

GENDAI HAIKU: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MODERN HAIKU

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The concept of gendai haiku, literally translating to “current/contemporary haiku,” still manages to perplex some Anglophone readers more familiar with “traditional haiku,” even a century after its first inklings and almost half a century after the first widely available surveys appeared in the English language. The reputation of gendai haiku is long established and it remains well respected in Japanese literary circles, and since its first thorough treatments in the English language (through translations by authors like Makoto Ueda and William Higginson in the 1970's) an increasing number of poets writing haiku in English have looked to this tradition as a font of creative inspiration, broadening their conceptions of and approach to the haiku genre. At this point in time, any conception of haiku that ignores gendai haiku is woefully inadequate in terms of appreciating and understanding the contemporary practice of haiku in any language.

Certain Western misconceptions regarding the history, proper translation, and tradition of the Japanese haiku have created the sense of a monolithic origin and singular form that is called “haiku,” a narrow definition of the word that doesn't reflect the many simultaneous styles and aesthetics that have informed pre-modern haikai, early modern haiku, post-war gendai haiku, and that will continue to inform world haiku in the future. Despite what some might believe, gendai haiku is not a widely divergent, incomprehensible oddity from a historical viewpoint, but rather a vital part of the haiku tradition, well rooted in pre-modern haikai—through Bashō, to Buson and Issa—but primarily derived from Masaoka Shiki's original conceptions of haiku as a distinct poetry; gendai haiku is a genre that is both forward looking (modern) and retrospective (traditional), and in the decentralization of the myriad approaches it contains, it can also be considered “post-modern,” to a certain extent.

This view of the Japanese haiku—as a complex and varied tradition rather than a static, historical form—will only gain in relevance to the

poetics of haiku in English as time passes and more poets become properly informed about the history of Japanese haiku and its development as an independent literary form, while at the same time further developing a multitude of their own personal styles and approaches to the genre in English.

While most Western accounts of Japanese haiku focus on the pre-modern era, with a particular emphasis on the poetry of Bashō, the word “haiku” was not in common use during his time. Rather, the 5-7-5 verses that we now call haiku evolved from a longer form of collaborative poetry, comic linked verse (*haikai-renga*). Excellent examples of the *hokku*—the starting verse of a longer sequence—were collected in anthologies and considered on their own against other verses in contests, but the bulk of *haikai* poetry was written in the context of longer sequences. Rules governing the *hokku* when used as a starting verse for a formal sequence—the presence of season words (*kigo*), cutting words (*kireji*) and topical proscriptions—were not strictly enforced when *hokku* were written on their own for contests or *ku* writing gatherings (*kukai*). So, the word served for both *hokku* as formal starting verse in a group setting—with strict rules—and a looser conception of “*hokku*” as a standalone poem that allowed a wide range of topics and the occasional non-seasonal verse or omitted *kireji*. In addition, even some highly crafted middle verses from later on in a sequence (which had no need to follow the rules of the starting verse) could be deemed worthy of inclusion in an anthology, and would make their way into collections of poetry undifferentiated from standalone *hokku*. Thus, use of the word “*hokku*” and the rules of its composition were not as strict in practice in the pre-modern era as later theorists would assert. In fact, this looser tradition of informal, standalone *hokku* is the most accurate conceptual precursor of the modern haiku.

With the restoration of the Emperor and the rapid modernization that Japan underwent during the late nineteenth century, a young journalist, Masaoka Shiki, saw the stultifying rules of the longer poems of *haikai* as an artless relic of the past. He envisioned haiku as a modern, artful genre that was genuinely Japanese poetry, but that could stand up against the

newly imported translations of Western poetry, which had spawned an entirely new Japanese poetic genre, *shintaiishi* (new-style verse).¹ At the time, *shintaiishi* was seen as more sophisticated and literary than traditional forms, and it still maintains high esteem by Japanese literary critics. Shiki's haiku was designed to hold its own as part of world literature in the face of changing expectations of what poetry is or should be.

