

HAIKU IN THE SHADOWS OF SKYSCRAPERS

Can the three simple lines that once dealt in images of nature adequately portray life's modern maze?

Millions of Japanese, and an increasing number of foreigners, seem to think so.

By Richard Evanoff

Haiku translations by Mitsuo Tsuboi/R. Evanoff

Illustrations by Mika Morita

ikiko Matsuda puts in a full week as an office worker in Tokyo, yet she still finds enough time to write thirty or so haiku a month—an average of one per day. She also attends monthly meetings of Azami, a haiku group near her home in Fuchu which takes its name from the thistle-head flower. Twice a year the group sponsors a ginko, literally a “singing trip,” for members who want to spend the day hiking at various local nature spots in search of poetic inspiration.

If asked to describe what a haiku is, Matsuda, and more than likely most people—Westerners and Japanese alike—would define it as a traditional form of Japanese poetry. But

just how “traditional” and “Japanese” is haiku today? Can a haiku by an office worker in downtown Tokyo about skyscrapers be as poetically valid as an old master’s haiku about beautiful snowcapped mountains? And just how “international” is it possible for haiku to actually become? Can a real haiku ever be written in any language other than Japanese?

In modern Japan haiku continues to be a popular, vibrant art form practiced not by professional poets but by common, workaday people. Consider Tsuneo Hatori, a self-employed jeweler who lives on the outskirts of Tokyo. Six years ago Hatori responded to an ad in a local shopper’s newspaper seeking new members for a haiku group.



Down in our alley
Rainest in our alley too -- a
give in festive clothes.

