Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese Literature

Rachael Hutchinson, Leith Morton

Literature short on time

Jon Holt
Published online on: 13 Jun 2016

How to cite :- Jon Holt. 13 Jun 2016, Literature short on time from: Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese Literature Routledge
Accessed on: 13 Dec 2018

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
LITERATURE SHORT ON TIME
Modern moments in haiku and tanka

Jon Holt

Introduction
One characteristic of modern Japanese literature that distinguishes it from earlier, traditional forms is the prominence of a freer sense of time in early twentieth-century writings, especially in poetry of the modern (1868–1945) and contemporary (1945–present) periods. Premodern poetry embraced a variety of themes (love, friendship, mourning, and so on), but the conventions of representation dictated a seasonal framework for the expression of these themes. Haruo Shirane writes that poets of the classical age (784–1185) ‘developed and established an extremely complex and highly codified view of the four seasons that would become the model of elegance and the primary literary representation of nature for the next thousand years’ (2012: 203). The traditional requirement in haiku and tanka that a poet situate the poem in time was not restricting but quite the contrary: it was liberating, because the demands of the form helped the poet shape the poem’s scope.

However, by the early twentieth century, many Japanese poets clearly rejected the idea of human beings being tied to the clock or calendar. For example, in 1910, Ishikawa Takuboku (1886–1912), a modern poet who often made idle and wasted time his theme, wrote this tanka: ‘Without a thought in my head / one day, all day / I will let my heart linger on the echoes of the steam train’ (1910a: 55). In literature of the modern and contemporary periods, the emphasis on individual identity and personal agency required fictional characters to transcend the bonds of time. Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933), perhaps Japan’s most cosmically attuned poet and a writer of a greater, Buddhist sense of time, created avant-garde poetry that located human beings outside of time and, by extension, worldly concerns (Holt 2014). Japanese naturalists and I-novelists, who reigned supreme in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, may have meticulously documented their mundane daily affairs, but one senses that by the 1920s, for writers like Miyazawa and the New Perceptionist School (Shinkankaku-ha), time was no longer a constant, no longer bound by even human perception. These rejections of human-centric time were also flights from the dismal reality of Japan’s early war buildup. Flash-forward to the contemporary period and we see the legacy of a rejection of a nationally shared time in favour of a time that is far more focused on personal and often idle moments, such as in Tawara Machi’s Salad Anniversary (Sarada kinenbi, 1987):
2. Literature short on time

‘Kono aji ga ii ne’ to kimi ga itta kara
shichigatsu muika wa sarada kinenbi

‘Hey, this tastes great,’ you said,
so July 6th became
our Salad Anniversary.

(1989: 127)

Has modern and contemporary Japanese poetry come to embrace moments of depoliticized time, outside of the realm of an official Japan time? Why has a more official, national time become eclipsed in contemporary Japanese literature by a more personal idle time, free from the burden of national history and contemporary events?

My focus in this chapter is on short moments of time framed and depicted in traditional literary forms like haiku and tanka. The tanka and the haiku are quite short, perhaps some of the shortest forms of poetry in world literature. The haiku has only seventeen syllables. It is actually derived from the older thirty-one-syllable form of waka, which is now known as tanka. The haiku, or hokku, was the first poem in a commoner-linked-verse sequence (haikai), which was derived from and parodied classical linked verse (renga), which in turn was modelled on the two poetic parts of the thirty-one-syllable waka; the haiku form would emerge with its first seventeen syllables as an independent unit from the final fourteen to create opportunities for interesting poetic collaborations among these late-classical renga or early-modern haikai poetic revelers. As the haiku and the tanka evolved in the Meiji period (1868–1912) when Japanese culture became heavily Westernized and modernized, dramatic shifts occurred in these two traditional Japanese poetic forms. In the short poems of the trailblazers like Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902) and Ishikawa Takuboku, there is a distinctly modern approach to the handling of time. Shiki and Takuboku provide two different approaches, at once both traditionally Japanese and radically new, to a sensibility about time that lasts in Japanese poetry today. Sam Hamill writes of the ‘enormous resonances, ghosts at every turn’ one finds in the haiku of Bashō, which for Hamill are Zen-like moments of encounters with ‘nothingness’ (mu) or an ‘exquisite loneliness’ (sabi) that can be truly relished through Japanese poetry (1989: 12; 16–17).

The propensity for quiet, ‘ghost’-like moments in Japanese poetry are often found in another important art form, manga (comic books or graphic narratives), which is highly developed in Japan compared to comics of other countries, even those of the United States. In fact, there are numerous examples of adaptations of Japanese literature, even haiku and tanka poetry, into manga. I will analyse a couple of examples here to consider the similar approach that is taken by poets and manga artists to the handling of time. The manga scholar Frederik Schodt draws comparisons between short form poetry and manga: ‘Like Japanese poetry, Japanese comics tend to value the unstated’ (1986: 21). Scott McCloud, author of the seminal work Understanding Comics, identifies an approach to comics ‘rarely seen in the West’ where ‘time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations [of panels]’ (1993: 78–79). In this chapter, I will explore the development of modern Japanese approaches to the depiction of time seen in these multiple forms of artistic endeavour. For readers of these forms of literature and art who have ever wondered why Japanese poems or comic books are so quiet at times, I suggest a way to parse those silent moments in order to make sense of the mysteries within them instead of simply mystifying the art even more. Understanding the Japanese sensitivity to time, especially to quiet and personal time, in turn begins to help us better understand Japanese culture. In this way, we may also begin to explore why Japanese literature and manga today are, at times, often at odds with other aspects of culture, such as political involvement.
The aspect of time in Shiki’s haiku and tanka sketches

