

Following Bashō Following *Zoka*

by Janice Doppler

Chinese philosophy and poetry spread to Japan over a thousand years ago. In modern times, Westerners have become aware of Zen and the yin-yang symbol. A concept unknown to most westerners, *zoka*, was important to Bashō. What is *zoka*? Why did Bashō follow it?

This essay explores concepts easily understood within an Asian mindset, but challenging for Westerners. Explaining *zoka* is difficult since the notion is absent in English. Western cognitive patterns focus on discrete pieces in order to understand the whole; however, *zoka* is a whole that is the sum of inseparable aspects. *Zoka* is also embedded in cyclical patterns that don't fit the normative linear patterns of the west. The cyclical nature of *zoka* makes some repetition unavoidable.

As Bashō's haiku descendants, his roots are our roots. Is this particular root relevant to modern Western poets? If so, what potential does it hold for deepening haiku?

What Is *Zoka*?

The definition of *zoka* has been translated in varied ways. All are accurate; none are accurate. Each definition points toward meaning that exists within the space between them. Taken together, they can be understood intuitively rather than intellectually. *Zoka* is:

- the synthesis of, workings of, and embodiment of the *Dao/Way* in which everything is perpetually emerging, transforming, and returning to its source
- the vitality and creativity of nature
- the unpredictable force of nature that constructs and deconstructs all objects
- the unbridled, never static nor stagnant, creative force of nature
- nature's tendency and ability to continuously self-transform
- the creative force of nature that has the spontaneous tendency to generate transformations
- transience and impermanence

Zoka is a force, not an entity. *Zoka* is not simply nature, as in a collection of plants and animals or a wild place. *Zoka* is not something outside nature that is directing nature or bringing things into being. It should not be confused with a spiritual deity nor translated as the Creator. Perhaps it is like the Force in *Star Wars* movies.

Bashō and Zoka

In this essay, *zoka* is described in the context of Chinese philosophy. This is relevant to Japanese-style poetry because aesthetic ideals in Chinese poetry, Daoist philosophy, and Chan Buddhism that reached Japan from China during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) were popular among Japanese scholars, painters, and poets for centuries before and during the time of Bashō (1644–1694 CE). *Zoka* was embedded within that spread.

In his translation of *Matsuo Bashō's Travel Writings*, Steven D. Carter identifies *zoka* as “a term used by Bashō in reference to the dynamic spirit that informs the natural world and the inner workings of the cosmos.” Carter translates a portion of *Knapsack Notes* as:

The waka of Saigyō, the renga of Sōgi, the paintings of Sesshū, the tea of Rikyū—there is one thread that runs through them all. For it is the essence of art to follow the Way of creation, taking the four seasons as a companion. Do that, and what you see will never *not* be a flower; what you ponder will never *not* be the moon. To not see the form before you as a flower is to be like a barbarian; to not have a flower in your mind is to be like the birds and the beasts. So, I say, go out from among the barbarians, separate yourself from the birds and beasts: follow the creative, get back to the creative!

In the footnote for this quote, Carter explains that the “one thread” that runs through the work of the masters is a “commitment to *zoka*, the creative.” In haiku, this thread is the creative spirit of the universe merging with a poet to create images that imply

transformation that is beyond words. *Zoka* is the mysterious process that brings a beautiful landscape itself into being rather than the objects in the landscape.

What the Ancients Sought

Kūkai (744–835 CE), founder of Shingon Buddhism, said “Do not seek the traces of the ancients, seek what they sought.” Bashō encouraged his contemporaries to accomplish this by seeking the principles ancients sought rather than copying their styles and old trends of writing.

Ancient sages sought to comprehend the ever-changing universe. They came to understand a cosmos in which the *Dao (Tao)*,¹ the Way, emerged from an undifferentiated Void. From that, two inseparable energies arose that continuously shape and reshape the *Dao* into the “ten-thousand myriad things”—all the living and non-living things in the cosmos. One of the energies fuels the process in which all things come into being and then transform, and the other is the condensed energy of everything in the universe. The Creative is both energies simultaneously; perhaps similar to light existing simultaneously as waves and particles. The Creative is called *zaohua* in Chinese, *zoka* in Japanese, and written 造化 in both. *Zoka* is ineffable—beyond human ability to define, categorize, or predict . . . and yet, we try.

Thinking of complementary yet opposing forces, known as yin and yang in popular culture, can be helpful, although those terms did not come into use until centuries after *Yijing (I Ching)* and the *Zhuangzi*, which will be discussed later. The familiar yin–yang symbol depicts interconnected light and dark “fish” containing small circles of the opposite value. Imagine this flat symbol as a sphere containing a formless mix of light and dark molecules. Tension between light and dark causes movement that never stops. Something mysterious happens. Light and dark separate and become visible. Next, bits of light and dark spontaneously take form. Whatever initially caused the movement shapes things from itself. The things exist for a while and then sink back into the formlessness within the sphere.

