

A New Era for Haiku*

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I would like to discuss certain issues inherent in haiku, not only from just the conventional point of view, but from the vantage point of a new era for haiku around the world. In 1957, a haiku poet and some critics had a round-table discussion on the future of haiku.¹ When critic Hideo Kanda said, “I don’t want to make haiku live any longer by force,” haiku poet Kusatao Nakamura replied, “I’d like to keep it alive till it comes to a conclusion.”² From their discussion, we can imagine that the haiku situation in the middle of the 20th century was that the leading figures in haiku felt this unique poetry form would fall into a decline sooner or later.

snowfalls—
the Meiji era
gone far

Kusatao Nakamura

降る雪や明治は遠くなりけり²

中村草田男 (1901–83)

Poetry forms which cannot adapt to the times now exist only in collections of past masterpieces. Today few poets try to adopt, for example, the alliterative verse form of brave Beowulf, or rhymed poems in stanzas like those by delicate William Wordsworth. In the previous century when everything around us had been modernized, a number of Japanese poets thought haiku would join such past poetry forms before long. However, this hasn’t occurred. Now haiku seems to be more popular than ever both in Japan and around the world.

The reason haiku has survived seems to lie in its innovative substance. In fact haiku has transformed itself to respond to circumstances in various times. I would like to mention here the distinctive features of haiku especially from its reformative point of view.

What Is Haiku?

Shortness

Haiku poets ask themselves, “What is the essence of haiku?” About this question, Akito Arima, president of the Haiku International Association (HIA), said in a haiku symposium in the International PEN Congress Tokyo 2010³ that the most important characteristic of haiku lies in its “shortness.” I agree with his assessment.

a kitten
however it is called
it answers back
Akito Arima

猫の子のどう呼ばれても答へけり⁴ 有馬朗人 (1930–)

(English translation by Emiko Miyashita & Lee Gurga)

From fixed-form rhymed lyrics to present-day free verse, detailed description has been the important characteristic of Western poetry. The essence of haiku, on the other hand, lies in the fact that even this fragment-like poetry can express something poetic. Why are Western poems longer? The simplest explanation for it might be that all of those lines are needed to convey the poet’s ideas to readers. That is to say, even a thousand-line epic or a dozen-line lyric would not have any unnecessary lines.

Now, why can haiku be so short? The explanation is this: although it is short, it can convey a profound poetic meaning. How then can haiku convey meaning in spite of its brevity? I think it is because, historically, Japanese people have been able to gain almost the same impression from one word or phrase. Critic Shōichi Watanabe mentioned that the reason haiku can convey meaning is because it is written on the basis of a common association of ideas between the poet and readers.⁵ When one word has exactly the same meaning for both, then they may come to a mutual understanding on the basis of just that one word. As you know, “flowers/blossoms” in haiku mean

“cherry blossoms” when used without any other modifiers. Watanabe said that short poems like haiku came into existence presupposing the same, strong association of ideas. In Japan since the time of the *Man'yō-shū*, the ancient poetry anthology (from the 7th to 8th century), poetry has become shorter and shorter as these common associations of ideas have become stronger and stronger.

The common association of ideas seems to owe much to Japan’s centralization of government. The Imperial Court and then the Shogunate were not only the center of politics, but also of culture. After hundreds of years of their government, people came to share the same language, culture, and history. As a result, sharing the common association of ideas, people could communicate with each other in only 17 syllables. Japan’s *sakoku* (the national isolation policy) during the Edo period would have reinforced this tendency.

The Fixed Form

This 17-syllable short Japanese verse has a well-known important characteristic: the fixed form. However, most Japanese poets do not recognize haiku as 17-*on* verse (*on* literally means “sound”; in English, a kind of “syllable”), but as a whole poetic rhythm of 5–7–5. Japanese poets almost never count the number of *on* (i.e., the number of syllables) when composing haiku; the haiku fixed form lies in the poetic rhythm itself, not in the number of syllables. Bashō’s famous frog pond haiku goes like this in Japanese:

Furuike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto Matsuo Bashō

古池や蛙飛こむ水のをと⁶ 松尾芭蕉

When we consider “what haiku is,” its short structure is closely linked with the fixed form, particularly in the Japanese language. However, when we look outside of Japan, the fixed style often disappears, and only its shortness emerges as a distinctive factor, as Arima said.

