

REPORT OF THE HSA RENKU CONTEST COMMITTEE

INTRODUCTION

Why "renku"? Renku (linked verse) is the type of renga which came into prominence among Japanese poets associated with Matsuo Bashō (1644-94), and continues today to be the primary style of renga composition in Japan. The majority of renga so far composed in English are more or less loosely based on renku, while the term "renga" (linked poem) in Japanese normally refers to a much broader range of styles and forms. "Renga" first appears as the name for tanka (short poems of 31 sounds, arranged 5-7-5-7-7) composed by two people. Later, "renga" refers to linked poems of 50 or 100—some even 1000—short stanzas (alternating 5-7-5 and 7-7 sounds) composed by several court poets at a party or in a formal setting, and heavily based on a detailed knowledge of the important works of much earlier Japanese literature.

Bashō and others of his time brought the composition of renga to the common people, reduced the usual number of stanzas to 36, and shifted the focus to real or imaginable experience. Thus, following Bashō, composition involves mainly the ability of the participants to relate creatively to the work of others, instead of depending heavily on a knowledge of ancient literatures. Allusion can still be used, but it is not the main point of the game. This fresh style of renga, dominant for the last 300 years or so, is now usually called "renku".

Since writing renku in English is quite recent, we offer the following guidelines for renku composition and provide a bibliography of English-language resources, as well as suggesting some administrative procedures and providing rules for the first annual Haiku Society of America Renku Contest.

It should be understood that the following discussion reflects what we feel to be the best practice current in English, based on the Japanese tradition. Some variation from that tradition is essential to avoid a stilted exoticism. Where we recommend such a variation, we have explained our reasons.

We hope and anticipate that contest entries will vary considerably, but suggest that these aspects be among the features which the judges will consider in their evaluation.

ASPECTS OF RENKU

Form: Rhythm and Structure

The best English approximation of the verse-rhythm of Japanese renku seems to be a poem written in thirty-six stanzas, beginning with a three-line stanza, followed by a two-line stanza, and alternating three- and two-line stanzas thereafter. This parallels the gentle longer/shorter/longer rhythms basic to renku in Japanese, which is controlled by well-understood

metrics similar to the 3-line/2-line/3-line format in English.

We do not advocate a rigid adherence to any particular stanzaic form, but suggest that staying close to a norm of twelve to fifteen syllables in three-line stanzas and nine to ten syllables in two-line stanzas will help maintain the sense of stanzaic rhythm typical of *renku*. A finer point would be striving to keep the middle lines of three-line stanzas and both lines of two-line stanzas close to the same length throughout, with the first and third lines of three-line stanzas shorter. This last has often been ignored by those attempting *renku* in English recently, and might bring a refreshing sense of metrical form to new work.

Bashō and his followers established thirty-six stanzas, or the *kasen* form, as the common length for a complete *renku*. However, other lengths do exist, most notably the *hankasen* (half-*kasen*) of eighteen stanzas, and the fifty stanza form. It is tempting to experiment with varying the length of *renku*, but changing the length introduces problems in the overall structure and in the placement of special stanzas. Since the thirty-six stanza pattern is most widely used and well documented with published examples, we suggest that those attempting *renku* stay with it until they have a good understanding of the structure of *renku* in the *kasen* form.

The traditional *renku* has a three-part overall structure consisting of a "preface" (*jo*), "development" (*ha*), and "fast close" (*kyū*). These three parts usually consist of 6, 24, and 6 stanzas respectively.

The first six stanzas (normally the preface) occupy page 1. Here poets avoid unusual images or negative language—no death, violence, illness, religion, love, personal, or gaudy material—observing a decorum not unlike the way the opening minutes of a party are dominated by introductions and polite conversation.

The next twenty-four stanzas (usually the development section) appear twelve each on pages 2 and 3. Here the poets become more playful, cover a wider range of experience, and admit unusual and entertaining subject matter.

The last page contains the final six stanzas (the fast close), and depends on clear images and direct linking to give the impression of speed, much the way a party ends with brief, more formal speech, before people move quickly for the door.