The edict of the Meiji era was to serve one's country through modernization, and that is exactly what Shiki did in creating the haiku. While *gendai* often is translated as "modern haiku," the very concept of "haiku" as Shiki saw it was in and of itself a modern phenomenon. Thus, the haiku of Shiki and his immediate successors can rightly be called modern (or even modernist) haiku, insofar as the form was progressive and formed in the interest of uplifting Japanese culture through modernization, drawing upon western models of philosophy, literature, and art in addition to Japanese tradition, in keeping with the spirit of the Meiji Era.

While the modern haiku evolved from the *hokku* of pre-modern *haikai*, Shiki was heavily critical of the *haikai* establishment and its cronyism, reliance on strict rules of composition, and set topics. Shiki had no problem critiquing the clichés of the past and pushing a forward-looking movement of literary reform. Like many artists in his generation, Shiki was broadly influenced by the influx of European philosophy, literature, and art, but he was most specifically inspired by Western painting—the realism of which he admired and wished to replicate in haiku. Envisioning haiku as life sketches, an aesthetic taken from French painting and translated as "shasei," he discarded the complex literary play and elegant clichés of pre-modern *haikai* and divorced the *hokku* from the longer collaborative form from which it had evolved.² In giving it a new name, *haiku*, Shiki overthrew a system where strict rules and policing by the reigning literary schools had determined authenticity, replacing the old literary establishment with a more modern, individualist haiku and replacing the old language games with a poetics of Western inspired realism.

It is a common mistake to look at the pre-modern *hokku* of say, Bashō, in terms of the realism and simple language Shiki advocated, when the poetry of Bashō was actually often complex, layered, allusive, and literary,

still using much of the elevated literary diction of courtly poetry (*waka*) which evoked traditional aesthetics like *sabi* and *yūgen*. Shiki himself was heavily critical of the literary pretensions of the dominant school of *haikai* at the time, which revered Bashō with an almost religious fervor, and his *shasei* style provided a major shift in aesthetic. After his untimely death due to tuberculosis, Shiki's disciple Hekigotō took over his position as the *haiku* editor of the newspaper, *Nippon*.³

The early twentieth century in Japan was a chaotic time of transition and anxiety. The younger generations were growing up in a bourgeois, cosmopolitan, and Westernized atmosphere, and there was an inflorescence of pop culture as well as serious art that integrated the many new ideas that had come with the Meiji government's policy of rapid modernization. Mass printed books, newspapers, radio programs, and magazines all served a new bourgeoisie hungry for entertainment and sophistication. Amid continental philosophy and science, Western style painting (*yōga*) was studied, and fiction writers like Shiki's close friend Natsume Sōseki wrote the first modern Japanese novels.⁴

Hekigotō and his circle developed Shiki's *shasei* aesthetic further, writing about their lives and the world around them, which was increasingly modern, urban, and filled with startling new technology, their time seeing the birth of radio, the beginning of mass-consumer culture, and a shift toward a less collective and more individualist mentality. They experimented with writing *muki* (non-seasonal) *haiku*. They also started abandoning the 5-7-5 count and writing free verse *haiku*. Nevertheless, despite these radical departures from the past, free verse poets in this line, like Seisensui and Santōka, still saw themselves as developing and continuing a tradition stretching all the way back to Bashō, and Hekigotō had the full confidence of Shiki at the time of his mentor's death. The modernist *haiku* poets came to these developments through building upon Shiki's *shasei* aesthetic toward what they saw as its logical conclusion, allowing the truth of their inner experience (*makoto*) to determine the form of their poetry, rather than adherence to traditional formulae.

On the other hand, while Shiki's new genre had grown popular and largely supplanted the old establishment of long form, traditional *haikai*, traditionalist, conservative poets didn't simply disappear. Many of them

adapted and wrote haiku, but were concerned with the new directions all of this innovation and change were heading. In the wake of the rapid modernization and tumultuous changes to the Japanese way of life during the Meiji era, many in Japan mourned the loss of traditional culture. Some felt that Japanese identity was under attack by technology and Western colonialism, and a wave of anti-modern, anti-Western sentiment began spread in the 1920's. "Modern" and "Western" came to be considered one and the same, and were seen as something that was to be resisted, modernity came to be seen as somewhat of a "crisis," and how to deal with it would become the subject of much debate.⁵

