

Renku: A Challenging Word Game from Ancient Times

By Ishida Hiroto

Prof. Akito Arima is a famous *haiku* poet as well as a prominent scientist. His past career includes the President of the University of Tokyo, the President of RIKEN, a government affiliated research institute, and the Minister of Education and Science. He is one of the top leaders in Japanese science and technology community, where many are concerned about young students' reluctance to study science. Prof. Arima says that it is important to promote the intellect of all Japanese people totally rather than to worry about young men's attitude toward science. And he also says that tradition of writing short poems known as *haiku* and *tanka*, which are very popular among Japanese people, has played a significant role to polish writing skill and sharpen their ability to observe nature and human lives.

Tanka consists of thirty-one syllables, divided to five, seven, five, seven and seven. Tanka's former half, seventeen syllables, is the form of *haiku*. In addition to *haiku* and *tanka*, which are written by single person, Japan has the tradition of interactive poems that are made by many persons. Historically this poem was named *renga*, and now many people call it *renku*, in which Prof. Arima also has a keen interest. *Renku* is composed of long stanzas called *choku*, which is the same form as *haiku*, and short stanzas, called *tanku*, which is the same style as the latter half of *tanka*. Long and short stanzas should come in turn, and neighboring stanzas should be written by different persons. These two stanzas, mostly, should be linked slightly in some sense but never too close, and at certain parts they must be totally different to give a sudden change of the mood. The participants are usually up to six persons, and they make long and short stanzas to reach 18(*han-kasen*), 36(*kasen*), 50(*goju-in*) or 100(*hyaku-in*) totally.

■ The Origin of Renku

As above mentioned, *Renku*'s root goes back to *renga*, a literary form developed in medieval times. *Renga*, generally completed with 100 stanzas, requires time-consuming efforts and was an aesthetic literary game played by members of the leisure class.

In the Edo period (1603-1867), traditional *renga* took on witty, playful and humorous elements while abandoning some of the strict rules governing the choice of words and themes. The new style which is the result of this change was called *haikai*. The important point of this poem is to keep the mood

progressing forward, changing the seasons and themes. In place of *renga's* 100 stanzas, standard *renku* is completed at the 36th stanza. Many famous *haiku* written by old great masters such as Matsuo Basho or Yosa no Buson are actually the first stanza of *haikai*, and called *hokku*.

In Meiji era, Masaoka Shiki, who was an eminent *haiku* poet, thought only *hokku* of *haikai* could have high literary and aesthetic qualities as art, while remaining stanzas could not. By the influence of Masaoka Shiki and with other reasons, the popularity of *haikai* went down. Today *haikai* is called *renku*, a word made popular by Masaoka's closest disciple and friend, Takahama Kyoshi. One of the reasons why *renku* is not composed as frequently as *tanka* or *haiku* is probably that for any participant it is rather hard to claim his own literary individuality upon whole completed work, while *haiku* or *tanka* is an independent work created by single person, and so it could possibly stimulate the ambition of a writer to make *haiku* or *tanka* which is very close to the stature of ones written by such renowned poets as Kakinomoto no Hitomaro or Matsuo Basho. Another problem is that, although *renku* is shorter than *renga*, it still takes an inordinately long time to complete by today's standards. In addition the rules called *shikimoku* may be easier than those of *renga*, but that does not mean they are simple. For example, one rule is that certain stanza of *renku* is devoted to blossoms, others to the moon.

■ Benefit of Renku in Modern World

And yet, *renku* contains a great wealth of benefits for the modern world. People come together as a group to link their own ideas into a work of art. This word game helps to develop flexible imaging, swift thinking and the ability to guess where other people's trains of thought are taking them, all of which are important abilities in today's society. Of course, people do not expect literature to have practical applications, and first of all, it must first be enjoyable. *Renku* will open the door to both a new type of pleasure and a new way to develop your mind and skill.

These are some of the reasons why Kanazawa Gakuin University has launched a *renku* project. Our first open seminar for *renku* was held in July 2005, inviting three illustrious men: Prof. Arima, Prof. Kawaguchi Junkei, a literary figure born in Kanazawa City, who used to be a Japan Railway Tokai executive, and Prof. Fukumoto Ichiro, well known in the society of

Photo: by courtesy of Hokkoku Shimbunsha.



The author (left) and his reku companies. Image of Sugawara no Michizane is shown on a hanging scroll. The table is a work by a famous artist of Japanese lacquer ware and color of the wall is traditional red of Kanazawa

haiku and *senryu* as well as reku. Six people including them composed about half of reku, sitting around a table, on the first day. Next day, the public was invited to participate to continue and complete the kasen of reku. About 200 people there were asked to compose choku or tanku according to the rule. The judge, Prof. Fukumoto, chose what he considered to be the best for each part without knowing writer's name, and this process grew into a joint composition of kasen(36 stanzas).

This event was so successful that City College of Ishikawa Prefecture took over the job of organizing it in 2006, with our university taking practical leadership. In April we started the seminar giving lectures on reku every Saturday, and then in August to round out the seminar we held open reku sessions by the seminar participants and some other people who applied.

■ Various Kinds of Renku Sessions

The literary gathering is called "za". I hear that many different types of "za", reku sessions, have been held in various parts of the country, and these days online sessions linking participants over long distances are tried often.

During our reku sessions, I thought about the following. First of all, no matter how many participants there are, just a few or over hundred, every participant tries his/her best to make excellent stanzas. Even more important, steeping him/herself in the atmosphere of collaboration as a member of "za" seems the greatest pleasure. Members are cooperators rather than competitors. The final product, kasen might be something like music score that conveys the harmonious

atmosphere of "za". Just as music scores are played and enjoyed, we can experience atmosphere of the "za" again by reading and citing written kasen. Our intention is that reku sessions which are not the exclusive domain of a selected few but open to everyone can be good catalyst that stimulates participants' sense of language. A wide variety of literature lovers came to our sessions in Kanazawa, including active members of haiku and modern poetry societies.

Secondly, reku sessions contain the zest of interactive communication, which used to remind me of playing catch in baseball, but now I feel that it is more like rotating passes in football training. Always there is the urge to keep the theme forward.

In "za" of reku, every participant is a writer as well as a reader. This is a unique character of composition. Whether a masterpiece in this literary field is art or not may not matter.

■ Towards Mutual Understanding Internationally

People worldwide enjoy very short literature, such as one-line or three-line poetry. The Haiku International Association is actively making efforts to spread haiku around the world. When various persons from the world get together in one place or online, to link short poems together as reku, we may take another step forward to mutual understanding.

A well-known puppet artist, Mr. Kawamoto Kihachiro, collaborated with 34 anime artists or masters of cartoon art from Japan and overseas, visualized successfully very famous kasen of Edo Era, "Winter Day" composed by Basho and others into fascinating DVD imagery. Stimulated by this, our university is planning to link the reku created during our open seminar to still and moving images for illustrated scrolls or video production. I expect pictures linked to stanzas are not explanatory, but leap higher than the stanzas.

The Maeda family, Edo period ruler of Kanazawa area of Japan, is said to be descended from a nobleman Sugawara no Michizane, who was a great politician as well as the top scholar and poet. At the Tenmangu Shrine erected in Michizane's honor, the renga and reku tradition lives on, and even today her/his portrait on a hanging scroll decorates a wall during very formal reku sessions. Kanazawa may be very appropriate city to promote this kind of art of letters. I hope this will prove to be another way to break down language barriers. **US**

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