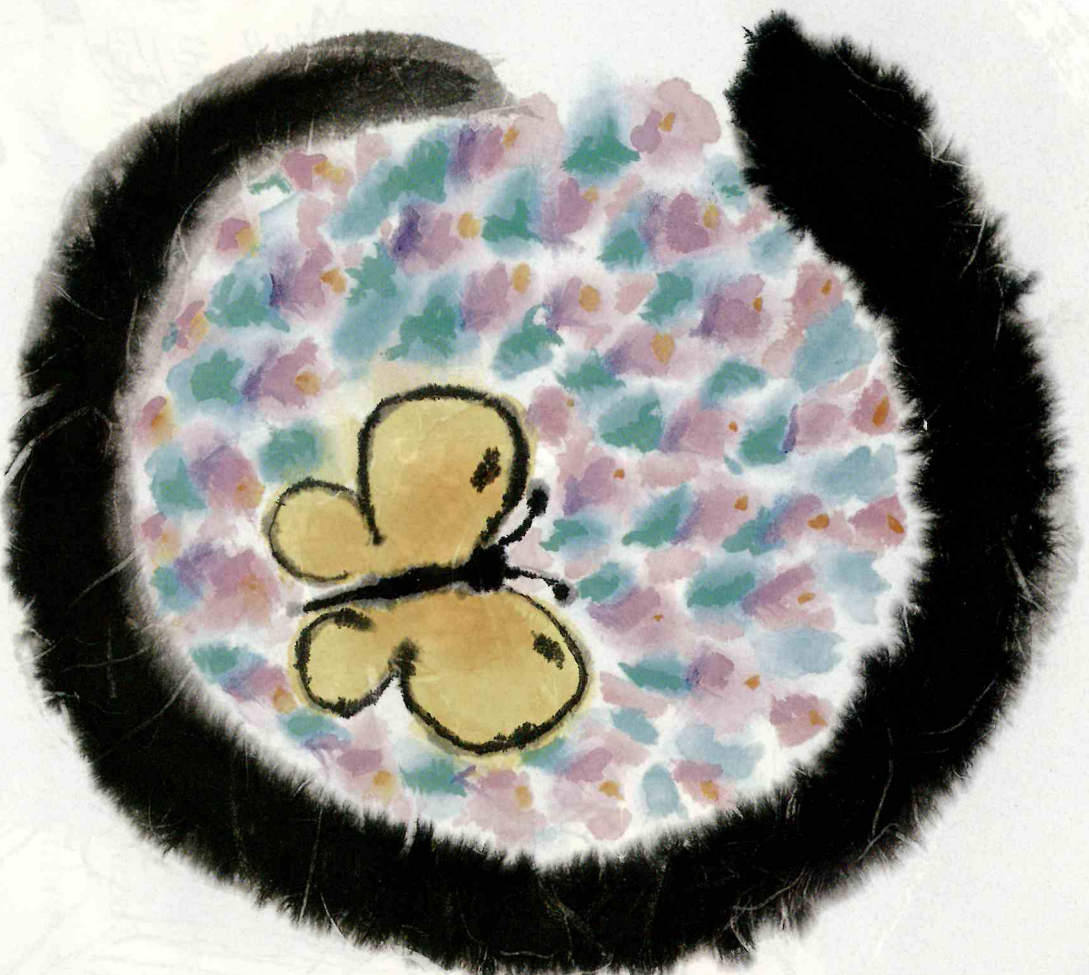
-- Olga Khokhlova

"I wanted to do something creative," Hatori says of his decision to join the Kari ("Hunting") Haiku Society, "but I didn't have the time to write novels or longer poems. Because haiku is so short, I thought it would be easy to begin writing. And my interest in haiku has grown as I've come to see just how complex it can really be."

Hatori and Matsuda are among the estimated five million Japanese who regularly write haiku and participate in haiku societies. The number swells by another two million if occasional writers and beginners are added. What the statistics illustrate is the continuing appeal haiku has even in contemporary Japan. There are, moreover, some 650 major haiku magazines published in Japan by haiku societies.

While haiku have long appeared in newspapers, general interest magazines, and in small-press books, the audience continues to expand through radio and television. Recently a haiku contest sponsored by N.H.K. Television drew more than 20,000 entries. And the interest in contests has not been confined to Japan alone. In 1964 approximately 61,000 haiku in English were submitted from abroad to Japan Air Lines' first international haiku competition. The airline has sponsored periodic contests over the years and recently announced that the deadline for its current contest will be the end of March for this year. (A brochure describing contest rules and prizes can be obtained by writing to the JAL Haiku Contest, P.O. Box 7734, Woodside, NY 11377 U.S.A., by the way.)

Despite the continuing international interest, the roots of haiku are deeply embedded in Japanese culture and history. Surprisingly, even though the word "haiku" dates from approximately 1663, it was not until the nineteenth century that the master poet Masaoka Shiki used the word to designate a completely independent literary form. Until then haiku was still closely associated with *renga*, or "linked verse"—long poetic works consisting of alternating stanzas composed by several different poets.



*The first butterfly
 you will be my song
 opening sentence.*

--Juniku Nigamata

Only gradually did the first three lines of a *renga*, known as the *hokku*, come to be regarded as a self-contained poetic unit. Even such haiku laureates as Basho, Buson and Issa technically were not haikuists, but rather teachers of *renga*. Their reputations as haiku poets rest mainly on their efforts to establish *hokku* as vehicles for individual, rather than group, poetic expression.

While from time to time there are innovative poets in Japan who try to tamper with the form and content of haiku, none of their innovations have made a lasting impression in the history of haiku, and certain conventions have proven their durability. The four most common rules are that a haiku should be written in lines of 5-7-5 syllables, contain a season word, deal with a theme from nature, and provide a direct, intuitive insight into the subject matter.

Only the last of these rules has been consistently followed by people writing haiku in languages other than Japanese. The first "foreign language" haiku on record were written by a group of poets from France, including Julien Vocance and Paul-Louis Couchoud, who visited Japan and published their own original haiku in French in 1905. Since then haiku have been written in languages as diverse as Arabic and Serbo-Croatian.

