

Masaoka Shiki: Making of the Myth of Haiku

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A recent story from *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* reports this year's International Haiku Festival, hosted by Japan Airlines, in which kids from twenty two countries of the world participated, submitting some seventy *haikus*.¹ *Haiku* is a significant genre of Japanese literature that has won by far the widest recognition and popularity. Many refer boastfully to *haiku* as an international form of literature. As Prof. Miner's now classic study, *Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature*, tells us, *haiku* is also one of the few genres of Japanese literature that have succeeded in exerting serious influence on the Western literatures.²

Paradoxically, however, a claim to "internationality" of *haiku* is frequently related to its uniqueness. Very often it is not so much its universal feature which appeals to humanity as its originality that is regarded as a primary reason for its distribution abroad. For instance, Takahama Kyoshi remarked in an interview: "[*Haiku*] is impenetrable to foreigners unless they live in Japan and understand the Japanese language. *Haiku* is a unique form of literature that compares favorably with any kind of literature in the world."³ For Kyoshi, *haiku* claims a position in the world literature precisely because it is unique and esoteric.

The "impenetrability" of the genre of *haiku* is usually ascribed to the brevity of its form and its dependence on specifically "Japanese" mentality, i. e. sensibility to the changing seasons. Immediately preceding the remark just cited, Kyoshi makes the following comment: "If one is to stay in the camp of *haiku*, one should obey its rules. Not content with its short form, Prof. Oreguchi gradually proceeded to compose *waka*, and eventually *chōka*. I have respect for his choice. But, it is another respectable choice to stick to what *haiku* should preserve. *Haiku* is a unique Japanese form of literature in that it consists of just seventeen syllables, and in that its theme centers on the beauty of nature, typically represented by the use of seasonal words."⁴ According to Kyoshi, the 17-syllable form and the use of *kigo* bestow *haiku* at once unique Japanese features and international recognition.

Of the two features which Kyoshi cites, and which are usually considered to feature *haiku*'s uniqueness, i. e. brevity of the form and emphasis on seasonal associations, I will be focusing, in my paper, on the former, on its 17-syllable form, to which, I think, the originality of *haiku* is more often attributed.

Now, if for defenders of *haiku* the brevity of a form has guaranteed its superiority, for those who attack the genre of *haiku*, brevity has always been its major drawback. Kuwahara Takeo highlighted this position in his notorious *Haiku daini geijutsu ron*. Following I. A.

Richards' method in *Practical Criticism*, Kuwahara selected about a dozen of *haiku* at random by respectable poets and amateurs alike. He then let subjects of the experiment read them without *maegaki* and without any background information concerning authorship. The result was that appropriate interpretation of the works, let alone, consistent evaluation of their literary value, was not arrived at. He pointed to the "incompletion and fragileness" (*mikanketsu sei to zeijaku sei*) of the genre: the form of *haiku* was too short to convey and achieve sustainable artistic experience.⁵

Kuwahara's idea is obviously dependent on new critical theories rejecting intentional and affective fallacies: any work of art has to make sense in itself and has to be appreciated as such. In broader terms, Kuwahara depends on modern notions of art: that a work of art should be clearly delineated from other discursive practices; that it be independent of extra-artistic standards; that artistic value should be self-sufficient.

It follows then that one significant type of *haiku*, *aisatsu no ku*, has to be rejected: a kind of rejection tenable only in Kuwahara's conception of literature. For him, work of art can be personal. But the personal elements should be contained in work itself. They should not come from extra-textual sources. Hence, Kuwahara's criticism that "a contemporary *haiku* cannot be given an artistic evaluation as it is alone." Kuwahara paraphrases "*haiku* as it is alone (*ku hitutsu*)" as "a work of art itself (*geijutsu sakuhin jitai*)."⁶ If *haiku* is a form of art, it has to be able to be evaluated just as a 17-syllable line.

It is true that Kuwahara's criticism is directed at "contemporary" *haiku*, but not at *haiku* in general. But this is exactly where his argument gets problematic. For, strictly speaking, *haiku* is a term whose use should be confined to post-Meiji, or more precisely, post-Masaoka-Shiki literary productions.

This distinction Kuwahara does not really make. In spite of his harsh criticism of *haiku* as a genre, he seems to show respect for Bashō. But his admiration derives from Bashō's mastership in *hokku* as an independent entity, not in *haikai*. As long as Kuwahara wants to evaluate a poem as a piece of work, coherent in itself, linked poetry contradicts with his evaluative system. When he speaks of Bashō's merit as a poet who composed in a vulgar language to achieve spiritual freedom, he treats Bashō as an author of poems which are created by him alone, and which should be evaluated by themselves. Kuwahara reduces Bashō to a master of, not *haikai* but *hokku*, which can then be conveniently paraphrased as *haiku*.

