

# Japanese Poetry Forms

A Poet's Guide

James P. Wagner (Ishwa) and Nick Hale

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## Foreword

Usually the first thing that comes to people's minds when they think of Japanese poetry is the haiku. Everyone has learned about the 5-7-5 syllable count, usually while in school, and some people might have even been fortunate enough for their class to teach them about the tanka. Sadly, not much else is covered, at least in school.

We hear about haiku in more than just the classroom though, it's in books we read, television shows we watch, popular culture has run away with this short form. The truth of the matter is that the haiku is kind of like the grandchild of Japanese poetry--and didn't appear in the form we know it as, until the later half the 19th century. The earliest records of recorded Japanese traditional poetry come from over a thousand years before that.

Japanese poetry has a long--very long history of being adapted, contorted, borrowed from, inspired by and changing over time. The haiku went from being a hokku, to haikai, sometimes a haibun if mixed with prose, until it finally arrived as the stand-alone form we know it as today.

A tanka is a tanka, unless it's part of a renga, or another collaborative verse. Mix a poem with art, and it becomes something else entirely. And yet through all the history, the syllable structures have remained relatively the same--the differences coming from many other elements and combinations. The history of Japanese poetry is rich with a

culture that wrote several hundred verses back and forth as correspondence, and where they had recitation competitions that gathered thousands and thousands of spectators. A culture in which the art of the verse was so important, that many chose to leave this world with their last poem still a tingle on their lips.

This short volume was written with the poet in mind--- attempting to explain in a very simple and straight-forward manner the basics of each of the major Japanese poetic forms going back to the classical waka forms, all the way up to the more contemporary ones, while at the same time explaining some of the history of what makes each poem so unique.

Enjoy the journey into the history of this rich and vibrant part of Japanese culture, and (hopefully) let the information on the various forms inspire your own writing.

Katsu!

~ James P. Wagner (Ishwa)

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## A Brief History of Waka

What exactly is "Waka?"

Waka is simply a Japanese word for poetry. In recent years people have been using the word waka to describe a specific form of Japanese short poetry---the tanka. Some people use the word waka and tanka interchangeably. However, historically, while the Japanese poetry form tanka (5-7-5-7-7) is only a part of waka.

Long, long before anyone saw the current form of the haiku--over 1100 years before to be exact- the earliest forms of Japanese poetry were recorded. Japanese poetry, like many Japanese martial arts, were heavily influence by Chinese culture. Poets from Japan would travel to China to study poetry and bring the teachings back home. Poetry from Japan, in the these early days, would often be written in Chinese---so you could have Japanese poets writing their poetry in the Chinese language---this was known commonly as kanshi.

Not long after this, the Japanese classical poets began writing poetry in their native language. This

became known as waka. The most common original poetry forms of waka were

The Katauta

The Tanka

The Choka

The Bussokusekika

The Sedoka

The Kokin-shu (905) Man'yōshū (7<sup>th</sup> century) are two books of Japanese poetry that contain waka in different patterns. Man'yōshū, which has 20 volumes, contain waka of different forms such as tanka (short poem), choka (long poem), bussokusekika (Buddha footprint poem), sedoka (repeating-the-first-part poem) and katauta (half poem). By the time Kokin-shū was compiled, most of these poetry forms, except tanka, had vanished. Therefore, waka was used to refer to tanka poetry. Tanka also gave birth to renga and haiku. Choka and sedoka are early poetry forms whereas renga, haikai, and haiku are later poetry forms.



## **The Waka Forms**

## The Katauta

In waka the *katuata*, or "poem fragment," was referred to as a side poem or a half poem. It is an emotional, intuitive verse, rather than a logical one. Many *katuata* asks a sudden question or make an emotional statement and then responds to it. *Katuata* would often be written to address a lover.

As a stand-alone 3-line poem, the *katuata* is the shortest form of waka. However, it was often written as a side poem to one of the other forms of waka. Later on, it became a popular side poem to *renga*.

This form dates back to 8th century Japan and can be found in the *Manyōshū*.

*Katuata* is:

- Syllabic, 19 syllables or less.
- Usually a tercet. 5-7-7. This can also be reduced to a 5-7-5 syllable count if desired.
- Emotional, intuitive and not necessarily logical.
- Often considered incomplete on its own.

## The Tanka

The Tanka, or "short poem," is one of the most well known and well-used forms of Japanese poetry. In the ninth and tenth centuries, this style of short poems dominated Japanese poetry styles and it was one of if not the most popular form of original Waka. *Kokinshu* is one of the earliest collections of tanka.