Haiku in English did not really get underway until the 1950s when the postwar interest in Zen and Japanese culture first began to burgeon. In adapting haiku to the English language, early poets such as Jack Kerouac quickly abandoned the 5-7-5 form and began writing haiku in freer rhythms better suited to English. Lacking established "season words," many English-language haiku were nonetheless written with specific seasons in mind. The eyes of the poets began to focus in on the native landscapes of North America, Europe, and elsewhere. For the first time haiku was written about jungles, deserts, tundra and the Rocky Mountains.

In the West, where originality and innovation are more highly valued than tradition, the form developed in directions which remain largely unexplored in Japanese haiku. Some Western poets have experimented with visual haiku—haiku which forms pictures with the letters of the poem on the page. Other poets have extended the subject matter to include human emotions, love and relationships. Erotic haiku and haiku which incorporate a political consciousness (Viet Nam, feminism, ecopolitics) are two of the most interesting recent developments in the West.

There are purists who would argue that such innovations have nothing to do with "real" haiku and that haiku is a uniquely Japanese cultural art form. Yet even Japanese haiku poets are not immune to the innovating tendency. The 5-7-5 rule, for example, while followed in the majority of Japanese haiku, is liable to exceptions. Haiku of 5-7-6 or 5-7-9 syllables may be perfectly acceptable if they preserve a sense of

rhythm and feeling. During the 1960s and '70s many Japanese poets were interested in changing the number of syllables per line, but recently the avant-garde seems to be losing ground in favor of an emphasis on more traditional styles.

Certainly the Japanese language gives Japanese haiku a distinct flavor. There are special dictionaries to help poets identify and use season words, for example, and these books in themselves provide some interesting insights into Japanese culture. The seemingly seasonal word *kamisuki*, for instance, which refers to the process of making paper, is associated with winter because winter is the time of year when paper is traditionally made in Japan. Moreover, the word conjures up a number of associations which may be lost on someone not so familiar with Japanese culture.

Comments Mitsuo Tsuboi, member of a Chiba haiku society who only half-jokingly claims that a dictionary of haiku season words would be the one book he would take with him if he were ever stranded on a desert island, "When I see the word *kamisuki* I get a picture in my mind of an old, somewhat shabby house

in the country where the paper is made. It's winter. The branches on the trees are bare, the trees are being cut to make paper. There's a stream beside the house. An older woman with slightly frostbitten hands is working in the house, dipping the paper in cold water."

For the advanced reader all of these associations are contained in the single word *kamisuki*.

Some critics contend that the recurrence of traditional themes in Japanese haiku is indicative of little more than a sentimental attachment to a traditional art form which reached its creative peak centuries ago. A rough equivalent might be if several million poets in the West remained unswevering in their commitment to writing Shakespearean sonnets about courtly love. Part of the problem, according to American haiku poet Marlene Mountain, is that many "typical" haiku words have become both literally and literarily polluted: "Like it or not, if we are honest, we cannot say 'rain' without being aware of acid rain."

Part of the criticism about the social naiveté of Japanese haiku undoubtedly holds true.

Nonetheless, many poets have in their own often interesting ways come to terms with the encroachment of urban sprawl on the sanctuaries of nature and the supplanting of intuitive thinking with the logic of computer circuitry. The convention that a haiku should deal with a theme from nature is treated very flexibly by modern haiku poets, especially among those living in urban areas, who write as much about skyscrapers, concrete sidewalks, and neon signs as they do about trees, birds, and flowers.

To many haiku poets in Japan, "nature" is more closely identified with one's environment, whatever that environment might be, than with organic matter. The reasoning goes that if a poet is really "one" with nature, there can be no Thoreau-like dualism between society and nature or between the city and the wilderness. It is only the dualistically-minded West, a Japanese haiku poet like Mitsuo Tsuboi might argue, which continues to insist upon making a sharp split between human-made and naturally created environments.