It is a widely accepted notion that after the People Rights’ Movement (Jiyū Minken Undō) failed in the 1880s, Japanese writers, particularly males, diverted their excitement for promoting new kinds of political freedom into the writing of literature, which was a far safer choice given the resistance and repression they might face in opposing the oligarchy that ruled Japan in the early part of the Meiji period. Nakamura Mitsuo, an important critic writing after World War II, declared that Japanese literature had two paths: one marked by the activism of the political novel (seiji shōsetsu) and another form of prose marked by the inward focus on the individual, centred on the feelings of a central protagonist and rendered with a psychological approach that Tsubouchi Shōyō prescribed in his treatise Essence of the Novel (Shōsetsu shinzui, 1885), then put into practice by his disciple Futabatei Shimei in his nearly completed Drifting Clouds (Ukigumo, 1886–1889) and later perfected by the naturalist novelists Shimazaki Tōson, who wrote The Broken Commandment (Hakai, 1906) and Tayama Katai, author of The Quilt (Futon, 1907). These novels all feature protagonists who turn inward, rather than outward, examining their own feelings in light of external pressures. They are pensive novels in which thinking, rather than doing, distorts the traditional flow of Japanese fiction, which until the Meiji period had been focused on plot developments. These changes in fiction can also be seen in poetry, particularly the haiku and tanka experiments of Shiki, who was active as both a poet and a critic at the turn of the twentieth century. Until then, no other modern Japanese poet displayed a fresh, original approach to private moments of time better than Shiki.

Bedridden for nearly a decade because of tuberculosis, Shiki transcended his illness and wrote approximately 10,000 haiku, nearly 2,000 tanka and numerous pieces of criticism, as well as completing three important diaries. Donald Keene has said of Shiki’s diaries that ‘death, rather than love, was his theme’ (1999: 374). However, I believe that the main theme of Shiki’s late haiku and tanka is life itself. In his poetry, Shiki cherished life by meticulously documenting beautiful moments. Shiki’s exploration of this theme in these two traditional poetic forms is what makes him so modern. For our purposes, Shiki is important in understanding the shift in the depiction of literary time for the way he was able to use the very forms of his short poems to represent, sometimes mimetically, the flow of time. Shiki’s approach to poetry was that of ‘sketching life’ (shasei). Keene argues that the method of shasei was ground-breaking in poetry because Shiki opened the eyes of poets, encouraging them to use the seventeen- or thirty-one-syllable forms to actually describe the world around them rather than rely on centuries-old clichéd descriptions of cherry blossoms and spring love. Haruo Shirane writes that originally Shiki conceived of the goal of shasei as being one of ‘objectivity and mimesis’ but ‘towards the end of his life he believed... that poetry should apply shasei only to nature and leave human affairs to the modern novel – a stance that had a profound impact on the future of modern haiku’ (1998: 38–39).

One important aspect of Shiki’s shasei that has not been fully discussed is the way he handles time in his poetry, which often requires the reader’s imagination and thus abandons the illusion of ‘objectivity’ in order to understand the poem, as seen in the following tanka:

```
matsu no ha no
ha-goto ni musubu
shiratsuyu no
okite wa kobore
koborete wa oku
```

white dewdrops
form on pine
needle after needle
they hold steady then fall,
fall then hold steady.

*(Shiki 1904: 6.218)*
Shiki eschewed the hyperbolic wit of the thirty-one-syllable waka poets of the Heian period (784–1185) found in the Collection of Early and Modern Japanese Poetry (Kokinwakashū, 905), who often feigned confusion (mitate) about seeing snow when actually looking at plum blossoms, frost when looking at white chrysanthemums, and so on. He warned new poets to avoid the tedium (rikutsu) of such extreme conceits, and instead he urged them to write poems about what they saw. He favoured the old poetry of The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves (Man’yōshū, ca. 759) for its directness and lack of artifice. Yet this ‘white dewdrops’ tanka by Shiki is far more direct in its observation than most poems of the Man’yōshū. He carefully records the slow iterations of droplets as they hold, then fall, then hold again to the pine needles.

