

Kasen

the thirty-six splendid immortals
per Matsuo Basho 1680s

Kasen—36 verses: Description

The kasen—meaning *splendid immortals*—takes its name from the practice of creating ideal groups of thirty-six artistic forbears. In outline the kasen predates Basho but his subsequent refinements earned it such popularity that the format has been identified with him ever since. Before the 1650s most sequences were one hundred verse *hyakuin*, or fifty verse *gojuin*. By the time of Basho's death the kasen predominated.

The macro structure of the kasen reflects the number of standard writing sheets—*kaishi*—needed to record it. If the scribe's brushwork is suitably neat, a kasen requires two sheets. Both sides are written on.

The front of the first sheet—*sho-ori no omote*—records any title or foreword plus the six verses of the preface—*jo*. The back of the first sheet—*sho-ori no ura*—carries the first twelve verses of the development movement—*ha*. The front of the second sheet—*nagori no omote*—holds the further twelve verses of *ha*, whilst the finale—*kyu*—is carried on the reverse—*nagori no ura*—along with a record of the who, where and when of composition.

Historically, the division of the central section into two movements of twelve verses is a function of their physical separation. However in the writing of the immediate Basho school, and subsequent generations of Shofu poets, it is often possible to discern a difference. The second twelve may be more swift moving and challenging, exhibiting deliberately disruptive dynamic and phonic properties. Some renku theorists, writing in English, therefore distinguish between the two halves of *ha*, referring to the first as the *development* and the second as the *intensification*.

Given that it was Basho's format of choice, the general parameters of the kasen are to be found in many contemporary sources aimed at persons new to renku. In order to be both brief and intelligible, such descriptions are necessarily simplified. Unfortunately, the consequent standardisation can give the impression of an unrelenting orthodoxy. This in turn places an apparent premium on conformity—the implication being that the genre is both formulaic and dull.

The reader should be aware that the précis given here, and illustrated by the schematics, is an indication only of how the kasen may be written. Moreover it describes the contemporary approach which, influenced by the cautious conservatism of recent years, is less flexible than in times past. Words such as *must*, *will*, *never* and *only* are frequently encountered in respect of the kasen but, in the corpus of Basho's own work, there are many exceptions that would doubtless cause the modern editor to quail and perplex the more didactic of our worthy authorities.

Assuming there are any trees left to pulp, elsewhere in this screed of cant the chapter *The Seasons of Renku* discusses the forces that govern the order and duration of seasonal passages in all forms of renku. It is the basis for the layouts charted below. Familiarity with it will allow writers to exercise an appropriate degree of flexibility.

Though Basho's own work shows a preponderance of the former, in theory a kasen divides more or less equally between season and non-season (miscellaneous) verses. Of the season verses, spring and autumn are more prominent than summer and winter by a ratio of approximately 5:3. Spring and autumn verses typically appear in threes—a number that may extend to four or five, as was common in the Edo period. Summer and winter likewise appear in pairs or singly, with the possibility that the run will extend to three. A feature of the earlier literature is that a series of season verses will often be found to cross the boundary between one side of a writing sheet and the next, or to transition between

sheets. By contrast, in contemporary practice there is a tendency to regard the folio and seasonal boundaries as co-terminous, with a consequent emphasis on the breaks between movements.

Over the course of a poem, and other than for poems begun in spring, the major seasons—spring and autumn—feature twice, whilst summer and/or winter may be represented by a single group of verses. For poems begun in spring, the season makes three separate appearances. In all cases, the fixed topic of spring blossom appears twice: as the penultimate verse on the back of the first sheet—at #17—and as the penultimate verse of the sequence as a whole—verse position #35. These positions are referred to as the place or throne of blossom—*hana no za*—and are very rarely brought forward or delayed.

In the *kasen* a blossom verse is never treated as the more generic topic of *flower*—it remains the preserve of cherry or plum—though far more irreverent tones are possible than would have been thinkable in medieval *renga*. Some of Basho's sequences contain puns that disguise the topic altogether.

In total the moon makes three appearances: as the penultimate verse of the preface—position #5, at or around the seventh position on the back of the first sheet—verse #13, and as the penultimate verse on the front of the second sheet—position #29. These are *tsuki no za*—the place of the moon. Two of the moons are almost invariably set against autumn, that of *jo*—unless the season itself is displaced—and that towards the close of the second part of *ha*. The third moon takes a different season—generally summer or winter, rarely spring—and may be relatively underplayed. Unlike blossom verses, the moon positions more readily shift—#13 being most likely to be brought forward or delayed.

