strengthen connections between the United States and Japanese leadership in those fields.” CULCON works to ensure that the best new ideas for cultural, educational, and intellectual activity and exchange are implemented as operational programs.<sup>43</sup> CULCON meetings have been held every two years since 1962, and the committee on publications was formed in 1986. They embarked on the ambitious publishing project dubbed “Library of Japan” – a multivolume collection of Japanese fiction and nonfiction.<sup>44</sup> By 1989, the committee had created a list of 27 books on modern Japan, mainly fiction, which were supposed to be published with the help of the University Press of America and some generous funding from the Japan Foundation. At the same time, the committee suggested creating a newsletter in English on newly published Japanese works to promote their translation and publication in the US.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, the titles chosen for the list were quite

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41 Sh. Kōno, “Following Murakami’s Path. Japanese Books as World Literature,” *Nippon Communications Foundation*, June 19, 2019. <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00491/following-murakami%E2%80%99s-path-japanese-books-as-world-literature.html#>; accessed: 15.04.2020.

42 “News,” *Japanese Literature Publishing Project*. <https://www.jlpp.go.jp/en/competition5/competition5en.html>; accessed: 30.11.2020.

43 “Mission Statement and Goals,” *CULCON*. <https://culcon.jusfc.gov/about-us/mission-statement-and-goals>; accessed: 15.04.2020.

44 The project was inspired by “Library of America” – a highly successful series of America’s greatest writing, which as of November 2020 consisted of 325 volumes.

45 For more detailed information, see “Recommendations of CULCON XIV Publications Subcommittee” available on CULCON’s website.

obscure, even in Japan.<sup>46</sup> What is more, 2/3 of the titles had already been translated into English. Obviously, no thought was also given to who the potential readers of those books might be. While the first five books in the series were published in 1993, there was no continuation.<sup>47</sup> Since then the focus of CULCON shifted to the Education and Visual Arts programs while the Japan Foundation implemented the ideas presented by the publishing committee.

It is also the Japan Foundation that has truly created a world of difference when it comes to publishing Japanese translations abroad. Its main message is creating “global opportunities for fostering friendship, trust and mutual understanding through culture, language, and dialogue between Japan and the world.”<sup>48</sup> Established in 1972 as a special legal entity supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was reorganized in 2003 as an independent administrative institution. Based on a government endowment of 78 billion yen, the activities of the Japan Foundation are financed by annual government subsidies, investment revenue, and donations from the private sector. One of the Foundation's most successful projects is the *Support Program for Translation and Publication on Japan*. A form of financial assistance for foreign publishers, it was launched in 1988 in order to aid translation and/or publishing Japan-related books. The grant covers a part of the translation and publishing costs. The program focuses on publishing those Japanese books which might be otherwise difficult to release commercially and thus makes them a cheaper and more accessible product for the general public. Their main goal is not financial gain but the promotion of Japanese culture abroad. Similarly to the support from the Suntory Foundation, the

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<sup>46</sup> The majority of the books that were yet to be translated into English at the time of creation of the list were political biographies and works concerned with economic management. Fowler suggests that the makeup of the subcommittee might have been to blame for such a narrow selection: the members were all men and either university professors or corporate executives in the area of publishing. The selection of titles they chose to highlight was a representation of their professional and academic interests rather than a list of works which might be of interest to a wide audience abroad. See E. Fowler, “Rendering Words,” p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> E. Fowler, “Rendering Words,” pp. 24–30.

<sup>48</sup> “About Us,” *The Japan Foundation*. <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/about/index.html>; accessed: 30.10.2020.

copyright agreements concerning the translation must already be completed. It also requires a signed contract between the translator and the publishing house as well as a draft and a sample of the translation. The grant money is not paid until a report detailing the release of the book is submitted to the Japan Foundation. This delay (as well as the paperwork) makes the big publishing companies slightly less likely to go through the trouble. It is a big help, however, to smaller imprints and independent publishers.<sup>49</sup> Every year a couple dozen translations are aided by this project. Twenty-one works in seventeen countries have been published with the aid offered by the program in the fiscal year 2017/2018. This number has been steadily growing, which suggests that the program is considered successful and deemed worth continuing.<sup>50</sup> The success of the Japan Foundation in this field might have partially come from the fact that instead of limiting themselves to subsidizing translation, they have also decided to provide Western publishers with information about the Japanese literary market. On their website, publishers and translators can consult the Japanese Literature in Translation Database, which covers works of Japanese literature translated into foreign languages. While the database is not perfect,<sup>51</sup> it is a good starting point. Between 1993 and 2016, the Japan Foundation also published a quarterly newsletter called *Japanese Book News* – the same one that was once upon a time suggested at one of the CULCON meetings. This provided overseas publishing companies and librarians with regular access to the latest information on publishing trends and new publications in Japan. Even though it was discontinued, it was partially replaced by a new initiative: a project called *Worth Sharing – A Selection of Japanese Books Recommended for Translation*, which was launched in 2012.<sup>52</sup> Similarly to

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<sup>49</sup> One must note, however, that for a small publisher this scenario might also carry a higher risk.

<sup>50</sup> During the last three years, the number of accepted projects has more than doubled – in the fiscal year 2020/2021, 37 works from 26 countries were accepted. See “Support Program for Translation and Publication on Japan,” *The Japan Foundation*. [https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/culture/publication/support-list\\_publish/list.html](https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/culture/publication/support-list_publish/list.html); accessed: 30.10.2020.

<sup>51</sup> Since its inception, the database has been experiencing frequent errors and outages – at the time of writing this article, the site is under maintenance.

<sup>52</sup> Paper copies of the booklets were sent to various publishing companies and universities around the world. Copies are also available for download in the digital format on the Japan Foundation website.

the earlier newsletter, it aimed at giving people overseas a better understanding of contemporary Japan by selecting recommended outstanding books for translation. In five issues (the final one released in 2017), it presented one hundred titles that are supposed to provide readers with authentic views of Japanese society and its people. The practical importance of the list stemmed from the fact that works included in the *Worth Sharing* pamphlets would be then prioritized for the support program in translation. In this way the people in charge of the program could help ensure that the new projects would be works of adequate quality, which, in consequence, would present modern Japan in a certain, positive way.<sup>53</sup> Unsurprisingly, in the twenty-first century the focus on contemporary fiction has also become more apparent. By now, most ancient and modern Japanese works have been (fully or in part) translated into English. At the time of writing this article, there exist at least fifteen general anthologies of Japanese literature and a further seventeen anthologies focusing on a specific topic (seven of those are modern fiction anthologies written by Japanese women writers).<sup>54</sup> The Japan Foundation has started promoting what the world wanted to read: fiction pertaining to issues regarding women's studies and portraying shifts in our social history. This interest was then confirmed by the slew of international fiction awards mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

## Japanese literature as global literature

In terms of both quantity and quality, it can be said that Japanese literature has achieved global recognition. Even though it cannot compete in numbers of translations with those performed from English, it is on a par with translations from other major European languages and is the definite leader among Asian languages when it comes to translations performed into Western tongues. From the qualitative perspective, Japanese fiction has attained a much greater acclaim than literature of other Asian countries by obtaining a higher number of laureates and finalists of prestigious literary awards. As has been demonstrated by retracing the history

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<sup>53</sup> The focus also seems to be on more contemporary authors and titles – ones which are not showing an overly exoticized image of Japan.

<sup>54</sup> The list of anthologies has been assembled by the author from available publication databases and university library archives.

of Japanese translations in the West, this level of worldwide acceptance was first achieved due to the efforts of American scholars and translators after the Second World War and then strengthened in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The renewed interest in literature from Japan in the new millennium might have been substantially aided by a large number of varied literary support programs and awards which have focused on supporting young translators and incentivized publishing good quality translations of contemporary fiction. Taking all the above-mentioned information into account, it can be argued that fiction from Japan has truly become a major literature appealing to contemporary readers in the West. When commenting on the subject, Donald Keene claimed it was due to its universal and timeless themes which evoke deep emotion in the reader.<sup>55</sup> However, American novelist Matthew Sharpe has more recently stated the opposite. He is a contributor to *Monkey Business. New Writing from Japan* – an English language journal which publishes works from Japanese and Western authors.<sup>56</sup> Sharpe said that what he really values in Japanese writing is that the sense of story is profoundly different from the American style of writing, which opens new perspectives for him. In the same interview, Ted Goosen – a translator from Japanese – also stressed the uniqueness of the way Japanese works of literature look at the world.<sup>57</sup> It can be said, then, that Japanese literature has currently achieved universal acclaim in global literary circles, but it continues to be unique enough to remain distinctive to global readers.

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<sup>56</sup> After its seventh issue, the magazine was rebranded and renamed. The first issue of the new magazine came out in the fall of 2020 under the name *Monkey. New Writing from Japan*.

<sup>57</sup> J. Maki, "In Its Seventh Year, *Monkey Business* Seen Creating Hybrid Space for Japanese, English Literature," *The Japan Times*, June 2, 2017. [https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/02/national/social-issues/seventh-year-monkey-business-seen-creating-hybrid-space-japanese-english-literature/#.Xag\\_upMzaqA](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/06/02/national/social-issues/seventh-year-monkey-business-seen-creating-hybrid-space-japanese-english-literature/#.Xag_upMzaqA); accessed: 30.10.2020.

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## Abstract

### *Globalizing Japanese Literature: Translation and Literary Canon Formation in the West*

Appreciation for Japanese literature has been steadily growing in the West. Together with the Japanese traditional arts and pop-cultural products, literature has proven to play a vital role in communicating Japanese values to the global audience. However, a typical global reader can only access those works that have been translated into major European languages, mainly English, which currently holds the symbolic crown of the ruling language of literature in the world. This paper aims to show the current status of Japanese literature in the global literary space. For this purpose, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the available statistical information is carried out. In order to properly interpret the data, the history of translation and publishing of Japanese literature in English is briefly summarized, with special attention paid to the last few decades and the foundation of new publishing houses dedicated solely to translating fiction from Japan. It is highlighted that the titles promoted for translation have not only been deemed universal enough to resonate with the Western audiences but also display a certain level of uniqueness which would set them apart from other works available to the global reader. A particular focus is then given to private and public initiatives, such as support programs and translation awards that aim at promoting and popularizing fiction from Japan outside its borders. The paper attempts to show what impact those efforts have had on raising the status of Japanese literature in the global literary system.

**Keywords:** Japanese literature, literary translation, literary canon, translation awards, literary awards, globalization, literature support program

# Passion and Form, Modernity and Tradition in the Unique Language of the *Midaregami* Poems of Yosano Akiko

Anna Zalewska\*

Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) (Fig. 6) was a Japanese poet who created both *tanka*, a continuation of the so-called *waka* (Japanese classical poetry), and *shintaiishi* (non-traditional poems in new form), a form influenced by Western poetry popular in the Meiji era (1868–1912). One of the most important poets of the twentieth century, she was also a pioneer of feminism in Japan, a social reformer, a writer, and a commentator. She contributed articles to, among others, the famous *Seitō* [*Bluestocking*], which was the first all-women literary magazine in Japan (published between 1911 and 1916, 52 issues, more than 100 female contributors). In her works, Yosano brought up valid social problems and ideas, for example in *Watashi no teisōkan* [*My Thoughts on Chastity*] (1911). As a poet she was interested in poetry theory and practice and published essays like *Uta no tsukuriyō* [*How to Compose Poems*] (1915).

Yosano's surname comes from her husband, Yosano Tekkan (1873–1935) (Fig. 7), an accomplished poet and the founder of the *Myōjō* literary magazine (1900–1908), the most important publication of *tanka* poetry in the early years of modern Japan. She was born in Sakai near Osaka. In 2015, the city established a museum commemorating her and Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), who had also been a citizen of Sakai a few hundred years earlier. The Sakai Plaza for Rikyū and Akiko (Rishō no Mori) has on display numerous exhibits such as the first editions of her poetry books,

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Figure 6. Yosano Akiko posing by a window. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

her letters and kimonos, as well as a recreation of the room in which she lived and worked, which allows us to get to learn about the more intimate aspects of her life. Akiko was also a mother of twelve children and a very busy homemaker. But most of all, she was a poet: praised and criticized, passionate, controversial, and inspiring.

One of her greatest and most time-consuming literary achievements was a complete translation of *The Tale of Genji* into modern Japanese. She started working on it in 1911 while simultaneously writing texts about social issues. In her lifetime she published 75 books, among them more than 20 volumes of poetry and several thousand *tanka* poems. Yet her most important, successful, widely read, and widely discussed literary work turned out to be her very first *tanka* poetry book: *Midaregami* [*Tangled Hair*] (Fig. 8), published in 1901, when she was only 23 years old.



Figure 7. Yosano Akiko and Tekkan. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.



Figure 8. Cover of Yosano Akiko's *Midaregami* [*Tangled Hair*], 1901. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

Poems from *Midaregami* – full of passion, love confessions, and descriptions of a young girl's bodily beauty – were an instant sensation. “At times mesmerizingly narcissistic, the collection of 399 pieces spelled out a young woman’s sexual thoughts and acts,” writes contemporary author and translator Satō Hiroaki (b. 1942).<sup>2</sup> The intensity and audacity of her expression was admired but also criticized for “licentious sentiments and shallow philosophy.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the poems were considered to be difficult to understand “because of the irregular syntax and the private

<sup>2</sup> *Japanese Women Poets. An Anthology*, trans. H. Sato, An East Gate Book, New York 2008, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup> *Japanese Women Poets*, p. 264.

meanings of certain words," as mentioned by Donald Keene when citing three different interpretations (by Yosano Tekkan and two other critics) of the first poem in the collection, printed soon after its publication.<sup>4</sup>

The originality of her language and imagery gained her praise from readers and critics alike. A few years later, the writer Mori Ōgai wrote about her poetry: "Akiko does not imitate anybody. Her individuality certainly can always be noticed."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, this originality and individuality is well-rooted in Japanese literature, both classical and modern: Janine Beichman studied Akiko's work in relation to the language of Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943), Yosa Buson (1716–1784), and others,<sup>6</sup> while G.G. Rowley noted her output's deep connection to *The Tale of Genji*.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper I want to present some of the unique, characteristic elements of the diction in *Midaregami*, concentrating especially on the versification and the length of the respective verses of the poems. Counting syllables in the verses may seem dull compared to savoring the passionate words of love but, surprisingly, may lead to a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of Akiko's art.

## *Midaregami* [Tangled Hair]

*Midaregami* contains 399 *tanka* poems organized into six cycles with separate titles, as follows:

*Lipstick-red Lavender* [*Enji murasaki*], numbers 1–98 (98 poems),<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> D. Keene, *Dawn to the West. Japanese Literature of the Modern Era. Poetry, Drama, Criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York 1999, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> M. Nakazaki, "Mori Ōgai Yosano Akiko san ni tsuite to kaseigakusha Pāshibaru Rōeru" ["Mori Ōgai's About Mrs Yosano Akiko and Percival Lowell, Mars Specialist"], *Chūkyō Daigaku Kyōyō Ronsō* 1990, no. 31-3, p. 1489.

<sup>6</sup> J. Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird. Yosano Akiko and the Birth of the Female Voice in Modern Poetry*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2002, pp. 250–252.

<sup>7</sup> G.G. Rowley, *Yosano Akiko and The Tale of Genji*, Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 2000, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> English titles of the cycles after: *A Girl with Tangled Hair. The 300 tanka in Midaregami – Tangled Hair by Akiko Yosano*, trans. J. Reichhold, M. Kobayashi, AHA Books, Gualala 2014.

*Lotus Flower Boat* [*Hasu no hanafune*], numbers 99–174 (76 poems),  
*White Lily* [*Shirayuri*], numbers 175–210 (36 poems),  
*Twenty-year-old Wife* [*Hatachizuma*], numbers 211–297 (87 poems),  
*Dancing Girl* [*Maihime*], numbers 298–319 (22 poems),  
*Spring Heart* [*Shunshi*], numbers 320–399 (80 poems).

The collection has had many editions. Nowadays *Midaregami* is often published together with a translation into modern Japanese or at least accompanied by explanations in modern language. Now, a hundred years after Akiko translated *The Tale of Genji* (a story written 900 years earlier) into the Japanese of her times in order to make it more accessible to readers, her own poems are subjected to the same treatment. In 1998, poet Tawara Machi published her own translation of *Midaregami* into, as she called it, “chocolate language” (*chokorētogo yaku*),<sup>9</sup> making it something more than merely a translation into present-day Japanese – rather, it was her new version, a late twentieth-century version of *Midaregami* or, alternatively, *Midaregami* in a new setting, with some new artifacts, but still preserving the feelings Akiko expressed.

Let us start with one example of Akiko's *tanka*:

sono ko hatachi	ma dwadzieścia lat	Her hair at twenty
kushi ni nagaruru	spywają po grzebieniu	Flowing long and black
kurokami no	jej czarne włosy	Through the teeth of her comb
ogori no haru no	jakież bogactwo, wiosna	Oh beautiful spring
utsukushiki kana	w całej swojej piękności	Extravagant spring! <sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In 1997, Tawara published her third collection of *tanka* poems, entitled *Chokorētō kakumei* [*Chocolate Revolution*] and also later on she has used the epithet *chocolate*, for example in the name of her official home page: *Tawara Machi's Chocolate Box*, <http://www.gtpweb.net/twr/>; accessed: 16.01.2022. As Tawara explains in the afterword for *Chokorētō kakumei*, chocolate revolution and chocolate language are full of passion, as opposed to adulthood, which is fearful of strong emotions and expressing them directly. M. Tawara, *Chokorētō kakumei* [*Chocolate Revolution*], Kawade Shobō Shinsha, Tokyo 2000, pp. 167–168.

<sup>10</sup> English translation: R. Pulvers, “Yesterday is Another World. *Tanka* by Yosano Akiko,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 2010, no. 5-3-10, p. 1. All Polish translations by the author of the paper. I am taking the liberty of including them in this English language publication, because the study of the versification which I conducted for this paper has been very helpful in the work of translating Yosano's poems into Polish.



This is poem number 6 in the book, one of the best known and most often quoted, depicting a young girl who is enjoying her own beauty. As she is twenty, it makes us think of Akiko herself, who at the time was only 23 and titled one of the cycles in *Midaregami* as *Twenty-year-old Wife*. The word *hatachi*, twenty years of age (or in the variant version: *hata tose*) appears in *Midaregami* as many as eight times, the only age number used in the whole collection (only poem 194 mentions another age without giving the actual number: *my friend is twenty, I am two years older*<sup>11</sup>). In this poem we can see one of the elements typical for Akiko's early poetry: description of the female body, a positive image of body and feminine beauty, especially the long black hair (*kurokami*, most important for the perception of female beauty, at least since the Heian period, 794–1192).

Let me use this opportunity to cite one example of Tawara Machi's "chocolate language" translation of this poem:

hatachi to wa	dwudziestolatka	twenty years old
rongu heā o	rozpuszcza, rozczesuje	she lets her long hair
nabikasete	swoje <i>long hair</i>	flow like a stream
osore o shiranu	jej serce nie zna strachu	her heart knows no fear
haru no Vīnasu	Wenus wiosenną porą	she is Venus in springtime <sup>12</sup>

As for the elements creating the unique character of Akiko's poetry, the following can be given: frequent descriptions of female beauty, frequent use of *keigo* (honorifics), frequent use of inversion or anastrophe,<sup>13</sup> many numerals (in the poem above – *hatachi*, twenty years). She also often uses words and settings connected to Buddhism and sometimes Christianity. The last element that should be mentioned is a very frequent use of hypermetric verses. Let us examine some of these in more detail.

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<sup>11</sup> *A Girl with Tangled Hair*, p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> M. Tawara, *Chokorētogo yaku Midaregami* [*Tangled Hair Translated into Chocolate Language*], Kawade Shobō Shinsha, Tokyo 2002, p. 11. English and Polish translations by the author.

<sup>13</sup> T. Waragai, "Midaregami ni okeru gengo hyōgen" ["Verbal Expression in *Midaregami*"], *Kiyō Ronbun* 1993, no. 3, p. 59.

## Female beauty

As can be seen in the example cited above, many of the *Midaregami* poems show the beauty of a young woman's body. Yosano Akiko was the first poet, and a female one too, to use words such as breasts (*chibusa*) in *waka*:

chibusa osae	piersi przyciskam	I press my breasts
shinpi no tobari	i mistyczną zasłonę	Gently parting
soto kerinu	lekko odtrącam	The shroud of mystery
koko naru hana no	a kwiat pod nią ukryty	Revealing the flower
kurenai zo koki	jest płomiennie czerwony	Redder than red <sup>14</sup>

This is one of her most famous and most erotic poems. Does it not make the reader think of Western symbolist painting, with a mystic shroud, breasts hidden under a palm of a hand, and a red flower of love? At the beginning of the twentieth century, this poetry shocked a part of readers and critics, and was even condemned as immoral by some. Today, for the contemporary audience, this passion and eroticism of Akiko is much easier to comprehend and accept.

The word *chibusa* appears only in poem 68, but she also uses *mune* (translated as chest, heart, etc.) in poems 226, 228, 236, 244, 324, and *chi* or *chichi* (breast, but also breast milk) in poems 40, 233, and 321. In total, breast-related words can be found in nine poems. Let us see one more of those:

haru mijikashi	„wiosna jest tak krótka	Spring is short.
nani ni fumetsu no	życie co nie przemija,	What is there in life that
inochi zo to	cóż to takiego?”	does not decay?
chikara aru chi o	i do mych pełnych piersi	I let him caress
te ni sagurasenu	jego dłoń poprowadziłam	these strong young breasts <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> R. Pulvers, “Yesterday,” p. 5. Poem number 68.

<sup>15</sup> L.R. Rodd, “Tangled Hair,” [in:] *A Tokyo Anthology. Literature from Japan's Modern Metropolis, 1850–1920*, ed. S. Jones, Ch. Shirō Inouye, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2017, p. 381. Poem number 321.

Her mentioning blood (*chi*) in as many as eleven poems out of 399 (numbers 4, 9, 88, 206, 218, 226, 294, 295, 333, 357, 392) is also interesting. In other poems, she speaks about hands and feet, fingers (353), neck (17, 149, 373), arms (143, 218, 373), teeth (224), cheeks (236), slender body (203), and lips (41, 161, 219, 333, 334) – in total, more than 30 poems explicitly mention certain body parts, which would not have been considered a proper subject for poetry at that time.

In her poems we can see the acceptance of the female body or, to phrase it using twenty-first-century vocabulary, body positivity; however, the female body in her poems is always that of somebody like herself – young, slender, feminine. Let us look at how conscious she is of the beauty of her body and her own sex appeal:

tsumi ōki	po to bym mogła	Made to punish men for their sins
otoko korase to	tych grzesznych mężczyzn karać	The smoothest skin
hada kiyoku	mam skórę gładką	The longest black hair...
kurokami nagaku	i włosy czarne, długie	All that
tsukuraeshi ware	tak zostałam stworzona	Is me! <sup>16</sup>

In this poem, as well as in the one cited at the beginning of the paper, we can see that long black hair held a special charm for her. Actually, out of the 399 poems in *Midaregami*, at least 33 mention hair (*kami*, *kushi*) or black hair (*kurokami*), which amounts to almost 10% of the poems.<sup>17</sup> Descriptions of long black hair were a distinctive feature of her poetry as much as breasts, feet, and blood. While the latter were elements that had hardly ever so boldly been mentioned in *waka* before, this admiration for long black hair had had a very long tradition in Japanese culture. Yet Akiko's hair is *midaregami*: it is tangled, it is not flowing gently and submissively, and in this one picture of long black tangled hair we can see a mixture of tradition and modernity.

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<sup>16</sup> R. Pulvers, "Yesterday," p. 1. Poem number 362.

<sup>17</sup> Poems number: 1, 3, 6, 7, 15, 16, 22, 23, 30, 43, 56, 58, 90, 101, 103, 104, 133, 140, 168, 176, 237, 240, 245, 255, 260, 303, 331, 341, 350, 360, 361, 362, 398.

## Hypermetric and hypometric verses

In this paper I endeavor to put particular focus on the length of the verses in *Midaregami* poems. *Waka* poetry was based on a rhythm of five and seven syllables (or more precisely, moras) in alternating verses. The most popular form of *waka* consisted of five verses containing five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables, respectively, 31 syllables total. In modern times, this form is called *tanka* (a short poem). This has been the most basic rule for creating Japanese poetry, and poems in this form have been recorded in the earliest anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Man'yōshū* [*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*] compiled after 759. This format has been preserved until today. However, sometimes it was impossible for the poet to retain the prescribed length of every verse and so, as an exception, so called *jiamari*, or hypermetric verses, were also accepted. They were mostly longer by one syllable: six instead of five, or eight instead of seven. Also accepted were *jitarazu* verses, hypometric verses, consisting of an insufficient number of syllables, mostly six instead of seven. Since the words *hypermetric* and *hypometric* sound almost identical and may be confusing for the reader, let me also use the Japanese words *jiamari* and *jitarazu*.

