

Ten Thousand Leaves

The 1,250th Anniversary
of

Manyoshu

The Oldest Collection of Japanese Poems



The Anglo-Japanese Tanka Society

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The 1,250th Anniversary of *Manyoshu*

In Japan, poets' works were collected and recorded from as far back as the 8th century, and a remarkable body of early poetry survives to this day. One collection of ancient poems is entitled *Manyoshu*, which means either *A Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves* or *A Collection for Ten Thousand Ages*.

It contains about 4,500 poems, of which over 90% are in the form of tanka.

This booklet has been produced by the Anglo-Japanese Tanka Society to mark the 1,250th anniversary of *Manyoshu*, and to introduce a taste of classical Japanese poetry to a wider audience.

Tanka means a "short poem" or a "short song". It consists of 31 syllables, which are divided into syllabic units of 5-7-5-7-7. When a tanka in Japanese is translated into English, the syllabic structure is lost. However, it is possible to compose a tanka in English using 31 syllables as can be seen at the end of this booklet.

Manyoshu includes tanka by about 450 identifiable people with very diverse social backgrounds. It is not known exactly over what period it was compiled, but the year 759 is the last date mentioned in it. The main compiler is thought to have been Otomo no Yakamochi (718-785). The poem he composed on New Year's Day 759 in the province of Iwami is the last poem in *Manyoshu*.

Manyoshu is characterised by simplicity, straightforwardness and the fact that it includes tanka by an incredibly wide range of people: men, women, imperial family members, civil servants, monks, farmers, conscripts and entertainers.

For 1,300 years since the era of *Manyoshu*, the form of tanka has remained unchanged. However, it has developed to express a tranquil realm of sensibility based on suggestiveness, the association of ideas and symbolism. Capturing the transient nature of existence and the essential pathos of life, tanka exerted a far-reaching influence on the aesthetics of No theatre, the Way of Tea and Japanese ceramic art; on haiku poetry, which developed in the 17th century; and on British and American imagist poets in the early 20th century.

Today in Japan, *Manyoshu*, *Kokin Wakashu* (the first imperial anthology of tanka compiled in 905) and *Shin Kokin Wakashu* (the eighth imperial anthology of tanka compiled in 1205) are still widely read, and millions of tanka are composed annually. Over the last decade writing tanka in English has become popular worldwide, and the Anglo-Japanese Tanka Society now has members in 21 countries. Creative Writing students at York St John University study classical tanka and its related culture, and compose tanka in English, some of which are included in this booklet.

The history of tanka, beginning with *Manyoshu* and spanning 21 imperial anthologies compiled between 905 and 1439, has had a significant bearing not only on Japanese literature but also on the history of culture on a global level.

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Dr Hisashi Nakamura
The Anglo-Japanese Tanka Society, 2009

Some ancient poems attributed to famous historical figures emerged from an oral tradition and the two tanka below are good examples. They are recorded in *Manyoshu* as having been written by Empress Iwa no Hime (d.347?) who was the Empress-consort of the 16th Sovereign, Emperor Nintoku. According to legend the Empress was made unhappy by her husband's affairs.

Just as I am
I shall wait for my Lord
Till on my black hair,
Trailing unconfined,
The frost shall fall.

As the morning mist trails
Over the ears of rice
In the autumn fields,
I know not when and where
My love will end.

In around the 7th century, tanka written by members of the royal family appear, and Princess Nukata was one of them. The first tanka below was composed by her when she attended a ceremonial gathering of herbs in the Royal Field organised by Emperor Tenji on 5 May 668. She was one of the consorts of Emperor Tenji, but here she is addressing her ex-husband, Prince Oama, who was also there. The second poem refers to the Emperor.

As you come and go on the field
Of Murasaki,
The Royal Field,
May not the watchman see you
Waving your sleeve to me?

As I wait for my Lord,
Longing for him,
Stirring the blinds
Of my house
The autumn wind blows.

