

JAPANESE POETRY – 20th Century

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Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52).

In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings. Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishō period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

The war put an end to all of this. And so it was that nearly a century following Japan's first encounter with the United States— and Commodore Perry's ultimatum to the Shogunal regime— Japan found itself subject to the Occupation authority of General Douglas MacArthur. Its cities had been destroyed, its economic and social infrastructure was in ruins, and its fate hung in the balance. In order to ensure the end of a virulent Japanese militarism, a new Constitution was put in place in 1947, which sought to establish an egalitarian and peaceful society— women were accorded equal rights, under a modern political and social order, and the nation renounced the use of military force. No longer a Shinto divinity, Emperor Hirohito was 'repurposed' as Japan's patriarchal figurehead and the imperial system was allowed to remain.

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace.

Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

What, then, of Japan in the twenty-first century? What of the perennial 'identity' question, and the schizophrenic identification of Japan as both perpetrator and victim of the Pacific War? Then there is the nuclear question— and the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recently revisited in the wake of the 2001 Fukushima catastrophe. One thing is certain: We can look to Japan's writers, artists, and performers to grapple with these questions in their respective ways.

The Place of Poetry in Twentieth-Century Japan

By the turn of the 20th century, the mainstream of Japanese literature underwent a shift from poetry, which had been the dominant literary genre for many centuries, to prose fiction. The Westernization agenda of the Meiji regime encouraged the adaptation of exemplary Western literary and artistic products. Poetry

was no exception, insofar as its centuries-old traditional verse was regarded by the literary vanguard as outmoded and antiquated. And so the work of the British Romantics and French Symbolists, which greatly appealed to a new generation of so-called 'literary youth,' began to circulate. The role of translation here cannot be overemphasized, and the careers of many Meiji writers and poets were inspired by published translations of admired Western works.

Notwithstanding the ascendancy of fiction in Japan at the outset of the 20th century, its poetry— even the earliest verses dating back to the 7th century—was by no means eclipsed. Indeed, the range of poetic production would continue to expand, underscoring the strong affinity that Japanese have long had for poetry and lyrical expression. In line with the Meiji modernization agenda, verse forms that broke with the traditional poetic styles and conventions began to appear. Derived from Western models— Wordsworth was especially admired— this new-style '*shintaiishi*' poetry appealed to those won over by the promise of a new, Western-inspired poetic modernity.

Yet the appeal of the traditional forms— the 17-syllable *haiku* and the 31-syllable *tanka*— remained strong. Pioneering poets such as Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), and Ishikawa Takuboku (1886-1912) set about repurposing these forms as modern genres capable of expressing contemporary concerns and themes while maintaining the time-tested vehicle of five- and seven-syllable lyrical lines. (See the essay on 19th-century poetry for coverage of the above poets.)

With the Taishō period, which ushered in a host of innovations in the arts and culture, a new modernist poetry, which sought a definitive break with traditionalism and encouraged bold experimentation, emerged on the scene. Of note are Kitahara Hakushū (1885-1942), Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942), and Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933). It was Hagiwara whose 1917 collection of new-style (*shintaiishi*) verse, *Howling at the Moon*, was widely regarded as a watershed moment in the history of modern Japanese poetry. Miyazawa, for his part, is an especially esteemed figure— Buddhist devotee, ardent social activist, author of admired youth-oriented fables and folktales, and beloved possessor of *kodomo no kokoro*— a childlike spirit and pure soul.

The Postwar Scene

Pre-war poetry thrived in the open and innovative cultural milieu of the Taishō years. But the rise of militarism in the 1930s put a damper on creative expression, in poetry as elsewhere. Japan's radical transformation in the wake of the Pacific War— the loss of empire and national sovereignty, and a profound sense of dislocation and desolation— served to inspire, paradoxically, a new creative impulse. For instance, a circle of poets centering on Tamura Ryūichi (1923-98) assumed the name *Arechi* (wasteland), acknowledging T. S. Eliot's poetic masterpiece and underscoring the theme of desolation and vacuity that marked the postwar scene in the Fifties. Among the most popular and prolific poets of the postwar era is Tanikawa Shuntarō. With well over sixty collections of verse to his credit— most notably, *Two Billion Light years of Solitude* (1952)—Tanikawa is also known as translator of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*.

