

JAPANESE POETRY – 19th Century

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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Nineteenth Century

Japan in the nineteenth century underwent an all-but unprecedented social, political, and cultural transformation. The centuries-old Tokugawa shogunal regime, predicated upon the privileged status of the samurai class and a policy of national seclusion, went into decline in the early nineteenth century. The shogunal leaders were unable to reform their outmoded regime, and they were equally incapable of fending off the incursion of Western powers— most notably, Commodore Perry and the American 'Black Ships' (*kurofune*). But they did succeed in promoting a strong sense of native identity and a credo of Japanese uniqueness based upon the Shinto faith and the Emperor as a living god— a *kami*.

Fifteen years following Perry's arrival on Japanese shores, the Tokugawa shogunate fell, in what was a relatively bloodless transition to Japan as a modern nation. The advent of the Meiji era (1868-1912) set in motion a process of modernization that eventuated in the establishment of Japan as a powerful empire that succeeded in rivaling the Western imperial powers. The shogunal center of Edo was 'reinvented' as the modern nation's new capital— Tokyo.

Japan's modernizers, though, were largely erstwhile samurai who sought to preserve and promote traditional values and a strong national identity at the same time that they embarked on a comprehensive program of nation-building, industrial development, urbanization, and Western-inspired political, educational, social, and cultural institutions. Their rallying-cry of 'Civilization and Enlightenment' (*bunmeikaika*), which trumpeted the virtues of science, technology, and modernity, was tempered by a state-sponsored embrace of duty and dedication to the Emperor and to the imperial state— *Nippon teikoku*. This seemingly incongruous embrace of tradition and modernity, epitomized in the motto of 'Japanese spirit, Western know-how' (*wakonyōsai*), marks the new age.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan had in place a sophisticated rail system, a powerful military, and a productive industrial economy. It had established a representative parliamentary system, political parties, and a modern Constitution. A modern educational system provided a standard Western-style curriculum to the nation's youth, and modern print and entertainment media were available to all Japanese. Japan gradually absorbed the material and intangible culture and institutions of the West. But the identity question— the contest between individualism and personal autonomy and the fact of an authoritarian regime intent upon maintaining order and discipline— remained unresolved. The death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912 marked the end of a truly unique chapter in world history.

The Place of Poetry in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Poetic production in late Tokugawa Japan was impressively varied and enjoyed widespread popularity among various segments of society. (See Tokugawa Literary Genres: Poetry) Poets composed in both Japanese and Chinese, and they continued to engage in group versification, much as their Heian era and medieval forebears had done centuries earlier. Yet the conventions and styles of what was a twelve century-long lyrical tradition had lent a degree of predictability and staleness to this poetry. The innovations achieved by figures such as Bashō and Buson had largely given way to imitation and poetic factionalism. The dominant role of natural imagery and seasonal reference remained unchallenged, as did the orthodoxy of the five- and seven- syllable poetic form— be it the *haiku* (5-7-5) or the *waka* (5-7-5-7-7).

However, with the waning of the Tokugawa regime and the advent of Japan's modern era with the Meiji Restoration, things changed. The old poetic forms and techniques were retained, but they would be imbued with a new language and spirit that reflected the Meiji Westernization agenda and the rapid growth of cities and urban modernity. New poetic forms were introduced, and a new openness to innovation freed poets from the constraints of the old conventions and regulations, while poetry itself would gradually give ground to prose fiction inspired by the work of major Russian, German, French, and

British authors. Yet a strong current of lyricism and poetic sentiment, which had so long undergirded Japan's literature throughout the ages, would persist even in the face of the torrent of Western imports and influences.

Late Tokugawa Poetry

Late-Tokugawa literati (*bunjin*) remained devoted to poetry in the traditional styles, but harbingers of a new approach to self-expression can be gleaned. Among the countless poets and poetic circles, two individuals stand out— Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827) and Priest Ryōkan (1758-1831).