A tanka's form is five lines.

5  
7  
5  
7  
7

31 syllables in total in the original Japanese.

The first three lines (5-7-5) is called *kami-no-ku* (literally upper phrase) and the last two lines (7-7) is called *shimo-no-ku* (literally lower phrase.)

Many renditions, versions and adaptations of the tanka are used in other poetic styles, such as the renga (more on that later.)

The tanka is:

- 5 lines long,
- unrhymed,
- 5-7-5-7-7 syllable count

## The Choka

In waka, the choka was known as a long poem. This form was the epic, story-telling form of Japanese poetry from the 1st to the 13th century.

Storytelling was rare in the Japanese language during the Waka period although it is found in the Man'yôshû and even the Kokinshû. Most of the time the Japanese poet would write epics in classical Chinese. But, occasionally, a poet with a story to tell would tackle the choka, the earliest of which can be traced back to the 1st century--the poem describes a battle and is 149 lines long.

Originally choka were "sung." It should be noted that singing in ancient Japan was not what we currently view as singing--but rather to recite something in a high-pitched voice.

The choka is:

- A narrative.
- Syllabic. Composed of any number of couplets made up of alternating 5-7 onji (sound syllables) per line. In English we can only treat the onji as a syllable.
- Unrhymed.
- Often written to commemorate events.
- Concluded by a hanka, an envoy in the form of the waka, 31 onji or sound syllables in 5 lines with 5-7-5-7-7. "han" meaning repetition, the hanka is to summarize the choka. (Note that a hanka and tanka are syllabically the same, but a tanka is a stand-alone poem whereas a hanka is part of the choka.)

## The Bussokusekika

Also known as Bussokuseki no Uta, these are poems inscribed beside the stone Buddha Foot monument at the Yakushi Temple in Nara. To date, this is the only spot in the world where poems that take this specific form were found from the Waka period.

Numbering twenty one poems in total, the poems at the monument are divided into two sections:

- Seventeen poems praising the virtue of Buddha.
- Four poems warn against the impermanence of life and preach the Buddhist path.

Because of the wear and tear of time, part of the stone monument has worn away making the eleventh poem of the first section and the fourth poem of the second section partially unreadable.

The Buddha Foot monument at the Yakushi Temple was built in 753. Historians believe the poetry at the base were composed around that time as well. The author is unknown.

The poems are written in Man'yōgana, a precursor to kana where Chinese characters are used for their phonetic value, and in Bussokuseki-style.

Named after the poems, Bussokuseki-style is an old and archaic poetic device where the lines are written in a 5-7-5-7-7-7 pattern. These poems can be seen during the Nara period but greatly diminishes by the Heian period.

Some poets in recent years have taken up the style again.



## The Sedoka

*Sometimes known as a whirling head poem* is similar to a later form of Japanese poetry called the *mondo* from the Zen practice of rapid question-answer between a master and a student or, more frequently, between two lovers. Often the answer would be in nonverbal form such as pointing to a natural object. The *sedoka* can often be considered the combination of two or three *katuata*. A *sedoka* is written by only 1 poet and rather than question-answer, the 2 stanzas are often parallels, sometimes taking the form of an internal dialogue or contemplative dilemma. This verse can be found as far back as the 6th century.

The *sedoka* is:

- 2 stanzas of 3 lines each
- 19 syllables or less
- often 5-7-7, sometimes 5-7-5 is used for each stanza.
- the stanzas should be parallel to each other, or in some ways opposites without being directly contradictory.

## **Other Japanese Forms**

## Haikai

Haikai or Haikai No Renga, sometimes also known as Renku, or its earlier form the Hokku, is a popular form of Japanese linked poetry. The Haikai or Hokku have often been historically mistaken for the haiku or senryu in the sense that they all follow the same

5

7

5

syllable pattern. However, a haikai, unlike a haiku or a senryu is not a stand-alone poem. Instead it is the first part of a renga--a collaborative verse between different poets.

In its earlier version the hokku would be a 5-7-5 bit of poetry that would be the starter for a renga, which would then continue with any number of linked 5-7-5-7-7 patterns. As time went on, the form of the hokku was attributed to specific poets known for starting the renga verse---which became an art form in and of itself--almost considered its own genre of poetry--and it became renamed the haikai. (The haiku and senryu

would later derive itself from the haikai or hokku, more on that later.)

Basho, one of the most famous historical Japanese poets was a haikai or hokku poet whose verse started many collaborative renga--but in later years, his verse have been taken on their own and he has been relabeled (somewhat inaccurately) to be a haiku poet when he was in fact a haikai poet.

