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LASALLE College of the Arts

Gabriel Oh

Kishōtenketsu and its potential applications to prose writing

Abstract:

Aristotelian Western narrative structures follow the rise and fall of tension and conflict in a narrative, necessitating certain qualities in other story elements. The Japanese Four-Act structure of *kishōtenketsu* alternatively is an inductive narrative structure that relies on developing events and revelations rather than tension and conflict as a story's driving force. This article explores the unique narrative features of Japanese contemporary novels employing *kishōtenketsu* as well as technical considerations when employing the narrative structure. Through the examination of Eto Mori's *Colorful* (2019) and Emi Yagi's *A Diary of a Void* (2022) among other novels, I ask how *kishōtenketsu* may be applied to the writing of English literary prose, broadening options for the craft.

Biographical note:

Gabriel Oh holds an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts. He is interested in experiments across genres that combine words, visuals and technology. His works have been read at the Singapore Writers Festival and NTU English Graduate Research Symposium, and have been published in *SAMPAN: The LASALLE Anthology of Creative Writing*, for which he has been chief editor. He maintains a collection of snapshots at glimpsesnsnaps.blogspot.com.

Keywords:

kishōtenketsu, alternative narrative structures, creative writing, Japanese literature, prose

Introduction

Demand for diversity in English publishing and greater overseas recognition for female Japanese writers have led to an increase in readership for translated literature (Smith, 2022, para. 4) and greater exposure to foreign narrative conventions. However, major literature prizes like the Man Booker Prize and the Pulitzer Prize for Literature feature those from a limited group of countries (Vittachi, 2017, p. 2), failing to represent much of the body of literature produced in the rest of the world. Similarly, the field of Creative Writing “is rooted, for better or worse, in Americana... [with a] bias in favour of the Anglo-American canon” (Xu, 2021, p. 51), and prose writing courses “focus[ing] strongly on the Western concept of the novel” (Vittachi, 2017, p. 3). While it should be acknowledged that there is no clear dichotomy between Western and Eastern literature as they have influenced each other over time, Elena Traina (2023) observes that there is a lack of research on creative writing pedagogy in Asian languages (p. 16).

Among the elements of Japanese narrative strategies, *kishōtenketsu* (起承転結), a four-act narrative structure, has been deemed predominant in modern Japanese prose (Hinds, 1982, p. 80). Examining the features of *kishōtenketsu* and how it is used in Japanese novels can broaden the range of narrative strategies to be considered for English prose writing. As Vittachi observes: “a narrow focus on a single format, Western-style novels, may be unhelpful for aspiring [Asian] writers wanting their work to attract global audiences” (Vittachi, 2017, p. 4). Increasing the recognition and usage of *kishōtenketsu* in English prose writing will improve the appreciation and understanding for Japanese narratives, as was the case for the Haiku which has become a popular form in English poetry. It is important, however, to consider *kishōtenketsu* holistically when approaching the narrative structure as a potential literary device for writing. For example, how the structure interacts with other narrative elements and areas of caution when using *kishōtenketsu* should be looked at. Putting all these together, I consider in this article the potential applications of *kishōtenketsu* to English literary prose writing.

Overview and features of *kishōtenketsu*

Kishōtenketsu is a four-part structure originating from Chinese poetry and is employed in East Asian literary prose, “poetry, music, calligraphy, art, chess, strategy and in arguments” (Kim, 2021, section. East Asian 4-act). *Kishōtenketsu*, the Japanese term for the structure, bears similarities to the Chinese *qi cheng zhuan he* (起承转合) and Korean *gi seung jeon gyeol* (기승전결). John Hinds (1982) suggests *kishōtenketsu* is “ubiquitous in modern [Japanese] prose” (p. 80). The structure consists of *ki*, *shō*, *ten*, and *ketsu*, interpreted in English as “introduction”, “development”, “twist or climax”, and “conclusion” respectively (Iwane-Salovaara, 2011, p. 48).

