

# LONGER RENKU

## The Hyakuin of 100 Stanzas

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### Introduction

Lately, I have received some inquiries about renku in 100 stanzas. For those who may wish to experience renku in the longest possible forms, I offer the following overview of the *hyakuin*, or 100-stanza format. At the end of this piece, I briefly discuss the even longer *senku* form, involving literally 1,000 stanzas.

Readers unfamiliar with Japanese-style linked poems should first read “Link and Shift: A Practical Guide to Renku Composition”, which takes up many larger issues in renku composition as well as explaining the details of form and format in a *kasen* of 36 stanzas, the favored length for linked-poem composition since Bashô concentrated on it in the 17th century. The article “Shorter Renku” may also provide further insight into such matters as seasons and variety of topics. (This article does not take up linking and shifting or the variety of topics in linked poetry. Also note that a glossary of most of the more common Japanese renku terms, with links to their meanings, can be found at the end of the article “Link and Shift”.)

### Initial Preparations

First of all, all participants should understand the seasons of haikai and shift their sense of the seasons earlier to the timing of the seasons in the Japanese tradition. If the participants don't do this, they will soon run out of season words in sufficient numbers to allow for the great variety of subject matter that distinguishes Japanese-style linked poetry from any other literature, and may even find it impossible to go forward without unconsciously crossing over from one season to another in the seasonal runs.

In fact, it doesn't make a great deal of difference how we set the seasons, so long as we have a really accurate and long list of seasonal phenomena in whatever seasons the group decrees. But in a 100-stanza renku, the season-word list must include several times that number of phenomena to avoid feeling horribly constrained as the poets try for the necessary variety. So we need some really comprehensive list. Unfortunately, no such list exists that handles the wide range of seasonal phenomena, from weather and geography through human institutions, animal behavior, and plant cycles, outside of a Japanese *saijiki*, which is set to that traditional Japanese view of the seasonal cycle. My book *Haiku World* is only a beginning, but at least has an international focus. Another list, with a distinctly Japanese focus, is the “500 Essential Season Words” on this Web site. The kiyose on the Shiki list's Web site also contains a translation of a Japanese season-word guide. (To use it, go to the page, scroll down one screen or so to “Kiyose - Collection of season words in Japan” and click on appropriate links.) Finally, there is the list of some 800 basic seasonal topics, each with several alternative

expressions, on the Japanese Text Initiative web site at the University of Virginia, called the “Japanese Haiku: A Topical Dictionary”, which has excellent navigational aids. All of these, naturally, reflect the traditional Japanese seasons with spring beginning in February (in the northern hemisphere), etc. One other wrinkle, expanded on below: Participants need to know not only what season something happens in, but if it is characteristic of a particular month or “part of season”.

### Seasonal Verses

Given the longer format, there are no set “ideal” seasons for each verse, as some renku masters have suggested for *kasen* and some other short forms. There are some general rules that govern the seasons, however.

In general, the rule is that spring and autumn, once entered, must persist for at least three verses, and may continue for up to five before the season must change or go to nonseasonal verses. In a *hyakuin*, it would not be

unreasonable to have two or three instances of four- or five-verse sequences in spring or autumn, but generally three is enough. For summer and winter, one verse is ok, and they can persist up to three consecutive verses before a changing or seasonless verse; most common is one or two verses. On average, roughly half of all verses will be seasonal, the other half not.

The overall layout of a Japanese 100-verse linked poem involves four writing sheets, two sides each, for a total of eight “sides” or pages. Note that each side has its verses separately numbered; one may number 1-100, but must keep track of what verse is under composition by position in each side; otherwise, the participants will lose track of moon and blossom stanzas. There is some confusion about this because scholarly editions of classical *renga* and *haikai* are usually numbered straight through from #1 to the end. ***However, during composition, poets number the verses of each side independently.***

### Layout of a Hyakuin (100 Stanza) Renku

(Moon and blossom placements based on Akimasa Higashi, et al., *Renku Jiten*, Tokyo, 1986, p. 257.)

