

A gap in the clouds:

Translating Japanese poetry

James Hadley

In February 2021, in collaboration with award-winning Irish poet, Nell Regan, I published *A Gap in the Clouds: A New Translation of the Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, which had been a labour of love for the two of us for several years. The *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* is by far the most famous collection of poems in Japan. It consists of one hundred *tanka*, each one penned by a different poet. The *tanka*, also called the *waka*, is the longer antecedent of the more famous haiku. Haiku, with its famous 5-7-5 arrangement of syllables was developed in the seventeenth century by famous poets like Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), who composed the iconic ‘old pond’:

古池や蛙飛び込む水の音
(*furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto*)

which I might translate as:

An old pond
a frog jumps in
the sound of water

and Uejima Onitsura (1661–1738), who composed:

山里や井戸のはたなる梅の花
(*yamazato ya ido no hata naru ume no hana*)

which I might translate as:

Over a mountain village’s well
a banner –
a plum tree in bloom

As these examples illustrate, the 5-7-5 arrangement in Japanese is a formal device which defines the overall nature of the poems. However, it does not imply a line break or the introduction of punctuation as is often seen both in translations of haiku in English, and in haiku originally written in English. The same is true for the *tanka* form, which consists of a 5-7-5-7-7 pattern.

Tanka – a single moment in time
Tanka rose to prominence during the



Illustration from A Gap in the Clouds

ninth century, when the written Japanese language had no syllabary of its own, and was fully reliant on Chinese characters to represent Japanese words, variously logographically and phonetically. Thus, written Japanese was effectively a proxy of classical Chinese, meaning that writing at the time implied huge privilege, because it essentially required learners to have the leisure to acquire a solid grasp of written classical Chinese to write or read in Japanese. The hundred tanka in the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* were composed by historical figures who lived between the early eighth century and the mid-thirteenth century. Among them are emperors and empresses, ladies in waiting, priests, ministers, and even

Murasaki Shikubu, the author of the *Tale of Genji*, which has been called the world’s first novel by Martyn Lyons in *Books: A Living History* published in 2011. Many of these individuals are also related, with a large proportion being senior members of the Fujiwara clan, which was politically preeminent at the time. Thus, although the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* has become something of a national institution in Japan over the centuries, the poems actually capture a snapshot of the preoccupations of a tiny cross-section of the most elite members of medieval Japanese society.

A snapshot is a good metaphor for the poems in general, since in a very

similar way to the haiku tradition, tanka could be described as the art of depicting a single moment in time, often with implied or explicit emotional undertones, as can be seen in this example, by Harumichi no Tsuraki:

山川に風のかけたるしがらみは
流れもあへぬもみぢなりけり
(*yamagawa ni kaze no kaketaru shigarami
ha nagare mo aenu momiji nari keru*)

which we translated as:

The wind builds a dam
with maple leaves –
blown one-by-one
they clog the flow
of this mountain stream.

Very often, the emotions expressed in the poems are nostalgic, melancholic or vexed, rather than passionate or jubilant as may be more frequently seen in other poetic traditions. And this pattern, we found part way through the process of translating the poems, is reflective of the central position that poetry had for the medieval Japanese elite, of the mores of courtship at the time, and nature of the day to day lives of the poets. Poetry for this small group of elites was a hugely important element in the reckoning of social capital, whereby a single poem could make or break careers and relationships. Poems were used by both genders as forms of emotional expression in courtship. However, somewhat counterintuitively for the position of the people involved, the kinds of emotion that appear to have elicited the best response from potential partners are not those which might associate the poet with positions of power or supremacy, but those which

illustrate the fragility and weakness of the poet. Moreover, as members of the super elite, these individuals' lives were closely regulated and ritualised. Leaving the residence would have been a substantial affair, involving a retinue. Therefore, while poetry also no doubt acted as a form of entertainment, it gives us a window on the poets' state of mind when they say that they are gazing out of the window, for example.