Issa is something of a Japanese patron saint, whose poetry speaks to a gentle, childlike innocence that has endeared him to devotees over the centuries. Among his best-known *haiku* are the following:

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

<i>tsuyu no yowa</i>	This world of dew
<i>tsuyu no yonagara</i>	Is a world of dew, and yet
<i>sarinagara</i>	And yet. . .

Ryōkan, a Zen priest who never left his home in the provinces, was equally adept at Chinese verse (*kanshi*) and Japanese *waka*. His poetry has been regarded as channeling a humble spirit and an enlightened soul. Two representative poems are as follows:

<i>yo no nakawa</i>	Our life in this world—
<i>naninitatoemu</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

<i>kazewakiyoshi</i>	The breeze is fresh
<i>tsukiwasayakeshi</i>	The moonlight bright
<i>izatomoni</i>	Let's dance together
<i>odoriakasamu</i>	The whole night through—
<i>oi no nagorini</i>	A keepsake for my old age

Based on Marcus, p 59; and Shirane, pp 952-3

Poetry of the Meiji Period

The Meiji 'mission statement' of 1868 envisioned a modern Japan that would be advanced in material terms while retaining a distinctive Japanese identity and spirit (*seishin*). The Meiji literary community can be said to have implemented this through their poetry, which effectively grafted new, Western-inspired elements onto the native stock of form, image, and sentiment whose roots extended some thirteen centuries into the past. No longer restricted to fixed styles and conventions, Meiji poets typically composed in both the traditional and modern forms.

Late nineteenth century literary Westernization hinged on locating exemplary works, translating them, and eventually adapting them to the native language and cultural milieu. This would be a laborious process. As for poetry, the British Romantics— Wordsworth, in particular— were widely read as of the 1890s, as were the French symbolists (most notably, Baudelaire and Mallarmé). The unrestricted form of this poetry, its broad poetic diction, and the expressive voice of the poetic speaker— these crucial elements helped inspire a new, free verse genre, the *shintaiishi*.

Shintaishi free-verse poetry

The pioneering *shintaishi* poet, Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943), was associated with the Bungakkai coterie of young Romantics. Tōson would go on to become a leading novelist toward the end of the Meiji period, but his poetry in the new style, composed in the 1890s, helped pave the way for this Western-inspired lyrical genre. Perhaps his best-known *shintaishi* verse is one entitled *On Traveling the Chikuma River*:

By the old castle of Komoro
Among the white clouds, a wanderer laments. . .
Ah, what does the old castle tell?
How do the waves on the riverbank reply? . . .
Alone I walk among the rocks
And bind fast my sorrows to the riverbank.

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 201-2

Echoing a mournful Wordsworthian refrain, Tōson's poetic wanderer, alone in the world, foreshadows the melancholic interiority that would become a hallmark of Japan's modern literature. Yet one senses as well the profound aesthetic and emotional quality of precisely such lyrical melancholy.

Modern poetry in traditional forms

The radical transformations of Japan's modern condition challenged poets to discover ways to pour 'new wine' into the 'old containers' of seventeen and thirty-one syllable verse. The latter, earlier referred to as *waka*, became known as *tanka* as of the Meiji era. Among the leading 'modernizers' of this traditional poetry are three individuals: Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), and Ishikawa Takuboku (1885-1912).

SHIKI

Masaoka Shiki can be credited with expanding the horizons of Japanese poetic imagery, which had long been tied to a fixed vocabulary of nature and seasonal image. The final years of Shiki's life, cut short by tuberculosis, were spent in his sickbed. Freed by his convalescent state to explore the horizons of his fertile imagination, Shiki crafted a rich lyrical voice, in both *haiku* and *tanka*, that centered on the close observation of his confined space and personal incapacity; and of the odd intersection of disease and immobility, on the one hand, and a passionate and replete vision of life, on the other. Several examples—a *tanka* and two *haiku*—will suggest these qualities:

<i>kamenisasu</i>	Sprays of wisteria
<i>fuji no hanabusa</i>	Arranged in a vase—
<i>hanatarete</i>	The blossoms hang down
<i>yamai no tokoni</i>	And by my sickbed
<i>harukuren to su</i>	Spring is coming to an end
<i>kawoutte</i>	I swat mosquitoes, as
<i>gunsho no ueni</i>	Bloodstains appear
<i>chiwo in su</i>	On the warrior tale I read
<i>ringokute</i>	I think I'll die
<i>botan no maeni</i>	Eating applies
<i>shinankana</i>	In the presence of my peonies

