



## Remembering Ooka Makoto The Poet from Mount Fuji

Yamazaki Masakazu, playwright

I didn't want to come from Mount Fuji," Ooka Makoto once recollected matter-of-factly. But even as he said the words, he didn't look particularly unhappy at the idea. Ooka Makoto was born in Mishima, a city in Shizuoka Prefecture at the base of the Izu Peninsula. In other words, he could see that sacred mountain from his home, and as a baby he was bathed in the water that flowed into the Kakita river from Fuji via underground tributaries. Many people have places of beauty as their hometown, but for a contemporary poet it's no small matter.

From ancient times to the present day, Mount Fuji has held a sacred place in the hearts of Japanese people, something you might describe as "special." For Yamabe Akahito, Katsushika Hokusai, and Lafcadio Hearn among others, Fuji has been an expressive motif that symbolizes Japan itself. And unfortunately, for that reason Fuji has also been used by nationalism. The mountain symbolized the flawless Japanese nation in patriotic popular songs. Popularity and specialness were two sides of the same coin.



Yamazaki Masakazu, playwright

On the other hand, contemporary poets (not to mention other modern artists) are dedicated to destroying the special, the popular, the established, and good sense. Of course, Japan has its tradition of haiku and tanka poetry, and compared to other countries there is a strong tendency to maintain rules of subject and form. But perhaps because of that, professional poets aiming to be avant-garde react against those rules even more fiercely. When it comes to form or to content, they break all the established rules. Not a few avant-garde poets put Japanese grammar and vocabulary on the torture rack and stretch it until its screams become their verse. For them, to compose poetry about sacred Mount Fuji would be a near disgrace.

For Ooka Makoto, who was well versed in poetry of all times and places, and shared similar attitudes to avant-garde poets of his time, coming from an area near Mount Fuji was surely something of an inconvenience. But human beings have no choice but to accept reality. In one of his last poetry collections, *Kujira no kaiwatai* (Conversing like whales), he wrote that “humans carry the mountains and rivers on their backs (as their identity or even destiny),” and that the mountains and rivers he personally carried only happened to be an inexpressible something of “huge, dark, and pure” waters that ran down underground from the mountain.

He wrote “by accident,” yet Ooka grew up in a place without fear of authority or opposition to it; an environment that evoked affection and nostalgia. In other words, a lion was brought up like a gentle house cat, but it would be wrong to see that fact lurking deep in the poet’s world view. In fact, it was Japanese poetry that should be considered the true hometown of Ooka’s soul; that was the huge mountain, the special cultural heritage. It is not too much to say that, for Japanese people, poetry is a special cultural resource, something that links and unites the people at a basic level.

Side by side in the *Manyōshū* are poems by both emperors and soldiers who came from the farmers class, while poetry contests were an important ceremony in the imperial court. Traces of

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Born 1931 in Shizuoka Prefecture. Graduated from the Faculty of Letters, University of Tokyo. Recognized as a poet since a student. Worked as a reporter in the Foreign News Department of the *Yomiuri* newspaper, then as a professor at Meiji University and Tokyo University of the Arts. His best known collections of poetry include, “*Memory and Present*,” “*Spring. For a Young Girl*,” “*Suifu*,” “*The Dark Dark Night. The Vacuum Cleaner of the Night Comes Closer*,” “*Crouching at the Turn of the Century*.” His books include, “*Ki no Tsurayuki*” (winner of the Yomiuri Prize), “*The Banquet and the Fox Heart*,” and “*The Japanese of Poetry*.” Has been active in composing anthologies with poets such as Ishikawa Jun, Ando Tsuguo, and Maruya Saiichi, and *renshi* linked poems with poets from overseas. From 1967 to 1968 succeeded Yamazaki Masakazu as the writer of *Chuokoron’s* “The Arts Today” column, which were later collected and published as “Thoughts of the Naked Eye.” Ooka Makoto passed away April 5, 2017.

that remain in the present day New Year's Poetry Reading, at which the emperor reads poems together with ordinary members of the public. This bringing together of the highest authority in the land with ordinary citizens through poetry is surely a beautiful and unique Japanese tradition. For 1,000 years collections of poems were frequently produced at the behest of the emperor, and history features the names of many professional verse writers recognized as famous poets. Even more surprising than that is the extent to which poetry spread to general society. Almost all samurai left a death poem. What's more, poetry was considered a tool of social communication. Parties for the composition of haiku, *renga*, and *renku* were loved equally by aristocrats and by merchants. Notably, at these poetry meetings the barriers between social classes were swept away; it was not unusual to see someone like the aristocrat Sanjonishi Sanetaka sit alongside the poet Sogi, who came from a humble family. Incidentally, the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* poetry collection was used as a card game, and is still enjoyed as a kind of competitive game today; it is a tradition that would be hard to imagine in any other country.

