

## Background Notes for Teachers

The Japan Society (2022)

### What are Furin (風鈴)?

*Furin* means wind chime in Japanese. The most common type of *furin* is bowl shaped and made from glass (although it is not unusual to see *furin* made in different shapes and from other materials, including cast iron and ceramic). Suspended in the middle of the bowl is a thin rod (the clapper) with a strip of paper called *tanzaku* hanging from it. When the paper moves in the breeze, the clapper hits the bowl to make a delicate sound. The minimal quality of the sound produced echoes the *furin's* simple design and harks back to its origins as a temple bell.



The *furin* is a symbol of summer in Japan where the sound of the chime is associated with a refreshing breeze, bringing momentary relief to hot and humid days.

### A Brief History of Furin

*Furin* originated in China during the Tang Period (618-907) as bronze wind chimes that were used as fortune telling tools. (The chimes would be interpreted as signs of either good or bad fortune). *Furin* were introduced to Japan with Buddhism and were found hanging from temples; it was believed they offered protection from diseases and misfortune. During the Heian period (794-1185), Japanese nobility began to hang *furin* up at home, as a protective charm to ward off evil spirits.

*Furin* began to be produced in glass during the Edo period (1603-1867), as new glassmaking techniques were introduced to Japan via contact with the West through Nagasaki. They were initially expensive and therefore a luxury item, but as the price of glass decreased, *furin* became widespread. Red was a popular colour for *furin* as it was associated with warding off evil spirits.

Despite widespread use of air conditioning in contemporary Japan, *furin* and its cooling sound are still associated with summer and a common sight in the summer months. *Furin* can undoubtedly be spotted for sale as souvenirs at outdoor festivals and hung up outside peoples' homes.



## What are Tanzaku (短冊)?

*Tanzaku* are long, narrow strips of paper or card for short compositions (written vertically) such as poems or wishes and their use in Japan dates back hundreds of years.

## A Brief History of Tanzaku

The term is used in a number of ancient Japanese texts as a reference to any strip of paper (with a variety of uses including: notes, tokens, labels, drawing lots and so on), but over time came to refer exclusively to poem cards.

In the past, writing poems would have been the reserve of privileged members of society who were educated in the arts. Practicing calligraphy, which has long been considered an art form in Japan, was a mark of cultural refinement and sophistication. The custom of exchanging poems in elegant writing was particularly prevalent amongst members of the court and the cultural elite during the Heian period (794–1185). It is worth noting that *Tanzaku* are just one type of poem card; Japanese calligraphers devised cards of various shapes and sizes for compositions.

In the spring of 1598, the ruler of Japan (Hideyoshi Toyotomi) famously hosted an extravagant party to view the cherry blossoms. His guests wrote poems on *tanzaku* and hung them from the tree branches. This *tanzaku* collection is now designated as a national important cultural property. In modern Japan, *tanzaku* are associated with bright and decorative wish cards hung up during the Tanabata Festival (also called the Star Festival) celebrations every summer. Sendai in the Tohoku region has one of the largest and most famous Tanabata festivals in Japan.



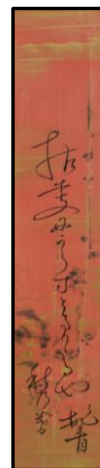
Left: Tanzaku showing personal wishes, hung up on bamboo to celebrate the Tanabata festival.

Right: Decorations at the Tanabata Festival in Sendai.

## What are Haiku (俳句)?

Haiku are a form of poetry, originally from Japan. Whilst haiku follow a strict syllable count of 5/7/5 in Japanese, this is not necessarily the case for haiku written in English. Instead haiku can be thought of as short poems, split over three lines. Haiku often capture a moment in time or contain a seasonal theme and the short form means the poet has no choice but to be minimal - stripping away unnecessary words and focusing on the essence of what they wish to convey.

Left: A haiku poem on tanzaku, Matsuo Basho, circa 1680s.



## A Brief History of Haiku

Haiku poems first emerged in Japanese literature during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as poems with a similar form called 'hokku' which evolved and later became established as an independent form, mainly due to the efforts of the poet Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902). Therefore the history of the modern haiku is officially considered to start around the late 1800s, however many poets from the Edo period (1603-1867) are renowned haiku masters, known as *haijin* in Japanese. These include: Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828), Yosa Buson (1716-1784) and the most famous, Matsuo Basho (1644 - 1694). Examples of their work are below.

old pond... a frog leaps in water's sound  Matsuo Basho	a thief vanishes over the rooftops night chill  Yosa Buson
autumn clear – the smoke of something goes into the sky  Masaoka Shiki	the coolness... the half moon shifts puddles  Kobayashi Issa

The earliest translations of haiku into English are believed to have been around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and influenced poets abroad as they became more widespread and popularity of the form grew.