

*English summary***Poems of Japanese school children**

Japanese schools have invested an astonishing amount of energy in teaching children to write poems. Both poems and essays fulfil the important task of helping children become conscious of the world around them, but poems in particular train swiftly grasping a basic mood and obtaining a clear "feel" for objects and situations. Thus Japanese teachers very consciously link poetry to the notion of *ninshiki* (awareness, understanding) and *seichō* (growth, development, maturing).

Japan has a long-standing tradition of expressing feeling in written rather than in verbal form. It is therefore important for us to pay sufficient attention to the activity of writing, and here again especially also to the writing of poems, if we are to catch a glimpse of what worries or impresses people in Japan. Writing, in short, can be said to constitute one of the most fundamental forms of capturing the relationship between "self" and the outside world, and, building upon this, "coming to terms with self".

Poems of 6 and 7 year old children are naturally simple in structure, and yet even here we often find reflected a sudden awareness of something, a little detail, a bizarre turn (example: **Ōmu** [The Parrot]).

Children who are about 9 begin to use their senses to penetrate (*mi-tsumeru*) into deeper levels of understanding the nature of the universe. First, usually, comes close and patient observation (example: **Shizuku** [A Raindrop]), followed by fascination for the acoustic dimension (example: **Gaji-gaji Pari-pari**, the sound of rabbits munching). The close examination of the acoustic dimension is an enjoyable challenge for speakers of the Japanese language, that is rich in words representing sounds and feelings and quite freely permits the invention of one's own expressions.

To deal with (physical) feeling and reflect upon thoughts arising within oneself is a further important function of a poem. Thus overcoming the inner feeling of disgust is the topic of **Chiisa na kaeru** (A Little Frog), while the agony of having to pee is dealt with in **o-Shikko** (Pee).

If the inner feeling of "self" is taken so seriously, then naturally "self" as it appears outwardly is too. Not surprisingly, therefore, many poems are based on self-observation in a mirror, as in **Kuchi** (Mouth) and **Kagami** (Mirror).

It is not far from the question "What do I look like?" to "Who am I?". "Who am I?" is answered by reference to society, in many cases in form of self-reflection and an inner struggle to accept the values upheld by "the people" in general. Self-reflection almost invariably leads to the topic of work, as "self" comes to realize that it is through work that the expectations of "the people" are satisfied. It is therefore certainly no coincidence that the cover poem of the poetry collection *Sugikko 10* (1983) is one on the **Ôkawa-sen**, a tiny railway line with a tiny train, but always working, as the people need it. Similarly, **E-no-den** (The Little Train of Enoshima) rattles and creaks but never, never gives up, since its duty is to serve the people.

Even if it is not possible to be the best, the utmost effort invested in mind and body can help you become second-best (example: **Watashi no ribbon wa midori-iro** [My Ribbon is Green]). Sometimes, however, reflecting upon how others work and put strain on themselves can lead a child to show an almost fanatic will never to do less than others (example: **Ane kara no tegami** [A Letter from my Elder Sister]).

Grief, anxiety or loneliness are typical feelings that are given expression in poems, not only at school. An interesting example tracing the feelings of scare and claustrophobia is **Erebêta** (The Elevator). Sorrow, inner torment, and even aggressions and anger regularly find themselves worked into poems like **Denwa** (A Telephone Call) or **Sake** (Rice Wine).

Quite a special kind of anxiety, sparked by the mere glance of a foreigner, is kept as a strict secret until given expression in the poem **Gaijin-san** (The Foreigner).

We should never fail to pay attention to the fact that life and emotions of the people in rural Japan may differ considerably from those in urban or suburban areas. Looking at children's poetry from some of the smaller cities and villages we can see, at first, that they reflect the local dialect, usually to a high degree. We thus sense that the children are basing their poems on very intensive observation of human states and activities, similarly to the children in the large cities. However, the topics chosen appear to be less playful. Often, the poems from rural areas describe the enormous changes being wrought on culture and landscape (example: **Bokura no machi** [Our Town]), or hardships of a different kind to those experienced in the families of a salary man (example: **Fuyu** [Winter]).

Finally, the vitality of a rural festival with its rhythms and dances obviously will leave lasting impressions that children in country districts artistically shape into poems (example: **Shishimai** [Dance of the Deer]).

Diskussionsbeitrag Nr. 12

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**"Self" in Japanese
Communication**

**Selbstwahrnehmung in
japanischer Kommunikation**

Erlangen 2002