Linking and Composition

Renku participants link one stanza to another in a variety of ways. (See the bibliography, below.) The main principle to keep in mind is that in any sequence of three stanzas, there will be no direct connection between the first and third, though each will be connected to the middle. In other words, any two consecutive stanzas form a connected poetical unit, but three in a row do not. *Renku* is not narrative verse.

One of the most important aspects of *renku* is spontaneity and improvisation in composition. While most English-language *renku* so far have been written in correspondence, most Japanese *renku* poets compose together

face-to-face, is a very different experience from doing one through the mails, and produces more spontaneous, less self-conscious work. The liveliness of an informal Japanese renku party, or the serious, performing aspect of a formal Japanese renku session, have rarely been experienced by poets writing in English.

English-language renku poets tend to be distant from one another. A rule requiring all renku, or all renku contest entries, to be written in face-to-face renku sessions might quickly kill most of the renku activity that does exist here. In any case, such a rule could not be enforced. But the joy of writing renku together, in close contact, and with the encouragement of fellow poets waiting for your work, should not be missed by any who are serious about the genre.

The Seasons, Variety and Balance

A major point of renku writing is to move forward, from stanza to stanza, through a great variety of time, weather, environment, activity, fauna, and flora. Time includes seasons and time of day, understood as cyclical. Weather involves everything from utter calm to violent storm, from temperature variations to precipitation. Environment includes the heavens, seas, and landscapes, from the wildest to the most urban. Activity embraces all the things that humans do, from work and religious obligations to holidays and leisure pursuits. Animals and plants appear, not only as objects, but as active elements that can be the main focus of stanzas.

Many renku stanzas relate to the seasons by including season words—names of phenomena and objects traditionally associated with specific seasons. To promote variety and keep things moving forward, there are limits as to the number of stanzas in a row which may or must reflect the same season before moving on to another. If a series of stanzas refer to spring or autumn, it must be at least three stanzas long but not more than five. Stanzas of summer or winter may appear singly, or up to three in a row.

Non-seasonal, or “miscellaneous” (20) stanzas may appear between groups of seasonal stanzas, but a renku may move directly from one season to another, and even skip seasons, as long as all four seasons are included in the one renku.

Within a specific seasonal run good renku practice avoids “backing up”. For example, “spring snow” is typical of early spring, and should not follow the “horsefly” of late spring in the same run or spring verses.

In a renku it is important not to repeat related images, situations, or phrases. For example: the word or words for “doll” should not occur more than once in a renku, nor should images reflecting office life, or vacation time, and so on.

Stanzas focused on human activities and concerns should be balanced throughout with stanzas concentrating on landscapes, animal and plant life, and other subject matter. Too many stanzas in a row concerned with people, for example, will become a narrative, something to be avoided beyond two stanzas in renku. However, humans and their activities are a

dominant feature of our lives, and should not be excluded from too many verses in sequence. Hiroaki Sato gives good advice on variety in human and other subject matter in *renku* (see *That First Time* in the bibliography, below).

Special Stanzas

Certain stanzas of a *renku* have special functions. Some of these are structural, others refer to subject matter.

The first, or "starting verse" of a *renku* (*hokku*) must relate to the time of year and place of composition. Usually it names an animal, plant, or object commonly associated with the season of composition (or in which composition begins), and often alludes to the location by naming something typical of that place. In keeping with the decorum of *renku*, the starting verse is normally written by the senior guest present, and indirectly compliments the host of the *renku* gathering. If not obviously complimentary, the first stanza at least will have a pleasant, slightly elevated tone.

Note that the starting verse of a *renku* is what evolved into the "haiku" as we know it, with its emphasis on the here and now. The remaining stanzas of a *renku* usually do not have the fullness typical of a haiku, but should connect well with their preceding stanzas and provide opportunity for movement in a new direction for those following. The inner stanzas of a *renku* are not haiku.

The second stanza, called the "side verse" (*wakiku*), usually is written by the host, and politely responds to the guest's compliment. As with the starting verse, this returned compliment is indirect, but the tone remains pleasant and elevated.

The third stanza (*daisen*) moves away from the subject matter of the first two, and provides an opening for the following poet to move even further away, thus starting the rich variety that typifies *renku*.