Kyoshi, another disciple of Shiki's, and the editor of their haiku circle's journal, *Hototogisu*, had largely abandoned haiku and focused on publishing prose fiction in the wake of Shiki's death. But he felt called back to the haiku, in order to save it from what he saw as a corruption of traditional culture. Kyoshi doubled down on rules like kigo and a separation of haiku from "human nature," insisting upon rules that would actually de-legitimize many famous hokku by pre-modern poets like Bashō and Issa.⁶ In recoiling against the modern, Kyoshi's traditionalism was extreme and saw the past traditions in an idealized but distorted way, and many of his pronouncements served to separate a large chunk of what had previously been considered haiku (or hokku) from his neoclassical model, as he stressed the most serious and spiritual side of Bashō, whose oeuvre and life was much more complicated than just ascetic Zen simplicity, and he took Shiki's selective realism, life sketches, and inner truth and twisted them instead to objective realism and impersonal sketches of nature.

Kyoshi pushed an anti-modern view of haiku as an essential, fixed form from the traditional past, and refused to concede any changes to his ideal (such as non-seasonal poems or free verse). Ironically, this reactionary conception of haiku has been re-framed by its proponents as the most authentic to pre-modern tradition, but a deep engagement with pre-modern haikai quickly shows that to be a false narrative, with many ku by famous masters that broke the new "rules" of haiku in their hokku. While there had always been some conservative haikai teachers who made strict rules for beginners, the most respected masters, like Bashō and Issa, had

always played fast and loose with convention, treating the form as highly flexible.

By the end of the Taisho period, laws had been passed in order to preserve traditional culture and the Japanese way of life, and in the wake of the devastation wrought by the great Kanto Earthquake, as Japan entered the Shōwa period and saw the rise of fascist ultra-nationalism, it had actually become an act of sedition to challenge or change traditional Japanese culture, making the modernist and socialist haiku poets subversives and outlaws by default.⁷

By the 1920's, with modernism seen as a crisis to be overcome, Japanese artists and theorists struggled with the quandary of how to retain Japanese cultural tradition in the face of the onslaught of western technology. The Japanese felt both utterly dependent on technology for their imperial ambitions (and ultimately their survival in a war with the West), and yet existentially threatened by the way the very same technology was erasing the traditional Japanese way of life. The government made Kyoshi president of the haiku branch of its wartime propaganda department, and there was violent suppression of modernist, anti-war, and leftist haiku poets. Saitō Sanki, who would found the *Gendai Haiku Kyokai* (Modern Haiku Association), and many others were imprisoned, tortured and most of those who were released alive ceased writing haiku for the rest of the war period. This was a dark time for haiku, with Kyoshi and others writing jingoistic, “Holy War haiku,” and the modernist school being effectively silenced.⁸

In the aftermath of the war, with new found freedoms of speech and assembly, Sanki and other poets regrouped and created the Gendai Haiku Association. This was the beginning of widespread use of the label “gendai haiku.” While generally translated as “modern,” some interpret gendai as meaning “postmodern.”⁹ These poets had roots going back to Shiki and we can consider the early modern haikai's pre-war work as part of the gendai haiku lineage (just as we consider pre-modern hokku to be haiku), even though it was only in the post-war period that the word came into common usage.

The Gendai Haiku Association was inclusive and sought to bring all forms of haiku together, including traditional, non-seasonal, and free

verse styles. Ironically, while many in the West view gendai as radical, postmodern (in a Western sense) haiku, the post-war period saw many progressive haiku poets return to the 5-7-5 form and brought renewed interest in kigo among experimental poets—though the nature of the treatment of kigo changed to what was often a more ironic and deconstructive use of seasonal references. Many of the most radical haiku written were from the pre-war era, with gendai seeing a more balanced mix of experimentation, individualism, and respect of tradition. While free verse and muki haiku remained options, gendai poets in the post-war era focused more on depicting modern life and their individual perspectives, choosing a sense of interiority or social consciousness and an engagement with the inescapably transformed social and natural landscapes of Japan, rather than the impersonal, idyllic nature focused haiku that Kyoshi continued to promote in the name of tradition.

