

# The Poetic Spirit of the Japanese

By Saeki Shoichi

Some thirty years ago, I first taught a course called History of Japanese Literature at an American university, and what surprised me most was the response of students to haiku, for I found it was quite popular.

That is not to say that all was smooth sailing. At the time, I was teaching at the University of Michigan, a state school in the Midwest. By chance, on the very morning that I was going to take up haiku in my lecture, it suddenly began snowing. I happened to look out of the window of my university office to see snow falling literally thick and fast. Surprised in spite of myself by the vigor of this "first snow," I grew thrilled. I could not help muttering to myself, "How extraordinarily fortunate for the first snow to fall on the day of my first lecture on haiku!" Unconsciously I put even more effort than usual into my preparations, and searched out a number of haiku that mention "first snow" (*hatsu-yuki*). I was barely able to contain myself out of the absolute confidence that my first haiku presentation would be a success.

Enthusiastically entering the classroom, I started my lecture. "Look out the window, everyone! How fortuitous it is that we can have our first class on haiku on the day of the first snowfall!" I was unable to translate my elation into English very well, but I energetically commenced the morning's lecture. However, contrary to my expectations, a hush fell over the classroom. Instead of a congenial response, there was no

response at all, as if the students were thinking, 'What is this Japanese man so excited about all by himself?'

Then I suddenly came to a realization. The very assertion of "first snow" and placing great value on it is a distinctly Japanese literary and cultural aesthetic. The first snowfall of a particular year is actually no more than a simple atmospheric phenomenon. The very



A snow scene which can inspire a Japanese poetic image

act of deliberately focusing on it and using it to give play to various emotions is in itself a "cultural sensibility." By such means, a simple natural phenomenon becomes what may be called a communal emotional and cultural sign, and hence it can also function as a poetic image or symbol.

At the time, while I was initially disappointed - even stunned - by the unresponsiveness and apathy of my American students, I was newly convinced that the very sensibility of "first snow" is in a way a Japanese literary "discovery" and no less than an element in Japanese cultural sensibility.

While not a little deflated inwardly, I pushed onward, wrote on the blackboard several time-honored haiku dealing with "first snow," added some comments and somehow managed to bring the lecture to a close without further difficulties. However, after having been unable to keep myself from dancing for joy at the unexpected coincidence of having a first snowfall

on the first class dealing with haiku, it was hard not to be depressed by the lack of response and the apparent apathy of the students. I even began to think that haiku was impossible for Americans to comprehend and that the wisest course for me would be to finish the segment on haiku as soon as possible.

However, the next time that class met, another surprising development awaited me. From the very beginning of the period, a number of students raised their hands, saying how interesting they had found haiku, how surprised they had been by it and how they wanted to hear more. I was taken aback, but of course I was pleased. "I don't get it," I told them. "In our previous class, when I talked about 'first snow' you all seemed so uninterested. I was downhearted and had begun to think haiku was just beyond you." Several students responded. "Professor Saeki, to be honest I can't get too excited about 'first snow.' Here in the Midwest, some years the first snow falls in October and other years it comes in December, so it's really irregular. In other words, it's just a

natural phenomenon.” “But if that’s the way you look at and think about it, you cannot possibly understand haiku. If you don’t carefully observe various natural phenomena, and respond sensitively to them...,” I began. “But, you see, although we can’t get too excited about ‘first snow’ itself, these short, almost too short poems called haiku are really interesting. They’re so neat because if I wanted to, even I could make some up.” With this comment as a point of departure, the morning’s Japanese literature class opened into an unprecedented vigorous exchange of opinions.

What was most interesting and stimulating as far as I was concerned was the following comment. “I always thought that poetry was composed by either geniuses or sissies. But with these short poems, even I can do that. What is astounding to me is to realize that people who are neither brilliant nor effeminate can write poetry and it makes me feel glad. Instead of a term paper for this semester,” this student went on, “could I submit a collection of my own haiku?” “A collection of your own haiku would be perfectly fine,” I replied. “Such a spirited response to my lectures would be most welcome.” While this may have been going a little too far, it was certainly true that the majority of the students responded personally to haiku and showed an interest in it. I became somewhat ashamed of myself for having jumped to the conclusion that haiku was utterly beyond the grasp of non-Japanese.

The broad popularization of haiku such that anyone can compose them has become so commonplace that Japanese people tend to overlook the fact. In Japan today, haiku are being composed and enjoyed by a great many people. There are innumerable haiku poets who hold haiku gatherings and publish little magazines of their works. In addition, almost every daily newspaper has a column on haiku for readers who are also contributors. Almost all of the major dailies boasting large circulations publish a lengthy column every week in which they ask a well-known haiku poet to select and

comment on the best of the haiku submitted by contributors. Haiku remains vibrant in the lives of contemporary Japanese.

