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Sekai kotowaza hikaku jiten. [*Comparative Dictionary of World Proverbs.*] Eds. Masamizu Tokita and Yamaguchi Masanobu. Supervised by The Japanese Society of Paremiology. Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 2020. Pp 395.

The Japanese language has a well-developed set of proverbs derived from diverse sources, including the Chinese and Japanese classics, Buddhist lore and even some Western texts, such as the New Testament and Erasmus' *Adagia*, that reflect its variegated history. Proverbs are a significant component of literary education in the country and are regularly featured in school and university entrance examinations. Japan is also one of the few countries in the world which has an academic society dedicated to proverb studies.¹

The title under review, appearing from the major academic and educational publisher Iwanami, is yet another sign of the popularity of proverbs in contemporary Japan. One of the two lead editors is Masamizu Tokita, a founding member of the Japanese Society of Paremiology and currently its vice-president who has published several standard reference works in the field in the last two decades. He is also the originator of a collection of about 3500 historical paremiological items such as Edo-period (1603-1868) proverb play cards (*kotowaza karuta*), which is housed in the Meiji University Library and Museum.² Yamaguchi Masanobu, professor emeritus of Meiji University specializing in sports linguistics and another founding member of the Japanese Society of Paremiology, served as the second lead editor.

The reviewed title is the culmination of a collaborative project which started in January 2010 within the Japanese Society of Paremiology, which had been founded just in the preceding year. As the preface (second page, no page number) of the book explains, the project was originally one of three separate streams, centering on an international comparison of 300 major Japanese proverbs (the other two were on a comparative study of animals in world

proverbs, and a collection of representative proverbs from selected languages). After nearly a decade of collaborative work involving dozens of collaborators, the number of languages represented in this annotated anthology for a popular Japanese audience grew from fewer than 10 to 25.

The majority of languages whose proverbs are listed in this volume are, unsurprisingly considering the current state of research, Western (including classical ones): Ancient Greek, Latin, English, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Spanish (including Mexican Spanish), Rumanian, Hungarian, Russian, and Georgian. The rest are mostly Asian or Oriental, namely: Nepalese, Mongolian, Arabic, Turkish, Hindi, Indonesian, Tibetan, Taiwanese Hokkien, Chinese, and Korean. Two African languages, Swahili and Kiga or Chiga, round up this polyglot collection.

The entries are each arranged as follows. First comes the Japanese proverb, ordered in the so-called *gojūon* system (the common Japanese equivalent of the Roman alphabetical order). Thus it differs from most current paremiographical collections which arrange entries by keywords or themes, instead ordering them strictly from a the viewpoint of a Japanese language user. When the proverb comes from the Chinese classics or from a Western source it is so indicated, and then a short, single-sentence definition or explanation of the proverb is given. Synonymous and antonymous Japanese proverbs, often several for each entry, follow. After these comes a more discursive analysis, occupying about half a page to a page, which explains the proverb's etymology and historical usage, and lays out cultural, historical, or otherwise general linguistic issues regarding some of its foreign equivalents. Lastly comes a list of similar foreign proverbs, each line consisting of the name of the language, a Japanese translation, and the proverbs themselves written out in their own native letters or characters.

While not all of the 24 non-Japanese languages are represented in every entry (since some languages may not have commonly used equivalent proverbs), the editors seem to have tried their best to have as many of them represented as possible. Most of the entries are followed by synonymous proverbs in 15 or more languages. At times there are also several proverbs in one language listed together (the preface notes that the number of synonymous proverbs in one language had to be limited to a maximum

of 5; p. vii). The preface states that more than 6500 foreign proverbs could be listed in this collection (p. ii).

The breadth of linguistic range is reflected in the registry of 25 cooperators which is found in the end of the volume (no page number). Their geographical, cultural and professional background is quite diverse; among them are the usual researchers and translators as well as a museum curator from Germany and a Rumanian diplomat. Cooperation within such a group, whose diversity reflects the wide reach of interest in proverbs, must have involved much challenge as well as enjoyment. The reviewer has learned for example that the group responsible for the Dutch language, led by Yoko Mori, Professor Emerita of Meiji University, Tokyo, specializing in art history, and Willy F. Vande Walle, Professor Emeritus of Leuven Catholic University whose expertise is Oriental Studies, collaborated across the ocean over a period of about 5 years to collect more than one thousand Dutch proverbs and hammer out the selection as well as their translations.³ The cooperating authors appear to have taken sufficient care to make the orthography, including diacritics, of the proverbs written out in their native characters all standardized and correct, surely not a small typographical feat (see also notes on the orthography of Kiga/Chiga and Arabic in preface vii-viii).