In modern times, since the Meiji era, the language of *waka* poetry has changed greatly: many poets have started to use modern, colloquial language (usually together with elements of classical language, both in terms of grammar and vocabulary). The five-and-seven rhythm has remained, yet one can observe that today *jiamari* and *jitarazu* verses, longer or shorter than the basic form, appear much more often than before. Here are some relevant statistics in Akiko's poetry:<sup>18</sup>

1. Out of 399 poems in *Midaregami*, as many as 233 have one or more *jiamari* or a longer, hypermetric verse, which equals to 58% of all the poems.
2. There are 162 poems with one *jiamari* verse, which makes up almost 70% of all *jiamari* verses and 41% of all the 399 poems.
3. There are 61 poems with two *jiamari*, longer verses – 26% of all poems.

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<sup>18</sup> All the calculations were made personally by the author in preparation for the present paper.

4. Nine poems have three verses longer than the regular rhythm (2.25% of all poems).
5. Only one poem has four *jiamari* verses (0.56% of all).
6. There are no poems with every line being longer.

Now, let us see in which verses *jiamari* occur:

1. There are 129 *jiamari* in the first verse.
2. In the second verse there are only six cases of *jiamari* and this is the least of all.
3. In the third verse: 99 cases of *jiamari*.
4. In the fourth verse: seven cases of *jiamari*.
5. And in the last, fifth verse, there are 73 cases of a longer verse.

These numbers show that the longer verses most often occur as the first, third (these should be short, five-syllable verses), and fifth verse (which should contain seven syllables). The second and fourth verse are very rarely longer, almost as an exception.

Let us now look at the pairings: when the two *jiamari*, hypermetric verses, occur in one poem, in which verses are they used?

1. There are 30 cases of *jiamari* in the first and third verse.
2. 16 cases of a pair of the first and fifth verse.
3. 12 cases of the third and fifth verse.
4. And only four cases of other pairings (first and second verses – one case, first and fourth verses – one case, third and fourth verses – two cases).

We can see that the closer to the beginning, the more irregularities. The most *jiamari* occur in the first line, then in the third, and then in the fifth line. There are almost none in the even verses (second and fourth). There is also a strong correlation between the presence of *jiamari* verses and the structure of the *tanka* poem. A typical *tanka* can be divided into two parts, a *kaminoku*, an upper part of three verses, 5–7–5 syllables, and *shimonoku*, the lower part, two verses of 7–7 syllables. In *Midaregami* there are 234 cases of *jiamari* in the *kaminoku*, and 80 cases of *jiamari* in the *shimonoku*. This data shows us that, in many cases, the first part is heavier than the second part and is much more prone to being irregular.

I also mentioned above the phenomenon of *jitarazu* verses, those shorter than the standard rhythm. Among 399 poems in *Midaregami* there is only one poem containing a shorter verse, four syllables instead of five. Apparently, Akiko was never lacking words. Her poems often sound as if compressed, sometimes to the point that they are hard to comprehend – so much substance was packed and overflowing. The *jitarazu* poem has number 127 and it possesses an exceptionally irregular rhythm: 6–4–8–7–7. The shorter verse is the second one, and while all the verses in the *kaminoku* are irregular, the *shimonoku* part is regular: 7–7.

The one poem with four longer verses is numbered 131 and composed as follows: 6–8–6–7–8. It contains two words of Sino-Japanese origin, a personal name Rengetsu (four moras) and a geographical name Kyō (two moras), meaning Kyōto. Until the Meiji era, *waka* poetry – true to its name meaning “Japanese poetry” – did not accept Sino-Japanese words as a rule and so they were rarely used. Here they may have interfered with the regular length of verses.

What does this data tell us about Akiko’s poetry? I have been translating *waka* poetry into Polish for thirteen years now and I have been constantly working on the best form for the translated poems. As a rule, I try to keep the five-and-seven rhythm as much as possible without sounding unnatural, with occasional *jiamari* verses (not necessarily in the same places as the original poems). Working recently on translating Akiko’s poetry, I have been giving even more consideration to the problem of how to translate it, since even at the first sight one can notice some irregularities. After counting syllables in all the 399 poems in *Midaregami*, one can notice that these irregularities are actually very regular. They occur only in very specific places of the poems. This means the structure of the poem held meaning and was very important to Akiko. Naturally, it is not the case that she wrote the longer verses deliberately, but she allowed the irregularities to happen in specific places. She remained strict about keeping the classical rhythm in general and was only tolerant of irregularities in certain parts of this rhythm. She kept to the traditional form but, to some extent, modernized it.

## Repetitions and wording in the irregular verses

What else can be observed about these irregularities? Akiko very skillfully uses repetitions and parallel wording, and there are at least 25 poems with *jiamari* in the lines with repeated words, for example:

kurokami no	czarne włosy i	My black hair
chisuji no kami no	czarnych kosmyków tysiąc	My thick thick black hair
midaregami	splątane włosy	My wild hair
katsu omoimidare	kiedy myślę wciąż się płaczą	Its thousand strands my heart
omoimidaruru	myśli wciąż mi się płaczą	Dishevelled, torn apart <sup>19</sup>

The *jiamari* verse here is the fourth one, *katsu omoimidare*, and the same verb, in a different form, is repeated in the next one: *omoimidaruru*. As we saw above, *jiamari* most often occur in the first verse. They can also often be observed in a phrase constructed with more than one noun and more than one particle, like in this poem, starting with *kimi ga uta ni* (six syllables, two nouns and two particles):

kimi ga uta ni	czy ty chociaż wiesz	hearing your poem
sode kamishi ko o	kto słysząc twój wiersz szarpie	someone bit her sleeve
tare to shiru	ząbkami rękaw?	do you know who
Naniwa no yado wa	w tej gospodzie w Naniwie	it was at the Osaka inn
aki samukariki	jesień była tak zimna	in the chill of autumn <sup>20</sup>

It can also be observed that there are often *jiamari* when words like *omou* (to think), or *tamau* (to honor, to bestow) are used, also with the verb endings like *-ramu* or *-ran*, or in verses with words in Sino-Japanese readings like *kyō*, meaning *miyako* (the capital city, i.e., Kyōto) as we have seen before.

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<sup>19</sup> R. Pulvers, "Yesterday," p. 3. Poem number 260.

<sup>20</sup> *A Girl with Tangled Hair*, p. 73. Poem number 94.

## Numerals in *Midaregami*

Let us now check some other peculiarities of Akiko's unique style. In many *Midaregami* poems numerals are used. I have counted at least 75 such poems in the collection, almost 20% of 399, which is also a modern, not traditional, feature. The first poem cited here starts with *sono ko hatachi* – “she is twenty.” There are nine poems mentioning somebody's age, mostly twenty years, like *hatachizuma* – “a twenty-year-old wife.”

There are also eight poems with a numeral and *shaku*, which is a traditional unit of length, 30.3 centimeters. This is one of them:

tokigami o	rozpuszczam włosy	unbound hair tangled
wakae ni karamu	wiatr je próbuje wplatać	by wind on a green twig
kaze no nishi yo	w młode gałązki	flows to west
nishaku ni taranu	jak tęcza na zachodzie	as a beautiful rainbow
utsukushiki niiji	piękna, choć na dwie stopy	less than two feet long <sup>21</sup>

Here, *nishaku ni taranu*, almost two feet, is the length of a girl's hair, and there are three other poems mentioning it: hair five *shaku* long (3), seven *shaku* – “not her sleeve but her hair they say”<sup>22</sup> (101), again five *shaku* – thick hair, cut after the girl's prayer was fulfilled (361). In three others, a two *shaku* kimono sleeve (79), a three *shaku* sleeve (35), and a nine *shaku* obi belt (304) are mentioned. It is quite striking how Akiko made use of dry numerals to emphasize the flowing luxurious beauty of long sleeves, hair, and a kimono belt.

One is the number most often used, appearing in at least 24 poems. Among them there are poems about *hitori*, one person or a lone person, and also *futari*, two people, meaning Akiko and her beloved – Tekkan. In the following poem there are as many as three different numerals, which show their intimacy, their love, and how well they understand each other on the basis of poetry:

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<sup>21</sup> *A Girl with Tangled Hair*, p. 78. Poem number 104.

<sup>22</sup> *A Girl with Tangled Hair*, p. 77. Poem number 101.



hito futari	oboje w wiersze	two people
busai no niji o	dwa słowa „bez talentu”	smile at the two letters
uta ni eminu	wpletliśmy ze śmiechem	inadequate
koi nimannen	dwadzieścia tysięcy lat	for 20,000 years of love
nagaki mijikaki	miłości: długo czy krótko?	the long and short of it <sup>23</sup>

Numerals are also combined with *ri*, a unit of length equal to 3.9 kilometers (translated as a league), in order to show the great length of a journey (poems 50, 60, 93). Also counted are days, months, years, times, nights, people, temples, bunches of hair, poems, clouds, and 25 bodhisattvas in Oku no in temple (possibly a place in the Kōya mountain temple complex; poem 20).

## Honorific language

One more characteristic trait of Akiko's language that I would like to mention here is the use of *keigo* (honorific language). It might have been quite natural for a cultured young woman one hundred years ago to speak very politely, but modern *tanka* poetry in her times was not really keen on honorifics. The frequent use of honorifics is considered to be a distinctive feature of Akiko's language and, in most cases, it is *sonkeigo* – respectful, appreciative language. There are significantly fewer examples of *kenjōgo* (humble language), both in poetry of Akiko and in *tanka* of the Meiji era.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as her language was based on classical Japanese, so was her *keigo*. Let us have a look at this poem: the verb ending *-masu* here is repeated as often as four times:

isamemasu ka	czy mnie napominasz?	do you
michi tokimasu ka	wskażesz właściwą drogę?	reason with me
satoshimasu ka	czy będziesz pouczać?	persuade or admonish
sukuse no yoso ni	nie myślmy o przeszłości	ignore our past
chi o meshimase na	mą krew ci oddaję, panie	just take my blood <sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *A Girl with Tangled Hair*, p. 75. Poem number 98.

<sup>24</sup> T. Waragai, “*Midaregami* ni okeru gengo hyōgen,” pp. 59–63.

<sup>25</sup> *A Girl with Tangled Hair*, p. 173. Poem number 294.

This is not considered to be a modern use of *-masu* as polite speech (so called *teineigo*), but a classical usage of *-masu* as an auxiliary verb expressing respect. The last two verses may sound quite bold and provocative in the English translation, but in the original Japanese the tone is quite different: the respectful language makes it sound elegant, delicate, and old-fashioned, emphasizing the love of Akiko towards Tekkan. It is usually rather hard if not impossible to translate Japanese honorific language so that it would sound natural and effortless in other languages, and here we have a perfect example showing vividly how much can be lost in translation when honorifics are removed.

## Conclusion

In this paper I attempted to discern some peculiar traditional and modern elements in the language of Yosano Akiko's poetry and show how, when combined, they form the basis of her unique style. Nonetheless, this uniqueness may still have quite a universal appeal.

The poetry of Akiko has been translated into many languages, and numerous poems from *Midaregami* have been translated into English by at least four different translators. Moreover, the collection regularly gets new editions in Japan, with new translations into present-day Japanese language and modern interpretations. It seems that her unique language, blending some old and new traits, was still able to convey ideas with a truly universal meaning to contemporary readers, more than one hundred years after the first edition of *Midaregami*.

The calculations and observations I have made have a very practical meaning for me, as they are going to help me with my work of translating Akiko's poetry into Polish. They help me understand the structure of her *tanka*, and in poems which are as short as 31 or so syllables, divided into five verses, structure is of utmost importance. Although Akiko wrote in a classical, traditional genre of poetry, she gave it a new life with a new language and a new view on love (one of the most traditional, classical subjects of poetry): full of passion, intimacy, and sensuality. In classical *waka*, the bodily beauty of a woman was limited mostly to the beauty of her long, black hair, but in *Midaregami* the hair is tangled and the women have slender bodies and full breasts.

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## Abstract

### *Passion and Form, Modernity and Tradition in the Unique Language of the Midaregami Poems of Yosano Akiko*

Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) gained fame as a poet, both in *tanka* and modern *shintaiishi* form, as a wife of Yosano Tekkan, also a prominent poet and literary magazine editor, and as a feminist, pacifist, and social reformer, author of many texts published in the *Seitō* [*Bluestocking*] magazine. In order to better understand the uniqueness of her poetic art, I take into consideration her language and the peculiarity of the versification of her poems. Although throughout her lifetime she produced many thousands of *tanka* poems, her most successful and most discussed collection of poetry was the first one: *Midaregami* or *Tangled Hair*, published in 1901. Being the first poet, and moreover a female poet, to use words like 'breasts' in *tanka*, she scandalized and received harsh criticism from some literary figures of her time. Others criticized her for creating poems which were hard to comprehend. In the first half of the twentieth century, her poems appeared to be full of passion and eroticism, her women were active and conscious of the beauty of their bodies and their sexuality. Yosano Akiko is still remembered as a scandalist and a creator of the most assertive, passionate poetry, but how is this passion created? In this paper I attempt to analyze modernity and tradition in Yosano Akiko's poems.

**Keywords:** Japanese poetry, *tanka*, Yosano Akiko, versification, modern poetry, sensuality, female beauty

# Universal Rule of Infinite Variety? Japanese Nominal Elements as Abandoned Parts of Speech

Arkadiusz Jabłoński\*

Japanese nominal elements *taigen* include nouns, pronouns, numerals, and their sub-categories. They are typically opposed to verbal elements *yōgen*. They may be viewed as the binary set of *nomen* vs. *verbum*. Their morphological properties, declensional paradigm, and case forms of nominal elements of Japanese, a language often described as agglutinative, could also be taken into account in its effective description, similarly to its verbal elements. Contrary to this, Japanese linguists characteristically seem to have a preference to neglect the systemic morphological features of nominal elements. This paper presents certain phenomena usually overlooked or obscured in the approach to linguistic facts. Their analysis (as implemented under a grant from the Polish National Science Centre<sup>1</sup>) may support the view that nominal elements are literally abandoned parts of speech in the tradition of grammatical description of Japanese. At the same time, at least certain facts concerning the nominal elements of Japanese seem to support the view that many of their features may be considered universal, especially when viewed against the background of other (inflecting) languages and their descriptions, rather than unique and impossible to describe by any available systemic methodology.

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## Noun=thing – inexorable progress?

As Langacker<sup>2</sup> ironically points out, seemingly obvious properties of nominal elements may be interpreted in various ways:

In elementary school, I was taught that a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. In college, I was taught the basic linguistic doctrine that a noun can only be defined in terms of grammatical behavior, conceptual definitions of grammatical classes being impossible. Here, several decades later, I demonstrate the inexorable progress of grammatical theory by claiming that a noun is the name of a thing.

It is interesting to find, in a text based primarily on cognitive premises, the following footnote:

My definition of ‘thing’ is highly abstract. It subsumes people and places as special cases and is not limited to physical entities.<sup>3</sup>

The semantic properties of nouns, as the representative nominal elements, may be discussed in linguistic terms, related either to literally nominal (alluding to the *names* of objects) or concrete, material features of their designates (cf. Latin: *nomen* [*substantivum*], Finnish: *substantivi*, French: *nom*, English: *noun*, German: *Substantiv*, Russian: *имя*, Japanese: *meishi*, Czech: *jméno*). The Japanese term *meishi* may be considered a direct translation of the English *noun* or Latin *nomen*, while the term *taigen* ‘nominal elements,’ due to the meaning of the sinographic constituent *tai* ‘body; substance’ constituting its *differentia specifica*, may be intuitively related to the Latin element *substantivum*. The German alternative term *Hauptwort* overtly alludes to the central position of nouns among the parts of speech. The Polish term *rzeczownik* refers to the meaning of a *thing*.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Langacker, *Cognitive Grammar. A Basic Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> R. Langacker, *Cognitive Grammar*, p. 93.

## Parts of speech: properties and classifications

The intuitive recognition of terms and their meanings may not always lead to an unambiguous description of their more advanced properties. Parts of speech (units of lexicon) may be classified according to various criteria. Most general sources list three groups: semantic, morphological, and syntactic.<sup>4</sup> Arranged in the increasing order of entropy, they encompass the following factors:

**MORPHOLOGY** deals with the internal structure of elements, viewed systemically, within inflectional paradigms. Dictionary (canonical) word units may reveal (numerous) word forms with distinct structures of constituent phonemes, reduceable to systemic sets of word forms for canonical units with the same nominal stem. Japanese nominal stems are uninflected, like *hon* 本 'book,' homophonic with its canonical form. Such forms may be juxtaposed with *stem+marker(s)* word forms (in an agglutinative language, with uni-functional grammatical morphemes, with one or more markers in a word form). Basic (one-marker) word forms are units like *hon-wa* 'book-TOP,' *hon-no* 'book-GEN,' *hon-o* 'book-ACC,' etc. The number of stems is large. Grammatical markers are limited in number, in Japanese probably to no more than two or three dozen. When all *stem+marker(s)* word forms are differentiated, their paradigmatic, finite set may serve as a reference for the systemic description of their oppositions.

**SEMANTICS** deal with meaning, that is, with how a string of phonemes is related to a designate. With its apparatus, it is possible to translate the *stem+marker(s)* word forms of Japanese, as *hon-wa* 'as to the book,' *hon-no* 'book's; of a book,' *hon-o* 'a book [the object of a transitive predicate].' This inherently unsystemic though intuitive technique demonstrates some aspects of their relations – both external, to the designate, and internal, between the respective word forms. Still, the meanings are

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<sup>4</sup> J. Lyons, *Semantics*, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge–London–New York–Melbourne 1977, p. 423; *Encyklopedia językoznawstwa ogólnego* [*Encyclopedia of General Linguistics*], ed. K. Polański, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków 1995, pp. 92–94; *Gendai gengogaku jiten. Seibido's Dictionary of Linguistics*, ed. H. Tanaka, Seibidō, Tokyo 1988, pp. 469–471.

not immediately linked to the morphological forms. They are imprecise and numerous. These factors limit the efficacy of the semantics-centered approach.

**SYNTAX** deals with repetitive roles of elements in text and co-text. According to the syntactic approach, a word form *hon-wa* may be explained in terms of 'topic or topic/subject,' *hon-no* as 'nominal attribute,' and *hon-o* as 'direct object.' Similarly to the semantics-centered approach, word forms need not be immediately linked to syntactic functions. Certain values and properties may interweave. Some semantic values may also be subject to neutralization in terms of syntax. In various languages, different syntactic techniques of marking the same semantic content may exist.

Not all values in a language may be marked in a parallel and regular manner. It is especially true for semantics and syntax. Elements may reveal slightly differentiated meanings or appear in various syntactic functions. Semantic and syntactic relations are usually more complex than phenomena on purely morphological level. It is considerably easier to operate on small, finite sets of elements, such as phonemes and phonemic structures (phoneme strings) than on more complex sets (semantic definitions, phrases, sentences, texts and their respective constituents). Such an approach, unfortunately, is rare in sources dealing with Japanese grammar.

## Lexical and grammatical elements in Japanese

The ambiguous status of the very term *case* in Japanese can be seen even in popular lay sources on Japanese grammar. While Wikipedia, quoted here on purpose, is definitely not an expert source, it reflects how some lay conceptualizations of the term may mimic the dominant analytical, isolating approach to the nominal phenomena of a language. The definition of *case* for Japanese is as follows:

Cases in Japanese are marked by particles placed after the nouns. A distinctive feature of Japanese is the presence of two cases, which are roughly equivalent to the nominative case in other languages: one representing the



sentence topic, the other representing the subject. The most important case markers are the following: [...] <sup>5</sup>

It is quite surprising to find out that in the above definition, clearly imprecise and based on lay common sense, the nominal phenomena of Japanese are described almost in the same manner as in most existing expert sources on Japanese linguistics. *Particles* are not clearly defined as dependent suffixes of independent elements. Case markers are described instead of and in separation from case forms. It is not clear what “the most important case markers” are. Finally, the nominative case is described, rather inconsistently, as marked both by *ga* and *wa* markers.

The issues related to coherent description of nominal cases of Japanese, roughly enumerated above, already emerged in the dilemmas of the first grammarians in their recognition of nominal stems, usually written in ideograms, as distinct from grammatical markers, written in syllabaries and absent from the signified versions of script. Still, even texts belonging to the genre of *kanbun*, which exclusively use ideograms (sinograms), could only be decoded (in fact: translated to Japanese from their quasi-Chinese version) after the reconstruction of original grammatical markers. This, rather than being a hint to engage in describing the regular and systemic roles of grammatical markers, fostered the spread of the technique of *okototen*. Missing markers were rendered with dots placed in fixed spots of the sinogram frame. Rather than showing the regular and systemic functions of markers, the dots indicated the presence of some elements regarded as optional – non-sinograms – with the sinograms viewed as the most important content of the message. As a consequence, grammatical markers were not seen as systemic constituents of Japanese nominal word forms. Even contemporarily, they are usually described as separate from nominal stems, as may also be noticed in the title of one of most prominent sources following the model of Japanese school grammar. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Grammatical Case,” *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical\\_case](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammatical_case); accessed: 21.04.2020.

<sup>6</sup> Sh. Hashimoto, *Joshi, jodōshi no kenkyū* [*The Study of Particles and Auxiliary Verbs*], Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1969.

In the traditional discussion on parts of speech, a distinction has been made between what in contemporary terms of general linguistics could be considered the counterparts of lexical and grammatical elements, both for nominal and verbal elements. This may further lead to a systemic and scientific description of lexical and grammatical elements similar to the following: “the latter are marked in a language in a systemic way, that is, they reveal appropriate formal markers, while the former do not have such markers.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the choice that the grammarians of Japanese are apt to make.

In a nineteenth-century pre-linguistic source by Suzuki Akira, an opposition of lexical *shi/kotoba* and grammatical *tenioha* is made in an intuitive but generally effective manner.<sup>8</sup> It is similar to the distinction between *shi* and *ji* put forward by contemporary sources.<sup>9</sup> Still, the properties of the two heterogeneous categories are often recognized erroneously. Suzuki’s analytical apparatus was for obvious reasons non-scientific. He, however, managed to distinguish aptly between the elements that “point at things [lit. ‘point at places’]” and “are words” and those that “do not have designates [lit. ‘do not have places to point at’].” This was an undoubted accomplishment of the erstwhile Japanese studies on language. Suzuki’s distinction was later quoted by Tokieda, with rather contradictory and unjustified assumptions on “the level of reflection he has achieved, higher than whatever the Occidental linguistic theories had ever been able to reach.”<sup>10</sup> What Tokieda admired may be reduced to Suzuki’s description of grammatical elements as *kokoro-no oto* ‘sounds of the heart.’ This, in the modern perspective of descriptive grammar, could be transposed with the emphasis on the systemic functions of grammatical elements as “phonetic representations of the intended [systemic, paradigmatic] meanings” of lexical elements. Instead, Tokieda proposes a distinction of *gainengo* ‘concept words’ and *kannengo*

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<sup>7</sup> J. Bańcerowski et al., *Wstęp do językoznawstwa [Introduction to Linguistics]*, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 1982, pp. 195–196.

<sup>8</sup> *Gengo shishuron/Gago onseikō kiga [Theory of Four Parts of Speech/Sounds of Speech of Refined Language]*, ed. A. Suzuki, commentary by T. Kojima, M. Tsuboi, Benseisha, Tokyo 1824/1979, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> H. Kindaichi et al., *Nihongo hyakka daijiten. An Encyclopedia of the Japanese Language*, Taishūkan Shoten, Tokyo 1988, p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> M. Tokieda, *Kokugogaku genron [Principles of Japanese Linguistics]*, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1941/1984, p. 233.

‘words of perception,’ with a clear intention to emphasize the alleged intentional, subjective properties of the latter.<sup>11</sup> He makes no attempt at discussing the paradigm of Japanese adnominal grammatical markers, not to mention the recognition of word forms as such.

A different point of view was provided by Ōtsuki, with an overt allusion to the fixed forms of grammatical adnominal elements and with a tentative proposition to describe variation patterns of *stem+marker(s)* type as nominal postpositional inflection, similarly as in Latin. The sinogram idiom *senpen’ichiritsu* ‘universal rule,’ lit. ‘various uses, one rule’ was used to emphasize the systemic properties of *stem+marker(s)* forms. Ōtsuki also aptly recognized that in some instances certain grammatical elements may be omitted in Japanese: “Latin cases are like legs” while “our *tenioha*, like shoes, may be taken off.”<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that these remarks met with fierce critique from Yamada, who openly criticized them as “insufficient” and an “easy way out.”<sup>13</sup> Yamada’s text does not constitute any systemic critique as it only includes citations from sources in English and German, languages with properties different from Japanese. This leaves the impression, quite similar as in the remarks by Tokieda, that Japanese grammar cannot be considered easy.