Based on Rimer and Gessel, pp 309-10

AKIKO

The wife of a noteworthy Meiji poet, Yosano Tekkan, Yosano Akiko emerged as an even more celebrated poet and essayist. Indeed, she ranks as perhaps the preëminent modern Japanese literary woman—although one hesitates to assign her to a seemingly subordinate gender category. Equally fluent in the 'language' of *tanka* and *shintaiishi*, Yosano Akiko is best known for her proud and passionate voice, which challenged the orthodox code of female subservience. For this reason she was regarded as a 'second coming' of the great Heian poet, Ono no Komachi. (See Classical Literary Genres: Poetry)

Akiko is widely recognized— and admired— for her poetic challenge to Japan's war with Russia (1904-05), in the form of a plea to her younger brother not to die uselessly in battle. The following excerpt includes a startling indictment of none other than the Meiji emperor himself:

Ah, my brother, I weep for you.
 Beloved, you must not die—
 You the last born, and so cherished. . .
 You must not die!
 How could our great emperor. . .
 Not himself do battle, but instead
 Ask other to spill their blood,
 To die like beasts
 And think those deaths a glory?
 Brother, you must not die in this war

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 302

Akiko's passionate voice in the following pair of *tanka* speaks for itself:

This hot tide of blood	Pressing my breasts
Beneath my soft skin, and you don't	I kick aside the
Even brush it with a fingertip—	Curtain of mystery—
Aren't you lonely then,	How deep the crimson
You who preach the Way?	Of the flower there!

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 313

TAKUBOKU

Ishikawa Takuboku, the son of a Zen priest in the remote northern provinces, established himself as a poet in the 'new style' (*shintaiishi*), which served to channel his left-wing political views. He would become known, too, for a private diary, written in Roman alphabet transcription, that detailed his involvement with the Tokyo poetic circles and revealed a range of anxieties and obsessions. (See: Autobiography)

Takuboku also earned acclaim for two late-Meiji collections of *tanka*— *A Handful of Sand* (1910) and *Sad Toys* (1912). As with Akiko, his *tanka* verses openly bare the speaker's self— his isolation and alienation, and his tenuous and awkward connection with others. Consider the following:

<i>akiyaniiri</i>	I once went into
<i>tabakonomitaru</i>	A vacant house
<i>kotoariki</i>	And smoked a cigarette
<i>awaretadahitori</i>	Only because I longed
<i>itakibakarini</i>	To be alone

kyōshitsu no	Escaping through the
madoyorinigete	Classroom window
tadahitori	I lay down
kanoshiro-aton	All alone
neniyukishikana	Amidst the castle ruins

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, p 208

hatarekedo	I work and
hatarakedonao	I work and
wagakurashi	Life never gets
rakuninarazari	Any easier—
jittotewomiru	I stare at my hands

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 308

Conclusion

Despite the rising prominence of fiction in the Meiji period, Japanese poetry in the nineteenth century maintained its enduring value, as poets demonstrated a capacity to adjust to the changing times. The 'cultural capital' of the late-Tokugawa *bunjin* literati class gradually declined during the Meiji, in line with the rise of modern media and a national readership attuned to the consumer economy and leisure activities. Nonetheless, elevated literary expression— in particular, traditional poetic cultivation and sophistication— was prized by many in the *bundan* community who sought to promote Japanese cultural exceptionalism via literary means.

The fact remained, though, that the practice and appreciation of poetry— together with many other arts— was now accessible to the broad Japanese public, irrespective of social class, gender, and locale. As for poetry, in its many forms— the print media regularly published work submitted by individuals from every corner of the nation. Their poems spanned the creative spectrum and effectively democratized what had been a cultural property of the privileged elites. That said, many purists held that the 'heartbeat' of the traditional 5-7-5 poetic cadence and the homage to the seasonal cycle and the images of nature embodied a transcendent value as part of the Japanese national identity.