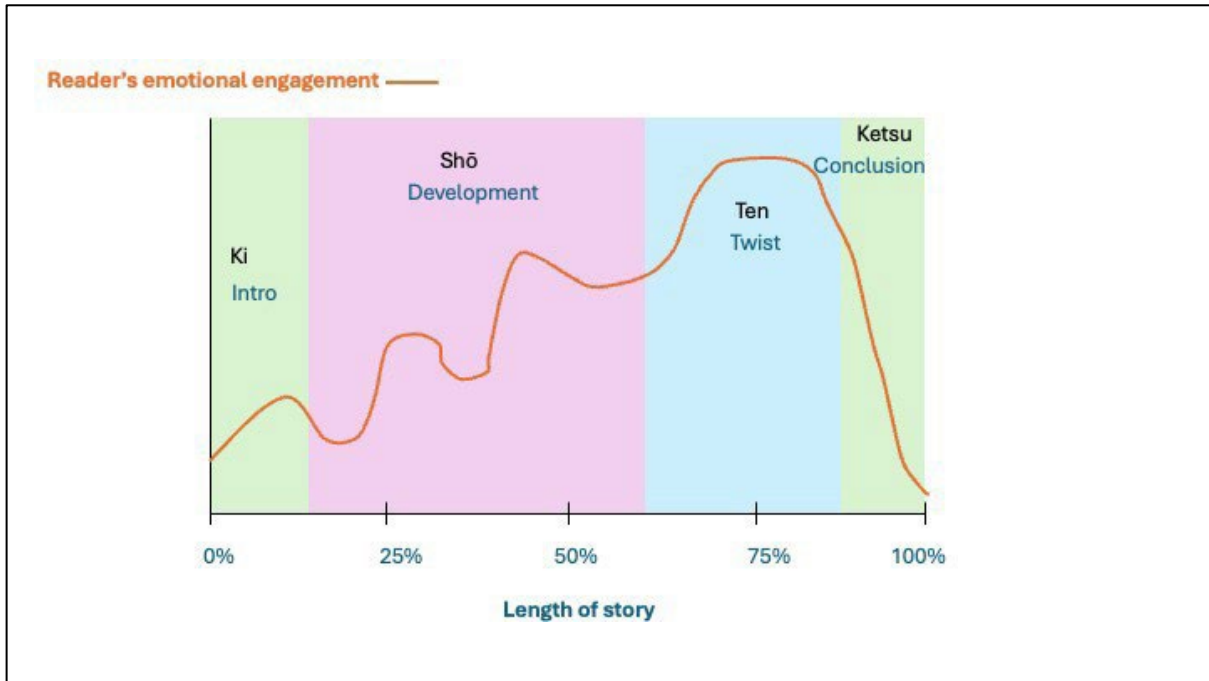


Figure 1: Graph showing the flow of *kishōtenketsu*. Adapted from “Worldwide Story Structures” by Kim Yoonmi, 2021, <https://www.kimyoonmiauthor.com/post/641948278831874048/worldwide-story-structures>

As seen in Figure 1, *kishōtenketsu* “relies on exposition and contrast to generate interest” (Still Eating Oranges, 2012, para. 2). Each part of *kishōtenketsu* builds off the previous one, increasing readers’ interest until the narrative peaks at a point of revelation at *ten* and falls in *ketsu* (Kim, 2021, section. East Asian 4-act). *Ki* gives the basic information and setting of the narrative, which are built on in *shō*. A contrasting element is presented at the peak of *ten*, giving new perspective to the previously presented information before reconciliation of “the experience acquired during the twist with all that was learned over the course of the development” (Jelen, 2022, p. 26) happens in *ketsu*. This rise-and-fall motion is visually similar to Freytag’s pyramid where tension rises through the story, peaks at the climax and falls towards the denouement.

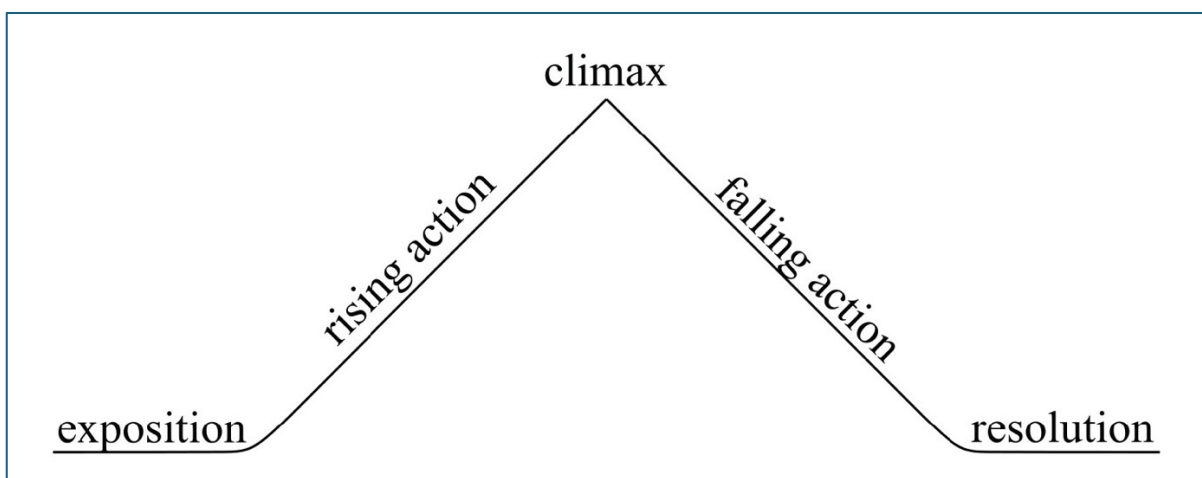


Figure 2: Freytag’s Pyramid. Adapted from *Prose Fiction: An Introduction to the Semiotics of Narrative* (1st edition, p. 27), by I. Ribó, 2019, UK: Open Book Publishers.

Ignasi Ribó (2019) describes Freytag’s Pyramid (Figure 2) as a standard five-act structure of dramatic and prosaic plots (p. 27). The exposition sets the stage at the start of the narrative, while an inciting incident starts the rise in tension leading to the climax, before a decrease in tension ends in the resolution of the narrative’s events or the catastrophe of the protagonist’s death (Herman et. al., 2005, p. 189). Freytag’s Pyramid is a variation of “the narrative pattern of a rising action-climax-epiphany-denouement that is the Western narrative structure” (Xu, 2021, p. 51) – the idea of the Western novel that is at the core of most creative writing courses (Vittachi, 2017, p. 3). It should be acknowledged that like other fields of art, English prose works that depart from such conventional structures of inciting and resolving conflict do exist (Ribó, 2019, p. 28), notably modern and contemporary ones. How some English novels employ elements shared with *kishōtenketsu* will be examined later.

Despite the visual similarity in Figures 1 and 2, the two narrative structures have different foci for readers’ engagement and investment. Freytag’s Pyramid focuses on tension in a story, while *kishōtenketsu* “functions by induction” (Fister-Stoga, 1993, p. 148), gradually unfolding and building up a story’s narrative, events and revelations. This allows for narrative features that will not work in the Aristotelian Western narrative structure, such as: the absence of a central conflict; passive protagonists; cyclical structures lacking resolution and constituting compounding parts; and a narrative shift towards the end.