The "final stanza" (*ageku*) ends the *renku* on an upbeat, with a positive image, almost always connected with spring.

Stanzas not in one of these four fixed positions are called "regular" or "ordinary verses" (*hinaku*).

In traditional Japanese *renku*, two topics out-weigh all others in popularity: the (autumn) moon, and the blossoms (of spring). To avoid over-use of these topics, they may appear only in specific positions within a *renku*.

A "moon verse" (*tsuki no ku*) normally occurs as the fifth stanza of page 1, the seventh of page 2, and the eleventh of page 3. The position on page 1 usually does not vary, unless the *renku* starts in autumn, in which case the moon verse may appear earlier. Those on pages 2 and 3 can move as much as three or four verses away from their normal positions, as long as they stay on their respective pages.

While the word "moon" (*tsuki*), by itself, refers to the full moon of autumn, any mention of the moon makes its stanza a moon verse. For example, "hazy moon" (*aburazuki*) indicates spring, and may be used in a moon verse. So while most moon verses will be set in autumn, they need not be.

Similarly, the Japanese word for “blossom” or “flower” (*hana*), by itself, is always taken as meaning the blossoms of the cherry tree. This, of course, implies spring in every instance.

A *renku* will have only two “blossom verses” (*hana no ku*), and their positions are relatively fixed as the eleventh stanza on page 2 and the fifth stanza on page 4, the next-to-last in each case.

We feel that mentioning cherry blossoms twice in every *renku* composed outside of Japan would become tiresome and precious. Therefore, we propose that the traditional blossom verses in English refer to one of a variety of spring-blossoming trees, including fruit trees and ornamentals. As in Japanese *renku*, this gives spring a special edge.

Since these blossom stanzas specifically indicate spring and moon verses usually mean autumn, spring and autumn dominate a *renku*, no matter when it is written. Seasonally neutral (*su*) stanzas normally take up from one-third to nearly one-half of a *renku*, so summer and winter show up only occasionally. But note that all four seasons should appear in a complete *renku*.

Also, other flowers—such as wild and garden varieties—may appear elsewhere in their normal seasonal contexts, as they do in Japanese *renku*. There is no conflict in having a blossoming tree in the approximate position, with a dandelion in another spring verse (not a designated “blossom stanza”). Such flowers as zinnias and cosmos are typical of summer, while chrysanthemums imply autumn.

Finally, the topic of “love”—typically understood as longing for one’s absent lover—occupies a special place in *renku*. Usually a *renku* will have a pair of love verses each on pages 2 and 3; love verses rarely appear singly.

Conclusion

We propose these guidelines as a starting place for those who wish to enter the Haiku Society of America *Renku* Contest, and offer them to those who wish to pursue writing *renku* for their own pleasure. We do not intend them to be overly restrictive, though they may seem that way to those who have casually attempted writing *renku* with a few of their haiku friends. In fact, this is only a sketch of the technicalities of Japanese *renku*, adapting the major aspects to our English-language, mostly North American situation. It is a game, with rules. We do not insist that all who play abide by these particular rules, but hope we have adequately described the main features so that those who wish to do so can play something resembling *renku*. We hope that every group of poets writing *renku* with these guidelines in mind will discuss them and make adjustments to suit their own interests and objectives.

The following bibliography is annotated to help readers find more information on *renga* and *renku* generally, and on specific aspects of *renku*, as well as examples.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Renga/Renku History and Description

Higginson, William J., with Penny Harter. *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985; Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989. Chapter "Before Haiku" has description of renku and example. Largest season-word list in English.

Kondo, Tadashi. Presentation at the February 1976 meeting of the HSA; transcript of talk and discussion in *Minutes and Proceedings of the Haiku Society of America*, 19 February 1976 and 18 March 1976. Discusses the organization and linking in four varied examples of Bashō-school renku. Copies available for a business-sized s.a.s.e with 45¢ postage, from From Here Press, Box 219, Fanwood, NJ 07023 USA. Request "HSA Renku Talk."

Matsuo Bashō. *Monkey's Raincoat: Linked Poetry of the Bashō School with Haiku Selections*. Lenore Mayhew, translator. Rutland, VT, and Tokyo: Tuttle, 1985. Very readable translations, with notes and transliteration, of four *kasen*, plus several haiku from the same collection.

