



A Journey To Japan Through Poetry

Curriculum Unit 94.02.09

by Patrice M. Flynn

Japan is a country that is rich in culture, history and tradition. These elements have influenced the way in which the country has dramatically and rapidly become a powerful economic contender with the United States. In view of the vital role that the Japanese people play in the world today and for the future, this unit will play an important role in exposing elementary students to this country and its strong cultural traditions.

Poetry is the main focus of the unit. It will be incorporated into each lesson as either the main objective of the lesson, as a reinforcement to other learning goals or a motivator prior to the main activity. Thus, the students will gain an appreciation for writing, analyzing, reading and listening to poetry, and will also view poems as a motivation for studying Japanese culture and tradition.

I have chosen poetry books at various reading levels. Some of the literature is written specifically for children. The poems are written for an elementary reading level and are beautifully illustrated with related art work. I have also chosen some books that were made by Japanese children using their poetry. This will allow the children to see and read poetry of Japan and will inspire ideas for their own poetry.

Additionally, the unit will incorporate much of the traditional Japanese poetry which is translated into English. Although the texts will be more difficult, I think that it is important to expose the students to “real” poetry at an early age. The lessons will include simple analysis of the poems, which will lead to more complex critical thinking and writing skills. The students will develop their own original poems in response to these poems.

Some of the poems I have chosen are written by modern poets with beginnings around the last twenty years of the 19th century. These are influenced by European and American poetry and have a more romantic style than the classical Japanese poems.

However, traditions of poetry had been prominent ever since literature was first recorded in the oldest Japanese archives. Haiku and Tanka poems, with ancient roots, are highly formalized poems which, with brevity, simplicity and suggestiveness, provide models for young writers in the classroom to create original poems. Both the modern and older forms of poetry will help reflect Japan today: its great land of young people and huge cities rivaling its old landscapes, sculpture and customs.

The students will also read Japanese folk stories, which will teach Japanese culture as well as inspire ideas for poetry writing. Many of the stories were originally written in Tanka form. Another variation will include the use of non-Japanese poetry from American poets. This poetry will be relevant to the study of culture. The narrative

literature, together with American poetry, will add diversity to the unit.

If writing, or studying, the related poem is not the specific objective of the lesson, it will be used to reinforce Art, Music, History or Science relating to Japan. The poems will be carefully chosen to supplement each activity and to show that Japanese life and poetry are interrelated.

After successful completion of the unit, the students will have accomplished various goals and acquired skills which reflect the course of study for third grade. Most importantly, however, they will gain an understanding of a different cultural and ethnic group. The poetic tradition of this country will assist in the understanding and utilization of creative expression across the academic disciplines in oral and written communication and social development.

This unit is designed for a third grade class at a New Haven public school. The students in this class at L. W. Beecher Elementary School are predominantly African-American and Latino. They belong to low to middle socioeconomic levels. The students are also diverse in academic levels, including children participating in the talented and gifted program as well as the learning disabled resource program.

Before the unit's implementation, the students will have written, read and discussed other types of poetry, including rhyming poems, shape poems and poetry that is related to their reading and creative writing themes.

Although the unit is designed for a third grade curriculum, it could be executed in a wide range of age groups, from primary to middle school. The lesson topics and selected poems would be ideal; however, the complexity of the presentation would match the specific learning level. The main objective of the unit would remain the same at each level: to discover the rich culture and traditions of Japan through study of poetry.

The unit is designed to focus on the traditions of poetry in Japanese culture and the importance of traditional celebrations in Japan. The specific types of Japanese poetry should be introduced first because they are then to be used in the study of celebration. However, once they have been introduced, they may be sequenced in any order.

Throughout the unit, the students will be involved in various ongoing activities. During the lessons, the students will write their last name before their first. This accords with Japanese tradition in which the family name is dominant and written first. Japanese word symbols will also be hung around the room near or on their related objects. Furthermore, the students will add their original poems, copied poems, illustrations and other lesson creations to a unit portfolio which they will share during the culminating activity.

The first activity of the unit will introduce Japanese culture through Japanese folklore. In addition to poetry, in this unit, the students will read literature books which will orient them with Japanese culture and, in turn, inspire original poetry writing. The students will respond to literature through poetry. The class will read *The Witch's Magic Cloth*. This book depicts a brave old Japanese woman who overcomes obstacles to climb to the top of a mountain, home of an evil witch, to save her village. The book illustrates many facts about Japan: village life, honor for the elderly, the custom of "moon gazing" and belief in gods and magic. The students will discuss these realities of Japan. They will use this information and classroom library books to create an emblem, or shape, poem in the form of a mountain. The poem will illustrate knowledge of Japanese life and geography.