Written near the end of his life in a ten-poem sequence dated 21 May 1900, this poem greatly embodies the basic principle of Shiki’s sketching method. In this sequence Shiki took something ‘as simple as “pine dew”’, the poet Kimata Osamu wrote, ‘but his approach to it was new in the history of modern tanka’. Shiki’s way was to grasp the fine nuances of nature in a fresh way’ (1954: 42). However, if we consider the time that elapses in this short sketch, then we can judge the poem’s actual achievement. This modern tanka is more than a visual sketch; it also records a wonderful period of time that could have lasted seconds, minutes or perhaps even longer. Shiki’s repeated use of the conjunctive particle –te and the bound particle wa (okite wa kobore, koborete wa oku), is a textbook example of the pair’s nuance in classical Japanese, where ‘the first action (before the te-wa) and second action (after the te-wa) are repeated: “constantly”, “repeatedly”’ (Shirane 2005: 192). The cyclical nature of the grammar here requires the reader to imagine the combined actions happening over and over again. Shiki, the poet, is witness to a miracle of nature, a beautiful display of water art that seems to last forever. The poem’s power is not only in Shiki’s exquisite visual framing but also in Shiki’s subtle suggestions of an impossibly infinite scene, all within the thirty-one syllables of the poem.

Shiki’s call for shasei innovation also included expanding the possibilities for poetic diction. He wrote poems, for example, about baseball, a new sport imported to Japan around 1882, which soon captivated the public, including Shiki:

kokonotsu no
hito sorezore ni
ba o shimete
bēsubōru no
hajimaran to su

The nine men
each take their
positions:
the baseball game
is set to begin.

(Shiki 1904: 6.72)

Shiki enjoyed using new sports terminology in tanka, lifting up the thirty-one-syllable form from centuries-old descriptions of cherry blossoms, autumn leaves and other classical topics. The tension felt by the players waiting for the game, as well as the growing excitement felt by Shiki, a spectator, is immediately felt in the poem, particularly in the tactical placement of the verb combination hajimara[mu] to su in the last line to describe an action that is about to occur. The reader reaches the end and waits for what will happen next: game on!

Although Shiki’s shasei might be considered a form of realism, which was becoming a dominant strain in Japanese literature at the turn of the twentieth century, Shiki did more than merely describe objects as he saw them. Shasei also allowed for the possibilities of poetic imagination, as seen in the following two late haiku, written in Shiki’s last year of life, when he was most certainly restricted to his sickbed, the futon on the floor of his ‘six-foot room’ that was his world. These poems feature the mystical beings known as tengu, mountain-dwelling spirits, usually half-man and half-bird, who can fly and sometimes bewitch maidens, taking them off to their remote lairs:
Both haiku describe two scenes, which the tengu inhabit (at least by proxy). Rather than thinking of them as realistic ‘snapshots’, the reader should note that a significant period of time elapses in each poem, adding to the mystery and flavour of these incredibly short verses. The poems are better savoured when the reader appreciates that in only seventeen syllables, the poet slowly unfolds two large, dynamic scenes. Readers will create their own closure on the scene, marking the time when the action begins and ends by positioning the first image against the second image in each poem.

In the ‘axes’ poem, Shiki proposes a cause-and-effect relationship, but this poem requires the reader to imagine a story that unfolds over a much longer period of time than the scene in the tengu-mask poem. This poem is quite possibly about time before time, marking a virgin forest in which the divine or demonic nature spirits have guarded for ages. Shiki mixes the supernatural element of the tengu in these poems to ultimately make them modern rather than traditional. Time is crucial to these poems, as Shiki juxtaposes premodern Japanese life and customs with modern Japanese life: the superstition of the tengu against the still-remaining virgin wood in Meiji Japan; the customs and dress of old Japan being performed and worn by a contemporary Japanese. These scenes are not snapshots but moving pictures cut and framed by Shiki, who has expanded the power of traditional haiku by having them record both old and new Japanese life in a form with a history centuries old. They require the imagination of the reader to creatively add context between the first and second images of these poems, filling in the blank between the images of the powerful tengu and the proliferating forest. In the ‘mask’ poem, the final image of the tengu mask seems to bounce through the heat-stricken field, clinging to the back of its human host. The haiku’s cutting-word (kireji) shears the poem into two halves, separating them in the middle of the line, which is somewhat rare, between the person ‘going’ across the field and a close-up on the thing that goes with him.

Shiki’s life story and poetry have often been adapted for television as well as manga, albeit with different degrees of success. Analysing how Shiki’s poetry is translated to the comic-book page can aid in our understanding of how time functions in Shiki’s works as well as how illustrators similarly depict the passing of time in manga. For example, if the scenes from the two poems above were translated into manga, they would certainly use the juxtaposition technique of what McCloud calls ‘aspect-to-aspect’ panel transitions. McCloud describes the act of reading comic books as one in which ‘every act committed to paper by the artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice’, the reader (1993: 68). This act of imaginative ‘closure’ is what comics require of the reader, far more than a viewer of film. Furthermore, McCloud astutely notes that ‘aspect-to-aspect’ transitions ‘have been an integral part of Japanese mainstream comics almost from the very beginning . . . Most often used to establish a mood or a sense of place, time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations’ (1993: 79).
2. Literature short on time

