



The floating world

Classic anthologies of Japanese poetry in new translations

BRYAN KARETNYK

HYAKUNIN'SHU

Reading the *Hundred Poets* in
late Edo Japan

JOSHUA S. MOSTOW

176pp. University of Hawai'i Press. £68 (US \$68).

**JUITA SŌKYOKU LYRICS
AND EXPLANATIONS**

Songs of the floating world

Translations and annotations by Christopher
Yohmei Blasdel with Gunnar Jinmei Linder
362pp. Routledge. £130.50.

“My feelings are buffeted by the frothy white waves”, laments a courtesan in “Sue no chigiri”, a popular Japanese song written at the turn of the nineteenth century. Likening her wayward, fleeting life to a small fishing boat tossed on the seas, she implores her absent lover to recall the vows he once made and remain true to her - to be steadfast, unlike the fickle cherry blossoms of spring.

Still, she cannot prevent doubt from creeping in. “Like those who pined for love in ancient *waka* poetry,” she says, “did I not realize how forlorn I am?” In this one line, the courtesan’s anguish invokes a tradition of poetry that had, even then, more than a millennium’s worth of history behind it - a history to which one collection in particular, the *Hyakunin Isshu*, was central.

Of all the *waka* - “Japanese poetry” - collections in Japan’s estimable literary history, none has been more beloved or widely read. Believed to have been compiled in the thirteenth century, the collection, whose title has been rendered in English as *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each*, is a compendium edited by a scholar and the most admired poet of the day, Fujiwara no Teika. It comprises about 100

waka written as early as the seventh century and includes some of Japan’s greatest classical poets, like Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon.

Such was the importance of the *Hundred Poets*, as Joshua S. Mostow tells us in his illuminating introduction to *Hyakunin’shu: Reading the Hundred Poets in late Edo Japan*, that it was “read, copied, and annotated by emperors and aristocrats, military elite, monks ... samurai and commoners of all levels and locations ... It was memorized by virtually all children”. For centuries, it served, moreover, as the means by which women in Japan - including, one might safely imagine, the pining courtesan of “Sue no chigiri” - were taught the rudiments of literacy and penmanship, as well as cultural erudition and “refinement” of character.

With its eternal themes of love, parting, loss and the passage of time, the *Hundred Poets* stands alongside *The Tales of Ise* and *The Tale of Genji* as one of the quintessential works of Japanese classical literature. Perhaps for this reason, it was also the first work of Japanese literature ever to be translated into English - in 1866, by Frederick Victor Dickins - and it remains one of the most retranslated texts in the Japanese canon. One might reasonably ask, therefore, what Mostow’s offering brings to the table.

At the heart of his book lies the perennial problem of interpretation. By the time Teika edited the collection, more than a century before the birth of Chaucer, some of the poems were already 500 years old, and linguistic slippage, variant readings and changes in nuance had rendered some of their meanings obscure. In response, a vibrant exegetical tradition has built up across the generations, with new editions incorporating commentaries that cast light on the poems’ interpretative possibilities. What *Hyakunin’shu* does is to reproduce and translate one of the most popular nineteenth-century editions, known as the *Keigyoku* - or “Auspicious Jewels” - edition, replete with beautiful woodblock illustrations and fascinating expositions on each of the poems.

A detail from
“Pleasure-Boating
on the Sumida River”
by Kitagawa
Utamaro, c.1790

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Each poem in the book is presented in a new translation, facing a reproduction of the page as it appeared in the nineteenth-century original. Below we find a transcription of the Japanese text, as well as a translation of “the meaning”, as provided by the nineteenth-century editor, then a wealth of explanatory notes and counter-readings provided by Mostow on the poem and the woodblock image. While this may seem like a “busy” arrangement, it affords a remarkably dynamic reading experience, with the new material seeming to imitate the layout of the original *Keigyoku* edition.

The new translations are also arresting, in that they are singularly challenging to the reader. By comparison with any number of the other versions of this popular anthology currently on the market, they may appear unnatural and clumsy, lacking somehow in the poetic finesse and lingering aesthetic qualities that other translators have been able to capture. Take Mostow’s version of poem No. 9, one of the most famous and beloved in the collection, by the ninth-century poet Ono no Komachi:

The flowers’ color -
moved on
it has!
- in vain -
have I through this world
passed
while gazing at the falling rains.

These same lines in Peter MacMillan’s acclaimed rendering of the collection became: “I have loved in vain / and now my beauty fades / like these cherry blossoms / paling in the long rains of spring / that I gaze upon alone.” Only a keen eye would recognize these as one and the same poem.

Undoubtedly, the meaning of MacMillan’s silken, domesticated version is more immediately apprehensible, its imagery and diction more conventionally “poetic”. Yet a translation that caters to anglophone tastes and traditions in this way is not Mostow’s aim. In his rendering, we see neither the interpolation of the original’s “flowers” as cherry blossoms, nor the exposition that the implicit season is spring. Instead we find something far closer to the literal meanings of the original (and plurality here is key), complete with the pivotal ambiguity of the middle line, which, depending on how it is read, may alter what comes before or indeed after it. All this is typical of Mostow’s ethos.