Absence of central conflict

Stories employing Aristotelian Western narrative structures centre around conflict, with the protagonist spurred into action to overcome it and attain resolution (Ribó, 2019, p. 26), following the philosophy that conflict is unavoidable in life and is essential to narratives and character (Morrison, 2010, p. 27). Conflict is attributed as the building block of an Aristotelian Western narrative, without which there is no plot. The story progresses – and tension rises as the protagonist actively overcomes obstacles to reach their goal, “the story’s unified action is quite simply the PURSUIT of that objective” (Price, 2018, p. 37).

While conflict may be present in a narrative employing *kishōtenketsu*, it is not a driving force nor does it have to play a central role, such that the protagonist may not face any impediments nor are there any opposing forces (Still Eating Oranges, 2012, para. 4). Instead, the plot is inductive, flowing in a micro to macro direction that presents an overarching message at the end of a narrative (Kubota, 1997, p. 460) with “a dynamism... that keeps the [story] from depicting merely a series of events” (Still Eating Oranges, 2012, para. 4). The story builds on what comes before, gradually revealing the story’s events, background and world to readers. The culmination of the plot is not an overcoming of an obstacle, but a narrative turn that changes readers’ perspective on what has come before. The aftermath consolidates the narrative’s development as it concludes.

This non-focus on conflict is seen in Eto Mori’s *Colorful* (2021) and Emi Yagi’s *Diary of a Void* (2022). In *Colorful*, the main character (henceforth referred to as ‘I’) is a spirit tasked

with finding out his mistake in his past life by inhabiting the body of Makoto, a boy who committed suicide. The narrative does not feature overt opposing forces, using the gradual revealing of Makoto's background and life for story progression before the narrative turn, where the truth of 'I's death is revealed. In *Diary of a Void*, the narrative does not feature an antagonistic figure or force opposing the main character, Ms Shibata. Instead, it progresses together with Ms Shibata's fake pregnancy that starts in response to the misogynistic treatment she receives in her predominantly-male workplace. The chapters correspond to the forty weeks of a human pregnancy and culminates with Ms Shibata realising the truths surrounding pregnancy and society.

Passive protagonists

Western narratives with an Aristotelian structure feature protagonists in pursuit of their goals, where characters in a narrative tackle problems that come their way “in an increasingly active fashion, cognitively speaking” (Boyd et. al., 2020, p. 2). Protagonists at the narrative's beginning may have no need to pursue any objectives, but the Inciting Incident sparks the rising in narrative tension (Herman et. al., 2005, p. 189), spurring them to begin their journey – “[if a character] is weak and unresisting, it is because the author has not found the psychological moment when he is not only ready, but eager to fight” (Egri, 2004, p. 86).

Stories using *kishōtenketsu* conversely feature passive protagonists who do not wish to pursue their objectives or struggle against obstacles, because conflict is not central to the narrative. Characters may be thrust into circumstances that progress the story, but need not gain the motivation to pursue objectives and are instead strung along by the unfolding narrative. Ultimately, stories using *kishōtenketsu* feature “self-realization, self-actualization and self-development” (Kim, 2021, section. East Asian 4-act), where the narrative turn in *ten* causes a perspective shift and growth in characters.

In *Colorful*, 'I' has no motivation to complete the task given to him by God. “All that stayed with me was this vague weariness, this total disinterest in ever going back to the world below”, narrates 'I', preferring for his “dead soul [to] leisurely [drift] off to some dark place” (Mori, 2021, pp. 3–4). 'I's lack of choice is highlighted by his guiding angel, Prapura: “Neither you nor I—nor anyone else, for that matter—can disobey [God's] word. He is, after all, the father of all creation” (p. 4). As the story progresses, 'I' “still had zero interest in training to be reborn” (p. 57), so much that Prapura questions “how long would [he] drift along like this?” (p. 52) – that 'I' is “not even trying to recall [his] past life” (p. 53). As the narrative unfolds, 'I' inadvertently learns about Makoto while living the boy's life and through Prapura. At the story's end, 'I' complains of having been strung along: “But you made me win the lottery. You tricked me. You even forced me to work” (p. 201). Even though 'I' develops active cooperation in the end, he is largely passive for the majority of the novel.

In *Diary of a Void*, Ms Shibata's lie is a spontaneous reaction when her unfair treatment “was too much for [her]” (Yagi, 2022, p. 5). “What I did wasn't supposed to be an act of rebellion—more like a little experiment,” she explains, “I think I just wanted to know what would happen

if nobody was there to keep an eye out, to rush over as soon as the meeting ended and deal with the messes they'd made" (pp. 4–5). "So this is pregnancy. What luxury. What loneliness," she reflects when she is able to leave work early before nightfall (p. 2). Although Ms Shibata is a willing party, she continues her lie passively. She reactively follows her colleagues' and societal expectations about pregnant women to keep up her lie. She displays a maternity badge on her bag after seeing a pregnant woman using one in a bookstore. Her male colleague Higashinakano praises that she is "finally getting into the spirit" (p. 24) of her pregnancy. She attempts a fake belly because her pregnancy tracker app says "it was about time for [her] belly to start showing a little" (p. 36) and because "Higashinakano was right" (p. 36) in that "soon her belly's going to start showing" (p. 34). She subsequently "check[s] Baby-N-Me to see what size the fetus should be each week and adjust[s] accordingly" (p. 70). She decides on a name for the baby because Higashinakano "started asking [her], at least once every three days, whether [she'd] decided on a name" (p. 99). Commuters on the train offer her their seat and even when she refuses, "they'd insist, so [she'd] end up playing along" (p. 25). "I guess I figured I might as well make the most of my situation. Even if it is just a lie," she narrates (p. 208). She enjoys the benefits of being pregnant in private, such as being able to exercise, leave work early, go on maternity leave and be covered for her unreasonable responsibilities at work until she fulfils the full term of her 'pregnancy' and returns to work.