## Linguistic description and morphological properties

Nominal elements are usually described after verbal elements in contemporary sources. A representative example is the encyclopedia on Japanese linguistics and the diagram on the parts of speech,<sup>14</sup> with both verbal and nominal elements recognized as *jiristugo* ‘independent words,’ which alludes only partly to their lexical character. Not only are nominal elements listed after verbal elements, they are also by default considered non-inflected, literally *katsuyō-ga nai* ‘there is no inflection’ when it comes to their morphological properties. Accordingly, their syn-

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<sup>11</sup> M. Tokieda, *Kokugogaku*, p. 231 ff.

<sup>12</sup> F. Ōtsuki, *Kōnihon bumpō bekki* [General Overview of Japanese Grammar. Supplement], Ōtsuki Fumihiko, Tokyo 1897, pp. 135–136.

<sup>13</sup> T. Yamada, *Nihon bunpōron* [Japanese Grammar], Hōbunkan, Tokyo 1908, p. 80.

<sup>14</sup> H. Kindaichi et al., *Nihongo*, p. 171.

tactic feature of *shugo-ni naru* 'becoming a sentence subject' is emphasized. This resembles the description of Japanese parts of speech proposed by an earlier source compiled by one of the creators of Japanese school grammar.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the attitude presented by the authors adhering to the model of Japanese school grammar, there are no reasons to assume that nominal elements are non-inflected, especially in comparison to verbal elements. Both reveal lexical stems and grammatical markers. The only reason to contrast them could be that nominal stems are not subject to alteration, while some of the verbal stems are. The nominal stem is a part of a word form of a dictionary unit (both terms, as mentioned above, usually not being differentiated in the grammatical description of Japanese) carrying lexical meaning. Inflection is not about various forms of lexical stems but about various word forms belonging to the same inflectional paradigm of a dictionary unit. In this way, *hon-wa*, *hon-no*, or *hon-o* and other word forms of the dictionary unit *hon* may be described as its regular variants with the same lexical meaning and different morphological forms suited to the semantic properties and semantic contexts governing them. While certain exceptions may occur, the general rule holds. This is clearly not a view supported by the grammarians of Japanese.

Traditional distrust of the idea of systemic, paradigmatic research of nominal phenomena in Japanese may be illustrated by another passage, this time extracted from the original work of Hashimoto. His point of departure was not far from systemic. In a passage on the properties of parts of speech, he mentioned *gogi* – semantics, *gokei* – morphology, and *shokunō* – syntax. He aptly noticed that semantics reveal no objective, systemic criteria for classification. Then, for reasons known only to himself, he found morphological features applicable mainly to the order of the elements in dictionaries. Hashimoto briefly admitted that they might be useful in the description of *gokeihenka* 'inflection,' but then failed to recognize which factors were solely linked to changes in word forms. As a consequence, he described morphological differences in terms of "infinite variety." Accordingly, the Sino-Japanese term *sensa-*

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<sup>15</sup> Sh. Hashimoto, *Kokugohō kenkyū* [Study on the Grammar of the National Language], Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1948, pp. 61, 65.

*banbetsu* was used, meaning literally 'thousand differences, ten thousand exceptions.' The lack of the very notion of morphological paradigm is obvious in this kind of reasoning. At the same time, it is striking how different this point of view is from the one proposed by Ōtsuki, quoted above. Finally, what Hashimoto perceived as most representative and predictable were the syntactic functions of lexicon.<sup>16</sup>

## Morphological properties

Morphological classification often resorts to labels such as: isolating, fusional, or agglutinative. Still, even in the early works on linguistic morphology, it is intuitively mentioned that "[...] these so-called agglutinating languages do not differ from the inflectional ones, as do those which reject all indication by means of inflection."<sup>17</sup> This opposition seems to also be confirmed by contemporary sources on the morphology of languages in which morphological paradigms are traditionally implemented in the research of grammatical phenomena, such as Polish. In fact, fusional and agglutinative phenomena may co-exist in a language and are easy to distinguish. In the fusional forms, "a single inflectional morpheme is a marker of various inflecting categories."<sup>18</sup> The markers are "cumulative," cumulating grammatical functions. In the agglutinative forms, "the markers of various inflecting categories are as a rule different inflecting morphemes."<sup>19</sup> Both groups of word forms are consequently assumed as inflectional. This distinction is usually overlooked by the grammarians of Japanese, especially when it comes to the description of the nominal elements of the language.

Yoshida describes the particles *joshi* as specific for *tenchakugo* (contemporarily *kōchakugo*) – agglutinative languages, defined as Japanese and other Ural-Altaic languages in which grammatical functions are specified, as postulated by the author, by attaching separate word

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<sup>16</sup> Sh. Hashimoto, *Kokugohō*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>17</sup> W. von Humboldt, *On Language*, trans. P. Heath, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge–New York–New Rochelle–Melbourne–Sydney 1988, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> M. Bańko, *Wykłady z polskiej fleksji* [*Lectures on Polish Inflection*], Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2012, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> M. Bańko, *Wykłady*, p. 48.

units to the stem. These units are, due to the lack of clear differentiation of lexical and grammatical elements, referred to as *go*, which is a common practice in the sources of Japanese school grammar. Agglutinative languages are further differentiated from the ones referred to as *kussetsugo*, which in this context should probably be translated as ‘inflecting languages.’ They are defined as European languages, which specify grammatical functions, as the author puts it, by different sounds. The difference between the “separate word units” of the former and the “different sounds” of the latter is unclear. The third group are *koritsugo* – isolating languages, defined as languages of the Chinese type, with no inflection.<sup>20</sup> *Joshi* are hence described rather ambiguously, as “not bearing independent meaning” but at the same time “supporting the meaning of the words they attach to”<sup>21</sup> and originating from *tenioha*, with their division based on clearly syntactic properties.<sup>22</sup> Nominal elements are uninflected by their very definition. Even more significant is the fact that the term *kussetsugo* seems to be used to refer to “inflecting languages” as such, not to fusional languages. The latter would be more justified, since fusion and agglutination are in fact sub-types of inflection. Otherwise, one could also define isolating languages in terms of “attaching separate word units” to mark grammatical values.

While Yoshida’s work is almost one hundred years old, it embodies numerous tacit assumptions not absent from contemporary grammatical sources of Japanese. A fairly recent source states, for example, that Japanese “is [...] commonly classified as an *agglutinative language* because units of meaning are ‘glued’ to one after another.”<sup>23</sup> This is mentioned without reference to the uni-functionality of grammatical morphemes. The uni-functional character of agglutinative grammatical markers produces the need to “glue” more of them in compound word forms, exactly as it may be observed in the inflectional (conjugational) forms of Japanese verbal elements. This feature, if ever recognized by

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<sup>20</sup> K. Yoshida, *Chiisai kokubunpō* [*A Concise Grammar of Japanese*], Kōbundō, Tokyo 1927, p. 129.

<sup>21</sup> K. Yoshida, *Chiisai*, p. 129.

<sup>22</sup> K. Yoshida, *Chiisai*, p. 129 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Hasegawa, “Introduction,” [in:] *The Cambridge Handbook of Japanese Linguistics*, ed. Y. Hasegawa, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge–New York–Melbourne–New Delhi–Singapore 2018, p. 3.

the grammarians of Japanese, seems to be considered invalid for nominal elements.

## Grammatical markers

It is the grammatical markers, not the nominal elements of Japanese, that are usually described by grammarians. In addition, the analytic auxiliary functions of these elements are usually not differentiated from their synthetic functions. This further obscures the role of adnominal grammatical markers, also used with non-nominal elements, but in their evidently non-synthetic functions corresponding to but not identical with synthetic adnominal usage.

The very term used to refer to grammatical markers, *joshi*, contains the element *shi* 'lexical elements; vocabulary' as its *genus proximum*, which may suggest that they should be viewed and described as lexical. The element *jo*, occurring at the *differentia specifica* position in the term and meaning 'auxiliary,' does not seem to alter this significantly. Auxiliary elements are differentiated in the classification of parts of speech, formally treated as dependent elements but in practice also described as dictionary entries with numerous 'meanings.'

The list of grammatical markers is not fixed. The opportunity of listing and differentiating in a paradigmatic manner all markers that occur in a given morphological or syntactic context is rarely taken advantage of. Moreover, *joshi* come in many sub-classes. They include mainly, though not only, *kakujoshi* (literally 'case particles,' despite no declension being described in Japanese, typically with the elements: *-ga*, *-no*, *-ni*, *-o*, *-e*, *-kara*, and others), *kakarijoshi* ('bracket particles,' despite the fact that their functions may only be differentiated in the classical usage, typically with the elements such as: *-wa*, *-mo*, and *-koso*), *fukujoshi* ('additional particles,' with apparently unclear functions, as: *-dake*, *-hodo*, *-shika*, and others). There are also *setsuzokujoshi*, 'connecting particles,' such as *to*, *kara*, *koso* and others; however, their clearly syntactic, analytic usage and functions are usually mixed in with the description with other members of the *joshi* category.

Detailed semantic and syntactic differentiations of *joshi* may include more types, as was the case with the nine-type classification proposed by Hashimoto.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of how detailed they are, they are usually presented as open lists of selected (not all) markers. Moreover, the classification into groups is not definite. Some particles belong to two or more groups, their diachronic functions being often described along with synchronic usage. This further obscures the recognition of synthetic word forms of nominal elements, impeding a systemic, paradigmatic description of their morphological properties. As such, the enumeration of grammatical markers in Japanese grammatical sources seems to be possibly far from the systemic, paradigmatic description of grammatical oppositions based on a fixed lists of word forms and values ascribed to word units.

A separate group of grammatical markers is differentiated as “conjugated” and typically added to verbal elements as synthetic *jodōshi* ‘auxiliary verbs.’<sup>25</sup> This further emphasizes the fact that only verbal elements are described as inflected.

## Aid from the US

The unsystemic and unparadigmatic attitude towards nominal elements presented by Japanese grammarians is only in some minor respects altered by non-Japanese sources on Japanese grammar. Among these, English sources may be considered the most popular nowadays. In one of the most representative classifications of Japanese parts of speech (I. The verb. II. The adjective. III. The copula. IV. The noun. V. The postpositions or grammatical particles), the noun is listed after other parts of speech and just before grammatical elements, the latter being differentiated as parts of speech in a rather ambiguous manner.<sup>26</sup> This does not constitute a considerate improvement on the original Japanese classification. Moreover, in his definition of the Japanese noun as “an uninflected word that occurs before the copula” as well as in the follow-

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<sup>24</sup> Sh. Hashimoto, *Kokugohō*, pp. 78–79.

<sup>25</sup> H. Kindaichi et al., *Nihongo*, p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> R.A. Miller, *The Japanese Language*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1967, pp. 315–355.



ing sub-classification of nominal elements,<sup>27</sup> the author of the source seems to be surprisingly compatible with the texts of another prominent American scholar of Japanese linguistics he himself edited in a later publication.<sup>28</sup> The morphological properties of Japanese nominal elements are almost completely ignored by both sources, quite apart from a rather contradictory definition of noun as occurring “before the copula,” which overtly neglects the construction of nominal predicate, not radically different from its English counterpart. In the latter source, there is no mention of nominal elements in the chapter devoted to inflection,<sup>29</sup> with the description of the noun and other nominal elements included in the following chapter on syntax.<sup>30</sup> Grammatical markers are described in both sources in the form of a rough enumeration of their functions, viewed as post-positional and syntactic, not paradigmatic. The former source covers their description on merely two pages (sic!); it lists “sentence particles,” “clause particles,” “referent particles, which occur after noun expressions to form relational phrases,” “quotative particles,” “conjunctive particles,”<sup>31</sup> seemingly without any effort taken to mention their systemic, paradigmatic features. Their joint analysis is instead proposed on the basis of a sample text, which further confirms the lack of interest towards the paradigmatic approach. The latter source groups adnominal markers as constituents of “relational phrases”<sup>32</sup> with “two immediate constituents: an element called the *relatum*, and a following particle,”<sup>33</sup> of which “the *relatum* is most commonly the noun or other type of substantive expression.”<sup>34</sup> The fact that English nouns do not indeed reveal many morphological oppositions of word forms may not be a justification for this.

The scarce mentions of nominal inflection in the English sources quoted above stand in contrast to the abundant amount of information provided by other sources, often copying the original Japanese technique of defin-

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<sup>27</sup> R.A. Miller, *The Japanese Language*, p. 335 ff.

<sup>28</sup> B. Bloch, *Bernard Bloch on Japanese*, ed. R.A. Miller, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 1970, p. 56 ff.

<sup>29</sup> B. Bloch, *Bernard Bloch on Japanese*, pp. 1–24.

<sup>30</sup> B. Bloch, *Bernard Bloch on Japanese*, pp. 25–89.

<sup>31</sup> R.A. Miller, *The Japanese Language*, pp. 343–344.

<sup>32</sup> B. Bloch, *Bernard Bloch on Japanese*, pp. 51–55.

<sup>33</sup> B. Bloch, *Bernard Bloch on Japanese*, p. 51.

<sup>34</sup> B. Bloch, *Bernard Bloch on Japanese*, p. 51

ing “grammatical particles” by their purported (numerous and not fixed) dictionary “meanings.” In publications using this method, inherited by many educational sources on Japanese grammar, the scope of the described objects is not fixed, the lists of their meanings being virtually unlimited. Martin’s grammar is focused mainly on syntactic properties of grammatical elements, which is also visible in the not-too-elaborate definition of the noun by “plucking a pure noun from the nuclear ‘nominal’ sentence (*N da* ‘It’s N’) and preposing it as an adjunct to some given nuclear sentence, marking whatever grammatical relationships might obtain between the two by a postposition of ‘case’ relationship.”<sup>35</sup> This definition is not substantially different from that of “an uninflected word that occurs before the copula” quoted above. The descriptions of the “postposition” meanings also seem to leave much room for improvement, as exemplified by the following six “meanings” of *-o*:

1. direct object, AFFECTIVE, CATHETIC object,
2. place traversed (with *wataru*, *tōru*, *aruku*, *tobu*) TRAVERSAL object,
3. place departed from (= *kara*) (with quasi-intransitive verbs of leaving such as *deru*, *tatsu*, *oriru*) ABLATIVE object,
4. time spent (TEMPORAL object) as in *Tōkyō de issshō o kurasu*.
5. “orphaned object” (*Yuki no naka o [ ] dōmo osore-irimashita.*),
6. antithesis (*Sore o* ‘despite that’).<sup>36</sup>

The reader may get an impression that the function of a grammatical element differs according to the lexical elements which it accompanies. Should this be the concern of grammarians, further questions could arise, such as why meanings like OBLIVION (with such Japanese verbs as *wasureru* ‘to forget’) or COGNITION (with *shiru* ‘to know’) are not taken into account in the description. This would result in a practically unlimited list of “meanings” of a grammatical element, not substantially different from its most salient function, that is, marking the direct object or accusative case. A more thorough analysis of the six allegedly different meanings proposed above reveals that distinctions seem to have also been made between the instances of “intuitive” accusative/direct object

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<sup>35</sup> S.E. Martin, *A Reference Grammar of Japanese*, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 1975, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> S.E. Martin, *A Reference Grammar*, p. 40.

marking, to be found also in English counterparts of the listed usages (represented mainly by no. 1), and between the instances of “non-intuitive” usage, present in Japanese but often not found in their immediate translations into English, as in nos. 2, 3, and 4. This is reflected by the rather curious remark on “quasi-intransitive verbs.” Additionally, the definitions no. 5 and 6 above, alluding to an illusionary “orphaned object” or mixing synchronic inter-dependencies with diachronic facts of Japanese, do not seem to be useful in the description of *-o* in its function as a Japanese grammatical adnominal marker. In the approach proposed by Martin, the morphological properties of nominal *stem+marker(s)* word forms are utterly neglected. In addition, not all markers described, similarly as *-o* above, as “noun postpositions” or “particles” are recognized in the similar manner. In a separate section devoted to “focus of attention,” one may find the description of such markers as *-wa* and *-mo*, clearly interpreted in a different framework than case relationship.<sup>37</sup>

A seemingly different technique is to override the phonological content of nominal forms for the sake of reducing the role of grammatical elements to their syntactic function. A side effect of such approach, usually going undocumented, is that some actual properties of glossed (Japanese) markers are disguised by the language of description (English). This is visible, for example, in glossing the grammatical marker *-ga* as NOM, with direct reference to its allegedly primary function of marking the sentence subject. At the same time, other markers, even more characteristic for Japanese, as *-mo* or *-dake*, are rendered with their translation (‘too’ or ‘only’), which obscures their grammatical functions.<sup>38</sup>

Glossing is often introduced with no definition of the concepts behind the acronyms. The act of glossing *-ga* as NOM may be motivated by an (erroneous) assumption that it is the default function of the NOM-inative case to mark the sentence subject. However, Japanese is not a subject-prominent but a topic-prominent language, which is clearly neglected in such descriptions.

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<sup>37</sup> S.E. Martin, *A Reference Grammar*, p. 52 ff.

<sup>38</sup> M. Shibatani, *The Languages of Japan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 271.

## “Noun conjugation”

The nominal stems of Japanese, while being uninflected, may be subject to certain morphological changes. They are of the derivational, not of the paradigmatic, systemic character.

The above fact might not have been clear for Suzuki, who, in a manner typical for the pre-linguistic thought, described nominal elements in contrast to verbal elements, stating that the former do not reveal the *-a* to *-o* endings, and that the *-u* ending, typical for the latter, is rare among the former.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Suzuki noticed some alternations in nominal element endings. Similar phenomena exist contemporarily. *Ame* ‘sky’ alternates to *ama* in *amanogawa* ‘the Milky Way.’ *Sake* ‘alcohol’ alternates to *saka* in *sakaya* ‘liquor shop.’ *Te* ‘hand’ alternates to *ta* in *tamukeru* ‘to see off.’ *Take* ‘bamboo’ alternates to *taka* in *takagaki* ‘bamboo fence.’ *Hi* ‘fire’ alternates to *ho* in *hokage* ‘flame.’ And *ki* ‘tree’ may alternate to *ko* in *kogakure* ‘tree shade.’ These alterations are not explained in a convincing manner by grammarians. In at least one source, a section on so-called *meishi no katsuyō* ‘conjugation of nouns’ may be found, with the remark that nouns may be considered inflected, but only according to the pattern of conjugation.<sup>40</sup> The work does mention that such phenomena are far from systemic. It is not clear what value the contents of the section and its title hold for contemporary linguistic research.

There is more proof to the claims that conjugation, despite existing language data, is considered as (apparently only) a pattern of inflection, while systemic phenomena related to nominal elements do not seem to garner much attention. A fairly recent and popular source in Japanese linguistics describes nouns (and particles) on mere two (sic!) pages.<sup>41</sup> Most attention is devoted to the element *-no*, referred to as a genitive case particle and described as an analytical marker (half a page). Not only is there no declensional paradigm proposed for nominal elements. Presented instead is the alleged conjugation paradigm, which is

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<sup>39</sup> Gengo *shishuron*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>40</sup> H. Kindaichi et al., *Nihongo*, pp. 177–178.

<sup>41</sup> N. Tsujimura, *An Introduction to Japanese Linguistics*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge–Oxford 1996, pp. 126–127.

described, for reasons apparently clear solely to the author, as different from English:

What further separates Japanese nouns from English nouns is that Japanese nouns are associated with a conjugational paradigm, illustrated below with the noun *hon* 'book.'

Table 1 below sums up the data provided by the original source.

a. non-past	<i>hon-da</i>	'it is a book'
b. non past neg.	<i>hon-ja nai</i>	'it's not a book'
c. past	<i>hon-dat-ta</i>	'it was a book'
d. past neg.	<i>hon-ja na-kat-ta</i>	'it wasn't a book'
e. tentative	<i>hon-darō</i>	'it is probably a book'

Table 1. "Nouns associated with a conjugational paradigm" by Tsujimura.<sup>42</sup>

Without alluding to the traditional lack of interest towards the description of nominal phenomena exhibited by most grammarians of Japanese, it is almost impossible to understand why the above phenomenon, clearly an example of nominal predicate, is explained as a "conjugational paradigm" by Tsujimura. It is also hard to explain why it is considered different from English.

## Inexplicable (?) nominal elements of Japanese

It is surprising to find out that, in many descriptions of Japanese nominal elements, the method of direct translation or explanation of lexical "meanings" is, even contemporarily, more popular and valued than paradigmatic description of grammatical phenomena on the basis of their systemic functions. In such approaches, selected descriptive exceptions are presented instead of (abandoned) systemic rules. It is impossible to claim that all nominal phenomena are systemic and paradigmatic. Still,

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<sup>42</sup> N. Tsujimura, *An Introduction*, pp. 126–127.

the study of their morphological properties, at the level of least entropy, may serve as a solid foundation for research more complex than the popular studies of derivational features or detailed semantic variations. Quite apart from the fact that Japanese is different than other languages, it is hard to maintain that its nominal phenomena cannot be linked to regular *stem+marker(s)* word form structures and that they exhibit only lexical, non-systemic features. This seems to constitute a strong argument for a universal, systemic description of the nominal elements of Japanese. Unfortunately, this argument is neglected or questioned in a variety of ways by most of the existing sources on Japanese grammar.

The unparadigmatic and unsystemic grammatical description of the nominal elements of Japanese in terms of "infinite variety" rather than of "universal rules" is founded on one fundamental conviction:

I. Lack of differentiation between lexical and grammatical elements, the former being identified with (meaningful) sinograms and the latter reduced to pure sounds.

This basic attitude results in more or less immediate consequences:

II. Description of grammatical elements as quasi-independent units of vocabulary.

III. Lack of interest in the concept of word units (word forms) as paradigmatic, inflecting variants of dictionary units.

IV. Uneven recognition of agglutinative properties in nominal and verbal elements.

V. Description of peripheral phenomena instead of general rules.

VI. Proliferation of bizarre or contradictory descriptions of nominal elements.

Such *status quo* of Japanese linguistics leaves unresolved the basic issue: what is uninflected in *hon-wa*, *hon-no*, or *hon-o*? As a consequence, there has been questionable (rather than inexorable) progress in the study of Japanese nominal elements throughout centuries, with scarce perspectives both for the extensive description of the nominal phenomena and for their comparison with other inflecting languages. Quite apart from the fact that script-centered (sinogram-centered)

approaches to the grammatical facts of Japanese (utilizing the borrowed elements of Chinese script due to obvious historical reasons, but at the same time being drastically different from the typological properties of Chinese languages) are inevitably superficial and misleading, at least certain contemporary descriptions of allegedly inexplicable facts of Japanese nominal morphology must simply be considered unscientific.

At the same time, it may be concluded that a coherent description of Japanese nominal word forms (consisting of lexical stems and grammatical markers and contrasted with dictionary word units, containing only lexical information) could make it possible to achieve a systemic and paradigmatic model of nominal phenomena in Japanese. When viewed from an appropriate typological perspective, Japanese nominal elements reveal certain universal and regular properties. Their consistent morphological description, not (yet) available at the time of the compilation of this paper (November 2019) is planned as a future research task.

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## Abstract

### *Universal Rule of Infinite Variety? Japanese Nominal Elements as Abandoned Parts of Speech*

It is common in the grammatical descriptions of Japanese to neglect the morphological properties of the nominal elements of the language. This may probably be related to the Sino-centric tradition of ideographic (sinographic) writing and results in emphasizing the isolating and analytic properties of the Chinese languages it originates from. In this paper, certain detailed consequences of this approach are presented. They include, in the first place, the lack of differentiation between lexical and grammatical elements in grammatical descriptions. Little interest towards the concept of paradigmatic nominal word units, uneven recognition of agglutinative properties of language in the nominal and verbal elements of Japanese as well as description of peripheral phenomena instead of general rules may be considered the immediate consequences of the *status quo*. Bizarre or contradictory theories resulting from it, also presented in the paper, embody a characteristic preference for unsystemic grammatical description among the grammarians of Japanese, described in terms of emphasizing alleged infinite variety over universal morphological rules.