Women Poets in the Vanguard

In line with Japan's resurgence as of the Sixties, poets went on to explore new avenues of expression. And as a reflection of movements for social change and calls for gender equality, women poets— as did their counterparts in the realm of fiction— assumed prominence. Among the most noteworthy is Ishigaki Rin (1920-2004), a Tokyo bank teller for over forty years who— incongruously, perhaps— emerged as a poet of unusually creative gifts. Younger poets such as Isaka Yōko (1949-) and Tawara Machi (1962-) achieved wide acclaim. Tawara, a high-school teacher turned poet, published a collection of contemporary *tanka*— *Salad Anniversary* (1987)— that sold millions of copies.

Poetry and the People

The members of Japan's poetic elite are widely read and admired, but their work is in a sense insignificant compared to the production of verse by ordinary citizens in cities and towns across the nation.

Poetry on the local scene is alive and well—countless groups, clubs, organized readings, and the like. And there is an astonishing array of internet-based blogs and networks— everything from traditional haiku and tanka, to linked verse, to prose poetry and edgy, ‘post-modern’ verse, to rap and poetry slams.

In short, Japan’s reputation as a land of poetry most certainly has a basis in fact. Then again, such a claim can be made about any nation, any people, insofar as poetic expression is a universally human capacity— and need.

What follows is a sampler of 20th-century verse by representative poets.

Prewar poets

Kitahara Hakushû(1885-1942)

The Kiss(1911)

A woman of rich aroma approaches
Her body rubs hot against me
At that instant the lilies beside me
Flushed red, glittering
Dragonflies ceased their movement
The wind stopped
I recoiled in fear
Her palms, wet with perspiration,
Suddenly and forcefully lifted me up
And kissed me
Painful, cruel, longed-for, as a
Grasshopper leaps
At the hot evening sun (Based on Rimer&Gessel, *Modern Japanese Literature*, Vol 1, p 298)

Hagiwara Sakutarô(1886-1942)

Sickly Face at the Bottom of the Ground(1917)

At the bottom of the ground a face emerges—
a lonely invalid’s face emerging
in the dark at the bottom of the ground
Soft vernal grass stalks beginning to flare,
a rat’s nest beginning to flare,
and entangled with the nest
countless hairs begin to tremble
From the lonely sickly ground,
roots of thin blue bamboo begin to grow,
begin to grow,
looking pathetic, blurred,
truly, truly pathetic (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 1, pp 586-87)

Miyazawa Kenji(1896-1933)

Undaunted by the Rain(1933)

Undaunted by the rain, by the wind
By snow or summer heat
Stout of body and without greed
Never angry, always smiling
Content with my portion of rice and bean paste

And with no concern for myself
Content to look, listen, and try to understand
To live in the shadow of pines in a thatched hut
If to the east a child is sick, I will go and nurse him
If to the west a mother is exhausted, I will care for her
If to the south someone is dying, I will go and say:
Fear not
If to the north people are quarreling, I will go and say:
Stop this nonsense
Content to be known as a person of no account
Incapable of inflicting pain on others—
This is all that I desire (Based on Rimer&Gessel, pp 592-93)

Postwar and contemporary poets

Ishigaki Rin(1920-2004)

Life (1968)

To live we must eat— rice, veggies
meat, air, light, water, parents,
sisters and brothers, teachers,
money, and hearts, too
I pat my full stomach
wipe my lips
survey my kitchen littered
with carrot tops, chicken bones,
Daddy's intestines
Pushing fifty, my eyes for the first time
overflow with a wild beast's tears (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 416-17)

Tamura Ryûichi(1923-98)

4000 Days and Nights(1954)

For a single poem to be born we must kill
We must kill many things
We must murder, assassinate, and poison those we love. . .

