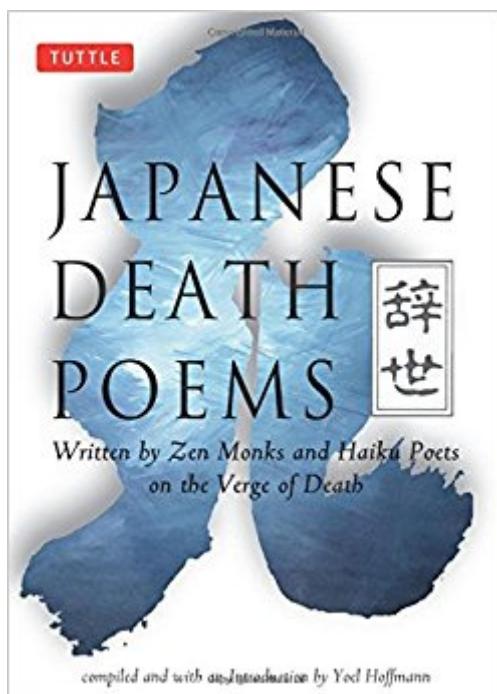


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Japanese Death Poems: Written By Zen Monks And Haiku Poets On The Verge Of Death



Synopsis

"A wonderful introduction the Japanese tradition of jisei, this volume is crammed with exquisite, spontaneous verse and pity, often hilarious, descriptions of the eccentric and committed monastics who wrote the poems." *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* Although the consciousness of death is, in most cultures, very much a part of life, this is perhaps nowhere more true than in Japan, where the approach of death has given rise to a centuries-old tradition of writing jisei, or the "death poem." Such a poem is often written in the very last moments of the poet's life. Hundreds of Japanese death poems, many with a commentary describing the circumstances of the poet's death, have been translated into English here, the great majority of them for the first time. Yoel Hoffmann explores the attitudes and customs surrounding death in historical and present-day Japan, and gives examples of how these have been reflected in the nation's literature in general. The development of writing jisei is then examined from the poems of longing of the early nobility and the more "masculine" verses of the samurai to the satirical death poems of later centuries. Zen Buddhist ideas about death are also described as a preface to the collection of Chinese death poems by Zen monks that are also included. Finally, the last section contains three hundred twenty haiku, some of which have never been assembled before, in English translation and romanized in Japanese.

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Yesterday? Today? by Yayu Of Late The Nights by Yosa Buson Katsu! by Yoso Soi Frost On

Grass: by Zaishiki You Must Play by Zosan Junku | Pondered Buddha's Teaching by Zoso Royo --

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The death poem, or *jisei* in Japanese, is expected to be composed in addition to a last will and testament. This book's masterful compiler, Yoel Hoffmann, notes in his introduction that *jisei* have been interpreted as final concessions to politeness and proper social conduct (i.e., they are salutations to those still living), but quickly dismisses this theory by showing how few of these poems are written using the honorific language intended for such salutations. This collection offers us both *tanka* written by Zen monks and a larger helping of death-related haiku: for those unfamiliar with the mechanics of those styles, the former is a 5-line poem following a pattern of "5-7-5-7-7" syllables per line, while the latter is a 3-line poem following a "5-7-5" pattern of syllables per line. Neither uses any rhyming convention, even though the vast majority of the words in the Japanese language end with one of the five vowel sounds. Hoffman's synopsis of *tanka* poetry's spiritual inclinations is as accurate as any you're likely to read (he likens the poet to "a person holding two mirrors in his hands, one reflecting a scene from nature, the other reflecting himself as he holds the first mirror (p. 19-20.)" The vast majority of the poems here were recorded on dates during the Tokugawa period of Japan (1603-1868), even though *jisei* practice only really became de rigueur in the subsequent Meiji era. Nevertheless, the Tokugawa-era poems perfectly reflect the dramatic increase in cultural pursuits - the fabled *ukiyo* or 'floating world' - particular to that time. This collection also shows the great friction between the Japanese heathen spirit of Shinto and the neo-Confucianism popular during the Tokugawa era: the former's identification with nature spirits and the latter's more anthropocentric morality sometimes mesh perfectly in the poems, and sometimes make for bold moments of incongruity. The book's publisher, Tuttle, is one that specializes in Asian-themed books (travel journals, reprints of classics etc.) In their case, keeping this restrictive policy towards their choice of subject matter has allowed them to, ironically, release books that maintain a very universal appeal. *Japanese Death Poems* is one of these: despite the author's careful attempts to explain who wrote which poems under what uniquely Japanese historical conditions, these epigrams rarely fail to transcend time and place. Having said that, there are examples here that would be highly relevant to practicing Japanologists: there are entries from the renowned painter Hokusai (who pictures himself as a ball of blue fire hovering in the air), from haiku master Basho's oft-boastful pupil Kyoriku, and from several of the famous 47 ronin