**Keywords:** Japanese language, nominal elements, word form, agglutinative properties, morphology, paradigmatic features

## Part II

### Theater and Film



## The New *Nō* Drama (*Shinsakunō*) for the Appeasement of Spirits and Process of Reconciliation

Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska\*

Apart from the classical or canonical repertoire of the most often performed *nō* dramas, there exists an ever, if slowly, growing number of new dramas for the *nō* stage, called *shinsakunō* – “a newly composed *nō*.” This term usually embraces pieces written from the end of the Edo period (1603–1868) until present, and encompasses more than 400 pieces, including ones written by non-Japanese authors. They are an interesting object for study, even if, in principle, they are performed barely once or twice, and only on special occasions. Studies in this field are far less developed than the research of classical texts, which is somehow understandable, as they are staged relatively rarely. Some of the *shinsakunō* seem to be specifically aimed at healing some kind of a group trauma or a social tragedy and deal with a sense of guilt and remorse. The present paper focuses on such texts.

The conviction about the necessity of reconciliation with the dead can be found in many *nō* plays. Among the categories of plays from the canonical repertoire, dramas about warriors, the so-called *shura nō*, are considered to be quite important. Those plays recreate the moment of death of a warrior killed in battle. The audience sees how the warrior’s soul is liberated from its grief by the prayer of a monk before whom the suffering soul had appeared. In another category of plays, one dealing with the beautiful women of the past, a woman’s soul, filled with passion, is not allowed to go into the state of eternal rest, but still it can be soothed once someone listens to her story with compassion.

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We will now review the bulk of the *shinsakunō* works created with this particular aim of reconciliation and atonement in mind, including dramas written by foreigners and in languages other than Japanese.

## New *nō* dramas for appeasement and reconciliation authored by Japanese writers

The first such drama in the modern era was the play *Shika no se* [*The Sea Current of Deer, or Deer Shallows*], written in 1902. The author, possibly Osaka's port director named Nishimura, created it for the anniversary of the catastrophe of a fishing boat which had sunk in the Sea Deer Current, killing the entire eleven-member crew. The play was commissioned by the members of the bereaved families in order to soothe the troubled souls of the victims. Their bodies were never found and so were not buried properly. In the drama, the ghost of the ship's captain appears and tells the story of the disaster.<sup>1</sup> The stage recreation of the fishermen's last moments was cathartic and soothed the feelings of all families, as they were mourning them while watching the performance. The actors of the Kongō school<sup>2</sup> collaborated in staging the play.

It is interesting that no text of this kind was created for the following three decades. Even after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 1923, none of the new *nō* dramas dealt with the meeting of the dead, instead only one play was written about the reconstruction of a temple in Asakusa.

It took the outbreak of the Second World War (or rather, the War in the Pacific) for some new pieces for appeasement of spirits to be written. Japan's capitulation soon after the nuclear bombardment of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought about new dramatic texts, many of them of a high

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<sup>1</sup> The summary is based on H. Nishino, "Kindai zenki no shinsaku yōkyoku" ["New *Nō* Plays in the Early Modern Era"], *Nōgaku Kenkyūjo Kihyō* 1983, no. 9, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> The Kongō school is one of the five family schools of *nō* theater and is known for its dynamic and energetic style of acting. Other existing schools are: the Kanze, the Hōshō, and the Komparu. These four were established before the seventeenth century, while the fifth one – the Kita school – was started in the early seventeenth century.

artistic level, answering the need for reconciliation with the terrible feeling of grief. The first text written on the theme of nuclear bombing appeared in 1955 and was entitled *Genbaku* [*An Atomic Explosion*]. It was written by Takenaka Minoru, who also composed the music for it in the Kanze style.<sup>3</sup> In *Genbaku*, a wandering monk meets a hungry beggar at the Motoyasu River bank in Hiroshima. The monk is asked by the latter to chant a Buddhist sutra for the souls of the victims of the bombing. The two start chanting together. Soon a chorus joins in, and it is understood that those are the voices of the souls of the victims being heard.<sup>4</sup> There is not much dramatic tension in this play; it is a requiem of sorts for the souls of the people killed.

In 2001, writer Dōmoto Masaki wrote *Sadako genbaku no ko* [*Sadako – the Child of the Bomb*]. The plot was based on the story of a real girl, Sasaki Sadako, who died of post-radiation leukemia in 1955, at the age of twelve. While in hospital, Sadako held a belief that folding one thousand origami paper cranes (the symbol of longevity) would be a cure for her sickness. She died after making slightly more than six hundred. Therefore, her friends decided to finish her work, so that Sadako could be buried with all the one thousand cranes. Her story became quite famous, giving inspiration to a piece of a literary work and film based on her story, not to mention popularizing origami cranes worldwide. In 1958, a monument to Sadako was erected to symbolize all the child victims of the bombing. It stands in Hiroshima and has the form of a huge three-legged oval pedestal supporting a sculpture of a girl holding a huge metal origami-like crane over her head (Fig. 9).

In Dōmoto's play, the protagonist is a foreigner who arrives in Hiroshima and talks to a certain bomb victim with the help of an interpreter. He hears about Sadako's death, and this marks the end of Part One. In Part Two, he lets a paper lantern float on the water of the river. Suddenly Sadako's spirit appears in the form of a crane. She sings a song of love for life and peace, performs a dance, and, in the end, flies up to disappear in the sky. The premiere in Hiroshima in 2002 was received well. The renowned

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<sup>3</sup> Kanze style, taught and practiced by the most powerful family school of *nō* theater, is characterized as full of elegance and beauty.

<sup>4</sup> H. Nishino, "Shinsakunō no hyakunen.1" ["One Hundred Years of the New *Nō*. Part 1"], *Nōgaku Kenkyūjo Kihyō* 2005, no. 29, p. 115.



Figure 9. The Children's Peace Monument in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

*nō* actor Umewaka Rokurō served as the literary curator and director of the performance, and he also played the role of Sadako. Music was composed by Umewaka Shin'ya, while Dōmoto's original text, written in contemporary Japanese language, was adapted to the *nō* idiom by Oda Sachiko.<sup>5</sup>

One year later, there appeared another *shinsakunō* devoted to the Hiroshima tragedy. Titled *Genshigumo* [*Atomic Cloud*], it was written by Uda Michishige – an actor from Kyoto. The heroine is an old woman, a mother who lost her child in the nuclear bombing. She is on a pilgrimage and arrives in Yonokuni (The Other World of the Dead). There she meets a crowd of souls of women and children killed not only in Hiroshima, but also in “all the wars.” Therefore, they symbolize all the people killed around the world, all the victims – including those of terrorist attacks. The woman starts praying to soothe their souls.<sup>6</sup> *Genshigumo* was the first *shinsakunō* that spoke directly of the victims of modern terrorism; undoubtedly the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 influenced it, as it was written soon after that event.

Finally, in 2004 Tada Tomio wrote two pieces of *shinsakunō* dedicated to Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombings. The first one was *Genbakuki* [*Requiem for Hiroshima*], and the second one *Nagasaki no Seibō* [*Our Lady of Nagasaki*]. Both met with universal acclaim, and *Nagasaki no Seibō* was performed more than once, including multiple stagings in Europe in 2019 (in Poland, Austria, and France).

The plot of *Genbakuki* takes place in the city of Hiroshima in August, on the eve of anniversary celebrations. A monk is looking at the ruins of the town hall, presently known as the Atomic Bomb Dome, when an old woman approaches him and starts a conversation. Full of bitterness, she suddenly exclaims that, despite the terrible experience of the nuclear bombings, humanity has still not understood its lesson. She says that even in Japan there are people who want to develop dangerous nuclear energy to serve the country's economic needs. Then she tells her story:

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<sup>5</sup> H. Nishino, “Shinsakunō no hyakunen,” p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> H. Nishino, “Nōkai tenbō. Heisei jūgonen-jūrokunen” [“Outlook on the *Nō* World. Years 15–16 of the Heisei Era”], *Nōgaku Kenkyūjo Kihyō* 2006, no. 30, p. 167.



she lost her mother in the explosion, and her father disappeared following the attack. After sharing her story, she leaves. The monk decides to wait by the river until the evening, when he intends to pray for all the souls. Later, at dusk, two homeless people come up to him: a grandfather with a grandchild. The older man introduces himself as a survivor of the bombing, and after exchanging a few words, they both go away. Crowds slowly gather to light up memorial lanterns and float them on the river. The wind stops and it starts to rain. A man approaches them and reveals his true identity: while previously he had taken the form of an old woman, he was actually the spirit of the woman's father, killed in the bombing. He recounts his last moments in the bombed city: he speaks of the terrible heat, the blinding light, and how Hiroshima "turned to hell." He also speaks of the "black rain" that fell on the city. In the end, he starts dancing and the chorus sings – these are the voices of the victims, praying for world peace and an end to war.

The second of Tada Tomio's plays, *Nagasaki no Seibō* [*Our Lady of Nagasaki*], differs greatly from the other pieces, because it refers to Christian beliefs and the Catholic Church. The plot unfolds around a visit of a wanderer – a Japanese Christian from Tsuwano,<sup>7</sup> to the rebuilt St. Mary's Cathedral in Urakami, a district of Nagasaki. The action takes place in the late afternoon of a hot August day. The wanderer sees three women approaching the cathedral, then a Gregorian chant is heard, and a bell resounds to announce prayer. One of the women is quite old, while the other two accompanying her are young girls. The wanderer greets them, and we find out two of their names: Anastasia and Lucia. They mention that they had not showed up for vespers in a long time, but on that day they have somehow decided to come to the rebuilt cathedral. The oldest one still remembers the bombardment. She recalls the horrible moment when the roof collapsed. Black smoke devoured the nave, and one could hear moaning and shrieks of the injured people. The nuns, all wounded themselves, ran to help the others. At night, an unknown woman suddenly appeared. She joined in the rescue: she tirelessly carried water, dressed wounds, and comforted the dying people. But when the morning

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<sup>7</sup> The very origin of the wanderer is significant. Tsuwano was one of the hidden Christian settlement centers during the Tokugawa regime. It was a place of martyrdom of thirty-seven of those who refused to renounce their faith. To commemorate them, the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary was built in Tsuwano in 1936.

came, she disappeared. After sharing this story, the old woman leaves. Anastasia and Lucia stay. They say that maybe it was Holy Mary herself who had come to rescue the victims after the bombing. They also reveal their true identity: they are the souls of nuns killed back then. Then music can be heard: the chorus sings a Gregorian chant, and the bell rings. At this moment, the silhouette of the Holy Mother (*Seibō*) appears. She is clad in a beautiful Goddess's dress, with a sapphire veil over her face and a golden crown on her head. She sings the hymn of life and of the love of God, and dances before the altar.<sup>8</sup> This drama was staged in 2005 in cooperation with the choir of a private Catholic university built on the grounds of the Nagasaki Junshin University monastery. The main role (the Old Woman/Holy Mary) was played by Shimizu Kanji.

Another difficult topic that Tada Tomio took up in one of his *shinsakunō* was the theme of Koreans being deported to Japan during the war and their subsequent tragic fate. In 1993, Tada wrote *Bōkonka* [*A Song of Bitterness*], which certainly could be interpreted as a drama for reconciliation. The play is set in Korea. A Japanese Buddhist monk from Kyūshū arrives, bringing with him a certain letter discovered in his temple's archives. The letter was written by a Korean man named Ritōjin, who had been taken to Kyūshū by the Japanese for compulsory labor, and this was where he ultimately died. The letter he had written to his young wife never reached her and, instead, it lay buried in the temple's bureau in Kyūshū. The monk decided to try and find the addressee, so he set out on a journey which led him to finding Ritōjin's home village in Korea. He manages to find Ritōjin's widow there. She has become old and decrepit, and lives alone outside the village. On the evening of the Korean festival for dead ancestors, the old woman accepts the letter from the monk with a great shock. Instead of rejoicing, she speaks with rebuke. She bitterly talks about her wasted youth, her grief, despair, and even shame. She has become an object of ridicule for the local children. To vent her anger, she takes out a wooden mallet (*kinuta*)<sup>9</sup> and starts to pound it. The monk comforts her and encourages her to participate in the festival. Finally, she starts dancing. When she is finished, she utters

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<sup>8</sup> T. Tada, *Tada Tomio shinsakunō zenshū* [*Tada Tomio. The Complete New Nō Dramas*], ed. K. Kasai, Fujiwara Shoten, Tokyo 2012, pp. 154–180.

<sup>9</sup> *Kinuta* – a type of a fulling block used to smoothen silk fabric.

the words of eternal grief ("The heart will never forget!" – *Wasureji ya wasureji*) and leaves the stage.<sup>10</sup>

In *Bōkonka*, Tada used the motif of the fulling block, well-known from the canonical play *Kinuta* [*The Fulling Block*], in which a neglected wife beats cloth with the eponymous tool. The beating is a symbolical expression of grieving. *Bōkonka* is probably the only play of the new *nō* dedicated to the Korean victims of the Japanese aggression, and one that does not end in a peaceful prayer. The piece does not end with the appeasement of a tormented soul, and so this may indicate a heavy historical burden of the troubled Japan–Korea relations. Still, even by choosing to undertake this theme, Tada showed courage and initiative.

Among the dramas written to relieve the suffering of those who were harmed, one can also find a very moving piece based on the poetry of Ishimure Michiko. Composed in 2002 and entitled *Shiranui* [*Lights of Ignorance*; Shiranui is also the name of the inland sea next to the town of Minamata], it was dedicated to the victims of the Minamata disease. A terrible contamination of sea water with mercury compounds released into the sea by the Chisso company in the 1950s and 1960s caused a severe and crippling illness which affected more than two thousand people, the majority of whom died. For years, Ishimure fought for recognition of the problems faced by the victims of the Minamata disease. She initiated an exhibition of shocking photographs of the people affected (especially those taken by famous photojournalist W. Eugene Smith), showing both their deformed bodies and their caretakers, usually mothers. In 2002, on the basis of her poems collected in the volume *Kūkai jōdo* [*Pure Land in the Sea of Suffering*, 1969], Ishimure composed the *Shiranui* (also transcribed as *Shiranuhi*) *shinsakunō*. The very title of the collection of her poems – *Pure Land in the Sea of Suffering* – indicated her approach to the problem. In her poetic vision, the sick people enduring terrible pain keep hoping for the Buddha to give them an answer to the question of why they must go through such an ordeal. Ishimure speaks

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<sup>10</sup> T. Tada, *Tada Tomio shinsakunō zenshū*, p. 86.

of them as of unrecognized Buddhas who are incorporated in the contaminated bodies.<sup>11</sup>

## New *nō* dramas written by the non-Japanese

The first contemporary *nō* play written by a non-Japanese was *Drifting Fires* by Janine Beichman, published in 1986.<sup>12</sup> Beichman gave her work the subtitle: “American *nō*.” It is a kind of futurist fiction tinged with elements of nature philosophy and cosmology. It describes extra-terrestrial visitors who come to Earth from the Veil Nebula in the Swan Constellation; when they arrive on Earth, all life has already been extinguished. Only fires are blazing over emptiness. Suddenly, a phantom comes up. He says that he is the only living creature left on Earth, as all life died in a great cosmic cataclysm long ago. Then the creature disappears. Next, a Servant of the Lord of the World arrives and says that he is to write the history of the universe. Asked by the visitors, he recounts the history of the Solar System from its formation in the Big Bang, through the cooling of the lava, the emergence of seas and the creation of life on Earth, to the extinction of the Sun in the process of expansion and absorption of all planets. He then leaves only to reappear again, this time as an Old Woman – the Earth Soul. She sings a song extolling the beauty of the planet Earth in the past, when it was filled with life. She dances her Dance of the Earth and then disappears. In the play there is no dramatic conflict; instead, a sort of a Requiem for Earth resounds. At present, when there is so much concern about the global extinction of life on our planet, Beichman’s *shinsakunō* seems almost prophetic and strangely reconciled with the dark perspective presented. *Drifting Fires* was translated into Japanese by Ōka Makoto and staged in 1985 at the EXPO ’85 world exhibition in Tsukuba. It was shown in 1986 at the Zōjōji Temple in Tokyo, and then in 1993 in San Francisco.

Another piece I would like to discuss comes from Australia. There, the feeling of guilt and shame of the colonizers, brought about by their

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<sup>11</sup> M. Ishimure, *Ishimure Michiko zenshū* [Collected Works of Ishimure Michiko], vol. 18: *Shiranui* [Unknown Light], Fujiwara Shoten, Tokyo 2004.

<sup>12</sup> J. Beichman, *Drifting Fires. An American Nō = Hyōen. Janin Baichiman ni yoru eigo nō*, trans. M. Ōoka, Shichigatsudō, Tokyo 1986.

exploitation of the Indigenous peoples, has created a need to somehow atone for the past deeds. The year 1989 saw the premiere of a *shinsakunō* created in Australia on the basis of motifs related to the history of white people settling on the continent. The drama, titled *Eliza*, was written by Allan Marett, a professor at the University of Sydney, an ethnomusicologist and researcher of the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific region. The narrative of the play is based on real events. Eliza Fraser was the wife of James Fraser, the captain on the ship *Stirling Castle*. After the cargo ship crashed on the reef, eleven survivors escaped on a boat and alighted on today's Waddy Point on Fraser Island. They split into two groups; Captain Fraser and his wife went to a place today known as Hook Point. They were taken care of by the local Badtjal people. After some time, they managed to make contact with the second group of survivors, but then Eliza started telling imaginary stories of their own group having been "kidnapped" – as she claimed – by the Badtjal. Although the other survivors challenged her testimony, the white people ended up massacring the Badtjals and banishing them from their land. The play opens on the coast, when someone meets a woman sharing the story of Eliza Fraser, forced to live in an Aboriginal village after the shipwreck. The traveler realizes that the woman's story of her horrible experiences is told in a way necessary to meet the political needs of the white settlers. Nevertheless, in the course of her storytelling, the woman (who turns out to be Eliza herself) starts to realize her own tale is nonsense. She admits to her wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness. Then she disappears. She reappears in the second part of the play. Now, freed from her passions, Eliza dances during the *corroboree* – an Aboriginal dance ceremony of the living meeting with their Ancestors. In it, the participants are believed to enter the Dreamtime (*Alcheringa*), which is the space-time of eternal Creation. Only in that space can the reconciliation between Eliza and the Indigenous peoples' group be completed.<sup>13</sup> The music for the play was composed by Richard Emmert, while Matsui Akira, who played the lead role in the premiere in 1989, created the choreography.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Marett, *Eliza*, author's private collection (manuscript received from Richard Emmert, a *nō* performer and professor at the Musashino Women's College, founder of The Theatre Nohgaku).

A different theme was taken up in Canada. *The Gull*, subtitled *The Steveston Project 2006*, was created by Daphne Marlatt, a well-known Canadian writer and literary theoretician from British Columbia. The drama was commissioned by the non-governmental organization Pangaea, located in Vancouver, whose goal was to build an intercultural understanding and artistic cooperation in initiatives connected to peoples of Asian traditions. The project aimed to address the consequences of the internment of the Japanese community in Canada during the war. The problematic consequences of the internment were particularly severe for the Japanese Canadians of Steveston, a town on the outskirts of Vancouver. After living there for decades, they had developed small businesses in fishing, but the wartime internment destroyed their community. Only a few returned after the war. The drama features two brothers who return to Steveston – the place where they were born and raised. In the first part, the two of them take a stroll on the seashore, where they notice a strange being. To one of them it appears to be a woman, while the other sees a seagull. They think it is the soul of their mother, who came to Steveston from Japan a long time ago. In the second part of the drama, the soul arrives again, this time in the form of a woman. She recalls Japan – in particular, the town of Miho. She says that even though she considered herself Japanese, her sons were already Canadians. She insists that they should stay here, where they were born and where they belong. They all dance together and reconcile the past with the present. They also reconcile their two identities: the Japanese and the Canadian one.<sup>14</sup> *The Gull* premiered in 2006 in Richmond, Canada, and was directed by Matsui Akira of the Kita school.

The fate of Chinese emigrants living abroad and the question of the cultural identity of their children became a foundation for another *shinsakunō* created in 2009. It was written by an English author Janette Cheong, whose family hailed from mainland China and who eventually settled in London. Cheong decided to look at the fate of her own family through the prism of *nō*. She based her play, *Pagoda*, on the story of her father, who was sent by his mother to work abroad during the famine in China in the 1920s. He never returned and died in London in 1970. In

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<sup>14</sup> “The Gull,” *Theatre Nohgaku*. <https://www.theatrenohgaku.org/>; accessed: 01.02.2018.

the drama, a Girl (the author's alter ego) travels to the humble home village of her father in southeastern China. There, on her way to a Buddhist pagoda, she encounters a woman with a daughter. This woman, named Meiling, had long ago sent off her young son to work on a ship. After climbing the pagoda hill together and looking out to the sea, the characters of the Woman and the Daughter say that they're waiting there for the return of their son/brother. Shortly afterwards, they disappear. Next, the traveling girl meets a fisherman who tells her the story of this pagoda. It was built by the village mothers who were separated from their children but always kept praying for their safety and welfare. The fisherman asks the girl the name of her father and is astonished and silent when he hears her answer. The girl then realizes that the two women she encountered earlier were, in fact, the spirits of her own grandmother and aunt. The spirits soon reappear and tell the story of their past hardships. Afterwards, a happy reunion dance takes place. The traveling girl realizes that her family is now reunited in the spiritual world. She reflects on the fate of all those who were separated from their homeland.<sup>15</sup> In 2009, *Pagoda*, directed by Richard Emmert, who also composed the music, was staged in London, Dublin, and Oxford to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing relations between the UK and Japan. The role of the Mother was played by Oshima Kinue, an actress cooperating with Emmert. It was performed again in 2011 in a special series of shows at the National Nō Theatre in Tokyo. Perhaps the term 'reconciliation' is not quite justified here, because the main topic of the play is the search for one's own identity. Yet, in recognition of one's own past, the processes of reconciliation with the unknown part of one's identity also become possible.

## The Polish *shinsakunō* of reconciliation

In 2012, the author of this paper completed writing her own second *shinsakunō*: *Ukojenie dusz/Chinkon* [*The Repose of Souls*] (Fig. 10).<sup>16</sup> The first

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<sup>15</sup> Contents of the play are available in the booklet *Two Noh Plays. Kiyotsune & Pagoda*, Oshima Noh Theatre/Theatre Nohgaku, Classical and Contemporary Noh Theatre, Tokyo 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Texts of both plays were published in J. Rodowicz, *Inne nō/新作能* [*Another Nō/Shinsakunō*], Muzeum Sztuki i Techniki Japońskiej Manggha, Kraków 2020, pp. 257–302.



Figure 10. Kanze Tetsunojō in *Chinkon/ The Repose of Souls*, photo by Maciej Zakrzewski. Source: Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska archives.

one was the 2010 play *Stroiciel fortepianu* [*The Piano Tuner*], a piece about the composer Frederic Chopin. We might consider *Ukojenie dusz/ Chinkon* to be a typical *nō* of reconciliation, as it is even suggested in the title itself.

The play was written and staged after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent tsunami that took place in Tōhoku in March 2011, after which the remains of a total of 2,585 victims have never been found. At the same time, nuclear contamination resulting from the accident at the Fukushima power plant spread over hundreds of hectares of land, and huge volumes of irradiated water flew into the ocean. To this day, the Japanese society has not been able to come to terms with the full consequences of the Fukushima disaster, which was half natural and half human-made. The second factor which influenced the development of the play was the author's personal family memory connected to Auschwitz – the Nazi German concentration camp built in Poland during World War II. The present Auschwitz Museum belongs to the group of 'must-visit' places for the Japanese tourist traveling to Poland.

In the first part of the play, a Japanese man who lost his family in the Tōhoku tsunami and then was displaced due to the compulsory relo-



cation of his village after the Fukushima disaster comes on a trip to Poland. As it is often the case with tourists there, he visits the Auschwitz Museum. There he meets a deranged old fellow hanging around the museum grounds, who suddenly approaches him. The Japanese guest is accompanied by a Japanese-speaking guide (a Japanese person living in Poland). The old man, in his madness, considers himself to be a young boy killed in the camp during the war. He says that he could not meet his father before he died and badly wanted to see him. A strange conversation follows, as the madman addresses the visitor as if he were his father. Conversation is carried out through the Japanese interpreter (the guide). The bewildered Japanese tourist, still mourning the death of his own son, himself falls into a kind of a delusion. He starts to think that perhaps he really is seeing the spirit of his own deceased son. When the madman disappears, the tired Japanese man decides to take some rest. In the second part, the Spirit of the Boy appears, clad in a beautiful Robe of Glory. He sings the song of love for life. He directs his song at the Japanese tourist. He describes how life keeps returning after destruction, and how new bodies take up new forms by emerging from the earth into which corpses and ashes return. This unreal meeting of father and son is then considered to be completed. The play quotes two *tanka* poems by erstwhile Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko. These are pieces written by the imperial couple at the 2012 *Utakaihajime*, that is, a New Year's poetry presentation at the Imperial Palace.