Remember: just because we craved the terror
of a stray dog that sees what our eyes cannot see,
hears what our ears cannot hear,
we poisoned the imagination of 4000 nights
and the cold memories of 4000 days

To give birth to a single poem
we must kill those we care for—
Only then can we revive the dead
This must be our chosen path (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 435-36)

TanikawaShuntarô(1931-)

Growth(1952)

Three years old: I had no past
Five years old: My past went as far as yesterday
Seven years old: My past went as far as topknots
Eleven years old: My past went as far as dinosaurs
Fourteen years old: My past was what the textbook said it was
Sixteen years old: Frightened, I stared at the infinity of my past
Eighteen years old: I did not know what time was

(Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 437-38)

IsakaYôko(1949-)

Fingers(1979)

When I was little my father
Extended his index finger and I grasped it
With my five hot fingers and walked,
Letting the landscape of the days go past—
His finger possessing slightly more speed

Men tangle me up slowly, and
In the hollow of my palm, heat builds up
And exudes moisture
I bend my five fingers so they do not overlap
I size them up by the degree of heat and moisture
With the passing years, my fingertips
Have become bone dry (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, p 733)

TawaraMachi(1962-)

Four tanka

At breakfast	I remember your hand
The coffee on my table	Your back
Smells so,so good—	Your breathing—
What's all this about a life	White socks left
With room only for love?	Where you took them off

Changing trains	Fireworks, fireworks—
As if folding up	Watching them together,
An umbrella—	One of us sees only the flash
Making my way back	The other,
To my hometown	Only the darkness

(Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 747-49)

Conclusion

Poetry in 20th-century Japan amply reflects the nation's dramatic, traumatic, and remarkable modern history. A distinguishing feature is the survival and persistence of classical poetic forms and lyrical sentiment. Haiku, tanka, and linked-verse renga continue to thrive— among Japanese poets of every description and around the world. Indeed, haiku poetry must be regarded as one of Japan's great cultural exports.

One could argue that poetry and the 'poetic moment' have given way to the immediacy and image-centered world that increasingly dominates our lives. Yet the vibrancy and sheer output of poetic production in Japan is evidence to the contrary.

What is it, then, that we look for in the poetry of Japan (or elsewhere)— be it the explicitly modernverse or the unapologetically traditional? Some of us are drawn to the beauty of a scene from nature. Or the strange, unforeseen encounter. Or the calming, reflective moment. Or the stark, shocking image. Perhaps all of these. What is it, then, about the language of poetry that moves us?

As we attempt to make sense of the 21st century, how do we relate to the world of poetry? Do we relate to it at all? The electronic media and networking modalities have opened up a new universe of poetic expression. This is a good thing, although some might disagree. On the societal level, the phenomenal increase of Japan's aging population, together with the isolation of many who live anonymous and lonely lives, have inspired a return to 'poetic roots' and to the pleasure of composing verse in the company of kindred spirits— be they together in a physical space or as part of a virtual, on-line community.

Poetry can most certainly be therapeutic— a means to an end. But it is perhaps more crucially understood as an intrinsic good, a life-affirming necessity.

Sources

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What questions are raised by the notion of old, traditional forms— such as haiku and tanka— serving as vehicles of modern poetic expression? What, in short, are we to understand by the term 'modern poetry'?

Give thought to the manner in which poetry expresses personal voice, social and ethical concerns, and a sensitivity to human relations and spiritual longings, in comparison with works of prose fiction. Is this a complementary relationship? Should we necessarily prefer one over the other?

What themes and concerns can you identify in the modern Japanese poetry introduced here— and available in great abundance elsewhere? How significant is gender here, and the role that poetry can play to advance a feminist agenda?

