

The life and work of matsuo basho



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The life of the great poet Matsuo Basho was one filled with modesty and adventure. His journeys throughout nature and his encounters with new ideas influenced him to create many poems and journals. These works became treasured by his friends and followers due to their unique style and poetic beauty. To this day, his life and works continue to be studied and loved by Japanese and non-Japanese people alike. By observing his life, extensive travels throughout Japan, and highly acclaimed works, one can learn why Matsuo Basho was and is considered to be the greatest and most influential haiku poet of all time.

In 1644, near the Japanese village of Ueno, a samurai warrior and his wife gave birth to a son who they named Matsuo Kinsaku. The boy would be known by this name during his childhood and adolescent years, but would later on change it to Matsuo Basho. At that time, Basho's father was likely to only have been a low ranking samurai, but the boy was still given the right to join the league of great warriors if he wanted to do so. Matsuo took no interest in this profession, because he had fallen in love with poetry. However, despite all this, he would spend quite a while wondering if he had made the right decision by dedicating his life to poetry.

The reason for him taking interest in a career so polar opposite to that of a samurai is probably due to Basho's childhood friend, Todo Yoshitada. Since he was a low ranking samurai, Basho's father was likely serving under a local aristocratic family; so when Basho's father died in 1656, Matsuo Basho too came to serve this family. The Todo family had a son named Yoshitada, a boy who was Basho's elder by two years. Yoshitada had already long taken a fascination to poetry, and now Basho joined in the enthusiasm. With

counselling from their poetry master, the two boys quickly took up the art of *haikai no renga*, an early form of haiku, together. Soon after, in 1662, Matsuo Basho composes his earliest known haiku, and a few years later, in 1664, Basho's first collection of poems was released.

Unfortunately, everything changed when Todo Yoshitada unexpectedly died in 1666 at only twenty-five years old. The loss of such a close friend left Basho so traumatized and deeply shocked that he resigned from serving the Todo family, and embarked on a long journey by himself. For the next few years he travelled to various cities, with no specific records of all of his whereabouts. He was likely hesitant about his decision to become a full time poet and was struggling over the many career options he was passing off because he wrote, " The alternatives battled in my mind and made my life restless" (Biography web). He did, however, continue to write many poems during this time.

Basho's first major step into bustling society was when he arrived in Edo, the modern day city of Tokyo. He had chosen to come to this busy city to study and craft his poetry skills. During his first year there in 1672, he started working at a waterworks company, began making a good reputation for himself, and in the years following, quickly became embraced by the literary community. Pretty soon Basho started up a poetry school, and nurtured the minds of many great young poets. It was during this time that he adopted the pseudonym Tosei, but he did not keep this name for long.

Basho taught his students with a fatherly love and his students came to love and respect him. Through Basho's teachings, the students were brought

success when their works were eventually compiled and published under the title of *The Best Poems of Tosei's Twenty Disciples*. Around the year 1680, Basho moved away from the lively city of Edo, and into the more relaxed area of Fukagawa. It was here that Basho's disciples proved their love for him by building him a home. They also planted a banana tree by the hut that grew so well that Matsuo Tosei changed his name once more to the commonly known Matsuo Basho, meaning banana tree.

Matsuo Basho lived in this hut for a few years, but he was not necessarily happy. By this point he was surrounded by success, but still felt incredibly lonely. The cure, he thought, would be to become a practitioner of Zen meditation. Everything turned for the worse when, in 1682, his house burned down, followed by his mother's death in 1683. With no home at this point, he went to stay with a friend while his students rebuilt his home. His unhappiness remained with him, though, so he decided to do what he did before and set off on another trip throughout the land of Japan.

Matsuo had four major journeys around the country. These trips lead him through many famous mountains and towns. Because Matsuo Basho was approaching middle age at this point, many worried for him. Travelling alone was a hazard at this time, and some thought that he would not survive the long treks between cities or, in a worst case scenario, be murdered by some bandits. Basho was aware of this and had even prepared a will in case such a situation ensued. Luckily, this never happened.

The most famous of his trips was recorded in a journal titled *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, in which Basho travels on foot for over five months. He

stopped at numerous locations such as hot spring resorts, temples, lakes, and natural wonders. During the entire extent of his travels, Basho recorded what he saw in forms of poetry. His poems left the internal theme they had exhibited before that point and instead focused on the natural beauty of the world. He wrote his most famous poems at this time: a haiku about a frog leaping into a pond. Essentially, his goal was to observe and record the elegance of the earth. In the same way, his path through the country itself was like a poem. His route was so lovely and exotic that tours of Japan are prepared following Basho's own course.

One might think that living such a nomadic life was tiring and lonesome, but Basho would disagree. To begin with, Basho was not always alone. During the trip of *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Basho was accompanied by Kawai Sora, his old neighbour and student. Together they visited the sites that they had heard about through older poems, and due to Basho's then religious state of mind, also visited many shrines and temples. By the end of the journey, Basho had completed the journal that would one day be known as his most famous piece of work. This was all because Basho did not view his roaming lifestyle as a burden, but instead thought that "Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home" (Matsuo web).

Matsuo Basho's worldview was very mature for his era. He believed that everyone was equal in that, in the end, the journey of life would always end in death. It is believed that his decision to live as a wanderer is based off of this worldview, and that he was physically living out the journey of life until death. A common theme in his writings called *mujo*, or impermanence, suggests the quickness of human life and nature. He tied this theme

together with another similar idea often found in his writing, an idea of soft yet elegant changes in nature, such as the gradual changes of a stream over the years.

Basho gradually ended his journeys as he approached his late forties. Though still immersed in his love of poetry, Basho decided to settle down in a new Basho hut built by his supporters. Unfortunately, he had become plagued by an illness, and a few years later, his beloved nephew, Toin, died. He became closed off from most social interactions because of this, and his illness only got worse. In 1694, Basho attempted to plan another journey to western Japan, but the illness overcame him and he passed. He was only fifty years old.

From the very beginning, Basho was a boy who harbored a talented mind, and in the end, became a wise man with a unique worldview. His elegant outlook on life provided him with the ability to create works that have left scholars with countless topics for discussion. These works will likely continue to be observed for their thoughtfulness, and remembered for their important insights into the history of Japan. From birth to death, Matsuo Basho lived the life of a friend, a teacher, and a poet. Additionally, when it comes to his works, teachings, and travels, Matsuo Basho succeeded in engraving his name into the list of the world's greatest poets.

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