## Conclusion

From the survey of the several new *nō* pieces presented in this paper, one can conclude that the determining motivation for writing and producing them was providing consolation of a disturbed psyche. They also embraced the idea that enacting a past tragedy and speaking of grief and sorrow in front of a witness is a crucial element of the process. This aspect is very prominent not only in canonical *nō* texts written between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century but also in the works created within the "new *nō*." The basic two-part construction of the classical *nō* drama, in which part one serves as a presentation of the main characters and their dilemmas or conflicts, while part two is used for the re-creation of a crucial moment of a past event performed in front of a compassion-

ate listener, seems to work very well as a process of reconciliation and overcoming a negative experience.

In Japan, numerous new *nō* texts which deal with this process have been written: they undertake various themes of different types of relations that are in need of repair, or human feelings that need soothing. The ancient concept of appeasement of a spirit – *chinkon* – can be spotted in several productions, of which the starkest examples are the pieces written after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. The *nō* texts written by the non-Japanese similarly deal with unresolved moral problems, such as colonial past (in Australia and America) or malignant consequences of scientific research (construction of the atomic bomb). The new element that appears in the “new *nō*” is the concern for the destruction of the natural environment and the fate of nature.

The universal element in the *shinsakunō* pieces written for the purpose of reconciliation with a bad or difficult past is the human heart's persistent need to clear out the darkness and to heal the hurting soul. Yet, the need to remember one's past in order to better understand one's present is universal, too. Especially plays dealing with colonial past (*Eliza*) and immigrant identity (*Pagoda*) help to reconcile us with our hidden or unknown past.

However, what is compellingly unique is the *nō* dramatic form, which allows for the presentation of the world of the living right next to the world of the dead. The two come together on stage; they converse and merge together in a poetic vision. A sort of humankind Dreamtime – a space created outside of the three-dimensional one and somehow encompassing it fully – appears on stage within a play. It contains both the past and the present. Being there consoles our feelings and facilitates the processes of reconciliation. This is where the ingenuity of the *nō* format arises.

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## Abstract

### *The New Nō Drama (Shinsakunō) for the Appeasement of Spirits and Process of Reconciliation*

Studies of *nō* texts very rarely focus on plays written contemporaneously. Even though more than 400 newly created *nō* texts (*shinsakunō* in Japanese) have appeared, one can hardly find any information about them. By looking through the lists published by Hōsei Daigaku Nōgaku Kenkyūjo and browsing available data on the internet, as well as reading texts written by foreign authors (Cheong, Marlatt, Beichman), one can see how strongly the format of *nō* is related to processes of appeasement and reconciliation with a difficult past. The term *shinsakunō* is usually used for texts written since the beginning of the Meiji era until now. This term is not used for plays written in languages other than Japanese by non-Japanese authors, even if they are created in the exact same *nō* format. Yet it is precisely this format that allows one to deal with trauma, both individual and social, in a poetical way on stage. In Western theater, spirits appear on stage almost exclusively in works of fantasy. But in the *nō* format, they can meet the living thanks to this long-established convention. In this respect, the uniqueness of *nō* forms serve the universal human need for appeasement of a bad or painful past.

**Keywords:** *nō*, *shinsakunō*, new *nō*, appeasement, reconciliation, *The Sea Current of Deer*, Dōmoto Masaki, Uda Michishige, Tada Tomio, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Ishimure Michiko, Janine Beichman, Allen Marett, Daphne Marlatt, Janette Cheong, Richard Emmert

## *Kanadehon Chūshingura* in Kabuki Theater – a Universal Reflection of Japanese Uniqueness

Iga Rutkowska\*

During the Edo period (1603–1868), kabuki theater was a thriving form of entertainment responding to the contemporary needs of its audience. It had many faces as it reflected the vigorous masses of city and country folks. Kabuki was entertaining, religious, political, aesthetic, and, above all, trendy. From the Meiji era forward (1868–1912), it became the national theater which was to stage “proper” content and become the flagship of New Japan. As the national theater, it became valuable in terms of propaganda during Japanese wars in the first half of the twentieth century. After World War II, for purely political reasons, it was transformed into the so-called ‘classical theater.’ However, no matter the role that kabuki theater plays in the Japanese culture of a given time, it has always remained an important part of it, and, in this sense, it reflects its political, social, and cultural changes. The reflection of Japan mirrored in kabuki theater is watched abroad. Regardless of the times and Japan’s position in the world, kabuki shows a complete picture of the country, thus supporting both Japanese and foreigners in their belief that Japan is unique. This uniqueness has become part of its universal image. In this article, I will try to use the example of a timeless kabuki hit, *Kanadehon chūshingura* [*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*], to describe the process of creating this reflection.

*Kanadehon chūshingura* is one of the most frequently staged plays in the entire kabuki repertoire. During the Edo period, it was called the *doku-*

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*jinto*<sup>1</sup> of theater, the antidote to everything that ailed theater, especially the problem of empty seats.<sup>2</sup> Between the initial production in 1748 and the end of the Edo period, it was staged at least 233 times. During the Meiji period and before World War II, it was one of the main texts of nationalist propaganda. After the war, it was banned by the American censorship but later returned in cinema (1962) and on television (1964), becoming a hallmark of Japan abroad. It also influenced the way the Japanese think of themselves. This is the reason why, in this paper, I have decided to base my description of the universal and unique reflection of Japan in kabuki theater on this particular piece.

On January 30, 1703, forty-seven samurai of the Akō *han* avenged the death of their master, Asano Naganori (1667–1701), who was sentenced to commit *seppuku* after drawing his sword and attempting to kill Kira Yoshinaka (1641–1703) at Shogun's castle. All of them were sentenced to death for committing the crime, but because they did it to avenge their master, the authorities allowed them to commit honorary suicide (*seppuku*). The samurai were buried next to their lord in the Sengokuji Temple in Edo (now Tokyo). The story of this vendetta made a huge impression on the general public and, having become one of the favorite themes of the Japanese audiences of those days, was then processed many times in literature, art, and, of course, theater (later followed by movies, manga, anime, computer games, and many other media). The story is very well known in Japan. Visiting the temple where anyone can (and a lot of people do) worship their heroes by lighting an incense on each of the graves, offering flowers, praying, and visiting a museum dedicated to both the real heroes and to their literary counterparts is a popular tourist attraction of the Japanese capital. The real event is referred to as *Chūshingura*, after the play's title, and so both realities mix here smoothly.

*Kanadehon chūshingura* was created at the peak of the Tokugawa shogunate. The play in eleven acts was written for *ningyō jōruri* puppet theater (known outside Japan as *bunraku*) by Takeda Izumo II (1691–1756), Miyoshi Shōraku (1696?–1772?), and Namiki Senryū I (1695–1751) – all of them

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<sup>1</sup> *Dokujinto* was a rare and expensive Chinese medicine made from a type of ginseng. It was known for its miraculous and revitalizing properties.

<sup>2</sup> S. Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition. From the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, p. 121.

were still young boys when the events of the vendetta originally unfolded. The premiere of the play took place in August 1748 at the Takemotoza Theater in Osaka, and the adaptation for kabuki theater was shown in December of the same year at the nearby Naka no Shibai Theater. This was not the first stage version of the Akō *han*'s story and definitely not the last one. However, the censorship of the times required that all the names, place names, and dates of events be changed in the theater adaptations, especially since the story did not present the shogunate in a favorable light. The plot was moved to the fourteenth century, and Asano Naganori performed as En'ya Takasada (Hangan), Kira Yoshinaka as Kō no Musashi no kami Moronao (Moronō), and Ōishi Kuranosuke (1659–1703) as Ōboshi Yuranosuke – the commander of the vendetta (Fig. 11).

The story of En'ya Hangan is told in Volume 21 of the fourteenth-century chronicle *Taiheiki* [*Chronicle of the Great Peace*],<sup>3</sup> in the chapter *En'ya Hangan Zanshi no koto* [*The Slander and Death of En'ya Hangan*] in which, as Matsui Kesako wrote: "the shogun official Kō no Moronō lusts after Hangan's beautiful wife and asks Yoshida Kenkō, the famous author of *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essay in Idleness*, 1330–31) to write her a love letter on his behalf. When his advances are rebuffed, the furious Moronō humiliates Hangan by slandering him in front of the shogun. This outrageous incident provides the starting point for *Chūshingura*."<sup>4</sup> The plot of *Chūshingura* is based partially on facts and partially on medieval classics. The story, when rewritten as a play, became extremely complex – maybe because it had to combine two narratives and events encompassing very different social and cultural elements. It contains at least four different domestic dramas, one of them being the tragedy of Hangan's family describing how, after En'ya Hangan was forced to commit suicide, his wife, Kaoyo, becomes a nun and surrenders Hangan's castle. Another one is the tragedy of the Teraoka family, depicting Okaru, wife of Hayano Kanpei (Hangan's

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<sup>3</sup> *Taiheiki* [*Chronicle of the Great Peace*; the title is sometimes translated into English as *The Grand Pacification*] – one of the most important *gunki monogatari*, 'war tales,' typical for Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1336–1573) periods of Japanese history. *Taiheiki* covers the period from 1319 to 1367, mainly Nanbokuchō period of the civil war between the Northern Imperial Court controlled by Ashikaga Takauji (1305–1358) and the Southern Imperial Court of the ex-emperor Godaigo (1288–1339).

<sup>4</sup> K. Matsui, *Kabuki, a Mirror of Japan. Ten Plays That Offer a Glimpse into Evolving Sensibilities*, trans. D. Crandall, Japan Library, Tokyo 2016, p. 69.



Figure 11. *Kanadehon Chūshingura* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1847. The kabuki actors Nakamura Utaemon IV as Kō no Moronao (top), under attack by Onoe Kikugorō III as Ōboshi Yuranosuke, from the 1847 performance at the Nakamura Theater in Edo. Source: The Trustees of the British Museum.



retainer), being sold by her father into prostitution so that his son-in-law could have money to participate in the vendetta. To make matters even more complicated, Kanpei commits suicide before the vendetta takes place while thinking he killed his father-in-law, even though he had not. Just looking at the examples mentioned above gives the reader an idea about the amount of tragedy that occurs in the play, since forty-seven men commit suicide, and they are not the only people that die.

Probably the first staging of the story of the Akō clan took place at Nakamura Theater shortly after the incident took place, and the time of action was moved to the twelfth century, that is, the time when the Soga brothers enacted revenge on their father's robbers. It might have been written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725),<sup>5</sup> but too many sources are missing to confirm either the authorship or the staging of such a play. It is currently not possible to determine how many versions preceded the main, famous one, but many fragments from these earlier productions were later used in various scenes of the main text. After researching some of its many predecessors, one might feel that *Chūshingura* almost completely lacks originality. But it is not originality that ensures success. The history of culture shows us that, above all, original texts do not exist, and that they are becoming more and more known as the number of their recipients increase. In kabuki theater, the text – always called *daihon* (a script) and never *gikyoku* (a drama) – is, and always has been, subordinated to the show's success and to the actor's whims. One thing remains certain: Japan seems to need *Chūshingura* regardless of the political situation, times, or generation.

Now, let us try to trace what stories were told by kabuki theater while using *Chūshingura* as a reflection of Japan. As I have mentioned before, during the Edo period, *Kanadehon chūshingura* was staged at least 233 times (as a part of official theater's repertoire, not to mention amateur or semi-professional stages) and – as might have been expected – every

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<sup>5</sup> Chikamatsu Monzaemon – one of the most important premodern Japanese dramatists, famous for his plays written for *ningyō jōruri* puppet theater. His best-known masterpieces are: *Sonezaki shinjū* [*The Love Suicides in Sonezaki*, 1717], *Shinjū ten no Amijima* [*The Love Suicides at Amijima*, 1721], and *Kokusen'ya kasen* [*The Battles of Coxinga*, 1715]. Though he started his career as a writer (*sakusha*) in kabuki theater, he had changed his field because of the underlying role of dramatists there.

version differed from the others. Reading Shimazaki Satoko's research results, the only conclusion that comes to mind is that it is simply impossible to get even the slightest idea of what the performances during the Edo period might have been like.<sup>6</sup> Would it be possible to describe modern theater only on the basis of stage scripts? Our image of kabuki theater is primarily the result of comparing texts from the Edo period and contemporary productions. Current adaptations of traditional plays, of which *Kanadehon chūshingura* is a flagship example, are usually staged similarly. Small differences are allowed depending on the stage heritage of the actors playing the main roles, but these are not differences that would affect the story and its meaning. The story remains unchanged, and it would seem that it has invariably always been so, since it is a play based on a true story (and probably because it is a classic play in a classic theater). However, nothing could be further from the truth.

When in 1841 the guardian deity of the local Hie Shrine answered the desperate pleas for help of the villagers from Kuromori (now Sakata city, Yamagata Prefecture), they performed an ablution in the nearby Ōgawa river. One day after offering a *kagura* dance, they staged Sanbasō and kabuki in front of the shrine. The kabuki performance was entitled *Chūshinkan juzō* [*Statue of a Living Person as a Proof of Loyalty of the Retainers*], and it was a modified version of *Kanadehon chūshingura*, but what is most striking, it did not include the most tragic and gruesome elements, that is, none of the forty-seven samurai committed suicide. It was believed that such sad events would not correspond well with the happy occasion. Kuromori Kabuki<sup>7</sup> was one of the hundreds of amateur

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<sup>6</sup> S. Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Kuromori Kabuki – one of the last remaining *setchū* kabuki ('kabuki in snow'), an amateur troupe from the city of Sakata. For almost three hundred years, the village has been hosting *koshōgatsu* (Festival of Little New Year) performances, which nowadays falls on February 15 and 17. Amateur kabuki theater, *jishibai*, has been a massive activity of peasants and townspeople basically ever since professional scenes had started to gain popularity, i.e., since the second half of the seventeenth century. Currently, about 200 troupes are still active. See for example I. Rutkowska, *Boska obecność. O względności tekstu i rytuału w teatrze kabuki* [*The Divine Presence. On the Relativity of Text and Ritual in Kabuki Theater*], Universitas, Kraków 2015; or I. Rutkowska, "Village Kabuki, *Jishibai*, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Fossilized Tradition or Living Performance?," *Silva Iaponicarum. Special Edition: Japan. New Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* 2010, no. 23/24/25/26, pp. 477–484.

and semi-professional troupes of mid-nineteenth-century Japan. Based on that, we cannot expect that this treatment would have been exceptional or unique.

Not to limit my analysis to only such extreme examples of the audience's real needs when it comes to a kabuki play, I would also like to mention another one. When Ichikawa Danjūrō II (1688–1758), the greatest star of his time, first played one of Hangan's vassals, Ōwashi Bungo, at Nakamura Theater (Edo) in 1749, he used the rough *aragoto* style of acting – with explicit *kumadori* makeup and a huge ax in his hand. Later this part was actually known as *aragoto*. “In Meiji period the revenge scene has been staged using realistic sword fighting,” and the acting style differed a lot.<sup>8</sup> The era of Meiji, which changed the character of kabuki theater, granted it, as Henryk Lipszyc wrote, a “civilizing mission.”<sup>9</sup> The government – and soon also kabuki theater producers and actors, tempted by the chance for a social promotion – had a plan for a future revolution in theater. Kabuki was now to serve modern Japan as a modern theater presenting modern ideas.<sup>10</sup> Roughly from the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) until the end of the Pacific War (1946), *Chūshingura* was one of the main texts of nationalist propaganda. As such, it was read in schools, staged in theaters, and later banned during some part of the American occupation (although only until 1947). The Meiji period *Chūshingura* as well as its later versions could not implement the *aragoto* style, the ax had to be replaced by the universal symbol of Japan – a samurai sword, and the mad warrior – by a handsome and loyal samurai.

In the meantime, the world learned about kabuki. When Sada Yacco (1871–1946), a geisha, actress, and dancer, conquered the Western

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<sup>8</sup> K. Matsui, *Kabuki, a Mirror of Japan*, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> H. Lipszyc, “Jak reformowano *kabuki*” [“How Kabuki was Reformed”], [in:] *Japonia okresu Meiji. Od tradycji ku nowoczesności* [*Japan of the Meiji Period. From Tradition to Modernity*], ed. B. Kubiak Ho-Chi, Nozomi, Warszawa 2006, p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> See also J.R. Brandon, *Kabuki's Forgotten World 1931–1945*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2008; I. Rutkowska, “*Kabuki* okresu Shōwa – od teatru współczesnego do klasycznego” [“Kabuki of the Shōwa Period – From Modern to Classical Theater”], [in:] *Japonia ery Shōwa (1926–1989). Kultura i realia społeczne* [*Japan of the Shōwa Era (1926–1989). Culture and Social Realities*], ed. K. Starecka, Japonica, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Wydział Orientalistyczny, Katedra Japonistyki, Warszawa 2020, pp. 104–112.

world at the turn of the twentieth century, long before any kabuki company had had a chance to perform on foreign stages, it was believed that suicide was, somehow, quintessentially Japanese. It was also assumed that her shows were kabuki theater, and so, a reflection of Japan. The first, albeit few, performances of kabuki outside of Japan did not end up disappointing the public in this respect, and always included in their repertoire at least one scene of suicide and at least one scene from the genre's greatest drama, *Kanadehon chūshingura*. That was the case during the kabuki tour to the USSR in 1928 and 1961, to the United States in 1960, and to Europe in 1965.<sup>11</sup> Taking a look at the repertoire of foreign kabuki performances, one can clearly see a retreat from shows depicting suicides in the 1980s. But by this time, this reflection of unique Japanese culture and theater had already been deeply engrained in the universal imagination of foreign audiences.

In 1986, Maurice Béjart (1927–2007) directed a flagship performance of the Tokyo National Ballet which is still staged until today, tellingly titled *Kabuki*. It is the ballet interpretation of none other than *Kanadehon chūshingura*. For more than thirty years, this performance has been presented worldwide (in 2019 also, for the first time, to the Polish audience). The freedom with which Béjart picked elements of Japanese culture to include in his “ballet mosaic” is truly incredible. There seems to be only one key: in the Western audience's mind, these elements should already be associated with Japan. The more stereotypes can be crammed in, the better. The only important point of reference remains the knowledge of the viewers, who leave the show delighted that they were able to interact so closely with such an exotic culture. Kimonos, swords, folding screens, porcelain faces of women, Japanese writing, tea, fans, Mount Fuji, the image of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, and, of course, most importantly – suicide. Unfortunately, the audience reacts with enthusiasm, not only to the daring and, beyond any doubt, quite excellent level of the dance performance, but also to its content; yet, they believe that what they see is a universally recognizable, unique Japanese presentation, and not a thirty-year-old vision of one French director.

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<sup>11</sup> In 1955, the kabuki troupe led by Ichikawa Ennosuke II performed in China, but kabuki reception there was greatly different from reception in the West, see T. Kawatake, *Kabuki. Baroque Fusion of the Arts*, International House of Japan, Tokyo 2006, pp. 3–11.

It seems to me that it is not only the fake, Béjart-concocted version of kabuki, but also the real Japanese kabuki that is perceived this way – as a classic show which is frozen in time, permanent, and unchanging.

How different it was in the Edo period, when kabuki theater was an indicator of social moods. The best example is *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan* [*The Ghost of Yotsuya*] – one of the most widely known Japanese horror stories. This play, while probably not unequivocally associated with *Kanadehon chūshingura*, is actually a mid-nineteenth-century version of *The Treasury of Loyal Retainers* by Tsuruya Nanboku IV (1755–1829), staged for the first time in 1825. *Yotsuya kaidan* is a drama in which “the clear distinction between good and evil found in *Treasury of Loyal Retainers* has been completely undone, and we are left in a world in which the very possibility of such stable roles seems, at best, questionable.”<sup>12</sup> It is hard to count all the deaths in the performances of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*. Tomita Iemon kills his father-in-law first, then his wife, his servant, his fiancée, and then her family with the servants. Eventually he himself, along with his family, becomes a victim of his wife’s spirit. The fiancée of his comrade, who in turn committed suicide, also dies in the meantime. On top of this, throughout the story various other people die, some of them by accident, some of them as victims of wicked intrigues. Yes, if anything can be said for sure about this kabuki show and its characters, it is that they are certainly wicked. Which does not change the fact that they all are beloved by the audience.

The aforementioned Tomita Iemon and his friend, Naosuke, are ronin who try to find a way to survive. They live in poverty and earn money by means of fraud and theft. One of them has just killed his father-in-law, while the other killed his former lord after mistakenly taking him for the husband of his lover. The premiere show of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, as well as those that followed, was staged as a *niban me mono* (the second part in the theater program) for *Kanadehon chūshingura*. During the Edo period, it was necessary for the plots of the performances staged within the same program to be somehow connected. And this is why most of the wicked characters from this new performance eventually turn out to be involved in the vendetta of the forty-seven ronin. Iemon and Naosuke are among them – to later become important national heroes. This

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<sup>12</sup> S. Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, p. 133.

connection created a unique effect and showed the whole great story of revenge in a fairly crooked mirror. It eventually came to be forgotten after the Meiji restoration, and even more so after World War II, when almost all main, good characters of *Kanadehon chūshingura* became examples of the perfect Japanese – the servant of the emperor.

What was the reason for the great popularity of this performance during the Edo period? The country, falling slowly into political and economic crisis, was no longer able to worship flawless heroes. Or maybe people didn't need them. Tsuruya Nanboku IV introduced one more new, important context. He transferred the weight of the story to a woman, as if to give a voice to Okaru, who was sold to a brothel in order to provide her husband with money for his vendetta. Before, "most household-disturbance and revenge plots relied on a clearly gendered division of labor: the feudal hero who led the revenge or played the key role in bringing a household's troubles to a happy resolution was invariably an experienced, middle-aged samurai. [...] female characters could prove their devotion to their community and its moral code only through the disposal of their bodies in a manner decided by their husbands, fathers and male siblings. Female bodies were always available for use."<sup>13</sup> Okaru, and the way she was objectified in *Chūshingura*, was a perfect example of this trope. Another one was Oiwa, the main female character of *Yotsuya kaidan*. She is a woman from the samurai class who marries a man because he promises to avenge her father's death. Unbeknownst to her, it was her new husband who had killed her father. After he murders her as well, Oiwa comes back to enact a bloody vendetta. "Oiwa's revenge is purely private and personal [...] [and] [...] is not intended to put the things right."<sup>14</sup> *Yotsuya kaidan* is one of the biggest kabuki hits of all time (of course not as big as *Chūshingura*), and there must be a reason why one of the greatest Japanese playwrights, so popular in his lifetime, decided to connect them. At the end of the Edo period, *Kandehon chūshingura* and *Yotsuya kaidan* were performed together, alternating one or two acts of each, on the same day, and for the same audience. This is not the case anymore: they exist as separate spectacles, staged at a different time of the year: *Chūshingura* in December and *Yotsuya kaidan* as a ghost story, in August.

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<sup>13</sup> S. Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, p. 131.

<sup>14</sup> S. Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition*, p. 132.

Edo kabuki reflected the culture of Japan in a completely different way from the kabuki that we see today and which Gunji Masakatsu (in my view, one of the most important researchers of Japanese theater) calls “kabuki for tourists”: very well-mannered spectacle that scolds the audience with thousands of injunctions and is frozen in its too-beautiful costumes and stage design, together with the untouchable stars – authorities of mass society. It also says a lot about Japan.

*Chūshingura* is an extreme example, because it is an unparalleled masterpiece with which it is difficult to compete. At the same time, it shows in different ways how the uniqueness of Japanese culture was and is reflected in the kabuki theater mirror. No matter what the reflection may be, it remains universal.

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## Abstract

### **Kanadehon Chūshingura in Kabuki Theater – A Universal Reflection of Japanese Uniqueness**

Kabuki, one of the most important classical Japanese and world traditional theaters for almost three and a half centuries (from the beginning of the seventeenth century until the end of the Pacific War) was a very popular mass phenomenon in Japan. This contemporary theater, which represented the life of the entire society – people's dreams, wishes, and problems – has always been strictly connected to politics and social changes, as well as to Japan's reception in the West. The form has changed (and is still changing) together with politics, times, and culture. This article discusses issues related to the uniqueness of Japanese culture and its universal reflection in kabuki theater based on the example of *Kanadehon chūshingura* [*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*] drama, a hit of all times.