It would seem unfair to touch on haiku without mentioning *waka* and *tanka*. In addition to columns on haiku in the newspapers, there are similar ones taking up *tanka*. The number of *tanka* poets in Japan may even exceed the number of haiku poets. *Waka* originated even earlier and hence has a longer history. The *Man’yōshū*, Japan’s oldest anthology of poetry from the 7th to the 8th centuries, is largely composed in *waka* form. In this collection there are *chōka* (long poems), but the majority are *waka*, the 31-syllable form divided into verses of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Somehow or other, it seems that Japanese are imbued with an almost instinctive preference for such short poetic forms. In the beginning, 31-syllable *waka* was used as a “summary” or “comment” for *chōka*, but before long it became the dominant poetic form.

The sway of the *waka* form continued for several centuries, primarily within the imperial court and among the nobility. Then along came the 5-7-5 syllable haiku as a parody of *waka*. In the beginning, the intent was clearly to satirize and make fun of *waka*, in reaction to *waka* having gone too far in standardizing “elegance.” At times, they were a bit too vulgar and sometimes obscene. This poetic form which was even shorter than the *waka* form must have suited the taste of many contemporary Japanese, for upon the commencement of the Edo period (17th - 19th century), with a vitality that overwhelmed *waka*, haiku spread widely among the common people. During that period, although the “flavor” of this shortened poetic form was different, it too became highly sophisticated and polished, and subtle, sharp haiku masters such as Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) and Yosa Buson (1716-1783) appeared. Haiku which had originally tended toward humor and satire continued to be composed under the



Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) and his disciple Sora (1649-1710), were both haiku masters

rubric of *senryū*, maintaining their sharpness and even relatively obscene quality. Anthologies of *senryū* took up festivals and spectacles, even including the atmosphere and sexual behavior of the Yoshiwara and other red-light districts, vividly portraying everyday life in Edo. There is no room for doubt regarding their literary and cultural impact. Along with the *ukiyo-e* known widely around the world, they are certainly worthy of renewed appreciation.

Viewed this far, from the point of view of the degree of diffusion as well as the variety and volume of the information included, one can conclude that the Japanese are among the few peoples of the world who are “poetic” or at least lovers of poetry. Needless to say, there is no precise, objective international measurement for evaluating poetic value, but it would be difficult to find in any era a people in

another nation who have loved poetry so deeply and continuously.

I would now like to touch on an important literary and cultural characteristic of the Japanese. That is, the extensiveness of the habit of keeping a journal. At the end of each year, one finds diaries for the coming year piled in great heaps in almost every bookstore in the country, and it would seem that almost all of them are eventually purchased. Of those actually bought, one cannot say clearly what percentage are actually filled in to the end and it would be difficult to carry out such a survey with any precision. The Japanese proverb "*Mikka bozu*" refers to a weak-willed person who energetically begins something only to give it up a few days later, and that may apply in this case. However, the superb Japanologist and Columbia University professor Donald Keene attests to the Japanese love of keeping diaries. During the Pacific War, Keene serving as an intelligence officer encountered wartime diaries found on the battlefields. He writes that he was astonished by this fact and moreover by the numbers of the soldiers' diaries. He reports that in contrast, the U. S. Army had strictly prohibited the keeping of diaries out of a desire to maintain secrecy. With this shocking discovery as a start, Professor Keene began tracing this Japanese tradition of keeping diaries. As early as the Heian period (8th - 12th century), the genre of diaries was already in favor among the courtiers. And in order to demonstrate the extent of their education, in almost all cases, the male courtiers wrote in *kambun*, classical Chinese. In contrast, women's diaries were written in Japanese and composed in *kana* syllabary. In the end, of course, it was the diaries of the women, written in their native language, which they could use freely, that came to be highly valued and widely read as literature.

It is problematic whether a personal diary can in itself be considered literature. However, because one finds revealed within them vivid personal emotion, a delicate expression of



*Kinkaku-ji temple (Kyoto) covered with snow attracts many poets*

individual feelings and descriptions of daily life, could there be anything wrong in labelling them as literature? On the contrary, the view that diaries ought to be excluded from the category of literature ought to be seen as a mistaken notion based on unnaturally rigid criteria. Actually, in modern literary criticism, it is hard to find anyone who contends that diaries should be excluded from consideration as literature. In this respect, one ought to commend the foresightedness of the Heian courtiers for recognizing and enjoying diaries as literature as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Let us now turn to the diaries of Heian women. For instance, in *Kagero Nikki* (translated as *The Gossamer Years*), we find that what was originally an explanatory prose preface to a waka has become longer and expanded. In other words, we can recognize in the detailed explanation of the conditions and state of mind in which the waka

were composed the centrality of the poetic motivation. True there are long poems (*choka*) included among the poems of the *Man'yoshu*, but in almost no time the 31-syllable *waka* form became dominant. It would seem that in the preference for condensed, abridged briefness there is at work some deep, ethnic instinct. This is applicable to virtually all of the "women's diaries" of Heian and the depictions are limited to personal feeling and deep emotion. At times, public events of life at court are touched upon, but reference to their political background or significance are extremely rare. *The Towazugatari* (translated as *The Confessions of Lady Nijo*), which dates from the end of the thirteenth century in the Kamakura period (12th - 14th century), is a masterpiece which is unrestrained in its psychological portrayal of sexual relations among men and women, but in it one finds not even a mention of the

Mongol Invasion, a contemporary crisis of national significance. This is an astonishing adherence to private concerns, and setting aside considerations of evaluation, it is clearly a deep-rooted distinctive characteristic of Japanese literary tradition.