Humor

Humor is another characteristic of *haikai*/haiku. *Haikai* literally means “humor,” and it is what separates *haikai* from *waka*. *Waka* was written mainly by nobles and had conventional poetic subjects of serious aristocratic taste. When composing it, deviation from the poetical tradition was basically not accepted because such a thing was thought to be unrefined. On the other hand, *haikai* (*-no-renga*) developed among common people who attended haiku meetings for making collaborative poems since around the 16th century. It was to some extent a parody of serious *waka*, and people considered this comical nature to be important rather than the traditional subject, because most of the attendees, who may not have understood much of detailed conventional literary connotation, could understand humor. By composing *haikai* together, the common people resisted the political and cultural establishment—not by rioting, but by laughing off the conventional aristocratic poetry. Even today, humor still remains one of the characteristics of haiku.

meow meow the violin
kicking the moon
and there goes moo

Toshio Kimura

ミャーミャーバイオリン月蹴ってモー⁷

木村聡雄 (1956–)

Haikuness

You can find many short poems or fragmented phrases around the world, but such poems would not always be recognized as haiku. We may sometimes ask ourselves, “Is this haiku or not?” Once a female haiku poet, Sonoko Nakamura, told me as a young student that when a poet decides his/her poem is haiku, it can be haiku. An interesting interpretation, isn’t it?

in the other world
still combing my hair
—alone

Sonoko Nakamura

黄泉に来てまだ髪梳くは寂しけれ⁸

中村苑子 (1913–2001)

However, sometimes other people might not recognize it as haiku, so the problem may not be so easy. We ask ourselves again, “What makes haiku essentially haiku-like?” About this, I have not yet heard a definitive answer. All the same, if a haiku poem has such “haikuness” in it, not only traditional haiku, but also free form *jiyūritsu* haiku and non-seasonal avant-garde haiku could be recognized as haiku. This may be like a Zen riddle. In a sense, it may be Japanese psyche or mentality, a kind of national cultural sort of thing. Japanese haiku poets probably feel it in their hearts, even though they do not have any idea how to explain it.

Haiku and Zen

There was an Englishman who spread haiku around the world in the mid-20th century. I suppose you know his name well: R.H. Blyth (1898–1964). Blyth made one primary assertion about haiku: “Haiku are to be understood from the Zen point of view.”⁹ Concerning this insistence, I think that while people admire his contribution to the development of haiku around the world, some still feel that he connected haiku to Zen too much. I also thought at first that haiku is one thing and Zen Buddhism another. Each aims for a different goal; haiku, toward a poetical peak, Zen, a religious one.

As I pondered what haiku is, however, I came to realize that Blyth’s statement on haiku and Zen can be understood as a kind of rhetoric meant to evoke the poetical truth. I guess that in his statement, the term “Zen” could suggest what you might call a method of “Zen riddles” here, rather than Buddhist faith as such. And through these riddles, his words may hint at a “haiku moment” when the poet is in contact with the poetic truth.

In both Zen riddles and haiku, no explanation is required: they rely on “intuition,” which surely seems to be inconsistent with minute descriptions in longer poetry forms like some Western ones. Avoiding lengthy explanations, a poet might even—with

an instant inspiration—reach universal truth. I think this kind of “grasp by intuition” may be the essence of haiku and the virtue of its shortness. I imagine that in this galaxy of haiku intuition various haiku techniques and methods, like Bashō’s *wabi / sabi* (elegant simplicity), Shiki’s *shasei* (sketches), Kyōshi’s *kachō-fūei* (nature themes), *jiyūritsu* (free-verse style), and even “non-seasonal avant-garde haiku” are revolving, like planets, around the axis of poetic truth. This would be the line that divides haiku from other general short poems.

