

Poet Profiles

His Imperial Majesty Emperor Akihito and Her Imperial Majesty Empress Michiko of Japan

Ty Hadman

Since 951 A.D., in the fifth year of Tenreki during the reign of Emperor Murakami, there has been held a ceremony, in the presence of the assembled high court of Japan, known as *Utakai Shiki* (Ceremony for Chanting Poetry). In spite of interruptions of wars and political variations of the powers of the clans to determine actual rulers of the country, the ceremony is still celebrated to this day. One of the sustaining facets of the ceremony is the fact that the Emperor and members of the Imperial Family each contribute their best poem of the year to be read before this distinguished audience. In order to fulfill this duty of office and to also present an elevated standard of proficiency, part of the education of princes and princesses, is to study the art of *waka* or tanka writing.

The present Emperor of Japan, taken from his mother when he was three years old to be raised by tutors, chamberlains and nurses, was also given instruction in poetry writing. Even after becoming an adult, and still as His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, he continued to be instructed on tanka composition by Gotô Shigeru.

In 1957, when the then Crown Prince Akihito was of an age to marry, he met, at a tennis match, Miss Michiko Shoda, the eldest daughter of the chairman of the Nisshin Flour Milling Company. She had just graduated, as valedictorian, from the Sacred Heart Women's University, with a degree from the Department of Literature. Within a year the two were engaged among a flurry of controversy. This was the first time in the history of Japan that a so-called commoner was allowed to marry into the Imperial family. Yet the two young people showed the world that they loved each other enough, were wise enough and mature enough to start their own family, make their own careers, and become poets in their own right before becoming Emperor and Empress with their coronation in 1989, after the death of the Emperor Shôwa (Hirohito).

Still when she was Crown Princess, Empress Michiko had authored several collections of *waka* / tanka, as well as children's books. Father Neal Henry Lawrence would tell me of his seeing Crown Princess Michiko at the Sunday afternoon meetings of the Poetry Society of Japan in Tokyo. Often she was attended by her aunt and later by her daughter Princess Nori. Almost like anyone else, she would bring her poems for discussion and review as well as entering discussions of the work of others. She continued her studies in both English and in tanka with her tutor Hirano Keiichi, a scholar of English and Canadian literature.

Her interest to this day remains strong in supporting literature for children and spreading the popularity of tanka to other lands. One of her books that was co-authored with her husband, then Crown Prince Akihito, titled *Tomoshibi (Light)* was published in a bilingual English edition in which Princess Michiko translated many of her own poems. This book showed that Their Imperial Majesties not only wrote tanka for the official ceremonies, but turned to tanka

to express their feelings for family members, their admiration for others (especially the people who took part in the Olympics for the Disabled), and for wonders seen during their official travels in other countries.

And each year, in the second week of January, each member of the Imperial Family have prepared their tanka written on the theme declared by the Emperor for the ceremony of the New Year's Poetry Party at the Imperial Court. In 1998, the chosen theme was *michi* (way, path or road). The Emperor's contribution was:

*Viewing the display
Of Todai's history
Led me to ponder
The road our country traveled
With the advance of learning.*

The Emperor wrote the poem after visiting an exhibition held to commemorate the 120th anniversary of the establishment of the University of Tokyo (Todai).

During the whole ceremony, every person had the serious attitude of absolute rectitude. Not one glance, not one gesture by anyone was outside of the prescribed regulations for a high religious ceremony. Until! the Empress's tanka had been chanted and sung twice with everyone in the room standing except the Emperor:

*Along that far road
Trodden by immigrants
On their hard-won way,
Oh! How many times till now
Have the flowers bloomed?*

Then she turned sideways toward him and bowed slowly with great feeling. His face broke into the most radiant smile, wreathed in light and happiness, that was even brighter for the constrained atmosphere in the rest of the huge Pine Room. For one second the Emperor let his love for the Empress and her tanka, blaze out in full view of all. It was like a comet streaking across a blue-black sky to light up the whole earth. It was my most precious moment in Japan. (You can read a complete report of our involvement at the [event](#).)

