

JAPANESE POETRY—Early Modern Period

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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chônin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Literature and the Role of Poetry

Notwithstanding its iconic culture of pleasure-seeking, the Tokugawa period witnessed a flourishing of cultural pursuits across the spectrum. There emerged sophisticated connoisseurship, exquisite aesthetic sensibilities, and masterful arts and crafts of every description. The literature of the period clearly reflects the intersection of refinement and vulgarity, the spiritual and the mundane.

For one thing, Tokugawa literati were understandably inspired by the look and feel of their society— the world of merchants and money-making, stylish amusements, romance and escapism, and the comic posturing and hypocrisy of smug samurai. Poetry, the centerpiece of Japan's age-old literary tradition, was in evidence. But the cumulative effect of a millennium of stultifying rules and conventions had taken its toll. The new social order called for fresh inspiration and up-to-date avenues of poetic expression. The key figure here is Matsuo Basho, a Japanese cultural icon of the first magnitude.

Bashô and the Haiku Moment

In this land of poets, Matsuo Bashô (1644-94) stands head and shoulders above the rest, and he surely ranks among the great Japanese cultural ambassadors to the world. The head of a poetic coterie, Basho mastered a genre of group-centered poetic composition— *haikai*— which grew out of a prominent medieval-linked-verse genre, *renga*. The idea here is for like-minded poets to produce 'collective' poetry through the spontaneous composition of poetic verses, in a round-robin format.

Mastery of this genre required intimate familiarity with the expanse of Japan's poetic tradition and unswerving dedication to perfecting one's art. This was Bashō's achievement. But the man is far better known in our own day for his individual haiku poems— those seventeen-syllable poetic morsels said to embody transcendent meaning. In short, Bashō has been canonized as the 'god of haiku.'

Yet Matsuo Bashō by no means invented the haiku. It is essentially a truncated *waka*— the orthodox 5-7-5-7-7 poetic form, minus the final 7-7 syllable lines. But his mastery of this minimalist form has achieved almost mythic proportion. An oft-cited example is the following:

<i>furuikeya</i>	The ancient pond
<i>kawazutobikomu</i>	A frog jumps in
<i>mizu no oto</i>	The sound of water

Frogs, alas, had not been welcome in the refined, courtly *waka* domain of the Heian period. But these and other humble creatures and ordinary objects would become the raw material of artistic creation in the hands of this master poet who realized that the world of poetic expression had to expand beyond the confines of courtly elegance and propriety.

Another iconic haiku, among thousands that Bashō composed, can be said to valorize the poetry of old and the elegant melancholy embodied in the medieval aesthetic of *sabi*:

<i>kareedani</i>	On a withered branch
<i>karasu no tomarikeri</i>	A crow has come to perch—
<i>aki no kure</i>	Autumn dusk

How, then, are we to understand the 'haiku aesthetic' suggested by Bashō's verse, which subjects a humble image— be it frog or crow— to a certain alchemy of transformation? In one reading, the seemingly random, unremarkable incident takes on deep meaning— a poetic intersection of the infinite and the instantaneous, requiring no explication, no commentary, and calling forth a spiritualized sense of enlightenment, *satori*.

Others, though, might opt for a less transcendent response to these seventeen syllables. They will examine the frog and crow and find— precisely nothing at all. The more cynical among us will choose to dismiss the 'haiku mystique' as a game of smoke and mirrors, a Ponzi scheme of hyper-inflated value based on little more than hero worship, with no basis in actual literary merit.

What, after all, makes for a 'good' haiku? Beyond the received wisdom of a tradition that separates the wheat from the chaff, how are we to judge? For those drawn to haiku merely as a 'fun activity,' judging quality is beside the point. One can easily think of haiku as mereword doodles— oriental limericks, so to speak. After all, there are computer programs that can generate them instantaneously, and in massive quantities.

Bashō himself was likely spared such doubts. Thanks to the accounts of his many disciples, we know that their mentor was deeply beholden to a tradition that he had inherited, lamenting only that poetic practice had fallen on hard times. And despite his attempts to expand the horizons of poetic composition, Bashō insisted on dedication to mastering one's poetic craft and respect for the artistic standards of revered forebears. One such figure was Saigyō, the great poetic wanderer of the early medieval period. Among Bashō's greatest literary achievements are his poetic travel diaries, which trace his sojourns in the Japanese countryside, following— literally and figuratively— in Saigyō's footsteps, observing the passing scene, and leaving a haiku record of his spiritual communion with the places and people he met along the way. [See Tokugawa genres: Autobiography]

Poets of the Late Tokugawa

Notwithstanding his eminent stature, Matsuo Bashô by no means exhausted the field of Tokugawa poetry. The work of three noteworthy poets— Buson, Issa, and Ryôkan— pays homage to their great predecessor while advancing poetic expression in new directions.

