

A stimulus for the senses

Sakura flowers bloom, but they only last for a few days and fall with good grace, suggesting a metaphor for the fragility and transience of human life.

*In an old temple
A bell is voiceless
Myriads of cherry-flower petals
swirl in the spring breeze*

THIS is a piece of *haiku*, an epigrammatic Japanese verse form of three short lines, depicting the beauty of *sakura* flowers. For centuries, this flower has appealed to and stimulated the aesthetic senses of artists – poets, writers, musicians and painters.

Back in my home nation, buds of this flower have begun blooming, heralding the arrival of spring. After having stood up to long and severe wintry months, we welcome the end of the hardships, and rejoice together at this happy moment.

No other time of the year is, therefore, more appropriate for graduation ceremonies at schools and universities. Hence, our academic year ends in March and commences in April, lauding efforts and perseverance and celebrating advancement to higher stages. So does our budgetary year, out of similar thoughts and wishes.

Early in March, denuded branches swiftly shoot out thousands of solid buds in the cold wind. Gradually, those buds swell and start blooming, one after another. Soon the whole tree is blanketed



Full bloom: People strolling under fully bloomed cherry blossom trees along a riverside promenade in Tokyo. — AFP

with tens of thousands of pale pink and white flowers. The tree looks as if it were covered with snow, against the blue sky.

Clustered cherry trees at the foot of mountains look as though a patch of cloud were drifting along. If illuminated by a bonfire in the darkness, the flowers create a natural pavilion for evening receptions.

And the flowers fall within days, prompted by rain and wind, though it is not cold any longer. Flowers are then replaced by fresh young leaves. As the Ambassador of Japan in

Malaysia, I am delighted to note that

many Malaysians now visit Japan to admire the beauty of *sakura* flowers. One of the features of *sakura* flowers

is its very short blooming period, about a week in average or, at the longest, 10 days, as well as the simultaneity of the time of bloom in one region.

The flowers come out almost at the same time throughout the region. This falls in early April in the centre of Japan.

We have been informed that most of the flights to Japan are already



Comment

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almost fully booked towards the end of March and early April. But, for those who might think you missed the opportunity this year, I would say, "Do not feel bitter. You are not too late at all."

The *sakura* blossom front moves from south to north along our 5,000 kilometre-long islands. You can catch up with the front and admire the same beauty early in May in the northern quarter of Japan, for example in Aomori. Our high-speed rail will take you to this city in the north, within a little over three hours from Tokyo.

Malaysian visitors to Japan hit a new record high last year, reaching 249,500 – surpassing the previous high of 176,713 in 2013. This registers a 41.3% increase.

If compared with 130,183 in 2012, the figure has almost doubled! Our nation welcomes tourists from Malaysia.

Sakura inspires various feelings in its viewers. Magnificent flowers bloom, but they only last for a few days and fall with good grace. Some say that *sakura* flowers are often a

metaphor for the fragility and transience of human life.

In marked contrast to the ephemerality of its flowers, the average life of *sakura* trees is very long. Some have lasted 1,000 years, while exceptional trees have even stood over 1,500 years.

An existing legendary tree in Nagano prefecture is said to have been planted about 2,000 years ago by a son of the 12th Emperor during his visit (note: the present Emperor is the 125th in an unbroken straight line of descent from the first Emperor). Every spring since then, this tree has borne blossoms.

In many countries around the world, flowers such as roses, orchids, tulips, lavender and lilies have enriched life. So do cherry blossoms in Japan.

Just as the *bunga raya* is the national flower of Malaysia, *sakura* represents Japan. *Sakura* flowers and trees represent the country's heart and soul – patience, persistence, continuity, genuine nobility, punctuality, regularity and spiritual purity.

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