

Report: Kyokusui no En (曲水の庭) – a Heian Poetry Festival

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The 45th Dazaifu Tenmangu Heian poetry festival took place on the first Sunday of March 2008, and that was about the extent of the spoken Japanese that we understood during our visit.

The Heian period (AD 794-1185) is often seen as the most culturally significant time in Japanese history for the aristocratic class. The Imperial family and those favoured by the Empress and the Emperor, resided in the palace in Kyoto, attending festivals, playing *go*, writing out Chinese poems in their best calligraphy and partaking in philosophical discussions accompanied by moonlight and the strumming of the *koto* (Japanese harp). So tells us Sei Shonagon, author of the Pillow Book, a classical text full of her biting observations. Sei also mentions a poetry game, where aristocrats compose a *waka* (sung Japanese poem) in the time that it takes a lacquered sake cup to float down a stream to reach them. When this happens, the court noble would stop writing and drink from it, thus spending hours of carefree amusement.



The procession in the Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine
Photo: Daria Luchinskaya

This custom has been revived in Dazaifu Tenmangu shrine on the island of Kyushu, one of the most important shrines in Japan. Inspired by recommendations from the locals, we went along to see what this entailed. Arriving just after noon, we managed to see the parade of richly dressed noblewomen, guards, priests, *Mikko* (shrine maidens), servants and very cute, dressed-up children progress to the shrine proper. A service was performed and prayers were said in the *haiden* (hall of worship) by the Heian group, while the crowd, we among them, threw coins into the collection box, over the heads of walkie-talkie carrying organisers who were trying to control the enthusiasm.

The party then moved over to the nearby garden, where we were entertained by dances with a *koto* accompaniment – first a person in a white costume, then the *Mikko* troupe, pink as the plum blossoms. After the *Mikko* dance, the nobles sat themselves down on the grass and the poetry game started. It was a fitting location for such a re-enactment to take place, but the beautiful plum trees and the crowds of visitors prevented us from seeing most of the action.

It was at this point that we decided to pose as newspaper reporters to gain access to the large tiered seating area, and, quoting an Oxford student newspaper, we were let in without any problem and without any tickets. However, while watching the sake cups float downstream from a better viewpoint, we decided that we would actually write about this festival.



The *junihitoe*, Heian kimono
Photo: Daria Luchinskaya

We could see the Empress and the other nobles write on a vertical strip of special paper using ink and brush. The Heian style kimono are called the *junihitoe*, meaning twelve-layer robes. These ones were reproductions, but very colourful and probably about as heavy as the real thing. Guards in blue dress, armed with *nihontou* (Japanese sword) and Japanese bow and arrows, paced the small garden space trying not to step on the children or the *junihitoe*. A singer in the pavilion was singing the previous *waka* as the sake cup floated down the stream. Another dance was performed at the interlude, this time by a person wearing an orange *hakama* (long pleated skirt) and sporting a long braided wig. He was replaced by Heian-style children with beautifully arranged hair, being led by their mothers to take the poetry to the singer.



Writing *waka* poetry
Photo: Daria Luchinskaya

After the children fulfilled a few rounds of deliveries the loudspeaker announced that the game was over and that ticket holders could have their photographs taken with the party on the grass. Feeling that we would overstep our tolerated presence, we escaped the seating, only to be stopped by a camera crew and asked to present our opinions on the event. We said, of course, that it was very interesting. However, we could not feel that we were really back in tenth century Japan, as there were many camera crews, signs, wires, jeans and modern kimonos alongside the Heian-costumed stars, as well as the frequent loudspeaker announcements.

Although the garden banquet was over, there was more than enough going on in and around the Dazaifu Tenmangu shrine complex. Stalls of souvenirs, festive food, sake, goldfish and games

were crammed in where possible and performing monkeys entertained children, adults and tiny handbag-carried pedigree dogs. Despite not having understood any of the fine poetry composed under the falling plum petals, it was a very enjoyable experience nevertheless.

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Daria Luchinskaya was fortunate enough to be one of the five St Anne's students to receive a Year in Japan scholarship, 2007-2008. She would like to thank fellow former Stanner Tara Beaney for her collaboration in securing access to the seated area for the 45th Dazaifu Tenmangu Heian poetry festival.