| Part                  | Folio & Side                                   | Stanzas   | Notes   |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| Preface ( <i>jo</i> ) | 1st Folio Front<br>( <i>sho-ori no omote</i> ) | 8 verses, the “face”, with at least the <i>hokku</i> and <i>wakiku</i> in the season when written, the 7th verse with the autumn moon, unless the poem begins in autumn, in which case the moon usually appears in one of the first three verses. | Note that this <i>omote</i> is longer than the 6-verse face of a <i>kasen</i> . Usually, illness, disaster, death, love, flashy images, proper nouns (personal and place names, for example), and peculiar words or events are avoided throughout this side. The first three stanzas are called, respectively, the <i>hokku</i> , <i>wakiku</i> , and <i>daisan</i> . |

| Part                         | Folio & Side                                      | Stanzas  | Notes  |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Development<br>( <i>ha</i> ) | 1st Folio Back<br>( <i>sho-ori no ura</i> )       | 14 verses, the 9th verse with the moon, in any season, the 13th verse with the word “blossoms”, meaning cherry blossoms, and being therefore a spring verse. | A few blossom verses might mention “cherry blossoms” by name. Robert Spiess, an America haijin, suggested adopting a Western standard for the blossom stanza, naming any spring-blossoming fruit tree—note that “spring” is Feb-Mar-Apr (Aug-Sep-Oct in the southern hemisphere). See * below. |
|                              | 2nd Folio Front<br>( <i>ni no ori no omote</i> )  | 14 verses, the 13th verse with the moon, in any season.  |  |
|                              | 2nd Folio Back<br>( <i>ni no ori no ura</i> )     | 14 verses, the 9th verse with the moon, in any season, the 13th verse with the word “blossoms”, meaning cherry blossoms, and being therefore a spring verse. | Ditto above note on “cherry blossoms”.   |
|                              | 3rd Folio Front<br>( <i>san no ori no omote</i> ) | 14 verses, the 13th verse with the moon, in any season.  |  |
|                              | 3rd Folio Back<br>( <i>san no ori no ura</i> )    | 14 verses, the 9th verse with the moon, in any season, the 13th verse with the word “blossoms”, meaning cherry blossoms, and being therefore a spring verse. | Ditto above note on “cherry blossoms”.   |
|                              | Last Folio Front<br>( <i>nagori no omote</i> )    | 14 verses, the 13th verse with the moon, in any season.  |  |
| Conclusion<br>( <i>kyû</i> ) | Last Folio Back<br>( <i>nagori no ura</i> )       | 8 verses, the 7th verse with the word “blossoms”, meaning cherry blossoms, and being therefore a spring verse.   | The final verse, or <i>ageku</i> , must end the poem on a positive note.   |
|                              |   | (6 x 14 = 84; 2 x 8 = 16;<br>total = 100)  |  |

\*This could include such early-bloomers as apple blossoms, apricot blossoms, peach blossoms, pear blossoms, plum blossoms, and so on. Note that while most of these bloom in late spring in mild temperate areas, plum blossoms bloom in early spring.

## Blossom and Moon Stanzas

Thus, there are four blossom stanzas and seven moon stanzas, in all. The positions or “seats” (*za*) of those stanzas on the first and last sides are pretty firmly fixed, but those in the interior may move around a little, provided they stay on their appropriate sides. (It's a breach of the rules to push a blossom verse, for example, onto the following side. Thus, the need to number the verses side-by-side, so the participants can keep track of this. Once, but not more than once in a *hyakuin*, the moon and blossom stanzas may converge on one of the interior sides; this is relatively rare, and causes some other problems, so it is best avoided unless the participants feel confident that they can manage real variety of strength and tone in the verses around such a convergence.)