Though these two persons are very close, they have different styles of writing or approaches to the subject matter. The Emperor Akihito, sounding like the scientist he is (he is an expert on a rare species of goby fish on which he has published 26 papers), writes his tanka in a clear, rational voice of description. An early example of his work is taken from the New Year's Poetry Party in 1960 when his poem was:

*'Twas well on past noon -
The brilliant rays of the sun
Pouring into the woods,
So mottled with sunbeams were
The fallen leaves 'neath the oak trees. 1*

As contrast, compare the poem by then Crown Princess Michiko in this same year as she was pregnant with her first child:

*Ever since the spring
Overflowing with light bloomed
In this heart of mine,
What a kinship I've come to feel
With the earth that brings forth life! 2*

It is tempting to attempt a newer translation of these poems but it is not possible to publish any translation other than the one authorized by the Imperial Household so we will have to draw our conclusions from these translations of examples of their early works.

Ah, I have just found in *Tomoshibi (Light)* there is an example of an even earlier work written by the then young Prince Akihito upon a visit to Lake Yu in which he writes:

*Unawares
The larch leaves
Have turned yellow.
So softly on them
The rain is falling. 3*

I find this poem to be very well-done using the parallel technique. The first word sets up the pivot which is a good variation to make from always positioning it in the middle. The idea is that the leaves are unaware of their aging as well as being unaware of the softly falling rain. One can also read into the "unawares" the human component which often is not aware of what is happening in nature as we go our busy ways. So the poem has three aspects instead of only two. Very interesting!

The first poem in the same book by Empress Michiko comes from the year 1960, and is translated as:

*As I look up
At the plum blossoms
Becoming tinged with colour,
My face turns upward
To the gentle sky of spring. 4*

Here the Empress makes use of the pivot, placing exactly it in the middle of her poem to express the idea that as the plum blossoms are tinged with a blush, as is her face when she turns it toward the gentleness of the spring sky. Notice the strong sense of refined gentleness in the poems by both of these people. It is no wonder their work is seen as being exemplary for the genre.

Even when the Empress writes of pain and the fury of winter weather, her gentle nature tempers all harshness and shines through with a calm inner radiance.

*This month of November
When my son was born,
Always brings back memories
Of the cold blast of the kogarashi*
I heard all night long. 5*

**kogarashi* : literally a tree-withering wind, that refers to the cold winds that blow from late autumn to early winter.

In addition to their three children, which they insisted on raising in a family situation instead of the traditional way by turning them over to the care of professionals, Their Imperial Majesties, as royals are somewhat bound to do, were tutelary heads of charitable organizations. But somehow both of them took a special interest in the Olympic Games for the Disabled and though many poems sprang from other official duties, one senses that feelings were especially touched at these yearly events. The Emperor's poem from 1981, in Shimane Prefecture was:

*The athletes,
Overcoming obstacles,
Have gathered.
Feeling their delight,
I watch their races and games. 6*

Woman-like, one could say, the Empress Michiko's best poems evolve out of her relationship with her family. This one, shows a moment shared with her only daughter, Princess Nori, who had been born on April 27th, 1969. She manages to convey the special sense of their mother-daughter relationship for which there is no word, while positioning the poem in the month of the girl's birth.

*When the wind blows,
Snowdrifting cherry blossom petals
For a while
Come brightly shining
Between my daughter and me. 7*

Because I am having trouble showing you the poems of this pair in these translations, I would like to bring one which the Empress Michiko herself has put into English.

*Closing the window
I stood for a while
In the evening air
Steeped in the soft, tender rays
Of the new moon. 8*

This tanka was written on the assigned theme of the birthday of the Empress Dowager, her mother-in-law, a proud woman who greatly resented her son marrying a commoner. Even though the words are clothed in softness, the undercurrent of the pain of her many years glints through in the image of the closed window. As a gentle and refined person, she maintains her own honesty in her poetry. I cannot help myself; I admire her work as a poet very much and value her even more as a person who has stepped into a rigorous position with all grace and humility around a core of strength. Both the Emperor and the Empress of Japan should, I feel, be feted as poets of our age to a greater extent than is currently the situation. We have much to learn about tanka writing from this very special couple.

Notes

[1] Translation by Marie Philomene and Hagimura Kyoko. Published in *The New Year's Poetry Party at the Imperial Court – Two Decades in Postwar Years: 1960 – 1979* by The Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, Japan. 1983. Pg. 20.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Translation by Marie Philomene and Masako Saito. Published in *Tomoshibi (Light)* by Weatherhill, Tokyo, Japan. 1991. Pg. 13.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid. Pg. 135.

[6] Ibid. Pg. 65.

[7] Ibid. Pg. 125 ,153.

[8] Ibid. Pg. 115.