Such a position is open to question. It is a basic knowledge of scholars in Japanese literature that *hokku* became independent from *haikai* and came to be generally called *haiku* in the Meiji period. As Prof. Konishi in the introduction to his *Haiku no sekai* emphasizes, *hokku* is not a self-sufficient piece of work as *haiku* is supposed to be, and consequently, *hokku* should strictly be differentiated from *haiku*.⁷

As known to all, the main proponent of the shift from *hokku* to *haiku* was Masaoka Shiki. In *Dassai shokku hairwa* he polemically argued: "*Hokku* is literature, but *renhai* is not."⁸ A few years later in *Haikai taiyō* he repeated the same idea, this time saying "*haiku*" was a branch of literature which in turn was a branch of art.⁹ Thus, Shiki first gave an emphasis to *hokku*, the

first line of *renku*, and then completely separated it from the *haikai* system by giving it a new name, *haiku*, in the sense that it was complete in its 17-syllable form.

Now, what exactly were the motivations for Shiki's project of creating a new literary genre? As a motto from *Dassai shooku haiwa* that I just cited demonstrates, his objective was to make *haiku* a form of "art."

What, however, constitutes "art" for Shiki is rather vague. Although in his recollections, *Fudemakase*, Shiki mentions his early interests in Western philosophies and aesthetics, his actual reading seems to have been scarce. For Shiki, the major source for the new concept of *geijutsu*, or *bijutsu* as it was more commonly called in early Meiji, was Tsubouchi Shōyō's *Shōsetsu shinzui*. For instance, Shiki constantly emphasizes in his writings that art is what ennobles you. (*kūshō ni suru*) It is, of course, one of the main premises of *Shōsetsu shinzui*. Also, Shiki's idea that a work of art requires coherence (*tōitsu*) is taken from Shōyō. This leads to Shiki's rejection of *haikai*. When in *Dassaiya shooku haiwa* Shiki makes a judgment that *hokku* is literature, but *renhai* is not, one of the two reasons he gives is that *haikai* lacks in coherence. For, he argues, *haikai* is based on the principle of change.

The other of the two reasons Shiki gives for insisting on the superiority of *hokku* over *haikai* is that *haikai* relies more on knowledge than on emotions.¹⁰ The idea that true art should predominantly explore human emotions also underwrites Shōyō's influence on Shiki.

The idea, however, that *haiku* should aim at the description of human emotions is a moot point. In fact, Shiki himself quickly withdraws his call for the description of emotions. In other essays Shiki tacitly attempts to distance *haiku* from the depiction of emotional contents. In *Haikai hogo kago*, Shiki argues that since *haiku* is a very short form of poetry, it is suited for the description of "reallandscape" (*jikkei*). Shiki emphasizes that with the restriction on the length, *haiku* authors should refrain, as much as possible, from subjective treatment of the external reality.¹¹ Shōyō also argues that since one of the purposes of art is an expression of complex human emotions, Japanese *waka*, which is too short to accommodate them, is not an ideal form of art.¹² Hence, the superiority of novel as a modern genre of literature. If *waka* is too short, what would *haiku* be good for? Shōyō's *Shōsetsu shinzui* is essentially an apology for novel, a genre which Shiki once attempted and gave up with a bitter sense of failure. Now, in order to recuperate *haiku* in defiance of Shōyō's theory, Shiki has to adapt another of Shōyō's aesthetic concept, *shajitsu*, and to bring out the concept of *shasei*.

Shiki insists that an aim of art is the effective representation of the "essential beauty" of things, their Platonic ideals (*mottomo binaru tokoro, kanzen naru bi, etc.*).¹³ Apparently, it echoes Shōyō's version of the theory of mimesis. It is, however, here that Shiki succeeds in making an acrobatic turn and in reformulating *haiku* to adapt to the Western mimetic theory. For, Shiki argues that if the aim of art is the representation of the ideal, i. e., the very essential of things, it has to be expressed in a concise form: "If one hopes to fully express one's idea within seventeen syllables, one should, as much as possible, omit unnecessary language and unnecessary objects."¹⁴ Quite possibly, by this trick, the concept of *shasei* emerges as a meaningful modern literary category: concise and objective description of the "essential."

Shiki thus overturns Shōyō's logic, and insists that the shorter a literary rendition of the reality is, the more accurate its grasp of the essence can be.