Western labels like “modern,” or “postmodern” don't always fit to describe phenomena in Japan, so whether or not gendai is “modern haiku,” or “postmodern haiku” is somewhat of an open and rather academic question, the answer to which depends entirely on how these terms are defined. Postmodernism in Japanese haiku in the post-war period is perhaps best seen in terms of a movement beyond the “crisis of the modern” experienced during the war, on to the acceptance of a Japanese identity that is pluralistic, varied, and retains both traditional and modern features, retaining a sense of traditional Japanese culture while integrating modern life (with an increasingly capitalistic, consumerist, and technology-mediated individualism) as something internal to Japan rather than foreign and intrusive.¹⁰ Abandoning the dialectic of monistic national identity, and focusing on personal, psychological insight, and philosophical views, poets like Kaneko Tōta would pursue their “*shisō*,” or “existentially embodied philosophy.”¹¹

Gendai haiku is not truly postmodern in the Western sense of the being fraught with the oft discussed “crisis of representation” or being plagued by the collapse of Enlightenment philosophy with a movement toward post-structuralist philosophy, as is seen in the West—for the Enlightenment was a European phenomenon and Japanese thought has long contained many features associated with postmodernism in the

West, including suspicion of logocentrism and a focus on non-dualistic thinking.¹² The idea of objective realism was in itself a new and “modern” concept in Japanese art, and pre-modern Japan was highly engaged in Zen’s interrogation of the limits of perception and the nature of reality, ideas generally associated with the postmodern in the West. Given this context, what is generally seen as postmodernism in Japan does however share a splintering of hegemonic structures of thought into greater pluralism and relativity, and thus contains a challenge to the idea of one Japan, or in this case, one haiku. Individualist artists or poets working outside of the historical centers of power and culture (Tokyo and Kyoto) bring diverse, local, and folk perspectives to haiku and challenge the cultural hegemony of the Kanto and Kansai regions. Thus, postmodern haiku questions power structures and defies authoritarian attempts to control a strict definition of the genre that cleaves to unbending rules and grand proclamations about content, tone, and form.

After the war, there were of course still schisms and arguments surrounding the nature of haiku-mind, the acceptability of non-seasonal and free verse haiku, and the strictest traditionalist poets have maintained their own associations while others split off from the Gendai Haiku Association over disagreements in theory. However, those poets who remain under the umbrella of “gendai haiku” have continued to write in a diversity of styles to this day. Thus, gendai can be seen as the one conception of haiku that respects all of the Japanese schools of haiku as valid approaches, rather than excluding liberal, modernist, or postmodernist poets at the expense of a fetishized past and nationalist identity—allowing for a dynamic and malleable tradition rather than a fixed poetics that has been knocked loose from the flow of history in order to keep it static and inviolate. Gendai should certainly not be seen only as experimental, atypical, or willfully bizarre, for a great deal of it is fully recognizable and coherent as traditional haiku, and it is comprised of a wide variety of styles.

It was in the early postwar period that R.H. Blyth, a British émigré living in Japan, would write the four book series on haiku that would introduce Kerouac and the Beat Generation to the genre, ushering in a new

wave of interest in haiku that would precipitate the formation of English-language haiku associations across the globe. Ironically, Blyth did not view haiku as something that could be written outside of the Japanese language and culture and his intent was more to explain Eastern thought to the West via Japanese poetry. A prisoner of war in Japan during the conflict, afterward he became the tutor of the crown prince and thus he had deep ties with the imperial family—the most conservative and traditional institution in Japan—more known for its relation to waka, the courtly tanka, rather than haiku. It was largely Kyoshi's neoclassical views and his revisionist history of the haiku tradition, along with an idyllic view of Japanese exceptionalism, which was so eloquently described by Blyth and which grew popular in the Anglophone world, riding the wave of fascination with Zen and Eastern philosophy as espoused by writers like Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki.

The issue is not that what these Zen practitioners said about haiku or Japanese culture was completely untrue, but that they omitted a great deal and viewed the genre from a very narrow and specific lens, starting with the most conservative interpretation of the genre possible and treating haiku as a rather static, monolithic, and spiritualistic exercise, rather than the varied and constantly evolving literary tradition it had always been. They looked at pre-modern work through a modern, revisionist lens.