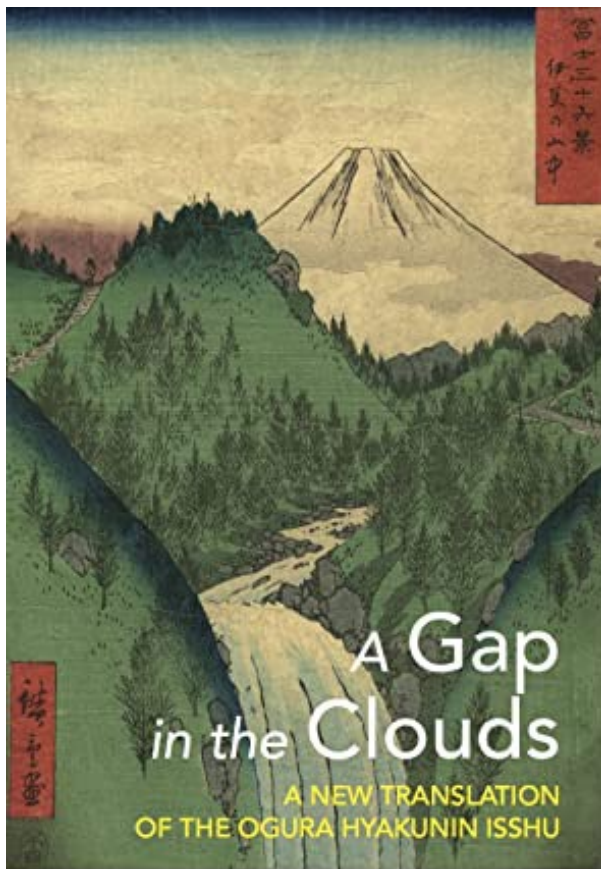
“A snapshot is a good metaphor for the poems in general”

A collective journey

Our journey through translating the poems was also a journey of discovery, as understanding these factors behind their composition allowed us to interpret the patterns and motifs that occurred in the collection. Nell Regan had already published several collections of poems before we embarked on our collective journey and was also familiar with translating between Irish and English. However, Nell had no understanding of Japanese. On the other hand, I had a grasp of the Japanese, but a limited capacity for writing poetry in English. Therefore, on paper at least, our respective expertise complemented one another.

I would take each poem and translate it for Nell in several different ways to give her as clear a picture of the Japanese

poem as possible. I aimed to give Nell a literal sense of the poem as it is written. So I aimed to translate each poem as a single sentence, accompanied by copious notes on cultural context and word plays. In addition, I would indicate where each of the syllable breaks fell and what content appeared in each of these breaks. I would also provide a transliteration of the Japanese poem, in order for Nell to get a sense of the sound of the poems.



Translated, with an Introduction, by
JAMES HADLEY & NELL REGAN

Cover of *A Gap in the Clouds*

The two of us would meet each week to discuss the poems. In the first place I would read the poems to Nell and talk her through the images and effects the poems contained. Later, she would bring several versions of the poems in English for us to discuss.

Aside from the obvious cultural distance between medieval Japan and contemporary Ireland, one of the key aspects of the translation process which raised its head in almost every poem is classical Japanese's liberal use of particles to introduce complexity. Where English and some other European languages may add adjectives to phrases to hint at the emotion behind an action, classical Japanese more frequently makes use of these small words with no direct translations, which add layers of meaning to a statement.

For example, in the following poem, particles are used extensively, but the final three words, all of which are particles interact with one another to create complex layers of meaning:

難波渦みじかき芦のふしの間も逢
はでこの世を過ぐしてよとや
(*Naniwagata mijikaki ashi no fushi no ma mo awade kono yo wo sugushi teyo to ya*)

The *teyo* particle indicates that the speaker is expressing a view with strong emotion. The *to* particle reacts to what comes before it. The *ya* particle indicates that the author is not sure about the statement they have just made. Thus, a sense translation might be something like 'could it really be the case that...?!'. The remainder of the poem is similarly built with heavy use of particles, such that a complex image can be built in relatively few syllables in Japanese which would take far more words in English to express. A very un-poetic translation of the whole line above might be something like 'Could it really be the case that the length of time that has passed without us meeting in this world is [as short as] the space between



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James Hadley
Photo: Private Archive

the nodes on the reeds in Naniwa lagoon?'. The translation we settled on for *A Gap in the Clouds*, however, is:

See the reeds of Naniwa lagoon,
that brief span between
each notch – are you saying
we've only been apart that long?
Already it's another world!

Witnessing Nell's power in judging what to say and what to omit, or to hint at using punctuation, was an eye-opening experience for me, and one which I feel has gone on to influence the way that I translate in general, even in the case of prose. I realised that I tend to assume a reader will not latch onto something unless I make it explicit. However, watching complex and multi-layered concepts be condensed into a small amount of space and that the result was also poetic has demonstrated to me the power of saying less in translation. This is not a question of what is lost or found in translation, but one of the leeway that

one can give a reader to make their own interpretations based on what you are able to give them. If everything is laid out, the reader is passive in the reading process. But if some of the dots are not joined, the reader is included. The instinct is to feel that by not joining the dots the reader will take away the wrong impression. But in the case of the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, the concept of a word-for-word translation is a fantasy. Even putting the concept of translating a poem as a poem to one side, the fundamental building blocks of the two languages are so different that any translation is necessarily an extrapolation. The range and variation of interpretations inherent in the poems can be easily seen by comparing our translations with others, such as Peter McMillan's *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each: A Treasury of Classical Japanese Verse*, published in 2018. Therefore, is it important for the reader to take away the same impressions of the poem's underlying meaning as I do?