Conveniently, Shiki found a support for recuperating *haiku* as a short form of literature. He read Herbert Spencer's *Philosophy of Styles* while he was a student, and according to *Fudemakase*, was greatly impressed with Spencer's idea of "economy of mental energy."¹⁵ Spencer argues that the more effective an expression is, i. e., the shorter form it needs to convey the same message, the less mental economy it requires, and therefore, the better and the more literary that expression is.¹⁶ This pseudo-psychological and pseudo-scientific theorem, typical of the positivistic academism of industrialized Britain, must have given Shiki a ground to counter Shōyō's novelistic imperialism and to give *haiku* a new meaning.

These observations make Kuwahara's modernist attack on the "parochiality," "unintelligibility" and "exclusiveness" of *haiku* somewhat self-contradictory. For, Kuwahara's criticism is that *haiku* does not deserve the title of truly "modern" form of "art" since one piece of *haiku* is not an independent entity. *Haiku* as it is today, however, is precisely a result of its own modernization process. *Haiku* would not have existed, to begin with, if it had not been for a pressure from the new aesthetic assumptions to make it concise, independent, and modern. Kuwahara's criticism is entrapped in a vicious circle. He criticizes *haiku* for being too short a form to stand the test of the critical standards of the modern Western aesthetics. But, *haiku* has been delineated precisely as a consequence of the application of modern conceptions of art.

However, the critics who, contrary to Kuwahara, defend *haiku* for its unique merits are entrapped in the same paradox. If *haiku* is uniquely Japanese, and if its value lies in it, the genre of *haiku* ironically emerged in an effort to detach it from the traditional formal requirements in order to conform to the Western ideas of literature.

This contradiction is very often consciously blurred. In other words, *haiku* in critical discourses surreptitiously but constantly attempts to subsume *haikai* and erase its historical origin. As a result, the term *haiku* is usually used quite non-problematically as a generic term, subsuming *haikai* and obscuring their differences. As mentioned earlier, scholars in Japanese literature are well aware of the distinction between *haikai* and *haiku*, and of the immense change that took place in the Meiji period under the leadership of Shiki. Nonetheless, they all queerly tend to blur the rupture and to use *haiku* as a generic term, not as a historical concept.

For instance, Okazaki Yoshie in his book *Geijutsu to shite no haikai* follows Shiki's theory, and argues that *hokku* is superior to *haikai* as a form of art, for *haikai* is lacking in coherence.¹⁷ He further makes it clear that *haikai* is an invention of late *chusei* to *kinsei*, and that part of it is now called *haiku*, which actually should be considered as one branch of *haikai*. He then proceeds to argue that it was Shiki who conferred *hokku* an independent status, and that, conversely, with Bashō, every *hokku* implicitly anticipated *waki ku*. However, his argument begins to sway when he starts to discuss *hokku* (mind you, he first says *hokku*) as "the smallest form of poetry in the world" or "minimal art (*kyokubi no geijutsu*). "He then writes: "*hokku* and its heir, contemporary *haiku* has a place in the literatures of the world as the

smallest form of poetry.”¹⁸ Subsequently, he gives applause to *haiku* (now he says *haiku*) as a form of art which is unique, and which is superior to foreign art. Japanese culture, he writes, has seldom demonstrated excellence in longer forms of art. But, with *haiku*, Japanese art can excel. Finally, he encourages the readers to seriously reconsider Bashō’s poetics, not Shiki’s. He declares: “I hold that standards of *haiku* after all lie with Bashō. Superficial changes notwithstanding, something unchanging can be found in the works of Bashō.”¹⁹ (Note that here, too, he uses the term *haiku*) In spite of the presumption that *haiku* is part of, or an heir to, *haikai*, a presumption, with which he began arguments, he concludes with the assumption that a 17-syllable line, *haiku*, is generic, and an a-historical category, to which not only contemporary *haiku* poets but also Bashō belongs. This tacit assumption is again and again related by Okazaki to his belief that if a certain genre of Japanese literature can beat foreign literatures, it is that unique short form of literature, called *haiku*.

