

On New Year's morning
I grieve for my ancestors
And for their lost dreams.
Vanished, too, are the forests,
The ancient murmuring pines.

Jan. 18, 1987

Milsho

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

The Japanese Greet '87, in 31 Apt Syllables

By CLYDE HABERMAN
Special to The New York Times

TOKYO, Jan. 13 — In a ceremony as subdued as the whisper of snow that had fallen overnight, Emperor Hirohito presided today over Tokyo's lyrical welcome to the new year, the annual poetry party at the Imperial Palace.

Perhaps nowhere else in the world is the value of verse reaffirmed with such formality by a sovereign and his subjects. While the quality of today's readings may be debated, no one questioned the enchantment of the moment for a select group of 70 Japanese invited to the palace and for millions of others who watched on television.

Six men wearing morning coats and striped trousers sat around a table and, in unison, read Japanese tanka poems in a low, doleful chant. The verses, of 31 syllables each, had been written by the Emperor, other members of the Imperial family and 10 ordinary Japanese whose offerings had been selected from among 29,372 entries inscribed in calligraphy.

Hirohito sat at a separate table covered in brocaded cloth, listening with barely perceptible nods as his own contribution, apparently an allusion to Japan's economic success, was intoned three times:

Year by year, as our country

*Has recovered from the war,
The dawn redwood has grown taller.*

Poetry ceremonies at the Imperial court date from the 10th century. In 1869, the second year in the reign of Hirohito's grandfather, Emperor Meiji, readings became a New Year's fixture, usually held around Jan. 10. At first, only the Imperial family and guests took part, but starting in 1879 the public was allowed to submit verses, too.

In Japan, virtually every important endeavor has a prescribed form, and the New Year's performance in the palace's Pine Room is no exception. The men wear morning coats and the

women formal kimonos or Western-style gowns. They stand, stiff and unsmiling, as their poems are chanted — two times for everyone except the Emperor. Their verses are written only in classical tanka style.

The tanka consists of five lines arranged in an unvarying sequence of five, seven, five, seven and, once again, seven syllables. It has a close relative in the haiku, the 17-syllable form that is much better known to Westerners.

At the annual palace gathering, verses must be based on a specific topic. This year's was trees.

Empress Nagako, who was not feeling well, according to the Imperial Household Agency, did not attend. Her offering was read anyway:

*As warm sunlight shines
On the Izu hills,*

*Branch tips are colored
By sprouting buds.*

As a matter of course, Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess Michiko also had their poems chanted. For ordinary Japanese, fate rested with a panel of five poet-judges. How they determined the 10 winners was not announced, but attention seemed to have been paid to striking geographical, occupational and other balances.

Teruko Otani, from Tottori Prefecture on the Sea of Japan, was the youngest winner at the age of 44. She wrote of a tradition in rural Japan in which parents plant trees, then chop them down years later before their daughters are married. The wood is sold to lumber companies, and the money applied to wedding costs:

For my dowry,

*My parents cut down cedar trees
That took decades to grow.*

The oldest person at the reading was Kosaku Tanaka of Gumma Prefecture, north of Tokyo. At 90, he was five years older than the Emperor. He wrote:

*Voices of students
Who plant saplings
Roll down the mountain slopes,
Echoing.*

When the last chant drifted into the air today, winners and losers alike got a chance to think of 1988. They were given until mid-October to put brush and black ink to paper, once they had found 31 apt syllables on the subject of wheels.

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