The Cellphone Poets Of Tokyo Marry Tech, Tanka and Tradition

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Tiny Screens Are Just Right
For 31 Syllables in 5 Lines
Dashed Off on the Run

BY PHRED DVORAK

TOKYO—For years, Ayano Iida used email on her cellphone mainly to tap out quick messages to friends like “Let’s get together tomorrow.”

But these days, Ms. Iida’s mobile is spouting out heartfelt verse like this: “The guy who I liked/second-best, was second-rate/in the school that he/went to; and also in his/performance between the sheets.”

Ms. Iida, 26 years old, is one of a growing number of young Japanese using mobile phones to write and exchange tanka, an ancient form of unrhymed poetry whose roots reach back at least 1,300 years. Scores of tanka home pages and bulletin boards are popping up on cellphone Internet sites with names like Palm-of-the-Hand Tanka and Teenage Tanka. Japan’s national public broadcaster airs a weekly show called “Saturday Night Is Cellphone Tanka,” which gets about 3,000 poems emailed from listeners’ mobiles each week on topics like parental nagging and the boy in the next class.

The marriage of tanka and cellphones is all the more unexpected because tanka is so bound up with Japanese tradition. Tanka, literally “short song,” is thought to have first emerged around the eighth century. It is composed of 31 syllables arranged in a rigid, five-line pattern of 5-7-5-7-7. It’s big on archaic words and has long been associated with high culture.

Courtiers of the 10th century exchanged love letters in tanka form, and the imperial family still pens tanka at the start of each year on topics like “happiness” and “spring.” Tanka are often used to commemorate pivotal moments like death: Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima wrote two tanka before he slit his belly in ritual suicide in 1970.

But young Japanese say tanka is surprisingly suited to the cellphone. It’s short enough to fit on little mobile screens, and simple enough to let young poets whip out bits of verse whenever the spirit moves them. In many ways, tanka is similar to

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the kind of terse, sparse messages Japanese kids have tapped out on their handsets for years—especially in the early days of the cellphone when just a small number of characters could be crammed into one email.

"The rhythm and the length of tanka make it exactly the right vessel for what I want to say," says Ms. Iida, an ebullient woman in red-framed glasses who works nights at a bookstore in the city of Tochigi, a few hours north of Tokyo.

The new, free-wheeling wave of poetry on cellphones is rolling the traditional, hierarchal tanka world. There, budding writers spend years of apprenticeship in poetry societies called kessha, under the guidance of a master poet. Many labor for 10 or 20 years before the master decides they're good enough to put out their own poetry collections.

Traditionalists frown on cellphone tanka's liberal use of slang and colloquial Japanese. They say the topics are frivolous and the writing shallow and one-dimensional. Some even take issue with the way tanka is displayed on a handset: horizontally to fit the screen rather than vertically as in traditional Japanese writing.

"Almost all of the cellphone poems are stuff I'd never call 'tanka,'" says Tokio Ishii, an 80-year-old former paper-company employee who is a ranking member of Shin Araragi, or New Yew Tree, one of Japan's most traditional kessha. "What we do is something like religious training.

It's pure literature. On the cellphones what they're doing is more like a chat group."

True tanka should be complex and multilayered, says Kenya Washio, 61, an editor who for 27 years has been a member of the kessha Karin, which means quince in English. Sitting in his small, book-cluttered office, Mr. Washio, who writes under the pen name Ken Kodaka, points to a poem he wrote about 25 years ago: "Whether the baseball/stamped with the emblem of Health/which once I did throw/into the wide-spreading mitt/held by my elder brother."

The poem is a nostalgic yearning for the simple joy of playing catch with his brother and for his childhood in the years after World War II, explains Mr. Washio. And the word "Health" refers to both an old Japanese baseball brand and the vigorous, hopeful mood of that era.

What's more, Mr. Washio says, nobody improves in cellphone tanka because everyone is just too nice. In a kessha, poets learn their craft the hard way: by having their creations torn to shreds at group readings.

"Tanka is an exercise in masochism," he says. "You get criticized and put down; you curse, you're mortified; you cry. Then you go home and write some more."

The younger poets argue that the mobile phone has opened up tanka to a wider group of people who would never have put up with the rules and rigor of a kessha.

Ms. Iida, who writes under the initials A.I., was drawn to tanka in 2002 by the prizes offered in a writing contest she spotted in a magazine. Entrants could email poems from their handsets—a big plus for Ms. Iida, who didn't have a computer.

Ms. Iida sent in three poems, and won a CD-ROM dictionary and box of fruit jellies. Encouraged, she searched for other tanka-related sites on her cellphone, and joined a fledgling group called Mobile Tanka.

Now, Mobile Tanka has more than 90 members, mostly in their teens and 20s. Members mail out calls for poems, then rank their favorites among the entries.

One recent summer day, Ms. Iida and three other Mobile Tanka members sat in a common room at a Tokyo university and put out a call for poems on "juice."

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"It's summer break now, so students are probably close to their phones," said Ms. Iida, who finished after 10 minutes of furious tapping on her keypad. "Five so far," said Risa Watanabe, 27, a part-time postal worker, who was done five minutes later.

By the 30-minute time limit, seven tanka had come in. Ms. Watanabe's poem: "Juice spilled on homework/makes a pattern that looks like/handmade rice paper/leaves me solving equations/from in between the wrinkles."

"Unique," emailed in a member nicknamed Star. "Oddly dispassionate," wrote a member called Flower.

Some feel that despite the differences, cellphone tanka could be good for the tanka world. The tanka-writing population has been aging rapidly—along with the rest of Japan—and it's badly in need of new blood.

Shin Araragi's members are 75 years old, on average, and they have dwindled to 3,000 from 10,000 10 years ago. One tanka on its Web site describes a visit to the urologist.

"Tanka Study," Japan's most prestigious tanka monthly, whose subscribers are in their 70s and 80s mostly, is reaching out to a younger audience by including a section for cellphone tanka, where the text is typed horizontally, unlike the rest of the magazine.

"We're really hoping that with the spread of cellphones, tanka will be able to survive," says Akiko Oshida, the magazine's editor.

Yet the divide remains wide—even for people who bridge both worlds. Ms. Watanabe is a member of the traditional Shin Araragi, but says she relishes the freedom of her mobile compositions.

"The kessha is stuffy and I feel like I have to stifle myself," she says. "The tanka I write on my cellphone feels closer to me."