A particularly awful example of Japanese comic-book storytelling and poor adaptation of Shiki’s handling of time for manga is found in the cheaply produced series *Finish Those Classics with Manga (Manga de dokuha)* by Variety Art Works Studios and their manga version of Shiki’s *My Six-Foot Sickbed (Byōshō rokushaku)*, (1902). This 189-page adaptation features a number of his haiku poems translated into sequential-art format, all of which are disappointing because they fail to capture the mood and spirit of Shiki’s originals. The manga fizzles because the panel-to-panel movements are action oriented, as if the invalid author Shiki was a superhero racing against time to stop a bomb from exploding. The un-credited artists depict two of Shiki’s three deathbed poems (*zeppitsu*) in flagrant ignorance of the poet’s style. The most famous poem of the three again demonstrates how Shiki cherished life by documenting the passing of time in his poetry. In Donald Keene’s translation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hechima sakite} & \quad \text{The sponge gourd has bloomed;} \\
\text{tan no tsumarishi} & \quad \text{see the Buddha} \\
\text{hotoke kana} & \quad \text{stuffed with phlegm.}
\end{align*}
\]

*(Shiki 1925: 3.759) (Keene 2013: 188)*

‘Shiki sees himself,’ Keene writes, ‘as a Buddha (a dead man), but even though this was his farewell to the world, it contains a touch of haiku humor, the incongruity of a Buddha being choked by phlegm’ (2013: 188).

Janine Beichman observes that Shiki typically identified with nature or noted his separation from it, but in this last poem he particularly ‘lamented the separation’, noting that ‘he was trying overcome the distance between himself and the beauty he observed’ (1986: 102). Certainly in this poem about the beginning of flowers and the end of a human life, the ‘distance’ Beichman speaks of is not spatial but temporal. There is a tension between the time required for the two actions: the gourd’s blooming and ‘(my) phlegm blocking up’ happen simultaneously over days. The health of the poetic persona hinges on which action is completed first. The latter action is realized first, much to the regret of the subject.

For the manga version of this poem (Figure 2.1), the poem is brought to life more like a storyboard for a cheap televised drama than a carefully drawn manga. The sequence begins with a panel of the hanging gourd (*hechima*), which sets the scene. (The juice from the hechima can be a palliative that helps relieve coughing spells for tuberculosis sufferers.) Then it cuts to a brief image of Shiki looking out into the garden. The third panel cuts to a close-up of a look of bewilderment by Shiki’s sister, Ritsu, his caregiver. Using McCloud’s panel types, I classify these three panel transitions as ‘subject-to-subject’ because they merely express linear narrative development and lack the subtlety of ‘aspect-to-aspect’ panels, which focus on mood or atmosphere. The following panel contains looks of surprise from Shiki’s disciples. Finally, in the fifth panel, Shiki heroically completes the haiku with the swish of the brush. Mission accomplished.

In the manga version of the next poem (Figure 2.2), the poem appears in the foreground with a coughing, dying Shiki occupying the frame. The manga simply dramatizes an important episode in Shiki’s life; it fails to capture the spirit of the haiku, in which Shiki defends his dignity and what remaining time he has against the demands of death. The manga also presents this second poem of the set with an image of a haggard Shiki, again as a kind of punctuation to the dramatic tension of this moment. Originally, in this second haiku, like the previous one in the sequence, Shiki described not only a concrete visual image but also joined that image to a poignant moment in time – in this case, the lack of time.
Figure 2.1 Variety Art Works’ version of Shiki’s ‘Hechima sakite’ poem rendered in the style of an extreme-action sequence (My Six-Foot Sickbed, 173).

```
tan itto
hechima no mizu mo
ma ni awazu
```

Four gallons of phlegm – but the hechima elixir does not come in time.

(Shiki 1925: 3.759)

There is a long backstory prior to this scene, as the person suffering from tuberculosis has coughed up an incredible amount of phlegm, indicating the severity of his disease. Had the flower of the hechima bloomed earlier and the resultant vegetables been harvested, the needed medicine could have been produced, perhaps slowing the course of the disease and allowing the patient to live longer. The poem ends on the sharp realization that after waiting and struggling for so long, the patient has no more time left.

In each poem, there is a balance between the first and second images; each set of images is mediated by a sense of time. I disagree with the manga artists’ handling of the scene; they simply use it to illustrate the wasted state of the writer. Perhaps if they had attempted to use an aspect-to-aspect approach instead of subject-to-subject, they could have conveyed the true spirit of this
2. Literature short on time

Figure 2.2 ‘Tan itto’ by Shiki, adapted into manga form (My Six-Foot Sickbed, 175).

poem and its companion, which Keene rightly characterizes as having a sense of humour, or perhaps even irony, in the way that time sadly played out for its poetic persona in his final days.

Thus far, I have discussed how manga can successfully or dismally communicate a mood or feeling through the juxtaposition of images, usually involving not only gaps between the types of images but also the use of temporal gaps, a strong feature of both modern forms of haiku and tanka. McCloud’s analysis of the types of closure – particularly aspect-to-aspect transitions – in the sequential art of comic books is useful, but he did not fully consider the importance of time in the juxtapositions of his fifth type of comic-book closure, especially in manga. ‘For in Japan more than anywhere else, comic is an art of intervals’, McCloud writes, hinting at the possibilities of a new kind of imagined time that occurs in manga, but he focused more on the spatial shifts of the page layout to describe visual ‘rhythms’ rather than fully consider all the possibilities for temporal flow in these manga panels (1993: 81–82). The flow of time, and the length of the interval between juxtaposed images is a crucial element in the art of both modern Japanese poetry and manga. Next, I will consider a few other approaches to poetic time in tanka
in order to clarify how Shiki and other later poets created a new sense of time – one which was highly personal – and how such a move changed the stakes of Japanese literature.