To introduce Japanese poetry, the students will read various poems from the book *Festival In My Heart: Poems*

by *Japanese Children*, ed. H. N. Abrams. This is an illustrated collection of poetry written by Japanese elementary school children. This will serve both as an introduction to Japanese forms of poetry and to an often mysterious culture. Abrams includes poetry, school verse and writing samples which are translated into English. The students will compare their own traditional nursery rhymes and children's poems which we have studied during the year to those of Japan. They will compare the similarities and differences in rhyme, pattern, wording and subject matter.

Next, the class will be introduced to the tradition of Japanese haiku poetry. They will read poems by the famous haiku writer, Basho. Poems such as -

Hidden by darkness,
even old herons feel safe
from the hungry hawk.

(Behn, p. 11)

and

When a cuckoo sings
on a hill, tea-pickers stand
stock-still to listen.

(Behn, p. 8)

- will be compared. The students will discuss their interpretations of the poems. They will identify qualities and characteristics of haiku. For example, such poems normally adhere to the three-line, five-seven-five syllabic pattern. They are also typically the result of gazing or reflecting nature. The students will use selected photographs of nature scenes to "gaze upon" and write their own haiku with the traditional format.

Following some lessons in writing haiku, the students will identify haiku drawings and create individual haiga. Haiga uses images and emotions through haiku. Shadows and silhouettes are usually the focus of the drawings. The haiku are included in the haiga picture. Examples of haiga which can be found in Ann Atwood's haiku and art book will help the students create original haiga. They will make shadows and silhouettes by cutting forms out of black paper. They will glue these forms onto brightly colored paper. They will then write their own haiku to accompany the picture and include it within the shadow picture.

The next form of Japanese poetry we will study is Tanka. This is one or more stanzas consisting of five lines of five, seven, five, seven and seven syllables. The poem by Yaichi Aizu -

I stand as though
only I am existing,
in heaven and earth -
at this solitariness,

Kannon, you are smiling.

Coming stealthily,

Who is it hitting the temple bell?

It is late at night

and time for even the Buddha

to go into dreaming.

In the Lord Buddha's

drowsy eyes

the ancient

country fields of Yamato

Have their hazy existence.

(Sawa, p. 142)

- will illustrate the tanka form. The students will compare it to haiku. This poem is also ideal for discussion of Kannon, the goddess of mercy, and of Buddhism, the dominant Japanese religion. The poem shows the way Japanese poetry can also be written in a series. The students will compile a list of beliefs from the Japanese Buddhism. They will then use this information to write a tanka poem dedicated to that religion.

Next, the students will study the great Japanese festivals and holidays. On the first day of January, the most important festival in Japan occurs. This is the Japanese New Year. I will introduce the New Year with a poem, "Her Birthday" by Feng Yen-Chi.

A feast being spread in springtime,With a cup of green wine and a joyous song,I repeat my salutation and offer my three wishes:First, may you have a long life;Second, may I have good health:Third, may we live as the swallows on the beam,Happily together all year round.(Lewis, p. 112)

The students will learn that everyone has a birthday on the Japanese New Year. On the day you are born, you are already one year old; you then turn two on the new year. The students will read poems and literature about the other traditions surrounding the New Year. Then they will design a birthday card for another student in the class. The card will include an original poem which reflects the special wishes and significance of the day in "Her Birthday". They will also include the Japanese writing symbols for Happy Birthday and Happy New Year.

The girls' festival and the boys' festival are also elaborate celebrations. The girls' festival, or Doll Day, is held on the third of March. This is the month of the cherry blossoms so the decorations are made of these flowers. All young Japanese girls own a set of festival dolls which are displayed at this time. Two of the most elaborate dolls represent the Emperor and Empress. Music, food and family gathering accompany the ritual.

The boys' festival, however, is held on the fifth of May. During this celebration, the boys erect bamboo poles in

front of their homes. At the top of the poles are great colored banners in the shape of fish which blow in the wind. The fish represent the brave and strong carp. This ritual is supposed to ensure that the boys grow to be strong and brave.