a boy—
just like spring
after 60 years

Kōi Nagata

少年や六十年後の春の如し¹⁰

永田耕衣 (1900–1997)

only two blades
of grass growing
—time

Kakio Tomizawa

草二本だけ生えてゐる 時間¹¹

富澤赤黄男 (1902–1962)

Cutting

Another conventional haiku technique is *kire*, or cutting. We sometimes use *kireji* (cutting words like *-ya*, or *-kana*); however, without cutting words, a haiku poem can be cut into mainly two parts: you can simply call it “juxtaposition.” And if such juxtaposition is given unexpectedly in haiku, we may see an image evoking modern surrealism:

Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table.¹²

Kire is, in fact, an ideal technique that allows for multiple images within haiku’s short form. When we consider *kire* as a kind of device with which we can reach insight without

explanation, the role and significance of it can be better understood. Here again we could recognize that this technique can be related to Blyth's insistence about haiku and Zen from the intuitive point of view. Thus, I argue that the essence of haiku lies in its shortness with associations of ideas and intuition.

my friend—
one of my arms
already a demon

Shigenobu Takayanagi

友よ我は片腕すでに鬼となりぬ¹³

高柳重信 (1923–1983)

The Problem of Seasonal Images in Haiku

Haiku and Nature Themes

Haiku is often said to be a poetry form with conventional nature subjects. Undoubtedly, you have already heard arguments along that line. Here I would like to discuss seasonal themes from a different point of view, so that we see another side of this issue.

In Japan and other places, haiku may be thought to have developed as the only poetry specializing in season. However, this interpretation does not seem to be accurate. When you examine the history of Japanese poetry, you realize that before *haikai*/haiku was born, nature themes were already included in most ancient Japanese poetry and developed as one of its main subjects. When *haikai* appeared, it shared those seasonal subjects with other Japanese poetry.

Kenkichi Yamamoto, a leading critic of the traditional school, said, "Concerning a rule that haiku has season words, you would never convince all the people of the reason."¹⁴ Though Bashō basically composed haiku with seasonal themes, he once told his disciple Kyorai that if *hokku* didn't have seasonal subjects, other subjects could be used:

The subjects of *hokku* include not only “the four seasons,” but also “love,” “travels,” “noted places,” and “the separation of people”; and non-seasonal haiku would be good.¹⁵

Here is one of Bashō’s famous non-seasonal haiku:

if on foot . . .
on the Tuetsuki-zaka hill
falling from my horse! Bashō

歩行ならば 杖つき坂を落馬哉¹⁶ 芭蕉

Subjects in *Waka*

In ancient and medieval times, most poetry in the world would have been written following conventional themes. Needless to say, a poet’s original thoughts or private feelings as a focus in poetry are products of the self-consciousness of modern times. *Waka*, a direct ancestor of *haikai*/haiku, had some conventional regular subjects and Bashō’s words quoted previously were conscious of them. Among several subjects, *waka* poets preferred subjects of “love” and “season,” and we can imagine such poetical themes were essential in all times, especially in Japan. Thus seasonal subjects originally developed as conventions in *waka*.

It is said the reason that ancient poetry like *waka* included nature themes lies in the climate in Japan. People there have always enjoyed the changes of the four seasons. Another reason is the agrarian lifestyle: the Japanese people subsisted mainly on a vegetable diet. Growing crops is influenced by weather, and as a result people came to be very conscious of climate. For them, nature was not just something to be conquered as in the West, but to get along with. These situations contributed much to the seasonal themes in *waka* from ancient times. For example, the moon was one of the most popular nature themes: since the Japanese depended on the lunar calendar, when they saw the moon, they knew the date of the month.

in the sea of heaven
waves of clouds,
the ship of the moon
into the forest of stars
rowing in and out

Kakinomoto no Hitomaro

天の海に 雲の波立ち 月の船 星の林に 漕ぎ隠る見ゆ¹⁷

柿本人麻呂 (c.660–c.720)

Seasonal Subjects as Abstract Ideas

Even though Japan is a much smaller country than the U.S., the climate in the north and south is different: in September Tohoku (the northern district) is already cold, but in Kyushu (the southern district) it is still hot. The sense of the season in Japan will be felt considerably differently from end to end, and there are different plants and animals in those places. Such differences of weather may be compared to those between Chicago and Miami, for example. Some poets may wonder whether it might be inconvenient to share the same seasonal subject in the north and the south areas when they write seasonal poems.