Since *kishōtenketsu* features an absence of conflict and passive protagonists who are not actively pursuing objectives, the structure can complement writing characters who lack motivation and drive – characters unsuitable for Aristotelian Western narrative structures such as the Hero's Journey – in English literary prose writing. This may apply, for example, to characters suffering from burnout, "physical, emotional or mental exhaustion, accompanied by decreased motivation, lowered performance and negative attitudes towards oneself and others" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.b); apathy, the "lack of motivation or goal-directed behavior and indifference to one's surroundings" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.a); and depression, "a negative affective state" with several symptoms such as a "lack of energy or motivation" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.c). As *kishōtenketsu* focuses on character development, unmotivated characters can be strung along as events unfold, before the narrative reaches *ten* where they are presented with something that changes their perspective and outlook on life. While the narrative should not present itself as a prescriptive solution to these issues, *kishōtenketsu* can convey a writer's message and themes in a work to the reader.

Cyclical structure that lacks resolution

Stories using *kishōtenketsu* contain cyclical structures that lack a concrete resolution. Such stories are "not a modern, linear world of conflict and rising action, but rather one of harmony and eternal, cyclical action" (Jen, 2013, p. 30) so that even as time progresses, characters look back and confront, or are made to confront, a part of their past (Kim, 2021, section. East Asian 4-act). In *ketsu*, characters may go back to their initial circumstances (Kerr, 2020, section. Ketsu- How to conclude a story with no conflict) at the story's beginning with a new perspective or outlook, or a narrative continuity with no definite resolution may be implied.

In *Colorful*, ‘I’ returns to his life after learning about his past mistake and that he has been Makoto all along. He gains a greater appreciation for the value of his life, that he “had to be in that world” (Mori, 2021, p. 205). The novel ends with an open conclusion implying the continuation of his cycle of life, with ‘I’ having internal growth. The end of *Diary of a Void* explores what happens after Ms Shibata’s false completion of a pregnancy cycle. Ms Shibata returns to her life before the start of the novel, although she finds her “old section different—just a little different” (Yagi, 2022, p. 209) with less mistreatment. Having carried out her deceit, Ms Shibata reflects that “[she’d] love to have another baby” in the future (p. 213). Even as the cycle restarts, there are changes from before, signalling a growth in Ms Shibata’s character and a change in her worldview.

Compounding, multi-part kishōtenketsu structure

The cyclical nature of *kishōtenketsu* allows for stories to compound multiple instances of the structure into one overarching *kishōtenketsu*.

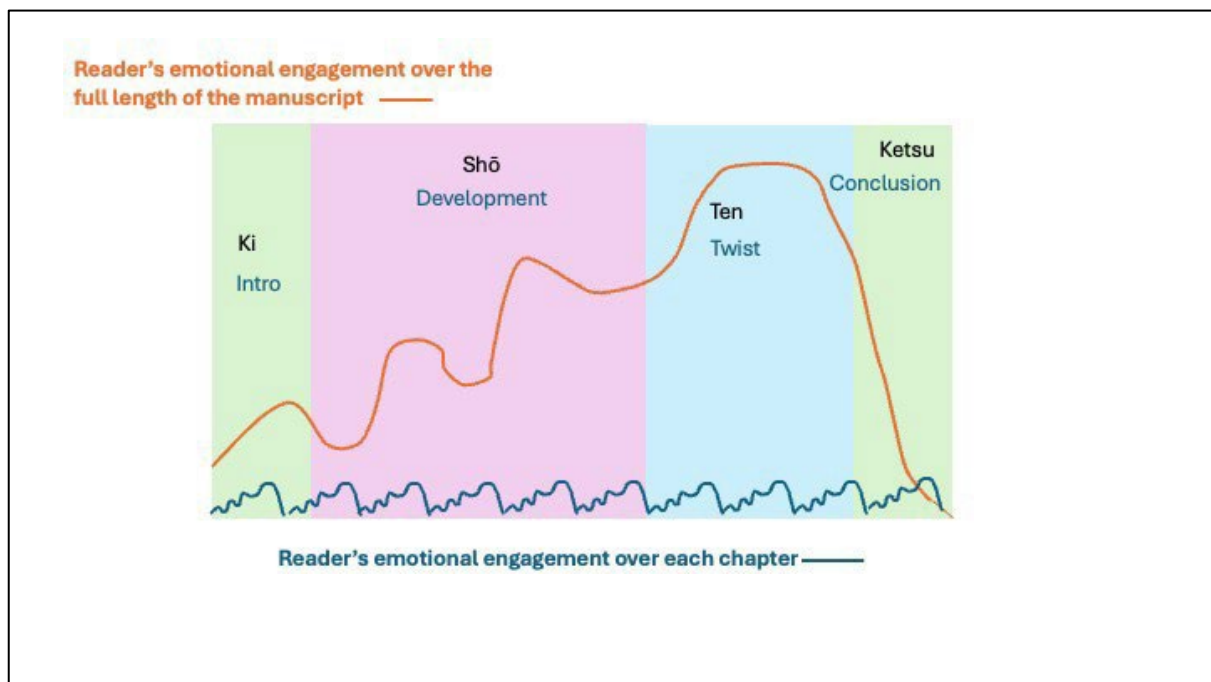


Figure 3: Multiple *kishōtenketsu* accumulating into one overarching *kishōtenketsu*. Adapted from “*Ki-sho-Ten-ketsu*” is “*KA-ME-HA-ME-HAA!*”, *Japanese Manga 101 #051 [Video]* by THE SILENT MANGA AUDITION® COMMUNITY! (SMAC!), Youtube, 2016, <https://youtu.be/Tfi0FvD9Yu0>

Figure 3 shows multiple instances of *kishōtenketsu* used successively as parts of an overarching *kishōtenketsu* (SMAC!, 2016) encompassing the whole narrative, before the turn in the overarching *ten* is reached. Each of these instances has arcs within itself with contained sub-narratives and outcomes, and at the same time build upon preceding instances to carry the overall narrative on toward greater odds, plot points and resolutions (SMAC!, 2016).