In short, the domain of Japanese poetry and lyrical expression in the nineteenth century is marked by many contesting and converging forces, which yielded a rich and varied harvest.

Sources

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to compare the 'new-style' poems and the traditional 17- and 31-syllable forms? What if anything do these two categories share?

What might account for the survivability of *haiku* and *tanka*— not to mention the host of other Japanese traditional arts and crafts? How does the Meiji project of creating a strong and resilient national identity figure here?

What do you find most 'relatable' about this diverse body of poetry? How does it reflect the rapidly-shifting historical context? What aspects of Japanese society and character does it fail to reveal?

How does the quality of selfhood expressed in this poetry relate to literary selfhood in the prose writings (essay, fiction, autobiography) of nineteenth-century Japan? How does it harken back to the 'golden age' of Heian and medieval poetry?

Images



Image of the poet Kobayashi Issa, early 19th century (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Statue of Zen priest-poet Ryōkan, early 19th century
(Source: olympiazencenter.org)



Shimazaki Tôson, early 20th century
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Masaoka Shiki: Final photograph (December 24, 1900)
Source: Terebess Asia Online



Yosano Akiko and husband, Tekkan (early 20th century)
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

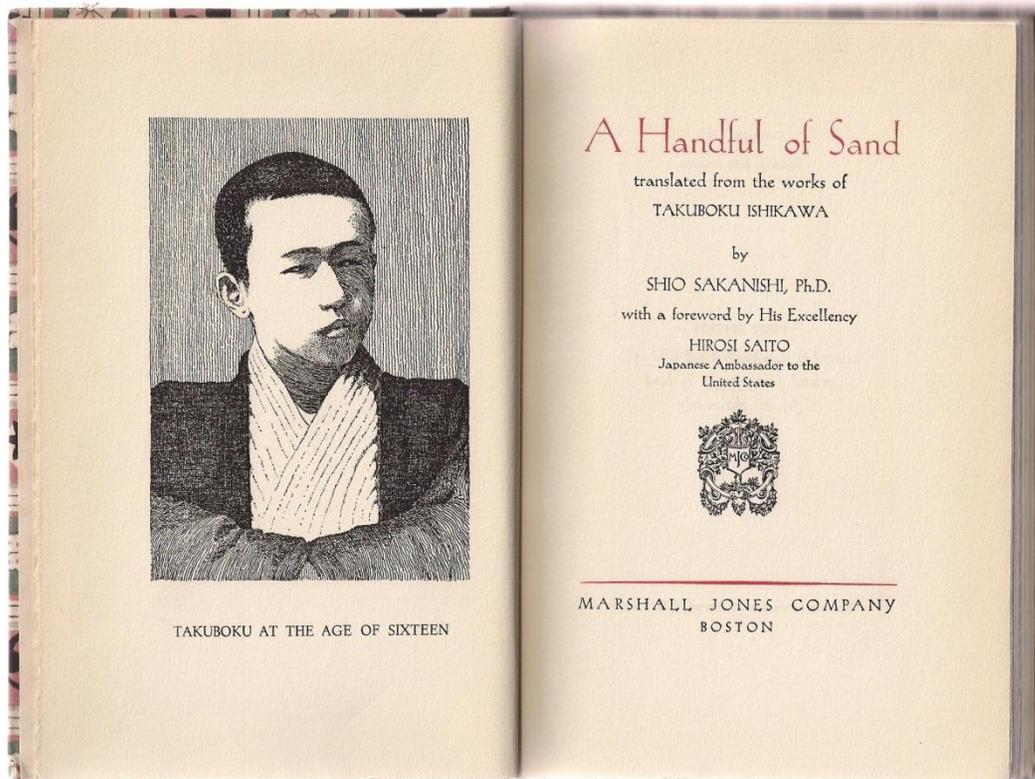


Image of Ishikawa Takuboku as frontispiece of an English translation of his 1910 *tanka* collection, *A Handful of Sand* (Ichiaku no suna)