The students will use the information pertaining to the festivals to complete an activity involving art and oral reading. Each student will choose either a doll or a fish to make. Then, the students will work in pairs to find a poem that may represent their artwork or respective festival. For example, the students who create a fish may choose "The Fisherman" by Li Po.

The earth has drunk the snow,

And now the plum trees are blossoming once more.

The willow leaves are like new gold;

The lake is molten silver.

It is the hour

When sulphur-laden butterflies

Rest their velvet heads upon the flowers.

The fisherman casts forth his nets

From a motionless boat,

And the surface of the lake is broken.

His thoughts are at home with her

To whom he will return with food,

Like a swallow to its mate.

(Lewis, p. 113)

They also may choose poems about bravery, tradition, strength or related subjects. The students will perform the choral reading exercise in pairs while displaying their artwork. Finally, they will explain why they chose their particular poem.

The last festival that the students will study is the Moon Viewing celebration. This is held during the full moon in October. Hundreds of people climb to the mountain tops of the villages to gaze at the full moon. During this time, the Japanese people write poetry or compose or sing songs in honor of the moon. The students will read poems dedicated to the moon from Kazue Mizumura's book, *Flower, Moon, Snow: A Book of Haiku*. This lesson will integrate with the science curriculum in which we study the solar system and the phases of the moon. After the students discuss and read the poems about the moon and the festival, they will design a mobile with paper phases of the moon. They also will include their favorite moon poems. These will be written on the moon shapes.

Origami is a special tradition in Japanese art. Anne Laurin, author of *The Perfect Crane* describes a Japanese folktale of how origami was inspired. The story is about a Japanese magician named Gami. He was very lonely until he discovered that he could carefully fold paper into lanterns, flowers and birds. The perfect crane comes to life and becomes the companion of Gami. Curious people came to visit the magician and became his friend. Finally, the cold day came when the crane said that he must “follow the sun”. He returned every spring afterward. After reading the story, the students will create their own origami cranes by folding paper. They will then write a poem in dialogue form as if it were written by the crane itself. By this means, the students’ crane will come to life like Gami’s.

Additionally, the Japanese wear unique traditional dress for special occasions. Vivid colors in the clothing symbolize wealth, fertility, strength and bravery. The students will read Mary O’Neill’s book, *Hailstones and Halibut Bones*, which includes descriptive poems about the colors of the spectrum. These poems, with full color illustrations, bring colors to life and show the students how the colors can have meanings and lively images. Examples include the poems “What is Red?”,

Red is a Sunset

Blazy and bright.

Red is feeling brave

With all your might...

and “What is Gold?”,

Gold is a Metal

Gold is a ring

Gold is a very

Beautiful thing.

Gold is the sunshine

Light and thin

Warm as a muffin

On your skin.

After reading the poems, the students will discuss the Kimono and the Gi with focus on design and color. The kimono is worn by girls in Japan along with an obi (sash), obijimi (sash cord), tabi (ankle socks) and zori (sandals). They are usually bright blue, yellow, pink and white. Although the Gi for boys is white, its belt color indicates one’s level of mastery in karate. The students will create puppets dressed in traditional Japanese outfits with colors inspired by the poems.

Finally, an International Day will provide a means in which the students can share and display what they have learned and created during the unit. This culminating activity will include food, dress, literature, music, art and poetry. Four grade levels, including my own, will participate and share. The students will gain knowledge and

appreciation of the traditions and culturally unique customs of the Japanese, African-Americans, Mexicans and Colonial Americans. The units of the other cultures will be developed by my fellow team members from the Yale Institute. These teachers and their students will ensure the diversity of the International Day with their displays and presentations.

Lesson Plan

Objectives:

1. To identify symbolism in Japanese poetry.
2. To write haiku poetry using descriptive language.
3. To create a calendar using original poems.

Procedure:

1. Discussion and charting

- a) Students will fold a 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper into four sections
- b) They will write Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer in each box
- c) They will write descriptive words to illustrate what they see, hear and feel during each of these seasons
- d) Share answers in group discussion

2. Read selected poems from Haiku Vision, by Ann Atwood

- a) Much of Japanese poetry is written in awe of the seasons. Symbolic words or phrases, in haiku, convey mood. For example, the words "plum blossom" not only personify spring, but also suggest tenderness of love. When the word "deer" appears, it represents swiftly fleeing autumn with its overtones of imminent change. "Snow" indicates winter and the "on-going" (Atwood, p.6)
- b) Over the leaf-crisp ground the deer in autumn wood leap... and make no sound. (Atwood, p.7)
- Snow softly, slowly, settles at dusk in a dance of white butterflies. (Atwood, p. 61)
- The day dark with rain. Young leaves struggling to open, you too have your tears. (Atwood, p.13)

3. Discussion and charting

- a) What seasons are these poems depicting? What words indicate the seasons? Why?
- b) Chart more ideas of words that may illustrate the seasons, add to your list.

