

Bashō's "Prose Poem on the Unreal Dwelling"

The title of Bashō's "Prose Poem on the Unreal Dwelling" in Japanese is *Genjūan no fu* (幻住庵の賦). The first character, "gen" (幻) is also read "maboroshi" and means phantasm, dream, fantasy, illusion, etc. Keene translates this word as "unreality". The second character, "jū" means to dwell or live in a place. The third character, "an" (庵), describes the sort of small (very small) house or hut that a recluse might live in, and could be applied to the structure that Chōmei lived in (his "10-foot square" hut). The last character, "fu" (賦), was originally a genre of Chinese literature, a "prose-poem", which was largely descriptive and philosophical. Writing a *fu* in Chinese was popular among educated men during the Early Modern Period as a way of showing off their erudition, and especially their knowledge of obscure Chinese characters, but the *fu* had an approximate Japanese counterpart in the *zuihitsu* ("following the brush") form associated with Sei Shōnagon and Kenkō's "Essays in Idleness".

Basho and his disciples developed a new form of prose called called *haibun* or "haikai prose", turning the "random jottings" of the past into a much more disciplined, though seemingly artless form. Bashō's *haibun* are considered an important part of his writings and a complement to his poems. These prose pieces are typically very short, concise, and deal with philosophical and aesthetic matters that may only be hinted at in *haikai* poetry.