**Keywords:** *Kanadehon chūshingura*, kabuki, Kuromori Kabuki, *Chūshinkan juzō*, Maurice Béjart, Sada Yakko, *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan*, suicide, Ichikawa Danjūrō II



# Kurosawa Akira's Adaptations of Shakespeare Influenced by *Nō* Theater

Hiranoi Chieko\*

## Introduction

This paper will analyze two Kurosawa Akira's adaptations of Shakespeare's plays: *Kumonosu jō* [*Cobweb Castle*], in English titled *Throne of Blood*, and *Ran* [*Chaos*], while paying special attention to the presence of *nō* elements which frequently appear in Kurosawa's work – even in such modern dramas as *Ikiru* [*To Live*] and *Yume* [*Dreams*]. Although some people might claim that *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru* [*The Bad Sleep Well*] could be recognized as an adaptation of *Hamlet*, I would regard those two as separate stories that share only some aspects, that is, both are revenge stories and include similar characters. *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru* depicts a conspiracy and cases of bribery in modern society. Those crimes then lead to murders which are meant to hide them, and then to the protagonist's revenge in order to reveal those deeds and to restore his father's honor in the process. The plot tends to focus on the reveal itself, which is a typical characteristic of a detective story, just like it was in the case of another Kurosawa movie, *Nora-inu* [*Stray Dog*]. In my opinion, *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru* imitates *Hamlet* only in those very limited aspects.

However, in Kurosawa's adaptations of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, the director transforms those plays into historical pieces, set in Japan but still respecting Shakespeare's dramaturgy. What is more, he also introduces in them some original interpretations which are influenced by the tra-

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dition of *nō* theater. *Nō* pieces are typically categorized into five genres depending on the characterizations of the *shite* (protagonist). The five genres are supposed to be performed in a specific order, originally intended for a one-day program. Out of those five categories, the second one is called *shura nō* and depicts the soul of a samurai warrior who laments and repents for the suffering caused by his hatred, by his past obsessions, and by the conflicts in which he partook in his past life. Kurosawa applies this genre of *nō* theater to his adaptations of *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

This paper will analyze the *nō* elements in terms of stylized depictions borrowed from *nō* performances, specific *nō* pieces reflected in the Kurosawa films, and the philosophy of *shura nō* permeating them. It will also discuss Kurosawa's comparative perspectives on the unique culture of *nō* and one of the most universal artistic subjects – the works of Shakespeare, which continue to prevail as original works through translations and adaptations worldwide.

### *Kumonosu jō*

Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth* was released in 1957 and won the Grand Prix, Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival. It is generally acknowledged that *Kumonosu jō* has been highly acclaimed precisely because Kurosawa sensibly adapted the original drama into the traditional performing art of Japan that he was familiar with – *nō* theater.<sup>1</sup>

In this section, I will analyze Kurosawa's methods, the relevant *nō* works, as well show how his framework and philosophy were influenced by *nō* theater.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Nomura, "Kurosawa eiga. Nō kyōgen no jo-ha-kyū" ["Kurosawa Films. Artistic Modulations in *Nō* and *Kyōgen*; Opening, Middle, and Climax"], [in:] *Kurosawa Akira: Eiga no dainamizumu* [Kurosawa Akira. *Dynamic Depictions of Films*], Kawade Shobō Shinsha, Tokyo 1998, p. 38.

## 1. Methods

It is well known that Kurosawa used *nō* masks while directing. He instructed each of the main actors to base their facial expressions on the assigned *nō* masks. For example, he asked Mifune Toshirō, who played the protagonist, Washizu Taketoki (Macbeth), to mimic a *heida* mask, which is used for the character of a valiant samurai warrior. Yamada Isuzu, who was portraying Washizu's wife, Asaji (Lady Macbeth), was assigned two masks used for characters of powerful women: *shakumi* and *deigan*. This was because she had to play a woman gradually losing her beauty and, then, also her sanity. Furthermore, Kurosawa showed the actor playing Miki Yoshiaki (Banquo) a *chūjō* mask, that is, the mask for a noble ghost, while Naniwa Chieko, the actress playing the Forest Spirit, was given a *yamauba* mask (Fig. 12), one used for a powerful mountain spirit.<sup>2</sup>

What is more, Kurosawa tried to shoot every scene without any close-ups, because he respected the physical movements of actors in *nō* theater. What he understood by that was the importance of not focusing only on facial expressions but showing the entire physical performance – this attitude was closer to authentic *nō* theater. For example, it is this exact technique that enables audiences to appreciate the contrastive depiction between Washizu and Asaji while they are arguing about the assassination of the feudal lord, Tsuzuki. A full-body shot, as employed in this scene, especially if taken from a bigger distance, tends to make characters look small and lonely, which can be quite appropriate for depicting an isolated person such as Washizu. The assumption is that the majority of the viewers will notice the calm and threatening presence of Asaji during her confrontation with Washizu, in which she urges him to commit murder. Her walking style, *suriashi* (walking with sliding feet), and her sitting posture, *tatehiza* (sitting with one knee drawn up), are also derived from *nō* theater. When put together, such stylized movements, called *kata*, can produce a steadfast atmosphere. Meanwhile, Washizu looks restless, timid, and uncertain in this scene. The amplified rustling sound of Asaji's costume also emphasizes her charisma and

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to add that in the *nō* performance, this mask is in no way connected to the demonic mad character of *yamanba*, an old woman living in a mountain known from children's literature.



Figure 12. *Yamauba*-type mask used in *nō* theater, nineteenth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

the pressure she puts on Washizu. Nomura Mansai has compared the figures of Asaji and Washizu in this scene to the genres of *nō* and *kyōgen*: Washizu here is a comic figure necessary for *kyōgen* performance, while Asaji consistently sticks to her stylized *nō* acting, including in the scene where she goes insane and tries to wash off the imaginary blood of Tsuzuki from her hands. In this comparison, Nomura recognizes their relationship as two sides of the same coin.<sup>3</sup>

The conflict between the couple takes place in a room which has been locked ever since the execution of a rebel, Fujimaki – his blood stains remain on the floor and the wall. The Washizu couple decides to use the room as their provisional bedroom while they give up their usual quarters to house the visiting lord. Although the blood stain itself would be sinister enough to foresee the evil deeds that are about to be committed, the stain on the back wall also seems to resemble an *oimatsu* (an old pine tree) usually depicted on the back wall of the *nō* stage, the *kagami ita* (a mirror board). *Nō* performances were originally supposed to be devoted to gods, and pine trees are regarded as sacred places for them to settle on – as such, the *kagami ita* reflects the pine tree which was supposed to be grown in front of the stage. Seen from this perspective, the wall in the movie comes to reflect the assassination that Washizu will eventually carry out.

Kurosawa employed *nō* methods to emphasize elements of time and space. The isolated room where the murder-urging is taking place has another association with the *nō* stage – it has a limited size, is separated from the outside, and has a passage connecting it to the main bedroom where Tsuzuki is staying. John Collick refers to other places Washizu appears at as “an area that is surrounded or confined; either by people, ghosts, animals or architecture,”<sup>4</sup> depicting Washizu as trapped in inescapable situations. Another example of Kurosawa’s manipulation of time and space, both in the opening and in the ending of the movie, is closely related to the framework and philosophy of *mugen nō* (dream *nō*), in which the audiences witness a retelling of a dream throughout

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<sup>3</sup> M. Nomura, “Kurosawa eiga,” pp. 39–40.

<sup>4</sup> J. Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1989, p. 179.

the play, for example by means of a priest listening to the story of the protagonist's distress. Here, in the opening shot of the movie, the camera shows wilderness and castle ruins to eventually focus on a post which reads: '*Kumonosu jō*.' Afterwards, a deep mist covers the screen completely to then clear and show us the castle as it once was. This dream-like opening sequence is then developed in reverse to be shown at the end of the movie.

## 2. Related *nō* works

Kurosawa introduced a *kiri nō* piece, *Kurozuka* [*Black Mound*]<sup>5</sup> to depict a supernatural being prophesizing Washizu's future. In the category of *kiri nō*, protagonists are supposed to be supernatural beings such as ghosts, demons, or fairies. He replaced the three witches from *Macbeth* with a forest spirit taking the shape of an old woman. In the original *Kurozuka*, the protagonist is supposed to be a middle-aged woman lamenting her lost youth and her current, painful life, who later turns into a female demon to curse a group of priests because of their betrayal. The chief priest of this group, Yūkei, leads his company on a Buddhist training trip. They come to Adachigahara, where there is no place to stay except for a shabby hut. Yūkei asks the dweller of the hut to let them in. Although she repeatedly refuses to do them this favor, she finally allows them to go inside because of Yūkei's persistent entreaties. Yūkei gets curious about a spinning wheel in her hut and wonders how to use it. When the woman explains her work and talks about her difficult life, the priest admonishes her to think positively, that is, in accordance with Buddha's teachings. After this encounter and her honest confession, the woman says she must go out to get firewood, strictly prohibiting the guests from looking into her bedroom. The priests make a promise, but their servant cannot help but take a peek. He finds out that there is a pile of dead bodies inside, and the group decides to escape. The woman gets furious once she notices their betrayal and starts chasing them in order to eat them, transforming herself into a demon in the process. Finally, she is exorcised by their prayers and disappears, leaving behind only terrible cries.

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<sup>5</sup> *Kurozuka*, ed. H. Koyama, K. Satō, [in:] *Yōkyokushū* [*Collected Nō Plays*], vol. 2, Shōgakusan, Tokyo 1998, pp. 459–473.

Kurosawa purposely used the image of a spinning wheel and of a pile of skulls and skeletons in *Kumonosu jō*. The spinning wheel stands for a cyclic flow of life that people should follow and endure, while the bones are symbolically remnants of the battles and cruelty in the civil war era. Although the spinning wheel image is the same as the one in *Kurozuka*, Kurosawa replaced unadorned dead bodies with skulls and skeletons clad in armor, emphasizing the repeated follies of the cruel battles of the past. The forest spirit foretells Washizu his future and criticizes him for becoming embarrassed upon hearing the prophecy: “Humans are strange. You will get scared to look into the bottom of your own mind.”<sup>6</sup> The forest spirit is a powerful being manipulating Washizu to usurp the throne and to then remove any obstacles standing in the way of keeping his status. The characterization here is completely different from the female demon present in *Kurozuka*.

Another *nō* piece Kurosawa used for *Kumonosu jō* is *Tamura*, a *shura nō* piece.<sup>7</sup> It is a *kachishura* piece which celebrates a successful samurai warrior, Sakanoue no Tamuramaro. The original *nō* work starts with an encounter between a boy who is supposed to be closely connected to the Kiyomizudera Temple and a group of priests. The boy tells them the history of the temple, and together they enjoy the view of beautiful cherry blossoms under the moon. After the boy vanishes, the priests realize he was an incarnation of Sakanoue no Tamuramaro, who had originally erected the temple. When they start to pray for the hero, Tamuramaro, clad in armor, appears to narrate his success in the battle at Mount Suzuka. In the most critical stage of the battle, Senju Kannon (the Bodhisattva-with-One-Thousand-Arms) shot one thousand arrows at once to defeat the enemies of the imperial court.

In the movie, *Tamura* is performed during the banquet scene which is intended to celebrate Washizu's future as a lord. However, Washizu interrupts the performance by getting upset and flying into rage, not only because he is obsessed by Banquo's assassination but also because of

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<sup>6</sup> A. Kurosawa, *Kumonosu jō* [Cobweb Castle or Throne of Blood], in: *Zenshū Kurosawa Akira* [The Complete Works of Kurosawa Akira], vol. 4, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1988, p. 147. My translation.

<sup>7</sup> *Tamura*, ed. H. Koyama, K. Satō, [in:] *Yōkyōkushū* [Collected Nō Plays], vol. 2, Shōgakukan, Tokyo 1998, pp. 115–127.

*Tamura's* lyrics, which include the line: "The demons serving Chikata, a rebel, were punished for ignoring the emperor's glory."<sup>8</sup> The scene which follows these lines is the description of the Bodhisattva-with-One-Thousand-Arms and its role in battle, which naturally brings to mind a later scene in the movie in which all the warriors aim their arrows at Washizu and cause him to flee around the castle under their attack.

### 3. Framework and philosophy

The opening chorus, which is not an *utai* (a *nō* narrative song) but an *imayō uta* (a genre of Japanese songs which was popular in the ancient period and has lyrics in the seven-and-five syllable meter), sings the following:

Behold, the ruins of a castle  
Inhabited by deep-rooted delusion.  
Perpetually haunted by spirits.  
The ruins show the fate  
Of demonic men with treacherous desires.  
Life is the same now as in ancient times.<sup>9</sup>

The chorus invites the audiences to enter into a dream, a *mugen nō* world, as the framework of *Kumonosu jō* is set in the medieval civil war period. The lyrics explicitly convey that the movie deals with the tragedy of ambitious samurai warriors, their obsessions and futility. The audiences are supposed to inhabit the perspective of a wandering priest from *mugen nō* who is an observer or a witness of the protagonist's past and ultimate fate. During the opening song, by an effective use of mist, the scenery of wilderness overtaking castle ruins transforms itself into the view of the castle shown in all its former glory. By the end of the movie, the audiences will return to the same image after witnessing Washizu's tragedy, portrayed by employing the philosophy of *make-shura nō*, which focuses on a defeated samurai warrior and allows for him to narrate his

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<sup>8</sup> *Tamura*, p. 126. My translation.

<sup>9</sup> A. Kurosawa, *Kumonosu jō*, p. 143. Translation by Niki Hisae, in: H. Niki, *Shakespeare in Translation in Japanese Culture*, Kenseisha, Tokyo 1984, p. 155.



own agony. The chorus then concludes *Kumonosu jō* with the *imayō uta* from the beginning, which serves as a metaphor for the recurrence of ambition, treachery, cruelty, and karma throughout human history.

However, is Washizu nothing more than an ambitious sinner? During the civil war, all powerful and competent warriors needed to be ambitious if they were to succeed their predecessors. At this point, Asaji's words are quite pertinent: "[Y]ou know the current lord... he also took the throne by killing his previous lord."<sup>10</sup> John Collick notices this inconsistent code of feudalism which demands perfect sincerity from retainers towards their lords despite those lords' own betrayals against those who came before them. Washizu cannot assassinate his lord, Tsuzuki, without any scruples. Focusing on his characterization, Collick refers to "the politics of ambition as an inescapable machine,"<sup>11</sup> and he also states that "it is the political system that creates evil, not the characters caught up in it."<sup>12</sup> Although Collick's interpretation is valid from the point of view of social study of Kurosawa's movies, according to the *nō* philosophy (which does not impose a specific sense of value), it does not matter that the characters' attitudes or codes of behavior seem inconsistent.

No matter what the character analysis of Washizu might be, I appreciate Kurosawa's respect for stylized expressions, including the use of *nō* masks, the physical method, and the framework in general. This is because the styles of traditional performing arts have the power to make characterizations and subjects universal, while modern psychological characterizations lean towards individualization.

## *Ran*

Kurosawa's adaptation of *King Lear* was released in 1985. It was nominated for the 1986 Academy Awards in four categories, including Best Director, and won the Oscar for Best Costume Design. At a press conference in 1983, Kurosawa said that he regarded *Ran* as his most important

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<sup>10</sup> A. Kurosawa, *Kumonosu jō*, p. 150. My translation.

<sup>11</sup> J. Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society*, p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> J. Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society*, p. 177.

work and admitted that it was an adaptation of *King Lear* mixed with a real-life account of a figure from the civil war period, Mōri Motonari. Mōri encouraged his three sons to cooperate to make their land prosper and compared their joint power to a bundle of three arrows which, when kept together, cannot be easily broken. In the end, it is the conflicts among the sons that ruin their lands and territories in *Ran*.<sup>13</sup>

*Ran* also includes a variety of *nō* motifs, even though they might be less dominant than in the case of *Kumonosu jō*. I will analyze the *nō* features present in the film in the same way it was done in the previous section.

## 1. Methods

The protagonist of the movie, Ichimonji Hidetora, wears make-up simulating a specific *nō* mask, *ōakujō*, which is used for the face of a menacing old man. This mask is appropriate for his typified characterization as a powerful feudal lord who has survived a series of battles. He does eventually go insane, but this is because of his past deeds – Hidetora has conquered his enemies by perpetuating many cruelties – and not because of his sons' betrayals. Unlike Lear, then, Hidetora does not utter curses on his sons. His self-reflection and his agony are completely focused on his own career. His elder sons' assault on one of his castles shocks him, resulting in a change in his expression to one of an exhausted and resigned old man. After all of his retainers die in his last castle, he cannot even find a sword with which to commit suicide. He seems to not be afraid of dying per se, neither is he mad at his elder sons' betrayal. What he seems to fear is his own past and knowledge of his own cruelty. Accordingly, make-up imitating a *shiwajō* mask (which is used to symbolize such a resignation in *nō*) is applied to portray the change in the character. The *shiwajō* mask is used for the calm face of an elderly man.

The other character wearing a *nō* mask-like expression is Lady Kaede, the legitimate wife of Hidetora's first son, Tarō. She wears make-up resem-

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<sup>13</sup> *Kaisetsusho [Explanatory Booklet on Ran]*, ed. T. Nogami, Nippon Herald Films, INC., Tokyo 2003, p. 1.

bling the mask called *deigan*, which is used for a female character who is furious or mad with jealousy (such as, for example, Rokujō Miyasudokoro in *Aoi no ue*, who curses and tortures her lover's legitimate wife in the shape of her vengeful doppelgänger). As Hidetora has destroyed her family and her land, Kaede detests him. Kaede was forced to get married to Hidetora's first son as a part of wartime politics – Hidetora killed her father and brother to enlarge his territories and secure his position. The main castle of the Ichimonji clan originally belonged to her family. What is more, after the family was ruined, her mother committed suicide. She explicitly insults Hidetora and incites her husband to strip his father of his dignity. As soon as her husband dies in the assault at Hidetora, she seduces Jirō, Hidetora's second son. She soon becomes his legitimate wife by convincing him to murder his previous spouse, Sue. In the end, Kurogane, Jirō's confidant, decapitates Kaede once she confesses her revenge plan, aimed at bringing ruin to the Ichimonji family by inciting an internal conflict among its members. The actress, Harada Mieko, was directed by Kurosawa to act in a way that would incorporate stylized movements of *nō* theater.<sup>14</sup> Her presence is depicted as antagonistic to that of the protagonist, Hidetora, throughout the play. The *nō* mask-like make-up is applied to those two opposing characters.

The Fool from Shakespeare's play was turned by Kurosawa into a *kyōgen* performer, Kyōami, a servant of Hidetora. He accompanies and entertains Hidetora, although he often criticizes him as well, just like the Fool does in *King Lear*. Still, Kyōami continues to accompany Hidetora all the way to the end, apart only from the moments when he is dismissed by his lord himself, while the original Fool disappears in the wilderness to then be replaced by Edgar disguised as a mad beggar. Kyōami cries loudly upon Hidetora's death, and Tango (Kent) persuades him not to further bother Hidetora's spirit, as the lord heavily suffered in his final days and now deserves to sleep in peace. Kyōami is depicted as a faithful servant and an entertainer who is always sympathetic towards his lord. Although the limited space in this paper does not allow for a detailed discussion of the definition of the "fool" figure in European literature, it should be noted that "fools" are generally described as free from the boundaries of

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<sup>14</sup> T. Satō, *Kurosawa Akira sakuhin kaidai* [Explanatory Notes on Kurosawa Akira and His Works], Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 2002, p. 316.

time, space, and obligation. We would notice, then, that this is where the essential difference between Kyōami and the Fool in *King Lear* lies.

Kyōami gives a few brief performances: a *kyōgen komai* (a short dance), *Usagi* ('The Rabbit'), and *Hyōtan* ('The Gourd').<sup>15</sup> He performs *Usagi* at a banquet after a hunt, at which some feudal lords are making proposals of political marriage of Hidetora's third son, Saburō. After the performance, Saburō compares the two lords to rabbits which are about to be eaten by Hidetora. The scene is tinged with light humor, owing mostly to the carefree and broad-minded character of one of the two lords, Fujimaki. He is also the one who, moved by Saburō's honesty, accepts him as his stepson after Saburō is disowned by Hidetora. The other performance, *Hyōtan*, leads to a more controversial situation, because it uses the metaphor of a gourd blown in the wind to cynically describe Ichirō's indecisive and opportunistic personality. On top of that, Kyōami performs it in the vicinity of Ichirō and his followers. When one of the retainers becomes enraged and tries to kill the performer with a sword, Hidetora shoots the warrior with an arrow. This is one of the conflicts ultimately leading to the crucial rupture between Hidetora and Ichirō. The actor, Peter,<sup>16</sup> was trained specially for the *komai* scenes by Nomura Mansaku, a distinguished *kyōgen* performer. *Nō* lyrics are also incorporated into Kyōami's performances, such as lyrics from the play *Funa Benkei* [*Benkei in a Boat*], to suggest that Hidetora's nightmare is filled with his past battles.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Related *nō* works

The character of Tsurumaru appears on the screen only in limited scenes, but his presence casts a dark shadow on Hidetora's agony and the whole plot of *Ran*. When Hidetora killed Tsurumaru's parents and their retainers by setting fire to their castle, he decided to save young Tsurumaru's

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<sup>15</sup> E. Iizuka, *Kyō wa kyōgen koutai no okeiko desu* [*Let's Practice Kyōgen Short Songs Today*]. <https://zeami.ci.sugiyama-u.ac.jp/~izuka/erito1/okeiko3.htm>; accessed 09.02.2021.

<sup>16</sup> The stage name of Ikehata Shinnosuke at the time when the film was made.

<sup>17</sup> *Funa Benkei*, ed. H. Koyama, K. Satō, [in:] *Yōkyokushū* [*Collected Nō Plays*], vol. 2, Shōgakusan, Tokyo 1998, pp. 486–505.

life in exchange for blinding his eyes. The boy's sister, Sue, was forced to get married to Jirō, just like we've seen in the case of Kaede and her marriage to Tarō. However, Sue does not hate Hidetora and, in accordance with Buddha's lessons, keeps her mind calm – in stark contrast to Kaede, who continuously looks for an opportunity to enact her revenge on Hidetora and his family. Despite Sue's encouragement, Tsurumaru is unable to reach such a peaceful state of mind.

It seems that in creating the character of Tsurumaru, Kurosawa was influenced by the plays *Yoroboshi* [*Poor and Exhausted Priest*] and *Semimaru*, both of which feature a disowned blind son. *Yoroboshi* ends with a reconciliation between the father and the son, while *Semimaru* presents a more pessimistic future of a sister and a brother abandoned by their father.

In *Yoroboshi*, Takayasu Michitoshi, giving credence to a slanderous story about his son, Shuntokumaru, disowns and banishes him. Over the years, as he comes to recognize his son's innocence and is swallowed by regret, he ends up visiting the Tennōji Temple to pray for his son's peace and serenity, both in this world and in the afterlife. He conducts a charitable Buddhist practice of offering foods and necessities to the poor to accumulate good deeds. In the queue of impoverished people receiving such alms, he happens to find his son – now a blind beggar called *yoroboshi*. Shuntokumaru lost his eyesight because he kept on crying after being banished. Although Michitoshi recommends that the *yoroboshi* meditate on the topic of the sunset and try to imagine the paradise in the afterlife, Shuntokumaru cannot help but remember the sights of the beautiful scenery nearby and becomes embarrassed by his blindness. At dawn, Michitoshi confesses his identity to his son, and they end up reconciling and going home together.<sup>18</sup>

The other *nō* piece mentioned above focuses on Princess Sakagami. Contrary to the title of the play, *Semimaru*, it is the eponymous character's sister Sakagami that is the protagonist. The plot depicts adversities faced by siblings with blue blood: a princess and a prince. Princess

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<sup>18</sup> *Yoroboshi*, ed. H. Koyama, K. Satō, [in:] *Yōkyokushū* [*Collected Nō Plays*], vol. 2, Shōgakukan, Tokyo 1998, pp. 137–148.

Sakagami has a unique feature: her hair grows straight upward. She ends up going insane and wanders the countryside. Her brother, Prince Semimaru, is blind from birth, and so the emperor orders a courtier, Kiyotsura, to abandon him on Mount Ōsaka. Although Kiyotsura laments the emperor's cruelty, Semimaru regards it as a natural decision, or even a sensible idea, as his blindness was certainly caused by his own sins in the previous world. One day Sakagami comes to Mount Ōsaka and overhears the sound of *biwa* (a Japanese lute) being played by Semimaru. They celebrate the encounter in tears and talk about their plights. Sakagami cannot stay with her brother and resumes her wandering.<sup>19</sup>

In Kurosawa's movie, Tsurumaru's blindness was caused by Hidetora, who wanted to eliminate him as a potential enemy and to protect his own territorial rights. Without that deed, Tsurumaru would have become the successor of the Azusa Castle. However, he can still remember and imagine what he was able to see before Hidetora's attack. In that respect, Tsurumaru resembles Shuntokumaru, as they both show disappointment at losing their eyesight and feel embarrassed by their situation. They are different from Semimaru, who was blind from birth and accepted his misfortune. It is Sue who brings to mind an association with Semimaru in terms of her Buddhist enlightenment. Although Tsurumaru, just like Semimaru, plays an instrument (even though it is a flute rather than a lute), his skillful flute-playing does not seem to have a connection to Semimaru. It rather brings to mind the eponymous protagonist of a *shura nō* piece called *Atsumori*.<sup>20</sup> In it, Taira no Atsumori is killed in his youth by Kumagai Naozane in a battle between the rival clans of Genji and Heike. Both Tsurumaru and Atsumori are characters that have been deprived of their upcoming glorious future by this bloody civil war.