Two appendices complement the preface and main section of this book. Appendix 1 (pp. 497-8) is a ranked list of the 104 most common proverbs used in the 12 major Japanese newspapers published after 1945, compiled by the chief editor Tokita. The second appendix (pp. 499-517) is a selective index of world proverbs (in Japanese translation) found in the book.

Although the work is clearly aimed at a popular rather than strictly academic audience, the reviewer can easily envisage situations where it can serve as a starting point for more specialized research. For example, one may begin by noting that many Japanese proverbs, as Tokita himself states, are clearly based on Western sources, but that their point of entry has not yet been clearly documented. There are some commonly used Japanese proverbs that do seem to be derived from modern English (e.g. *isseki nichō*, “to kill two birds with one stone”, pp. 40-2, §027; *owari yokereba subete yoshi*, “all is well that ends well”, pp. 95-6, §071; *ki-zuguchini shio*, “rub salt into wounds”, pp. 137-8, §102; cf. also *arashino maeno shizukesa*, “calm before the storm”, pp. 21-2,

§016, which has numerous equivalents in Western languages and may be derived from any one of them), for which Tokita provides some citations of 19th and early 20th usage, but a more exhaustive philological research may contribute to a better understanding of the modernization of the Japanese language which took place in tandem with the reintegration of the country into the Western-dominated global network of knowledge communication starting around the late Edo-Meiji period.⁴ Another intriguing set of Japanese proverbs are those that show uncanny overlaps with ancient Mediterranean ones, possibly testifying to older transmissions with western-central Asian intermediaries (e.g. *atono matsuri*, “after the festival” (i.e., too late), pp. 11-3, §008, cf. ancient Greek and Arabic; *amadare ishiwo ugatsu*, “dripping rain bores through a stone”, pp. 17-18, §013, cf. ancient Greek, Latin and Chinese; *kaeruno tsurani mizu*, “water on a frog’s face”, pp. 105-6, §077, cf. ancient Greek and Latin). And to cite one final example that is fitting for our *annus terribilis* of 2020, *yudan taiteki*, “running out of oil is the great enemy” (i.e. one should not let one’s guard down), in pp. 470-2, §374, one may note that while it (or a very similar one) is attested in Japan as early as 1642, it also lacks a clear Chinese precedent (even though it consists of four Chinese characters, and thus appears, deceptively, to be of the classical Chinese type), and that it also recalls the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25.1-13.⁵ Could it possibly be traced to the influx of Iberian Catholic culture that took place in the late 16th to early 17th century which was subsequently blurred due to the intense religious persecution and hermeticization of the country that were in full force from the mid 17th to early 19th century? Future research could tell.

Overall, this work is a carefully prepared and very approachable multilingual collection of proverbs. The discursive analyses of the 300 entries, all written by Tokita, are especially valuable as they explain the etymology of the most common Japanese proverbs and compares them with their foreign equivalents in an eminently readable and often humorous style. The extensive lists of foreign proverbs will doubtlessly prove useful to paremiographers and will be a fun playing ground for language enthusiasts. One potential weakness is that since the volume is intended for a popular audience, it lacks a detailed bibliography. Only proverbs originating in the New and Old Testaments, Greco-Roman classics,

and sometimes those taken from Erasmus' *Adagia* are provided with regular citations (cf. pp. viii-ix), in addition to some sporadic mentions of sources or instances of usage in classical Chinese and Japanese literature that are found in the discursive analyses. Still, for reasons explained above, the work will doubtlessly be a suitable addition to paremiological and paremiographical libraries, especially but not only for those familiar with Japanese, as the proverbs are written in scripts native to each language (except in the case of Kiga/Chiga, for which the IPA is used since it does not have a standardized script; cf. pp. vii-viii) and so will be partially accessible to non-Japanese users as well.

Notes

¹ Namely the Japanese Society of Paremiology <<https://www.kotowaza-bunka.org/copy-of-home>> within which this book was developed. Other than Japan, there are several paremiological societies across Europe; cf. <https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/paremia/sobre_paremia/enlaces_en.htm>.

² See <meiji.ac.jp/koho/pickup/2010/100421.html>, Suzuki 2010 and Mori pp. 435-6.

³ Private correspondence of Dr. Mori, November 2020.

⁴ Cf. e.g. Lippert 2001.

⁵ Not mentioned by Tokita, but cf. e.g. Buchanan 1965, p. 42.

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