4. Calendar

Materials: Four calendar pages per student Crayons and pencils

Each calendar page will include a blank space at the top (for poem and picture) and 3 empty month calendar graphs at the bottom

- a) Use the chart to create an original haiku poem for each season
- b) Write the four poems on the appropriate calendar months
- c) Illustrate and color seasonal scenes

5. Read original haiku poems and use calendars for follow-up math lesson

Lesson Plan

Objectives:

1. To use images in describing animals.
2. To compare Japanese poetry with traditional nursery rhyme.
3. To write a tanka poem.

Procedure:

1. Read tanka poem by Mokichi Saito

You water spider
Against the streaming currents
skating upstream -your vigorousness, oh, although
it is a faint thing. (Shiffert, p. 143)

2. Discussion

a) Define vigorousness
b) Did the spider accomplish what he set out to do?

3. Compare with "The Itsy, Bitsy Spider" rhyme

a) The Itsy, Bitsy spider when up the water spout.
Down came the rain and washed the spider out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.
The Itsy, Bitsy spider crawled up the spout again.
b)

Chart the similarities and differences between the two works
c) Chart the similarities and differences between the two spider struggles

4. Discussion

Name other animals that may have similar struggles. (Examples may include a butterfly coming out of a cocoon, a bee searching for a flower, a bird flying south for the winter)

5. Create an original tanka poem

a) Choose an animal to be the focus of the poem
b) Review the form of tanka poetry: five lines of five, seven, five, seven and seven syllables
c) Write an original tanka poem which descriptively tells of their animal

6. Draw a picture of the animal to correlate with the poem

Lesson Plan

Objectives:

1. To identify the significance of the Japanese tradition of Tanabata in response to literature.
2. To listen to selected love poems.
3. To design a Tanabata star and poem.

Procedure:

1. Discussion

- a) Name some people that you love

- b) Why do you love these people?
- c) Name some love stories (Examples may include Romeo and Juliet, Beauty and the Beast)

2. Read *The Seventh Night of July*, by Paula Franklin

Summarize story: Tanabata is a Japanese word meaning weaving loom. It celebrates the story of two lovers, Shokujo and Kenju. Shokujo was a princess who was asked by her father to weave a wonderful cloth. Instead of completing her task, she fell in love with a shepherd named Kenju. When the King discovered that the cloth was not woven and that his daughter had fallen in love with a commoner, he became angry and he banished his daughter and her lover to the sky. He said that they could only meet once a year on Tanabata. When the two star-crossed lovers tried to meet however, they could not cross the sky. The lovebirds took pity on them and spread their wings between the two stars to make the Milky Way. That is why once a year Shokujo and Kenju are able to meet again.

3. Read selected love poems of Lord Byron, "To M.S.G." [Miss Mary Chaworth]

When I dream that you love me, you'll surely forgive;
Extend not your anger to sleep;
For in visions alone your affections can live,
-I rise, and it leaves me to weep...(Burr, p. 10)

and "On Parting"

The kiss, dear maid! thy lip has left
Shall never part from mine,
Till happier hours restore the gift
Untainted back to thine...(Burr, p. 37)

4. Create the star and poem

On Tanabata beautiful paper decorations symbolizing the Milky Way are hung on long bamboo poles in gardens and streets. Poems of love are written on long strips of rice paper and hung on the poles.

Materials:

1 construction paper star per child
hole punch
1 facial tissue per child
glue
6 construction paper strips per child (approximately 6 inches long)

- a) Write a six line love poem on the strips of construction paper (one line per strip). Model the mood of the Lord Byron poems. Students may choose to write to either Shokujo or Kenju.

- b) Punch a hole near the end of one of the star points. Pull the tissue half way through the hole, then fluff it out and tear the ends to look like flower petals.

- c) Spread glue on the back of the opposite end of star. Press one end of each "poetry strip" into glue. Let other end dangle loosely.

5. Read original love poems orally and display final product

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