The influence of previously mentioned *Kurozuka* also appears when Hidetora, Tango, and Kyōami visit Tsurumaru's hut. They ask him for a one-night's rest but they are not aware whose hut it is and enter despite Tsurumaru's refusal. They have a brief rest in the hut and realize the identity of its resident. When Hidetora hears Tsurumaru's hateful story

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<sup>19</sup> *Semimaru*, ed. H. Koyama, K. Satō, [in:] *Yōkyokushū* [Collected Nō Plays], vol. 2, Shōgakukan, Tokyo 1998, pp. 91–104.

<sup>20</sup> *Atsumori*, ed. H. Koyama, K. Satō, [in:] *Yōkyokushū* [Collected Nō Plays], vol. 1, Shōgakukan, Tokyo 1997, pp. 218–231.

accompanied by the penetrating sounds of his flute, he loses his final shred of reason.

### 3. Framework and philosophy

After the previously mentioned hunting trip, Hidetora falls asleep in the middle of the banquet and has a nightmare in which he finds himself alone in the wilderness. While the dominant themes of *Kumonosu jō* are the historical cycles of repetitive brutality of humans as well as the mentions of the Buddhist concept of the impermanence of all worldly things, in *Ran* Kurosawa focuses on Hidetora's nightmares and his earthly suffering. In the course of the brutal battle in which he is assaulted by his two elder sons, he gets to fully understand the cruelty of wars and what he has brought about through his acts as a conqueror. He ultimately survives the castle attack but goes mad and ends up wandering the wilderness just like his nightmare predicted.

Tango and Kyōami later find Hidetora picking grasses in the wilderness and rescue him. The lord is clearly obsessed with his nightmare, in which he continues being confronted by the phantoms of his dead enemies. Kyōami then sings and dances a part of *Funa Benkei* with some revisions, which suggests that Hidetora's nightmare is filled with memories of his past battles.

However, after they manage to reach Tsurumaru's hut, Hidetora explains to Tango that he was betrayed by his close adviser, Ikoma, and attacked by his elder sons in one of his castles. Hidetora then goes completely insane as a result of their encounter with Tsurumaru, a living proof and a symbolic presence of his brutal acts from his period of prosperity. Thus, the three people eventually leave the hut and stay within the remains of the Azusa castle, the one which Hidetora set on fire with its previous lord, his family, and his followers still inside.

In *Kumonosu jō*, the audiences can witness the entire story of a *shura nō* piece with Washizu as the protagonist and appreciate its circular destiny caused by human ambition. In *Ran*, on the other hand, we can only observe a brief narrative of Hidetora's dreams deriving from his past

battles. The audiences are supposed to witness Hidetora's agony in this world, which is even further accelerated and intensified by his aging. *Ran* also deals with the same subject as *King Lear*: ignorance mixed with a sense of powerlessness caused by aging, though it features a father and his sons, and not daughters, like it was the case in Shakespeare's play.

At the end of the film, Tsurumaru makes a step forward and nearly falls off the cliff overlooking the remains of his castle. The manner of his movement is referred to as *Kantan no sora ori* ('Kantan descending'), a stylized expression symbolizing waking up from a dream.<sup>21</sup> The author believes that in this scene Kurosawa is posing an open-ended question for the audience.

## Conclusion

Adaptations of Shakespeare's works first launched in the Japanese theater in 1885 with a staging of *The Merchant of Venice* with kabuki styles and actors. This was two years after the first publication of a translated work of Shakespeare in Japan: *A European Theatre Work, Julius Caesar*. This suggests that traditional Japanese performing arts managed to embrace European literature. Nowadays, traditional performing arts readily introduce Shakespeare into their repertoire in order to pursue originality and creativity.

Nomura Mansaku, who was tasked with overlooking *kyōgen* performances in the process of making *Ran*, also directed a piece called *Hora-zamurai* [*A Lying Samurai*] in 1991 and played the title role. The script was written by a Shakespearean scholar, Takahashi Yasunari, and was based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Takahashi has also adapted *The Comedy of Errors* for the *kyōgen* stage. Nomura Mansai, who played

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<sup>21</sup> Sh. Mitsui, "Kurosawa eiga to nō kyōgen. *Tora no o o fumu otokotachi, Kumonosu jō, Ran o chūshin ni*" ["Nō and Kyōgen Elements in Kurosawa Films. On *They who Step on the Tiger's Tail, Throne of Blood and Chaos*"], [in:] *Kurosawa Akira o meguru jūninin no kyōshikyoku* [*Twelve Writers' Rhapsodies on Kurosawa Akira*], ed. K. Iwamoto, Waseda University Press, Tokyo 2004, p. 82.



Tsurumaru in the movie, directed *Machigai no kyōgen* [*Kyōgen of Errors*] in 2001 and played the servant twins in the film.

*Bunraku* versions of Shakespeare's plays were performed as a part of the regular *bunraku* programs in the National Theater, *Tenpesuto arashi nochi hare* [*The Tempest*] in 2009 and *Farusu no taifu* [*The Merry Wives of Windsor*] in 2014.

Two outstanding modern directors have made their own versions of Shakespeare plays. Ninagawa Yukio incorporated kabuki methods and Buddhist philosophy in his *NINAGAWA Makubesu* [*Macbeth*], which received high praise at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1985. He later directed a kabuki version of *Twelfth Night*, or *NINAGAWA Jūniya*, staged in the Kabukiza Theater in Tokyo in 2007 and in the Barbican Theatre in London in 2009. Suzuki Tadashi established his original 'Suzuki Training Method,' which focuses on the physical characteristics of the Japanese affected by the *nō* practice, especially in terms of breathing and finding the gravity center of one's body. Through proper training, actors can acquire perfect control over their bodies, keep a beautiful posture, and perform perfect movements. Many actors from abroad come to Toga, located in Toyama Prefecture, to receive training in the 'Suzuki Method.' Suzuki has also directed *King Lear* multiple times in a variety of ways: as a collaborative work with a regional theater in the US, as an all-male performance, and in a multi-lingual version. His company, SCOT (Suzuki Company of Toga), has contributed to the international theater world by sharing their arts and methods from the local area of Toga.

Kawatake Toshio has called the European theater tradition a 'literary tradition,' while he regarded the traditional performing arts of Japan to be a 'physical tradition,' as it includes not only acting but also other elements such as costumes, make-up, music, props, and scenography.<sup>22</sup> He referred to the following statement by John Dexter: "It is an impossibility to 'preserve' tradition in Britain. Even with Shakespeare, our efforts are directed towards how to destroy the productions of bygone days and

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<sup>22</sup> T. Kawatake, *Butai no oku no Nihon. Nihonjin no biishiki* [*Japan on Stage. Aesthetics of the Japanese*], TBS Britannica, Tokyo 1982; published in English as *Japan on Stage*, trans. P.G. O'Neill, 3A Corporation, Tokyo 1990, pp. 247–248.

create a new stage. That is the path of succession from tradition and the classics."<sup>23</sup>

Shakespeare vividly depicted many characters and situations they find themselves in. All of those are universally recognized and understood, which has enabled his works to be adapted in a variety of regions and genres. In *Kumonosu jō* and *Ran*, Kurosawa combined and mixed elements of Shakespeare's plays and *nō* by making use of traditional methods and Buddhist philosophy to create his own, original Shakespeare adaptations. Namely, he made use of a unique genre of traditional performing arts in Japan, *nō*, for his takes on the Bard's works in order to make his movies unique in the context of international Shakespearean adaptations.

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<sup>23</sup> T. Kawatake, *Japan on Stage*, p. 246.

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## Abstract

### ***Kurosawa Akira's Adaptations of Shakespeare Influenced by Nō Theater***

This paper discusses the use of elements of *nō*, a unique genre of traditional performing arts in Japan, in the movie adaptations of Shakespearean plays directed by Akira Kurosawa (1910–1998). Kurosawa was one of the most distinguished movie directors in Japan. He created two adaptations of Shakespeare plays that were highly acclaimed worldwide, *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*) and *Ran* (*King Lear*), both of which are set during the civil war period in

Japan. Kurosawa effectively introduced a variety of elements borrowed from *nō* theater, such as showing *nō* masks to the actors for them to be used as a basis for their facial expressions during the movie and adopting certain stylized movements in some scenes, especially in *Throne of Blood*. Some elements of philosophy and motifs characteristic to *nō* theater are also present in his adaptations. For example, in *Ran* he introduces the perspective of people withdrawing from secular conflicts and battles while at the same time depicting the nightmare of ghosts rising from battlefields. In *Throne of Blood* the motif of the impermanence of worldly things is emphasized. These Kurosawa depictions of Shakespearean plays are relatively faithful to their original plots. However, each of the two films shows a different approach when it comes to the characters portrayed. In *Throne of Blood*, the major characters seem to roughly coincide with the equivalent characters in the original work. However, in *Ran* Kurosawa changes the three daughters present in *King Lear* to the three sons of the protagonist, and consequently he also introduces the sons' wives. The question is, how is this change necessary for or effective at conveying the director's interpretation of *King Lear* and presenting his adaptation? This paper shows, using the above-mentioned examples, how incorporating elements of traditional Japanese theater makes Kurosawa's movies unique in the world-universal context of Shakespearean adaptations.

**Keywords:** Kurosawa Akira, Shakespeare, *Kumonosu jō*, *Macbeth*, *Ran*, *King Lear*, *nō* adaptations

# Culinary Continuity: Time Travel and Unchanging Flavors in Recent Japanese History Films

Sean O'Reilly\*

## Introduction

What is the relationship – if any – between a civilization's past and its present? Many would doubtless wish to believe that some sort of causal or strong linkage does exist, but even if that were true, how could it be verified? No one alive today can possibly have first-hand knowledge of, say, the 1500s, or for that matter even the 1800s. Thus, filmmakers with an ideological axe to grind, those who wish to persuade their viewers that the present is informed by the past, have to resort to rather outlandish narrative strategies to make their case.

Fortunately for Japanese cinema, an unusual narrative tactic has existed since at least the days of the 1979 film *Sengoku jieitai* (a.k.a. *G.I. Samurai*): the time-slip. As for popular fiction more generally, the trope first appeared in 1975 when the eponymous Hanmura Ryō novel on which the film was based was published. However, since about 2010, this narrative device has gone from unusual quirk to mainstream, road-more-traveled status.<sup>1</sup> While the concept of time travel is nowadays certainly widespread enough in global pop culture to be considered universal, the 'time-slip' (as

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<sup>1</sup> Amidst the time-slip boom, quite a number of projects advance face-saving explanations for Japan's historical defeats (and this is certainly a theme which resonates in Oda Nobunaga's eventual decision to accept his historic fate at Honnōji in *Honnōji Hotel*), for example *Zipangu* and *Lorelei* (2005, dir. Higuchi Shinji). See J. Rayner, "Forever Being Yamato. Alternate Pacific War Histories in Japanese Film and Anime," [in:] *Sideways in Time. Critical Essays on Alternate History Fiction*, ed. G. Morgan et al., Liverpool University Press, Cambridge 2019, pp. 62–77.

a device for contemporary audiences to explore Japanese history) has now achieved such extraordinary prominence in Japanese cinema, anime, and manga that it has become a unique feature of Japan's pop culture. But how does a time-slip story actually work to reinforce the bond between the distant past and the world of the contemporary viewer-consumer?

The strongest possible testimony to a civilization's continuity would of course come from an eyewitness, someone with personal knowledge both of the distant past and the present. Only a person who managed to experience both eras would be qualified to assess the extent to which past cultural practices have continued to shape present-day norms. Like the legend of Tiresias, whose unique experiences brought the seer the dubious honor of being called upon to mediate the high-stakes dispute between Zeus and Hera, any figure who has traveled back – or forwards – in time would be asked to declaim on how much the past lives on in the present. But while it was little more than a gimmick, an interesting 'what if' science fiction premise in the case of the 1970s *Sengoku jieitai*, since the twenty-first century the time-slip has been paired increasingly frequently with putatively essentialist elements of Japanese cuisine. These examples can be separated into two categories: foods/flavors which are universal in their appeal (e.g., crème caramel) and foods which purport to offer a uniquely Japanese – yet unchanging – flavor experience (e.g., *abura mochi*).

This link between food and an alleged continuity with the past should not be a surprise. Indeed, each of us likely has the capacity to feel 'transported' back in time when we eat something familiar from our childhood. As this is perhaps a universal quality of the human experience, storytellers in many mediums, highbrow and lowbrow alike, have latched onto the sense of taste as a rich topic to explore. But Japanese pop culture has outdone everyone else in this regard. Not only is there already a much stronger focus on history itself (for example, roughly half of the Japanese films released each year from the 1920s through the 1960s were period dramas), there appears to be a very strong focus on the sense of taste, and more recently, a well-established pattern of adding time travel into the mix.

The linkage between food and time travel is also uniquely strong in the case of Japanese pop culture. While time-travel stories in other cultural contexts also, of course, involve foods and flavors (Marty McFly's com-

ical attempt in *Back to the Future* [1985] to order a “Pepsi Free” in the 1955 café comes to mind), there appear to be few if any projects outside of Japan that rely heavily on food/flavor as a central narrative plot device. Indeed, many famous American time travel movies don’t have any narrative focus on food: for example, the terminator sent back in time in the *Terminator* film series doesn’t eat at all! By contrast, almost every high-profile time travel-related story coming out of Japanese pop culture seems to feature food as a central element.<sup>2</sup> The question is, why has such a unique connection between food and time travel developed specifically in Japan rather than somewhere else?

If the ultimate goal is to forge a link between present-day viewer and distant past, the storytelling advantages of time travel in history films – especially when continuity between past and present is powerfully reinforced via allegedly unchanging tastes – are clear. As such, we might plausibly expect every culture which produces time-travel stories to latch onto the power of food eventually. And yet this has not occurred; instead, it seems to be only or, at least, primarily Japanese time-travel stories which are committed to exploring food’s usefulness. One potential explanation for this is the extraordinary focus in Japanese time-travel tales on connection with the past. Whereas many time-travel stories made elsewhere are devoted more to the future than the past, those in Japan almost inevitably involve slipping *back* in time. This backward-facing approach is also reflected in the sheer number of historical films and period dramas (and their TV equivalents) produced in Japan, which as a proportion of total output is undoubtedly among the highest in the world.

What do Japanese audiences find so fascinating about Japan’s past such that they continue to reward content producers who incorporate time travel into their tales? The central message may be simply one of reassurance and continuity. After all, Japan has changed so much (especially in the wake of defeat in World War II) as to be almost unrecognizable from the 1500s to the present, and everything from sartorial customs to views on status, gender, etc., to buildings and lifestyles, to even the way people

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<sup>2</sup> For example, *kuchikamizake* and coffee spring to mind as the ultimate engines of the time travel in *Kimi no na wa* [*Your Name*] (2016) and *Kōhī ga samenai uchi ni* [*Café Funiculi Funicula*] (2018), respectively.

speak the 'same' Japanese language has transformed greatly. Which cultural elements, then, can plausibly shoulder the weighty responsibility of establishing an unassailable link between present and past?

The answer increasingly being settled upon by Japan's popular culture over the last decade seems to be cuisine. Human beings certainly tend to be very finely attuned to minute differences in this or that type of food, and given the universality of that experience, having an on-screen 'expert' declare: "Wow, this tastes exactly the same!" is therefore a powerful confirmation of what many people wish to believe: that there is a powerful bond between bygone and contemporary times. This pairing between food and (via the fanciful narrative device of slipping back or forward in time) some sort of claim of sameness between past and present has become so prominent in recent years that I have dubbed the phenomenon "culinary continuity."

How does culinary continuity work in practice? I will examine two recent high-profile examples, interrogating each to see how they use food to construct their value judgments attempting to link present-day and historical Japan and discover why one connected with audiences while the other fizzled. First will be director Nakamura Yoshihiro's 2010 film *Chonmage purin* (lit. "Topknot [and] crème caramel" but whose official English-language title is *A Boy and His Samurai*), which offers a universal flavor experience, followed by the 2017 hit *Honnōji Hotel* (directed by Suzuki Masayuki) with its unique-to-Japan taste sensorium.

It is important to note that storylines prominently featuring both time travel and food are certainly not limited to Japanese cinema; indeed, they are equally common in TV dramas (such as *Nobunaga no chef*), manga (like *Jin*), and various other mediums as well. But as the blockbuster success (over one billion yen at the box office according to official statistics released by Eiren, the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, Inc.<sup>3</sup>) of *Honnōji Hotel*, with its playfully flimsy 'explanation' of both the mechanism and the implicit purpose of time travel, forcefully shows, the idea of someone slipping back or forwards through time to

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<sup>3</sup> Box office statistics are only released for films which exceed one billion yen; English-language results for 2017 can be found at Eiren's website, at [http://eiren.org/boxoffice\\_e/2017.html](http://eiren.org/boxoffice_e/2017.html); accessed 28.12.2020.



sample various culinary delicacies and confirm directly that they taste the same in both eras has become so commonplace as to require no real narrative justification anymore. What about in the trendsetter for this sub-genre, *A Boy and His Samurai*? How did this film attempt to explain away, and make the best use of, its basic time-traveling premise?

## The timelessness of crème caramel in *A Boy and His Samurai*

Time travel was somewhat well-trodden ground already by the early 2000s, when the manga on which the 2010 film was based was released. This story about a late Edo-era samurai suddenly finding himself in twenty-first century Japan was not by any means the first narrative experiment with time travel in Japanese pop culture. Yet earlier ventures such as *G.I. Samurai* or the manga and anime sensation *Zipangu* (about a modern-day Naval Self-Defense force vessel suddenly slipping back in time to mid-1942, causing its crew to agonize over whether to intervene and use their cutting-edge ship to prevent Japan's defeat) belong more to a science fiction approach, presenting their time-traveling events as intriguing 'what ifs.'

*A Boy and His Samurai* (and the 2006 manga on which the film is based) has little of this science fiction counterfactual about it. Instead, it focuses squarely on what the time-slip can teach the three protagonists, the samurai Kijima Yasubei (played by Nishikido Ryō) and the contemporary mother-son duo Yusa Hiroko and Tomoya (played by Tomosaka Rie and Suzuki Fuku, respectively), who take him under their collective wing (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say he takes them under *his* care). The lesson each learns is powerful and universal, providing insight into the deeper motivations of the filmmakers (and indirectly the manga artist as well) in constructing this story.

One might well assume that *A Boy and His Samurai* would focus on the fish-out-of-water aspect, showing the samurai confused and helpless in the modern world. Yet, while there are a few isolated elements of Edokko Yasubei's confusion and a kind of shocked admiration for contemporary Japan, such as when he first tastes an ordinary supermarket crème caramel (the eponymous *purin* of the Japanese title), exploring Yasubei's

haplessness is not at all a priority of the film. The viewer will quickly come to understand that despite the basic plotline of a samurai obsessed with mastering how to make modern-day desserts, Yasubei has not so much come to contemporary Japan to learn about all the ways his own late Edo-period existence is ostensibly lacking, but rather to teach the modern world what it lacks.

Again and again, Yasubei and Hiroko discuss the idea of “Edo and Tokyo in competition” and, inevitably, it is Edo which triumphs. This is true both figuratively and literally, as the samurai’s culinary model of Chiyoda (Edo) Castle, made with his surrogate son Tomoya’s help – or, more precisely, made despite the modern child’s often clumsy and counterproductive attempts to help – takes first place in a local father-son cooking competition. At another point in the film, as Yasubei gives an exhausted and sleeping Tomoya a piggy-back ride to Hiroko’s home, he muses to her that the surroundings are playing tricks on him: “this place we’re in is both Edo and not Edo at the same time.” Is one to infer that the not-Edo quality of Tokyo is that it has surpassed the ancient city... or is it, rather, that Tokyo, despite its technological sophistication, is somehow /ess than Edo? The filmmakers leave little doubt as to their preferred interpretation: this is the very reason Yasubei has been called forwards in time, to teach the people of modern Japan how to live well.

The many lessons Yasubei has to teach concern masculinity and rely on a very widespread, perhaps almost universal opinion: “a boy needs (or is better off if he has) his father.” Hiroko’s son, Tomoya, is growing up without a father and (the film suggests) it is this which causes the boy his various developmental and attitude problems. If he only had a virile father figure around to show him how to be a man, the film seems to be suggesting, that would take care of any such problems, and poof! the ultimate surrogate father appears. Tomoya, unsurprisingly, is over the moon, and near the end of the film, in the traditional kindergarten rite of passage where each child is asked what he or she wishes to be when grown, he proudly declares: “I want to be a samurai when I grow up!” and is not deterred even when most onlookers burst into disdainful laughter. The viewer is meant to sympathize with the boy, as we have been privileged to watch his very close relationship with an ideal samurai – and father – develop and are meant to conclude it is the disbelieving parents

and fellow kids, so confident in the superiority of their world to the world of Edo, who are the ridiculous ones. After all, Tomoya's own in-house samurai has little (apart from tasty desserts) to learn from the modern world, but much to teach.

In this sense, the English title of the film is quite perceptive. It is not "a samurai and a boy" or even "a boy and a samurai" but *A Boy and His Samurai*. As soon as Yasubei appears, all the purported inadequacies of Hiroko as a single mother vanish, magically solved by the presence of a man who will bark orders at the boy when he misbehaves, growl at him that "men don't cry!" and generally be altogether heroic, saving the boy from himself repeatedly (most dramatically in what amounts to the film's only real action scene, the climactic denouement when Tomoya wanders off in search of Yasubei, now working at a patisserie, and is in some danger from some street toughs). The film seems to be suggesting, almost petulantly, that whatever problems boys today may have, they could be instantly cleared up if only they could receive some tough love from hypermasculine figures such as Yasubei. Implicitly, then, the filmmakers are taking aim at modern Japanese society's men, who are shown as either emasculated or absent/irresponsible (or both).

If the film had left Yasubei in this hard masculine trope, appealing as it might have been to many viewers, it would perhaps be difficult for some audience members to connect with him. As such, the viewer is also treated to several scenes of a softened Yasubei, as when he himself cries tears of relief that Tomoya, sniveling in fright, is safe even while gruffly chiding him: "How many times have I told you? Men don't cry!" Yet no audience member can be left in much doubt about Yasubei's near-perfection as both surrogate father and surrogate spouse. While at first he appears sexist in his rigid beliefs about what constitutes men's work and women's work, irritating Hiroko with his prideful comments, he eventually softens towards her as well, indeed at one point commenting that he has become, in some ways, both a stand-in husband AND something of a 'housewife' to the hard-working Hiroko. He works diligently to clean her house and prepare meals for the three of them, immediately outperforming the overstressed Hiroko in the housewifely department. Quite taken with the flavors of crème caramel, he determines he will master how to make them himself and, of course, does so almost imme-

diately, deploying his homemade 'pudding' as a pick-me-up to nurse an ailing Tomoya back to health at one point.

The universal, unchanging, and endlessly repeatable experience of eating crème caramel becomes the focus of their relationship, with Yasubei promising Tomoya to teach him how to make it. But when Yasubei is pulled back through time before he's able to fulfill this promise and returns to the late Edo period, it all smacks of a kind of knowing, divine intention (it turns out to be a Jizō statue which is the source of time travel) and the viewer is left to wonder: why did he slip forwards in time to contemporary Japan? *Cui bono*, in short? It seems obvious that the modern world got the lion's share of the benefits. Tomoya, in particular, was subject to a masterclass on how to be a man, and the idea that Yasubei was pulled through time to help this boy is reinforced by the fact that the magical statue responsible for the time travel was of Jizō, the god who, among other duties, is said to watch over children.