Furthermore, poetry wasn't limited to *tanka* and haiku. It took the form of popular songs and entranced Japanese of all classes. The most famous anecdote is of how the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa was fond of *imayo* (modern style) poetry. He invited courtesans from Kanzaki to the imperial court, encouraged them to practice reciting poetry until their throats were sore, and ultimately let them compile an imperial anthology of imayo songs known as *Ryōjin hisho* (Songs to Make the Dust Dance on the Beams). Later, during the early medieval period, songs known as *kouta* became popular, and among them were works of considerable literary merit, such as those collected in the *Kaginshu* and *Ryutatsu-kouta*.

Faced with the towering peaks of Japanese poetry, people either bow and retreat, or get ready to become a specialist researcher. And if they have decided to become a specialist, they narrow down their field and produce an account of one writer, or at least decide to closely investigate one short period. Although in various forms, only three people in the post-war period have attempted a history of Japanese literature: Donald Keene, Konishi Jinichi and Maruyama Saiichi.

Here too, Ooka made a unique choice. Of course Ooka wrote well-known books on individual authors such as Ki no Tsurayuki and Sugawara no Michizane, but really the most remarkable thing for me is his "*Oriori no uta: Poems for All Seasons*" column. This column ran on the front page of the *Asahi* newspaper and was later collected in a book published by Iwanami Shoten. There were some 7,762 columns in all.

He ignored genre, order of era, and any kind of organization, and used the column to play with poems old and new. One might have expected explaining ancient works and introducing avant-garde poets to the readers of a daily newspaper to be extremely difficult, but he wrote simply and the prose never seemed strained. This labor of love that aimed to make "common sense of Japanese poetry," itself came across as a straightforward person talking common sense.

And all the time, hidden beneath the prose was Ooka's true poetic sensibility, which could

sometimes astonish easy-going readers. To give just one example, quoting Maeda Fura's verse, "Yukige-gawa/ meizan kezuru/ hibiki kana (the snow melts into the river/ cuts through the distinctive mountain/ and the sounds," Ooka picks up on the words "and the sounds." These solid words absorb the emphasized expression "cuts through the distinctive mountain" and prevent the verse from becoming frivolous. But how many readers would have been able to follow and match this feeling for words, I wonder?

In fact, the finely honed sensitivity hidden in these words is the key to understanding Ooka's own poetry. As everyone knows, Ooka's poems can be understood at a glance, and there is absolutely no tortured language or complicated expressions. That this was a conscious artistic stance is evident; when he warmly introduced Ozaki Hosai's avant-garde haiku in his *Oriori no uta* he dropped in the comment, "simple imitation [of Ozaki's haiku style] has to be carefully avoided." As Ooka's collected works of poetry show, however, the easier writing is to understand, the more its composition requires an uncommon talent and a delicate sensitivity towards language.

Then, one day this possessor of an expert sensitivity towards language went beyond the sphere of poetry, and started work on the elucidation of Japanese itself. This was his textbook for first-year elementary school children: *Japanese*. As the book was written together with Tanikawa Shuntaro, Anno Mitsumasu, and Matsui Tadashi it is hard to know how much is Ooka's own work. Nevertheless, it is clear that the basic principles running through the book, and the way it thinks about Japanese, reflect Ooka's beliefs. The most important aspects of that essentially consist of three distinct themes.

The first is that, while Ooka clearly has a deep love of the Japanese language, he scrupulously avoids any patriotic self-righteousness. He emphasizes how Japanese characters were born in China, how the language feature innumerable imported words, and also how the various other languages of the world are also each loved. The second is how dialects underpin our shared language, how they were appreciated as familiar language speech until recently, and regarding which Ooka gives examples. Lastly and more emphasized than anything else is the physicality of spoken language; Ooka encourages children to enjoy talking with clarity and energy.

Ooka was one of just a few poets who distilled down the language of everyday life and wrote poems that could be read aloud. He was also an international figure who wrote *renji* linked poems with poets overseas. On reflection, the book features the poet giving his own interpretation of his poems. But in the end, Ooka did not explain Japanese as a sacred mountain, but as a hometown.

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Born 1934 in Kyoto Prefecture. Graduated from Kyoto University Graduate School of Letters, with a PhD on Aesthetics and Art History. Worked as a professor at Kansai University and Osaka University, and as the president of the University of East Asia. His principal publications include “The Birth of Soft Individualism,” “The Truth of History and The Justice of Politics,” and “An Attempt at a History of World Civilization.” Long interviews with Mikuriya Takashi and Karube Tadashi published as “Changing the Scene. The Scene Changes. Yamazaki Masakazu’s Oral History.”

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