Colorful and *Diary of a Void* do not feature multi-part structures, as typically seen in serialised manga and books that employ parts and sections. Examples of such literary works are *She and*

her Cat by Makoto Shinkai and the *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* series by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. Sections of the former explore the lives of different cats and their caretakers in a neighbourhood, with characters from previous sections recurring in successive sections to paint a gradual picture of the novel's world. The novel culminates in a section involving characters from the previous ones altogether. In the latter series, the books' sections depict the experiences of different characters who visit or work at the café Funiculi Funicula, all wanting to employ its power to time travel. Each section establishes and builds on the background of a character, explaining their motivations for wanting to time travel. They experience a revelation or a change in perspective when doing so, changing as the section ends and another begins. Throughout these sections, readers follow the café's staff and long-time customers as they interact with these characters. Each instalment in the series culminates in a section involving a long-standing character that ties the instalment together and contributes to the overarching narrative of the series.

The inductive nature of *kishōtenketsu* keeps readers engaged as a story's plot and world are gradually unveiled to them, making it a useful guide on how a story can be structured. The multi-section, cumulative version of *kishōtenketsu* can be employed in a longer literary work to “[build] up and create story momentum” (SMAC!, 2016) and as a useful reference to plan when important revelations can be effectively revealed in the work.

Coupling the use of seasons, a novel can be divided into four seasonal sections to mark the passage of time and character growth, with the sections corresponding to *kishōtenketsu*'s four parts and having a *kishōtenketsu* structure themselves. A novel's first section can correspond to the *ki* of *kishōtenketsu* where foundational information is laid. Not much is known at the start but as time progresses, events transpire and information is gradually revealed until they culminate in the section's turn. The end of this section portrays the aftermath where the characters attempt to process the revelation. This leads into the second section of the novel, which can correspond to the *shō* of *kishōtenketsu*. The narrative from the first section is built upon, and the gradual unfolding of events and backstories will continue until the turn near the end of the second section, and will engage readers to continue reading the third section. The inductive nature of the narrative consequently occurs across the sections with each building the narrative in a successive fashion until the turn of the novel – the *ten* of the overarching *kishōtenketsu* structure – changes the protagonist's perspective on their life.

A shift in the narrative towards the end

Kishōtenketsu stories have an inductive narrative, peaking at the biggest narrative revelation in *ten* that ties the narrative together or completely tears it apart (Jelen, 2022, p. 25). According to David Cahill (2003), *zhuan*, the Chinese counterpart of *ten*, “can mean literally a turn or, figuratively speaking, any kind of change or shift” (p. 173) that is reconciled with the story built from preceding narrative sections. While *ten* has been equated to the narrative element of the twist in Aristotelian Western narratives by many, others note that they are not because the former can be more than a narrative twist. *Ten* can change how readers view a narrative, bring

in surprising revelations that flip a story on its head or be about a character considering a point in their past again (Jelen, 2022, p. 25).

In *Colorful*, this shift happens when ‘I’ finds out the truth behind his possession of Makoto. Before the novel’s *ten*, ‘I’ had a sense of detachment to his current life as “someone else’s business” (Mori, 2021, p. 203), constantly remembering that his possession “had a time limit of one year” (p. 121) and that he “had every intention of passing the baton with a please and thank-you” back to Makoto (p. 180), even keeping a distance from the family by calling the parents ‘the father’ and ‘the mother’. After learning about the misunderstandings that caused Makoto’s suicide, ‘I’ expresses pity for Makoto in that “[he] really did jump the gun”, that he had “rushed everything” (pp. 163–164) in ending his life. In the novel’s *ten*, ‘I’ realises that he is in fact Makoto, causing a shift in his and the reader’s perspective of the narrative. With this shift, ‘I’ is “glad [he] wouldn’t be removed from the cycle of rebirth” (p. 201) as there is now hope that it is not too late for Makoto – himself – after all. ‘I’ and the reader learn about life’s vibrancy with its ups and downs, what it means “to live, drenched in color with everyone else” (p. 206). Acknowledging the value of human life, ‘I’ reclaims ownership of his life as “*my* [emphasis added] world” (p. 207).

Similarly, the shift in the *ten* of *Diary of a Void* sees Ms Shibata realising the truth about life after a late-night encounter with Hosono, an acquaintance from her maternity aerobics class who rants about the difficulties of pregnancy. Even though one belonged and conformed to a society, “that’s the way it is from the moment we come into this world... how alone we all are” (Yagi, 2022, p. 194). She had been caught up with the expectations of society and of others regarding pregnancy, that what started as a clear lie gradually became a make-believe reality as she narrates her experiences as though it were a real pregnancy, so that she “feel[s] like [she] might forget who [she] is” (p. 195). After her revelation in *ten*, she keeps up her lie, as “it’s a place of [her] own” (p. 196), so that “[she’ll] change a little, and maybe the world will, too” (p. 197), signifying her character growing to take more of a stand for herself.

The authors of *Colorful* and *Diary of a Void* wrote their novels with a message for readers, which was effectively put across using *kishōtenketsu*. For Yagi in *Diary of a Void*, it was “the importance of sharing and empathizing with others... to write a story showing that it’s important for women not to feel that they are tied to certain roles – like office worker, wife and mother” (Kosaka, 2022, para. 3). For Mori, *Colorful* was written to “allow young people who are tired of living to have a break from their own lives”, that among the “many painful challenges that accompany teen years... the weight on their hearts [can] be just a little lighter” (Mori, 2021, pp. 209–210). Beyond the internal change in their protagonists, stories that use *kishōtenketsu* concern themselves with changing readers’ perspectives.