On the other hand, what has Yasubei learned? He was already nearly perfect as he was, so the only new attribute he appears to have gained was how to make desserts – no more, no less. He returns to the early 1800s well-versed in patisserie and, as we discover along with Hiroko and Tomoya at the very end of the film, he immediately and anachronistically launches Japan's crème caramel craze, establishing a vital continuity link to the present. In the process, he also engages in a unique counterfactual import substitution, nativizing a food item which originally was imported from Europe and rendering it almost quintessentially Japanese, imbuing it with his mighty samurai spirit to such an extent that, despite not having access to milk – a key crème caramel ingredient – in the early 1800s, he somehow replicates the essence of the dessert so fully that, nearly 200 years later, when Hiroko and Tomoya stand in a shop dedicated to his crème caramel recipe and sample the wares, they soon nod knowingly to each other and say, despite all evidence to the contrary, "He kept his promise after all!" Instead of teaching just Tomoya, he has taught the entire country the Way of Pudding.

The message of culinary continuity is strong, to be sure. Yasubei, alternate ingredients notwithstanding, managed to bring modern-day crème caramel back and paradoxically create it in Edo before it was ever

imported from abroad, nativizing it in the process. More importantly, he taught contemporary Japan, and in particular boys growing up without (manly enough) fathers, a great deal, embodying the steely superiority of Edo (the virile past) over Tokyo (the effeminate present). Yet while this nostalgic message of past trumping present may resonate with some viewers, in this case most strongly with young women in their teens and twenties according to surveys conducted at the time, it was apparently a hard sell at the box office overall, where *A Boy and His Samurai* did not manage to achieve blockbuster status.<sup>4</sup>

One obstacle to its success may have been the purported universality of crème caramel (pudding) itself: even after introducing uniquely Japanese ingredients to the recipe, the end result, as Hiroko and Tomoya can attest (having tasted his concoctions both in the 2010 present and via the unchanged recipe handed down from the late Edo period), is the same: in other words, crème caramel made by a master is universal and would be identical no matter what ingredients are used. The universality of the experience of eating crème caramel may have been difficult for the audience of *A Boy and His Samurai* to swallow. But the next high-profile experiment with a time-traveling test of culinary continuity, to which we now turn, fiddled with the formula, increasing the uniqueness of the experience in the hopes of reaching greater success.

### *Honnōji Hotel*: sweetening history through de-villainization

There are many similarities between *A Boy and His Samurai* and *Honnōji Hotel*. Both prominently feature paragons of male virtue, for example,

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<sup>4</sup> Overall on its opening weekend, the only period for which box office statistics seem to be available, the film grossed 44 million yen (about 400,000 USD) playing in a somewhat limited release of only 36 screens, and apparently won *zessan* (rave reviews) from women in their teens and twenties especially, though despite this ‘buzz’ the film never reached the one billion yen (roughly nine to ten million USD) mark sufficient to be officially considered a blockbuster by Eiren. See “‘Omoshiro no ni kandō dekiru.’ Nishikido Ryō shuensaku *Chonmage purin* ni zessan” [“‘It Was Riveting and Also Moved Me.’ Rave Reviews for *Chonmage Pudding* Starring Nishikido Ryō”], *Pia Eiga Seikatsu*. <https://cinema.pia.co.jp/news/153811/40524/>; accessed 28.12.2020.

and both certainly suggest that Japan of the past has something vital which modern-day Japan lacks. Like *A Boy and His Samurai*, which at its core is arguing that we in the modern world have much to learn from the putatively superior bygone historical era, an era so splendid its heroes could master desserts despite not even having the main ingredient, *Honnōji Hotel* also heavily relies on food as an anchor for the narrative – but this time it is a contemporary person traveling back in time to learn something directly from the titans of the past.

Mayuko (played by Ayase Haruka) is aimlessly drifting through life, following the path of least resistance. Having lost her job, she struggles to articulate to the employment agency what she would like to do next, and finds it easier just to agree to marry her handsome but unpleasantly controlling boyfriend, who oozes paternalism as he makes all her decisions for her, saying offhandedly: “You prefer it when I decide for you, right?”<sup>5</sup> Mayuko, in short, is in search of purpose, and stumbles across her answer when in the elevator of a rather incongruously old hotel while munching on Kyoto’s traditional take on *kompeitō* (Portuguese *confeito*), a hard sugar candy.

Here, in an elevation of the culinary continuity concept, it is food, specifically *kompeitō*, which is the very engine of time travel.<sup>6</sup> While the delicacy may have originated in Portugal, the recipe used in Japan since the mid-1500s promises a uniquely “Japanized” flavor experience. Moreover, its foreign origins notwithstanding, a food which is still made – and tastes – exactly the same despite the passage of hundreds of years can transport a person back, figuratively speaking, into the past. This is one of the pleasures of eating traditional foods: the conceit that in doing so, we are gaining experiential knowledge of what life was like back then, forging a link with our historical ancestors. But this figurative link is trumped by the literal time travel and consequent culinary continuity of *Honnōji Hotel*.

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<sup>5</sup> All translations from the original Japanese dialogue into English are by the author.

<sup>6</sup> The sense of taste as the fuel of time travel is supplemented by the sense of hearing, as there is also an old music box in the hotel lobby, and only when this seemingly broken music box plays can the elevator transport people back to the 1580s. But it is the *kompeitō* which is the more active element.

Mayuko is aimlessly meandering through Kyoto and happens to buy *kompeitō*, alleged to have been Oda Nobunaga's favorite snack, at a famous real-life shop in the Demachiyanagi neighborhood, at which the saleswoman earnestly assures her in the strongest terms that “we make these *kompeitō* in *exactly the same way* they've been made ever since the Sengoku era!”<sup>7</sup> Mayuko's unfocused nature caused her to mix up her hotel reservation and she drifts off to look for a new one, finding a rickety old building with a vacancy. As she boards the elevator she pops one of the sugar candies into her mouth, and the film launches into a colorful CGI sequence to convey the purported magic of these candies as the elevator brings her not to her hotel floor but to June 1582, opening on Honnōji, the site of Nobunaga's betrayal and demise.

Viewers, after seeing past his initially brusque manner, are soon treated to an altogether improbable portrayal of Nobunaga (played by Tsutsumi Shin'ichi) as heroic, egalitarian, and kind. Gone is the harshness of history's judgments of the man as a cruel tyrant, ruthless and ambitious, replaced with a very flattering depiction via a quasi-montage, showing in just a few seconds of sanitized footage Nobunaga the boy declaring status means nothing to him (!) and Nobunaga the young man swiftly winning battlefield victories before grandiosely declaring: “I just want to create a world where everyone can live in peace and smiles.”<sup>8</sup>

This valorization of Nobunaga is an especially eyebrow-raising example of what I call “de-villainization,” the sweetening of history by stripping popular figures of any negative traits. It is a process which has practical benefits from a commercial standpoint, as showing a famous and beloved historical figure in an unflattering light could violate what John Fiske has called the “recognition effect” and thereby alienate or offend any viewers who have grown so used to positive portrayals of the figure that they already view it heroically.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, showing such figures in an extremely and universally heroic manner carries little to no risk and will offend absolutely no one – except for a handful of historians, that is.

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<sup>7</sup> Author's emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> The original Japanese line is: *washi wa minna ga odayaka ni waratte kuraseru sonna yo o tsukuritai*.

<sup>9</sup> J. Fiske, *Television Culture*, Taylor & Francis, London 2010, p. 30.

The recognition effect, and de-villainization more generally, depend on the existence of other projects which depict the figure consistently in the same way. In fact, Nobunaga has long enjoyed considerable popularity and *Honnōji Hotel* is not even the first popular culture story to feature the specific device of someone traveling back in time to try to save him; that distinction goes to the 1986 anime *Time Stranger*.<sup>10</sup> But the twenty-first century has seen quite a Nobunaga boom, with pop culture celebrating his allegedly heroic qualities in every medium, from manga and anime (as well as video games) to live-action TV and film. This is a classic case of what Fiske and Hartley have called “claw-back,” referring to efforts in popular culture to shift a once-marginalized or misunderstood figure into greater socio-centrality.<sup>11</sup>

The last decade is noteworthy for the sheer number of claw-back projects on Nobunaga. Starting in the early 2010s, there have been quite a number of more or less interesting ‘what if’ scenarios. These range from the 2013 mini-series *Onna Nobunaga*<sup>12</sup> (what if Nobunaga had secretly been female, and Akechi Mitsuhide was her lover?) to the manga and later the 2016 live-action hit<sup>13</sup> film *Nobunaga Concerto* (what if a modern-day

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<sup>10</sup> F.A. Sherman, *Now and Then We Time Travel. Visiting Pasts and Futures in Film and Television*, McFarland, Inc., Jefferson, NC 2017, p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> J. Fiske and J. Hartley, *Reading Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge, New York 2003, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> The rather outlandish “what if Nobunaga was secretly female?” idea did not appear to win over audiences in 2013 Japan, as Fuji TV’s mini-series/made-for-TV movie, despite recruiting serious talent such as Iseya Yusuke (as Hideyoshi), Nishida Toshiyuki (playing Nobunaga’s father) and Koyuki (playing Nobunaga’s wife Nōhime) in addition to the headliner, former Takarazuka Revue star Amami Yuki to play Nobunaga, floundered to an average of a mere 8.9% audience share for part one and 8.7% for part two, far below the spot record of 22.9% cumulative audience share achieved by measuring anyone who tuned in no matter how briefly (indicating that nearly one quarter of households tuned in for at least a bit of it, and then the majority of those people quickly lost interest). See “Fuji uchiji ni Amami Onna Nobunaga shichōritsu hitoketa” [“Fuji TV Demolished. *Onna Nobunaga* Starring Amami Limp to a Single-Digit Audience Share”], *Tōsupo Web* [Tokyo Sports Web], April 9, 2013. <https://www.tokyo-sports.co.jp/entame/130876/>; accessed 28.12.2020.

<sup>13</sup> Box office results for 2016 show *Nobunaga Concerto* was a major blockbuster, with its 4.61 billion yen (about 45 million USD) making it the sixth-highest-grossing Japanese film released in that year (and ninth-biggest success of any film released in Japan in 2016). English-language statistics can be found at Eiren’s website, at [http://eiren.org/boxoffice\\_e/2016.html](http://eiren.org/boxoffice_e/2016.html); accessed 28.12.2020.



high-schooler slipped back in time and was recruited by the real Nobunaga, his spitting image, to pretend to be him?). But a reimagined Nobunaga has also popped up in other mediums, as in the stage play and 2014 anime *Nobunaga the Fool* (what if Nobunaga was secretly one of the world's greatest superheroes?) as well as the manga and, in 2013, the live-action TV series *A Chef of Nobunaga* (what if a contemporary chef slipped back in time and had to cook increasingly interesting foods for Nobunaga in order to survive?).<sup>14</sup>

What nearly all of these depictions of Nobunaga share is a generally quite sanitized and appealing take on the warlord himself. Each helped narrow the gulf between historians' consensus on the man as a blood-thirsty, ruthless, and erratic autocrat (and from a narrative standpoint, often a villain) on the one hand, and the enduring popularity of Nobunaga as a national hero on the other. These largely positive reevaluations of Nobunaga function as "gulf-narrowing" projects which made *Honnōji Hotel*'s glowing depiction of the warlord more plausible – and, dare I say it, palatable – than would otherwise have been the case. All of this positivity on Nobunaga ensured a powerful recognition effect of the (historically inaccurate!) view of him as unobjectionable hero. Indeed, resting on such seemingly firm cultural foundations as it does, *Honnōji Hotel* became just the latest in a long line of pop culture projects further confirming what we all "know" about Nobunaga and his times.

Given the film's very positive take on Nobunaga, one could be forgiven for assuming – as Mayuko herself does – that the reason for her accidental slip through time is to save the great man from his looming betrayal: to alter history, and let Nobunaga continue to dominate Japan. She may have been encouraged to take this dangerous step (fears of upsetting the space-time continuum notwithstanding!) when on a de-facto date with

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<sup>14</sup> Despite debuting in a Friday late-night time slot, *A Chef of Nobunaga* substantially outperformed its fellow 2013 reimagining of Nobunaga's live on TV, the aired-in-primetime *Onna Nobunaga*, managing to average a 10.8% audience share for the series. This was quite a success considering the late air time. See "Kisumai Tamamori Yūta shuen *Nobunaga no shefu* saishūkai 11.0% shin'ya waku de hitto!" ["Final Episode of *A Chef of Nobunaga* Starring Tamamori Yūta from Kis-My-Ft2 Hits 11.0% in the Late-Night Slot!"], *Sponichi Annex*, March 13, 2013. <https://www.sponichi.co.jp/entertainment/news/2013/03/18/kiji/K20130318005422490.html>; accessed 28.12.2020.

Nobunaga “downtown” in Kyoto. Nobunaga was apparently bothered by her bold pronouncement that his dream of a happy Japan is unattainable since even his own followers don’t seem happy, but obey him out of fear. In response, he goes incognito to show Mayuko the happy world of 1582 Kyoto, and buys her some *abura mochi*, closely watching her reaction to the flavors of his world.<sup>15</sup> When he asks her what she thinks of the treat, she gushes “It tastes exactly the same!”

This alleged sameness is reinforced by a bit of cinematic wizardry. We have seen this particular location, upon which the incognito Nobunaga and the time traveling Mayuko stumble, at another point in the film. While Mayuko was meandering around Kyoto, she happened to pass a stall selling – what else? – *abura mochi*. She dutifully purchased and sampled the treat, and thus when Nobunaga asks her what she thinks of the 1582 *abura mochi*, she is in the unique position of being able to attest to the truth of what she says, that they still taste exactly the same. But how to communicate this certainty to the film audience? Denied – at least so far! – any chance of adding narratively driven taste sensations (e.g., tasting in one’s own mouth exactly what the character on screen is eating, in real-time, or something of that sort) to the experiences one can sample during a visit to the cinema, must we simply take her word for it? Not quite: the film sets up a clever graphic matching sequence, with the *abura mochi* stall in the same general position on the street whether it be 2017 or 1582, and what appears to be essentially the same hand holding out the exact same item to Mayuko in each case. Thus we experience visually what Mayuko sensed viscerally: the past and the present are inextricably linked through the uniquely Japanese (and unchanging – why alter a winning formula?) flavor of *abura mochi*.

She has found not one but two culinary links to the past: the exactly-the-same *kompeitō* fueled her visit while the similarly identical *abura mochi* allow her to confirm the value of the past world. It is this turning point which sets her on the course of finding her purpose in life: to be a history teacher. But her realization of the excellence of the past also

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<sup>15</sup> For more information on *abura mochi*, see “*Abura-Mochi*. The Oldest Japanese Sweets Shop in Kyoto,” [in:] *Goin’ Japanese*, n.d. <http://goinjapanese.com/04334/>; accessed 28.12.2020.

makes her feel obligated to try to save Nobunaga no matter what. In the film's climax, after having already warned him once of what is coming, she travels one final time back to 1582, arriving in the middle of Akechi Mitsuhide's surprise attack, to plead with Nobunaga to save himself. What will the legendary warlord do when faced with a more or less plausible warning of impending doom?

Nobunaga arrives at a perhaps unexpected conclusion. He chanced upon a printed advertisement Mayuko had picked up during the course of her shiftless exploration of modern-day Kyoto at the beginning of the story, and was impressed with the smiling faces of the people in the photographs, even more so than he was with the advanced technology of the printed paper or the existence of photographs in the first place. Nobunaga, in short, feels his alleged mission to create a world where people can live peacefully and full of laughter will in future find, or has already found, fulfillment in modern-day Japan. The unique pleasures and experiences of his world, such as *abura mochi*, are preserved unchanged in Mayuko's present, and he therefore chooses to let history run its course, as meddling with it even to save his own life might make the wonderful, happy, peaceful world in which we live hard or even impossible to attain.

Presenting Nobunaga as both aware and accepting of his fate is a clever plot twist, as it also solves the greatest problem in the valorization narrative. We are meant to appreciate Nobunaga not only because of his alleged kindness and egalitarian ideas, but also for his strategic genius. For an ostensible mastermind to be caught unawares by Mitsuhide's betrayal has always been a serious problem in the (super)hero narrative about Nobunaga. A certain cognitive dissonance seems to cling to those wishing to claim Nobunaga was a great hero such that it is hard for those adopting this viewpoint to accept the Honnōji Incident at face value. In a 2014 poll in the magazine *Rekishi Kaidō* about the mysteries of Japanese history, a massive plurality, about 35% of the total respondents (the next-highest topic received only 10.7%), chose this incident as the greatest mystery in all of Japanese history.<sup>16</sup> How could the great man have been defeated so utterly?

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<sup>16</sup> See "Nihonshi no nazo wa?" ["What are the Mysteries of Japanese History?"], *Rekishi Kaidō kyōhonjin*, rankings from Oct. 2014; available in summary online at: <https://shuchi.php.co.jp/article/2063>; accessed 28.12.2020.

From a historiographic perspective Nobunaga's defeat is not a "mystery" at all. Indeed, *gekokujō* (the low overthrowing the high) was quite common during the 1500s and, given Nobunaga's capricious and cruel behavior, it is not exactly hard to imagine someone such as Mitsuhide nursing a grudge against him, even if the proximate cause remains unknown.<sup>17</sup> But the fact of Nobunaga's ignominious defeat does tarnish his (or, in the case of *Onna Nobunaga*, her!) legacy as a putative national hero, at least in the eyes of some, and that has caused all manner of outlandish "solutions" attempting to explain away this infamous final episode of the lord's life. One of the most popular, seen in both *Onna Nobunaga* and *Nobunaga Concerto*, is essentially to claim it was not, in fact, the end of Nobunaga's life at all – somehow, in secret, having ventured to another place or another time, the great leader lived on, or so they wish to claim.

*Honnōji Hotel* takes this valiant attempt to explain away Nobunaga's defeat to an entirely new level. First, it confirms what those wishing to view Nobunaga heroically undoubtedly already assume: Nobunaga can't really have been taken by surprise, surely, as he was (in their eyes, at least) too brilliant not to see the betrayal coming. He doesn't appear at all surprised when Mayuko reveals what is to transpire, and, in fact, Nobunaga maintains an almost infuriating calm throughout his final day, so much so that Mori Ranmaru (played by Hamada Gaku) is both exasperated with and in reverent awe of him, not able to understand how he could stay so calm and refuse to withdraw, instead waiting obligingly for history to be fulfilled. In a sense, Nobunaga, far from being outmaneuvered by Mitsuhide, is using him as the vehicle for his own eventual apotheosis – and thereby ensuring the future for which he allegedly longed, of a safe and happy Japan, will come to pass.

But how could Nobunaga be truly confident about a future he had never seen himself? How could a sixteenth-century individual evaluate the world of 2010s Japan, so utterly changed as to be unrecognizable? Recall the scene where Nobunaga observes Mayuko eating the *abura mochi*. When asked what she thinks, she blurts out that they taste the

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<sup>17</sup> On the prevalence of betrayal in Japan's Warring States period, and the persistence of the metaphor of *gekokujō* in attempts to make sense of this era, see for example D. Spafford, "An Apology of Betrayal. Political and Narrative Strategies in a Late Medieval Memoir," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 2009, no. 35(2), p. 326.

same, but instead of being confused by this ostensibly bizarre comment, Nobunaga only nods smilingly. In her unintentional slip he has all the confirmation he needs: the future from which she came is not only full of fun and laughing faces, it also shares a vital link with his own present via culinary continuity.

Silly as it may sound when parsed in the above manner, the undercurrent of culinary continuity in the plot of *Honnōji Hotel* is no joke. It's a relatively subtle argument seeking to persuade the viewer to admire the glorious past and to be satisfied with the happy and peaceful present. Indeed, it is no stretch to say the film pushes a specific kind of obligatory relationship onto the audience: gratitude towards the selfless heroes of yesteryear. Without the farsighted sacrifice of Nobunaga, the film seems to be saying, we would not be able to enjoy the wonders of the modern world and yet simultaneously, and paradoxically, that world is of value precisely because, at its core, it hasn't changed at all.

## Conclusion

We have now examined two films featuring a combination of time travel and culinary continuity. But the slip-back *Honnōji Hotel* was more successful (both commercially, at the box office, and arguably aesthetically as well) than the slip-forward *A Boy and His Samurai*, perhaps because the latter insists on the universality of crème caramel (even substituting ingredients won't change the experience of eating it) while the former relies for its "proof" of the link between past and present on the unchanging uniqueness of Japanese – and, in the case of *kompeitō*, Japanized – flavors. In short, *A Boy and His Samurai* relies on the erasure of difference to create a universal experience, while *Honnōji Hotel* emphasizes the uniqueness of Japanese foods, yet both conclude that food provides an unchanging link to the present.

At first sight, these two films may seem very different. After all, one shows a modern-day character slipping back in time to 1582, whereas the other involves a person of the late Edo period slipping forwards in time to the present. But consider the nature of time travel in these two examples: in both cases, the time slip connects Japan's past with its present. This is

very different from future-oriented projects one commonly sees in other cultures (*Back to the Future II* [1988], the *Terminator* series [1984–2019], *The Tomorrow War* [2021], etc.), in which present and *future* are linked. So the difference in the mechanism of time travel is only superficial; at their core, *Honnōji Hotel* and *A Boy and His Samurai* are advancing the same continuity argument, reassuring viewers that the past is still alive in the present. What, then, can explain the greater box-office success of *Honnōji Hotel*?

Both films insist we are beholden to the past, but with *Honnōji Hotel* we have confirmation from none other than the great Oda Nobunaga himself that our present is the fulfillment of his lifelong dream. For *Honnōji Hotel*, then, both the present and the past are excellent, whereas for *A Boy and His Samurai*, the past seems preferable to the present. Perhaps audiences find the suggested equality between 1582 and 2017 more appealing than the notion that the Edo-era past was somehow spiritually better than 2010 Japan; that notion may leave an unpleasant aftertaste. In any case, whether it be *purin* (crème caramel), *kompeitō*, or *abura mochi*, recent films are at great pains to reassure us, through the unassailable testimony of an eyewitness (or, should we say, mouth-witness?) with experience of both eras, that nothing fundamental in the hallowed experience of eating has changed: the flavor of the past and of the present are, in fact, exactly the same.

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## Abstract

### *Culinary Continuity: Time Travel and Unchanging Flavors in Recent Japanese History Films*

What is the link between a country's past and its present, and how can anyone possibly verify that link? The answer is time travel, allowing direct first-hand experience of both eras, and thus making it possible for the traveler to confirm the existence of foods which taste the same throughout time, forming what I call "culinary continuity." The concept of certain foods as universal and unchanging, linking past with present via the convenient plot device of a time slip, came into the mainstream with the 2010 film *A Boy and His Samurai* (*Chonmage purin*), featuring a time-traveling samurai who slips forward in time and then brings his crème caramel skills back to the Edo era with him, retroactively (and paradoxically!) introducing the universal delicacy to Japan. But the film did not connect with audiences. The 2017 hit *Honnōji Hotel* adjusted its formula to make a more successful continuity argument, fueled this time by the putatively 'unique' flavors of *kompeitō* and *abura mochi*, in the process offering a dangerously de-villainized view of Japan's cultural history. The savagery of the bloody past is stripped away, replaced with saccharine-sweet sentiments like "I want to create a world where everyone can live in peace and smiles." In the absence of meaningful criticism, the film's 1.5 million viewers might well be convinced by its (mis)use of culinary continuity. I analyze *Honnōji Hotel*'s reimagining of history, arguing that the film's box-office success relative to *A Boy and His Samurai* happened *because* of this food-fueled appeal to unique flavors of long-ago Japan, and its 'de-clawing' of warring states Japan and its greatest 'hero' Nobunaga. Contemporary Japanese audiences appear to reward films which focus more on unique-to-Japan culinary continuity linking Japan's glorious past and peaceful present.

**Keywords:** cinema, history, Japan, food, Oda Nobunaga, time travel, culinary continuity





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The second volume of texts submitted for the international conference celebrating 100 years of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw contains articles on the uniqueness or universality of Japanese literature, language, theatre and film. The authors examine both classical and modern examples of Japanese prose, poetry, and performative arts, debating whether the numerous 'unique' areas of Japanese culture have become universally recognized and already constitute an inseparable part of our contemporary transcultural world.

"Nowadays, many Japanese novelists – for example, Tawada Yōko, Murakami Haruki, or Kawakami Hiromi – write their novels with the intention of making them accessible and enjoyable not only to the Japanese audience but also to global readers. In their creative processes, certain sparks or conflicts, or rather, in some cases, intricately intertwined secret relationships arise between uniqueness, which can be called traditional or national, and universality, which should appeal to any person beyond any kind of border. In my opinion, in the history of modern Japanese literature it was Mishima Yukio who was the very first to be completely aware of this issue. This was due to his mind's propensity to concomitantly focus both on the internal (himself) and on the external (the world at large) element. Moreover, certain historical circumstances in Japan and in the world had also undoubtedly reinforced this tendency of his."

From the chapter by Inoue Takashi