The novelty of these translations lies partly in the fact that they do not seek to resolve the problems posed by the originals. Even issues of gender ambiguity are left unresolved, with the translations insisting repeatedly on non-gendered language. Mostow’s achievement has been to produce a series of translations that recreate the difficulties, the ambiguities, the multiplicities of meaning present in the originals. For this reason, although we encounter in *Hyakunin’shu* renderings that feel startling and strange, we also come to know and appreciate these poems so much better, in a manner that captures precisely their elusiveness and allusiveness, and that is at once both truer and indisputably more transparent.

Combine this with Mostow’s illuminating introduction to the work, in which he deals at considerable length - the introduction accounts for almost a quarter of the book - with the fascinating cultural and material histories of the collection, as well as the challenges of reading and translating it, and you have what may be soundly termed a landmark contribution. The same might be said of Christopher Yohmei Blasdel’s recent publication on Japanese song, *Juuta Sōkyoku Lyrics and Explanations: Songs of the floating world*, which is the first of its kind to appear in English for more than forty years.

Although indebted to *waka* for many of its lyrics and much of its inspiration, the *juuta*, or “local song”, genre is far less familiar to audiences outside Japan. Famed for ingenious wordplay and sophisticated use of literary allusion, *juuta* are a kind of art song that developed from the ballads sung by blind minstrels. They reached their zenith in the licensed

pleasure quarters during the extraordinary time of peaceful stability and cultural development that was the Edo period (1603-1868), when, as Blasdel notes, the government was “not geared on controlling individual morality but rather on regulating public order”. Composed for shamisen, koto or chamber ensemble accompaniment, the songs were intimate, elegant entertainments performed in theatres, private residences, tea houses and beyond. And, of the hundreds in the repertoire, Blasdel has selected seventy-three “representative” ones for inclusion in this fine collection.

Taken together, the songs evoke a wide range of themes and styles: their lyrics recite ancient poetry and legend, extol scenic beauty, borrow from the austere noh theatre, celebrate festivals and even accompany lion dances. Perhaps most strikingly of all, they provide unique glimpses into the lives of women, and in particular into the plight of courtesans working in the pleasure districts, recounting with subtle emotion and dazzling verbal exuberance tales of anguish and longing, of loves betrayed and abandoned. Among this last category, Blasdel pays particular attention to the plaintive, melancholy songs telling of women of the so-called “water trade” – that is, the renowned “river prostitutes” of the Edo period. “I am used to

this happy-go-lucky world of love”, one such voice hauntingly intones, “drifting and moving back and forth on the boat. This is the impermanence of the ‘floating world.’”

Inextricably entwined with the Japanese poetic tradition, these lyrics present many of the same translation challenges that the *Hundred Poets* does. Blasdel and his co-translator, Gunnar Jinmei Linder, have chosen to adopt a strategy that is in some respects remarkably similar to Mostow’s: here, each song is presented with historical context, transcriptions of the Japanese text and explanatory notes; yet, delightfully, they include not one but two translations.

The first is a “direct” linear translation that conveys the literal meaning of the Japanese texts, complete with their ambiguities and pivot terms, while the second weaves from this a prose poem, often of arresting beauty, that captures deftly the originals’ artistic spirit. Thus, in the famous lyric “The Maiden of the Dōjō Temple”, the bold, cascading lines “Bitterness in the bell / is much / when the midnight bell / is struck / impermanence / it echoes / the bell at the devil’s hour / when struck / life and death / it echoes / struck at daybreak / echoes evanescence / struck at twilight / total enlightenment” are affectingly re-rendered thus:

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The Hundred Poets stands alongside *The Tales of Ise* and *The Tale of Genji* as a quintessential work of Japanese classical literature

The midnight bell contains much sorrow and regret, and its tones echo the impermanence of all things. The bell of early morning – the devil’s hour – echoes life and its inevitable demise. When struck at daybreak its tones ring out the pangs of evanescence but when struck at twilight the tones beckon us on towards Nirvana.

This binocular approach allows us to appreciate the economy and associativeness of the original texts while grasping some of the poetic qualities that have made them so significant and memorable.

Classical Japanese poetry and song have long been held up as examples of “untranslatable” literature. And not without good reason. Their inextricability from centuries’ worth of literary and cultural heritage, their infinitely complex entanglement with the unique possibilities afforded by the Japanese language, to say nothing of their indefinable, shifting interpretations – all this would seem to resist traditional modes of cross-linguistic migration. Yet if these two volumes have shown anything, it is that ever deeper understanding can be found in the translation – and, more precisely, in the re-translation – of the classics. And what better tribute to the enduring value of these texts, which in myriad ways remind us of the transience of life? ■

Living la vida loca

Marxist machismo and homophobia in Chile

ALICE WADSWORTH

A LAST SUPPER OF QUEER APOSTLES

Selected essays

PEDRO LEMEBEL

Translated by Gwendolyn Harper
272pp. Pushkin Press. Paperback, £12.99.



