

## Renga: The Japanese Art of Linked Poetry

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*Renga* or *renku* is a form of Japanese poetry dating to the thirteenth century. It evolved from a more ancient Japanese poetry style called *tanka* from the eighth century or earlier. Tanka poems consist of 31 syllables, divided into 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic units. These are lyrical poems addressing a vast range of human experiences, mainly love and separation, with nature as their major source of imagery. Tankas were usually divided into two subunits: 5-7-5 and 7-7 syllables. The first part depicts a specific scene, and the second is a response to it. These were often courting games or contemplations of nature, love, etc. At times, as in courting poems, the verses were written by two people, as in the following poem, where the wooer is a nun, writing:

*Rice fields one planted  
by damming up the waters  
of the Saho stream.*

and the courted man replies,

*The rice from the first reaping  
Do you eat it all alone?*

A modern version, as exemplified by the following poem, reveals a division between a scene and a response [both by the same female poet]:

*We pass each other  
On the escalator  
In opposite directions  
Glad to be with you  
If only for a moment*

Over the years Japanese poets transformed tanka-writing into a collective event, a session of poetry-writing in an improvised sequence. One poet, usually the guest, would write the first 5-7-5 syllable unit, and the next would add a 7-7 syllable response; the next one would add a 5-7-5 syllable response to the second poem, and so on. According to the rules of this artistic game, each two consecutive links in the chain must form a complete independent poem. The opening poem usually contained a season-related word intended to note when exactly it had been composed, and what the natural conditions were at that exact time. Over the years conventions pertaining to the number of stanza sequences were established: thirty-six, fifty, one hundred, one thousand, and even ten thousand. In most cases the conventional scope was thirty-six, sixty, or one hundred.

The two staves in a pair creating a self-standing poem are linked by an association or complementing; at times a contrast is created between the first and second parts. Each chain is totally improvised, including the opening poem which is supposed to indicate the time, place and atmosphere of the poetry session. Each poem, then (excluding the first and last), must conclude – complement – an antecedent poem to form a whole, but at the same time must open itself to a poem that will, in turn, complete it – a highly challenging task. At their best, the renga chains are like a jam session of poetry, metaphors, complements, contrasts, extensions, interruptions, metaphorical surprises, etc. – a celebration to a poetic ear.