On the matter of diction, I suggest that the words “blossom(s)” be restricted to meaning cherry blossoms, unless modified by the name of another spring-flowering tree, such as “apricot blossoms”. And that all other flowers—for example garden and wild flowers—be called “flowers”, not “blossoms”. This is my personal attempt to keep track of things so that one will know what one is speaking of. Thus, there is no problem in having other kinds of flowers mentioned, but if “blossoms” is used, we know that we're dealing with one of those special verses. (The diversity of English vocabulary allows us this little extra flexibility.)

Note that each of the blossom stanzas indicated must be situated in a run of spring verses. So the group wants to be a little careful where the poem launches into spring, so as to allow for a spring blossom verse to come in or near its appropriate seat. On the other hand, the group needs caution approaching the seat of a moon stanza in order to avoid making all such verses autumnal. At least a couple of moon stanzas should be in other seasons.

These four blossom stanzas and seven moon verses require special attention so that they are each very different from one another. The varying seasons of the moon verses—at least half of which should be autumnal, the others in other seasons—allow some flexibility. But

getting four “different” blossom stanzas, each referring to flowering fruit trees in spring, is a bit of a challenge. Buds, open, full-blown, falling, fallen—not necessarily in that order—provides some range of possibilities.

## Seasonal Progression: From Season to Season and Within Each Season

The progression of the seasons in a longer linked poem, as with most varieties of *kasen* and shorter *renku*, does not usually follow the natural order of the seasons, though it may do so by accident at some point in one longer linked poem or another. Rather, the progression depends more on the recurrence of spring series anchored by the blossom verses, and on the general rule that spring and autumn are more aesthetically interesting than summer and winter, though these of course have their attractions as well. With moon verses occurring at almost double the frequency of blossom verses, and several of them not in autumn, great variety of seasonal progression becomes characteristic of longer linked poems.

Within the seasonal runs, a section of three-to-five successive spring or autumn verses, for example, one must also not “back up” by mentioning things appropriate to the beginning of the season after something else in the middle or end of the season has been mentioned within that run. This restriction applies to shorter *renku* as well, but when seasonal runs get longer than three stanzas, the “part of season” requires even more vigilance.

## Love Verses

Also note that every side except the first and last will have a run of two-to-four successive “love verses” (*koi no ku*), most commonly two or three. The majority of love verses will not be seasonal, almost always coming between moon and blossom verses as they do, but a love verse may come at the beginning or end of a seasonal run, or occasionally summer or winter will coincide with a love verse.

The tone of “love verses” in Japanese-style linked poems may take a bit of getting used to. To prepare for the necessary variety and typical tone of these, I would re-read all the indexed

mentions of “love” as a topic in Steven D. Carter's *The Road to Komatsubara*, which includes a complete translation of a medieval Japanese renga rulebook and a 100-stanza solo renga by Sôgi. This book may not be available outside of academic libraries, however, so a summary here may help those without access to it. (Another possibility would be to read through the *waka* in the love books of the *Kokin Wakashû* [or *Kokinshû*], Books 11-15, available in one translation by Helen Craig McCullough and another by Laurel Rasplica Rodd and Mary Catherine Henkenius—the latter currently in print in a reasonably priced paperback edition. There is also the collection *Love Songs from the Man'yôshû*, with translations by Ian Hideo Levy, which perhaps overall more closely matches the tone of love in haikai, while the other books mentioned here maintain a fairly strict courtly decorum.)

The classical Japanese poets viewed love relationships as going through a cycle that begins with an attraction to the unknown, continues through flirtation and infatuation (often at a distance), might briefly bask in the pleasures of requited love (with a good deal of attention to a woman waiting for her lover), then slips into failed attention and disappointment, finally fading into remorse and sometimes bitterness, only to pop up much later as a tender or jaded memory. Thus, the love books of the *Kokinshû* and the other imperial waka anthologies go through a natural cycle not unlike that of the seasons. And, just as spring and autumn receive most aesthetic attention among the seasons, so also the yearnings of early love and the disappointments of waning relationships receive most attention when the topic is love, in any classical writings. This schema also pervades love verses in linked poetry. While the tone of haikai or renku may be a bit more common and possibly even bawdy compared to that of classical renga, the focus *rarely* shifts to physical love-making. More often, we see one lover agonizing over the other's absence, at any stage in the relationship. (Hence the frequent appearance of the “pine tree” (*matsu*) and someone “pining” (*matsu*, literally “to wait [for]”) for the absent lover, a pun common in Japanese poetry that happens to have a very close parallel in English—purely by accident!