Traditionally people would not have been troubled by such things when writing *waka*, because the ancient and medieval poets did not make sketches of things in front of them in their poems. Historically seasonal subjects in *waka* developed as “ideal abstract concepts.” That is to say, before modern times, when you composed a poem, a subject you were going to write about was often given in advance by a master of a salon and you were expected to follow custom or the precedents of famous poems. One poet from the north and another poet from the south could employ the same abstract poetic subject at the same time.

Where, then, was the point between them that would set the standard for the season word? It was the place of the centralized government, Kyoto, and later, Edo. Kyoto was the capital when *waka* thrived, and was the center of the seasonal ideas. At that time, people who wrote *waka* were mainly nobles and many of them were living in Kyoto. Unlike the U.S., which has multiple cultural centers, Japan is small enough to have one

central spot. Even today, Japanese youth from the provinces try to imitate the newscasters' standard Japanese pronunciation or like to mimic the fashion trends in Aoyama or Harajuku, Tokyo. This center-oriented spirit among Japanese people has been nurtured from ancient times. Cultural matters in Kyoto became the model for associations of poetry subjects. Powerful regional nobles tried to follow the standard Kyoto mode. If you did not follow the conventional Kyoto manners on seasonal subjects in *waka*, you may have been considered to be uneducated, and if you were nobles in that time, you would surely have wanted to avoid that.

Again, individualism and localism are the products of modern times. When you write *waka* on the subject of *ume* (apricot) flower, whether it is in bloom or not in front of your eyes, you should praise (or mourn for) the flower in the style following that of the famous ancient poets. The point is not its originality, but how well you can do it in the conventional way. It is homage to those preceding masterworks.

all the apricots
blossom forth,
as spring not far away—
How vain am I
not awaiting?

Ki no Tsurayuki

梅もみな 春近しとて 咲くものを まつ時もなきわれや何なる¹⁸

紀貫之 (c.872–c.945)

Haikai adopted those subjects used in *waka*, especially the seasonal themes, probably because even for the common people the changes of seasons were much clearer than other sophisticated conventional literary manners. After a while “season words” came to be established in *hokku* (the first stanza of *haikai*).

A Reason for the Existence of *Kigo*

In the late 19th century (the Meiji Era), *waka* was transformed into modern poetry and its name was changed to *tanka*, though the 31-syllable (5–7–5–7–7) structure was not altered. This

change also meant that the tanka form threw away the whole system of conventional subjects in *waka*, including seasonal ones. Thus tanka was reborn as a modern fixed-form poetry, which is not restricted by any traditional rules or subjects, except its 31 syllables (usually five lines in English).

On the other hand, haiku took over the seasonal subject from *haikai* even after “the haiku reformation” by Shiki in the Meiji period. About this, critic Shigehiko Toyama observed, “Haiku was modernized incompletely.”¹⁹ I believe the reason for this may lie in its shortness, as I argued in the previous section: haiku is so short it needed some common poetic associations to convey meaning. If so, that also means that any subject (including non-seasonal ones) could have been used in haiku as long as it evoked common associations. Seasonal themes may have been more familiar at *haikai*/haiku meetings since such subjects were usually used as seasonal greetings, and because they can evoke a similar “association of ideas” among people. Tanka form, on the other hand, is long enough that it does not always need such an association of ideas to be understood.

I think that today this “incomplete” modernization of haiku is actually felt as traditional and thus authentic and, as a consequence, exotic to people around the world. However, concerning that incomplete evolution, there remains the possibility of arguments by innovative poets that haiku must be “completely” modern in our 21st century. One of the vital points for its modernization seems to lie in the problem of non-seasonal themes.