Tanka as pure moment: Takuboku’s poetry of our everyday lives

Writing about tanka ten years after Shiki’s death, Ishikawa Takuboku still believed in the power of *uta*, or the oldest word for tanka. If the thirty-one-syllable form was to survive at all, it was in its perfect ability to capture small moments of feeling in a poet’s life. In 1910, Takuboku wrote, ‘In life each second is one that never comes back twice to you. I love each second (*ichibyō ga itoshii*). I don’t want to lose any of them. Because it is so tiny, that’s why the *uta* is the most convenient, least troublesome form of poetry’ (1910b: 289). Takuboku achieved fame at an early age, debuting with his free verse (*shi*) at the age of seventeen in Yosano Tekkan and Akiko’s literary journal, *Morning Star* (*Myōjō*), the most prestigious journal of its day (from 1900 until 1908, when its brand of romanticism was eclipsed by naturalism). Takuboku attempted to ride the wave of romanticism and then naturalism by writing tanka, novels and (later) literary essays, but he is known in modern Japanese literature as a major innovator in the tanka form. Like Shiki, Takuboku remains even today one of the most beloved and original tanka poets of Japan’s modern period.

Takuboku’s *Handful of Sand* (*Ichiaku no suna*) was a groundbreaking collection of tanka, both representing his romantic period and his ‘lived-life’ (*seikatsu-ha*) phase. In terms of advancement in the tanka genre, the far more advanced of the two are the latter group of works, which blended a cry for social justice with a socialist perspective, awakened in the poet by the 1910 Great Treason Incident (*Taigyaku jiken*). Having failed to become a successful poet like his associate Kitahara Hakushū (1885–1942), Takuboku continued to write tanka poetry, and his poems reflect the day-to-day grind of having to scrape up money to get by in Tokyo, provide for his family or just enjoy the fruits of modernity that Meiji Japan promised its people. Takuboku’s poetry records the moments of excitement and frustration, sometimes in combination, producing a bittersweet sense of irony as he chronicles how he falls from lofty expectations of himself to a low, disappointing awareness of his actual circumstances.

```
Hatarakedo
hatarakedo nao waga-kurashi
raku ni narazari
jitto te o miru
```

(Ishikawa 1910a: 19)

The repetition of the five-syllable phrase *hatarakedo* (‘I work, yet’) is a risky move, taking up ten of his total thirty-one syllables, but it has great effect, reproducing both the feeling of frustration as well as a mimetic sense of the flow of poetic persona’s thoughts in time. The final line, with its onomatopoeic *jitto* (‘deeply’ or ‘intently’ staring), also draws out the time elapsed in the dramatic space of this tanka.

The poem speaks of at least three periods of time, all of which are conflated in the poem’s final poignant moment, as the persona stares at himself in an act of self-rebuke. The first period of time is the largest sense of time, the poet’s ‘life’ or ‘lived-life’ (*kurashi*, written with the kanji for *seikatsu*). The second is the repetitive temporality of work, work and more work that takes place within the weeks, months or years of the persona’s total daily life. In the final sequence of time, he stares at his hands – for a moment, for seconds, minutes or perhaps more – which may represent all of the poet’s life by proxy. There is a pregnant pause here where Takuboku’s persona comes to the realization that he has been toiling in vain for all of his life. Takuboku’s handling of poetic
(tanka) time is much different from Shiki’s handling of time in his haiku or tanka. Takuboku’s poetry features moments in which one has an epiphany about life or one’s life, and time seems to stop, or stretch out nearly infinitely, while the moment resonates within the poet. Takuboku wrote that the thirty-one-syllable form of the tanka was perfect for capturing moments and showcasing them as part of the modern sensibility. ‘People say the [tanka] is short so it’s inconvenient. I’d say the opposite: it’s short; that’s what makes it convenient’ (1910b: 288).

Earlier, when demonstrating Shiki’s radical juxtapositions of poetic time, I provided an example of how a manga team poorly executed their adaptation of Shiki’s life and art. Fortunately, examples of excellently produced manga adaptations of Japanese poetry exist that can help us understand not only how time is handled in modern Japanese poetry, but also how manga shares with poetry a similar approach to the depiction of elapsed time. Sekikawa Natsuo and Taniguchi Jirō’s *The Times of ‘Botchan’* (‘Botchan’ no jidai, 1987–1997), a five-volume history of late Meiji literary and political figures, focuses on Takuboku for one volume. Sekikawa lovingly writes and Taniguchi beautifully renders moments in Takuboku’s life, especially the moments they imagined produced some of the poet’s most famous tanka. In the following sequence, the creative team show the sequence of events that led up to the ‘I work’ poem (Figure 2.3), as the fictional Takuboku adds up his daily expenses and realizes the impossibility of staying out of debt.

