



What is Renku?

Renku is the name generally reserved for linked verse composed in accordance with the principles advanced by the great master Basho. Renku sequences are normally written by two or more people at a single sitting with poets taking turns to compose individual verses.

By Keiko Yamane (KAM LAX)

It was in early 1999 when I purchased my personal computer. I visited the homepage of "renku world" which was introduced to me by an Internet friend in Japan. The homepage was just created by Ms. Ai Yazaki and I began a relationship with her and her renku people. Later, I learned she was the new leader of renku in Japan and a very attractive professor at a university in Aichi prefecture. I already knew "haiku" is short poem composed of 5-7-5 syllables with a word describing the four seasons. But what is renku?



Keiko Yamane explains the finer points of renku to David Bennett.

Professor Yazaki taught me, "renku" is the linked verse. Please link short verse made with 7-7 syllables and then again 5-7-5 and repeat it. However, please do not return to the same image of 2 verses ago. "Link and shift" is the most important rule." Later, I learned more strict rules, but at the time it looked like a fun and creative game. In the beginning, her bulletin board (BBS) was a place to just have nice conversations. But, every time somebody linked the next verse, 5-7-5 and 7-7; so we started to number each new verse. As of June 26, 2005, the number reached 46,840.

I'd like to explain the history of renku for those who have never heard of it. Renku has a thousand years of tradition (some say 1,500 years) in Japan. This collaborative poetry has been used among friends and



At Takeshima Island in Gamagohri hot spring, Keiko Yamane (standing far right) and Professor Yazaki (standing third from right) meet with other renku poets to create 36 verses.

lovers. The famous Basho (1644-1694) established the most refined renku style, called kasen. Kasen is the popular renku with 36 verses (or han-kasen, half of kasen, i.e. 18 verses). There are others, like 100 verses, 50 verses; now 20 or 12 verses are becoming popular. Haiku was given by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) to the starting verse of renku.

Thirty-six (36) verses of kasen should have four seasons, 3 moons and 2 cherry blossoms. Kasen (or others) is just like a journey with more than 2 poets. They are traveling an assumed life while admiring beauty of cherry blossoms and moons over the world, even fly to universe by creating the verse. Also, important part of kasen is "love", just like real life. We need several verses of love. Two verses are connected by not only cause and effect, but also when someone touches the corner of your soul, he or she will make story to follow. That means somebody accepts your soul and links to next. I heard this renku was used as therapy for the victims of the Great Kobe Earthquake.

Through the renku world, I gained many precious friends who touched my soul and even met them personally several times in Japan. The first time was in September 2000 at Toyota-city in Aichi where Professor Yazaki was teaching Japanese literature. She asked me speak to one of her classes about our wonderful relationship caused by renku.

*The fourth Global Renku Memorial
23rd of September 2004
Sekiguchi Basho-an*

*Shisan: Autumn Communion
— Led by Shigeto Kobayashi*

*autumn communion—
another visit paid to
Basho-an — Shigeto Kobayashi*

*bush clover petals
spill into the old pond — Eiko Yachimoto*

*a housewife's busy mind
she has just taken up
oil painting — Kikuyo Sugiura*

*on the rope way
heading for the Lake's End — Junko Nagashima*

*the thin winter moon
sees the love scene
remaking of a film — Midori Suzuki*

*the sound of birdsong
over morning coffee — Junko*

*the ring removed
with determination
ah, the mark of it — Midori*

*holding a kitten
a convalescent girl — Kikuyo*

*woven mat of full blossoms
the azure of the sky
deepens — Eiko*

*munching norimaki
an accompaniment to sake — Shigeto*

*how many more hits
before the new record
Ichiro, the Major Leaguer — Kikuyo*

*against cumuli
the church spire shines — Junko*

This example of renku is 12 verses. In English, 5-7-5 is 3 lines, 7-7 is 2 lines.

Renku has mysterious power to link people's hearts, indeed.

Last month, I again visited Aichi prefecture to see Professor Yazaki and renku friends. There were 18 of us who spent time creating 36 verses (kasen) at a hot spring facing the sea. It was an unforgettable experience for me since I usually join renku via the internet. I would like to continue this journey for the rest of my life.

Wouldn't it be fun if renku world's current 46,840 verses would be linked to the next thousand years? 