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## 地域活動 – Final Paper

### History of Poetry Publication in Japan

#### I. Overview

In this paper, I will briefly discuss the history of poetry publication in Japan. In particular, I will discuss how imported language from China influenced the development of poetry and how small organizations such as Bunshin Publishing continue to impact literary development. Additionally, I will present the life of the famous poet Ujou Noguchi who lived in Musashino during the early 20th century, analyze one of his works, and write two works of my own based on his style, structure, and poetic theory.

#### II. History of Poetry Publishing in Japan

Japan is considered to be a “nation of readers.” On the train, passengers bury their noses in books while commuting to work everyday. Books are even published in special format - *bunkobon*, or pocketbooks - for easy reading on the daily commute. The origins of print can be traced back to the importation of Chinese characters during the 5th century. The printed word, then considered an important tool for asserting political control, continues to play a significant role in the daily lives of Japanese people, linking them to their cultural heritage and helping maintain their communities.

China, which exercised considerable influence over East Asia during the early AD centuries, first imported kanji to Japan via official seals, letters, swords, coins, mirrors, and other decorative, politically-significant items. Around the 5th century, the earliest Japanese documents

appeared, thought to be written by bilingual Chinese or Korean officials at the Yamato court. These were written on thin strips of wood because of the scarcity of paper.

Such types of communications continued throughout the century, eventually necessitating the development of a new writing system during the Heian period called *kanbun*. *Kanbun* enabled Japanese officials to read Chinese characters using a system of diacritical marks, rearranged word order, and appended indicators in accordance with ancient Japanese grammar. Eventually, *kanbun* would evolve into *mannyougana*, using Chinese characters for sound rather than meaning. From *mannyougana* would evolve *hiragana*, a system originally titled *onna no de* as women of the Heian court employed it in their literary works. Writing in Chinese characters was considered a masculine pursuit, hence, famous literary works such as *The Tale of Genji* were written entirely using Japanese hiragana.

Evolving writing systems led to the development of various forms of poetry. *Kanshi* was poetry written entirely using Chinese characters. *Waka*, on the other hand, was poetry written only in Japanese characters. By the 11th century, these two forms had begun to mix. For example, in *The Tale of Genji*, both *waka* and *kanshi* are used. Other types of verses gradually developed from this mix of *kanshi* and *waka*, including *renka*, *haikai*, and forms more common in the modern era such as *tanka*, *haiku*, and *senryuu*.

Historically, literary works such as *The Tale of Genji* were published on handscrolls<sup>1</sup>. These are called *emaki*. Often, on these handscrolls, the written text would be accompanied by paintings. They were composed of sheets of paper or silk rolled around a dowel. To read the scrolls, the readers would unfurl them one segment at a time in sections about two feet long. The

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jilh/hd\\_jilh.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jilh/hd_jilh.htm)

earliest remaining Japanese handscroll was created around the 8th century and depicts the life of Buddha.

Modern day Japan is currently facing a number of challenges due to the imbalanced age demographic. The distribution of actual books as opposed to manga, magazines, etc. varies in relation to age. According to the Mainichi Newspapers in a 2016 study, 49% of 16-years-old and above read a book in a month and 70% of them read a book or a magazine. This figure has remained constant throughout the past decade. Physical books are overall thriving in comparison to e-books, however. Chains such as Book-Off have enjoyed immense success in the resale of novels. Furthermore, book publishers tend to be small-scale, such as with the case of Bunshin Publishing. They are thus more integrated into their local communities, which provides the opportunity to reach out to a wider audience and for local authors - especially poets - to enjoy a greater outreach. Additionally, they are an important aspect of sustaining local community ties as they provide each region with a medium for print communication. The types of printing services they provide are diverse, and in some cases they even print in traditional mediums such as scrolls. Thus, small scale publishing firms are imperative for community development in Japan by providing a means for intercommunal communication and by sustaining ties to traditional culture.

### III. Noguchi's Poetry

Ujo Noguchi was a Japanese poet and lyricist for children's songs. While originally from Ibaraki, he grew up in Tokyo. He attended Tokyo Senmon Gakkou in Shinjuku and frequented the area near Inokashira Park and Kichijoji. He rose to prominence in the wake of the Great Depression and the 1923 Kanto Earthquake, where his melancholy songs resonated with his

audience's mood at the time. He maintained his popularity throughout World War II, but died in 1945 from a mild brain hemorrhage.

In Inokashira Park, famous children's song-writer and poet Ujo Noguchi has a monument dedicated to him. On this monument is a poem. The poem reads:

鳴いて

さわいで

日の暮れごろは

葦に

行々子

はなりやせぬ

雨情

A mediocre translation is provided below.

“Crying, clamoring at nightfall, the reed warblers in the cowpeas, sensations of rain.”

Noguchi's poem is actually a workman's song. However, it adheres to the Japanese poetic principles of minimalism and use of seasonal vocabulary. With concrete details and juxtapositions, Noguchi paints a picture of solitude in the midst of an ever-changing landscape as the warblers cry in vain at the setting sun and foreboding of rainfall.

When examining Japanese poems, I've noticed that the language itself is relatively objective. Compared to English poems where an author's attitude towards a subject is very distinctly conveyed, Japanese poems are subtle but strive to create strong imagery that evokes the readers' own independent impressions.

#### IV. Author's Poems

Below is an attempt at a poem. It is fashioned in the format of a *tanka* and attempts to use similar principles and techniques as used in the likes of Noguchi, Tawara, etc.

青い目が  
鳥居の途中で  
神社の外  
散る葉を見る  
「お祈りしようか？」

#### **Translation**

Blue eyes, standing in the middle of the torii gates, see the falling leaves outside the shrine.

“Shall we pray?”

#### **Explanation**

This poem is my first attempt at writing a poem in Japanese. It is meant to commemorate the time I spent with a close friend while visiting the shrine for Benzaiten in Inokashira Park, Kichijoji. My friend did not know proper shrine etiquette and stood on the path of the gods beneath the torii gates. The image of him watching the falling leaves is meant to convey a sense of loss as the leaves turn color. “Shall we pray?” is meant to convey a sense of helplessness as our time together was running out. Additionally, Benzaiten, a jealous goddess, is famous for

tearing people apart; a prayer is thus a futile attempt at salvaging the relationship. The speaker of the quote is intended to be ambiguous.

## V. Conclusion

From writing this poem, I already can discern that the quality of my vocabulary is slightly too simplistic to create as concrete an image as I would have liked. I believe that a truly masterful Japanese poet would've had access to vocabulary depicting the specific types of vegetation, architectural structures, etc. surrounding the temple at Inokashira Park.

On the other hand, from researching the development of Japanese poetry, I discovered how many changes the language has gone through over the years. I also have further grown to appreciate the complexity of the language. From this project, I hope to perhaps some day be able to contribute to continued publication of poetry, working to promote artistic development amongst locals and facilitate community development as well.

## References

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