[masterless samurai] that inspired so many legends and epic films. Along with the historical perspectives come knowledge of cultural facts that may be unknown to new students of this culture, such as the Buddhist convention of giving a deceased person a new name, or the metaphorical significance of birds like the plover and hototogisu (cuckoo.) Ultimately, though, the book's main selling point is not its ability to fill the gaps in one's historical knowledge, but its ability to provide fresh, unexpected perspectives on the great, creeping inevitability of death. One surprise comes in the sheer breadth of humor, from cheeky to mordant, that animates many of these entries: there are, for example, death poems that poke fun at the institution of death poems themselves, and also ones that upset the Japanese notion of reverence for grand masters in any craft: one poet takes the lines of Basho's famous death poem ("On a journey, ill: / my dream goes wandering / over withered fields") and twists them into the irreverent parody "Locked in my room / my dream goes wandering / over brothels." Elsewhere, the poet Moriya Sen'an unleashes some skillful punning while anticipating a happily debauched afterlife: he requests to be buried beneath a leaky wine barrel, with the gag being that the Japanese for "the cask will leak" ("moriyasennan") is phonetically identical to the writer's name. When not surprising with comic devices, we can find other moments of extreme unorthodoxy in this book, such as when a character named Shisui is asked to compose a death poem, but merely paints an enso in his dying moments (an enso being the plain black circle characteristic to Zen Buddhism, symbolizing 'void as essence' and enlightenment.) The Zen monk Takuan Soho chose a similar method, painting the Chinese character for "dream" in lieu of a death poem as he breathed his last. The orthodox entries are no less interesting, though, showing that much sublimity and individuality is possible even when working within the rules, like the suggestion that death poems should include a seasonal image from the time in which the writer is dying. Buddhist ethics and views on eternity do, naturally, color much of the poetry in this volume: this may be problematic for anyone who absolutely cannot handle a good dose of Mahayana Buddhism in particular (a philosophy in which the "void" is not the opposite of the phenomenal world, but rather "the world in all its shapes and colors" itself [p. 306.]) If this way of thinking doesn't agree with you, there is plenty of poetry here making no explicit or implicit reference to articles of Buddhist faith. Some do anyway, and yet are no less effective in their simple poignancy, or their ability to be applied to the lives of any mortal: see for example Sofu's entry, which reads "Festival of Souls: / yesterday I hosted them / today I am a guest..." Whatever one's inclination towards Buddhist thought, many of the stories Hoffman unearths are fascinating and vital- who can fail to crack a smile at the story of the poor monk Eisai (1141-1215, a founder of Japanese Zen): he traveled to Kyoto near his death in order to "show people how to die," willed himself to die while