Most haiku poets in Japan have found

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niches for themselves in contemporary society. The doctors, shopkeepers, housewives, businessmen, and factory workers who write haiku are seldom interested in making a profession out of their poetry. The poets come from all walks of life and the entire spectrum of social, economic, and educational backgrounds. "Education isn't important," says Japanese haikuist Aya Shobu. "All a person needs to write haiku is a pencil and paper."

Unlike the West, which since the Romantic period almost two hundred years ago has tended to view its poets either as outcasts rebelling against the social order or, in the popular mind, as eccentric and slightly snobbish cultural misfits, the majority of haiku poets in Japan are simply ordinary people interested in exploring the creative, poetic side of life. Haiku, like other traditional arts in Japan, is sometimes pursued by those who want to be regarded as "cultured," yet it is remarkable how most poets have managed to avoid the unintelligible cerebralty of much modern serious Western poetry.

Haiku is by its very nature democratic. It has never concerned itself much with high and noble themes, preferring instead to capture in brief, pithy phrases the poetic riches of everyday life. Poets usually begin by making sketches of what they see immediately around them, concentrating on concrete objects rather than on abstract ideas. Only when they have mastered recording their sense impressions do poets occupy themselves with giving their haiku a sense of poetic feeling.

As with flower arranging and the tea ceremony in Japan, there are various "schools" of haiku, some devoted to preserving the traditional forms and styles and others which are more avant-garde. The largest haiku groups have branches throughout Japan. New haiku poets are sometimes recruited through advertisements in nationally-circulated haiku magazines, but more typically they are introduced to a haiku society through friends who are already members. Most groups are anxious to attract new members, and anyone who is interested is



*Smaddled on her back
the baby eyes were blue
gazing at the sea.*

-- Joji Hatakeyama

welcome to join regardless of qualifications or previous experience.

The meetings of Shunrei, the "Spring Mountain Peaks" Haiku Society, are fairly typical. The society meets at the Haiku Literature Hall near Okubo Station, which houses, in addition to meeting rooms for haiku groups to rent, a 200,000-volume library (including collections of haiku in English) and a museum which exhibits original haiku manuscripts going back as far as those of Shiki in the Meiji Era.

Upon arriving at the hall, each of the Shunrei participants writes five or so of his or her best haiku on strips of paper to be distributed anonymously to the other members. While sipping green tea and nibbling on sweets, the participants silently read each haiku, noting down the ones they feel are particularly good. Each of the members then submits his top seven

choices to a reader who reads the haiku aloud. As each haiku is read, the author identifies himself and records are kept to see which poets and which haiku are favorites.

When all the haiku have been read aloud and the points tallied, the top five competitors are announced and awarded with certificates and prizes. Since an average of forty persons attend a meeting, two hundred or more haiku may be submitted, making the competition fierce. With so many people writing such short poems according to strict conventions, it is not unheard of for two poets to produce identical haiku entirely independently of each other. At the end of the meeting, the haiku master of the Shunrei group, Suishu Miyashita, makes comments both critical and laudatory about the poems submitted for the day's competition, ranging from remarks about the general feeling of a particular haiku to the proper use of suffixes.

Exceptional poets distinguish themselves by frequently winning competitions, and can establish a solid reputation within a year. If a poet continues to produce high-quality work over a longer period, the group may eventually ask that person to become the haiku master of their society. A distinguished poet may also be able to establish a new group and attract his or her own disciples.

There are signs, however, that whereas haiku abroad is still on the rise, interest in Japan is beginning to flag. Men are in the minority in haiku societies, and many people in Japan writing haiku are at or beyond retirement age. Yet while haiku in Japan is often written by those who are older, who are less involved with work and family, and who have more free time, haiku is in principle something which can be written throughout a person's life.

"Haiku is a diary of the emotions," says Joji Hatakeyama, editor of the Shunrei haiku magazine. "It's like making daily entries in the resume of a person's life."

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