Given the centrality of language and linguistic qualities to producing the 'poetic effect,' does the fact of reading poetry in translation constitute a handicap to one's appreciation? Given that even the best possible translation is still only that— a simulation, an approximation— must a poem be read in the original in order to truly 'get it'?

Images *



Hagiwara Sakutarô



Miyazawa Kenji

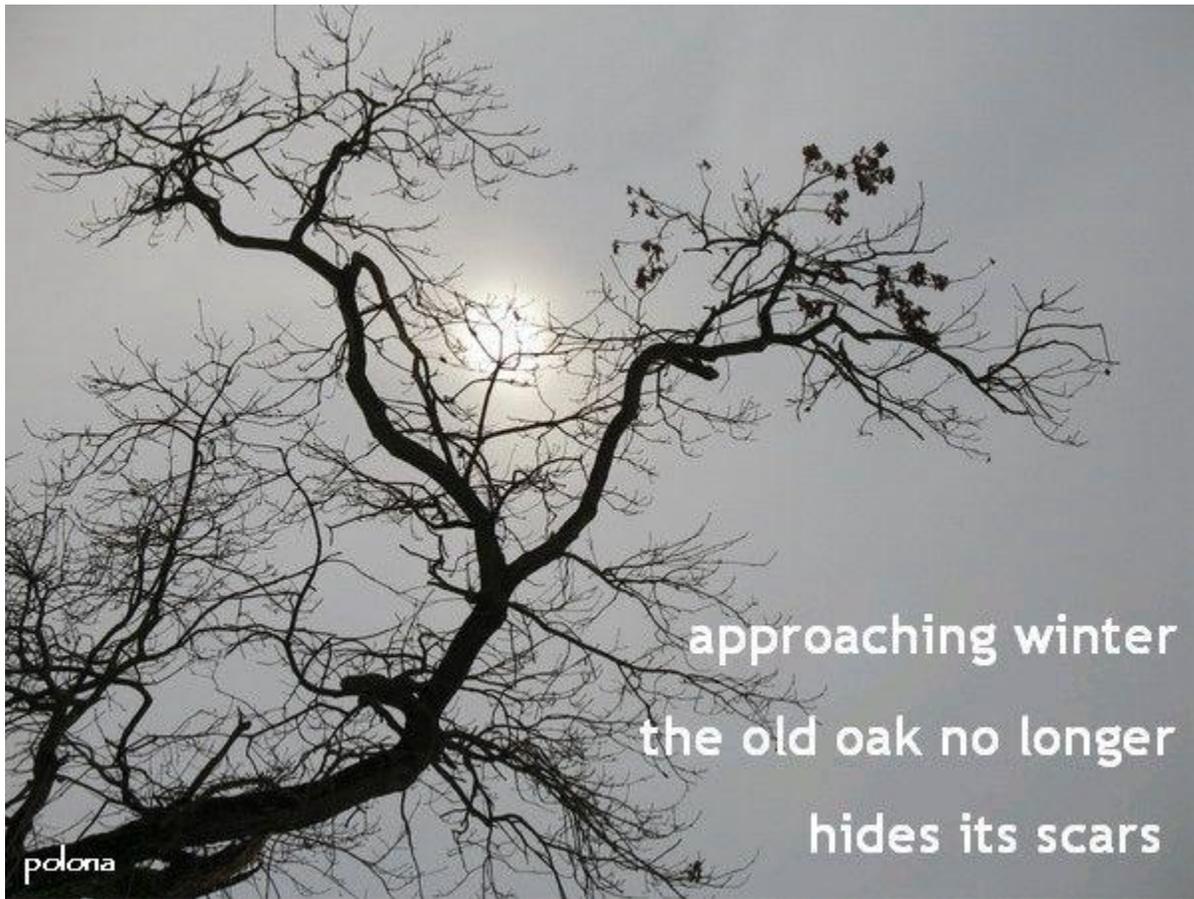


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