

Internationalizing the Essence of Haiku Poetry

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Haiku poetry developed over centuries in Japan, taking on such distinct characteristics that protective Japanese haikuists regard it as an inimitable part of their literature, aesthetics, and culture. At the same time, teachers all over the world have children write “haiku” poems in their own languages. There are also many English haiku contests and anthologies, some including Japanese judges, sponsors, editors or entrants, suggesting the internationalization of haiku. Therefore to decide between the conflicting claims as to whether non-Japanese are able to write real haiku poetry or not, the essential characteristics of this genre must be clarified.

The 5-7-5 syllable pattern captures much attention, but it becomes arbitrary when applied to other languages. The Japanese language differs in many ways from Indo-European and most other languages. Its sound system is based on syllables of similar length, in contrast with a stress-timed language like English. There are only five basic vowel sounds, a, i, u, e, and o, pronounced respectively like ‘ah’, ‘ee’, ‘oo’, ‘eh’, and ‘oh’ – similar to Italian) and several diphthongs (double vowels such as ai – pronounced like ‘I’). Rhyming is thus difficult to avoid in Japanese, yet rhyming is not considered aesthetically pleasing in Japanese poetry. On the other hand, the 5-7-5 syllable pattern was often violated by Shiki, the last iconic haiku poet who was active about a century ago. For such reasons, the 5-7-5 syllable pattern should not be a strict criterion for what constitutes haiku in languages other than Japanese. Alternatively, the very arbitrariness of the syllable pattern could be leveraged to instill in students the discipline of rewriting, or a formal haiku competition could require that approximate pattern as a bow to Japanese conventions.

Notwithstanding the above elasticity, the grossest error would be to consider haiku as merely short poems. In any language, the shortness of haiku should not be taken as a sign of ease. While there are general rules of 5-7-5 Japanese syllables for *haiku* and 5-7-5-7-7 for *waka* or *tanka*, there is another genre of similar length called *senryu* for poems that are not profound, that can be witty and refer to people or social situations directly. The most essential formal criterion for a poem to be considered a haiku is that it contains a seasonal reference (*kigo*). Nature symbolism provides the metaphors. It is a compact language of imagery, connected to emotions, yet nonetheless profound to the writer and reader. In language, rhetorical structure, and indeed the whole process of making meaning, haiku poems contrast starkly with Indo-European forms of expression in poetry, philosophy and religion.

Hajime Nakamura provides the key explanation in the book *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, Tibet, China, Japan*. Whereas Indian thought is at least as abstract as Western thought, ways of thinking are increasingly concretistic as one goes to China and most of all in Japan. Unlike Western or Indian verses that tend to be abstract or metaphysical, haiku poetry is

characterized by concrete nature symbolism. Haiku poetry at its best does hark back to Zen Buddhism in the tradition of Bodhidharma. It stems from the pithy phrases that accompanied the liberating insights of Chinese Ch'an practitioners. The earthy phrases about cows and so forth were sometimes handed down to serve as conundrums that transcended reasoning, called *koan* in Japanese, for Zen practitioners to contemplate. Meditative approaches have been in decline for a millennium, along with such deep experiences, but the concretistic way of thinking remains in haiku as a conventionalized form of expression using *kigo* seasonal references to evoke the symbolism in nature.

It would be a mistake to start with a conventional *kigo* rather than with one's own experience of nature itself and reflections thereupon. For what characterizes haiku most of all is deep meaning or profound insight that is authentic and contextualized in nature. The customary break in a haiku poem between the second and third line, or the equivalent break in a haiku that is written all on one line, allows for dividing and uniting different images, often suggesting a surprising relationship, opening up multidimensionality like a leap from a precipice. The haiku poem has to be able to stand alone without any explanation on the strength of the moving picture painted by its images. Then through the universality of nature symbolism, the reader provides the final dimension, connecting the elements without intellectualizing into a whole picture that speaks directly to the being of the reader as it did for the author.

If deep meaning is a criterion, children's poems would not be considered haiku. Even so, children are able to intuitively employ natural imagery, sometimes anthropomorphically, which is not unlike haiku writing, and such creativity is to be encouraged developmentally and educationally. It would be counterproductive to try to proscribe teachers from assigning "haiku" poems or to exclude beginners. Much poetry called haiku even in Japanese falls short of communicating a deep meaning. With such an overlay of conventions and a canon of admired literature to emulate, modern writers can readily churn out haiku poems that are mostly derivative and sentimental.