Pedro Lemebel at Pride in New York, 1994

Next year will mark ten years since the death of the Chilean queer activist, performance artist, novelist and essayist Pedro Lemebel (1952-2015), whom the former Chilean president Michelle Bachelet called “a defender of freedom”. Lemebel’s essays (or *crónicas*: informal pieces for papers and magazines on topical matters) typically covered Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship and the inequality instigated by the HIV epidemic. But in pieces such as “Manifesto (I Speak from My Difference)”, he also called attention to the vein of machismo and homophobia that so often runs through Marxist movements:

“Don’t speak to me about the proletariat
Because being poor and a fag is worse
...
What will you do with us, comrade?
Will you bundle us by our braids for shipment to
Cuban quarantine?”

“Manifesto” was originally staged in Santiago in 1986, at a meeting of leftist parties opposed to Pinochet’s dictatorship: Lemebel interrupted proceedings in high heels, with a hammer and sickle daubed across his face. A year later, he formed the arts duo Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis (The Mares of the Apocalypse) with the artist and poet Francisco Casas Silva, and together they set about disrupting readings, exhibitions and political gatherings with a series of protests, one of which memorably involved them

dancing the *cueca* (the “national dance” of Chile) on a map of Latin America strewn with broken bottles of Coca-Cola, until it glistened with their blood.

This new selection of *crónicas* is divided into five sections: “Maricón” (Spanish for “fag”) includes “Manifesto” and introduces us to Lemebel’s sensually provocative style; the second section, “Coup”, focuses on the years of dictatorship (1973-90); the third, “AIDS”, contains some of his most striking *loca* (literally, “crazy woman”, but also a reclaimed pejorative for cross dressers, trans women and gay men) *crónicas*; “Post-90” captures Lemebel’s disillusionment as the newly elected government, under Patricio Aylwin, fails to live up to its ideals (“this absurd demo of a democracy”); and “Finale” ends with something like hope – “The Transfiguration of Miguel Ángel”, a story of unlikely religious inspiration and gender conversion.

By “loca”, or “travesti” (transvestite), Lemebel doesn’t always mean transgender. Rather, he is identifying a marginal identity often associated with sex work – something “simultaneously uncompromising and malleable”, as his editor and translator, Gwendolyn Harper, puts it. *Loca* identity is culturally specific to South America, but also a marker of exclusion further afield. The Stonewall tavern in “New York Chronicles (Stonewall Inn)” is a “sanctuary of the homosexual cause”, Lemebel says, but not for a “third-world malnourished” *loca*

like him, and he is quick to pour scorn on post-1969 liberation – on what he sees as the “holier-than-thou gringas” who have turned the site of gay revolution in the US into a tourist pub filled with “white, blonde and lean” patrons: “a quick look around and you’ll see you don’t belong here, that you have nothing to do with the postcard gold of its muscled, classical aesthetic”.

Back home in Chile, Lemebel’s sharp-witted, bold protagonists insist on space that is never freely given. And he is one of them. In “Letter to Liz Taylor”, he invites the star to send him an emerald from the crown worn in *Cleopatra* (1963) so that he can pay for AZT, the first antiretroviral medication used to treat HIV/AIDS. AZT crops up regularly in Lemebel’s *crónicas* – “it stretches you out ... maybe adds a few months to your life. Some travestis inject it themselves” – but it’s expensive, has side effects (unlike today’s PrEP and PEP) and works only in the short term. Love, too, is a reckoning with necessary brutality: in “Loba Lamar’s Last Kiss”, a group of *loca* friends are shocked by the appearance of a newly deceased friend and apply their “necrophiliac handiwork” to her face, forcibly reshaping it so that she’ll look good at her funeral.

Harper’s translation is rich and graceful – particularly her version of “Anacondas in the Park”, a depiction of a cruising scene in which men “coagulat[e] with the other men, who snake along the path”. A description of “a clutch of condoms ... like stuffed cabbage rolls ... waiting for the sun to ferment them in the magnolias’ saffron mulch” is both sensuous and violent, and the violence feels known, familiar. Lemebel’s stories are tender but raw, littered with jokes, innuendo and stabs at the heart. In “Even Poppies Have Thorns”, a tryst becomes a murder. Here and throughout the selection, the narrator despairs of “butcherries where society’s resentment demands the weakest, most vulnerable hides”. The butcher takes many forms: Aids, dictatorship, poverty, or a man with a knife.

The last essay, “The Transfiguration of Miguel Ángel”, tells the true story of a young boy who, during the 1980s, claimed to have spoken to the Virgin Mary. He later transitioned and became female. Treated as an oddity by the Chilean media at the time, he is reclaimed here as a “Virgin travesti”, a saint for “destitute transexuals” and “nudist hermaphrodites”, whose sex has been ordained by Mary herself. The beatification is a performance, of course, but a sincere one. Pedro Lemebel gilds his *loca* protagonists while refusing to cover up their scars or deny them their bravery, and in so doing illuminates Chile’s recent political history with the same candour. ■

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