

REVIEWS

The Ends of Meter in Modern Japanese Poetry: Translation and Form

By **Scott Mehl**. Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell East Asia Series, Cornell University Press, 2021. xvi, 235 pp. \$49.95.

Reviewed by
Timothy J. Van Compernelle

This fascinating new book examines Japanese poetry during the period 1882–1907, a quarter century that witnessed an unprecedented degree of formal experimentation, motivated in large measure by engagement with and translation of European poetry as Japan opened its doors to trade and diplomacy with the world and began its audacious program of modernization. This dynamic between engagement with literature outside Japan’s borders and formal experimentation within them is what generates the subtitle of the book: *Translation and Form*. The title, *The Ends of Meter in Modern Japanese Poetry*, alludes to the overarching aim of the monograph: “a prehistory of free verse in Japanese” (13). In other words, the story traced in the book is how, stimulated by the translation and reception of European poetry, predictable metrical shapes inherited from the premodern era came to an end in Japan, to be replaced by metrical unpredictability.

Mehl documents this historical process with nuance and shows it to be an extraordinarily complex transformation. For non-specialist readers of



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The Ends of Meter, it may be useful to know that before the late nineteenth century, Japanese poetry had seen many forms, including what in modern parlance is called the *tanka* (literally “short verse,” thirty-one syllables with a meter of 5-7-5-7-7) and two later forms ultimately derived from it: the *renga* (linked verse) and, again in modern terminology, the haiku. The former began as a *tanka* split into a 5-7-5 part from one poet and a 7-7 part from another; in the late medieval era it evolved into an independent verse form in which poets (typically three) took turns contributing these two elements (5-7-5 and 7-7) to generate a communally produced verse of no fixed length (though often one hundred links). The haiku originated in the early-modern era when the initial 5-7-5 contribution to a *renga* became a standalone seventeen-syllable poem. There are longer poems that dominated a much earlier period during the formation of the court and the state in the seventh and eighth centuries, but these, too, were built of alternating lines of five and seven syllables in a verse whose length was not fixed but which always concluded with a 7-7 couplet. There are scattered experiments with alternative syllable counts and a long tradition of verse-making in literary Chinese, but even this brief exposition should show the dominance of a particular meter. In the simplest terms, modern Japanese poetry is the story of the effort to escape the stranglehold of fives and sevens and to create new verse forms. With a millennium of history behind traditional meter, this was no easy task. Poems that did not adhere to the inherited metrical scheme ran the risk of appearing not to be poems at all.

The first chapter shows how lines of five and seven syllables dominated the early experiments with translating European verse, even though the foreign poems did not use that metrical scheme. These translations appeared in the volume *Shintaishi-shō* (New-style poetry collection, 1882), and they were also meant to be models for those devoted to expanding the length, scope, and subject matter of poetry in Japan as part of an engagement with the modernizing world around it. *Shintaishi* might have relied on the inherited meter, but Mehl takes pains to acknowledge innovations, too: “stanza divisions, lines of verse demarcated by typographical means, a smattering of words from current speech, and, not least, an openness to the possibility of new subject matter” (33). In addition, the efforts of these translators and practitioners helped shift the meaning of *shi* from designating a poem written in literary Chinese to a more capacious term that included all poetry in whatever form or language, even traditional Japanese forms.

As the second chapter documents, an engagement with Byron and Goethe helped Kitamura Tōkoku (1868–94) conceive new verse forms in his long poem *Soshū no shi* (The poem of a prisoner, 1889) and his later verse-drama *Hōraikyoku* (The song of Hōrai, 1891). These two poems were not only innovative in terms of poetic genre, with no real precedent in the Japanese tradition, but they also featured no regular metrical scheme, the implication of which is that, as Mehl points out, they can legitimately be considered the first experiments with the free verse in Japan even if they do not appear in standard histories as such.

Occupying the exact middle of the book, the third chapter centers on haiku poet Masaoka Shiki's (1867-1902) defense of brevity in Japanese poetry and features an enlightening discussion of early European efforts to translate these short verse forms from another literary tradition. Among other things, Mehl shows how Europeans, fascinated with these brief poems yet unaccustomed to seeing such brevity as substantive, padded (there is no better word here) their translations to give them more heft and added rhyming schemes that did not exist in the originals. The chapter is compelling on its own, but, despite some loose connections, does not really advance the central historical argument of the book. To use a film analogy, the third chapter is like an instance of parallel editing, with the feeling of “meanwhile, in the world of traditional forms and meters,” after which we return to the main story in the final two chapters.