When developing the change and growth of passive and unmotivated characters in their stories, writers can consider the *ten* of *kishōtenketsu* for conveying the themes of a literary work. The narrative turn introduces a new perspective to the protagonist and reader, with *ketsu* showing how the protagonist reconciles their experiences thus far in the narrative. As the structure does not need a narrative resolution, the story can end with the protagonist in the process of growth,

putting emphasis more on character development rather than the result of it to the reader. *Kishōtenketsu* is consequently useful for exploring a novel's themes without being prescriptive, echoing the real-world process of an individual's development that spans their life.

Considerations when employing kishōtenketsu

While examining the features of stories using *kishōtenketsu*, caution should be applied to avoid generalising the narrative structure. Contrastive rhetoric researchers like Hinds conclude that “Japanese expository prose is characterized by a classical style (ki-sho-ten-ketsu), reader responsibility, and an inductive style with a sudden topic shift” (Kubota, 1997, p. 461). However, Ryuko Kubota states that such studies simplify cultural features from a small selection of works and hold the idea that other languages and cultures are altogether foreign and unchangeable over time (p. 460). He refutes that language is constantly evolving, influenced by the societal and political changes between cultures with similar and dissimilar languages (p. 462). Ozgul Özcan (2010) agrees with this, stating that “cultural and philosophical developments in the society affects its process of literature and its narrative forms” (p. 40). An example is how collectivist and individualistic cultures may differ in their perception and usage of singular and collective points of view in story narration (Iyer, 2022, pp. 189–190). Aristotelian and *kishōtenketsu* narrative structures do not exist in vacuums but possess influences from both their originating cultures and each other due to cultural exchanges over the years, – consequently not exclusively representing their respective literatures.

Narrative structures and religious influences

There are clear links between Aristotelian and *kishōtenketsu* narrative structures and the religions of the societies they originate from. Passive protagonists in stories employing *kishōtenketsu* are rooted in the Buddhist facets of traditional Japanese culture that discourages seeking desires and a goals-driven mindset (Matsuyama, 1983, p. 668). The cyclical nature of *kishōtenketsu* alludes to the Japanese Buddhist belief about “the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth” (Hammer, n.d., para. 1) with *Colorful* referencing the Buddhist aspects of past lives and “the cycle of rebirth” (Mori, 2021, p. 6). On the other hand, notable Western works “draw their plots, characters, and ideas largely from [Christian] Scripture” (Leithart, 1991, para. 1), as seen in works employing Aristotelian narratives like J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and books in C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. It is thus important to consider the local contexts in which *kishōtenketsu* is situated and developed before employing it in writing.

Narrative structures and influences of foreign cultures

Kishōtenketsu and Aristotelian narrative structures also cannot be considered in cultural vacuums because they have been influenced by exchanges across countries and cultures. *Kishōtenketsu* itself is an import from China and Korea. Despite the Japanese language retaining its fundamental structures during the late 19th century, major interaction with Westernisation and modernisation led it to be greatly influenced by Western languages (Kubota, 1997, p. 463) in the Meiji period when Japan opened its doors from national seclusion. Earl Miner (1968) comments that “Japan is at once unusually creative and unusually susceptible to

foreign modes” (p. 28), having the potential to both influence and be influenced by other cultures. The ending of Japan’s self-isolation in the 19th century led to the influence of Western culture on Japanese writers, and to the influence of Japanese culture on Western literature through *Japonisme* when Japanese art and culture were studied and incorporated in Western art (Moore, n.d., para. 2). Miner (1968) notes that “both the arts of Japan and the arts of the West have mutually benefitted from this contact”, with Japanese culture remaining “an abiding influence on Western art and thought” (p. 29). Mori Ōgai and Natsume Sōseki, two notable writers from that era, incorporated Western elements in their works as a way of exoticising their own culture (Fukuzawa, 2024, p. 78). For example, Sōseki’s exploration of Western individualism in *Kokoro* “reflect his considerable assimilation of Western (British) ways of thinking, and influences from his study of literature and his period of residence in England” (Okada, 2003, p. 22). Ōgai’s *doitsu sanbusaku* (“German Trilogy”) was inspired by his stay in Germany and by the Western novel, conveying to his impression of romanticism to Japanese society (Giuffré, 2019, p. 97).

Conversely, Western writers have similarly been inspired by Japanese culture and aesthetics as a result of *Japonisme*. French novelist Marcel Proust “used Japanese metaphors and symbols, often at key moments in his narration, which attests to their significance to him” (Hartman, 1981, p. 159), while American poet Ezra Pound was inspired by the haiku and invented the one image poem, a form where a single evocative image is overlaid across meandering verse (Miner, 1968, p. 34). There was also a proliferation of prose works with elements and mentions of Japanese culture in them, “set in Japan, using Japanese characters, or establishing characters in Western settings through their use of Japanese merchandise” (McAdams, 2016, p. 11), and writers applying Japanese aesthetics in their work (Genova, 2009, p. 454). Miner (1968) notes however the “almost total indifference of [American] novelists and short-story writers to Japanese prose fiction”, concluding that Western art was drawn to Japan “for what they needed, not necessarily for what is there.” (p. 48). Western artists’ attraction to Eastern cultures and art stemmed less from a desire to understand them and more from wanting to understand their own culture and art (Genova, 2009, p. 456). While more can be and has been done to further understanding and appreciation for Japanese literature, Western and Japanese cultures were instrumental in the development of each other’s writers and their works.