Yosa Buson (1716-83) was a cultivated dilettante (*bunjin*) equally adept at painting and poetry. He mastered a haiku style that privileged a kaleidoscope of images and a playfulness of spirit. The following verse is emblematic:

<i>tsuriganeni</i>	On a temple bell
<i>tomaritenemuru</i>	It has stopped, and gone to sleep—
<i>kochô kana</i>	A butterfly

Here the hushed tranquility of the scene is undercut by the inevitable *gong, gong* that will provide the rude awakening. And in the following verse, Buson, a great admirer of Bashô, provides a gentle parody of his signature verse:

<i>furuike no</i>	At that old pond
<i>kawazuoiyuku</i>	The frog is growing old
<i>ochiba kana</i>	Among fallen leaves

Another perennial favorite is Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), whose haiku evoke a gentle, childlike innocence with which he has long been identified. The following verse puts our reliable amphibian to a new poetic use:

<i>yasegaeru</i>	You, skinny frog—
<i>makerunaissa</i>	Don't give up just yet.
<i>koreniari</i>	Issa's here!

The crafted artlessness of Issa's haiku, which seeks to cheer up the downtrodden creature, contrasts with the work of Priest Ryôkan (1758-1831). Ryôkan, who never strayed far from his home in the provinces, was a Zen priest known for using poetry as a vehicle for spiritual awakening. Together with Bashô and Issa, Ryôkan was regarded as an avatar of enlightenment and essential wisdom by generations of admirers and spiritual seekers— Japanese and foreign alike. The following poem, a *waka*, speaks to his poetic roots:

<i>yo no nakawa</i>	Our life in this world—
<i>naninitatoen</i>	To what shall I compare it?
<i>yamabiko no</i>	To an echo
<i>kotaurukoe no</i>	Resounding through the mountains
<i>munashikigagoto</i>	And off into the empty sky

While presenting a Zen image of vast emptiness as its 'answer,' the poem's rhetorical question is an allusion to a famous *waka* from the great eighth-century *Man'yôshû* anthology. A village priest of early nineteenth-century Japan, Ryôkan thus inscribes his name in a poetic genealogy going back twelve centuries.

Haiku in the Modern Day

Haiku underwent a significant transformation in the modern period, emerging as an accessible form of poetic expression across all sectors of Japanese society. And its easy adaptability has made this iconic cultural export a popular vehicle for creative wordplay world-wide, in all languages and across the social spectrum. The old rules and conventions need no longer apply. What counts is an interest in looking at one's world in fresh, new ways.

Readings

Carter, Steven D., *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1991)

Hass, Robert, *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa* (Ecco Press, 1994)

Keene, Donald, *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era 1600-1867* (Holt, 1976)

Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2015) [Note: Material from this work has been incorporated into the essay.]

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900* (Columbia, 2002)

_____, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Bashô* (Stanford, 1997)

Ueda Makoto, *Matsuo Bashô: The Master Haiku Poet* (Kodansha International, 1982)

_____, *The Path of Flowering Thorn: The Life and Poetry of YosaBuson* (Stanford, 1998)

Discussion Questions and Topics

In view of its simplicity, on the one hand, and the deep lyrical tradition that has inspired it, on the other hand, how are we to read, understand, and appreciate haiku poetry? Should we be concerned about that which is lost in translation?

What qualities may be said to distinguish a 'good' haiku from a 'bad' one? Is it possible to make such judgments?

In what sense can haiku poetry be considered a 'modern' genre? A 'Japanese' genre? How would you define 'haiku' and the sort of 'vision' that it calls forth?

How do our haiku examples compare with the *waka* poetry of the Heian and medieval periods? How are the respective social and cultural contexts revealed?

As with the poets of earlier periods, Tokugawa poets generally worked in groups, preferring the linked-verse practice that downplayed individual creativity in favor of the collective voice. What questions does this raise regarding the nature of poetry and aspects of Japanese society and culture that appear to privilege group identity and conformity?

Images



Whimsical portrayal of Matsuo Bashō and his famous 'frog' haiku, by Kinkoku (circa 1820)



Statue of Bashō in Hiraizumi, Iwate Prefecture (site of a famous haiku composition)



Image of YosaBuson by Matsumura Goshun (late 18th century)



Image of Kobayashi Issa by MuramatsuShunpo (early 19th century)

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