Such subsumption of *haikai* into *haiku* is very common. Takahama Kyoshi even goes as far as saying that what used to be called *hokku* is now known as *haiku*, and that the two are essentially identical.²⁰ Such actually is the same kind of epistemological strategy that substantiates Kuwahara’s polemics. And Kyoshi just like Dr. Okazaki presents such a notion about the genre of *haiku*, i. e., *haiku*, not as an heir to *haikai*, but as a representative notion along with the awareness of its difference from literatures of other countries, an awareness that *haiku* (or, *hokku* if you will), is the unique short form of literature which, precisely because of that, can well compete with major literatures of the world.²¹

In this way, a certain inversion is created. It is not, as usually imagined, that *haiku* as a unique form of literature, can serve to show the uniqueness of Japanese culture. It is an impulse to insist on certain originality, an urge of “nationalism,” as it were, that let *haiku* emerge as an original form of literature. Such a situation itself is uniquely Japanese, or at least uniquely “Orientalist.” For, in the context of Western literatures, the understandability of a national genre is seldom, if ever, doubted. For example, in terms of formal requirements, sonnets are as specific as *haiku*, but Western critics have probably never wondered whether they make sense for foreigners. The question is not confined to literary forms. Troubadours’ lyrics are based on a set of eccentric notion about sexuality. But their sexual ideology is considered neither beyond comprehension nor beyond appreciation of foreigners, including non-Westerners. The Western literary genres even when they are closely intertwined with specific socio-historical milieux are expected to lend themselves ultimately to universal understanding and sympathy. In contrast, the Japanese genres are often expected to be particular even when they are internationally acknowledged.

Perhaps, it is the presence of a more powerful culture which behaves as a universal principle, applicable to all human beings, that arouses the consciousness of what is particular and what is Japanese. It is the “other” which brings forth the binary opposition between the unique and the international and the awareness concerning it. The issues of the short form of *haiku* and of its ostensible uniqueness are, then, inevitably interdependent on a consciousness of nationalism.

As a student, Shiki wrote a short paper in English on Bashō. In it he argues: “The *hotsuku* which is composed of 17 syllables, is perhaps the shortest form of verses in the world.”²² A sense of uniqueness is a sense of differentiation. He then translates the difference into superiority of this particularly “unique Japanese” genre of literature. What is unique is the source for nationalistic pride. However, Shiki attempts to substantiate his nationalistic theory in the following way: “If the rule that the best is the simplest holds good in rhetoric, our Japanese ‘hotsuku’ must be best of literature in this respect.” The first half of this sentence (the best is the simplest) is clearly taken from Spencer. Thus, he is speaking through the Western conceptions, pretending to be speaking of something uniquely Japanese. It is an access to an alien paradigm that has led Shiki to his chauvinistic conception of literature.

People become conscious about what is unique about themselves only when faced with what is not they themselves, what is different, what is external. The uniqueness of one’s national identity is, then, always and already contaminated by the “other.” Paradoxically, what is special about you emerge not from within but from without. Such is the tricky consciousness that created the genre of *haiku*.

This paradox, this mystery, is the myth of the uniqueness of *haiku*, introduced by Shiki, and consecrated by his followers. They did not know, however, a theorem in mythology and ethnography that what is sacred always comes from the outer world.

Notes

- 1 *Asahi Shimbun*, Sep. 18, 1994.
- 2 Earl Miner. *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1958) Chapters V, VI.
- 3 Takahama Kyoshi, *Haiku eno michi* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1955) 200.
- 4 *Haiku eno michi*, 192.
- 5 Kuwahara Takeo, *Haiku daini geijutsu ron* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1976) 19.
- 6 Kuwahara, *ibid.* 22.
- 7 Konishi Jin’ichi, *Haiku no sekai* (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1981) 1.
- 8 Masaoka Shiki, *Dassaiya shooku haiwa* in *Meiji bungaku zenshū* 53 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1975) 168.
- 9 Masaoka Shiki, *Haikai taiyō* in *Nihon kindai bungaku taikai* 16 (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1972) 220.
- 10 Masaoka Shiki, *ibid.* 169.
- 11 Masaoka Shiki, *Haikai hogo kago* in *Meiji bungaku zenshū* 53 211-12.
- 12 Tsubouchi Shōyō, *Shōsetsu shinzui* in *Nihon kindai bungaku taikai vol 3* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1974) 47.
- 13 Masaoka Shiki *Meiji bungaku zenshū vol. 53* 211-12.
- 14 Masaoka Shiki, *Daissaiya shooku haiwa* 160.
- 15 Masaoka Shiki, *Fudemakase* 34.
- 16 Herbert Spencer, *Philosophy of Styles* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1881) 9-13.
- 17 Okazaki Yoshie, *Geijutsu to shite no haikai* (Tokyo: Kaname shobō, 1950) 3.
- 18 Okazaki Yoshie, *ibid.* 10.
- 19 Okazaki Yoshie, *ibid.* 29.
- 20 Takahama Kyoshi *ibid.*, 4.
- 21 Takahama Kyoshi *ibid.*, 4.
- 22 Masaoka Shiki, “Baseo as a Poet” in *Masaoka Shiki zenshū* vol. 4 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1975) 16.