There are important conventions, nonetheless, that promote excellence in the genre. Haiku poetry should not refer to the writer or to other persons except as reflected obliquely in nature. The inability to use nature symbolism is telling even in some English haiku contests and publications. Perhaps the poets are not immersed in nature and use words to find meaning, whereas haiku writing should start from the source of meaning or the perception of nature.

To Japanese haikuists, certain rhythms and evocations exclusive to their language are also essential criteria. Their hand may go back and forth in the air as they evaluate a haiku poem. Yet the evocative power of the content and communication should be more important than the language. It would be superficial to insist on conventions confined to a certain language or tradition and deny the beauty and meaning that other languages can evoke in their own way. Instead, the question is whether there is an inspiration in the first place that is communicated in natural images needing no verbal explanation, hence packing powerful meanings into a minimum of signs.

The key to whether non-Japanese can write real haiku or not is whether non-native users of

Japanese, acquiring the language as adults, can publish haiku poems in Japanese that are vetted by acknowledged experts in the genre. This author's haiku in Japanese, 5-7-5 syllables with a seasonal reference, have been published in haiku journals and in one of the most competitive columns in a national newspaper with a circulation of about eight million. It stands to reason that if non-Japanese can publish haiku in Japanese, then they can write real haiku in other languages as well.

The author developed a bilingual haiku genre where each poem has a Japanese version and English version, not just a translation but poetic enough in both languages for the Japanese and English versions to be published separately. This article ends with the English version of some of them, while the "Bilingual Haiku Scroll" on the Web is divided into four seasons and includes 1) the Japanese version of each haiku in Chinese and Japanese characters (*kanji* and *kana*), 2) a Romanized version to help learners of Japanese sound out the Japanese version, and 3) the English version. Publications where they first appeared are named, and there is a brief explanation of haiku. The Web page is colorful with a light bamboo forest background. See: <http://waoe.org/steve/haiku.html>

In 1986 Japanologist Donald Keene of Columbia University gave a prepared lecture to a full auditorium in Matsuyama, a provincial capital known as the hometown of haiku, where the above-mentioned Shiki had lived. In Japanese but with a New York City accent, Professor Keene stated that non-Japanese cannot write haiku poetry. He knew exactly what that audience wanted most to hear, except that this author also was present. Even 22 years ago, those with a proprietary attitude to haiku were mostly advanced in years. Thus, as with so many venerable traditions in modernized Japan, the choice is to exquisitely preserve them like museum pieces or else to share and internationalize them like *judo* in the Olympics.

As has been seen, the issue of what constitutes real haiku quickly becomes murky. It may depend mostly on the interpermeability of the wall that Japanese officials and cultural purists maintain between Japanese and non-Japanese realms, which is an organizing principle in their world. When non-Japanese are accepted as writing or judging haiku, the wall has already been breached and universal characteristics of haiku can be considered as criteria for excellence. This author's haiku in Japanese are 5-7-5 but not the English versions, which are even shorter in terms of syllables. As judging criteria, look for several beautiful lines with imagery from nature doing the heavy lifting of a deep and moving message. It should not seem self-conscious, but rather a matter between the reader and the symbolism of nature just as it was for the author of the haiku.

What makes a haiku authentic, in the view of this author, is when sudden changes in nature reflect deep transformations in oneself. A haiku poem is not only written but lived, with the experience preserved in verse and the perspective opening a window for the reader. As an example of what makes a haiku poem authentic, the author used to go to Ritsurin Park in Takamatsu, a provincial capital not far from the above-mentioned Matsuyama. Nearly every season has emblematic vegetation in bloom, along with some unusual species. The author particularly identified with the pensive blue herons (*aosagi*) that would perch so motionlessly that most tourists probably did not even notice them. Watching one of them in the pine trees for a long time, the blue heron preening its feathers seemed to parallel the very process that drew the

author to the place, although to describe one's part in the scene directly in the haiku would be a fatal mistake. The moment the haiku was done and the pen hit the pad, the blue heron suddenly took flight.

English versions of some of the author's published haiku

A different spring
Than villagers see?
A temple pilgrim

(A winner of the UNESCO International Haiku Contest on Cultural Diversity,
published in the *World Culture Report 2000*)

To young leaves
The world seems
To spin on a branch

(The Japanese version was published in the national *Asahi Haidan*)

Before the rainy season
Tears of the Stone
Buddhas can wait

The blue heron
Preening its heart
White feathers fly

A distant foghorn blows
A midsummer night's call
A train whistle echoes

Snowy moat
Ducks as if
Baby swans

Bio-data:

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