A considerable number of classical tanka are associated with historical events, including the following by Prince Otsu (663-686) and his sister Princess Oku (661-701). Prince Otsu was falsely accused of a plot and was executed on 3 October 686 on the bank of Iware Pond. Princess Oku wrote the tanka below before and after the tragedy. Just before the Prince was arrested he visited his sister in Ise where she was serving as the representative of the Emperor at the Great Shrine. She had to send him back to Yamato, the capital, where he was soon executed. After the incident she moved his remains from a temporary mortuary to Futakami Mountain to lay his soul to rest.

Sending my dear brother
Back to Yamato
I stood as the night wore on
Till wet with the dew of dawn.

The autumn mountains
Are hard to cross
Even when two go together.
How will you get through
All alone?

Today seeing the mallards
Calling on the pond at Iware
For the last time-
Must I go away into the clouds?

Prince Otsu

From tomorrow
I who remain in this world
Shall think of Futakami Mountain
As my little brother.

Flowering pieris
Growing among the rocks-
I want to break off a cluster
To show to you,
Who are not in this world.

Separation and the death of a beloved one were always themes in tanka poetry. Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (c.690) wrote the first two tanka below when he left his lover in Iwami province, where he worked as a local government official. He wrote the other two when his wife died and he cremated her remains on Hikide Mountain.

On Takatsuno Mountain
In Iwami
I waved my sleeve
Through the trees.
Did my dear one see it?

Even though the bamboo leaves
Rustle in the wind,
Brightening the whole mountainside,
I think only of my dear one
Left behind.

Taking the route through Fusuma
I have left my dear one
On Hikide Mountain.
As I trudge back down the path
I feel as though I am not alive.

Coming back home
As I look round the house
I find my dear one's wooden pillow
Left unceremoniously in our bedroom
Out of its accustomed place.

Civil servants were expected to be accomplished tanka poets. Otomo no Tabito (665-731) wrote the following after losing his wife in 728 when he was Governor-General of Dazaifu. In 730 he went back to the capital, Nara, by boat to take up his new post as Grand Councillor of State.

Each time I see the plum tree
That my beloved wife planted
My heart swells within me
And the tears run down.

The junipers at Tomo Bay
That my beloved wife saw
Are still there without change.
But the one who gazed at them
Is no longer here.

In the early stages of the development of tanka poetry there were many women poets who candidly expressed their love. Lady Otomo of Sakanoue, who lived in the 8th century, was one of them. She is the most strongly represented female poet in *Manyoshu*. She lived near Saho River in Sakanoue.

How it crushes the heart-
A love not known to the beloved,
Like a star lily
That blooms among thick grasses
In the summer field.

Like the ripples
On the shallows of Saho River
Where plovers chirp,
My longing for you
Never ceases for a moment.

The night when your black horse comes
Wading across the pebbly shallows
Of Saho River-
I wish it were every night
All through the year.

If only at the moment of our meeting
After I have longed and longed for you,
Pour out all your words of love
If you wish our love to last.

Another female poet of the 8th century, Sano no Chigami, wrote passionate tanka when her husband (Nakatomi no Yakamori) was exiled to the province of Echizen (now Fukui Prefecture) because their marriage was deemed to be against a court rule in the 730s. We do not know what happened to them, but Yakamori was allowed to work for the government again and he was promoted in 763.

Would that a fire from heaven
Would pull up the long road
You must travel,
Roll it up
And burn it to ashes.

These are the clothes
Your adoring woman has sewn,
Thoughts all astray,
To keep until the day we meet again.

As long as we are alive
We shall be able to meet again
Do not be troubled about me:
If only life lasts.

The development of tanka interacted with that of Buddhism. Yamanoue no Okura (660-733), for example, was well grounded in Buddhism, Confucianism and Chinese literature, and composed tanka about children, poverty, ageing, death, separation and many social issues. The last two tanka below are elegies on the death of a boy called Furuhi. His poetry colleagues also wrote tanka imbued with the impermanence of life and with Buddhist thought.

The world is full of pain
And the shame of poverty
But not being a bird
I cannot fly away.

No means left
And nowhere to turn
I want to end it all-
But my children!