In sum, we might almost say that a sequence of love verses in linked poems typically deals with a range from waiting for absent lovers to the laments of rejected lovers, though other themes may come into it. And, just as the parts of the season in a seasonal run should be consistent with the actual progression of events within the natural season, so one might consider maintaining the order of a logical/emotional progression through the phases of a love affair for any particular sequence of consecutive love verses. (This should not be taken to mean that every phase of an affair should show up in two-to-four verses, but that they might best reflect a few of the sequential vignettes along such a course.)

### “Final” Preparations Before Writing

Were I to be on the verge of starting a 100-stanza renku, I would probably want to hone my understandings of two things, the seasons and seasonal phenomena appropriate to them, and the incredible variety of things and treatments found in a long linked poem.

For the seasonal work, I'd reread my own *Haiku World*, all the way through, again. An alternative, the only other one available in English, really, would be to reread the latter three volumes of R. H. Blyth's four-volume *Haiku*, recognizing that these focus only on hokku and haiku, not including any verses which would themselves be appropriate to the interior of a linked poem. Also, while the poems in Blyth's books are organized by season, he does not focus on their seasonality, nor specify which occur earlier or later in each season, as do better Japanese *saijiki*, my book *Haiku World*, and two of the three season-word web pages mentioned above.

Only years of practice can instill into one's mind the incredible diversity of seasonal phenomena and their proper loci in the seasonal schema. (This is the main reason that Japanese often call linked poetry “old people's poetry”, though I've certainly met plenty of young people interested in and practicing it.)

The great pleasure of the incredible variety in a well-written linked poem is hard to discover in most translations of same. Two works that

present such material in well-wrought English, and which may be found in better academic libraries (and hence possibly available through inter-library loan), are the aforementioned *The Road to Komatsubara*, by Steven D. Carter, and Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen's *Heart's Flower*, which contains two full hyakuin by one of the greatest masters of the form, Bishop Shinkei. One of these is a solo work by Shinkei, the other a collaboration under his direction. The two books are heavy duty academic works, though both highly readable. See the bibliography on this Web site for other books of possible use.

Another possible aid would be to read through four successive Bashô-school kasen, pretending for a bit that they are all one poem, to see the incredible variety one wants to achieve in a hyakuin. One good place to do that is the four renku translated in Lenore Mayhew's *The Monkey's Raincoat*, read through at one sitting. In fact, I'd probably make that my last stop before jumping off into a hyakuin, just to get the mind adjusted to haikai, after reading through classical renga.

As a direct aid to composition, I would review the Variety of Topics and Materials in the article “Link and Shift: A Practical Guide to Renku Composition” on this Web site, and print out or create my own version of the “Checklists of Topics and Materials” found there. (Note that the article also has an extensive index of renku terms, which functions as a glossary, as each term is linked to explanations of its meaning in the body of that article.)

### Longer Still

Though the Japanese generally recognize 100 stanzas as a practical upper limit on what can be composed as a unit, one hears mention of *senku*, classical linked poems of 1,000 stanzas, and even the amazing-sounding *manku awase*, or ten-thousand-verse competitions that flourished in the latter half of the eighteenth century. (Warning: the words *manku awase* may be a bit misleading. See below.)