If puzzlement greeted Tōkoku's experiments, when they were even noticed at all, something closer to outrage was directed at the esoteric and electrifying poetry of Kanbara Ariake (1876-1952), who is the focus of the fourth chapter. Ariake is usually dubbed a symbolist poet, but, while acknowledging this and exploring the critical discourse about their difficulty, the chapter is more interested in his wildly experimental attitude toward meter. As Mehl shows, translation of European verse is another motor here, with fives and sevens again dominating the translation of symbolist poetry from France especially, but new stanza shapes were created by Ueda Bin for his translations, such as alternations of 7-5-7 and 5-7-5. Ariake used these metrical schemes while also experimenting with many alternatives, including his signature 4-7-6.

These experiments opened the door for the free verse of Kawaji Ryūkō (1888–1959), to whom the fifth chapter is devoted. In most histories of Japanese poetry, scholars usually mark 1907 as the birth of free verse in Japan, a year that saw the publication of Ryūkō's “Four New Poems” (*Shinshi yonshō*) in September. As Mehl argues, the salient difference

between these free verse poems and those of Kitamura Tōkoku is that the latter, despite their metrical unpredictability, were in classical Japanese, whereas Ryūkō's poems were in the colloquial language.

In addition to successfully documenting the “prehistory of free verse,” Mehl also seeks to answer the question of why some experiments have the power to shape literature over the long term while others do not ultimately take root. For example, although haiku and to a lesser extent *waka* continue to be composed even today, no one writes *shintaiishi* any longer. The book's epilogue begins with Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944), one of the three translators of the 1882 *Shintaiishi-shō*, who had realized early in the twentieth century that the new-style poetry he and his two colleagues had so carefully crafted did not even survive his own lifetime. Why did the *shintaiishi* become defunct? Although it had its champions, it also had a great many critics, including, predictably, the practitioners of traditional forms, but also, intriguingly, the pioneering psychologist Mōtōra Yūjirō (1858–1912), who argued that the brain required variety of meter. Nonetheless, there must be something more happening than just the critics outnumbering the proponents to explain the failure of a new form to take root.

Drawing critical momentum from semiotician Yuri Lotman, the book argues that the surrounding critical context is crucial for the long-term reception and diffusion of experiments with form and meter, and so in each chapter Mehl documents “a series of interactions between those who wrote poems and those who analyzed them” (13). For example, Kitamura Tōkoku's experiments were not recognized at the time, in large measure because critics such as Yamada Bimyō (1868–1910), Uchida Roan (1868–1929), and Ishibashi Ningetsu (1865–1929) were engaged in the versification wars, a series of debates about whether the definition of poetry should center on the meter (Bimyō) or content (Roan and Ningetsu). These debates were prepared by the perceived lack of variety in the *shintaiishi*, but the centrality of a meter here kept Tōkoku's innovations with metrical unpredictability out of the spotlight. By the early twentieth century, however, the critics had turned their attention to the prominence of free verse from overseas, especially in France, and thus Japanese experiments were recognized as instantiations of this new poetic style in Japan itself. I am highlighting two pivotal points in the book's overarching argument, but each of the chapters shows how poetry and poetry criticism were inextricably intertwined in this twenty-five-year period between the publication of *Shintaiishi-shō* and Kawaji Ryūkō's “Four New Poems.”

The translation of European verse is a constant impetus for experimentation in Japan. This is a well-known part of the story, but in *The Ends of Meter* it is yoked to a compelling historical framework and treated with heightened sensitivity and a greater awareness of the global literary and critical context than is typical of the author-focused studies of modern Japanese poetry that predominate.

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By **Mari Noda, Patricia J. Wetzel, Ginger Marcus, Stephen D. Luft,** and **Shinsuke Tsuchiya.** New York: Routledge, 2021. 4 volumes.

Reviewed by **Robert Joseph Del Greco**

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