

Rethinking Nature in Contemporary Japan

From Tradition to Modernity

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The Relationship between Nature and Human Feelings in Heian *waka*

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Abstract Nature and human feelings in Heian *waka* are expressed simultaneously by *kakekotoba*. *Waka* was composed and exchanged in daily life like greeting cards today. *Waka* poems were written on strips of paper and presented, often tied to flowers or branches of plants in season. It was natural that the *waka* had expressions of those natural things. *Kakekotoba* is essential for the *waka*, containing two meanings in one sequence of *kana* characters, one meaning in the context of nature and the other in that of human feelings.

Summary Introduction: Nature in Early Japanese Poetry. – 1 Treating Nature for Itself. – 2 Ancient Equivalent of Today's Greeting Cards. – 3 *Kakekotoba*, the Most Important Art In *Heian Waka* Composition. – 4 Two Illustrations of *Kakekotoba*. – Conclusion.

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Introduction: Nature in Early Japanese Poetry


Japanese *waka* 和歌 poems are full of expressions relating to natural scenery, such as mountains, rivers, lakes and the seashore, and to plants and animals, such as trees, flowers, birds, even insects like crickets and cicadas. I recently read Earl Miner's *An Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry* (Miner 1968) and was enlightened to discover that treating nature for itself, which is common in early Japanese poetry, did not come into English literature until the eighteenth century. Miner wrote "It was not nature that was cursed by a fall in some distant paradise. In their poetry the Japanese have looked upon nature without uneasiness and have loved it without remorse. It has always been a home, a source of repose and strength, to which they could return" (1968, 150).

The first Imperial anthology of *waka* poems, that is the *Kokinwakashū* 古今和歌集 (Collection of Old and New Japanese Poems, 10th century), consists of twenty volumes, in other words, twenty scrolls containing about one thousand *waka* poems. A *waka* poem is very brief in form, written in five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables each, thirty one syllables in all. But in the

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Kokinwakashū, we find an integrated sequence of these short poems. On opening the first scroll, one will find a *waka* relating to the first day of spring. From one poem to the next, the environment gradually changes from the cold early spring to warmer days. It is clear that the compilers ordered the poems to show how nature changes beautifully through the four seasons, the chronology of nature.

1 Treating Nature for Itself

The spring breeze melts the iced ponds and rivers, the sound of the river flow changes with the water increasing with the melting ice. Birds begin to sing. Flower and tree buds grow plump. Plums begin to bloom. People anxiously wait for the cherry blossoms to follow. But although saddened by the inevitable fading and fall of the delicate cherry blossoms, they accept the end of spring and welcome the bloom of the wisteria and the warblers of summer birds, and so on. Thus follow *waka* poems of autumn and winter. The last *waka* poem of the winter volume relates to the end of the year. As can be seen, the world of the seasonal poems of the *Kokinwakashū* is shown as the chronology of nature. We might liken this to be a beautiful woven tapestry.

This movement is the result of the compilers' policy to arrange the poems according to the seasons as they were observed rather than by chronology of composition or arrangement by composers (Matsuda 1956, 13-40).

The *Kokinwakashū* was first compiled in 905 A.D. circa, followed by twenty Imperial anthologies. Twenty-one of them in total were produced from the early tenth century to the fifteenth centuries. Every anthology begins with a poem of early spring. One can imagine the great number of seasonal poems produced.

2 Ancient Equivalent of Today's Greeting Cards

Why was it possible for Heian *waka* poetry to be wealthy in expression of nature?

There are two points of view. One is related to the function of the Heian *waka*. The second is related to the art of *waka* composition.

A unique characteristic of the *waka* then was its use to communicate and express ideas and feelings among members of the aristocracy. When a child was born, relatives sent gifts with *waka* poems. When a man died, his widow received *waka* as laments from her friends. When a man left the capital, he exchanged *waka* with his friends. *Waka* was composed and exchanged on every special occasion in their life. It can be said that they were the ancient equivalent of today's greeting cards. As you see in the picture scroll, a letter is delivered by a servant (Hirano 2010, 142).

It was tied to flowers or branches of plum, cherry, wisteria blossoms and so on in season. The colour of the letter paper was expected to be the same as that of the flower. It is easy to understand that the *waka* must have had words related to the flower. It was very important to choose flower, to write the poem on paper of matching colour, and of course in graceful calligraphy. If a guest came and sat in front of the host and saw the cherry tree in the garden in full bloom, the *waka* poems exchanged naturally included the cherry tree (Hirano 2010).

3 *Kakekotoba*, the Most Important Art in Heian *waka* Composition

The second point of view is related to the art of *waka* composition. Despite its central role in the formation of Japanese literature and culture, *waka* is less widely known than *haiku* 俳句 outside of Japan. As Haruo Shirane suggests in his book, this is because *waka* uses much more highly encoded language than *haiku*, which tends to be image-centered. As he says, *waka* requires more “unpacking” (Shirane et al. 2012, 3).