The phenomenal poet and novelist, Bashô's contemporary Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), at

one point reportedly composed some 4,000 verses during the daylight hours of a single day, and responded to further challengers by composing 23,500 verses in one day and night. He spewed them out so rapidly that no one could write fast enough to do more than tally them, so there is no record of the verses themselves. Assumptions that they were of little value and that some of the “rules” of renku composition were broken may be right or wrong or mixed, but anyone who can spout syllables at the rate of 15,000 per hour—even short Japanese syllables—certainly deserves a place near the front of the *Guinness Book of Records!* (Perhaps he's already there, I wouldn't know. The math: Assume 24 hours. They say there were 23,500 haikai verses; alternating 5-7-5 and 7-7 yields 11,750 [half the number of verses] units of tanka-length, or 31 “syllables”. Multiply 11,750 x 31 for the total number of those syllables, 364,250. Divide that by 24 hours, and the result is 15,177 Japanese syllables per hour. And we think rappers talk fast!)

Lest we think Saikaku was merely a show-off, he wrote a number of quite wonderful verses that do survive, and was the inventor of the modern Japanese novel. His novels still please today, and most if not all have been translated into English.

But back to longer linked poems. The poets of early medieval Japan often composed formal linked poems, *renga*, as offerings. The best-known example of the genre, “Three Poets at Minase” (*Minase Sangin Hyakuin*, 1488), was one such poem, in the typical hundred-stanza (*hyakuin*) format of the day, much as described above. In times of national crisis, substantial numbers of renga were composed, written out by calligraphers on formal writing sheets (*kaishi*), and presented as offerings at temples and shrines. A typical large-scale renga event involved a few dozen poets working in ten groups, each group composing one hyakuin. The hokku of the ten hyakuin would be composed by prominent persons—often ranking noblemen or high government officials—and the leading poet, who would be in charge of managing the event, might contribute to several of the hyakuin, as well as overseeing the masters of each

hundred-verse poem. Thus, the ten groups, working on the same day under the direction of the same senior master, would produce ten *hyakuin*, which were then assembled into one large work of a thousand stanzas, a *senku*, and dedicated to the prospect of peace or some other worthy public goal. (Yes, that's not a typo: This was all typically accomplished in one day. A single, smaller group of a few poets normally completed a *senku* in five days.)

As far as I know, the popularity of constructing thousand-verse linked poems out of ten separately composed hundred-verse linked poems faded away by the time Bashô was popularizing the already extant thirty-six-stanza *kasen*. I don't know if Bashô participated in any *senku*, but he certainly did participate in a few *hyakuin*, some of which survive.

Beginning during Bashô's lifetime, and increasing in popularity throughout the eighteenth century, a linking game called *maekuzuke*, very different from *renku*-writing but loosely based on linking verses in *renku*, had gained the dominant position in Japanese popular culture by 1800. Haikai masters distributed "challenge verses" (*maeku*), usually in the form of two phrases (7-7), and the denizens of the pleasure quarters in Edo (now Tokyo) responded with "added verses" (*tsukeku* in 5-7-5) and a small fee, hoping to gain valuable prizes and modest fame by having their verses selected for publication. This was the birth of what we now call *senryû*,

after the pen name of the most popular selector and publisher of such verses, Karai Senryû (1718-1790). The published results of these contests were called *manku awase*, or "myriad-verse contests", perhaps because one such contest in 1693 was said to have produced more than 10,000 entries in a few days. Not quite the rate Saikaku achieved, but getting there. The main difference between their works and Saikaku's tour de force, however, is that the *maekuzuke* contestants were not writing a continuous poem, but individual verses in response to a few challenge verses. Thus, the names "maekuzuke" and "manku awase" refer to *senryû*, not to linked poems in the sense that concerns us here. And they certainly have little to do with longer linked poems.

### Conclusion

The bottom line with regard to Japanese-style linked poems: The *hyakuin* (100-stanza) format forms the basis of serious composition in even longer forms, though by the height of haikai (as practiced by Bashô and his contemporaries) the longer forms were no longer as widely practiced as they were in previous centuries. The composition of *hyakuin* is still the gateway to longer *renku*. In the meantime, the length of a *hyakuin* itself provides room for the maximum variety in subject matter, tone, rhythm, linking, and every other aspect of poetic art. After contributing to several *kasen*, *renku* poets will want to experience the broader world of 100 stanzas.

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