The other fixed topic to have survived the radical downsizing from *renga*—love—typically appears as a pair or trio of verses somewhere in the middle of both of the longer passages of verse. Basho tended to treat love rather freely whereas others of his school, and later writers, often choose to mirror the train of emotions inherited from the classics. We can therefore expect to see a naive attraction become physical consummation, only for the whole farrago to end in disillusion—circumstances in which it can take skill to avoid straightforward narrative progression. A love run may also be preceded by a verse which indirectly sets up the general subject. This is *koi no yobidashi*—the usher of love. Less common is *koi banare*—the end of love—a tag verse whose figurative reading implies some form of suitably sententious moralisation.

In the work of the immediate Basho school the special compositional characteristics of *hokku*, *wakiku*, *daisan* and *ageku* (see *Beginnings and Endings*) are rarely modified and never ignored. Likewise only the most intimate sequences fail to honour the duty to code for the appropriate greetings, leave-taking or augury.

Modern *kasen* are little different, especially where—as is common in Japan—composition marks a ceremonial occasion such as an anniversary. Though many new types of sequence have been proposed in the last fifty years, a wholesale revision of the *kasen* has not. The only appreciable difference is that—as indicated by the following diagram—contemporary poems tend not to employ a very long run of verses set in single season.

Kasen: Schemas

first sheet, front—preface—jo

	autumn	autumn	spring	spring	summer	winter
hokku	au	au [mn]	sp	sp	su	wi
wakiku	au	au [mn]	sp	sp	su	wi
daisan	au	au	sp	sp	su/ns	wi/ns
4 short	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
5 long	su mn	ns/wi	ns	wi mn	au mn	au mn
6 short	su	wi	au mn	wi	au	au

first sheet, back—development—ha part 1

7 long	su	ns	au	ns	au	au
8 short	ns lv	ns	au	ns	ns	ns lv
9 long	ns lv	ns lv	ns lv	ns	ns	ns lv
10 short	ns (lv)	ns lv	ns lv	ns	ns (lv)	ns (lv)
11 long	ns	ns (lv)	ns (lv)	au	ns lv	ns
12 short	wi	su [mn]	ns	au [mn]	wi	ns
13 long	wi mn	su [mn]	su mn	au [mn]	wi mn	su mn
14 short	ns	ns	su	ns	ns	su
15 long	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
16 short	ns	sp [bl]	ns	sp	sp	ns
17 long	sp bl	sp [bl]	sp bl	sp bl	sp bl	sp bl
18 short	sp	sp	sp	sp	sp	sp

THE FORMS OF RENKU

second sheet, front—development/intensification—ha part 2

19 long	sp	ns	sp	ns	sp	sp
20 short	ns	ns	ns	ns (lv)	ns	ns
21 long	ns	ns	ns	ns lv	ns (lv)	ns
22 short	ns	ns lv	ns	ns lv	su (lv)	ns
23 long	su	ns lv	wi	su (lv)	su lv	wi
24 short	su (lv)	su (lv)	wi	su	ns/wi lv	wi
25 long	ns lv	su	ns/su	ns	ns	ns (lv)
26 short	ns lv	ns	ns lv	ns	ns	ns lv
27 long	ns	ns	ns lv	ns	ns	ns lv
28 short	au	au [mn]	au	au	au	ns
29 long	au mn	au [mn]	au mn	au [mn]	au mn	au mn
30 short	au	au	au	au [mn]	au	au

second sheet, back—finale—kyu

31 long	au	ns	au	ns	au	au
32 short	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
33 long	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
34 short	sp/ns	sp	sp/ns	sp	sp/ns	sp/ns
35 long	sp bl	sp bl	sp bl	sp bl	sp bl	sp bl
ageku	sp	sp	sp	sp	sp	sp

- Notes
- sp/ns – spring is the more likely option
 - ns/wi – likewise non-season
 - ns/su – likewise non-season
 - su/ns – likewise summer
 - wi/ns – likewise winter
 - ns – non-season (miscellaneous) position
 - bl – blossom position
 - [bl] – alternate blossom position—for each adjacent pair the choice is either/or
 - mn (moon position)
 - [mn] – alternate moon position—for each adjacent pair the choice is either/or
 - lv – love position, indicative—love verses move as group
 - (lv) – additional love position, optional, indicative—love verses move as group