Aristocrats in the *Heian* period could exchange ideas and feelings through *waka* as mails or conversations, through the use of *kakekotoba* 掛詞 which played the most important role in *waka* composition in those days. This has to do with the “unpacking” which Shirane calls for the encoded language of *waka* poems.

Waka poems containing *kakekotoba* simultaneously present two separate contextual strands of meaning: the emotions and feelings of composer on one hand and natural phenomena on the other. Furthermore these two strands coexist in mutual parity rather than in a relationship in which either one is subordinate to the other.

This is shown in the two *waka* poems below, composed in the mid-tenth century, which were exchanged between two persons in conversation.

4 Two Illustrations of *Kakekotoba*

Atsutada 敦忠 (906-943) was a son of Minister Fujiwara no Tokihira 藤原時平. He was a handsome and talented nobleman whose wife passed away leaving a boy named Sukenobu 助信. Marriage then was quite different from married life today. It was common for them to live separately. The man visited his wife’s house and when their child was born, it was wife’s family that brought up the child. It was not unusual that the husband stopped visiting his wife’s house when she passed away.

Atsutada visited his wife’s house and was standing under the cherry tree. The petals of cherry flowers were falling down like a snow. The first *waka* poem was communicated from the person inside the house by a servant.

<i>Ima yori wa</i>	Now ever after
<i>Kaze ni makasemu</i>	I shall leave it to the wind —
<i>Sakurabana</i>	The cherry blossom—
<i>Chiru ko no moto ni</i>	For you stopped by the shedding bough
<i>Kimi tomarikeri.</i>	Of the lorn child's sheltering tree.

[Fujiwara no] Atsutada no Ason 敦忠朝臣 replied:

<i>Kaze ni shi mo</i>	Leave it to the wind...
<i>Nani ka makasen</i>	What could such a flower be?
<i>Sakurabana</i>	Not cherry blossom
<i>Nioi akanu ni</i>	For whose bloom I still reached out
<i>Chiru wa ukariki</i>	To this bitter scattering.

(Cranston 2006, 254-5)

“*Chiru ko no moto ni kimi tomarikeri*” means ‘you are standing under the cherry tree in our garden’. In this context, “*ko no moto*” is ‘*ki no moto*’ which is ‘*ki no shita*’ (under the cherry tree). In Japanese, when words are pronounced or written in *kana* letters, this reminds people of the other meaning; that is, “*ko no moto*”, also means ‘near the child’.

Cherry blossoms are longed for at the advent of spring, and after blooming at last the petals flutter away in no time. The poet (one of the deceased lady's family) laments that the cherry blossoms fall with the wind. The person inside the house who gave this *waka* to Atsutada also wanted to express with gratitude “you visited the child as you visited his mother when she was alive”. This *waka* expressed thanks for Atsutada's visit and how much they were consoled by his concern for the child. Read this *waka* poem aloud and when pronouncing “*ko no moto ni*”, be mindful of the two meanings ‘under the cherry tree’ and ‘near the child’.

Fujiwara no Takamitsu 藤原高光 (940-994), a son of a minister, was a promising young nobleman to be able to be a man of wealth and power. But he thought deeply the true meaning of life in this world. His decision to be a monk, leaving his beloved family, sent shockwaves in the aristocracy.

<i>Kaku bakari</i>	In this world
<i>Hegataku miyuru</i>	Where life is so hard,
<i>Yo no naka ni</i>	How enviable the moon,
<i>Urayamashiku mo</i>	Clear and untroubled!
<i>Sumeru tsuki kana.</i>	

(W. McCullough, H.C. McCullough 1980, 91)

“*Kaku bakari*” means ‘*kore hodo*’ in modern Japanese. “*Hegataku*” is an adjective, the end-form ‘*hegatashi*’ meaning ‘hard to live’. It is hard to live in this world, indeed, full of difficulties, misunderstandings and troubles. “*Sumeru*” has two meanings; one is ‘clear’ in relation with the word ‘the moon’, and the other is ‘living’ in relation with the part “*hegataku miyuru yo no naka ni*”, which means ‘in this world that seems hard to live in’.

Conclusion

When reading *kakekotoba* 掛詞, it is important to find the two meanings which were intentionally chosen by the person who uttered it. To distinguish ‘Heian *kakekotoba*’ from the pun, we must notice two meanings expressed by one sequence of *kana* letters and expressing two separate contextual strands. ‘Heian *kakekotoba*’ always has two meanings simultaneously, one in the context of nature and the other in the context of human feelings (Hirano 2013). This is the point that distinguishes *kakekotoba* from the pun.

A plenty of *waka* poems like these examples were composed in the middle of the tenth century. It is fifty years later that *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, 11th century) and *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon, 11th century) of Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 were produced.

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