He is so young
He will not know the way-
I will make offerings,
So carry him on your back
Messenger from the nether world.

I make offerings
And implore-
Be true and lead him straight.
Show him the way to heaven.

Manyoshu also contains tanka composed by “Frontier Guards” who were conscripted to defend the southern coasts of Japan against any attacks from the Asian continent. The first one below is a tanka by the wife of a drafted Frontier Guard and the others are among 166 tanka by Frontier Guards who were conscripted from 10 provinces in February 755. Some of these tanka were expressions of loyalty to their country, but many spoke of their feelings towards their wives, parents and children left behind in their home provinces.

“Whose husband is going
As a Frontier Guard?”
Someone asks without a care.
How I envy her!

Trying to forget
I have marched over fields and mountains
But I can never forget them,
My mother and father! *Akinoosa no Obitomaro*

I have left them behind
Crying inconsolably,
Clinging to the hem of my garment-
My motherless children. *Osata no Toneri Oshima*

In the rush to be off
Like waterfowl rising up
I left with so few words
To my father and mother.
Now how I regret it! *Utobe no Ushimaro*

My wife must be missing me sorely.
Her reflection appears
Even in the water I drink.
I cannot forget her
For a single moment. *Wakayamatobe no Mimaro*

The characteristics of *Manyoshu* include straightforwardness and simplicity, but Otomo no Yakamochi (718-785), who left 426 tanka and 46 longer poems in *Manyoshu*, composed some subtler poems. This sensibility developed in tanka over the following four centuries.

In the spring garden
The glow of deep pink peach blossoms-
Onto the radiant path beneath
A young girl comes out.

Over the spring fields
A trail of mist-
My heart is strangely sad.
In the evening twilight
A bush warbler sings.

The breeze that passes
Through the little cluster of bamboo
In my garden-
How faint the rustle is
In the calm of evening!

In the serene sky
Of a balmy spring day
Larks rise-
Sadness comes to my heart,
Sunk in lonely thought.

The last tanka entered in Manyoshu by Yakamochi.

Like the snow
That is falling today,
May the New Year and early spring
Pile up more and more
Happy events!

After *Manyoshu*, 21 imperial anthologies containing over 33,600 tanka in total were compiled between 905 and 1439, including the following:

The colour of the cherry blossom
Has faded vainly
In the long rain
While in idle thoughts
I have spent my life. *Ono no Komachi* (c.850)

Without a thought
For my black hair's disarray
I throw myself down
Already longing for the one
Who ran his fingers through it. *Izumi Shikibu* (c.978-?)

Sending my soul away
To where the moon has sunk
Behind the mountain,
What shall I do with my body
Left in the darkness? *Monk Saigyō* (1118-1190)

As the floating bridge
Of a spring night's dream
Breaks
A bank of clouds parts from the peak
In the dawn sky. *Fujiwara no Teika* (1162-1241)

Broken by the sound of the breeze
That plays on the bamboo leaves
Near the window,
A dream even shorter
Than my fleeting sleep. *Princess Shikishi* (1149-1201)

At York St John University, Creative Writing students compose tanka in English using the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic structure after studying Japanese classical tanka and its related culture.

Nature stirs the soul,
awoken by a soft breeze;
silent blades of grass
respond by gently sighing,
then resume peaceful slumber.

Marie Cartwright

Under silver skies,
where light waltzes on the lake,
spring leaf buds glisten.
With my back pressed up to bark,
the wind whispers; I listen.

Daniel Cannon

The early sun bathes
your brand-new self in its gaze.
Fists curled: as if you
hold your whole life within them.
Time is measured by your cries.

Susan Dougherty

Mist has collected
on the pale gold water's rim
since I fell asleep.
The river has its own life
outside in the cold night time.

Katie Smith

I and my sandwich
lie in the sharp Marram grass.
Canada geese see
worlds flat and smooth, but I walk
close over hills to the sea.

Ryan Weberling

The design of this Japanese tea bowl has been inspired by Japanese Tanka and has been created by York St John, Design Practice graduate, Charlotte Jagger.



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