![Figure 2.3](image-url)  
*Takuboku’s moment of poetic inspiration captured by Sekikawa and Taniguchi (The Times of ‘Botchan’, 152).*
Over five panels, Taniguchi maintains a conservative approach to the depiction of his subject; however, he is more careful not to rush the depiction of its poetic time than the manga adapters did for Shiki’s poetry. The emphasis here is on mood rather than action. Although the page consists of mainly subject-to-subject panel transitions and possibly moment-to-moment transitions as well (depicting Takuboku from different angles), two panels help amplify the long sense of frustration and sadness felt in the first panel. From the previous two Takuboku-centred panels, the third panel cuts to the accounts ledger. This is an aspect-to-aspect shift, accentuating the desperate reality of the moment. Because Taniguchi uses a photographic reproduction of an actual document written by Takuboku, the poet’s poverty hits home. Taniguchi switches back to the poet as he enunciates the opening lines of the tanka. The final panel closes on Takuboku in a near-fetal position of despair, his face buried in his hands. The viewer’s position is now somewhat godlike, again enhancing the mood in another aspect-to-aspect transition that has the effect of making the viewer see Takuboku as completely disempowered, but in our godlike position, we begin to have a greater understanding of – rather, compassion for – Takuboku, who is just one person among many trying to make ends meet.

Taniguchi’s manga adaption successfully conveys the spirit and art of Takuboku’s poetry in two ways. First, Taniguchi depicts the paused moment of Takuboku lying in the fetal position and looking helpless, an open image compelling his readers to identify with the defeated poet, perhaps imagining themselves in the faint outlines of his image, rendered both poetically and visually. Tanka poet Takano Kimihiko (1941–) describes how tanka personae take on a generic form, what he calls the ‘white outline of the empty “I”’, which lures readers into thinking they are getting the actual poet in the tanka and instead they end up with a generic, iconic persona, which they see themselves as anyway (Usami 1999: 258–261). Although Takuboku’s manga form is more fully depicted than a white outline, the artist frames the figure in a way to invite readers to imagine themselves in the poet’s cartoony form, or ‘icon’ to use McCloud’s term (1993: 59). This technique of reader identification is a characteristic of modern thirty-one-syllable verse that Tsubouchi Toshinori says began with Takuboku, matured with Terayama Shūji in the 1960s and was used with great success by Tawara Machi from the late 1980s (Usami 1999: 259–261).

The second way Taniguchi skilfully and authentically captures Takuboku’s art is through the nuances of time depicted in the manga. In a dialogue with Tawara Machi and critic Yoshimoto Takaaki, Yoshimoto astutely observed, ‘What makes you [Tawara] like Takuboku is how you both fix on an image that is based on the feeling of a moment’s passing’ (1989: 76). For Yoshimoto and the Botchan manga artist Taniguchi, Takuboku clearly expressed the passing moments of time in clear images, which constitute a strong, identifiable feature of Takuboku’s style.

In the last few years of his life, perhaps at the peak of his literary powers, Takuboku formulated a number of ideas that shaped the direction of the tanka’s development. Concerned about the future of tanka, Takuboku wrote how tanka should evolve from its conservative origins and become a more modern vehicle of expression. His ideas about new tanka involve the conception of how much time elapses in the short thirty-one-syllable form. In ‘Various Things about Tanka’ (Uta no iroiro), Takuboku wrote that the uta did indeed begin with The Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, but ‘our poems are the poems of our day . . . and they must be the poems of our future’ (1910c: 298–299). Like other young poets such as his comrade Toki Aika (Toki Zenmaro 1885–1980), Takuboku felt that tanka needed a new kind of awareness of time in order to be modern.

Takuboku compared the process of tanka composition to the feeling he had when he walked outside one day, was surprised by a dog jumping at him and uttered ‘Shit!’ (kon chikushō) in response. This purely spontaneous reaction (‘without thinking’, omowazu shirazu) is the birth
of a tanka. ‘Tanka will not die, provided that you have people who feel a loving attachment to fleeting moments that pop up in our daily lives, disappear, pop up and go’ (1910c: 299).

Takuboku felt that the secret to modern tanka composition required a newer approach to conveying epiphanies: ‘These days, actually, I think to myself, “I don’t want to be surprised.” Instead, I want to face my problems head on, with eyes open, surprised by nothing’. Instead, living as a modern Japanese, whose unique history now requires them to be surprised constantly through the day, Takuboku rhetorically asks, ‘Even if I cry out “Shit!” one hundred times in a day, do you think time will stop its hands for me?’ (1910c: 298). Takuboku’s answer to his question is obvious: tanka’s convenient form will give modern Japanese people the power to take control, however momentarily, of their time. Modern tanka, Takuboku proposes, comes from sudden, spontaneous reactions to one’s world and coolly capturing one’s response to the event.