Blyth's histories ended with Shiki, essentially telling the story of the standalone hokku, but ending the story of *haiku proper* precisely where it began. And while many haikai poets had been lay-priests and/or devout Zen Buddhists—even modern free verse haiku poets like Santōka—the introduction of haiku to the West by Zen practitioners who were also making an exposition of Zen thought by using haiku poems as examples ended up putting stress on the religious aspects of the genre to a much further extent than was generally seen in Japanese haiku criticism.¹³ Blyth was so focused on finding connections to Zen that in discussing pre-modern hokku he often missed what should have been obvious literary references to previous poems that had much more relevance to the significance of the poem than Buddhist teachings. Early Anglophone critics would rate haiku by the quality of their Zen, and saw little merit in the

modern perspectives of gendai haiku, with its attention to individual experience and inner truth, or *makoto*, rather than timeless and impersonal nature, and they would mistakenly read Buddhist metaphors in the poetry rather than picking up on the many references to classical literature and the literary connotations of poetic language.

By the 1970's, the first treatments of gendai in English were published, and some Anglophone poets found inspiration in the works of Santōka and Tōta. However, the strict, naturalist, Zen-infused view of haiku that had been introduced a generation earlier had already taken hold, and many others were unwilling to change their views of what they felt was essential to the genre in order to accommodate new information. Many felt they already knew the true spirit of haiku, and that this “new” poetry did not belong to it.

Using the dichotomy of nature (haiku) vs. human nature (senryu) as explicated by Blyth, “senryu” came to be a word used to describe English language haiku that did not fit the neoclassical, traditionalist mold. However, applying a strict separation of topic and tone to Japanese poetry ends up with many legitimate hokku from the pre-modern era being deemed “senryu” by Westerners, even though no one in Japan would see them that way, and conversely, some senryu can easily be mistaken for “haiku.” Blyth's books on senryu, in fact, freely mix pre-modern senryu and hokku, further confusing readers on their differences and completely muddling Western conceptions of the relationship between these two traditions. Furthermore, modernist senryu and modernist haiku in Japan both were heavily influenced by Shiki's shasei aesthetic, erasing many of their crucial differences, to the point that the two genres in Japan are now often indistinguishable on a poem to poem basis, sharing more in common with each other than either do with their pre-modern counterparts. At their most elemental, they can be easy enough to tell apart, but the “gray area” between haiku and senryu is far larger than people realize, and telling features are more linguistic and social than anything to do with the nature vs. human nature dichotomy of Blyth, which is completely irrelevant to Japanese poetics.

To be fair, Blyth's books were not written as how-to guides for creating haiku in English, they focused on explaining Japanese culture through

poetry. They were not essays on comparative poetics showing the subtle differences between the haiku and senryu traditions, but used the two genres as metaphors for illustrating different aspects of Japanese life and culture. The lasting impact of Blyth's conceptual dichotomies, however, would leave many confused to this day as to exactly what, if any, distinctions can be made about the haiku and senryu traditions, and his neglect of the modern haiku would leave many hostile to its introduction.

Meanwhile, some Anglophone poets merely took a brief perusal of a few Japanese haiku as a starting point for haiku in English and radically departed from there, largely unconcerned with Japanese tradition—post-modern, modern, or traditional. Fidelity to Japanese tradition is not always a strong motivation for writers of haiku in English, so many poets developed their own unique theories of what haiku meant in the English language. English-language haiku has developed many of its own conventions and aesthetics, and when the psychological “New Haiku” of the 1980's gave way to a more postmodern form of experimentation in English-language haiku as language poetry in the 1990's, newer treatments of Japanese gendai haiku that focused on its most avant garde aspects gave the more experimental haiku poets in English a new banner to rally under.

It was at this time that “gendai” became a label for postmodern or experimental haiku in English—and thus became a dirty word to those who did not appreciate the radical changes haiku in English was undergoing, somewhat analogous to the way “senryu” had been used in the past for non-conforming work in English. The extent to which this experimental language poetry in English has any connection to Japanese gendai or whether “gendai” is even an appropriate term for any work in the English language is a topic that is up for debate, with the answers largely depending on the individual poet in question, and whose conception of Japanese haiku one is comparing it to.