Regarding the existence of season words, haiku poet and critic Bansei Tsukushi says, “the only grounds for the existence of season words in haiku is that haiku was ‘*daiei*’ (that is, the poetry form ‘with given themes’).”²⁰ I agree with the gist of this remark.

falling cherry blossoms:
if sea is so blue
falling onto it

Sōshū Takaya

ちるさくら海あをければ海へちる²¹

高屋窓秋 (1910–1984)

A New Haiku Era

Metamorphosis in New Haiku

Some transformation in reading and composing haiku seems to be occurring outside Japan with the globalization of haiku in the 20th century—and this is related to the “common association of ideas” that has been said to be a part of the essence of haiku shortness. When people other than Japanese read Japanese haiku, in translation or not, they might not be aware of the traditional association of ideas. I understand that most HSA members, for instance, understand such connotations well, but I suppose that most readers in the world do not care much about Japanese *kigo*, for example.

Japanese readers always call up connotations from Japanese culture when reading *waka* or haiku; however, for non-Japanese readers the same expression may often be interpreted without this traditional association. That is to say, even if part of a haiku poem remains blank (with almost no connotation of *waka/haikai* conveyed), they can still enjoy haiku by Bashō or Issa, or any other Japanese poets. Indeed, these readers might fill the blank with their own imagination. Although this fact seems to contradict the suggestion by Watanabe, I should say that from the historical view of haiku development his opinion is correct. This metamorphosis in reading which allows for a blank part in haiku seems to have occurred in the 20th century after haiku spread around the world.

If some words in a haiku poem don't bring up a traditional association of ideas, and still the poem can be understood as haiku, then the complicated connotations behind the conventional *kigo* might be no longer necessary in haiku in the 21st century. For many haiku readers in the world, “flowers” may no longer be “cherry blossoms,” nor a spring thing, but might just be flowers, as the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé suggested:

I say: a flower! and outside the oblivion. . . , there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one absent from every bouquet.²²

Here, a new way of reading haiku could develop further. Because Japanese people cannot help reading haiku without getting some association of ideas from season words, the Japanese reading style might tend to be limited to a conventional base. However, outside Japan I suppose new chemical reactions may be occurring between a haiku poem and non-Japanese readers. Readers around the world might enjoy a kind of “blank” part in and of itself, imagining just as they like in the absence of Japanese traditional background ideas.

In addition, poets other than Japanese might write their own haiku with their own “blank” parts in them. Again, such haiku could be understood just as they are without conventional connotations, and still be enjoyable from the point of poetic insight. In this way, haiku from around the world are transformed into newer haiku, which convey new poetic meaning without traditional association. New haiku could open up new territory of the future of haiku in ways that conservative Japanese poets have never imagined.

elm tree—
you show your back
with your noble feeling

Ikuya Katō

楡よ、お前は高い感情の後ろを見せる²³ 加藤郁乎 (1929–2013)

Toward a New Era—Conclusion

The concept of “nature poetry” is surely a tradition of great interest. However, if haiku today is no longer *daiei* (the poetry form with given themes) but one of the universal short poetry forms, we should not be bound by old season subjects any longer. I know that some modern haiku poets enjoy writing haiku following only their own poetic imaginations, employing subjects other than seasonal ones—actually we have many non-seasonal haiku both in Japan and in the rest of the world. When considering haiku in a new era, we have to examine both positions: one to keep the tradition; the other

to search for new poetic possibility in reforming the old style. Bashō's point, that "the subjects of *hokku* include not only 'the four seasons' . . . and non-seasonal haiku could be good," is still valid in this very 21st century.

returned—
just bending the head
as a flower

Toshio Kimura

帰還せりただうつむいて花として²⁴

木村聡雄

Notes

*This essay was first presented as a keynote speech at the Annual National Meeting of the Haiku Society of America, in Evanston, IL, September 28, 2013. All English translations of poems and quotations cited are by the author, except as mentioned.

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Born in 1956 in Tokyo, Japan, Toshio Kimura is a haiku poet and professor of comparative literature at Nihon University. His haiku collections include In the Distance (2001) and Little Brier Rose (2010) [both in Japanese], as well as Phantasm of Flowers (2002) [in English].