In this metaphor, the formless mix represents the *Dao*. The light is yang, dark is yin. The small dark circle in the light fish is a bit of yin in the yang; the small light circle in the dark fish is bits of yang in the dark yin. The tension between fish and circles generates movement. The energy that constantly shapes itself is the Creative, *zoka*. The Creative initiates and its counterpart, the Responsive, completes the development of “ten-thousand myriad things.”

Since ancient times, *The Book of Changes or Yijing*, completed around 1000–750 BCE, has been a guide for learning to flow with the twists and turns of the cosmos, understanding one’s place within the structure and dynamics of the cosmic order, and practicing contemplative self-cultivation. *Yijing* was the foundation for later texts: *Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)*, attributed to Laozi, and the *Zhuangzi (Chuang tzu)* by Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE). The concept of *zoka* originated in the *Zhuangzi*. Bashō quoted from, and urged his students to read and know, the *Zhuangzi*.

Yijing

The basic tenet of *Yijing* is that everything emerges from, and returns to, *Dao (Tao)* through a continuous and never-ending process of birth, transformation, death, and rebirth initiated and sustained by the Creative. The *Yijing* uses sixty-four hexagrams to explore how humans can align with the flow of changes in the universe. The first hexagram is the Creative and the second is the Responsive. All other hexagrams explore the flow of change resulting from varied interactions between the Creative and the Responsive.

As you may be guessing, the first hexagram focuses on *zoka*. My assumption is that it is important to understand qualities of the flow to be able to align with it. I studied Creative and Responsive in eight English translations of *Yijing*. My goal was to mine information about the qualities, then identify patterns that could be applicable to haiku and other Japanese short-form poetry.

The Creative is the workings of *Dao*, and the Responsive is what can be seen. Creative is the source of the ten thousand things. Responsive

responds to the generative character of Creative to manifest physical forms such as mountains, lakes, shrubs, trees. It circulates material force (*qi*) to let clouds scud and rain fall. Creative and Responsive complement each other; neither can exist without the other. The opening of the Creative and the closing of the Responsive are the gateway to change in the cosmos. The combination of one opening and the other closing equals a tiny change. The constant, inexhaustible, never-ending opening and closing results in a flow of change. As one small action displaces another, over and over, change and transformation arise. Creative and Responsive are aspects of the same *qi*. The *qi* of the Creative is formless energy. *Qi* condenses into matter in the Responsive. Humans are incapable of plumbing the depths of these mysterious processes. Following *zoka* is following this mystery.

Zhuangzi

For centuries, myriad Chinese and Japanese scholars, monks, artists, and poets turned to the *Zhuangzi* as a source of inspiration. Bashō carried it on his journeys. It is a seemingly random collection of narratives—seven “inner” chapters written by Zhuangzi, and several “outer chapters” written by his followers. Reading it until the stories become part of you is more useful than systematic study.

I read the inner chapters in five translations, expecting to find a specific explanation of *zoka*. Instead, I discovered two themes that relate to *zoka*. The first, meditation, was illustrated through narratives about sages who meditated to achieve a state of mind beyond that of daily life—“open mind” or “no-mind.” Since Daoist (Taoist) principles and Chan (Ch’an) Buddhism were melded into Zen in Japan, and since Bashō is associated with Zen, this was not surprising. The second theme, the inseparability of things, was framed in two principles: (a) all things are equal and (b) the importance of finding the balance between opposites that appear to be opposites even though they are made of, and driven by, the same energy—*qi*—which is the cosmic life force that pulses through the universe simultaneously as matter and energy. These forms of *qi* are so intermingled that they cannot always be distinguished, and yet they separate into yang as universal breath that is in constant motion and that animates all things and yin that is matter that gives form.

Implications for Poets

The unpredictable rhythm of *zoka* creating, empowering, and shifting the seasons has been a source of inspiration for Chinese and Japanese poets from ancient to modern times. Ancient sages pondered cosmic mysteries through what they could see—sun, moon, and the seasons. Cultural memory, education, and experience define what each person sees and feels. Perceiving *zoka* can be difficult for Westerners; however, some Western poets have already found it. For example:

sunlit rain
a snail extends
its eyestalks

Chuck Brickley
Cicada 1981

ocean ripples . . .
the shape of wind
everywhere

*Don Baird*²
Haiku Wisdom, Modern English Tanka Press, 2011

thunder
the roses shift
into shadow

Roberta Beary
10th Kusamakura International Haiku Contest Grand Prize (2005)

Observing the Visible

Transformations in the cosmos work in dimensions of time and space that are exceedingly difficult for humans to understand. *Yijing* makes them somewhat understandable by using day and night and the seasons as metaphors. The sun represents light, and the moon represents dark. As per *Yijing*, light and dark are the main movers in the universe. The shift between light and dark creates the four seasons.