## Haiku

The haiku is the most well known (though often also most misunderstood) form of Japanese poetry. In fact, through historical readings of classical Japanese poetry, so often Haikai--or the starter for the poetic form Renga, are misinterpreted as Haiku.

In its most traditional form it had two principal requirements: a seasonal word and a "cutting word"(kireji) or exclamation. Kireji have no exact equivalent in English. In translated haikus, they are generally replaced by punctuation.

### History:

- Japanese poets traditionally used haiku to capture and distill a fleeting natural image, such as a frog jumping into a pond, rain falling onto leaves, or a flower bending in the wind. Many people go for walks just to find new inspiration for their poetry, known in Japan as ginkgo walks.

- Contemporary haiku may stray from pure nature as a subject. Urban environments for example, may be haiku subjects.

In traditional Japanese the form consists of

5

7

5

in terms of syllable count.

The form of haiku has been adjusted and has adapted to many different languages throughout the world. In English for example, a haiku is often considered to be any poem that is less than 17 syllables long, regardless of topic, line structure or word requirements.

## Senryu

The senryu is an extremely popular form of Japanese poetry. Like the haiku the senryu focuses on the 3 line form, traditionally with the same

5

7

5

as the haiku and like the haiku in English a poem less than 17 syllables may qualify as a senryu. A senryu is in many ways a partner form to a haiku for while haiku deal with the wonders of nature, senryu deal with human psychology and the deep intricacies of the human mind.

## Dodoitsu

The *dodoitsu* is a Japanese poetic form. Initially developed around the end of the Edo Period, (somewhere in the 1860's.) It is a poem consisting of 4 lines. The dodoitsu does not have meter or rhyme, like most forms of Japanese poetry focusing on syllables instead.

The four lines consist of a 7-7-7-5 line syllable structure for a total of 26 syllables to the poem.

7

7

7

5

Traditionally the poem's content usually focuses on either love, or work (though this is not required.) And many times the dodoitsu is comical, though not always.



## Mondo

The mondo, like the waka form sedoka, comes from the Zen practice of rapid question-answer between master and student. Often the answer would be in nonverbal form such as pointing to a natural object. The poetic tradition of the mondo takes on a similar structural form to the sedoka but with the key difference that it is a collaborative verse written between two poems--with one asking and one answering a question. The answer of course should reflect the spirit of the Zen student taking understanding from nature.

The Mondo is:

- written by 2 separate poets, one asking a question, one answering the question
- 2 stanzas of 3 lines each, 19 syllables or less, often 5-7-7, sometimes 5-7-5 is used for each stanza.
- The first stanza is the question, the 2<sup>nd</sup> is the response.

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- written in the spirit of Zen, responsive through meditation and observation of natural surroundings.

## Renga

The *tenga* is a popular form of Japanese poetry that is a linked verse written by traditionally 3 poets (though sometimes more.)

The *hokka*, later known as *haikai* and predecessor to the *haiku*, was the first part of a *renga*--written by one poet. (Basho being the most well-known historical *haikai* author.) The following stanzas took on the *tanka* form and alternated between 2 different poets (or sometimes more) but traditionally 2 poets going back and forth.

Poet 1: *Haikai* Poet

5

7

5

Poet 2: *Tanka* Verse

5

7

5

7

7

### Poet 3: Tanka Verse

5

7

5

7

7

And then alternating for as many stanzas as they could keep it going.

So the pattern of verse between the poets would be

A (Hokka Poet)

B (First Poet)

C (Second Poet)

B

C

B

C

B

C

And so on.

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The earliest record of renga poems is found in *Kin'yo-shu*, an anthology of poems compiled in about 1125.

In ancient Japan, composing renga was a favorite pastime affairs of poets, aristocrats, even the general public. In fact, tracts of *hokku* or *haikai* poems were published by famous literary individuals of the time for the specific purpose of instigating and inspiring renga poems between individuals in the general population. The renga also became a popular way for people to correspond with each other across long distances.

In the beginning, renga were based on light topics. By 15<sup>th</sup> century, however, there was a marked distinction drawn between *ushin renga* (serious renga) and *mushin renga* (comic renga.)

Renga poetry was known for becoming very long--many historical renga contain at least 100 verses.

## Japanese Death Poem Tradition

Throughout Japanese history, one of the most important functions of poetry was to enable people to eloquently say their final words in verse. The Japanese death poem tradition spans at least a thousand years and was taken very seriously by Zen monks as well as government officials.