The impact of this cultural exchange can be seen even more so today, further proving that narrative elements in Japanese stories may not be exclusively indigenous. Kubota (1997) notes that English and Japanese essays, for example, were found to share deductive and inductive styles although they differ in terms of how often the styles were employed (p. 465). *Kishōtenketsu* was also employed in the essays of several native English speakers (p. 463), suggesting that the writing styles of the two cultures are not mutually exclusive from each other. As a Japanese writer who had grown up in England for the majority of his life, Kazuo Ishiguro and his work embodies the increasingly ambiguous dichotomy between Western and Japanese literature. Ishiguro was concerned with the influences that the settings of his first three novels (Japan for the first two and England for the third) and his “double cultural [non-]affiliation” (Karni, 2015, p. 325) might deem his work as Japanese or English. Therefore his novels “thwart reader expectations as to their cultural authenticity and suggest the impossibility of such

authenticity in general” (p. 331). As narrative structures cannot fully attribute to a single culture today, *kishōtenketsu* should be approached as a way to vary narrative, rather than as an exotic narrative structure from a foreign culture unsuitable for telling stories elsewhere.

The non-exclusivity of kishōtenketsu

Elements of *kishōtenketsu* can be found in some Western literature, proving again to its cultural non-exclusivity. For example, passive protagonists are present in Western literature. Herman Melville’s protagonist in *Bartleby the Scrivener* is a pacifist lawyer who reacts to a confounding situation in ways to avoid direct conflict with Bartleby, his hired scrivener. In Ishiguro’s novel *Klara of the Sun*, the protagonist is a robotic assistant (AF) that waits to be bought in a store, then lives within the lives and struggles of her owners, subsuming her will and motives for their betterment. In *The Pine Islands* by Marion Poschmann and *Wabi-Sabi* by Francesc Miralles, their protagonists wander through Japan after facing difficulties in their romantic relationships. However, in Ishiguro’s and Melville’s novels the passive protagonists still have goals they seek to fulfil. The AF seeks the healing of the family’s daughter as she serves their needs, while the lawyer seeks to rid a persistent scrivener from his life with pacifist methods like bribery and relocation. Poschmann’s and Miralle’s protagonists take on tasks to fulfil in their journeys: the former visits Matsushima to stop a young man from committing suicide, and the latter to find the meaning of the term “*wabi-sabi*” for his writer friend.

Kishōtenketsu does not encompass all Japanese literary works and should not be deemed as representative of them. Just as “English rhetoric cannot be reduced to a single norm” (Kubota, 1997, p. 465), other Japanese literary and narrative structures exist, such as the *Jo-ha-kyū* (序破急) structure used in traditional Japanese arts like poetry and Noh theatre; and the “Fish fried in batter” and “Return to baseline theme” writing styles observed by Hinds (1982, p. 80). *Kishōtenketsu* should not be employed to elicit a sense of ‘Japanese-ness’ in a narrative, nor should all Japanese narratives be relegated to fit into this single narrative structure.

The indeterminable nature of ten

The indeterminable nature and purpose of *ten* should be considered when using *kishōtenketsu* as a narrative structure. Kubota (1997) states that there is no definitive explanation for the characteristics and utility of *kishōtenketsu* among Japanese academics (p. 462). While *ten* has been widely equated to the “Twist” in Aristotelian Western narratives (Kerr, 2020; Lien, 2021; Qian, 2018; Shah et al., 2022, p. 127), this is a limiting definition of *ten* as a form of looping, shifting or moving away from the key point of an exposition (Cahill, 2003, p. 171). Japanese writers too have differing perspectives and definitions of *kishōtenketsu* (Kubota, 1997, p. 363), while Chinese and Japanese scholars “advise against arriving at exact definitions of *zhuan* and *ten*... [to] retain their rich polysemy and metaphoricality” (Cahill, 2003, p. 173). *Kishōtenketsu* is meant as a reference and guide, rather than a rule of law. Di Chen states in *Pianzhang Xiuci Chutan* that *qi cheng zhuan he*, and by implication *kishōtenketsu*, is meant to be a broad form and not a rigid convention (1984, as cited in Cahill, 2003, p. 174). The structure is subject to the narrative and not the other way around as reiterated by Ch’ien Lu in *Pa Ku Wen Hsiao Shih*, who says that writing should not focus on fitting into *qi cheng zhuan he*, but instead on

conveying its point fully and distinctly (1937, as cited in Cahill, 2003, p. 175). Kaifu Wang in *Baguwen Gaishuo* also states that *qi cheng zhuan he* “should always be subordinated to the task of achieving clarity... [and be regarded] less as a fixed four-part, sequential structuring device than as a more general means of articulating the interrelatedness of parts and fashioning clarity out of the text” (2002, as cited in Cahill, 2003, p. 176). As an element of prose, narrative structure should be employed as a way to enhance the telling of a narrative, rather than as a rule to fit a narrative in. *Kishōtenketsu* hence should be considered from the perspective of how it can be used to help bring out the message or intent of a narrative.

Elements of prose – use of setting

As narrative structure is one of many elements of prose, features observed in stories using *kishōtenketsu* should not be attributed wholly to the narrative structure. All narrative elements play equally important parts for worldbuilding in stories and in real life (Ribó, 2019, p. 48), hence it is important to see how they interact with narrative structure to form a prosaic work. One such narrative element is setting, which can be connected to a culture. Hajime Nakamura (1968) observed that the Japanese “lay a greater emphasis upon intuitive sensible concrete events, rather than upon universals... upon the fluid, arresting character of observed events [as they regard] the phenomenal world itself as Absolute” (p. 350). Additionally, Japanese culture is a high-context culture where the majority of communication in conversation is conveyed through predefined meanings in the listener and in communication circumstances (Hall, 1976, p. 101). Physical cues play a large part in interpersonal communication with a preference for being indirect and vague (Fister-Stoga, 1993, p. 142). Japanese literature hence feature the “use of suggestion as an aesthetic principle” (p. 142), employing the physical world extensively with “certain poetic images [having], in the course of Japanese literary history, developed certain fixed associations” (Johnson, 2012, p. 175). East Asian texts are highly descriptive that even seemingly meaningless settings and objects build on a narrative’s themes (Qian, 2018, section. 3, para. 8). This is especially so when characters are facing critical and emotional moments that they withdraw within themselves.