Poets might investigate shifts between light and dark by pondering:

- subtleties in shadows and/or reflected light
- how the dark side of a mountain differs from, and is similar to, the light side
- changes associated with the coming and withdrawing of light and of dark
- how light brings new incarnations, and dark withdraws what life has yielded (such as mushrooms growing from nutrients of decomposing matter)
- how things grow, maintain equilibrium, and then disintegrate when light is withdrawing
- how things build up visible existence and also break down as visible existence is withdrawing (for example, sap rises under daylight's warmth while roots return under night's coldness)

Creation in spring, development in summer, fruition in autumn, and consummation in winter are all functions of the same energy. Creation births strength; development expands strength; fruition fulfills strength; and consummation consolidates strength. Each season has particular characteristic qualities:

- **Spring:** initiation; sprouting; originating; first arising; beginning positive energy
- **Summer:** prosperity; growing; developing; extension and expansion of positive energy; all things develop and flourish
- **Fall:** harmony; blooming; maturing; benefits of positive energy; goodness
- **Winter:** steadfastness; storing things; declining; resting of positive energy; quiescence; returning to the root

Observing the Invisible

The *Dao* is a macrocosm in which invisible, ineffable, and mysterious processes bring about the rise and fall of the ten thousand things. The rise and fall of thoughts and emotions in human consciousness is a

microcosm of the *Dao*. The *Zhuangzi* frequently alludes to “meditative experience.” In Zen, meditators watch thoughts rise from, and return to, consciousness with the intent of experiencing empty consciousness—known in Chan/Zen as “empty mind” or “no-mind.” Every poet has experienced moments when haiku rise and fall away forever if not jotted down immediately. Is this comparable to the rising and falling away that occurs in Zen meditation?

Much has been made of Bashō and Zen. His spirituality was integral to how he viewed the world and this affected how he wrote of the world. Bashō’s spirituality and how it impacted his poetry is an example of the human impulse to seek mystery beyond ourselves. This impulse has been given many names, has been experienced in many ways—some religious, some secular. Consciousness is the likely center regardless of the form used to explore the impulse.

Cultivating a haiku practice can be a way of cultivating one’s inner self. Watching a skyful of stars, a field of fireflies, a hawk crossing a meadow, or any of the ten thousand things with “empty mind” can be a meditative experience that sparks internal movement from which something emerges within the consciousness. Something that goes beyond the moment being experienced to something intuited rather than thought . . . a moment in the never-ending flow of *zoka*. Perhaps this is what is called a haiku moment. Perhaps the flow of *zoka* is about consciousness as spirituality—or perhaps consciousness is spirituality. Perhaps a word other than spirituality is needed, since that word is often connected with religion—something that has divided people for millennia. Each poet defines it according to their personal beliefs, understandings of the world, and mysteries experienced. We each experience it individually even in groups of like-minded people—think of the variety of haiku that rise during a ginko, for example.

When a haiku works well, it is a burgeoning forth from the empty-mind consciousness of the poet experiencing a moment, the Creative. The poet accepts the moment that comes, forms images for haiku, drops back into meditative observation. The resulting haiku, the Responsive, offers openness and space for the reader. Reading haiku

can be a meditative method of following *zoka* by encountering the open space created for the reader to intuit. The minds of the poet and the reader are part of the same generative energy. One is yang, one yin. Each haiku is a moment without a past or future, just the moment of observation and the moment of reading.

Questions that might foster pondering the invisible:

1. How are living and non-living things transformed and regulated?
2. What starts movement?
3. What starts action in this moment, and how does it develop?
4. What are the subtle changes within this development?
5. What small change is happening at this moment? How does it parallel larger changes?
6. Once moving, how does the free flow of change manifest?
7. What are examples of the ineffable, and how can they be brought to light?
8. What potentialities exist in the stillness?

Conclusion

In the *Dao* of haiku, each poet finds a balance among immediate experience, a scientific account of the cosmos, and their internal realm. We know from the modern science of ecology that all living things on earth, including humans, are part of a complex food web. Biologist Ursula Goodenough names components of “the mystery of nature” in *The Sacred Depths of Nature*: the vastness of distances in the cosmos, impermanence, pulsing, emergence of something from nothing, biological patterns, big and small rhythms of nature, adaptations to a habitat, interactions within the web of life, connections among all creatures everywhere, and the flow of energy from source to sink. Mystery can be stirred in the short-term by tides, seasons, and weather; in the long-term by tectonics and glaciation. Any of these are useful for pondering *zoka*. All are sources of inspiration for haiku.

Just as the definitions of *zoka* early in this article are all correct and all incorrect, everything in this article is true and everything false. Each reader can ponder the concepts and draw different conclusions. Each reader will be totally right and totally wrong, yet following *zoka* is beyond right or wrong.

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Notes:

1. There are two systems for romanizing Chinese characters. The Wade-Giles system, developed by two Englishmen in the mid-nineteenth century, and pinyin, developed in the twentieth century by the Chinese government. Pinyin is currently in use in China. Either appear in texts. In this article, pinyin is used followed by Wade-Giles in parenthesis. For example, *Dao* and *Yijing* are pinyin while *Tao* and *I Ching* are Wade-Giles.
2. For a haiku collection focused on *zoka*, see Don Baird's *As the Crow Flies*. It is available at the Haiku Foundation website.

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