At this juncture I would like to call your attention to what at first glance seems a peculiar, but deep and extremely interesting literary paradox. It is another actual instance which gives evidence of how the form of haiku, a poetic form that further condenses the waka in what we usually refer to a tanka, unexpectedly and to an uncanny degree has universal appeal and has achieved international popularity. Richard Wright (1908-1960) was a respected African American writer of international reputation and just two years ago a collection of his poems was published posthumously. The title, surprisingly enough, is *Haiku: This Other World* (New York: Arcade Publication, 1998). Novelist Wright's final work was literally a collection of haiku. Wright's works, which have been translated and are well read in Japan, include a novel titled *Native Son* (1946) and the autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945). Both describe the agonizing experiences and fortunes of a black man born in the Deep South in Mississippi, and even the Japanese reader cannot but react strongly to the experiences described. *Native Son* is a particularly vehement "protest novel" which portrays with great force the environment and the psychology of the black protagonist who daringly murders a white man, and the novel inevitably had a powerful impact on Japanese readers. The fact that following World War II Wright left the United States and settled in France can be seen as an attempt to escape from the unbearable psychological pressure of continuing writing as a black novelist in America. There are indications that he was captivated by the existentialism then prevalent in postwar France, and he himself wrote novels that showed such a philosophical bent. But there are signs

that his separation from America, on the contrary, brought to his life and mental state an unexpected psychological and physiological burden. Wright did not stop writing after he settled in France, but he seemed to lose the keenness and drive that he formerly possessed, and in the end he suffered from severe neurosis. At that time, he became captivated by a volume of haiku that he happened upon. He became so attracted to them that he began writing haiku of his own in English. It is said that he started out writing a few, became quickly engrossed in writing and continued until he had produced more than three thousand poems. Two editors (one a Japanese professor) compiled the verses and published them posthumously with a foreword written by his daughter Julia.

It was a truly unimaginable cultural and literary encounter, and Julia expresses it this way.

*For Richard Wright, hunger and beauty were once upon a time terrifying and ravaging. But writing these poems kept him spiritually afloat, some of us will even find these deceptively simple patterns of syllables tap-dancing in our minds long after they are read. They are Richard Wright's poetry of loss and retrievals of temperate joy and wistful humor, of exile and fragments of a dreamed return.*

For Wright in his last years, haiku was a truly wondrous gift from an unanticipated region and culture. It undoubtedly brought to him a serenity and opening of the mind as efficacious as a magic wand.

When I read his *Haiku: This Other World*, I was strongly moved by his ingenuous, gentle acceptance and I attempted to translate several into Japanese. What I felt particularly interesting was that observing the convention of writing in 17 syllables was not a troublesome restriction, but rather seemed to him a "support" bringing him peace of mind. In this collection of 817 haiku, he shows

devoted adherence to the 5-7-5 syllable form. Previously I had been somewhat stunned to read a report by an American psychoanalyst stating that considerable progress was achieved by encouraging patients to write haiku. It may be that a feature underlying the fact that haiku has been written so consistently, by so broad a segment of the population and with so much enjoyment in Japan is just such an unnoticed psychotherapeutic effect.

Since we are looking at the popularity of haiku in the Edo period, we surely ought to at least touch upon its companion genre senryu. While senryu and haiku share the identical form, they are distinct in how they are composed and in the tone that each takes. The lifeblood of senryu is comedy and satire. It appears that senryu became popular in reaction to haiku being taken too seriously and becoming too sophisticated. One could call senryu witty verse or satirical verse. There would seem to be nothing in worldly affairs - politics, economics, social affairs, sex - that was not taken up, satirized, laughed at or cuttingly remarked upon. One of its specialties was sexual titillation. Fads and incidents in the famous Yoshiwara and other red-light districts of the Edo period were immediately taken up, made fun of and laughed at. Their comic, satirical energy is both marvelous and truly astonishing.

I have given only a rough introduction, but I hope you can see how durable the poetic sensibility of the Japanese is and how broadly it extends, and can grasp a portion of its unusually diverse transformations and facets. Waka, haiku, senryu - from the perspective of world literature, the durability and diversity of the poetic sensibility of the Japanese merits even greater attention and study. JTI

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