sitting in a meditative zazen position, but then revived when his audience complained that he had died too quickly! I highly recommend Japanese Death Poems as a nuanced alternative to the more sensationalist (when not inaccurate or outright fabricated) "dark side of Japan" material. Given, the libidinous extremes uncovered by those other accounts are mind-altering when produced properly, but I often wonder what end purpose motivates these publishers' enthusiastic quest to show only the most blood-soaked side of Japanese life and death. A personal regimen of welcoming aestheticized psycho-terror (or, as the U.S. Marines call it, "embracing the suck") works to a certain degree, but unchecked death drive produces vastly diminishing returns when taken on as a full-time way of life. So, when you do tire of that, there are books like these to turn to, which contain more genuine surprises than many of the books claiming they will shock you out of your cultural torpor. Whether these compact little *jisei* are motivated by an inherited Confucian sense of duty, by pure egotism, or other factors, the effect of reading them all is intoxicating: there is something special about people forcing themselves to contribute to creative life even as death prepares to swallow them up. I leave the last word to Hoffman here, since he shows what it is that ignites this spiritual defiance: "...how wise and humane is a culture that does not contrive an otherworldly supreme being to rule this world, the only one we know. One might ask what there is to be gained from a 'spiritual' sovereign who disturbs the peace of man with commands to act one way or another, promising in exchange an eternal world where scent, shape and color never enter [...] [Japanese nature] is not nature as understood by Western religions, the work of a creator who stands apart from his work, but nature bursting with vitality, appearing and disappearing in cycles of life and death, os summer and winter, spring and fall (p. 38-39)."

It is traditional in Japan to have a poem on your lips at the time of your death. Many cultures have the tradition of ascribing importance to the "last words" of a dying person, but I think Japan is unique in attempting to make death a beautiful aesthetic experience. As such, this collection has something for all humanity. Death is something we'll all eventually face; doing so with something approaching dignity is something we can all hope to do. Many cultures and religions have a tradition of a sort of happy hunting ground for an afterlife, to provide comfort to the masses of people who have had a hard life. It is my sense that the Japanese didn't have this sort of tradition in Shinto or Zen. As such, the Japanese approach to the end of life has particular poignancy for modern secular humanists, who also have no "happy hunting ground" to hope for. I can't speculate whether or not the poems are well translated, or the cultural anthropology was accurate, but I found the collection profoundly moving.

this book has a wonderful introduction. it is a large chunk of the book, instead of the usual ten pages or so it's 87 pages! this serves to educate the reader on japanese poetry throughout history and it is very useful in understanding and internalizing the poems.after that are the poems of zen monks, many with little mini biographies preceding them that often leave you wishing you could read all about the poets, even more so after you read their last words! some of these poems made my hair stand on end in awe. very deep and transcendental words.next is the haiku poets, also truly beautiful and unique.

I have loved all kinds of poetry for most of my life, with the exception of the so-called "modern western free verse" form, which I call garbage poetry. My favorite poems are the shorter type (Haiku) which is why I love Japanese poetry with its Zen like approach to writing poetry. This 366 page paperback edition is to my knowledge the first book dedicated exclusively to Japanese Death Poems, which makes it unique and highly informative. To those not familiar with death poetry, it was a practice of Japanese monks, Samurai, (warriors) and other Haiku Poets to write a poem at the moment of their death. One of the many things I love about this book is the short biography and age of the poet writing the poem.This excellent book is well-written and it is clear a lot of hard research went into the writing of this volume. This text is organized into three parts. The first part includes the introduction, the poetry of Japan, death and its poetry in the cultural history of Japan and a note on the poems. The second part covers Death Poems by Zen Monks. The final section has numerous death poems written by Haiku Poets. This volume also had notes, Bibliographical notes, an index of poetic terms and a general index.In conclusion, if you have an interest in Japanese poetry this is one book you will want to add to your collection. I have read and reviewed numerous Asian (Chinese, Japanese etc) poetry collections and it was a pure joy to read the many poems in this book.Rating: 5 Stars. Joseph J. Truncale (Author: Haiku Moments: How to read, write and enjoy haiku)

These kind of poems are to be approached with reverence. I am very grateful that, finally, someone had the courage to move on from the heart moving poetry of nature to this particular subject. It is a deeper theme in many aspects, personal, social, semantics, as well as regrets for living this world. It is a very well explained kind of poetry and this book deserves a lot of attention. The reader will step in the realm of things a bit hard to talk about, but we all have things to learn from these poems.

I love the analysis done with the poems. But gave it 4 stars because Part 2 doesn't have the original haiku texts, like the ones shown in Part 3.

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