In conclusion, gendai haiku in Japan ranges from standard haiku on a natural topic with kigo and kireji in the 5-7-5 format, to non-seasonal, surrealist free verse, and everything in between. While gendai certainly can be avant garde, it is not necessarily so. It contains elements that can

be called pre-modern, modern, or even post-modern, but none of these words truly encompass the specific spirit of gendai, which resides in the poets themselves, and offers a multiplicity of personal philosophies. Even at its most experimental, gendai haiku ties deeply to a haiku tradition with master-disciple lineages going back through Shiki and tapping into the wellspring of the canon of the school of Bashō.

In the West, there have been periods of focus on certain narrow aspects of the Japanese haiku; early on, the focus was on the syllabic format and Imagism; later, it was the passage of seasons, nature, and Zen inspired moments of heightened awareness; and later still these gave way to a focus on linguistic play and novel disjunctive techniques. While all of these approaches show us vital and legitimate sides of the Japanese haiku, none of them alone begins to show the spirit of haiku in its totality. Only by putting all of them together do we start to understand everything that haiku has been, and can be.

We are now at a point where more and more interaction between international haiku groups is causing many differing schools of thought to bump into each other and intermingle. Knowing the history of how these conceptions of haiku relate to each other can aid us in understanding one another's approaches, appreciating what each viewpoint has to offer, and seeing how each connects to the wellspring of Japanese poetic tradition and the many different adaptations of the form outside of Japan.

Gendai haiku of any description is not a threat to or replacement of traditional haiku so much as an expansion and extension that broadens the haiku tradition, and those who approach it with an open mind will be enriched by the many fine poems and the wealth of artistic possibilities it has to offer. Gendai should not be the next "dirty word" used to marginalize nonconformist haiku, nor should the label become an excuse to willfully ignore the long history and roots of haiku tradition and abandon any pretense of fidelity to the form. Rather, it should serve as a new paradigm for appreciating the haiku genre, in which a plurality of voices can join the conversation of what the word haiku has meant in the past, what it means to living poets today, and what it will come to mean in the future.

NOTES

¹ Ueda, Makoto. *Modern Japanese Poets and the Nature of Literature*. Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1983, 38-39

² Ueda, Makoto. *Modern Japanese Haiku: An Anthology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976, 4-6

³ *Ibid*, 8-9

⁴ Weisenfeld, Gennifer. *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avante Garde 1905-1931*. Calif.: University of California Press, 2002, 3 and 19

⁵ Harootunian, H.D. "Visible Discourse/Invisible Ideologies" in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian. Il.: Duke University Press, 1989, 67

⁶ Modern Haiku Association. *The Haiku Universe for the 21st Century*. Japan: Modern Haiku Association, 2008, 11-12

⁷ Weisenfeld, Gennifer. *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avante Garde 1905-1931*, 251

⁸ Yūki, Itō. "New Rising Haiku: The Evolution of Modern Japanese Haiku and the Haiku Persecution Incident." The Haiku Foundation. <http://www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/3566>. Accessed February 12, 2019.

⁹ Bogar, Adam T. "Gendai Haiku and Meaning in Ban'ya Natsuishi's Hybrid Paradise" in *The Poetic Achievement of Ban'ya Natsuishi*. India: cyberwit, 2018, 29

¹⁰ Ivy, Marilyn "Consumption of Knowledge" in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian. Il.: Duke University Press, 1989, 78

¹¹ Kaneko, Tohta. *The Future of Haiku: An Interview with Kaneko Tohta*. trans. Kon Nichi Translation Group; Richard Gilbert, Masahiro Hori, Itō Yūki, Koun Franz, David Ostman, and Kanamitsu Takeyoshi. Va.: Red Moon Press, 2011, 17-18

¹² Ivy, Marilyn. "Consumption of Knowledge" in *Postmodernism and Japan*, 39

¹³ Kawamoto, Kōji. *The Poetics of Japanese Verse: Imagery, Structure, Meter*. Japan: University of Tokyo Press, 2000, 171