Tawara Machi, writing seventy years later, would echo Takuboku’s statement, reformulating it as her ‘moment of ah!’ (ā to iu shunkan), which is captured by her ‘magic wand’ (mahō no tsue), the 5–7–5–7–7 form (1989: 189). ‘The first step for one to compose a tanka is the “wavering” of the heart (kokoro no yure”). It doesn’t matter how small it is, as long as you have a feeling that gives you some kind of “ah!”’ (1993: 86). In terms of her composition practice, Tawara said in an early interview that she does not sit down to plan and construct her poems. ‘There’s no set time. I’ll be on the train, or walking around, and suddenly create something. When I think “Ah!” I make a memo of that feeling’ (1989: 10). Moreover, tanka is the best form to capture and represent these small moments, Tawara explains, her comments strongly reminiscent of Takuboku’s thoughts on the form: ‘We normally have in our daily lives countless “ah” moments that can form a tanka’ (1993: 86).

An example of the kind of surprise-moment tanka that Takuboku advocates is one by his junior colleague, Toki Aika, an iconoclast who challenged all the traditions of thirty-one-syllable poetry in terms of approach, lineation and diction. ‘This is a good poem’, Takuboku writes:

On the bricks of a charred ruin
I p-i-s-s and feel
in my bones autumn’s here.

(quoted in Ishikawa 1910c: 297)

Although Takuboku criticized Toki for using the romanized form of the word syōben (‘p-i-s-s’) here instead of the standard kanji characters for it, he defended it against a rival magazine’s conservative critic. Takuboku humbly ranks one of his own poems far below Toki’s ‘piss’ for its similarly modern approach to tanka.

Hey!’ I just got said to me
and my hand taken
by Prime Minister Katsura
so the dream went, and I woke up
on an autumn night at 2 a.m.

(1910c: 298)

Interestingly, Takuboku says of both poems that they could ‘elicit the same kind of feeling by any thousand people’ and thus we see that modern tanka poets ‘look straight ahead at the world and capture moments of time’ in order to create art that can be appreciated by the masses (1910c: 298). Toki and Takuboku, early writers of socialist literature in late-Meiji Japan, hoped that the masses would embrace tanka for its ability to critique the systems of power. If the tanka could rally the masses of Japan’s stifled society, even better. Takuboku’s poem can be
interpreted in a number of ways, even one that allows for Takuboku’s hand being shaken as a
greeting by a similarly ‘great man’ like Katsura Taro, a powerful prime minister, who crushed
many of his opponents. ‘This interpretation does not seem plausible,’ writes Iwaki Yukihiro,
because at the time of this poem’s composition, Takuboku knew of the Great Treason Incident
and was horrified by the actions of the conservative leader’ (1980: 114). The poet depicts a
moment of shock, horror, and fear that even a leftist sympathizer like himself would be rounded
up as a part of Katsura’s purge of the socialist left: the phrase ‘my hand taken’ indicates being
ducked. These ‘moments of our busy lives’ that ‘pop up and go’, which become the core
of tanka, are also ‘necessary’ (hitsuyō) in Takuboku’s thinking, and actually the only grounds
for modern poetry, including that of free verse. In another essay, ‘Poems to Eat’ (Kuu beki shi,
1909), Takuboku rejects art for art’s sake and promotes his vision of a true poet who ‘must be a
person who freely and directly records and reports, without any ornamentation, the moment-to-
moment changes (jiji kokkoku no henka) that arise in his heart, having both a fine discernment
like that of a scientist and the straight-talking approach of a barbarian’ (1909: 217).

On one hand, Tawara Machi has practised writing tanka since 1987 with Salad Anniversary,
very much following in Takuboku’s footsteps. Her approach of capturing the ‘ah!’ moment
in tanka continues even to this day. In her newest guide to writing poetry, which she co-wrote
with pop-song lyricist Hitoto Yō in 2014, she urges her apprentice Hitoto to think of tanka as
‘landscapes that come and go each moment by moment’ (2014: 63), clearly borrowing from
Takuboku’s definition. Tawara additionally explains that those scenes ‘are held with the pin of
the thirty-one syllables and they continue on, becoming snapshots of eternity (eien no snappu-

On the other hand, Tawara has consistently promoted a depoliticized version of Takuboku’s
formula in her career. It is true that Tawara’s reformulation of Takuboku’s poetics is very close
to the original, in the sense that she posits that tanka has the power to make a single moment an
eternal, almost mythic part of time. Everyone can recognize it and feel that moment. However,
Tawara’s emphasis on the product (the ‘eternal snapshot’) is entirely devoid of the lumpen
everyman, the ‘us’ (wareware) that Takuboku envisioned would be empowered by our claiming
the tanka form, and thus literature, for ourselves. What is decidedly different about the two
poets is that Takuboku envisioned tanka as a tool to help the masses awaken politically and
stimulate critiques of the status quo; but the contemporary poet, here represented by Tawara,
who is one of the great tanka teachers today, does not promote the same possibility for politi-
cal awakening with this small and modest literary form. As a tanka poet, Tawara is not like ‘a
straight-talking barbarian’ or ‘a scientist with fine discernment’, able to criticize ideological
systems. In a 1992 roundtable discussion, Tawara responded to a question in the following
way, disavowing her poetry from others which would challenge political or social norms:
‘From the very beginning when I started writing uta and even now, what I wanted to care about
the most are those everyday moments we all take for granted. That’s why if I am asked about
the possibility of discussing public incidents (jiken) in my poems, well, I can’t answer that’
(quoted in Kanai 1999: 140). In the late 1990s, Kanai Keiko, a scholar of modern Japanese
literature, found that Tawara’s style of tanka, although deficient in jikensei or the ability to dis-
cuss public incidents, still continued to dominate the genre, defeating and subjugating styles
that might stimulate a critique of problems faced by Japanese, especially women (1999: 142).
By rejecting jikensei in her poetry, Tawara clearly differs from her precursor Takuboku, who
wrote that tanka were his ‘sad toys’; at the end of his life, Takuboku was desperate but not yet
ready to deny the potential power of his art to criticize the political and literary establishments.
His tanka serve as sad reminders that his life ‘was sacrificed for the systems of patriarchy,
class, capitalism and the sellout-intellectualism’ (Ishikawa 1910c: 299).
Conclusion