In *Colorful*, environment-dominant prose portrays ‘I’'s despair after learning about the materialistic character of Makoto’s crush. ‘I’ relegates his devastated emotional state to his surroundings:

The wet asphalt reflected the almost-vulgar colors of the neon signs, as if the ground were soaked in red wine. Herds of people swimming in a wine river, eye-catching couples under a single umbrella, day laborers handing out pocket tissues on pretty much every street corner, touts shouting loud enough to be heard over the rain and the wind and the trains. (Mori, 2021, p. 76)

In the stupor-like, overwhelming environment built through an emotionally-tinted lens, the reader experiences ‘I’'s present and in turn infers the grief, confusion and disgust he is feeling. Another use of the physical in *Colorful* is its constant reference to colour, emphasising life’s vibrancy in its brightest and darkest hues. The passage below happens just before the shift in *ten*, showing the significance of colour to ‘I’'s revelation:

The eggshell color on the walls that had warmth even in winter. The burnt-umber shelves that occupied the rear of the classroom. The indigo curtains framing the dark windows. The forest green of the blackboard at the front of the room. The burnished silver of the easels. The porcelain skin of the plaster busts. The chestnut beret someone had set on one of their inert heads. The floor stained with multicolored blobs of paint. The white gleam of the fluorescent lights hidden under their dusty covers. Shoko's black hair shining in the hazy glow. *There are hints all over the place.* There actually were hints all over the place. (Mori, 2021, p. 192)

Environment-dominant prose is also prominent in *Diary of a Void*, with the plain reportage-like narration hinting at Ms Shibata's revelation. The passage below happens just before the shift in *ten*:

As Hosono went on, I looked up and found that same star in the sky. The red one I'd seen when I left my apartment. There it was, hanging over a cluster of high-rises.

Then, for just a second, the light went out.

Wondering if my eyes were playing tricks on me, I opened them wide. There it was. Of course it was still there. Stars don't just disappear. But as I trained my eye on the red dot, it vanished again, then quickly reappeared. I was pretty sure the star was moving.

It was blinking. Regularly. Daah, daaah. All the while moving at a set speed. Then I remembered the airport over there, on the other side of the high-rises. The red lights had to belong to planes landing and taking off. (Yagi, 2022, pp. 190–191)

What was thought to be one of the stars is instead the lights of a moving plane, paralleling Ms Shibata's deceit. The man-made imitation had been perceived to be part of nature, like Ms Shibata through her conjured lie was perceived to be pregnant – a natural phenomenon – and hence part of that segment of society. Ms Shibata saw herself in the red lights for what they really were – a lone individual trying to fit in, yet without its own rightful place in the night sky.

As not to similarly assign cultural exclusivity to environment-dominant prose, the physical has also been used in Western literature to allude to the emotional. For example, Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* uses the physical limitations of the protagonists, such as their ageing bodies, and the harshness and frigidity of the Alaskan wilderness to allude to the protagonists' internal emotional states. The alternating points of view between the wife and husband experiencing the unforgiving landscape bring insights into their inner conflicts that they hide from each other.

Considering this for English narrative writing, environment-dominant prose complements characters unwilling to look inward and reveal their emotions directly. Such prose conveys what is beneath the surface of the physical scene, giving readers a glimpse of the world through the emotionally-tinted lens of characters. The physical environment and the weather can enhance the mood of the current scene and convey character's repressed emotions and

intentions. Such characters may be closed off to themselves, having emotional burdens they do not wish to confront or share with others. Descriptions of physical characteristics and environments enhance characters and narrative flavour, and allude to their backstories.

Physical symbols can also be employed to bring out character's internal states and a narrative's message. Winter as a season of coldness and stasis can enhance the reclusive states of characters. It can also transition into spring, the environmental transition from stasis to life, signifying a transition in the characters or narrative. The cyclical seasons can also allude to a narrative being part of a bigger cycle of life that continues past the end of the story, echoing the cyclical structure of *kishōtenketsu*.

Conclusion

When writing literary prose, Aristotelian Western narrative structures are often referred to since they are the prosaic forms prominently taught in English creative writing programmes. These narrative structures may diminish the effectiveness of a story if other narrative elements, such as a passive protagonist and the novel's themes, are incompatible with it. The protagonist will be forced into an active journey when they do not wish to, be influenced in their journey as the narrative progresses and be forced to reach a resolution by the end. *Kishōtenketsu* broadens options to approach a prosaic work differently with its absence of a central conflict, passive protagonists, cyclical structure and lack of resolution, and a shift in the narrative towards the end. This can already be seen in the fields of animation, where films by Hayao Miyazaki combine fairytale tropes, the Hero's Journey structure and *kishōtenketsu* to become "puzzling and baffling, and at the same time so compelling" (Arnavas & Bellini, 2023, p. 19). Video games too employ *kishōtenketsu* as a way to build levels and introduce mechanics to players as they progress through the game (Henriques, 2024, section. The word for this para. 2). *Kishōtenketsu* however should not be considered representative or prescriptive as a structure, but as a guide to work together with other literary devices and elements of prose, such as setting, to bring forth the intended purposes and themes of prosaic works.

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