

# A LITERARY HISTORY OF THE HEAVENS

**The sun, moon and stars have been popular topics in Japanese literature for centuries and still attract many readers today.**

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**H**EAVENLY bodies are beloved themes of myths, folktales and poems around the world, and Japan is no exception. Professor Suzuki Ken'ichi of the Faculty of Letters at Gakushuin University, compiler of *Tenku no bungakushi: Taiyo tsuki hoshi* (Literary History of the Heavens: The Sun, Moon and Stars), says the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters), Japan's oldest historical chronicle (712), is also the first example of Japanese literature to feature heavenly bodies.

In the creation myth in the *Kojiki*, Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess, leaves the earth in darkness when she flees to a dark cave and only returns light to the world when she reemerges.

According to the myth, Amaterasu was born from the left eye of Izanagi-no-Mikoto, a god of creation, while Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto, the moon god, was born from his right eye. Professor Suzuki notes that it is interesting that the sun goddess and the moon god are seen as eyes watching over the world.

“The sun and the moon must have been very

mysterious to ancient people. I believe they expected the sun and the moon to answer fundamental questions about their past and future.”

*Taketori monogatari* (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter) is a popular Japanese folktale from the late ninth century in which an old bamboo cutter called Taketori-no-Okina finds an infant girl inside a mysterious stalk of bamboo. He and his wife raise her as their own and name her Kaguya-hime (shining princess of the supple bamboo) as she grows into a woman of extraordinary beauty. Eventually, she reveals that she is not of this world and returns to her people on the moon.

“As the day of her return approached, the Mikado [Emperor] positioned many guards around her house in vain to protect her from the moon people. This suggests that the moon was seen as something transcendent.

“The story is deeply touching as Kaguya-hime says that she adores spending time with the old man and his wife, and would rather not return to the moon, where nobody grows old or dies.”

“A certain melancholic impression of the moon dates back to the influence of Bai Juyi (771-846), a Chinese poet who was very popular in Japan in those days. Therefore, there are many lyrical poems from Japan associated with the autumn sadness of the moon.”

Professor Suzuki considers the following poem to be representative of those that express autumn melancholy.

*Tsuki mireba / chi-di ni mono koso / kanashikere wa ga mi hitotsu no / aki ni ha aranedo*

When I look at the moon / I am overcome by the sadness / of a thousand, thousand things— / even though it is not Fall / for me alone.



Matsuo Basho depicted by Yosa Buson  
Photo: Courtesy of Basho Museum



From an Edo-period picture scroll of *Taketori monogatari*: Kaguya-hime returns to her people on the moon  
 Photo: Courtesy of National Diet Library

– From the *Kokin Wakashu*, by Oe no Chisato, nobleman and poet, late ninth to early tenth century  
 (Trans. Dr. Joshua S. Mostow)

There are relatively few poems about the stars compared with those about the moon. Kenreimon-in Ukyo no Daibu (c. 1157-year of death unknown) is one poet who depicted the beauty of the stars.

*Tsuki-wo-koso nagamenareshika hoshinoyono fukaki awarewo koyoishirinuru*

It is upon the moon / That so often I have gazed enraptured, / But tonight / I have come to understand at last / The profound beauty of a starlit sky

– From an anthology of poems by Kenreimon-in Ukyo no Daibu (Trans. James G. Wagner)

Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), the most famous poet of the Edo period (1603-1867), embraced and expressed *wabi* (satisfaction with simplicity and austerity) and *sabi* (contented solitude). The following is one of his best known poems.

*Meigetsu ya / ike wo megurite / yomosugara*

The autumn full moon: / all night long / I paced round the pond  
 (Trans. Dr Thomas McAuley)

Meanwhile, Yosa Buson (1716-1784), painter and poet, composed the following panoramic poem depicting the sun and moon in the sky as well as the land full of rape blossoms.

*Nanohana ya / tsukiwa higashi-ni / hiwa nishi-ni*  
 Rape blossoms / and the moon in the east / the sun in the west

(Trans. Allan Persinger)

“Haiku is the shortest type of poem, consisting of just seventeen ‘syllables.’ Through its succinct form poets communicate the essence of the Japanese view of nature or aesthetics shared in society,” says Professor Suzuki. “*Saijiki*, a list of seasonal terms used in Japanese poetry, aids in understanding certain aspects of Japanese culture. Some sections refer to the heavens, including the sun, moon, stars and the weather. It has been translated into multiple languages. I hope you have a chance to read the book.” 