In the contemporary period, Takuboku’s vision of the tanka moment has survived, albeit somewhat depoliticized by his successors. Shiki’s influence on the handling of time in haiku and tanka still remains strong. Okai Takashi (1928–), a contemporary tanka poet, explains in his *Introduction to Tanka* handbook that the notion of sequenced time is important in nature descriptions. To demonstrate his point, Okai borrows a tanka from poet Satō Satarō (1909–1987):

```
haru madaki no
akaruki niwa o
tobu hachi ga
midori o yogirite
izuko ni yukishi
```

*Early spring
my lightened garden
through it a bee zooms
having passed over the green
where will it go next?*

*(quoted in Okai 1988: 110)*

Okai writes of this poem that it does not pivot (*henka*) on the bee. Instead, the change happens only after the fourth line (‘having passed over the green’), when the poem truly opens up. ‘It seems like the poet was wondering all along, “Where will the bee go?” but that is not the case. The final line is quite light and has a sense it was added on. The moment when he grasped (*isson no haaku*) the line “having passed over the green” is absolutely central to the poem’ (1988: 111). Okai does not add more than this, but another aspect of the poem’s charm is that the final line opens up the scene to include the poet’s awe and wonder at spring (and spring’s representative, the bee). The poet’s persona, like the reader of this poem, postpones closure on the scene: how long will the poet’s persona sit there on his patio, looking at the garden and wondering how far his bee will go from here? Without an answer to the question in the final line, there is no closure for the reader either. The bee’s flight, the persona’s musings and the reader’s own musings about the persona’s musings all can go on for an indefinite period of time. The similar approach to tanka shared by Satō, Okai and Tawara – all contemporary tanka poets – shows how Shiki’s and Takuboku’s handling of time in the thirty-one-syllable form, albeit in different ways, has become endemic to the genre. Shiki was able to create even shorter poems, his haiku, which encapsulated a sense of long-elapsed time. To speak of a shared legacy left by Shiki and Takuboku, one may say that these experimental poets compelled their successors to appreciate time in their poetry. This focus on time, whether it is a brief ‘ah!’ moment or an unfolding eternity, has remained a salient feature of tanka and haiku to this day and can also be seen in visual narratives like manga, prompting us to consider that short moments of time, however mundane or potentially revolutionary, are a significant aspect of the literary and visual arts of Japan.

Notes

1. The poem *Nanigoto mo omou koto naku / hi ichinichi / kasha no hibiki ni kokoro makasenu* is found in Takuboku’s 1910 collection *A Handful of Sand (Ichiaku no suna)* (1910a: 55).

2. Nakamura Mitsuo argued that ‘In one sense, the path from *Broken Commandment* to *The Quilt* was the great path that led to the destruction [of modern Japanese literature]’ (1950: 75). This assessment, as Karatani Kōjin writes, ‘has attained the status of a truism in Japanese literary theory’ (1993: 76). This is still a contentious topic. Nakamura’s view has been balanced by critics like Kenneth G. Henshall, who delineates the particular qualities of different kinds of Naturalism in Meiji Japan (1981: 3–4).

3. Masaoka Shiki, ‘*Utayomi ni atauru shō* [5]’, (1898: 22). ‘The great reason why *waka* has become obsolete is how it makes a big lie out of something small.’
4 Shiki even faults the great *Manyōshū* poet Hitomaro (fl. ca. 680–700) for not being as direct as he could have been as in the poem: ‘Mononofu no / yaso ujikawa no / ajiroki ni / isayou nami no / yukue shirazu mo’ (I too go off / like the waves that disappear around / the stakes holding the nets / at the Uji River, the river of the eighty clans / powerful men all). Shiki felt the first three lines (the final three in English) were ‘superfluous’ (zeibutsu) (1898: 15).

5 McCloud described six types of panel transitions: (1) moment-to-moment; (2) action-to-action; (3) subject-to-subject; (4) scene-to-scene; (5) aspect-to-aspect; (6) non-sequitur. American superhero comics, for example, rely heavily on type 2, where one panel shows the hero winding up a punch and in the next panel we see the punch delivered to the jaw of the villain, knocking him out (1993: 70–79). One detects a hierarchy in McCloud’s six types, where type 1 (moment-to-moment) is simplistic; on the other hand, type 5 (aspect-to-aspect) demands more sophisticated rendering techniques and thus more imaginative involvement from advanced readers.

**Bibliography**


2. Literature short on time