Miner, Earl, and Hiroko Odagiri, translators. *The Monkey's Straw Raincoat and Other Poetry of the Bashō School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981. Based on the same text as the previous item. The renku are presented as a succession of pairs of linked stanzas, making it impossible to get a sense of the movement over a series of verses. Highly technical discussion and transliteration.

Sato, Hiroaki. *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku to English*. New York: Weatherhill, 1983. A clear, concise, and enjoyable introduction to the essentials of renga composition. Includes over a hundred translations and adaptations in English of Bashō's famous frog poem, and Sato's thoughts on translating renga and haiku. Includes an anthology of haiku, linked stanzas, and renga composed in English by several poets.

Sato, Hiroaki, and Burton Watson, editors and translators. *From the Country of Eight Islands: An Anthology of Japanese Poetry*. Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981. (Several other editions since; latest by Columbia Univ. Press.) Includes several renga and renku, many not otherwise available in English. Sato's translations, in one line per stanza, are very readable.

Ueda, Makoto. *Matsuo Bashō*. New York: Twayne, 1970; Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1982. Extensive chapter on Bashō's renku, with translations and detailed analyses of two renku. Excellent comments on linking.

Examples of Renga/Renku in English

Frogpond, official magazine of the Haiku Society of America, various issues, various editors. Most issues of *Frogpond* include renku or renga, as do many other haiku magazines, most notably *Dragonfly* and back issues of *Wind Chimes* (no longer published).

Higginson, William J., editor. *Haiku Magazine, Special Haibun & Renga Issue*, 6:3 (1976), pages 14-33. Section on renga/rengu in English, with articles by Higginson and Kondo, examples of work by American haiku poets.

Reichhold, Jane, et al. *Narrow Road to Renga*. Gualala, CA: AHA Books, 1989.

Several renga of varying lengths and formats, with limited commentary.

Sato, Hiroaki. *That First Time: Six Renga on Love and Other Poems*. Laurinburg, NC: St. Andrews Press, 1988. Six kasen, written by Sato alone. Although virtually all "love stanzas," these renga observe most of the niceties mentioned in the guidelines above. A helpful discussion of renga follows. A tour de force.

RENKU CONTEST ADMINISTRATION

We suggest that the renga contest be judged by three or more judges, and that at least one of each succeeding year's judges have been a judge in one of the two immediately previous years, whenever possible. Care should be taken that not all judges in a given year regularly compose renga together. This will help to establish a continuity of practice from year to year, while allowing for a variety of perspectives each year.

We also suggest that no single group of renga poets receive two or more prizes in the same year or the top prize two years running. By "group" we mean two or three renga poets who consistently work together, with or without one or more other poets from renga to renga—or a number of poets obviously collecting around one or two leaders. This definition must be somewhat flexible; we do not mean that the same poet cannot participate in two different renga entered in a particular year, as this could cause the entry of one group to disqualify another. But we do caution judges to avoid allowing any one aspect of renga or group of renga poets to dominate the contest results in any given year, or from year to year.

While we propose one grand prize in the following rules, we suggest that the judges, in conference with the HSA president, agree on a number of prize categories, which may vary from year to year depending on the number, variety, and quality of entries. Categories might include: best classical form, most innovative, best use of season words, best linking technique, and so on. In each case, the judges should give category prizes only for work of high quality, and not feel compelled to give a prize because prizes were given in some category previously.

Traditionally, American organizations offering substantial prizes (HSA, Poetry Society of America, etc.) do not give out judges' names until awards are announced. However, it may be valuable to keep in mind that Japanese practice typically provides the names of judges in the rules.

Judging a renga contest will be quite strenuous, because many factors must be evaluated and weighed against one another. Therefore we suggest that each year's judges be committed to meeting face-to-face to make their final selection(s), as the free give-and-take which that encourages seems

essential to resolving differences.

Renku in English is in its infancy. Properly conducted, an Annual Haiku Society of America Renku Contest can help establish the "rules of the game" and promote the growth of interest and expertise in the genre.

Respectfully submitted,
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