These people took death very seriously---and all of them believed in the importance of the final words before death to be exceedingly important especially because it was the closing of the chapter of this world and the launch into the next chapter.

Many of the poems that follow were the final words/verse of Zen monks who had their disciples and followers transcribe their words for posterity. Some of these monks spent weeks or even months preparing for their deaths by contemplating and re-tooling their final words over and over in the heads. Some of them had been preparing their final words for most of their entire lives--and there was an extreme deliberate nature in the sense that several of these monks actually predicted not just the day, not just the hour, but the very MINUTE of their deaths. Some of them even

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announced to the many groups in the monasteries "I will be going tomorrow at noon,"--and they did! Usually down to a few minutes -- after a ceremony and a recitation of their final words.

Was this sheer will power, a good guess based on physical ailments, or some kind of prophetic ability? We might never know for sure the true power of purposefully and deliberately choosing your final words months or years in advance on one's ability to determine their own deaths---but what is purely factual and undisputable are the words themselves. Enjoy the following collection of final verse from Japanese poets throughout history.

**Rankei Doryu**

(Died in 1278, Month Unknown)

Thirty years and more  
I worked to nullify myself.  
Now I leap the leap of death.  
The ground churns up  
The skies spin round.



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### **Musho Josho**

(Died May 15, 1306)

When it comes--just so!

When it goes--just so!

Both coming and going occur each day.

The words I am speaking now--just so!

**Zosan Junku**

(Died on May 5th, 1308)

You must play

The tune of non-being yourself--

Nine summits collapse

Eight oceans go dry.

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### **Yakuo Tokuken**

(Died May 5th, 1320)

My six and seventy years are through.

I was not born, I am not dead.

Clouds floating on the high wide skies

The moon curves through its million mile course.

**Kozan Ichikyo**

(Died on Feb 12th, 1360)

Empty-handed I entered the world

Barefoot I leave it.

My coming, my going--

Two simple happenings

That got entangled.

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### **Daido Ichi'i**

(Died on Feb 26th, 1370)

A tune of non-being

Filling the void:

Spring sun

Snow whiteness

Bright clouds

Clear wind.

**Shun-oku Soen**

(Died February 9th, 1611)

Adrift between the earth and sky

I call to the east and change it to west.

I flourish my staff and return once again

To my source

Katsu!

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### **Chiri**

(Died on July 18th, 1716)

First crops:

my pillow fluffed up high,

I gulp down rice and tea.

**Bufu**

(Died on July 24th, 1792)

Oh, I don't care  
where autumn clouds  
are drifting to.



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### **Gengein'icho**

(Died on August 25th, 1804)

Morning glory  
even though you wither  
dawn will break anew.

**Hamei**

(Died on December 26th, 1837)

Man's end,  
a mound of gleaming bones:  
a flowering and a fading.

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**Fuso**

(Died on April 11, 1886)

Upon the lotus flower  
morning dew is  
thinning out.



















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## About the Authors

**James P. Wagner (Ishwa)** has been a poet since he was a kid. At Dowling College he earned his BA and his MALS and has frequently been back to guest lecture. While at Dowling and an active member of the Spoken Word club James founded (by accident) Local Gems Press which has since become the unofficial publisher of Long Island poetry—as well as a national publisher for poets from all over the country and internationally. He is one of the editors of the Perspectives series—poetry concerning autism and other disabilities, which went on to become best-sellers. His performance poetry takes some help from his time in musical theater. He has also had a very long and unorthodox relationship with the martial arts--currently enjoying being a student and practitioner of Tai Chi/ Bagua. His latest poetry collection *Ten Year Reunion* is available from Local Gems Press. James has edited over 20 poetry anthologies.

**Nick Hale** is a literal and metaphorical hat collector. He is the vice president and a co-founder of the Bards Initiative. Originally a native of Huntington, Nick currently lives in Northern Virginia where he leads a poetry workshop group. Nick is a manager, publisher, and editor at Local Gems Press. Nick's first collection of poetry, *Broken Reflections*, is available from Local Gems Press. He is currently working on two upcoming collections of poetry: *30 Pieces of Silver* and *Public Education*. Nick's enjoys reading his poetry live. He doesn't get to as often as he would like, but can usually be seen wearing his trademark bowler hat while doing so.



Local Gems Poetry Press is a small Long Island based poetry press dedicated to spreading poetry through performance and the written word. Local Gems believes that poetry is the voice of the people, and as the sister organization of the Bards Initiative, believes that poetry can be used to make a difference.

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